

News Framing: A Comparison Of The New York Times And The People's Daily Coverage Of Sino-U.S. Spy Plane Collision Of April 1, 2001

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NEWS FRAMING:
A COMPARISON OF THE NEW YORK TIMES AND THE PEOPLE'S DAILY
COVERAGE OF SINO-U.S. SPY PLANE COLLISION OF APRIL 1, 2001

by

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ABSTRACT

On April 21, 2001, the United States and China faced their first major incident of the 21st century when a U.S. spy plane accidentally collided with a Chinese fighter plane. The dialogue that followed between the two countries, as well as the tenor of the incident as reported in the international press, provide some interesting and insightful glimpses into how these major powers handled the incident in the days and weeks that followed. Although the mainstream media in both China and the United States reported the key facts and elements of the incident in a similar fashion, the spin that was ultimately placed on the event by the Chinese press was clearly indicative of the Asian state's desire to portray the United States as being at fault; however, because both countries have an enormous stake in ensuring continued friendly relations for trade purposes, the Chinese press eventually adopted an official position that would allow the United States to "save face" while ensuring that the killed Chinese pilot involved was lauded as a fearless hero of the state and a martyr to its cause. To determine how these events played out in the respective mainstream media of China and the United States, as well as the international media, this research provides a review of the relevant literature to identify how the spy plane collision was portrayed, what elements are regarded as important for analysis. This study compares the two accounts from China and the U.S., and to a lesser extent, the international media, by grouping the media accounts into three separate dimensions: 1) visual framing, 2) contextual framing and 3) operational framing, to determine how these factors played out in the spy plane incident. The analysis of the media accounts is followed by a summary of the research in the concluding paragraph.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background and Overview

On April 1, 2001, what began as a minor training exercise turned into a post-Cold War confrontation between two of the world's nuclear powers. On this date, a collision of a U.S. spy plane and a Chinese fighter jet resulted in a tense – but not hostile – political confrontation between the two nations. The month-long exchange of political diatribes that followed gradually diminished in tone until the United States agreed to the concessions demanded by China, but only after China grudgingly acknowledged that the United States may not have been entirely at fault in the incident. The stand-off was certainly not without some serious consequences for the United States, but the fact remained that when all was said and done, these two former Cold Warriors were able to resolve their differences without coming to blows. Furthermore, it became increasingly clear as the media accounts proceeded on both sides that the U.S. and China had far too much at stake to allow such a relatively minor incident to disrupt their carefully designed trade plans for the future. When the diplomatic dust had settled one month after the incident, what remained could be viewed as a clear application of the gatekeeping function that is increasingly defining the media's role in mainstream society in both the United States and China; however, because the two countries approach the media from diametrically opposite poles of reference as to the freedom of journalists to publish what they want, it is not surprising that what emerged in the press in China was radically different than what was published in the United States. Despite these stark contrasts in content, the mainstream media of both countries can be reasonably expected to adopt a position in support of their respective governments, notwithstanding any actual blame or

wrongdoing that may have occurred. In reality, media accounts in the United States and China are both shaped by the same type of gatekeeping processes that underlie all editorial decisions concerning what events should be reported to the public and how they should be presented; however, a fundamental difference exists between the two countries concerning the relative freedoms of the respective media in covering these events, particularly for international consumption.

Differences in Media Accounts

Although the actual details of the spy plane collision in April 2001 differed substantially in their respective accounts in the Chinese and U.S. media, these differences were not so important to many observers as how important the role they played in shaping public opinion as the events unfolded. Clearly, the mainstream media in any country plays a critical role in shaping public opinion, and the ideological manipulation involved appears to only differ in degrees. A side-by-side comparison of the accounts from China and the U.S. might seem to be covering two completely separate incidents; in reality, though, how the event was framed by the media in their respective countries represented the important story of the day.

Previous research on media framing has focused on the professional techniques that shape people's opinions in controversial situations. Controversy seems to be naturally attracted to major events such as September 11, 2001 and the recent disasters caused by the Pacific Basin tsunami, where observers criticized the Thai government before the floodwaters had receded. The spy plane collision of April 2001 may have paled in comparison to these events, but at the time it represented one of the most controversial stories of the unfolded 21st century as the two giant trading partners attempted to forge

valuable new trade agreements and refine existing ones, all the while walking a diplomatic tightrope on Taiwan.

Categorization of Framing Functions in Media Accounts

In order to facilitate the research on print media (especially newspapers), the framing functions were categorized into three dimensions: 1) visual framing, 2) contextual framing and 3) operational framing, which are defined and discussed further below.

1) Visual Framing. For the purposes of this analysis, this term will follow that provided by Todd Gitlin in *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (1980, p. 7). According to Gitlin, frames in general are “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, or selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (p. 7). Visual framing devices therefore are mechanisms that serve to condition the target audience’s reactions to particular news events, information, or entertainment media programming.

2) Contextual Framing. For the purposes of this study, this term will refer follow the definition provided by Richard A. Nelson in his work, *A Chronology and Glossary of Propaganda in the United States* (1996). According to Nelson, contextual framing refers to how fully the background of an event is developed and through which interpretive lens this information is filtered. It also refers to the use of techniques such as:

- **Demonizing.** The extent of the use of “good versus evil” categorizing language and images that elevate or deflate particular individuals, organizations, movements, ideas, or nations);
- **Equalizing.** Nelson states this means, “How puffed up or deflated are the sides in terms of their implicit strength or importance, especially when contrasted with one another” (p. 170);
- **Excising.** What types of information are left in or taken out of news coverage and why;
- **Ordering.** How the narrative is organized in an effort to favor one side or the other;
- **Personalizing.** The extent to which the protagonists in an given event are developed and portrayed as being “others” or “like us”;
- **Sanitizing.** The degree to which the event is censored to avoid reporting negative information concerning the actual costs in damaged lives and social devastation;
- **Timing.** The extent to which attention is given to a particular agenda, issue, or group compared to other events of the day (Nelson, 1996).

3) **Operational Framing.** According to Mark Allen Peterson, the mandate for journalists today is to "get" the story from sources with diverse, sometime inimical interests. “Most news stories are negotiated in defined social contexts among many different actors, including sources, journalists, editors and press agents” (Peterson, 2001, p. 201). This level of media coverage should be the goal of all responsible journalism; operational framing would provide a comprehensive and balanced analysis of the event without resorting to jingoism or appeals to emotion. For the purposes of this study, this

term will refer to completely objective news reporting that is absent of any discernible contextual framing efforts as defined above on the part of the reviewer.

Clearly, then, a universal theory by definition must apply to various circumstances, various cultures and various societies. Framing, as a mass communication paradigm that was first raised by American scholars and widely examined in American media practices, has an apparent “made-in-USA” label (Entman, 1991 & 1993; Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1974; Rachlin, 1988; Scheufele, 1999 & 2000; Tuchman, 1972). An important question is whether this theory is applicable to a media system with a different cultural background, historical heritage and political system? Framing research focuses on the professional techniques that influence people’s minds in a controversial situation. Nothing is controversial than a dramatically unfolded and dramatically wrapped-up international conflict between two politically and ideologically different countries.

The collision in the mid-air between China-US fighter jets eventually made this collision-in-the-media comparative study possible and timely. In fact, the *New York Times* prefaced its series of articles on this event: “Collision with China:”

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Role of the Media in News Presentation

The concept of “agenda setting” assumed its metaphorical name from the notion that the mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agendas to the public agenda (Bryant & Zillman, 1994). The concept was originally studied in the traditional context of mass communication and voter behavior, but has now been applied to other social and political events as well. “Through their routine structuring of social and political reality, the news media influence the agenda of public issues around which political campaigns and voter decisions are organized” (Bryant & Zillman, 1994, p. 4). This influence is manifested every day as journalists around the world deal with the news in several important ways.

In the first place, journalists (and their superiors) decide which news to cover and report and which to ignore. Further, all of the available reports must be analyzed for newsworthiness and public interests. According to Bryant and Zillman, in an average Western daily newspaper, over 75% of the potential news of the day is rejected immediately and is never transmitted to the general public in the first place. This is not so much a matter of censorship as it is of time and space constraints. “There is not enough space in the newspapers to print everything that is available. Choices must be made. These are the first steps in the gatekeeping routine. But the items that pass through the gate do not receive equal treatment when presented to the audience” (Bryant & Zillman, 1994, p. 4). Some news reports are used at length and are displayed prominently; by contrast, other reports only receive brief coverage. “Newspapers, for

example, clearly state the journalistic salience of an item through its page placement, headline, and length” (Bryant & Zillman, 1994, p. 4).

