

Chinese and Russian media coverage of the Black Lives Matter Movement

By

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Abstract

Today, the media closely monitor such a phenomenon as social activism. According to many researchers, the Black Lives Matter movement can be considered one of the most significant human rights movements in the history of the United States. In this regard, the reflection of the actions of this movement in foreign media is of particular interest. This study analyzed Russian and Chinese newspaper publications to identify similarities and differences in Russian and Chinese media's Black Lives Matter movement coverage. For a complete analysis, several Chinese and Russian publications with different political orientations have been selected: 40 articles from Chinese media (People's Daily, China Daily, China Youth Daily) and 40 articles from Russian media (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Izvestia, Novaya Gazeta) for the period 2019 – 2021. The analysis revealed the ambiguity of the image of the movement, the prevalence of a negative assessment of US actions in the Chinese media, and a radically different image of the movement in the Russian media. The findings might have important implications in linguistics and journalism.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, activism, media coverage, Chinese media, Russian media.

1. Introduction

The growth of public activism aimed at human rights issues is becoming a prevailing trend in the modern world. The latest and most striking example of this is the Black Lives Matter (BLM; from English - "Black Lives Matter"), which many researchers have already called one of the most significant civil movements in US history. Mass media attention to the anti-racist movement was drawn after the death of George Floyd in June 2020, which became a catalyst for public protests for the rights of black people and against police brutality. Numerous joint demonstrations of solidarity evoke both support from different parts of the public and opposite sentiments. Considering that today the role of the media in shaping a specific vision of events taking place in the world is beyond doubt, the coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement in the framework of Russian and Chinese newspapers is of particular interest for study.

The relevance of this study is associated with an increase in public involvement in activist activities focused on upholding rights and freedoms. It is also important to note the

acuteness of racial inequality, which is one of the central themes of world history and our everyday life in many ways.

The purpose of our study is to identify the features of coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement in Russian and Chinese media, to consider their standard and distinctive features in the transmission of information. The scientific novelty of the research is associated with an attempt, based on the analysis of articles covering events related to the Black Lives Matter movement for the period 2019–2021, to determine the main characteristic features of the broadcast of protest events in the Russian and Chinese media.

2. Materials and Methods

The empirical object of the research was the texts of articles, the main topic of which is related to the image of the “Black Lives Matter” movement. For a complete analysis, we have selected several Chinese and Russian publications with different political orientations: 40 articles from Chinese media (People’s Daily, China Daily, China Youth Daily) and 40 articles from Russian media (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Izvestia, Novaya Gazeta) for the period 2019 – 2021.

The main research methods are comparative analysis of language material - articles from selected newspaper publications, content analysis. Authors carried out a semantic analysis of the considered lexical and figuratively motivated units and analyzed publications’ general tone (positive, negative, neutral). In addition to this, the authors used the comparative method to generalize and classify research papers that consider the Black Lives Matter movement an object of research in the media.

3. Discussion

Shao Mengsha (2020) explores the underlying philosophies, historical roots, and specific manifestations of the anti-racist movement and interprets Black Lives Matter as a modern movement deeply influenced by anti-racial discrimination movements of the past. The author emphasizes the movement provides an opportunity to exchange thoughts between people holding different positions, which in the long term will help to reduce racial tensions and build a more harmonious and tolerant society.

The study “Facts Matter! Black Lives Matter! The Trauma of Racism” (Alcantara et al., 2015) shows that the linguistic basis constructs the image of “Black Lives Matter” “is more positive. Much of the work contains statistics proving the importance of the anti-racist movement in the fight against legal discrimination, oppression in the field of employment, social exclusion, hate crimes, demonization of non-white cultures, mass incarceration, unfair imprisonment, inhuman treatment in public institutions, achievements. Alvin and Tillery (2019) focus on communication media, particularly the world-renowned Twitter platform, and how the Black Lives Matter movement uses them. This social unrest responds to the expressive, informational content that Black Lives Matter activists pass on to their followers.

“We are in the Same Storm but we are not in the Same Boat” (Watson, 2020) notes that Black Lives Matter “is a clarion call for racial equality and justice.” Moreover, in some studies, such as “Together We Rise: How Social Movements Succeed,” (Nardini et al., 2020) the focus is that Black Lives Matter is primarily people who motivate collective action and encourage others “to transform from bystanders upstanders.”

