

Unpacking the Trend of the Belt and Road Initiative Narratives in Australian Media from 2013 to 2020

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a central policy of the Chinese government. This paper analyses the trend and evolution of the BRI narratives from 2013 to 2020 in Australian print media. By using Leximancer and NVivo Analysis, and frame analysis, this paper selects works from five Australian mainstream print media: *The Sydney Morning Herald* (The SMH), *The Age*, *The Australian*, *The Australian Financial Review* (The AFR) and Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). It identifies that the BRI has been gradually politicised and ideologized in Australian print media and these narratives shifted in tone from mostly positive to highly critical. Also, the BRI media narratives have been not about the BRI, but the Chinese government as a whole.

Keywords: *Belt and Road Initiative, Australian mainstream media, Leximancer and NVivo, Sino-Australian relations, frame*

1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was first proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013 and has been viewed within and beyond China as one of the party-state's central diplomatic and economic policies. While many countries have engaged with the BRI on different levels, the response in Australia has ranged from lukewarm acceptance in the initial stages to suspicion and rejection to varying degrees of anti-China rhetoric. According to Raby (2020), recent Sino-Australian relations have been like a roller coaster ride, purportedly diving into the lowest ebb of history.

The Labor Party-led Victorian state government signed two Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) on the BRI in 2018 and 2019. This was condemned by the Liberal–National Coalition-led Australian federal government under the leadership of Prime Minister Scott Morrison. The Morrison government claimed that Victoria broke ranks with the Australian federal government, because the Australian federal government had rejected the BRI in 2017. In 2020, the Australian Parliament passed Australia's Foreign Relations Bill to strengthen federal authority and foreign policy consistency over state and Territory foreign affairs. The Victorian state government was forced to withdraw from the two MoUs on the BRI in 2021. Adding to the anti-China rhetoric in the media in 2020 was a global pandemic. The worldwide Covid-19 outbreak, which first appeared in China, has complicated China's global image. The Australian federal government's move to advocate an independent Covid-19 inquiry in April 2020 without first consulting with the Chinese government first antagonized the Chinese government, and precipitated a Sino-Australian trade war, further damaging bilateral relations.

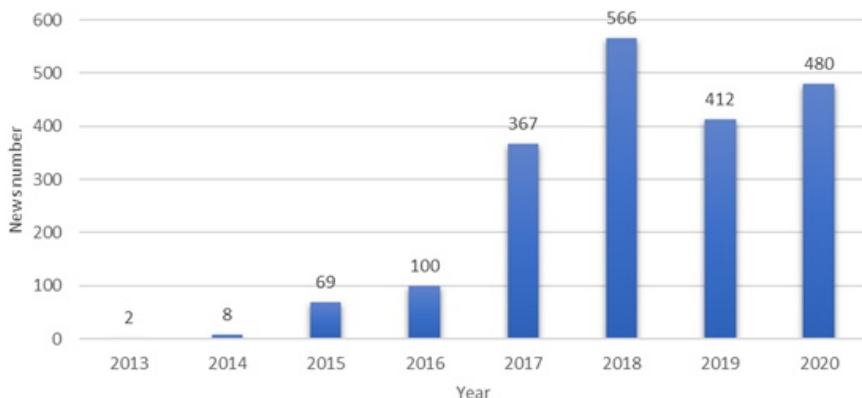
Prior to the collapse of the BRI deal with Victoria in 2021, a great deal of discussion had ensued in the Australian media about the

opportunities of the BRI for Australia. Drawing on empirical experience, this study hypothesizes that from 2013 to 2020, the BRI narratives in Australian mainstream print media shifted in tone from mostly positive to highly critical. By using Leximancer and NVivo analysis and frame analysis, this paper will test this hypothesis and identify the evolution of the BRI narratives in Australian journalism. Since there is no adequate empirical research of media representations of the BRI in Australia, this paper fills in the gap to record the evolution of the BRI narratives in Australian mainstream print media. It also helps to understand the BRI in Australia, as it has been a heated topic for years. Finally, it contributes to a better understanding of China in Australia on the whole.

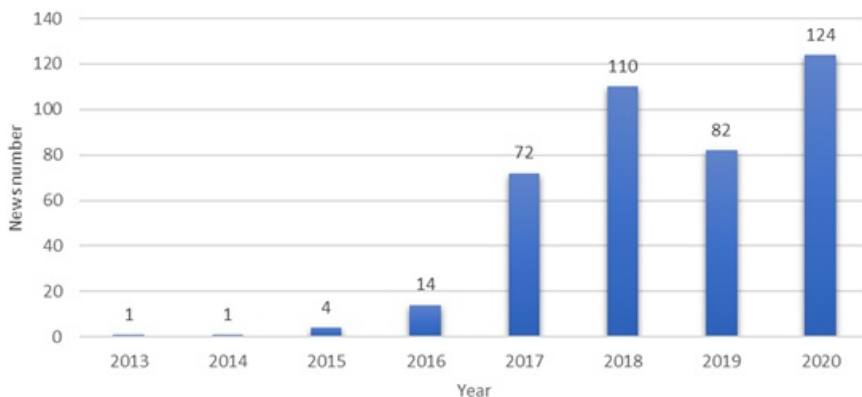
2. Method

2.1. Selection of Material

This paper selects *The Sydney Morning Herald* (The SMH), *The Age*, *The Australian*, *The Australian Financial Review* (The AFR) and Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) as media representatives to analyze BRI-related news. This choice is made by holistically considering the level of their influence, trust and target audience, based on different studies (Catsaras, 2015; Flew *et al.*, 2020). Factiva, a global news and search engine, is used. In order to find out the accurate BRI outlets, after rounds of experiments, I use “Belt and Road Initiative” or “One Belt One road” or “belt and road” or “Silk Road Economic Belt” or “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” or “Maritime Silk Road” or “belt road” as search terms, because these cover all names associated with the BRI in English. Also, time span is from 17th September 2013, when President Xi first proposed the BRI, to 31st December 2020, the last day of 2020. The number of news items mentioning the BRI is shown in Figure 1, 2004 articles in total.

Figure 1 The News Number of the Five Media That Mentions the BRI

However, some of 2004 media reports do not concentrate on the BRI. By employing Factiva, the research found 408 articles that focused on the BRI through adjusting the aforementioned search terms according to headline and lead paragraph.

Figure 2 The News Number of the Five Media That Focuses on the BRI

Last, these articles are double-checked for anomaly-detection and data-cleaning to delete inappropriate information and formats such as biographies of authors.

To observe the evolution of the BRI narratives in the Australian media, it is necessary to find the watershed of the BRI in Australia. In fact, the turning point of the BRI in Australia appeared in March 2017, when Canberra refused to officially endorse the BRI by signing an MoU. In my search of all the 408 samples, I concluded that the article “Cabinet saw no gain in Xi ‘project of the century’” written by Paul Kelly and published by *The Australian* on 29th May 2017, was the first one to indicate the official rejection of the Australian Federal Government. Before this, there were 59 articles published over more than 4 years; after that, there were 349 articles over the next three and a half year.

2.2. Leximancer and NVivo Analysis

The crucial step of this study is exploratory by identifying main frames in the Australian media narratives. Due to numerous media texts regarding the BRI in Australia, the usage of computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) is required in order to enhance efficiency and visualize data, which offer greater insights into the “patterns of relevance” of the data (Anderson, 2012; Angus *et al.*, 2013). NVivo and Leximancer are renowned choices for such identification and are selected for aforementioned purpose in this research (Wilk *et al.*, 2019). In terms of media text analysis, both programs can be used to find out the themes, concepts under each theme and the relationships among these concepts and themes (Adu, 2019; Smith and Humphreys, 2006). The process of working with texts in NVivo and Leximancer constitutes grouping all the data in a certain way so that main themes and their related concepts can be identified (Adu, 2019; Smith and Humphreys, 2006).

The reason why the two programs are employed concurrently is that even with similar roles of conceptual analysis and relational analysis, both have different algorithms and functions. In brief,

NVivo analysis is researcher-driven and is, therefore, influenced by and to some degree, limited by researchers' analytical decisions and epistemological positions. Leximancer analysis is more automated and relies on the researchers assigning meaning, interpreting and working with the results.

(Wilk *et al.*, 2019: 110)

More importantly, utilizing two programs to identify frames of identical data will avoid potential program bias and increase research credibility.

In Leximancer, the Concept Map I mainly apply is heat-mapped to demonstrate significance of themes and their affiliated concepts, which means themes outrank concepts (Leximancer, 2018). From the hottest to the coolest; colors in order are red, orange, green, blue and purple, in which the importance and relevance of themes decline gradually (Leximancer, 2018). By adjusting the configuration of “theme size”, the number of themes changes, and, in this research, theme size is arranged from 35 % to 60 % to show from 6 to 11 themes. By modifying the configuration of “visible concepts”, the intensity of concepts under each theme is altered to show different percentages of concepts. In this research, “visible concepts” are set as 100 % to illustrate all the themes and concepts. Based on concept maps, two figures can be drawn as “frequency of several most frequent themes” and “detailed concepts that are affiliated with several most frequent themes” to enrich the understanding of Concept Maps. In NVivo, I primarily employ the first 11 highest occurring words and Word Trees. Word Trees are used to

displayed a single word and its connected contexts through tree branches that reflect the contexts where the word appears (Woolf and Silver, 2017). These words in the branches transpiring near the searched word or with a larger size are ones more frequently appearing (*ibid.*). In this research, the word number of contexts is modified into either maximum 5 or 10, depending on if the pertinent contexts can be explained clearly. On account of lengthy Word Trees, screenshots are made to cover main contexts surrounding searched words.