Gatekeeping and Presentation of News Reports

In the study of mass communication, gatekeeping refers to the inevitable process of news selection by the media where various news items are either allowed into the gates (i.e. selected) or rejected out of the gates (i.e. discarded) through this labyrinth of editorial prerogative (White, 1950). According to Robert I. Rotberg and Thomas G. Weiss (1996), "gatekeeping" (from the scholarly literature in communications theory) refers to "the process by which a nearly infinite array of possible news items is narrowed to the relative handful actually transmitted by the media and heard, read, or seen by audiences” (p. 6). Gatekeeping has also been defined as the selection of media topics that are to be presented to different audiences through different types of media (White, 1950). Even though selected, the messages that finally reach the audience through the media are only the final screened, structured and interpreted products of the media which is merely a symbolic reality in contrast with social reality (White, 1950).

The gatekeeping function in practice may include reporters, copywriters, sub-editors, editors and, to a lesser extent, media owners as well as the government, various pressure groups, political parties and single-issue groups (Peterson, 2001). While these gatekeepers may have no direct influence over media content, they are able to exert considerable pressure as to who has access to what information (White, 1950).

Larger organizations with public relations departments will inevitably be faced with some bad news that must be covered. For example, projections of earnings might fall short of expectations, sales goals will be unfulfilled, employees will lose their jobs,

and so forth; however, it is always important to report such unfavorable news faithfully and accurately. As a direct result of the gatekeeping function by the respective media, some messages are prominently displayed, thereby facilitating low-cost public consumption, while others remain obscure or completely absent. According to Rotberg and Weiss (1996), as a theoretical construct that is applied to social phenomena, gatekeeping studies got their start half a century ago with the work of Kurt Lewin (1947).

This general theoretical framework, Lewin maintained, was applicable to a wide variety of social situations, including news decision-making. "This situation," according to Lewin, "holds not only for food channels but also for the traveling of a news item through certain communication channels" (p. 187). Each of the decision points along the channel represent a "gate"; at each of these gates, some news item will either be excluded from the channel, initially collected only to be discarded later, or promptly passed through various gates and into the news. "Progress in the channel is controlled by a series of gatekeepers -- the journalists, editors, and others who make the key decisions affecting a story. Gates, then, are decision and action points that interconnect and interact with other channels and gatekeepers" (Rotberg & Weiss, 1996, p. 69).

During the last decades of the 20th century, a number of researchers began debating the relative importance of the function of various gatekeepers. For example, Halbran, Elliott, and Murdock (1970) suggested that the gatekeeping function actually began further back in the channel, in fact, even well before a news story reached the editorial office (the news processors), or even the transmission point. The first gatekeeper in the chain is the reporter on the street (the newsgatherer), who is responsible for selecting some stories and not others. Much of the raw data that is employed in

constructing news accounts does not come from direct journalist exposure to an event; rather, such accounts are derived from other sources, which are usually government authorities even in the West (Rotberg & Weiss, 1966). Further, the majority of the power to define reality, in this view of the news process, resides at the point of the reporter-source contact. By the time the story makes its way to the editor, the most important gatekeeping decisions have already been made. The factors that serve to constrain or, conversely, facilitate reporter interaction with some sources and events and not others are important for understanding news content (Rotberg & Weiss, 1966). In this environment, gatekeepers have played an increasingly important role in the West. "Due to widespread uncertainty over the precise ingredients of a best-seller formula," write Rossman and Suman, "administrators are forced to trust the professional judgment of their employees. Close supervision in the production sector is impeded by ignorance of relations between cause and effect" (2000, p. 72).

Additional Factors Influencing Presentation of News Reports

Finally, there are a variety of forces at play in the decision-making process along the entire channel of the news selection process that would apply to both a state-regulated media as well as a free Western press. Certainly, monetary considerations are such a primary consideration, just as time is another. "The cost of obtaining a particular news item (its remoteness, the danger involved in covering it, and any lack of direct national involvement) may cause a journalist or an editor to be reluctant to invest in the progress of the story along the news channel" (Rotberg & Weiss, 1996, p. 70). If the story progresses beyond these initial gates, though, once it is actually through the gate, "cost" is then converted to an "investment" that must be recouped by exploiting the original

investment. “It may even be given special treatment, such as being the lead story. More time and space may then also be devoted to it” (Rotberg & Weiss, 1996, p. 70). This model has served as one of the fundamental research tools used in political communication research. For the purposes of subjective research, this approach provides a relatively straightforward and useful tool for the basis for how news is developed and understanding the news selection process itself (Rotberg & Weiss, 1996).

Research on the gatekeeping function in the mainstream media, including *The New York Times*, was extended by Charles Whitney and Lee Becker's study of 52 Ohio newspaper and television journalists whose responsibilities regularly included selecting wire service stories (McCombs & Protess, 1991). This experimental study was based on two versions of an average day's file of stories that were available on the wire, and provided strong evidence for agenda-setting through the gatekeeping function. These newer studies significantly shifted the focus in further research on the gatekeeping function. According to Maxwell McCombs and David L. Protess (1991), previous research examined characteristics of wire editors, such as attitudes and opinions, that influenced their decisions on which stories to select. “The agenda-setting paradigm shifts attention to environmental influences that affect the selection of stories from the wire” (McCombs & Protess, 1991, p. 208). These authors add that other major news organizations, such as *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, also tend to influence the selection of topics on the national news agenda. According to Gabriel Rossman and Michael Suman (2000), access to the mainstream media has historically been one of the key concerns of advocacy groups in the United States. “Consequently, many advocates and others have perceived network gatekeepers as playing especially powerful roles

because they ultimately determine what is produced and broadcast nationwide” (Rossman & Suman, 2000, p. 65). Similarly, McCombs and Protesse cite research by Stephen Reese and Lucig Danielian that examined the leadership role of five major newspapers, the three main television networks, as well as *Time* and *Newsweek* in the 1986 news coverage of the cocaine crisis, a topic that also occupied a prominent position on the public agenda and the Congressional agenda that year. Assuming the leadership role in placing the cocaine story on the press agenda was *The New York Times*. Although the frequent agenda-setting role of the Times is part of contemporary journalism mythology (as discussed further below), Reese and Danielian were among the first researchers to actually document this role with precise, quantitative evidence. According to McCombs and Protesse, “In preparing the daily agenda, editors do considerably more than make decisions about what topics will be covered and presented. They also make critical decisions about how these topics will be presented. In other words, editors determine the frame of reference for a story” (1991, p. 208). Likewise, Wenmouth Williams Mitchell Shapiro, and Craig Cutbirth point out that how a story is framed has a profound influence on the story’s agenda-setting impact. For instance, when mainstream network news stories about major public issues are explicitly framed as presidential campaign issues, there is significant agenda-setting taking place. McCombs and Protesse add that, “In the absence of an explicit campaign frame, there is no evidence of agenda-setting. Merely reporting an issue is not enough. It must be explicitly identified as relevant to the public agenda of campaign issues” (1991, p. 208). All of these forces come together to influence how, when and why one version of an event is presented over another, and sorting out the facts from the chaff becomes increasingly difficult, but not impossible, as

a result. To this end, the respective positions of the United States and China concerning the spy plane collision are analyzed further below, followed by an assessment of what the more disinterested international press had to say about the event.

The American Position as Reflected in *The New York Times*

While the Chinese press may be regarded as “toeing the company line” when it comes to reporting the international news, its American counterpart is not entirely without fault either. According to Bryant and Zillman (1996), “In another facet of gatekeeping, the substantial agenda-setting role of *The New York Times* is also well known” (p. 13). Going beyond the usual anecdotal evidence of this such, Reese and Danielian (1989) examined the agenda-setting role of *The New York Times* for the drug issue during 1986. On one occasion, *The Times* had assigned a reporter full time to drugs and led off with a front page story on crack, other major media quickly followed suit. Extensive coverage of the drug issue began to appear in the Washington Post and Los Angeles Times. In a Sunday issue in May of 1986, all three New York City newspapers contained extensive coverage on the drug problem. Further, it also is particularly evident, according to Reese and Danielian, that *The New York Times* established the agenda on this issue for the television networks in 1986.

However, the initial news coverage of the spy plane collision was straightforward and clearly reported the Chinese reaction along with the factual information about the collision. According to Elisabeth Rosenthal and David E. Sanger article in the *New York Times* (April 2, 1001), “U.S. Plane in China after it Collides with Chinese Jet”:

United States Navy spy plane on a routine surveillance
mission near the Chinese coast collided on Sunday with a

Chinese fighter jet that was closely tailing it. The American plane made an emergency landing in China, and the United States said it was seeking the immediate return of the 24 crew members, all said to be in good condition, and of the sophisticated aircraft and all its intelligence equipment (p. A3).

The article also reported a sufficient amount of details to provide its readers with the facts about the incident, as well as a quote from a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman who reported a search was underway for the missing Chinese pilot, as well as an “angry statement on Sunday night saying that ‘the U.S. side has total responsibility for this event’” (Rosenthal & Sanger, 2001, p. A3). According to the editors of *International Journal on World Peace* (2001), the initial American position on the spy plane collision incident was succinct and remained that way throughout the negotiations: “The United States had every right under international law to be in the air space it was occupying and the fact that it was engaged in intelligence-gathering activities was sanctioned by international law” (p. 99). Furthermore, the Americans maintained that the highly maneuverable Chinese fighter had most likely ventured too close to the slower-maneuvering American plane, thereby causing the collision and the crash and emergency landing that resulted.