“Organizing so Black Lives Matter” (Cole & Grace, 2020) raises the importance of

transnational solidarity as the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed structural inequalities. Another contextual background is the work of BT. Minard, in which the movement is viewed through the prism of comparison with oppositional forms of protest. The researcher analyzes “Black Lives Matter” as a content unit in contrast to “All Lives Matter.”

In the research of E. Ioannidou and J. Faine (2020), the movement’s influence is presented from a public health perspective. The study’s authors state that the abuse of systemic racism in the justice sector also extends to institutional racism in social, environmental, and economic structures and directly affects systemic health.

4. Results

Chinese media (People’s Daily, China Daily, China Youth Daily)

1. People’s Daily. The first article that should be highlighted: “我无法呼吸” 抗议活动在美蔓延 - “Protests under the slogan ‘I can’t breathe’ spread across America,” (<http://world.people.com>) which reflects the general picture of social tension in the first days after the death of George Floyd. This publication was released at the peak of protest activity, which determines its high emotionality. When describing the actions of law enforcement officials, the following expressions were used: “警方动用强力手段” - “the police used violent methods,” “无动于衷” - “was indifferent,” “用它煽动其他示威者” - “to use her to provoke other demonstrators.” The social portrait of the protesters is also partially displayed, there are ideas about their goals and requirements: “停止杀害我们” - “stop killing us,” “为弗洛伊德讨还公道” - “demand justice for Floyd.” Although the article focuses on the actions of the supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement, and not on their character: “走上街头” - took to the streets, “集会” - got together, “投掷瓶子” - “threw bottles,” “袭击警车” - “struck a police car.” It is essential to note the absence in the text of the evaluation category “friend or foe” about the protesters and the police.

In a different vein, the May events were commented in “通讯: ‘没有正义, 就没有安宁’ 直击华盛顿市抗议活动” - “No justice - no peace” - “Live report from the protest actions in Washington.” (<http://world.people.com>) This article traces the difference in the coverage of the protesters’ actions and the events carried out by law enforcement officials. In the description of the detention of George Floyd, the following words were used: “被按在地上” - “was pinned to the ground,” “他神情痛苦” - “his expression was painful,” “声音嘶哑” - “his voice was hoarse,” “屡次恳求说自己无法呼吸” - “repeatedly begged that he could not breathe.”

Starting in July 2020, People’s Daily articles, which report protests against racism and police violence, gradually cease to take their former emotionally charged form. “美国警察暴力执法不断民众抗议活动持续” - “Police and law enforcement violence continues in the United States, public protests continue,” (<http://usa.people.com>) released in November 2020, is characterized by a summary of events in which the details of the rally were omitted. However, it is emphasized that racial equality is an essential requirement of those who took to the streets, “非洲裔需要被正义对待” - “African Americans must be treated fairly.”

2. China Daily. In “Why BLM could get rid of more than statues” (<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn>), the journalist mainly adheres to stylistically neutral words. The text provides examples of both an upbeat assessment of the actions of the movement’s

activists and a negative one. In the beginning, the author makes an open-minded comment on the attitude of the US authorities and other countries to protest actions around the world; according to the source, it “has ranged from the tolerant to the hostile.” The actions of politicians are also controversial, while “President Donald Trump led the US response by threatening to send in the military to break up protests,” “The city’s African–American mayor renamed the area in front of the White House as Black Lives Matter Plaza.”

However, this level of impartiality is not typical for all China Daily articles. “Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2020” (<https://www.chinadaily.com>) contains a critical message towards the actions of the United States authorities, which can be seen in the very title of the article. According to the newspaper, the US government, instead of delving into its internal problems, “kept making irresponsible remarks on the human rights situation in other countries, exposing its double standards” exposing her double standards. “

The destruction of monuments to those who, according to the demonstrators, personified racial discrimination is one of the most visible consequences of the wave of mass demonstrations. “America takes stock of its historical relics” (<https://www.chinadaily.com>) describes this natural phenomenon: “Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is forcing America to re-examine its past beyond Confederate statues.” “Even though the work itself does not contain words with a pronounced evaluative connotation, a positive attitude of the journalist towards the protest movement can be traced. The author of the article does not express his position directly but emphasizes the statements of individuals who inspire the confidence of the readership. “I am torn about this because this is the representation of our history, this is the representation of what we thought were OK,” “We got major corporations to realize the fallacy of their ways,” these statements are an effective way of instilling a certain attitude towards one of the parties. Moreover, in the text of the article “UK enterprises forced to confront slavery legacy” (<https://www.chinadaily.com>) despite its ambiguous name, where the word “forced to” implies an involuntary desire, the author speaks of other significant changes in the world. Several well-known companies and brands have confessed and apologized for “owe much of their current success to past links with the slave trade.”