NVivo and Leximancer Analyses can help understand themes and concepts, but in practice, not every theme or concept will be analysed by the two programs, as some of them have obvious meanings and connotations in this thesis. Also, software is not omnipotent and cannot replace human analysis (Angus *et al.*, 2013). Themes and concepts do not usually equal to frames researchers pursue, because analytical ability of the programs is limited, and thus, this analytical process will be conducted by researchers (Adu, 2019; Smith and Humphreys, 2006). For example, “belt” and “road” is the name word of the BRI, but the BRI cannot be simply framed as “belt” or “road”. As Crofts and Bisman (2010) argue, “the application of CAQDAS should not operate as a substitute for the researcher’s immersion in, or interpretation of the data but rather as a means for enriching the research process” (p. 197). To be precise, Leximancer Analysis includes three categories: 1. concept maps with 100% visibility, 2. frequency of the several most frequent themes, and 3. detailed concepts that are affiliated with the several most frequent themes. NVivo Analysis encompasses two categories: (1) The first 11 highest occurring words, and (2) Word trees of certain words.

2.3. Frame Analysis

This study employs a qualitative frame analysis to investigate the trend of the BRI narratives in the Australian mainstream print media. While

researchers agree that the definition of frame and its application are not established uniformly, frame provides a powerful tool for researching the role of news media as the mediator of real-world events and public interpretation (Borah, 2011; Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). As a social constructionist, Goffman (1974) argued that the frame is an interpretative scheme that constructs reality and facilitates people's ability to perceive, label and understand the constructed information. Furthermore, Entman (1993: 52) notes that the function of the frame is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text".

According to de Vreese *et al.* (2001), from a media studies perspective, "the central dimensions of a frame seem to be the selection, organization, and emphasis of certain aspects of reality, to the exclusion of others" (p. 108). The key words here are "selection", "organization", "emphasis" and "exclusion"; they reveal that a frame is not a holistic and objective description of a subject, but an incomplete and subjective interpretation of the social reality. A generic approach is chosen to examine these BRI frames in the Australian media. According to de Vreese *et al.* (2001), generic frames permit comparisons in different temporal, physical and cultural contexts. This generic modality is well suited to the usage of Leximancer and NVivo Analysis which is often discursively broad and adaptive.

That said, frame analysis is an interpretative tool for reconstructing reality, which can result in contingent and dynamic frames since researchers are not isolated from the outside world and are impacted by their own biography, culture, and beliefs. As a result, it is critical that the frame is not merely "a figment of researchers' imagination" (de Vreese, 2005: 54), and that its validity be tested. Thus, I used Krippendorff's "face, social, and empirical validity" (2013: 329-333) technique to see whether the news reading matches common sense, if the frames

contribute to public debate, and if the evidence used in the framing process is reliable.

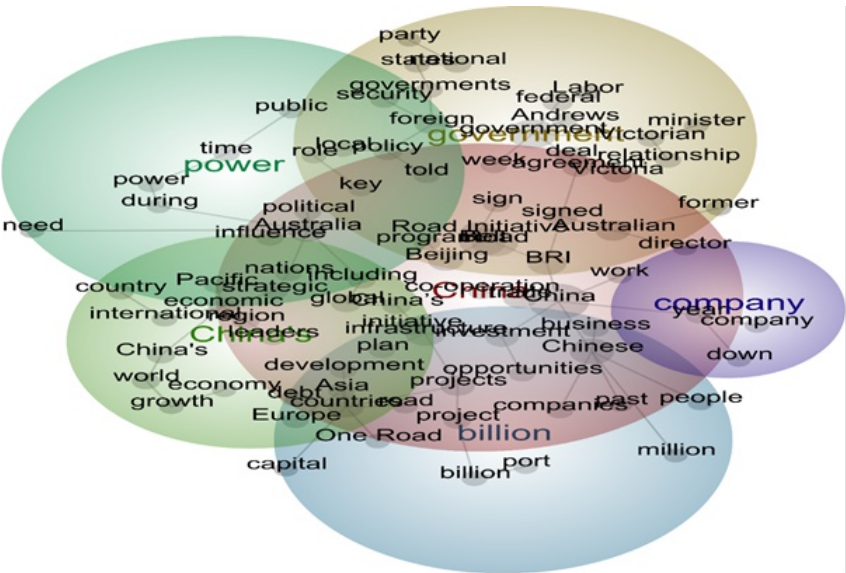
In addition, following the frame analysis and face, social, and empirical validity examinations, an intercoder reliability assessment was performed, with another researcher framing the selection of the obtained samples. This new researcher is fluent in English and well-versed in Chinese and Sino-Australian relations. A statistical reliability test based on Scott (1955) and his formula Scott's Pi has further confirmed the validity of the research findings, revealing 87.1 percent intercoder agreement for frames and their numbers from 2013 to 2020. For this calculation, 41 articles, or almost 10 % of the selected samples, was examined by the second researcher.

3. Framing the BRI in the Australian Media

Undoubtedly, China-related words such as “China”, “China’s” and “Chinese” are the dominant themes in Leximancer Analysis and most frequently occurring words in NVivo Analysis either from 2013 to 2020, 2013 to 2017, or 2017 to 2020, according to the following analysis. The issue is that China/Chinese is a massive concept and what the specific meaning behind China is unclear. Especially, during different periods, the emphasis on China could be different. In general, China can have at least three meanings: (1) the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the country; (2) the Communist Party of China (CPC), the political party; and (3) the Chinese government, the government located in Beijing. In addition, the essence of the BRI can be multi-interpreted. Usually, the BRI is regarded as a policy that has an impartial connotation. However, if there is another word such as “plan”, “project”, “conspiracy” or “strategy” with more stressed position, the more dominant word will be employed to replace “policy”.

3.1. Framing the BRI in the Australian Media from 2013 to 2020

Figure 3 Concept Map of 408 BRI-centred News in Leximancer



Note: Configuration of the map in Leximancer: theme size – 60%, visible concepts – 100%.

Figure 4 Frequency of the Six Most Frequent Themes of 408 BRI-centric News in Leximancer

Analyst Synopsis		Detail Level ▾	Spreadsheet (CSV) Export
Theme	Hits		
China	4720		
government	2895		
China's	2403		
power	1148		
billion	1018		
company	385		

Note: Configuration of the analyst synopsis in Leximancer, high detail level.

Table 1 Detailed Concepts That Are Affiliated with the Six Most Frequent Themes in Leximancer

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Concepts</i>
China	China, Road, Belt, Chinese, infrastructure, BRI, Australia, countries, Beijing, Road Initiative, trade, projects, Australian, investment, initiative, economic, global, China's, year, including, companies, project, business, program, political, co-operation, opportunities, work
Government	government, foreign, deal, signed, federal, agreement, policy, Victoria, security, national, sign, week, governments, Victorian, relationship, Andrews, Labor, former, states, minister, party
China's	China's, region, world, development, Asia, strategic, influence, debt, nations, plan, Europe, leaders, international, Pacific, country, economy, growth
power	power, time, local, role, key, need, public, during
billion	billion, road, people, port, One Road, capital, past, million
company	company, director,

Table 2 The First 11 Highest Occurring Words of 408 BRI-centred News in NVivo

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%) ¹⁷
china	5	4098	2.55
chinese	7	1784	1.11
australia	9	1634	1.01
road	4	1578	0.98
government	10	1476	0.92
belt	4	1345	0.84
bri	3	1053	0.65
infrastructure	14	907	0.56
australian	10	862	0.54
initiative	10	840	0.52
one	3	828	0.51

3.1.1. Contradiction

During this period, the Australian media portray the BRI as an abundant economic opportunity; however, it also depicts the BRI with security and strategic concerns. In terms of economic opportunity, the key words “infrastructure”, “trade”, “economic”, “project”, “business”, “co-operation”, “opportunities”, “growth”, “investment”, “development”, “port” and “capital” explicitly refer to the BRI as an economic opportunity, illustrated by Figure 3 and Table 1. “Infrastructure” is the eighth frequent words in Table 2, suggesting the content of the BRI. In general, the BRI, as an economic opportunity, can be elaborated into at least two facets. “Project”, “business” and “co-operation” signify that the BRI brings business prospect to corporations. “Infrastructure” and “port” illustrate business opportunities focus on infrastructure field. This aligns with the Chinese government’s official public diplomacy narratives that the BRI emphasizes economic cooperation and infrastructure building (Xiao *et al.*, 2019; Zhang and Wu, 2017).

