



Research on the Reports of Boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics by English Mainstream Media from the Perspective of Framing Theory

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Abstract

With the excuse of “human rights and democracy”, few countries followed the United States in boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics. By applying to the framing theory to some English mainstream media in reporting the diplomatic boycott towards the Beijing Winter Olympics, this paper aims to explore prejudices exist in those reports and put forward advice on how Chinese media could do in reporting English news relates to China or the unbiased attitude that the audience should maintain when reading news that concerns China. Furthermore, this paper intends to emphasize that the politicization of sporting event runs counter to the Olympic spirit, which would exacerbate divisions of the international society to some extent.

Keywords: framing theory, diplomatic boycott, Beijing Winter Olympics



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1. Introduction

When mentioning the Olympics, distinct images occur to different people, but what usually comes to their minds is likely to be the Olympic motto: Faster, Higher, Stronger-Together. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) added the word “together” in 2021, for it was in the hope of underlying the power of solidarity. As the grandest and largest sporting event throughout the world, the Olympics acts as a catalyst that transcends political conflicts, ideological barriers, and the likes, aiming to bring the whole world together for eliminating prejudices and therefore building friendship. After it was officially announced that Beijing and Zhang Jiakou would be the co-host cities of the 2022 Winter Olympics in 2015, the whole country was filled with thrill, for not only would Beijing be the first city in the world to host both Summer and Winter Olympics, but also that China once again would have the chance to exhibit its vitality to the rest of the world and enjoy the winter games with athletes from all over the world. However, the Beijing Winter Olympics could not escape from political interference. On December 6, 2021, the Biden administration announced that it would not “send any diplomatic or official representation” to Beijing for the 2022 Winter Olympics under the excuse of “ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity” in Xinjiang. Shortly afterwards, a small number of countries, such as the members of Five Eyes Alliance followed the United States. In response to the diplomatic boycott, the IOC, the Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China, and several countries expressed the objection to “politicization of sport”.

Nowadays, news exerts great influence on the public. Whether it is to discover how some people’s attitudes or opinions toward something are shaped, or to conduct research on the development of social events, one cannot ignore the role that news reports play. However, it has been questioned that if the news reports are of truth and reality, or they are just something being constructed or even fabricated by the media for the audience to easily accept to the benefit of interest groups. To explore the prejudice exists in the news by some English mainstream media and henceforth find out possible traps that Chinese media should avoid falling in when covering English news related to China, the research objective is to analyze some reports of boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics by English mainstream media from the perspective of the framing theory.

2. Research Overview

This part will first review some previous research on the framing theory and some theories derived from it. Then the methods used in this study and two relevant charts would be presented for better understanding how the authors probe into the research.



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2.1 Framing Theory and Three-level Structure Analysis

This study mainly applies to the framing theory in communications and one of its branch theories produced by Guoren Zang, namely the three-level structure analysis.

Initially, the American anthropologist Gregory Bateson put forward the concept “framing”, and he defined it as “a spatial and temporal bounding of a set of interactive messages” (Bateson, 1972). Later on, Erving Goffman introduced it into cultural sociology in his book *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. According to Goffman, a “frame” is as “definitions of the situation are built up in accordance with the principles of organization which govern events-at least social ones-and our subjective involvement in them” (Goffman, 1974). For him, “frame” is used to indicate these basic elements. In simple terms, frame is a set of interpretation that allows people “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” events and occurrences, thus rendering meaning, organizing experiences, and guiding actions. Todd Gitlin was the first scholar utilizing the idea of framing in the research of media (Gitlin, 2003). From then on, the framing theory was introduced in communications field to be researched and developed.

In the paper named *Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach*, William Gamson and Andre Modigliani argue that what is at the core of media discourse is frame, giving meaning to an issue (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Then Robert Entman generalizes in his paper that there are four functions the media frame embraces: defining problems, identifying causes, conveying a moral judgment and endorsing remedies or improvements (Entman, 1993).

For Zang (1999), he thinks that any media frame has three levels. The high-level of a media frame is equivalent to the macroscopic scale of the news, often indicating its theme; the middle-level corresponds to the assessment of relevant factors concerning to the news, such as the reason, the result, its effect and so on; and the low-level means the usage of words and rhetorical devices.