The article “Trump rioters got easy ride, critics claim” (<https://global.chinadaily.com.cn>) can be considered a similar, positive way to Black Lives Matter. Already from the title of the article, a critical message towards the US authorities is clear. The author gives them, like the police officers, all sorts of negative characteristics. The methods used against police are “draconian” and the US justice system “unequal.” In the article “Shameful scenes of violence” in London” (<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn>), the author tells about a similar attitude in France, where those who took to the streets became part of “angry scenes,” thereby assigning to “Black Lives Matter” the position of the oppressed, and for the representatives of the authorities and law enforcement agencies - the oppressors.

3. China Youth Daily. Considering the coverage of the Black Lives Matter protest actions in the China Youth Daily, it is vital to highlight the high publication activity. The number of published articles that mention the semantic unit “Black Lives Matter” by March 2021 reaches 286 publications. At the same time, in covering the Black Lives Matter movement, there is a tendency to increase the political nature, emphasizing the comparison of the two countries (China and the USA) based on the “friend or foe” category. The newspaper’s journalists are pretty bold for the Chinese media to speak out about the mass unrest, the state’s role, and the attitude towards the anti-racist movement Black Lives Matter.

“Normal,” (<http://news.cyol.com>) published in December 2020, draws attention to the failure of US to resolve the race issue. “只有腐烂的树木才会长出坏苹果” – “Only on rotting trees do bad apples grow.” This metaphor contributes to the formation of a certain attitude toward the younger generation in China. It is a simple but universal way of dividing into “bad” and “good,” a method of consolidating the desired image of the country.

A similar literary device can be seen in the article “戳穿美国种族”大熔炉“的谎言”- “Exposing the lies of America’s racial melting pot,” (<http://news.cyol.com>) which has a pronounced negative connotation. The author in the article uses many manipulative ways that will determine the perception of the United States as a state of oppressors and oppressed, which only can “造出一个自由公平、种族平等的假象”-“create the illusion of freedom, justice, racial equality.”

In the article “美式民主”神话的终结”-“The end of the myth of “American democracy,” (<http://news.cyol.com>) the journalist relies on foreign sources, thanks to which his words do not cause doubts among the general reader. “美式民主”没有带来政治稳定”- “American democracy” does not provide political stability” - the prevailing idea not only of the presented article but also of the overwhelming majority during the period of the rise of mass unrest in the United States.

The Black Lives Matter movement, on the other hand, appears in the media discourse of the chosen publication in a positive way. The articles show empathy for a situation in which people, despite numerous difficulties, continue to fight for equal rights after many violent protests. In the publication “黑人的命也是命”被提名诺贝尔和平奖”-“Black Lives Matter “was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize,” () the author considers the possibility of receiving a nomination by the movement as “好消息”- “good news,” however “这场运动任重而道远”-“This movement has a long way to go.”

“白色正义” – “white justice,” as the title of one of the publications released in June said, “成美国毒疮” - “became an American plague.”(<https://shareapp.cyol.com>) According to Chinese politician Zhao Lijian, “希望美方能够倾听美国国内少数族裔要求平等和公正的呼声，以及国际社会对美国国内人权状况的关切” – “There is hope that the United States will be able to listen to the voices of ethnic minorities demanding equality and justice, as well as the international community’s concerns about the human rights situation in the United States.” The article “他们在世界各地“对种族主义说不”-“They “Say No to Racism” Around the World” (<http://news.cyol.com>) summarizes that the Black Lives Matter movement is people who “试图改变世界”-“are trying to change the world.”