Regarding the security and strategic side, key words “security”, “strategic”, “influence”, “debt”, and “power” shows various intertwined concerns about the BRI, illustrated by Table 1. Among them, “power” is a theme in Leximancer Analysis, Figure 4. The logic behind these words is interconnected. Due to the well-admittedly rise of China’s “power”, its “strategic influence” has been growing and the BRI can be viewed as a part of China’s “power”. The Australian media narratives is concerned and unsettled about the possible “strategic influence” or “power” the BRI may bring, as the Australian media use words “expand”, “economic supremacy”, “saddle poor countries”, “predatory economic behavior” and “failing into Chinese hands” to depict the BRI, shown by Figure 5. This concern in Australian media narratives can be specified as “security” and “debt”. “Security” refers to military unease and fear of

losing stability, as Figure 6 shows that the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) appears closely in the word tree of “security”. The QSD is an informal strategic forum with the emphasis of military cooperation that has been extensively perceived as a response to China’s rise (Sarkar, 2020). “Debt” reflects economic anxiety with “trap” in the word tree of “debt”, alluding a threat to national “sovereignty”, as Figure 6 illustrates. The debt traps means that some BRI host countries such as Sri Lanka cannot afford the repayment on Chinese infrastructure loans and port projects, leading to lease the port to the Chinese government to offset the debt (Wade, 2016). Therefore, the BRI is framed as a contradiction in the Australian media narratives. The BRI clearly has its economic potentials in Australia media, while Australia media are also concerned about the growing power the BRI may have brought militarily and economically.

Figure 5 Word Trees of “power”, “influence” and “strategic” in the 408 BRI-centric News

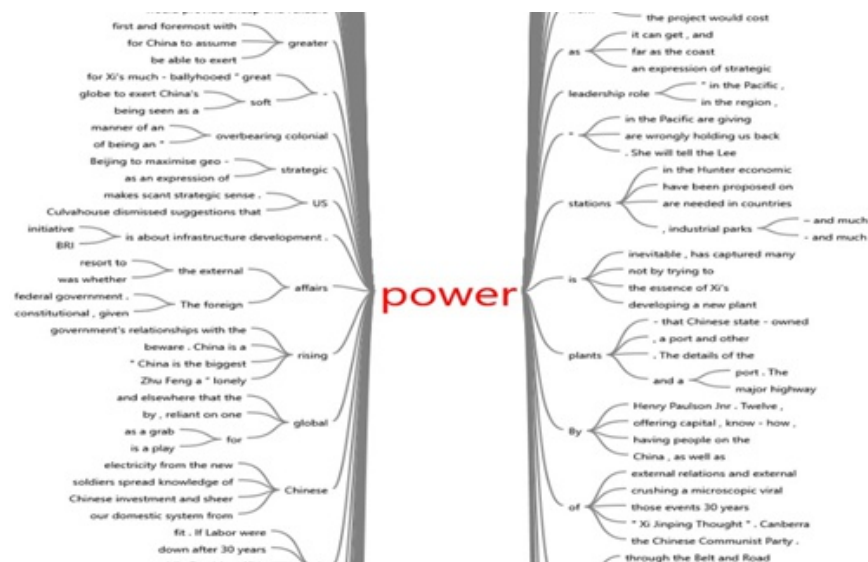
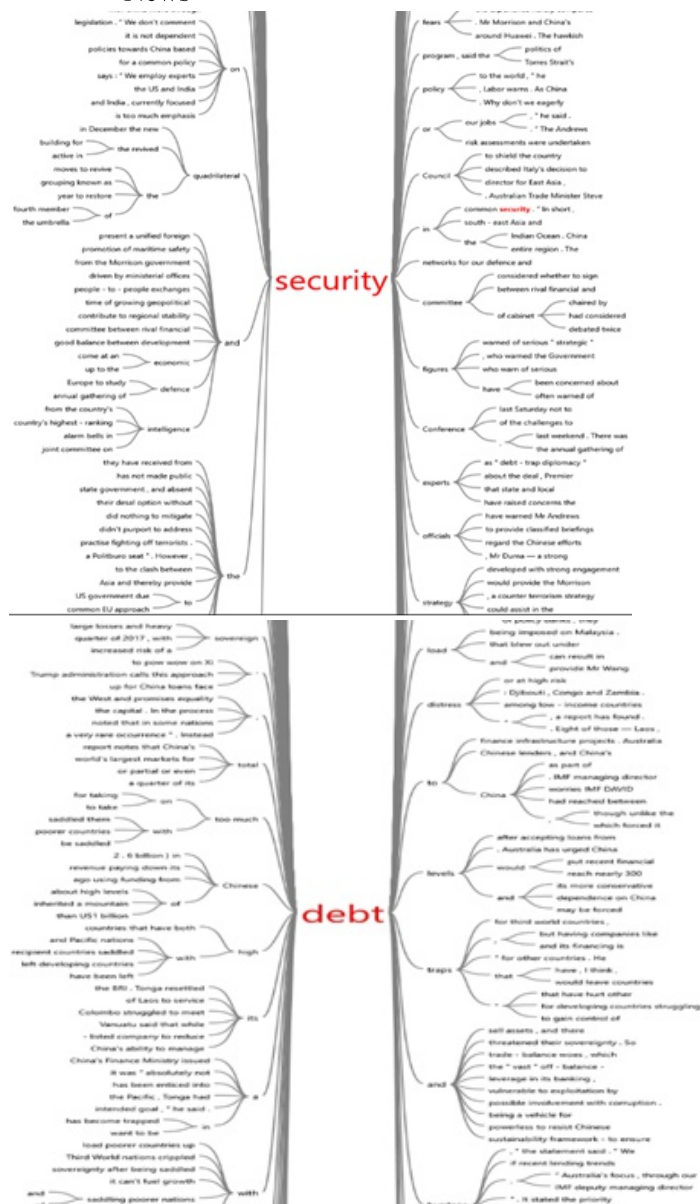




Figure 6 Word Trees of “security” and “debt” in the 408 BRI-centric News



3.1.2. *Government-related policy*

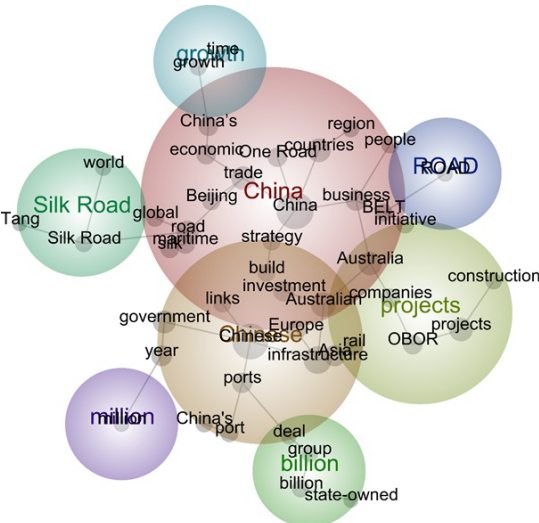
“Government” is the second most important theme in Leximancer Analysis, Figure 4, and fifth most frequently appearing word in NVivo Analysis, Table 2. In addition, there are numerous government-related concepts and key words in Leximancer and NVivo Analysis such as “political”, “federal”, “Victoria”, “national”, “governments” “Victorian”, “Andrews” (Daniel Andrews, Premier of Victoria), “Labor” (Australian Labor Party), “states”, “minister”, “party”, “leaders”, “president”, “premier”, “Xi Jinping” (President of China), “communist” (Communist Party of China) and “Morrison” (Scott Morrison, Prime Minister of Australia). Thus, the BRI primarily deals with relationships among governments. Thus, this frame implies the BRI mainly incorporates the interplay of the Xi Jinping-led Chinese government, the Daniel Andrews-led Victorian state government and the Scott Morrison-led Australian federal government. Behind these governments, there are respective the CPC, Australian Labor Party and Liberal–National Coalition. The BRI was issued by the Chinese government. The Victorian state government signed the BRI MoU, while the Australian federal government refused to be part of the BRI. Thus, the BRI can be viewed as a government-related policy.

3.1.3. *Chinese-government-centric infrastructure policy*

According to the above Leximancer and NVivo Analysis from 2013 to 2020, it is not difficult to observe that China in Australian five media denote the Chinese government, namely, Beijing, where the central government is located. Also, “government” is the second most important theme in Leximancer Analysis, Figure 4, and the fifth most frequently appearing word in NVivo Analysis, Table 2, which underpins the aforementioned observation. Furthermore, the BRI is an infrastructure

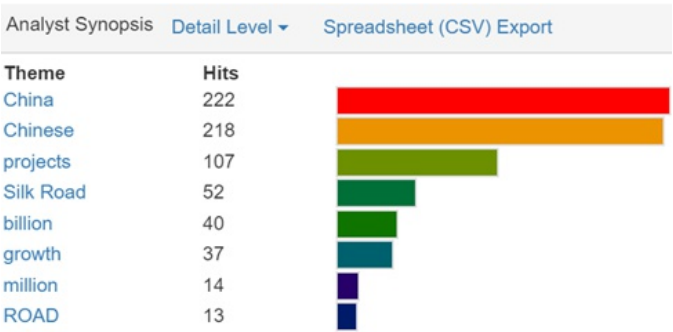
3.2. Framing the BRI in the Australian Media from 2013 to 2017

Figure 8 Concept Map of BRI-centred News in Leximancer from 2013 to 2017



Note: Configuration of the map in Leximancer: theme size – 50%, visible concepts – 100%.