The United States also insisted that the American plane retained the privileges of American sovereignty, that it was not to be entered by a foreign power, and that it and its crew should be immediately returned. The Chinese government declined this interpretation and consistently demanded and insisted that neither the plane nor the crew

would be released until an appropriate investigation was concluded. The detention of the crew lasted for a period of 11 days and concluded with the American's offering a statement of regret ("we are very sorry") for its unauthorized intrusion into Chinese air space without verbal clearance (China-US Relations, 2001).

Although the collision was considered to be important in its own right, the incident was made much more so because it provided the opportunity for a clarification or redefinition of Sino-American relations. The editors of *International Journal on World Peace* emphasize that, "There is little doubt that the Chinese government perceives American surveillance of its shores and radar installations as a provocative act and that it seized upon the opportunity this incident provided to express its displeasure" (China-US Relations, 2001, p. 100). Despite the need for such assertions, though, there is much at stake for both countries that transcend the collision of two military aircraft, notwithstanding the associated loss of life in this case. According to Timothy L. Fort and Cindy A. Schipani (2002), "The downing of the U.S. spy-plane in China may well have had a different outcome if the economic exchanges between the two countries were not already so great and the potential for increase so large" (p. 389). Therefore, the accession of China to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its increasingly important trade relations with the United States make any such incident seem to pale in comparison, but the fact remains that China felt compelled to do *something* in response, but things have changed in fundamental ways since the days of the Cold War when the Communists were clear in their objectives and unambiguous in their military threats.

There were also other factors involved in the Chinese decision on how it should frame its response. Both the U.S. and China, are of course, nuclear powers, and any

response from the Chinese would have to take this fact into consideration; furthermore, relations between China and the U.S. have been troubled by the “renegade” Taiwan, and there was also the pending issue of its efforts to secure the next Olympic Games, which was still up in the air at this point in time. “Further complicating the issue was the fact that China faced a new, untested American administration that had publicly declared a shift in Sino-American relations from the Clinton policy of treating China as a “strategic partner” to the Bush policy of “strategic competitor” (China-U.S. Relations, 2001, p. 100). Therefore, the spy plane incident served as a “testing ground” for both the American and Chinese policymakers.

The Long March veterans have largely died off, and as of 1997 or so, the Chinese leadership has been replaced by a younger cadre of Communists who have increasingly embraced certain free-market reforms in an effort to bring China into the international community and reap the benefits of increased trade with the U.S. and others. However, the Old Guard is not completely gone and much criticism against Western influence on China continues to be published. For instance, an article written by the Theoretical Department of *People's Daily* cautioned, “Bourgeois liberalization causes (youfa) corruption (fubai) and the corrupt elements then become the social base for bourgeois liberalization. Many of them are resolute supporters of bourgeois liberalization and ... their ‘anti-corruption’ is completely false. Their goal is to negate the leadership of the party and the socialist system” (Chan, 2000, p. 507).

This “bourgeois liberalization” phenomenon refers to a social and ideological trend among the bourgeoisie that resulted from China's opening to the West. According to Chen Yun, a senior leader among the moderate reformers, “in the process of the opening

up to the outside world, it is inevitable that decadent capitalist ideas and corrupt life style will enter China. They directly endanger our socialist cause” (Chan, 2000, p. 508). However, the events of the 20th century have shown time and again that politicians in the United States simply do not understand their Chinese counterparts, while the Chinese themselves are faced with the need to balance increasing demands for human rights against the dangers these may represent for their own positions in the Communist bureaucracy. “To the United States it soon became clear that within the Chinese government there existed a hard line faction (the military) that the government could ill afford to ignore, thus making resolution of the crisis that much more difficult” (China-US Relations, 2001, p. 101).

The Long March veterans also had their counterparts in the United States: “The government of the United States was similarly afflicted; the Pentagon and hard line elements within the Republican party were clearly at odds with the more conciliatory State Department, notwithstanding the fact that the latter was headed by a decorated army general” (China-US Relations, 2001, p. 101). Further complicating things for the American policymakers was the existence of business groups that were of a generally conservative persuasion but had a major interest in improving and expanding trade relations with China. “This bewildering array of variables eventually played a role in developing the American response to the Chinese demands and the Chinese decision to accept it” (China-US Relations, 2001, p. 101). All of these tended to influence the manner in which the U.S. responded to the Chinese rhetoric about the spy plane incident.

Furthermore, the American media has good reason to avoid intentionally publishing anything too provocative since the vast majority of them have a vested interest in

maintaining good relations with the Chinese powers-that-be. According to Elliot Abrams (2001), the primary role of the media should be as a source of information. As Professor Stanley Cohen of the Center for Human Rights at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem has indicated, "By far the most important source of information about human rights violations is the mass media" (Abrams, 2001, p. 290). For both the Chinese people and their American counterparts, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the media in this regard. "For most people, television, radio, and newspapers are the only sources of information. They are the primary definers of this type of social reality" (Abrams, 2001, p. 290). The American media's role, at least, is performed in two ways.

- 1) First, they serve as generators and sources of information;
- 2) Second, the mainstream media communicates the information generated by government agencies.

In this capacity, there is a negative side to the media's role because they can on occasion actually facilitate human rights violations. "They can spur such violations and even be used to do evil. To take one example, the UN special reporter on the media in Yugoslavia said, 'The media in Serbia and Montenegro fostered hostility among the population against other nationalities residing in the former Yugoslavia'" (Abrams, 2001, p. 291). Similarly, the submission to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission by the African National Congress said, "The South African Broadcasting Corporation was the most important weapon in the apartheid state's battle for the hearts and minds of the people. [It was] a virulent opponent of liberation movements" (Abrams, 2001, p. 291). The corporation's efforts resulted in an increase in the demonization of the liberation movements, polarization, and hatred for people from other racial groups.

Clearly, then, “the power of the media can be used for good or evil” (Abrams, 2001, p. 292). Another fundamental constraint involved in communicating absolutely factual information in the mainstream American press is that of corporate ownership. “Newspapers and TV stations are sometimes owned by media conglomerates, and they have financial interests that can make reporting on human rights abuses dangerous. One thinks of Time Warner and Viacom, Bertelsmann and the News Corporation, which have good reason to avoid provoking Chinese officials” (Abrams, 2001, p. 292).

The Chinese Position as Reflected in The People’s Daily

From the outset, the Chinese adopted a unilateral view of the events that caused the spy plane collision and where it occurred; *The People’s Daily* stood by this account of the events throughout the discourse that followed. The Chinese position was just as succinct as the American’s in this regard, and maintained that the American plane was responsible for the collision, and that its subsequent emergency landing on Chinese soil without permission represented a violation of international law (China-US Relations, 2001).

On April 2, 2001, the *People’s Daily* reported, “It was normal and in accordance with international practice for Chinese military jets to track the U.S. surveillance plane over China’s water areas. The direct cause of the damage and crash of the Chinese jet was that the U.S. plane suddenly veered into the Chinese jet, which was against flight rule. Therefore, the U.S. side should bear all the responsibility arising therefrom” (Chinese Fighter Bumped by US Military Surveillance Plane, p. 1). Although the rhetoric intensified as the days passed, there was never any real indication in the *People’s*

Daily that this relatively minor event would jeopardize the carefully orchestrated foreign relations that have been forged between China and the U.S. over the last 30 years.

In fact, most of the saber-rattling assumed the form of just how large of an apology the United States should offer, and which words would properly and adequately communicate these views to the Chinese leadership. According to Giandomenico Picco (2003), “One year after the April 2001 spy plane incident, relations between Beijing and Washington were so improved that any reference to that incident was downplayed” (p. 15). Picco points out that this is not a new alliance, but the Sino-American relations certainly represent a new and significant alignment in the post-September 11, 2001 world today.

The Chinese position did not vary from its original stance at all throughout the media coverage presented in the *People’s Daily*, but the level of hostility seemed to taper off following the intensive media blitz on the pilot’s birthday on April 8, 2001. There was also a distinct change in the tone of the news coverage after Washington made the all-important concession of agreeing to add “very” to its previously offered “sorry” in framing its apology for the incident.

In fact, on April 11, 2001, the *People’s Daily* reported that Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Yuxi Sun “said out of humanitarian considerations, the Chinese Government has decided to allow the U.S. crew members to leave China after completing the necessary procedures” (p. 3). The article, “FM Spokesman on Letter From U.S. Saying ‘Very Sorry,’” was quick to point out that this humanitarian gesture, though, was not the conclusion to the incident and that both sides would continue their negotiations on this incident and other related issues. Sun added that according to international law and

the provisions of the relevant laws of China, the Chinese side had “every right to conduct a comprehensive investigation of this incident. The Chinese side will reserve the right to make further representations with the U.S. side and handle the incident on the basis of results of the investigation” (p. 4).