Russian media ("Rossiyskaya Gazeta", "Izvestia", "Novaya Gazeta")

1. Rossiyskaya Gazeta. Immediately after the start of the protests, the Rossiyskaya Gazeta newspaper published an article with the headline “Why Loud protests gripped Minneapolis?” (<https://rg.ru>) It should be noted that, unlike most of the articles previously reviewed by the Chinese media, this work does not use words or expressions with a bright emotional connotation. For comparison, here is a fragment of the description of the detention of George Floyd. “You can see a white officer using his knee to pin Floyd to the ground,” a Rossiyskaya Gazeta journalist said. At the same time, in the article “People’s Daily,” as noted earlier, the author focuses the reader’s attention on the cruelty of the act. Let’s highlight the semantic difference in the treatment of the detainee himself about the police. In the Chinese media, the African American “屡次恳求说” – “repeatedly begged,” in the Russian – “spoke

with difficulty.”

In Rossiyskaya Gazeta, there is a certain disproportion of articles covering the consequences of the protest actions and the public's reaction in a negative way in quantitative terms, more than articles in which the achievements of the anti-racist movement are noted. For instance, refer to the publications “Black Lives Matter was detained in New York, (Black Lives Matter was detained in New York. Rossiyskaya Gazeta) “Facebook groups began to criticize the Black Lives Matter movement,” (Facebook groups began to criticize the Black Lives Matter movement) and the “Black Lives Matter movement discredited itself.” (Black Lives Matter movement discredited itself) In the first article, the movement participants are presented as people who do not know what they are fighting for. The second article suggests that many groups on the social network Facebook correlate the mass protests with conspiracy theories to “oust Trump” or promote the concept that “COVID-19 is a hoax designed to discourage re-election head of the White House President Donald Trump.” The authors of Rossiyskaya Gazeta touch on the protest movement issue from the church's position. According to the head of the Synodal Department, insulting the feelings of believers by most of the state “allegedly in the name of combating racism” discredits the Black Lives Matter movement.

At the same time, it is worth noting the presence in Rossiyskaya Gazeta of articles reflecting the successful results of the Black Lives Matter activists. “The Police Throwing Handcuffs” (The Police Throwing Handcuffs) is devoted to some of the goals of the anti-racist movement that have already been achieved.

2. Izvestia. The reviewed articles show the predominance of stylistically neutral words and expressions in describing the Black Lives Matter movement-image and the movement activists. In the article “This city is on fire: where the protests in Minneapolis will lead,” (This city is on fire: where the protests in Minneapolis will lead) there is no excessive detailing of events, the use of neutral words prevails, comments are provided not only by residents, but also by experts in political science, and tragic stories of African Americans who died as a result of police brutality mentioned. The author of the article, based on statistical data, confirms the urgency of racial discrimination. “The black population definitely has a glass ceiling,” and there are certainly exceptions, but “these are the exceptions, not the pattern.”

In the article “Emergency situation: protests in the United States declined,” (Emergency situation: protests in the United States declined) the journalist draws the readers' attention to several aspects: mass demonstrations that turned into widespread riots; measures imposed by Donald Trump to ensure “law enforcement dominance”; public response in other countries. The author emphasizes that racial injustice is characteristic of the United States and other European states.

In the publication “The section of the street in front of the White House was renamed in support of black people,” (The section of the street in front of the White House was renamed in support of black people) we see the difference between the coverage of the same event from the standpoint of Rossiyskaya Gazeta and Izvestia. In Rossiyskaya Gazeta, the title of the publication is “Part of the street near the White House in Washington was renamed in honor of the protest action.” If the Izvestia journalist omits details and value judgments about the actions of the mayor of Washington, describing precisely the activities: “reported,” “wrote,” “published,” and not their character. In contrast, the Rossiyskaya Gazeta article is full of emotional statements; the emphasis of journalistic work is aimed at the meaninglessness of Muriel Bowser's anti-racist gesture, which “adds fuel to the fire” and also makes people

wonder how such a “renaming” improves the life of Washington.

To identify additional similarities and differences in the research object’s coverage, let us consider the article “The Black Wheel: What decisions have been brought about by the fight against racism in the United States.” (The Black Wheel: What decisions have been brought about by the fight against racism in the United States) It is essential to pay attention to the fact that in *Izvestia*, as in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, there are works devoted to a negative and positive assessment of the protesters’ actions and the consequences of the anti-racist struggle. Still, there is no disproportion in the quantitative ratio between positive and negative vital articles in *Izvestia*. Returning to the earlier mentioned publication, we note that it provides examples of positive results of widespread protests. One of these results is changing the appearance of many well-known brands, including Mars Inc, Quaker Oats, B&G Foods. Nevertheless, it is emphasized that “there were also obvious excesses in the case of the rebranding.”