Figure 9 Frequency of the Eight Most Frequent Themes of BRI-centred News from 2013 to 2017 in Leximancer



Note: Configuration of the analyst synopsis in Leximancer, high detail level.

Table 3 Detailed Concepts That Are Affiliated with the Eight Most Frequent News Themes from 2013 to 2017 in Leximancer

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Concepts</i>
China	China, trade, countries, Australia, road, business, economic, maritime, China's, One Road, silk, Beijing, BELT, global, strategy, people, region
Chinese	Chinese, infrastructure, Australian, government, Asia, investment, year, ports, Europe, port, links, build, China's
projects	projects, OBOR, companies, rail, initiative, construction
Silk Road	Silk Road, world, Tang
billion	billion, group, deal, state-owned
growth	growth, time
million	million
road	road

Table 4 The First 11 Highest Occurring Words of BRI-centric News from 2013 to 2017 in NVivo

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%) [▽]
china	5	260	2.61
chinese	7	147	1.48
road	4	126	1.27
one	3	118	1.19
infrastructure	14	83	0.83
australia	9	74	0.74
belt	4	74	0.74
projects	8	64	0.64
government	10	59	0.59
australian	10	57	0.57
new	3	57	0.57

3.2.1. *The resurrection of the historical Silk Road*

According to Figure 9, “Silk Road” ranks 4th of all the themes in Leximancer Analysis. As a notion, Silk Road, literally takes its name from the profitable trade in silk that rose in the Han dynasty in China (Winter, 2019). The ancient Silk Road gradually developed into a network of trade routes, connecting and Southeast Asia and East Asia with the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, Persia, Southern Europe, and East Africa (*ibid.*). To further understand the historical ties of Silk Road, “Tang”, one of concepts in the theme “Silk Road” is worth noting. As illustrated by the following Figure 10, “Tang” refers to Tang Dynasty and is also intertwined with other words with historical connotations such as “dynasties: Zhou, Qin”, “Han” (the Han dynasty), “Golden age”, “Du Fu” (a poet in the Tang dynasty), “Fang Gan” (a poet in the Tang dynasty), “AD 618-907” (duration of the Tang dynasty) and “Emperor Li” (the family name of emperors in the Tang dynasty). Well-admittedly, the Tang dynasty is one of the most glorious and prosperous periods in Chinese history, when the Silk Road reached its golden age (Liu, 2019).

To deepen the understanding of the word “silk”, the word tree of “silk” is employed and shown in Figure 10. “Road” is as same as the size of “silk”, indicating the indivisibility of the two words. More importantly, the word “new” is a stressed one that occurs around the “silk” word tree. This leads to a notion of “New Silk Road” that has been constantly used as a substitute for the BRI by Xi Jinping’s speeches and the Chinese government’s official documents. Thus, the resurrection of the historical Silk Road is one frame of the BRI in the Australian media.

Figure 10 Word Trees of “Silk” and “Tang” of BRI-centric News from 2013 to 2017



Note: Configuration of six-word trees in NVivo: find exact matches; branch order – number of matches; context (words): maximum 5.

3.2.2. *An infrastructure-focused economic opportunity*

“Trade”, “business”, “economic”, “investment”, “companies”, “projects” and “capital” either show in red/orange colored Leximancer Analysis, Figure 8 or frequently appear in NVivo Analysis, Table 4. More crucially, “growth”, and “project” are two of eight themes in total in Leximancer Analysis, Figure 9, indicating the significance of the BRI’s economic side. In general, these words mean that the BRI brings investment and businesses to companies. Table 3 and Table 4 illustrate that “port”, “links”, “rail”, “construction” and “ports” regularly appear in Leximancer and NVivo Analysis, belonging to a broader notion, namely, infrastructure. More significantly, “infrastructure” ranks the 5th most frequently appearing word in NVivo map, Table 4. Thus, one of the frames of the BRI-centric news in the Australian media is an infrastructure-focused economic opportunity.

3.2.3. *A China-centric project*

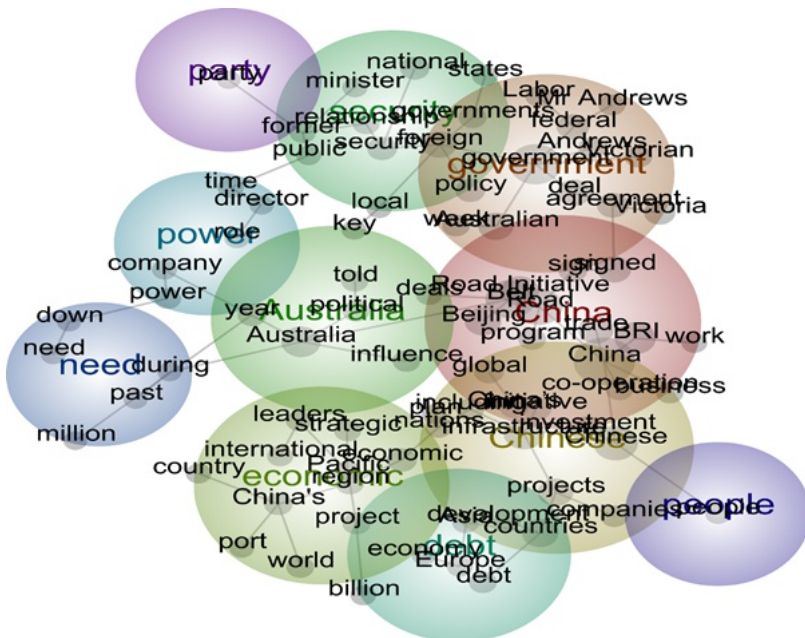
“Government” from 2013 to 2020 is the second most important theme in Leximancer Analysis, and the fifth most frequently appearing word in NVivo Analysis, whereas “government” from 2013 to 2017, as a notion, has been weakened. “Government” and “Beijing” only appear in Leximancer Analysis, Table 3 as a concept rather than a theme, and just rank 9th and 24th in NVivo Analysis, Table 4. Thus, the government is not the main frame here. Meanwhile, “China”-related concepts are still dominant, as Figure 9 and Table 4 indicate. Also, there are no other concepts to extend the meaning of “China”, so this only utilizes “China”, the People’s Republic of China.

Furthermore, “project” is the third theme in Leximancer Analysis, Figure 9 and the eighth most regularly occurring word in NVivo Analysis, Table 4. As mentioned before, the essence of the BRI is a

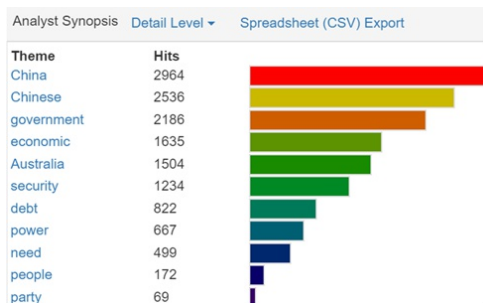
policy, as this research has constantly elucidated. “Policy” has an impartial connotation. However, if there is another word such as “project” in Leximancer and NVivo Analysis with a more stressed position, the more dominant word will be employed to replace “policy”. For this part, “project” as a word can be utilized to define the BRI, as it frequently appears both in Leximancer and NVivo Analysis. Moreover, the usage of “project” rather than “policy” implies that Australian media view the BRI more as a concrete business opportunity, stressing again its economic side. Thus, the BRI is framed as a China-centric project.

3.3. Framing the BRI in the Australian Media from 2017 to 2020

Figure 11 Concept Map of BRI-centric News in Leximancer from 2017 to 2020



Note: Configuration of the map in Leximancer: theme size – 35%, visible concepts – 100%.

Figure 12 Frequency of the Eleven Most Frequent Themes of 408 BRI-centric News from 2017 to 2020 in Leximancer

Note: Configuration of the analyst synopsis in Leximancer, high detail level.