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2.2 Research Methods

On the completion of the research, two methods are used: literature studies and inductive reasoning.

Under most circumstance, news report can give readers the most direct way of understanding the how the world moves forward. With the former method, it enables the paper to delve into the essence that the paper is needed. By utilizing the text from several mainstream media, it is possible to get to know how the meaning of a news report is endowed. And the way it is reported can convey similar meaning to the audience, and henceforth forming a “settled reality” in the heads of readers. To further understand how the stance of most mainstream English media on boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics, a number of news reports concerned have been collected and then analyzed, as well as aiming to explore how the international image of China is made by English mainstream media.

The latter one, inductive reasoning, is a method that one can use to analyze from many angles to discover how the news is produced under influences such as the media’s ideologies, the social cultures, the linguistics. Meanwhile, such a way of critical thinking can provide a view to think reversely, indicating to find out the effect that news exerts on other sides in the society. In this paper, this method is applied, hoping to put forward advice on how Chinese media could do to enhance the capacity of international communication so as to do a better job of “telling China’s stories.”

2.3 Statistical Analysis of Reports

LexisNexis (<https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/gateway.page>) is the world’s largest legal, political, and economic information database, whose data updated daily. Therefore, in this paper, LexisNexis database was used as the data source, with “boycott Beijing” and “diplomatic boycott” as the keywords, and the search period was from January 1, 2021 to February 20, 2022 (closing ceremony of Beijing Winter Olympics). The search results were screened to eliminate irrelevant samples and retain the valid news reports on boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympic Games from various newspapers, with a total of 421 samples.

The change in the number of news reports can, to a certain extent, reflect the degree of concern of journalists about boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics. The overall situation and trend of the number of reports can reflect the influence of the event and its appeal to the audience. Therefore, the following two charts are introduced. The first one includes the statistics on the number of media reports, and the second one exhibits the trend of reporting “boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics”.



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2.3.1 The Diachronic Statistics of the Report

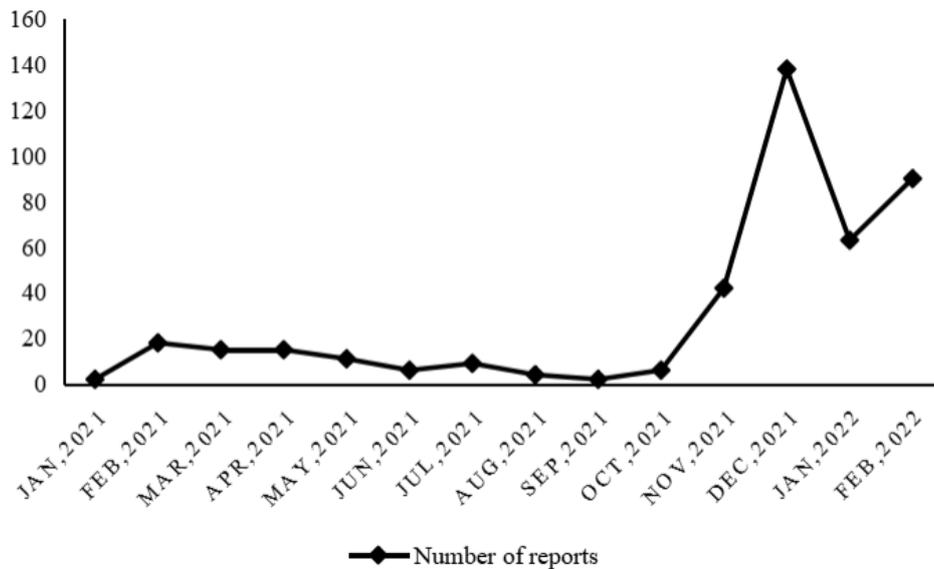
Table 1: Statistics on the number of media reports