These points, together with the Chinese requirement that the U.S. cease such spy plane reconnaissance flights in the future, were consistently and unwavering reiterated throughout the Chinese media coverage of the event, usually word-for-word. Nevertheless, it quickly became clear that, “In the spy-plane incident, the government tried to use public opinion for its own purposes but soon found it could not control what it had created” (Worf, 2002, p. 7). Since it was apparently obvious to the Chinese leadership that there was too much at stake to risk an escalation of the rhetoric with Washington in view of everything that was on the political table at that point in time, something else had to be done. The Chinese political leadership and press decided to “ride the horse that got them there” and resorted to making a hero out of the Chinese pilot who was killed in the incident.

A consistent theme that ran throughout the Chinese media coverage was the elevation of the Chinese pilot, Wang Wei, to the stature of a national hero. According to Eckholm (April 2, 2001), “After he plunged to oblivion on April 1, his jet fighter splintered in a collision with an American spy plane, Wang Wei was quickly declared a ‘martyr of the revolution’ and praised as a heroic defender of the motherland” (p. A2).

The Chinese government, and the press coverage, did not leave it at that, though. As the month of April 2001 progressed, there were reports of how the search was progressing and the ceaseless efforts of the heroic search parties who refused to accept

defeat. It became clear, though, that these efforts were futile and mid-month, the Chinese press finally admitted that all chances of Wei surviving had been lost, and even published an “aeronautical expert’s” opinion to that effect. Interviews with the dead pilot’s wife, mother and those who knew him peppered the People’s Daily as well, and characterized him not only as a good husband and provider, but as a “brave serviceman, a versatile talent,” a “man of fantastic health,” even a “meticulous housekeeper” (Eckholm, p. A2). According to this author, the spy plane incident was just what the doctor ordered for the Chinese leadership who desperately needed a national hero to help bolster their increasingly shaky political positions: “Some Chinese even joked privately that the military had probably located Mr. Wang soon after the collision over the South China Sea and spirited him away for a change of identity, to permit the creation of a badly needed national hero” (p. A2). To Western observers, the elevation in stature may smack off how the North Korean press treats its “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il, for example, but Eckholm points out that this is a traditional approach for the Chinese: “The deification of Mr. Wang might appear overdone, even silly, to some urban professionals . . . But depicting heroes in unshaded white -- and villains in stark black -- is a Chinese tradition and the party leaders may still find it useful to build up a hero like Mr. Wang” (p. A2).

The International Community’s Position

The type and tenor of response from the members of the international community largely depended on their respective relationships with the U.S. and China, but with most countries adopting a call for moderation and calm in the wake of the collision (Sakai, 2003). In their essay, “Two Planes Down: The Chinese Embassy in Washington Goes On Line” (2001), Chen and Culbertson report that the U.S. EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft

collision with a Chinese F-8 fighter plane off the coast of China's Hainan Island simply represented a continuation of the political and military initiatives that have historically characterized the Sino-American relationship in the post-Cold War environment. In New Zealander Bruce Harland's view, the collision on April 1, 2001 of an American reconnaissance plane and a Chinese fighter was not so one-sided as either the United States or China would have the world believe.

According to this author's view, the collision initially seemed to jeopardize the improved atmosphere that emerged following the visit to Washington of China's top foreign policy man, Qian QiChen. "The eventual release of the American plane's crew reduced the tension, but it rose again with the opening of the negotiations for the return of the aircraft itself" (p. 27). As a objective reflection of how the world views such events, Harland makes the point that these types of events are routinely used by the power-brokers in the U.S. as well as China to help raise the level of unease among the respective publics, and to ensure their continued positions in places of high power. By placing the appropriate "spin" on such international events, then, gatekeepers in China and the U.S. managed to squeeze out a bit of publicity for their own political agendas, while simultaneously painting the best possible picture of their respective positions concerning the event in the process. Harland writes, "As usual, the hawks on either side seized the opportunity to speak out publicly and demand stronger action by their respective governments" (p. 27).

The Chinese reportedly demanded the cessation of reconnaissance flights close to Chinese territory. The Americans insisted on their right to fly anywhere in international air space. From the outside, it looked as if they were groping their way toward some

understanding on the procedures to be followed to prevent a recurrence of the incident. Such an understanding evidently did exist between the United States and the Soviet Union in the later stages of the Cold War, though it was probably implicit rather than explicit. If both governments want to improve their relations, as they say they do, such an understanding may be reached (Harland, 2001).

Reconnaissance flights were a feature of the Cold War, when each side considered the other as an enemy; however, the Cold War is supposed to have ended ten years ago. The US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, has clearly stated that China is not an enemy. Nevertheless, the fact remains that both sides have nuclear weapons makes it inevitable that they will watch each other closely -- and both seem to accept that. The best that can be expected at this stage is some degree of understanding and restraint on both sides. "*Time* magazine pointed out in its 16 April issue that on each side there are people who see the two countries as enemies, and are constantly urging tougher action by their governments" (Harland, 2001, p. 27). The Hainan incident provided the Chinese and American leadership with an opportunity to promote their respective agendas, and they did not fail to seize the moment. Harland reports that, "The voices of moderation are not as loud, but they are powerful, and so far they seem to have carried the day (Harland, 2001, p. 28). However, it quickly became apparent there was much at stake between the Chinese leadership and their American counterparts that transcended this event, or others like it. "With luck," Harland says, "the Hainan incident will pass, and the slow improvement in relations will resume. On both sides, there are strong economic reasons for getting back to business as usual" (2001, p. 27).

China has dedicated itself to maintaining fast economic growth; however, this growth requires the American market. “In the United States, Big Business evidently sees great opportunities in China which it has no intention of leaving to its competitors, in Asia and in Europe, to exploit. President Bush needs the continuing support of Big Business and is unlikely to flout its wishes. Presumably, much the same is true of Taiwan and of China itself. Economic considerations should act as a constraint on the political pressures for confrontation (Harland, 2001, p. 28). Indeed, China remains the largest recipient of foreign direct investment from the West and from the United States. The consolidation of the economic relations between Beijing and Washington has therefore continued along its predestinated course without regard to “downed spy planes, the bombing of the embassy in Belgrade, and the Kosovo air campaign approved outside the Security Council” (Picco, 2003, p. 15). From a subjective perspective, one can almost envision the Chinese leadership hunkered down in the Forbidden City formulating a cogent but forceful response to the spy plane incident that would show the world that they still meant business militarily, but one which would not go so far as to jeopardize what was really important: the American markets. However, from an international perspective, the evolution of the Sino-American trade bloc may be thwarted by future recurrences of this level of hostility, and in the post-Cold War globe, former allies may become potential enemies. “Many people now think that China and the United States are drifting slowly but surely towards war. I still do not think it is inevitable, and I certainly hope it can be avoided. But the build-up of mutual hostility does worry me, and make me less sure that conflict can be avoided” (Harland, 2001, p. 27). Nevertheless, because there is so much at stake for the Chinese as well as the American leadership today and in

the future, it just makes good sense to seek timely and effective diplomatic solutions to such events, but as the events in the Middle East and North Korea have shown time and again, there is only so much the international community can do when two national juggernauts collide. “What can New Zealand do to help head off the threat of war?,” Harland asks, and then reiterates the fundamental issues at play in this case. “Not much, I am afraid. Striking moral attitudes, and lecturing the powerful on how to use their power, are not likely to achieve much, and could easily do harm. The best thing we can do is to keep cool, watch developments carefully, and remember the underlying forces -- economic on the one hand, political on the other” (Harland, 2001, p. 28). Just as the U.S. is seeking China’s assistance in moderating a solution to the North Korean nuclear dilemma, some observers in the international community believe the best path to future peace is restraint and counsel: “The best way for us to help avoid conflict between the United States and China is to go on talking, quietly but clearly, to both sides, and supporting the forces for moderation and restraint whenever we see an opportunity to do so” (Harland, 2001, p. 28). This New Zealander’s position was reiterated by Rod Lyon (2001), who reported that, “The crash landing of the US spy plane on Hainan island advertised how difficult Australia's position could become in instances of heightened tension between China and the United States” (p. 516).

According to Lyon, the spy plane incident took place in the context of a new administration that had already made clear that it intended to distance itself from the previous administration's policy of treating China as a strategic partner. “Australian foreign policy was left with no comfortable saddle point. Canberra's instinctive attraction to Washington's position was moderated by concerns about the level of anti- China

rhetoric in Washington and a compelling wish to avoid the emergence in Asia of a new bipolar contest between Australia's traditional ally and the fastest-rising Asian great power” (Lyon, 2001, p. 516). Like his New Zealand counterpart, Australian Prime Minister Howard also urged "calm and restraint on all sides" (Lyon, 2001, p. 517).