Table 5 Detailed Concepts That Are Affiliated with the Eleven Most Frequent Themes from 2017 to 2020 in Leximancer

Themes	Concepts
China	China, Belt, Road, BRI, Road Initiative, Beijing, trade, signed, global, sign, program, work
Chinese	Chinese, infrastructure, countries, projects, investment, initiative, China's, including, companies, business, nations, co-operation, plan
government	government, Australian, deal, foreign, federal, agreement, Victoria, policy, week, Victorian, Andrews, Mr Andrews, Labor
economic	economic, region, China's, project, world, strategic, Pacific, international, leaders, country, port
Australia	Australia, year, influence, political, told, deals, key
security	security, national, governments, relationship, states, former, local, minister, public
debt	debt, development, Asia, Europe, billion, economy
power	power, time, role, company, director
need	need, during, down, past, million
people	people
party	party

Table 6 The First 11 Highest Occurring Words of BRI-centric News from 2017 to 2020 in NVivo

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%) ¹⁷
china	5	3341	2.50
chinese	7	1501	1.12
australia	9	1350	1.01
government	10	1338	1.00
road	4	1242	0.93
belt	4	1108	0.83
bri	3	942	0.70
australian	10	738	0.55
initiative	10	706	0.53
infrastructure	14	701	0.52
beijing	7	690	0.52

3.3.1. Division

The BRI has an economic side, as “trade”, “infrastructure”, “projects”, “investment”, “companies”, “business”, “economic”, “development”, “economy”, frequently appears in Leximancer Analysis, Table 5, and NVivo Analysis, Table 6. “Economic” is the fourth of eleven themes in Leximancer Analysis, Figure 12. All of this indicates that the BRI brings investment and economic opportunities to companies. However, with regards to the aforementioned theme “economic”, its NVivo word tree Figure 14 not only demonstrates economic “prosperity” but also more closely adjoins economic “dependency”. There has been a long-time concern that the Australian economy relies on China. To stress this reliance on China, the Chief Economist of PWC Jeremy Thorpe (2019) suggests that the Australian economy could lose 3-5% of GDP growth in the event of a nose-dive in the Chinese economy. In the word tree of “economic”, many terms are in a negative tone such as “warning”, “dependency for its political advantage”, “benefit for signing up, but a lot of negative strategic”, “benefit derived from the agreement could be dwarfed in importance”, “benefit project, it has a lot of political agenda”,

“criticism of flares” and “defies rational analysis”, indicating that the BRI in Australian media is divisive.

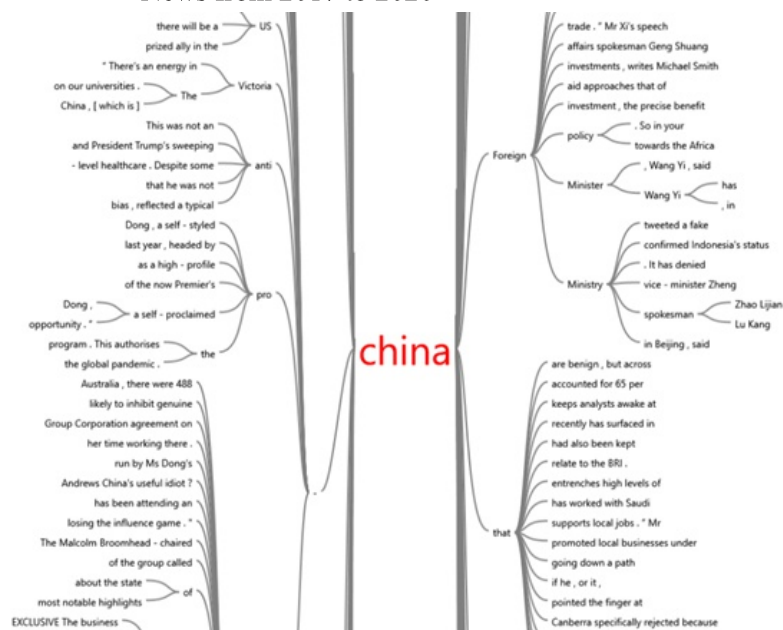
Furthermore, “security”, “strategic”, “influence”, “debt”, and “power” reveal a variety of intertwined anxieties about the BRI in Leximancer and NVivo Analysis. As mentioned previously, the BRI-represented “power” and “strategic influence” has been growing, leading to worries such as “security” and “debt”. More concretely, as word trees of these five words Figure 15 indicates, “debt” refers to “too much debt”, “debt trap”, “a political tool which saddles poor countries with too much debt”, “predatory economics”, “leave countries at China’s mercy” and “threaten their sovereignty”. “Security” is surrounded by “to ensure security” and “ability to protect security”, illustrating the fear of losing stability in Australian media. “Power” is strongly related to “paving the way for China to assume greater power”, “a fairly naked attempt by Beijing to maximize geostrategic power” and “it employs economic power as an expression of strategic power”, signifying the rise of China and transforming its economic power into strategic influence. Furthermore, “influence” suggests “an undue expansion of China’s global influence”, “China buying global influence”, “corrosion of democracy under China’s global influence”, “China’s initiative as a vision of foreign influence”, “seeking influence” and “influence, saddling poor nations with debt”, implying China’s ambition and strategy. Likewise, “strategic” indicates “a fairly naked attempt by Beijing to maximize geostrategic”, “Beijing directs capital flow to reinforce its strategic” and “as a tool used by Beijing to advance its strategic”.

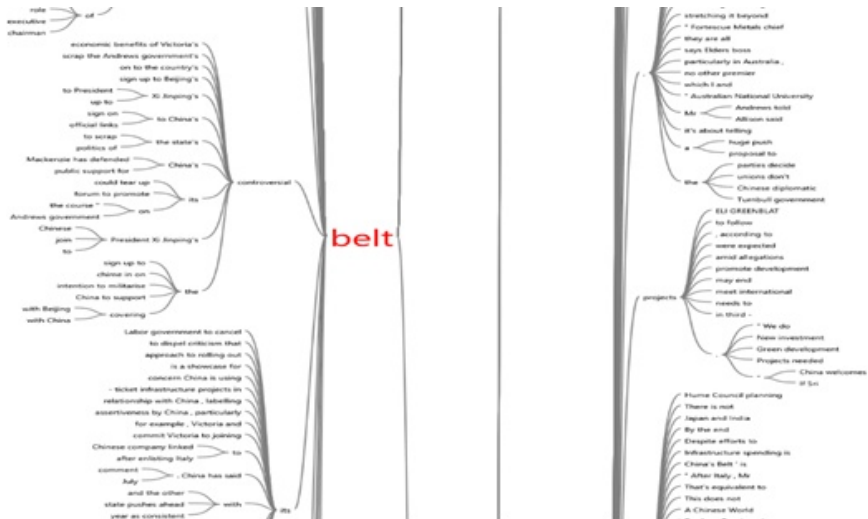
The similar narratives to the above five words appear from 2013 to 2020, as mentioned before, but the narratives from 2017 to 2020 clearly deteriorate. More crucially, it is worth noting that only “power” constitutes one theme from 2013 to 2020, whereas “security”, “debt” and

“power” are three independent themes in Figure 12 from 2017 to 2020. This conspicuously signifies the concerns towards the BRI in Australian media exacerbate.

Additionally, even the neutral terms become divisive. “China”, the most dominant theme in Leximancer Analysis, Figure 12 and most regularly occurring word in NVivo Analysis, Table 6, is closely surrounded by “anti” and “pro” in the word tree of “China”, as illustrated by Figure 13. This has never happened in the word tree of “China” from 2013 to 2020 or from 2013 to 2017. Also, as the sixth most frequently transpiring word in NVivo Analysis, Table 6, “Belt”, also the name word of the BRI, is tightly bordered by “controversial” in its word tree Figure 13. Thus, drawing on the above, one of the BRI frames in Australian media is division.

Figure 13 Word Trees of the “China” and “belt” in the BRI-centric News from 2017 to 2020





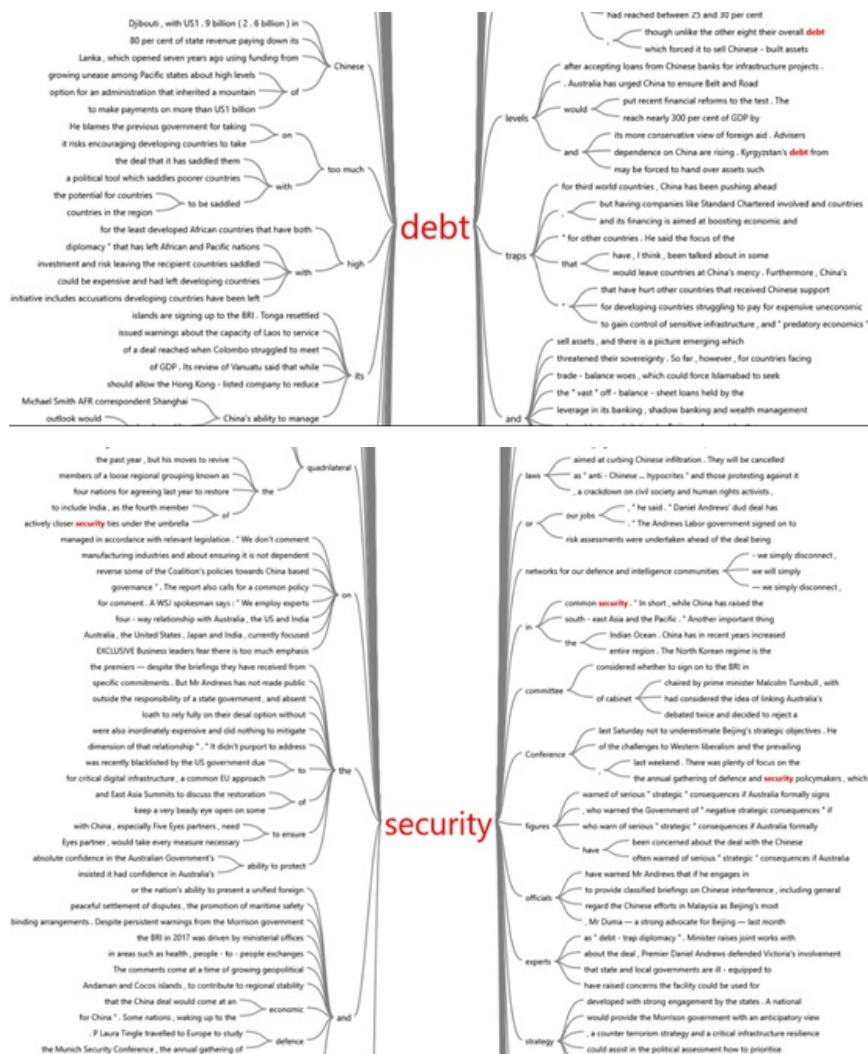
Note: Configuration of six-word trees in NVivo: find exact matches; branch order – number of matches; context (words): maximum 5.