Time	Number of Reports	Reporting Media (Report Number)
Jan, 2021	2	The New York Times (2)
Feb, 2021	18	The New York Times (2); The Associated Press (7); BBC (3); Los Angeles Times (1); Fox News (5)
Mar, 2021	15	The New York Times (2); The Associated Press (8); Fox News (5)
Apr, 2021	15	The New York Times (4); The Associated Press (6); Los Angeles Times (1); The Washington Post (1); Fox News (3)
May, 2021	11	The New York Times (2); The Associated Press (4); BBC (1); Los Angeles Times (1); Fox News (3)
Jun, 2021	6	The New York Times (1); Los Angeles Times (2); Fox News (2); BBC (1)
Jul, 2021	9	The New York Times (3); The Associated Press (4); Fox News (2)
Aug, 2021	4	The New York Times (1); Los Angeles Times (1); Fox News (2)
Sep, 2021	2	The New York Times (1); The Associated Press (1)
Oct, 2021	6	The New York Times (1); The Associated Press (2); Fox News (2); The Washington Post (1)
Nov, 2021	42	The New York Times (15); The Associated Press (9); BBC (1); The Washington Post (5); Fox News (8); Los Angeles Times (4)
Dec, 2021	138	The New York Times (47); The Associated Press (59); BBC (9); Los Angeles Times (8); Fox News (8); The Washington Post (7)
Jan, 2022	63	The New York Times (25); The Associated Press (24); Los Angeles Times (2); BBC (9); The Washington Post (3)
Feb, 2022	90	The New York Times (33); The Associated Press (46); Los Angeles Times (8); The Washington Post (1); BBC (2)



2.3.2 The Intensity of Reports

Figure 1: Graph of changes in the number of reports



From the two graphs, it is clear that in 2021, from January to October, reports relating to “boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics” were not that highly frequent comparing to those ranging from December 2021 to February 2022. The most striking feature is that in December 2021, the coverage on boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics reached its peak among the selected months. Moreover, the New York Times and the Associated Press were the media that paid most attention on relevant topics during the selected months, with the former had 139 reports while the latter one 172 reports.

3. Three-level Structure Analysis

Unfortunately, under most circumstances, the general public cannot know the truth well enough since their perceptions of many things are mainly shaped by the surroundings around them. For most of the time, those surroundings are the news that they watch on the TV, the information they browse on the Internet or the hearsay they pick up unintentionally. For some time, even the reporters’ sources of information are misguided. Thus, one cannot easily get the truth for that the news cannot completely mirror the reality. The framing theory holds that there are frames in news reporting, and to analyze these frames is beneficial. For one thing, it is possible to find out how the media or the audience can choose or reframe the real world with the help of frames.



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For another, the analysis of the media frames can dig into the essence of news activities.

In this part, by focusing on the three-level structure analysis and analyzing the news from three English mainstream media: BBC, Fox News and The Washington Post, the authors intend to discover the biases in the news related to China in terms of boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics and then try to generalize some suggestions for the audience as well as the media across the world in reading or reporting China-related news. The time line of this part is divided into three phases: phase one refers to the period when the idea of boycotting Beijing Winter Olympics was put forward by some politicians or social groups; phase two corresponds to the stage when the Biden administration was considering and officially announced the “diplomatic boycott”; and phase three relates to the attitude being expressed by other countries’ citizens or their heads of state after the Biden administration’s decision on diplomatically boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics was announced.

3.1 High-level Structure Analysis

Li Cheng and Hao Rujing combined Guoren Zang 's theory of high-level structure with previous category construction methods at home and abroad, and believed that high-level structure includes report time, report topic, news genre and length of the report (Li & Hao, 2021). After analyzing the news reports of the boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics by three English mainstream media, this paper discusses the high-level structure from three dimensions: report phase, news genre and length.