Further, Labor leader Kevin Rudd noted the dangers of rising tensions between the United States and China, and Stuart Hams, an academician at the Australian National University, maintained that Australian policy should be aimed at helping the US and China to find "a cool and moderate approach" (Lyon, 2001, p. 517). However, it became increasingly difficult to “keep cool and moderate” in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and whatever political animosities that may have emerged from this incident seemed to have evaporated in the meantime. While there has not been a U.S.-China-Russia alliance as such created to date, the changes in the global political climate may well result in such an end result in the not-too-distant future: “The gauntlet thrown down by Al-Qaida of an everlasting war between the West and the ‘believers’ may not occur. However, if it does, Osama bin Laden's troops may discover that across the divide there stands not only the United States but also Russia, India, and China” (Picco, 2003, p. 16).

The aforementioned gatekeeping function was clearly in full play during the spy plane coverage in China by the press on both sides of the issue; however, the degree and frequency of such influence was much more pronounced on the Chinese side as evinced by a review of the news coverage, as well as the international response. In his essay, “The media and politics: It’s more than the news,” Steve Bell reports that what is becoming increasingly clear is that "the media" needs to be defined in terms that go far

beyond the news media. “Less than 20 years ago, members of the establishment news media were the dominant ‘gatekeepers’ when it came to information flow. What they defined as ‘news’ was pretty much what was available to the public” (Bell, 2001, p. 10). According to Richard Worf (2002, “During the spy-plane incident, the state-controlled media presented the loss of the Chinese pilot as an assault on China's dignity. The government took other steps to stoke Chinese nationalism, such as setting up anti-US Internet chat rooms. US President George Bush's initial statement of regret never reached the Chinese people” (p. 7). What actually did reach the Chinese people in the *People's Daily* is examined in section one of Chapter Three below.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

A comparative case study will be conducted to demonstrate the applicability and integrity of the three-dimension framing categorization. This research employs the historical/case study approach and secondary research to answer the above-stated research questions. The historical method involves a procedure supplementary to observation, a process by which the historian seeks to test the truthfulness of the reports of observations that are provided by others (Benz & Newman, 1998).

The case study/historical method serves to closely align the historian with quantitative researchers and with the traditional scientific method; in this regard, Good (1963) compared the two research methodologies and then described the uniqueness of the historian in the case study approach: “Both historian and scientist examine data, formulate hypotheses, and test the hypotheses against the evidence until acceptable conclusions are reached” (p. 1983). According to Benz and Newman, a number of researchers who have employed the historical method have enjoyed success by emphasizing the interpretation and meaning of facts, and seeking to identify tendencies, themes, patterns, and laws of history; other historical method investigators have focused on philosophical or theoretical problems in history, such as the discovery of laws, unity and continuity, possibility or impossibility of prediction, and oversimplification stemming from the search for clues or keys (Benz & Newman, 1998). In this regard, while the facts of the collision were fairly straightforward, three key points of serious disagreement between China and the U.S. emerged during the controversy that followed the collision:

- First, both sides made conflicting claims as to which aircraft was responsible for veering from its regular flight path, thereby causing the collision. The Chinese maintained that the U.S. EP-3 turned at a wide angle, ramming the Chinese F-8. U.S. authorities, on the other hand, alleged that the F-8 flew under the U.S. plane and ascended prematurely so it clipped the EP-3 (Chen & Culbertson, 2001).
- Second, there was the question as to whether the crash occurred in sovereign Chinese air space or over international waters. The answer to this question depended on several complex legal questions, with the American authorities asserting that a nation can claim only about a 12-mile space extending from its land mass as sovereign territory. According to this interpretation, the crash site about 65 miles from the Hainan coast would have been over international waters; however, the Chinese claim a much larger territory, particularly with regard to the area of the South China Sea (Chen & Culbertson, 2001).
- Third, the United States claimed that its surveillance planes had been repeatedly harassed over several months. According to this version of the events, Chinese fighter pilots had flown dangerously close to U.S. aircraft on several occasions; however, the Chinese denied this claim (Chen & Culbertson, 2001).

According to Michael B. Salwen and Don W. Stacks (1996), much criticism of international communication research in the United States since 1970 has been based on the assertion that such studies support the existing order while claiming to be independent and value-free; however, the power of Western science in general is a product of the weight of evidence and logic that accompany claims of knowledge derived from it. These authors write, “The middle-range theories that communication can muster still rise

or fall on the traditional criterion of empirical verification” (Salwen & Stacks, 1996, p. 185). The particular problem of international communication involves the fact that there virtually no research has considered the variables that are assumed to account for the phenomenon in question. “Part of the problem is a failure to develop appropriate hypotheses; part is a casual and sometimes deliberate disregard for the protections of reliability, validity, and adequacy of evidence” (Salwen & Stacks, 1996, p. 185).

Consider the hypothetical but typical international communication study submitted to a conference or journal with the underlying premise that media around the world support the status quo. A content analysis could be used to demonstrate that:

(a) Coverage in The New York Times was more critical of the Tiananmen Square massacre than coverage in the People's Daily (because both papers reflect their governments' positions); or,

(b) Coverage of Tiananmen Square was more negative than coverage of the abortive coup against President Gorbachev (because the United States opposed the Chinese government but supported Gorbachev); or,

(c) Coverage of the coup against Gorbachev was greater than coverage of the coup against Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti (because Gorbachev is White and European and Aristide is Black and from a developing country) (Salwen & Stacks, 1996).

What is wrong with this approach involves a number of specifics and some general problems that are unique to international communications. In the first place, if the hypothesis is that media systems universally maintain political hegemony, then the key variable is a constant, and no analysis is possible since there will be no discernible

variance; likewise, if the hypothesis assumes that there is no difference between the two newspapers, then the null hypothesis is predicted, which cannot be done logically.

According to Salwen and Stacks, this is an assumption in the first example; however, if the study's goal is to understand something about different media systems and the varied economic and political systems in which they function, then the basis of explanation of the difference is difficult at best and will frequently result in dubious results. In this case, the second example assumes that both events are equivalent, and that the discernible differences in coverage are derived only from journalistic practice and political policies (Salwen & Stacks, 1996).

Finally, the third example assumes that news coverage is determined by factors over which journalists have no control such as capitalism, imperialism, or racism. “In each case, the assumption is less than persuasive at best, foolish at worst. In this hypothetical study and in most real studies, the explanatory variable is not explicit, not subjected to any real test, and not restrained by considerations of reliability, validity, or adequacy of evidence” (Salwen & Stacks, 1996, p. 186).

Notwithstanding the foregoing constraints associated with studies in international communication, a case study methodology analysis was employed to determine how this factual information was presented to the American and Chinese people. To this end, twenty-five news stories regarding the China-US spy plane standoff appearing during the period April 2, 2001 (the first date of reporting in both newspapers), to April 30th, 2001 in the *New York Times* and the *People's Daily* were content analyzed and coded.

A code was assigned according to the text's content as reflecting a predominately contextual or operational framing aspect (CF and OF, respectively); in addition, an

indicator was made as to whether there was an accompanying photograph or graphic with the article (a visual framing element, or “VF”). The statistical analysis was accomplished using an Excel spreadsheet. The results of the analysis will be presented graphically, followed by a narrative interpretation in the findings. A summary of the research will be provided in the conclusion.

Data Analysis and Findings

As noted above, the factual data involved in the spy plane incident are fairly straightforward. On the morning of April 1, 2001, the collision took place about 65 miles from the coast of Hainan Island, which is part of the People's Republic of China. Following the collision, the Chinese F-8 aircraft was unable to fly and crashed into the South China Sea. The plane's pilot, Wang Wei, parachuted into the sea but a massive rescue effort over several days failed to find him, and he was presumed dead. Although the U.S. EP-3 also suffered severe damage, the U.S. aircraft was still able to fly and landed about 20 minutes after the crash at Hainan's Lishui Airport without receiving official clearance to land from the Chinese. Thereafter, the EP-3 pilot and crew were detained on Hainan Island for 11 days. The U.S. crew members were reported to be treated quite well, with several visits by U.S. authorities being allowed. The U.S. pilot, in particular, though, was intensively interrogated concerning the circumstances that led to and followed the crash. The U.S. crew was allowed to leave China on April 12, 2001. This incident occurred following several months of sustained reconnaissance flights in the area by U.S. aircraft, “usually at the rate of about 4-5 flights per week” (Ricks, 2001, p. A01).

Section One: People’s Daily: April 2-April 27, 2001

While there were more than 25 articles published in the *People’s Daily* during the month of April 2001 concerning the events surrounding the spy plane incident of April 1, the following representative selections were used to provide a side-by-side comparison with comparable articles found in the *New York Times*. It should be pointed out that on the then-missing Chinese pilot’s birthday, April 8, 2001, there was a substantial increase in the number of articles dedicated to this story, with the majority of them focusing on the heroic sacrifices made by the pilot in his defense of the motherland.