Figure 14 Word Trees of “economic” of BRI-centric News from 2017 to 2020



Note: Configuration of six-word trees in NVivo: find exact matches; branch order – number of matches; context (words): maximum 10.

Figure 15 Word Trees of “security”, “strategic”, “influence”, “debt”, and “power” of BRI-centric News from 2017 to 2020





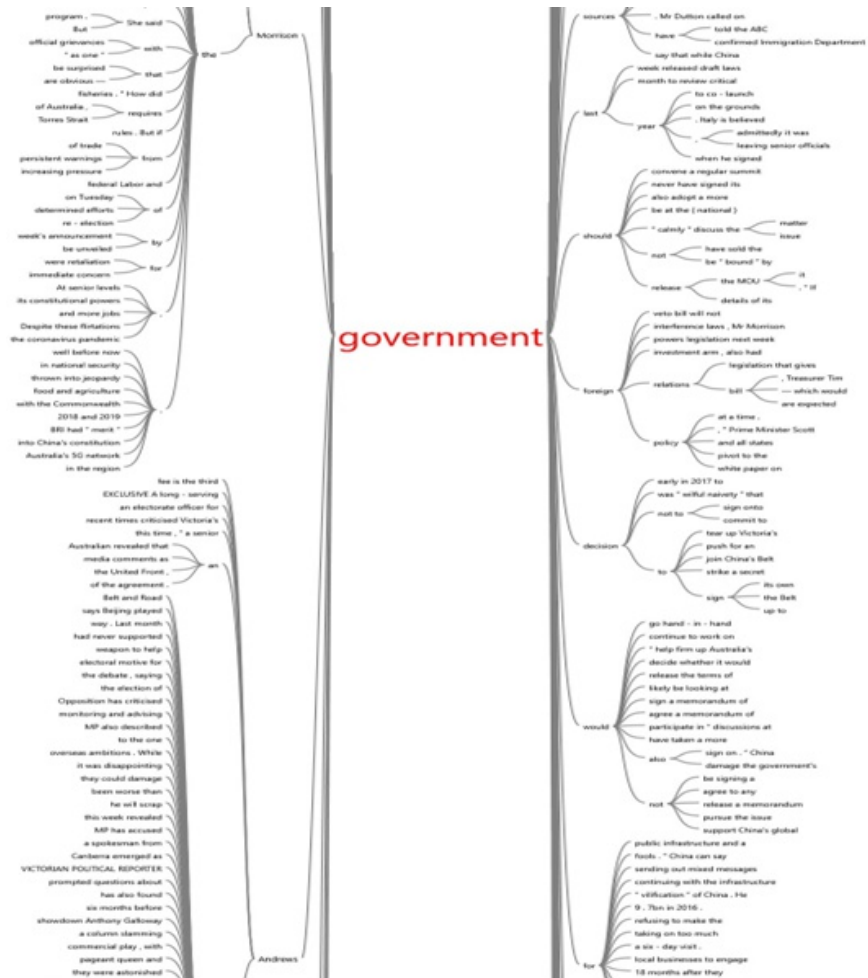


Note: Configuration of six-word trees in NVivo: find exact matches; branch order – number of matches; context (words): maximum 10.

3.3.2. An Australian domestic political issue between the federal and state governments

“Government”, the third most crucial theme in Leximancer Analysis, Figure 12, contains the following concepts: “government”, “Australian”, “deal” (the BRI deal between China and Victoria), “foreign”, “federal” (the Australian federal government), “agreement”, “Victoria” (one State in Australia), “policy”, “week”, “Victorian”, “Andrews” (Daniel Andrews, Premier of Victoria), “Mr Andrews” (Daniel Andrews, Premier of Victoria) and “Labor” (Australian Labor Party). None of them directly points out China. “Government” is the fourth most frequently occurring word in NVivo Analysis, Table 6, and its word tree in Figure 16 does not explicitly illustrate the involvement of China. More significantly, the word tree of “government” clearly indicates that it is between “Morrison”, Prime Minister of Australia, and “Andrews”, Premier of Victoria.

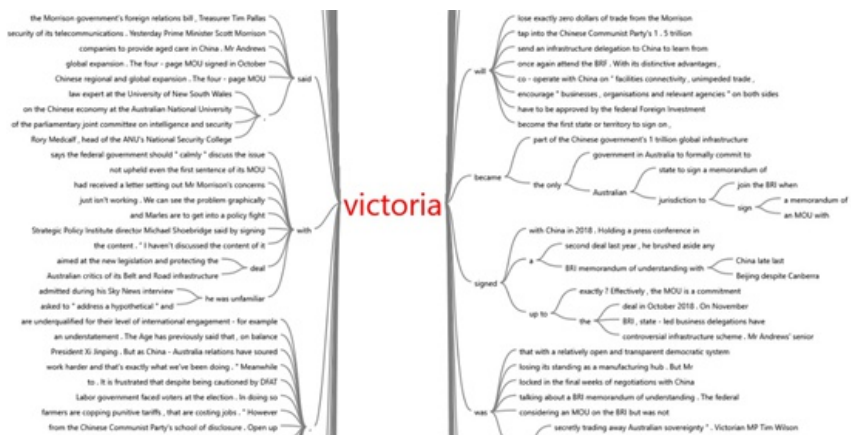
Figure 16 Word Tree of “government” in the BRI-centric News from 2017 to 2020

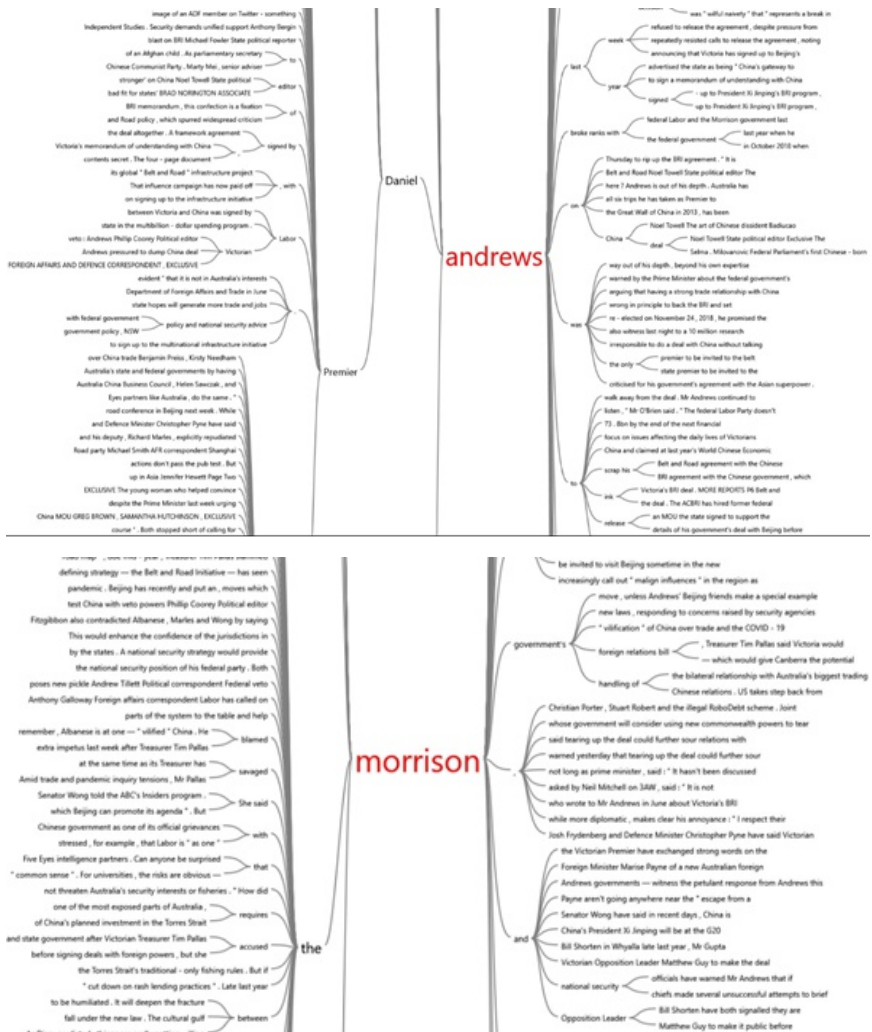


Note: Configuration of six-word trees in NVivo: find exact matches; branch order – number of matches; context (words): maximum 5.