Table 2: Statistics on the number of media reports at different phases

Phase	Number of Reports	Reporting Media (Report Numbers)
1	28	BBC (4); Fox News (22); The Washington Post (2)
2	38	BBC (10); Fox News (16); The Washington Post (12)
3	15	BBC (11); Fox News (0); The Washington Post (4)



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Figure 2: Graph of changes in the number of reports at different phases

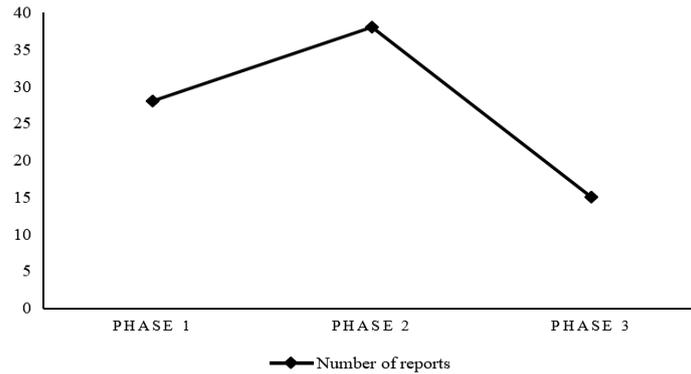
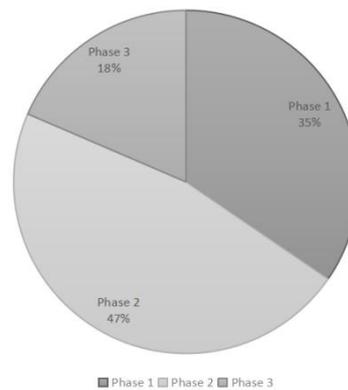


Figure 3: The proportion of the number of reports at different phases

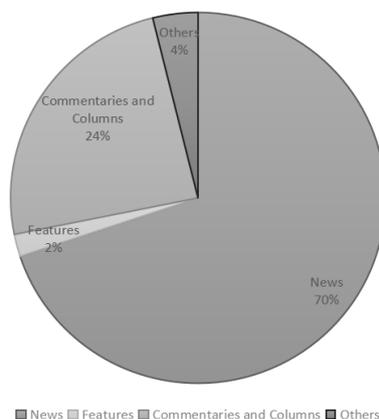


The Washington Post and BBC have reported relevant news in each phase, reflecting the continued interest of both media in the subject of the boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics, while Fox News focused on reports of that in the phase one and two. In terms of the number of reports, there is an overall trend of growth followed by decline, with 28 reports (35%) in phase one, 38 reports (35%) in phase two and 15 reports (35%) in phase three.

Figure 4: The proportion of different news genres of reports

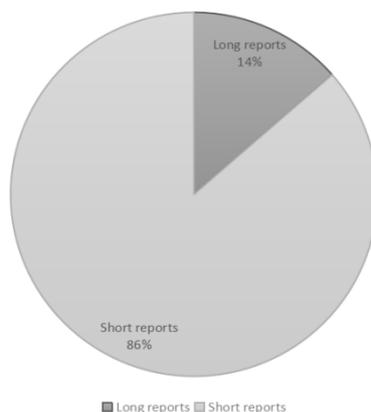


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As can be seen from Figure 4, the main type of reports related to boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics by the BBC, Fox News and the Washington Post was news, with 57 articles accounting for 70%, followed by 19 commentaries and columns accounting for 24%, and others and features with 3 and 2 articles each, accounting for 4% and 2% respectively.

Figure 5: The proportion of the length of reports



According to Figure 5, 70 articles (86%) are less than 1,000 words in length and 11 articles (14%) were more than 1,000 words in length. Most of the reports were accompanied by pictures and videos to illustrate the content.

The analysis of the results shows that the BBC, Fox News and the Washington Post have reported more on the subject of boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics in phase two, within 1,000 words, and in different news genres. Furthermore, it is shown that the three English mainstream media paid great attention on the coverage of boycotting the Beijing Winter



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Olympics. Additionally, focusing on analysis, explanation and attribution, reports in the genres of commentaries and columns have a certain political significance from the national point of view.

3.2 Middle-level Structure Analysis

According to Guoren Zang, the emotion and news sources of the report should be included in the middle-level structure. So this paragraph will analyze the content of the report from the perspective of information concerning to emotion and news sources of the report.

Looking at the theme of the report, there are multiple sources in reporting on “boycott the Beijing Winter Olympics”¹, which to some extent highlight the “authenticity” of mainstream media such as BBC and Fox News about the reasons for boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics.