Further, both publications included additional graphics and pictures that were not accompanied by an article but a caption only, such as the arrival of the U.S. crew back home in America in the *New York Times*. In all cases, the graphics and pictures were not available for review and the content was extrapolated based on the editorial descriptions provided, and these visual frames were included in the data analysis as appropriate.

Content categorizations of each article from the respective publications are provided in Tables 1 and 2 below, with graphic representations of the data following.

Table 1 People’s Daily Content Analysis.

Date	Article Title	Src	Code	VF #
April 02	Chinese Fighter Bumped by US Military Surveillance Plane	PD	CF	1
April 03	Chinese Official Rebuffs US over Air Collision Demand.	PD	CF	0
April 04	US Should Bear Full Responsibility for Plane	PD	CF	0

	Collision			
April 04	FM Spokesman Gives Full Account of Air Collision	PD	CF	2
April 05	Chinese People Concerned Over Missing Pilot	PD	CF	0
April 05	US Fully Responsible for Air Collision: Witness	PD	CF	1
April 06	US Diplomats to Meet Spy Plane Crew for the Third Time	PD	OF	0
April 06	Missing Chinese Pilot's Wife Writes to Bush	PD	CF	1
April 06	My Husband Is still Alive: Missing Pilot's Wife	PD	CF	0
April 07	Gloomy Birthday for Missing Pilot	PD	CF	0
April 07	U.S. Must Bear All Responsibility for Collision: Law Expert	PD	CF	0
April 08	Chinese President Expresses Solicitude to Wife of Missing Pilot	PD	CF	1
April 09	China, U.S. Discuss Settlement of Plane Collision	PD	OF	1
April 09	US Spy Plane's Aggressive Tricks Told	PD	CF	0
April 10	Spokesman Comments on US Wording "Sorry"	PD	CF	0
April 10	Missing Pilot's Wife Well Cared for	PD	CF	1
April 11	FM Spokesman on Letter From U.S. Saying	PD	CF	0

	"Very Sorry"			
April 12	China US to Continue Negotiations on Plane Collision Incident	PD	OF	0
April 13	US Urged to Halt Spy Activities along China's Coastal Areas	PD	CF	0
April 14	China Refutes Irresponsible Comments of US Side on Collision	PD	CF	0
April 15	Missing Pilot Model for Officers Soldiers: Navy Chief	PD	CF	0
April 16	Countrymen Mourn for Missing Pilot	PD	CF	0
April 17	China US to Negotiate on Plane Collision Incident	PD	OF	0
April 22	China-U.S. Plane Collision Not China's Fault Belarus says	PD	CF	0
April 27	China Mourns Over Death of Heroic Pilot	PD	CF	1

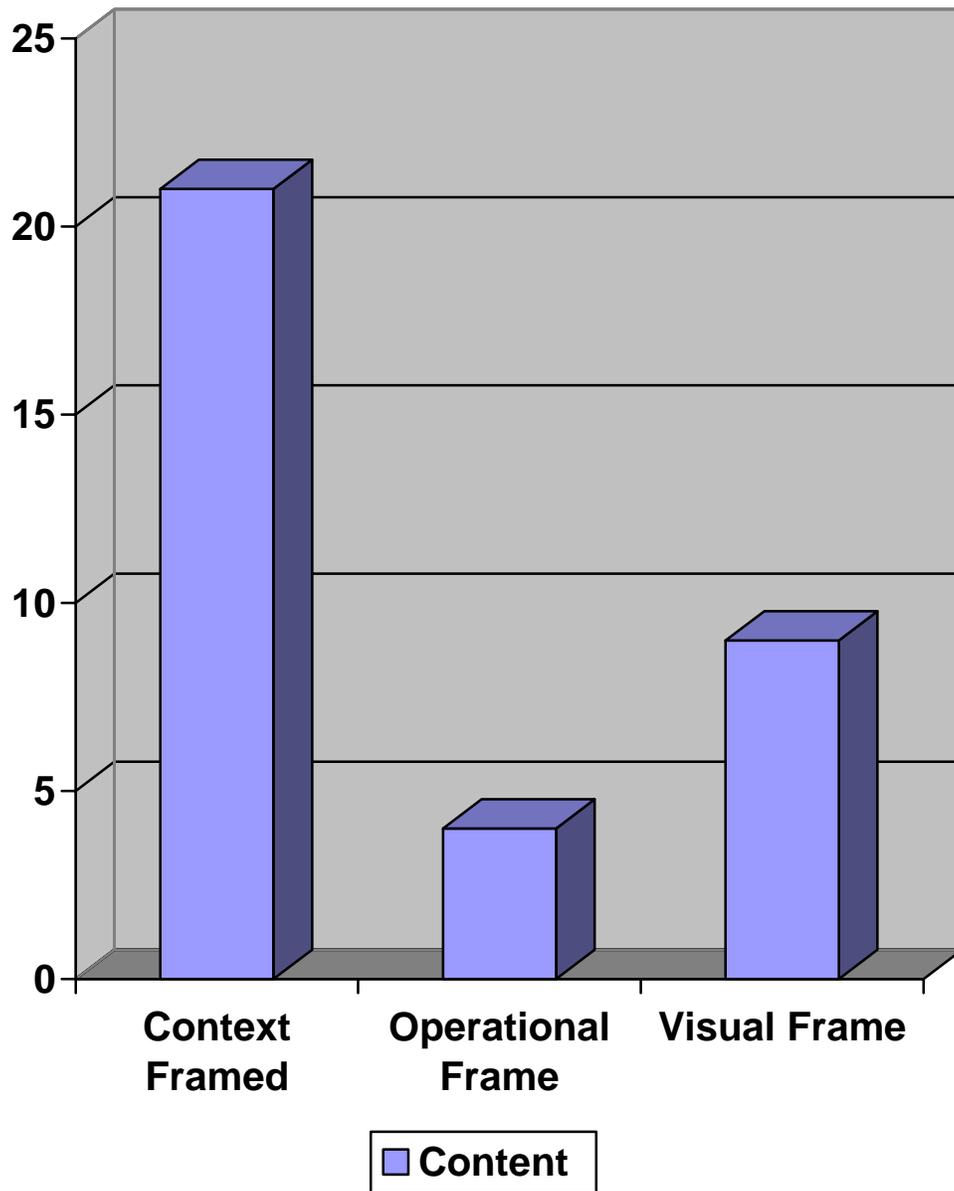


Figure 1 Content Analysis of People's Daily.

Findings. As can be seen in Figure 1 above, the overwhelming majority (61 percent) of the articles appearing in the *People's Daily* were, not unsurprisingly, contextually framed accounts of the spy plane collision. Furthermore, only contextually framed articles were accompanied by any visual framing elements, of which there were

nine total (one map from each publication was excluded from this analysis). In fact, for over a full week, every story appearing in the *People's Daily* was contextually framed, and it was not until April 9 that a story appeared that contained any objective reporting at all from the Chinese media.

All told, there were only four operationally framed articles, or 16 percent, and even here, there were touches of bias concerning the mainstream Chinese position on the events without a corresponding assessment of the U.S. position.

Section Two: *The New York Times*: April 2-April 27, 2001

In sharp contrast to the coverage as presented in the *People's Daily*, the events surrounding the spy plane collision as reported in the *New York Times* assumed an overall more balanced, yet occasionally U.S.-slanted perspective, in its reporting throughout the month.

Table 2 New York Times Analysis.

Date	Article Title	Src	Co de	VF #
April 02	U.S. PLANE IN CHINA AFTER IT COLLIDES WITH CHINESE JET	NYT	OF	0
April 03	MILITARY ANALYSIS; 'A Dangerous Game'	NYT	OF	0
April 04	Japan and the Koreas Stand By Their Respective Allies as All Feel the Tension	NYT	OF	0
April 05	Powell Offers China Aides Outline for	NYT	OF	0