By further exploring the word trees of “Victoria”, “Andrews” and “Morrison” in Figure 17, the political division of the Australian federal government and the Victorian state government regarding the BRI appears and this reflects the divisive essence of the BRI as the previous frame illustrates. For instance, “had received a letter setting out Mr Morrison’s concern with Victoria”, “Victoria signed up to the controversial infrastructure scheme”, “Victoria become the only government in Australia to formally commit to”, “Andrews broke ranks with the federal government”, “Andrews was warned by the Prime Minister”, “Andrews was wrong in principle to back the BRI”, “Andrews was criticized for his government’s agreement with the Asian superpower”, “Andrews pressured to dump the deal”, and “Morrison will legislate to tear up Victoria’s multimillion dollar bill”. Thus, although the BRI is a Chinese government-initiated policy, the BRI has evolved into a domestic political issue between the federal and state governments in Australian media. So, one of the BRI frames in Australian media is an Australian domestic political issue between the federal and state governments.

Figure 17 Word Trees of “Victoria”, “Andrews” and “Morrison” of BRI-centric News from 2017 to 2020





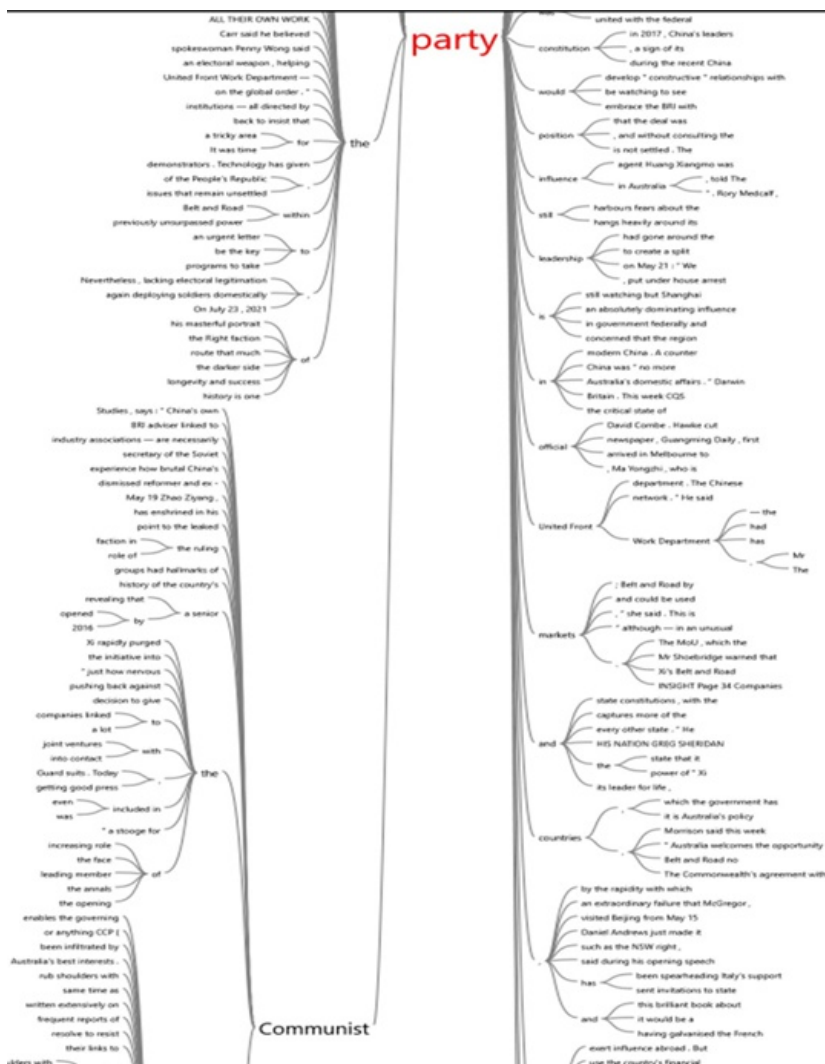
Note: Configuration of six-word trees in NVivo: find exact matches; branch order – number of matches; context (words): maximum 10.

3.3.3. A CPC's policy

Despite the significance of China-related notions, “government” as a concept does not appear in the first two most important themes “China” and “Chinese” in Leximancer Analysis, Table 5. Also, as mentioned in the last frame, “government”, the third most crucial theme in Leximancer Analysis, Figure 12, contains numerous concepts about Australia, but rarely relates to China. “Government” is the fourth most frequently occurring word in NVivo Analysis, Table 6 and its word tree in Figure 16 do not explicitly illustrate the involvement of China. Thus, even though China-related notions are still dominant, as shown by Figure 11 and Table 6, the meaning of China is not about the Chinese government. Also, are no signs are indicating that China is about the PRC.

By searching the word tree of “party” in Figure 18, a theme in Leximancer Analysis, Figure 12, “party” mainly means the Communist Party of China (CPC). This can be employed to explain the inference of China. Noticeably, in addition to routinely mentioning BRI issued by the CPC such as “the BRI, which was included in the party constitution”, the Australian media outlets discuss more about the Chinese political system, Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and its following Massacre and Uighurs. For example, “Mao Zedong, the great dictator of the People’s Republic”, “freedom that drove the Tiananmen demonstrators”, “intensified by Hu’s death in April. The massacre set” (Hu Yaobang, former General Secretary of the CPC, his death indirectly triggered the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989), “detention of Uighurs” “leader in nationally televised meeting May 19 Zhao Ziyang” (on 19th May 1989, Zhao, former Premier, appeared in Tiananmen Square and delivered a speech to protesters, which is the last time of his public appearance) “control history is one of the party”, “lack electoral legitimacy”, and “how brutal the CPC”.

Figure 18 Word Trees of “party” of BRI-centric News from 2017 to 2020



Note: Configuration of six-word trees in NVivo: find exact matches; branch order – number of matches; context (words): maximum 10.

All the above is irrelevant to the BRI and intended to condemn the CPC regarding its authoritarian political system and violation of human rights. To this extent, the BRI has been arguably politicized to an ideological level, stressing the CPC rather than the Chinese government or the PRC. Thus, one of the BRI frames in Australian media is a CPC's policy.

4. Discussion

Drawing the above, the frames are summarized in the following Table 7.

Table 7 The BRI Frames in the Australian Media from 2013 to 2020, from 2013 to 2017 and from 2017 to 2020

2013-2020	The BRI-centric news number: 408; The BRI-related news number: 2004
	Contradiction (Neutral)
	Government-related policy (Neutral)
	A Chinese-government-centric infrastructure policy (Positive)
2013-2017	The BRI-centric news number: 59; The BRI-related news number: 260
	An infrastructure-focused economic opportunity (Positive)
	A China-centric project (Neutral)
	The resurrection of historical Silk Road (Positive)
2017-2020	The BRI-centric news number: 349; The BRI-related news number: 1744
	An Australian domestic political issue between the federal and state governments (Negative)
	A CPC's policy (Negative)
	Division (Negative)

Source: Created by the author.

4.1. The Increasingly Dark Picture of the BRI in Australian Media

Drawing on the above Table 7 and Figure 1 and Figure 2, the amount of BRI news rose since 2016, when Sino-Australian relations started to deteriorate. By comparison, from 2013 to 2015, when bilateral relations were ‘normal’, the number of BRI outlets has not frequently appeared in the five media. The general trend of the BRI-centric articles is almost identical to the number of news stories in the five media that mention the BRI. The Australian media did not draw much attention to the BRI, and the BRI-centric news only make up 17% before 29th May 2017, when the official rejection of the BRI happened. However, after that, the BRI became a news topic in Australian media, accounting for 83% of the BRI-centric news. Similarly, the BRI-related outlets constitute 13% before 29th May 2017, whereas they comprise 87% after that date. More interestingly, the once-a-century Covid-19 pandemic has not decreased the media attention in Australia towards the BRI but has possibly deteriorated the media atmosphere of the BRI. In 2020, the BRI-centric news culminated, and the BRI-related news reaches its second highest. This, on the contrary, signifies increasing media attention to the BRI as an individual case in 2020. Arguably, the reason behind this phenomenon is that the BRI has gradually evolved into an Australian domestic political issue, a point I will return to in the next section of this paper.

In general, the BRI was framed as contradictions from 2013 to 2020 with the coexistence of the positive and negative sides that respectively refer to economic benefits, and strategic and security concerns. This reflects the two debating opponents divided by how Australia should respond to the BRI: economic commentators versus defense hawks or “security-intelligence-military establishment” (Laurenceson and Collinson, May 2017). The defense hawks accuse the economic

commentators of being too naive because they have not seen China's strategic ambition behind the BRI, while the economic commentators criticize the defense hawks that they just apply their emotive rhetoric and they are not interested in hard data and evidence (*ibid.*).