One example that shows an adverse reaction to events in the United States is the article “Trump said about the harm of the BLM movement for black Americans.” (Trump said about the harm of the BLM movement for black Americans) According to Rand Paul, the Black Lives Matter activists are real terrorists who attack passers-by.

3. *Novaya Gazeta*. The online platform novayagazeta.ru provides an opportunity to familiarize yourself with publications that carry an exclusively informational message, for instance, “Stop killing us, eat the rich,” (Stop killing us, eat the rich) “About 60 police officers were injured during the riots in Seattle” (About 60 police officers were injured during the riots in Seattle), and an article with an ironic title “And Scotland Yard with the people?” (<https://novayagazeta.ru/>) The report, published in June 2020, draws the audience’s attention to the reactions and actions of law enforcement agencies during the period of mass protests in the United States and outside of them, in this case, in England.

The critical orientation of this newspaper can be easily traced both in the title of the publications and in their content. So, for example, in the article “The War on Monuments,” (<https://novayagazeta.ru>) expressive-emotional speech is an integral part of the informational narrative. The movement “Black Lives Matter” itself is presented positively. The following description of the monument defenders is found: “Were continuously poured with beer and, not meeting the resistance of Black Lives Matter,” did not get confused and (do not disappear fuse!) attacked the police.” A fragment of the publication focuses on the gesture of mercy of the black protester Patrick Hutchinson, who carried a Nazi skinhead out of the crowd of demonstrators on his shoulders to save him. The high emotionality of the publications is, to a certain extent, related to the fact that the *Novaya Gazeta* journalist does not hide his sympathy for the protest movement. The author states that Black Lives Matter did not become an ethnic movement. Movement is a catalyst for “gigantic inequality” that has once again raised the public to talk about justice.

A positive assessment of the anti-racist movement in question is also contained in “The Right to Riot.” (<https://novayagazeta.ru>) In addition to substantiating the goals and demands of those who took to the streets, the article emphasizes the legality of the actions associated with an unforeseen event, which became the reason for the need for an open demonstration. Moreover, the author draws our attention to compliance with the norms within the framework of the epidemiological situation, free access to personal hygiene products during mass demonstrations. The above descriptions of civic awareness and the desire to be heard are contrasted with statements about the American government, which only makes promises “with the help of the military to smear the liver on the asphalt.” Speaking about such an attitude to

social problems from the country's leadership, the author emphasizes that such a reaction is characteristic of "Russian rhetoric."

5. Conclusions

The following results were obtained as a result of the study of Chinese and Russian media journalistic texts.

First of all, publications in which a negative attitude towards the actions of the US government and law enforcement agencies prevails in the Chinese media.

The publications display social portraits of the participants in the events; there are representations of their actions and goals, which reinforces the position of the oppressed for "Black Lives Matter" and the oppressors for the representatives of power and law and order. The "Black Lives Matter" movement in the Chinese media discourse most often acts positively. The articles highlight the changes aimed at eradicating racial inequality in society, which became possible thanks to activists of the movement. The high emotionality of the publications of the Chinese media is mainly characteristic of the period when social tension reached its highest points; over time, there is a tendency to change the negative broadcast of events to a relatively neutral one.

Concerning Russian media articles, it is essential to note that the image of the Black Lives Matter movement varies greatly. After analyzing the publications with a pro-government and independent editorial policy on the same or related topics, it was revealed that there are radically different methods of informing the audience within the Russian media discourse. In the pro-state media, negative value judgments prevail, focusing the audience's attention on the failure of the United States in solving acute social issues. There is also a specific difference in the quantitative ratio of articles covering the consequences of protests - more of those that broadcast actions from a negative side. In independent newspapers, the opposite situation is observed - in many journalistic works; the authors do not hide their positive attitude towards the Black Lives Matter movement.

In general, thanks to the study of stylistic, lexical, syntactic linguistic tools that create the image of the "Black Lives Matter" movement, intensive use of various linguistic means in articles by authors of both Russian and Chinese editions was revealed. There is frequent use of epithets and metaphors at the stylistic level, and the widespread use of idioms characterizes the Chinese media. At the lexical level, both negative and positive evaluations can be traced, expressed in words with the solid emotional background; at the syntactic level - the evaluation is most often manifested in comparative-contrastive constructions and rhetorical questions.

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