	Standoff's End			
April 06	U.S. Envoy Meets Chinese Foreign Minister as Negotiations on Plane's Crew Continue	NYT	OF	0
April 07	China's Demand for Apology Is Rooted in Tradition	NYT	CF	0
April 08	CHINESE INSISTING U.S. MUST DO MORE TO END STANDOFF	NYT	OF	0
April 09	U.S. and China Look for a Way To Say 'Sorry'	NYT	OF	0
April 10	Questioning By Chinese Is Intense	NYT	OF	0
April 11	In a Hint of Progress	NYT	CF	0
April 11	Standoff Brings Calls to Boycott Chinese Goods	NYT	CF	0
April 11	U.S. SENDS BEIJING FORMAL STATEMENT EXPRESSING REGRET	NYT	OF	0
April 12	A Readiness to Let Bygones Be Bygones	NYT	CF	0
April 12	Tempers Are Cooling	NYT	OF	0
April 12	CHINA RELEASES U.S. PLANE CREW 11 DAYS AFTER MIDAIR COLLISION	NYT	OF	0
April 13	With crew in U.S., Bush sharpens tone	NYT	CF	0
April 13	Beijing Declares Victory but Chat Rooms Are Skeptical	NYT	CF	0
April 14	U.S. Tape Is Said to Show Reckless Flying	NYT	CF	0

	by Chinese			
April 15	Angry Beijing Denounces Washington's Reports That Its Pilot Caused the Collision	NYT	OF	0
April 16	Plane Crew Details Detention in China	NYT	CF	0
April 17	Bush to Tackle Delicate Issue of Resuming China Spy Flights	NYT	CF	0
April 18	Knotty Task of Beijing Talks on Plane: Reconciling Reality With Posturing	NYT	OF	0
April 19	After Rancorous Start	NYT	CF	2
April 20	U.S.-China Collision Talks End With Need for More Talk	NYT	CF	2
April 27	Beijing Journal; A Pilot Is Lost	NYT	CF	2
April 30	China relaxing the tension	NYT	CF	0

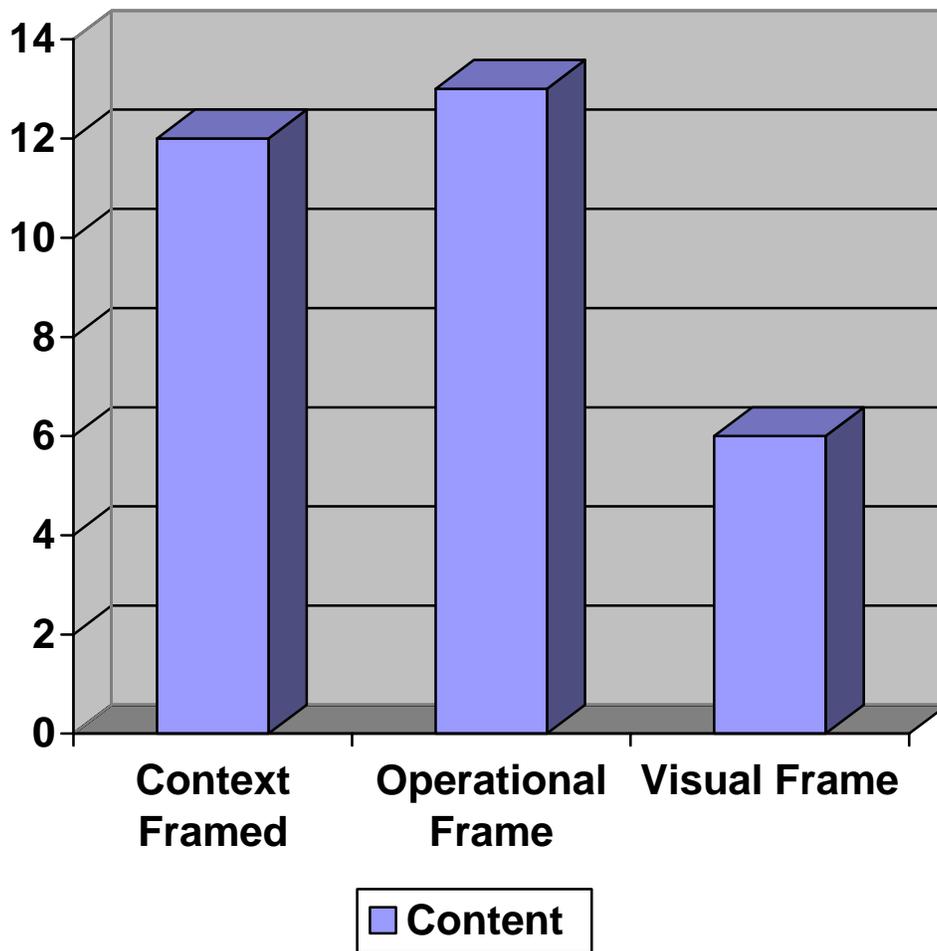


Figure 2 Content Analysis of The New York Times

As can be seen from Figure 2 above, the *Times* used contextual framing only 38 percent of the time, with operational framing being the technique of choice at 41 percent of the time.

A side-by-side comparison of the content analysis for the *People's Daily* and *The New York Times* is also revealing:

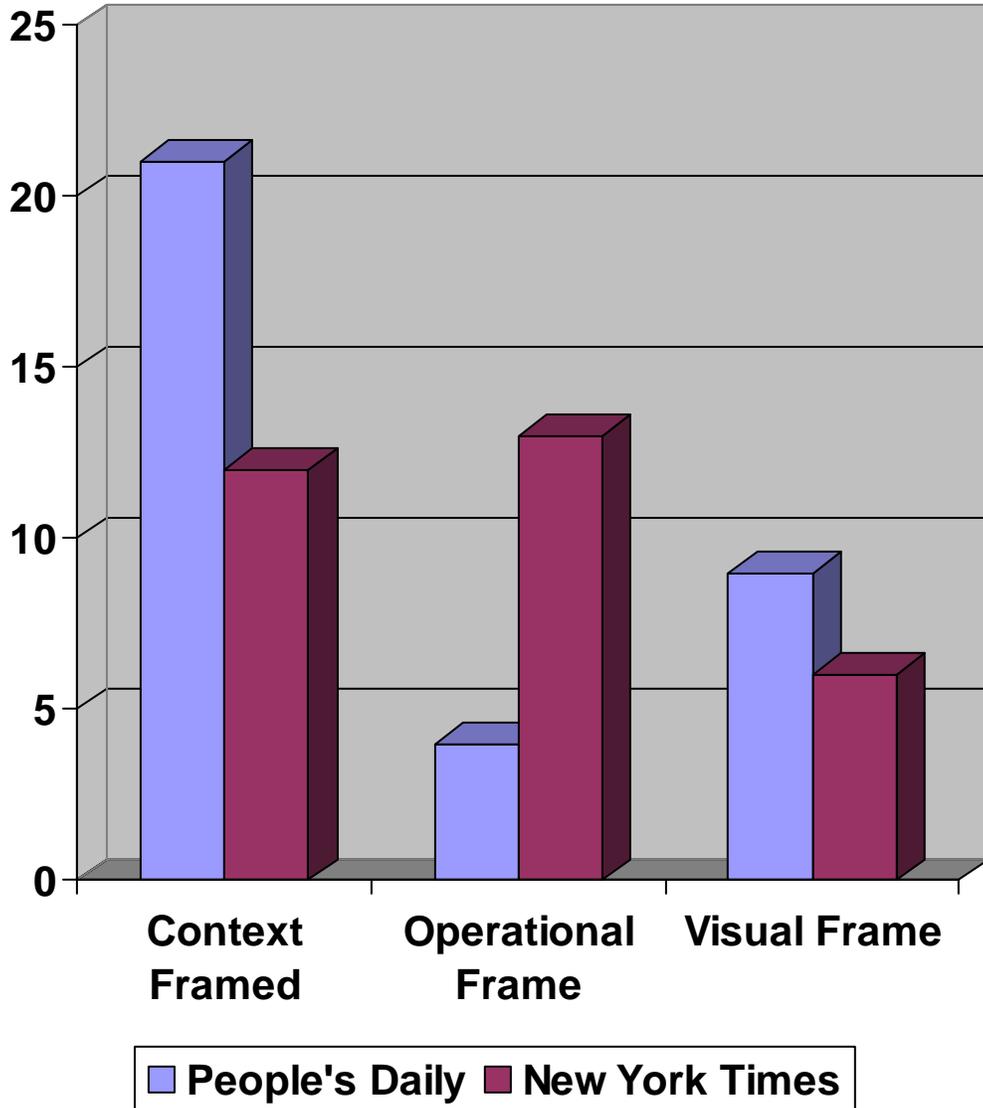


Figure 3 Comparison of People's Daily and New York Times Content.

As noted above, all visually framed articles were contextually framed, but the *People's Daily* incorporated this element more frequently than the *New York Times* as shown in Figure 4 below; whether this difference can be attributed to the intentional use

of graphic elements to sway the reader one way or another or to editorial policy or publishing constraints within the respective publications is unclear though.