This comparison is also reflected in the tone of the BRI narratives during different periods. Conspicuously, the BRI was much more positive before 2017 in Australian media and mainly means economic benefits such as investment and infrastructure projects, taking up 17% of the BRI-focused news. By comparison, the BRI became a divisive topic with concerns of security, debt, economic dependency, and strategic influence from 2017 to 2020, accounting for 83% of the BRI-centric news. Thus, the BRI media reports are generally unfavorable with some favorable opinions, which is consistent with the views of Yang and Wang (2016).

To further understand the current controversy of the BRI, Australia has a pluralistic media system that is conflicted by Australia's economic reliance on China. Freedom of speech encourages people to express differing views of the BRI, some leading to Australia's concerns about the BRI, while some of them being reasonable. Being economically too dependent on China is not healthy and not secure for the Australian economy. Facing increasing power imbalance in the Asia Pacific due to China's rise, Australia is justified to be concerned about the strategic influence of the BRI and take actions correspondingly. "The Liberal-Coalition government has increased spending on foreign aid for the first time since the Coalition came to power in 2013", which is mainly because of China's BRI investment throughout the Pacific (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8th March 2021).

However, military concern seems irrelevant to the BRI, as it is a Chinese economic and diplomatic proposal. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) appeared frequently about the BRI frames in the

Australian media, although the QSD is an informal strategic forum with the emphasis on military cooperation that has been extensively perceived as a response to China's rise (Sarkar, 2020). All of these signify that the BRI in Australian media has been beyond the BRI itself and politicized.

4.2. Tests for Australian Federal Authority and National Foreign Policy Consistency

The BRI has been involved by the Chinese government, the Australian federal government and the Victorian state government, reflecting the BRI reality in Australia. The Victorian state government has signed up to two BRI MoUs. However, after 2017, the Chinese government, should have been the leading actor, but in fact, has become less important. In fact, the BRI turned into an Australian domestic political issue between the Australian federal government and Victorian state government in Australian media. The Victorian state government's involvement of the BRI to pursue its local economic prosperity and employment improvement has led to fierce criticism in the Australian federal government (Jiang, 2019, 2020a). In 2020, the Australian Parliament passed Australia's Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Bill to strengthen the federal authority and foreign policy consistency over state and Territory foreign affairs (Jiang, 2020b). Currently, the discussion about the BRI in Australian media is not about the BRI itself, but a test for federal authority and national foreign policy consistency in Australian media, more accurately, a constitutional issue.

This media agenda has put the Morrison government in an extreme position that if he does not revoke the deal, Morrison will look incapable of showing Australia's sovereign resolve. This is a fatal issue for top leaders irrespective of democratic or authoritarian countries and maybe more deadly in a democracy, as democratic leadership is elected directly or indirectly by the public. Thus, to some extent, these media narratives

have set a policy agenda for the Australian federal government, which rhetorically leaves no diplomatic leeway to the Morrison government. In reality, the Victorian state government was forced to withdraw from the two MoUs on the BRI in 2021.

4.3. The Growingly Ideological Lens towards the BRI

“China/Chinese” is undoubtedly the central frame of the BRI in Australian media. Overall, “China/Chinese” refers to the Chinese government from 2013 to 2020 in Australian media, and this reflects the fact that the BRI is initiated by the Chinese government. However, before 2017, the BRI frame directs to “China/Chinese”, an open-ended concept, the PRC, without pointing out much about governmental agencies. In contrast, after 2017, “China/Chinese” in the BRI frame evolved into the CPC, which involves criticism against the Chinese authoritarian political system and violation of human rights. Evidently, these comments should have not been linked with the BRI, an economic and diplomatic proposal, but the Chinese government as a whole. Also, by using “CPC”, the single ruling party in China, the discussion about the BRI in the Australian media was colored with communism, an ideology that the West, including Australia, has opposed for decades.

To deepen the understanding of this trend, the background of China’s image in Australia is key. There is a growing literature around the threat of China in Australia from Clive Hamilton (2018), Andrew Hastie (2019), and Peter Dutton (quoted in *ABC News*, 12th October 2019). Despite some disagreements with their views, their ideology-driven viewpoints have been more widely transmitted and have stimulated a heated discussion in the Australian media, which, to some extent, has shaped the negative atmosphere of the China-initiated BRI in the Australian media, with other adverse commentaries on China, such as the Hong Kong protests, Sino-American trade war and so on.

To this extent, the BRI in Australian media has been ideologized and beyond the BRI itself since 2017.

4.4. The Gradually Disappearing Positive Frames

The resurrection of the historical Silk Road frame only appeared from 2013 to 2017 in the Australian media and relevant notions did not emerge as a primary frame either from 2013 to 2020 or from 2017 to 2020. To define the ancient Silk Road, it

began when trader and explorers found their passage from China to Europe and the Middle East in the second century BCE, mostly as a trade based on silk and silk products but also including precious stones and jewelry.

(Peters, 2019: 1)

However, the contemporary notion of the ancient Silk Road is a recent phenomenon forming in the mid-19th century (Mishra, 2020). Peters (2019) argues

The ancient Silk Road is more than an historical relic that serves as a modern metaphor..... It is a living reality that attests to the very early beginnings of capitalism as a form of merchant capitalism or mercantilism that predated the development of capitalism in Europe and therefore, of course, the industrial capitalism that grew up with the so-called 'Industrial Revolution'.

(Peters, 2019: 2)

Thus, the Silk Road has arguably had a positive image in the West, in which industrial capitalism/revolution originated. As a Western democracy, Australia has benefited from global trade, leading to an encouraging view of the Silk Road in Australia (Adams *et al.*, 2014).

Meanwhile, the emphasis on infrastructure has changed. Overall and before 2017, the BRI has been described as an infrastructure project, an economic opportunity, especially before 2017. However, infrastructure as a frame has gradually evaporated after 2017. In fact,

By 2034, Australia's population is projected to grow by 23.7% to reach 31.4 million, adding to infrastructure demand, while existing infrastructure struggles under maintenance backlogs and the condition of many assets is unknown.

(Infrastructure Australia, 2019)

Especially, in 2020, infrastructure building is one of the tenable solutions to recover the Covid-wreaked economy and the Australian federal and state governments have done so to stimulate the economy (Infrastructure Australia, 2020). The BRI with infrastructure as one of the crucial components exactly fits in Australian demand, which supposes to have a positive image in Australia. This also explains why the BRI has been supported by the Australian business community, which is a well-admitted common consensus in Australia (Laurenceson *et al.*, November 2017; Pan, 2018; Shen, 2018; Wade, 2016; Wang, 2018; Yang and Wang, 2016).

That said, the disappearing frames imply that positive factors of the BRI have been gradually receding. The BRI positive narratives about infrastructure or resurrection of historical Silk Road may easily lead to criticism during the Sino-Australian trade war and political tension, due to fear of being labeled "pro-China". To avoid this condemnation, it is

understandable that the positive frames of the BRI have disappeared. Thus, even though infrastructure and historical Silk Road are still key concepts of the BRI, Australia is not part of the BRI and thus, the Australian media cares more about what the BRI means to Australia politically rather than what the BRI is as an economic project with historical connotation.

5. Conclusion

From 2013 to 2020, the BRI in the Australian media has experienced drastic transformations from an economic opportunity to twisted concerns, and from less media attention to increasingly more. Due to the enormous disparity of the BRI news before and after 2017, we can conclude that the BRI media reports are generally unfavorable with some favorable opinions. After 2017, the positive frames of the BRI have gradually disappeared and the BRI has been gradually politicized beyond the BRI itself in Australian media. The BRI has become a domestic political issue, a test for federal authority and national foreign policy consistency in Australian media, more briefly, a constitutional issue. This leaves no diplomatic latitude to the Australian government, even though maintaining the status quo of keeping two MoUs could be less costly. It is more about the CPC being seen as an ideological and substantial threat to Australia, rather than the BRI itself.

That said, to some extent, the BRI has become a Rorschach blot.

Everywhere, inside and outside China, interest groups have gazed upon it and seen different things. What they see often reveals more about themselves than anything else. Naturally, most interpret the BRI to suit their interests.

(Hillman, 2020: 204)

To Australia, what the Australian media reveal is gradually more about Australia rather than the BRI. Its democratic values, liberal media system, economic insecurity, and corresponding overaction, local and federal political conformity are all the pictures the BRI mirror reflects.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This research mostly utilized Leximancer and NVivo Analysis, and frame analysis that involves methodological boundaries. Even if these were productive methods to identify the BRI frames, these methods do not actually demonstrate how these frames are produced from these journalists, what consequences certain frames may have, and why the dramatic shift regarding the BRI narratives in Australian mainstream print media appeared. Also, a certain number of selected articles and authors in Australian mainstream print media may be representative, but they cannot represent the whole media narrative in Australia regarding the BRI.

Future studies can build upon this work by exploring these how, what and why questions, and also television programs about the BRI. Additionally, I recommend the use of interviews to better understand the reporting process of Australian journalists. Such studies would better illuminate the BRI in Australian media.

Notes

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