In phase one, regarding the reasons to boycott the Beijing Winter Olympics, BBC and Fox News covered that Uighurs, Hong Kong people, Tibetans and Mongols had suffered human rights violations in China, so the two media called on everyone to boycott the Beijing Winter Olympics, especially on May 17, 2021, Fox News reported that a Canadian Tibetan named Lhadon Tetong and an American gold medalist of the two Olympic Games called Mikaela Shiffrin, were selected as representatives to boycott the Beijing Winter Olympics¹.

On May 19, 2021, BBC reported that “Pelosi calls for China Winter Olympics boycott”², the source was from Nancy Pelosi's speech at the United States capital about the covid-19 hate crimes act. The report adopted the method of direct quotation, that was to put Nancy Pelosi's speech directly into text, which increases the objectivity of the report and, in a sense, the reliability of the report.

Turning to phase two, on November 16, 2021, The Washington Post reported that the Biden administration would soon announce diplomatic boycott against the Beijing Winter Olympics³. Two days later, BBC also reported the same content. With regard to the content of reports, the one of BBC's mentioned that both Democratic and Republican lawmakers had called for a diplomatic boycott. The Washington Post referred to more details: first, the House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called for a U.S. diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Olympics; second, in a March New York Times op-ed, Sen. Mitt Romney also urged an economic and diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Olympics. In the Washington Post, the news calling for a boycott comes from The New York Times, which uses a direct quote to increase the “authority” of the source to some extent.

After the United States officially announce the boycott to the Beijing Winter Olympics, some countries followed it and this was accompanied by few pieces of English news, which is the phase three. On December 8, 2021, The report of BBC on Australia's participation in the boycott



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of China's 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics⁴, the source of the news was mainly from Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison. In his talk, he said that Australia's participation in the diplomatic boycott was not surprising because China-Australia relations were deteriorating. BBC adopted a combination of direct quotation and indirect quotation in its reporting, which not only ensured the authenticity of the news, but also made the content of the report more objective.

As reported by the Washington Post on February 3, 2022: "India joins diplomatic boycott of Beijing Olympics over role of Chinese soldier from border clash⁵". The source of report was the spokesman of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesman Arindam Bagchi. On the same day, the Washington Post reported on India's participation in boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics from a third person perspective. The text presented the reasons for India's participation in the boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, thus ensuring the comprehensiveness of the news.

Generally speaking, the combination of different citation methods and the description of emotion and language description skillfully applies the subjective purpose that the media want to present the "facts" in the reports to the audience.

3.3 Low-level Structure Analysis

Guoren Zang believes that the low-level structure analysis in the framing theory is mainly the analysis of keywords. (Zang, G.R, 1999) Therefore, this paragraph will analyze the use of words in the report.

Through keyword analysis, the vocabulary widely used in the research sample is obtained. Those keywords enable a better analysis of the image of China that those mainstream media want to shape within the framework of the audience.

According to the statistics, in its report on May 19, 2021, BBC mentioned human rights² three times, "abuse" twice, "denied" twice and "detained" twice respectively. On May 17, two days ago, Fox News mentioned "human rights" 10 times in its report on boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics. In addition, "excuse", "detailed" and "denied" were also mentioned once. In the two reports, the word "abuse" is always followed by "human rights". Human rights are mentioned many times in the reports, and supplemented by negative words such as "detained" and "denied", leaving a more negative impression on China's image on the audience.

Then, based on the keywords statistics of the report entitled "Opinion: Biden administration soon to announce democratic boycott of the Beijing Olympics" published by the Washington Post on November³ 16, 2021 and the report entitled "Biden mulls US Democratic boycott of Beijing Olympics" published by BBC on November 18, 2021, the following conclusions are drawn: the Washington Post mentioned "human rights" eight times in its report, while BBC



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mentioned “human rights” twice, and the Washington Post mentioned “abuse” four times. Each time, the word behind “excuse” is “human rights”. Although BBC only mentioned “abuse” in its report, the word behind “excuse” is also “human rights”. In addition, the Washington Post and BBC both mentioned “genocide” twice. And there is a phenomenon found in all the analyzed reports, that is: as long as the word “abuse” appears, the word behind it must be “human rights”. The former two media repeatedly mentioned “abuses human right” was in the hope to shape China’s “pedantic” image and spread the idea of “darkness” of Chinese society under the leadership of the Communist Party of China.