Visual Framing Elements

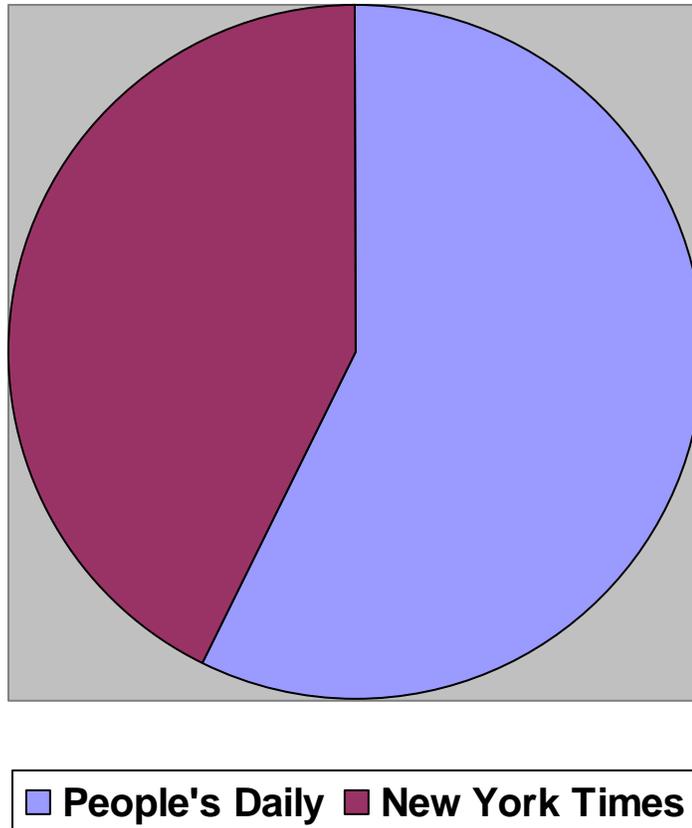


Figure 4 Comparison of Visual Framing Elements used in People's Daily and New York Times.

While the *New York Times* only resorted to reporting the spy plane collision events in an contextually framed manner less than half of the time (48 percent), the *People's Daily* relied on this approach almost exclusively, using contextually framed

techniques in 21 (or 84 percent) of their articles, and it should be pointed out that the remainder were also characterized to some degree by such biases as well.

Confirmation and Rejection of Hypotheses

The hypotheses that guided this research project are as follows

Hypothesis 1 From the perspective of the Bush administration, this diplomatic standoff with a newly defined “strategic competitor” provided a crucial test to his ability and experience in handling foreign affairs; these attributes in particular had been under increasing criticism in the months from April 2001. The results of how Bush handled this international incident could shape the domestic public opinion and worldview after the election controversy that had immediately preceded it.

From China perspective, even before this tragic incident, the Chinese people and its leaders had already been on the receiving end of hostile rhetoric from the newly elected Bush; this served to remind the Chinese people and their leadership about the embassy bombing in Yugoslavia just 2 years previously; moreover, such a direct military conflict between two nuclear powers has not taken place since the end of the Cold War.

From an international political perspective, the mainstream media in both countries should reasonably have been expected to concentrate their coverage of the event on the facts in an objective fashion and used relevant graphics when appropriate to communicate them. From this perspective, the media accounts in *The New York Times* and *The People’s Daily* should have employed a similar judgment regarding the respective political importance of every part of this event. As a result, the visual framing strategy utilized by the two newspapers would reflect this tendency.

This hypothesis is rejected in its entirety.

Hypothesis 2 Contextual framing works through deliberately choosing opinion-loaded words or authoritative sources to define responsibility and moral basis. For example, how to name an event becomes important when selecting the word to describe it; “accident” implies there was no actual fault while “incident” connotes a controversy. There will also be careful consideration given to the selection of descriptions of the action involved; for instance, should the collision be reported as the result of a “spy mission” or “routine reconnaissance routine”? Likewise, there will be careful considerations given to the treatment of the actors in the event; descriptions such as spy, detainee, hero or Top- Gun may be employed. The sources of facts used in the respective media would also play a role if only one side of the story was presented. The manner in which each of these components is presented may not seem important in isolation from the others, but taken together, they help to form important judgmental frames for readers.

One contextual tool that has been widely manipulated in international events by both sides is language translations and mistranslations. Based on the language barrier between the Chinese and American people, the audience on each side will only be able to learn about the other party’s messages through media’s translations, which represent yet another opportunity for shaping due to contextual framing.

Given the sensitive time, sensitive location and sensitive nature of this collision, both parties would have adopted all kinds of contextual framing techniques to occupy the moral high ground, and accuse the other side of wrongdoing. Since the foreign policy report in China is strictly controlled by the Communist Party, the news event portrayed by the Chinese media would be more homogenous and one-sided.

This hypothesis is supported by the findings.

Hypothesis 3 The blocking of the free flow of information, though weakened by the internet expansion in recent years, has still been carefully and successfully executed in international news coverage, either under the pressure from the government directly, or by the influences from certain interest groups. Such an intentional omission creates either a time lag or an information lag in people's reasoning. As a result, the audience's logical judgment may be distorted to a preferred direction.

Both sides will deliberately ignore or withhold some unfavorable evidence and change the actual time order of some key elements during their news coverage. Because the Chinese media are faced with far more direct oversight from their government and the ruling party to serve the established foreign policy of their U.S. counterparts, it would be reasonable to expect them to curtail, distort or otherwise shape the facts of an event to mirror the party line. As to the American side, the increasingly fierce competition in the information market have reduced the possibility of completely withholding certain facts; however, it would be naïve to assume that similar processes are not at play in the United States, again, only to a different degree.

This hypothesis was confirmed except to the extent that the time order of the events involved was distorted by either side. There was no indication of the times or dates of the events involved being changed, distorted or otherwise misrepresented by either side in the media coverage. Both sides were found to downplay the other side's argument while highlighting their own position, but the Chinese media resorted to this tactic much more frequently than their *New York Times* counterparts. Nevertheless, *The New York Times* was also shown to engage in the same types of gatekeeping functions as

their Chinese counterparts, although as noted, to a lesser extent; further, this is not a new phenomenon for the *Times*, though.

Validity and Reliability

According to Braun and Wainer's book, *Test Validity* (1988), defined in purely operational terms, validity is simply the correlation of scores on a test with some other objective measure of that which the test is used to measure. Others have defined validity in similar terms: "In a very general sense, a test is valid for anything with which it correlates"; however, unlike reliability, validity is not a general characteristic of a test, but is rather specific to a particular purpose (Braun & Wainer, 1988, p. 20). Therefore, a well-designed research methodology might be highly valid for one application, but not valid for others. The comparison of two separate accounts of a specific international incident represents just such a specific application requiring a specific methodology.

Assuming that careful attention is given to the various visual and contextual framing elements defined above, though, it is believed that one researcher should be able to derive much the same results from an analysis of the event coverage in the various media as presented below; however, it is unreasonable to assume that personal bias would affect such subjective interpretations of international events based on an individual's nationality and general worldview. In other words, a Chinese researcher, however well intentioned and subjective-minded, would likely view these news accounts from a drastically different perspective than an American counterpart and vice versa. Therefore, future investigations of this nature should incorporate comparable analyses of identical news events from various media to determine the extent to such inherent ethnocentrism on the part of the review, if in fact it exists.

Conclusion

The research showed that on April 1, 2001, an otherwise routine surveillance flight by an American EP3E Aries II surveillance plane through international air space turned into an international media event. A collision between a Chinese fighter jet and the American plane resulted in serious damage and an emergency landing for the American crew of 24, and resulted in the death of the Chinese pilot. In response, and predictably enough, the Americans and Chinese quickly lined up behind their respective carved-in-stone positions and fired salvo after salvo of increasingly heated rhetoric at each other through their respective news media. To their credit, the Chinese media, at least as reflected in the *People's Daily*, did manage to communicate the basic facts of the event to its readers; however, and not surprisingly, the mainstream Chinese media continues to operate under the oversight of a Communist government that is vitally concerned with its international image and which is not currently constrained in doing so in any substantive way. In fact, if there had not been a loss of life involved, the collision between the U.S. Air Force and Chinese Air Force jets might have just been glossed over and everyone would have shaken hands and retired to their respective WTO-sponsored corners. Since a Chinese pilot was killed, though, and the Americans were engaged in admitted *spying* activities after all, it quickly became clear in the *People's Daily* that a simple apology would not be sufficient, and this was simply non-negotiable. Likewise, had there not been a loss of life involved, the coverage in the Chinese press would have been positively humorous; in fact, by the time the Chinese press got through with him, the killed Chinese pilot did not even need a fighter jet to fly, but had bestowed upon him the stature of a heroic “Communist Titan” who was “even good at housework” and a “skillful tailor who made a fashionable skirt for his wife to mark their wedding

anniversary” (Eckholm, 2001, A2). The research showed that although the *New York Times* employed contextually framed accounts to report the spy plane collision events less than half of the time (48 percent), the *People’s Daily* used this technique to the almost total exclusion of others, employing contextually framed techniques fully 84 percent of their reports, with the rest being flavored to some extent in this manner. In the final analysis, although it is unlikely that most Chinese citizens would engage in such a side-by-side comparison of international news accounts as the foregoing, the fact that the international media is becoming more widespread in this country, as well as the fact that the Chinese people now represent the second-largest users of the Internet after the United States, means that the ability of state-run media outlets such as the *People’s Daily* to use such techniques is slowly coming to an end, and it reasonable to assume that by the end of the 21st century, the Chinese people would read comparable versions of a similar event in either the *People’s Daily* or the *New York Times*.

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