As for BBC's report entitled “2022 Beijing Winter Olympics: Australia joins us democratic boycott ”⁶ released on December 8, 2021, “human right” also appeared twice in the article, and “abuse” also appeared once. Indeed, it appeared together with “human rights” like what has been found out. Furthermore, the main content of this report is that Australia announced its boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics and the reasons for doing so. Therefore, the “national interest mentioned in the report is also used as one of the keywords. Its role is to make Australia’s boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics more reasonable.

In the Washington Post’s report on India’s announcement of a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the keywords are: “border clash”, “torch” and “regrettable”. The meaning of “border clash” and “torch” are the main reason why India announced its boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics, while “regrettable” is India's attitude towards the diplomatic boycott. Although the keywords mentioned above are not highly frequent words, they are still with strong representative characteristic. The role of its vocabulary is to rationalize India's boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

For the low-level analysis of keywords in the three-level structure analysis theory based on frame theory proposed by Guoren Zang, the keywords within the selected news reports show the following characteristics: paying attention to keywords, especially the emphasis on “abuses human rights”, highlighting the “feudal” image that foreign mainstream media wanted to create for China.

4. Conclusion

In fact, the English mainstream media dominate the discourse power of the international society and may guide the thoughts and value orientation of the audience for most of the time.

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By analyzing the reports of some English mainstream media on the Beijing Winter Olympics selected in this paper, it is found that these mainstream media have used a large number of negative words through the media frames, so as to shape a negative image for China in the mind of the audience. In their reports, when mentioning the Chinese government, passive words like the “violation of human rights”, “genocide” were applied in that the media aimed to correspond China to a country that lags behind the mainstream of the international society. However, those reports deviate from reality since China’s rapid development over the past decades requires a united society and well-being of people of all ethnic groups in China has been steadily increasing. Nonetheless, China’s peaceful rising is deemed as a threat by the western world. Hence, many westerners, especially the politicians, are for fear of China’s rising as a hegemony. As mouthpieces of the governments and interest groups, the media distort the reality in covering news related to China, because they want to smear on China so as to increase the pressure on China with regard to the international discourse power.

Nevertheless, in the paper, the samples of English mainstream media related to the boycotting of Beijing Winter Olympics are inadequate, making it difficult for the conclusion being thoroughly applicable to all the news related to China. That is, it is true that there is some pieces of English news related to China are of subtle biases. More importantly, to find out the biases existing in English mainstream media, including only the Winter Olympics in Beijing is insufficient, and the attitude of these media can change from time to time, incident to incident. All in all, the research has its limitations, but it may be addressed with more samples related to Chinese news globally.

Concerning to the foregoing facts and conclusions, Chinese media should show the world what the real China is. It is highly demanding, for one thing, they have to search for the right angles that foreign audience can accept to report news related to China. For another, to fight for the international discourse power in the face of innumerable challenges from home and abroad. Only by overcoming those hardships would the Chinese media do a better job of “telling China’s stories.”



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Report Resource:

1. *Full-blown boycott pushed for Beijing Olympics*
(<https://www.foxnews.com/sports/full-blown-boycott-pushed-for-beijing-olympics>)
2. *Pelosi calls for China Winter Olympics boycott*
(<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57166964>)
3. *Biden administration soon to announce diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Olympics*
(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/11/16/beijing-olympics-2022-biden-patriotic-boycott/>)
4. *2022 Beijing Winter Olympics: Australia joins US diplomatic boycott*
(<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-59573500>)
5. *India joins diplomatic boycott of Beijing Olympics over role of Chinese soldier from border clash*

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(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/2022/02/03/olympics-india-china-torch-boycott/>)

6. *2022 Beijing Winter Olympics: Australia joins US diplomatic boycott*

(<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-59573500>)