

Media Representation of National Strategy: A Framing Analysis of China Daily's Coverage of the Digital Silk Road

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Abstract: Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its digital counterpart, the Digital Silk Road (DSR), has been frequently mentioned in media coverage of China's overseas digital development. Meanwhile, digital governance has become a much-discussed issue worldwide. As a result, how the DSR is framed in media reports matters more than ever before for global audiences' understanding of China's engagement in digital governance. This study, therefore, aims to explore the framing of the Digital Silk Road in China Daily. Articles published from April 2019 to July 20 25 in China Daily were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively through content analysis and semantic network analysis. Results show an overall upward trend in media coverage over the past six years. The media depiction of the DSR, however, remains relatively stable. Specifically, keywords and frames related to international cooperation, economic development, and digital technology dominate the discourse. Key concepts that compose the semantic net, such as development, cooperation, technology, and global, mostly locate in the central and most salient regions of the map and cluster around topics of connectivity, mutual development, and involvement in global digital governance. Overall, China Daily frames the DSR more as a development project than a geostrategic initiative. China, correspondingly, assumes the role of a participant and builder of digital global governance.

Keywords: Digital Silk Road; Framing Analysis; Semantic Network; China Daily; National Image; Strategic Communication

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Since its introduction at the Belt and Road

Forum for International Cooperation in 2017, the Digital Silk Road (DSR) has become an increasingly important component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The initiative has expanded cooperation in areas including digital infrastructure, cross-border digital trade, and scientific and technological collaboration. [1] With its inclusion in the List of Deliverables of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017, the Digital Silk Road shifted from being a cross-section project to a holistic strategy for China to engage in global digital governance. [2] As of the end of 2022, China had signed MoUs on Digital Silk Road cooperation with 17 countries, set up bilateral Silk Road E-commerce cooperation mechanisms with 23 countries, and initiated various actions to build an open, secure, and cooperative digital space.

As the initiative has expanded, media have played an important role in communicating its objectives and shaping public understanding. [3] Among China's English-language media, China Daily occupies a prominent position in the country's international communication system. Its reporting on the Digital Silk Road provides insight into how the initiative is presented to overseas audiences and how narratives surrounding China's digital development and international cooperation are constructed in official media discourse. [4,5]

1.2 Research Significance and Questions

Theoretically, the depiction of the Digital Silk Road in China Daily can be viewed as an extension of Framing Theory to the study of state-led international communication. Framing is not only a way that the press reports on news but also a process by which media choose to focus on certain parts of an issue and neglect others, thus shaping the public's understanding of events and policies [6]. Therefore, studying the frames used by China Daily can help us understand how the Digital Silk Road is

presented in terms of international cooperation, digital development and global governance.

The study also has some applications. As digital technology has been increasingly integrated into world politics, the problem of digital governance and technological standards, as well as the competition for development models, have gradually entered the global discourse [7]. This paper will investigate how China Daily reports on the Digital Silk Road to provide an example of how the official English-language media in China communicate this initiative to foreign audiences. The above results can offer new references for research in strategic communication, foreign media narratives and the global spread of policy discourse.

Based on the above reasons, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the primary news frames that China Daily employs in its coverage of the Digital Silk Road?

RQ2: Where are these frames distributed, and what are their attributes?

RQ3: How do the semantic relations among the key concepts help to construct the whole media narrative of the Digital Silk Road?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Core Concepts: From the “Silk Road” to the “Digital Silk Road”

The Silk Road generally refers to a system of trade routes connecting areas in Asia, Europe and Africa for many years, from about 200 BC to the 15th century [8]. It is known for the exchange of goods such as silk, spices, pottery and horses, etc. These roads also allowed for the movement of merchants, religious ideas, technology and culture, and thus fostered long-term interactions among different societies in Eurasia and contributed to the process of cross-cultural assimilation [9].

Rather than being a single transportation route, most contemporary historians now consider the Silk Road a system of numerous interconnected roads that developed gradually over many centuries in response to changes in politics, economics and society. The development of imperial power, commercial centres and nomadic networks all affected the structure of these routes. Although the term Silk Road was first used in the modern period, and whether it simplifies the very complex historical reality has been discussed, it remains an extremely popular

research idea for studying cross-regional connections and the flow of goods, knowledge and institutions across Eurasia [10].

The historical exchanges fostered along the ancient Silk Road have also provided an important source of inspiration for contemporary Chinese policy discourse. Official narratives describe these interactions as embodying the Silk Road spirit—characterized by peaceful cooperation, openness, inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutually beneficial development—which is presented as the historical foundation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Announced in 2013, the BRI reinterprets the legacy of the Silk Road within a contemporary framework centred on policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people exchanges, collectively referred to as the “five connectivities” in China’s 2015 Vision and Actions document [11].

The Chinese policy discourse also indicates that from the historical experience of conflict and division, we have learned to develop in peace and cooperate internationally. Within this general framework, the Digital Silk Road (DSR) has appeared as the digital manifestation of the BRI, extending cooperation beyond physical infrastructure to cover telecommunications, digital infrastructure, smart cities, data connectivity and cross-border digital platforms [12]. Although it retains the connectivity focus of the BRI, the DSR places greater emphasis on digital technology, data flow and new forms of international cooperation in response to the rising importance of the global digital economy.

The Digital Silk Road is often mentioned in the literature as an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative that links its large-scale development goals with the expansion of the digital economy [13]; although it was not fully formulated at the time of the first proposal for the Belt and Road Initiative, its policy foundations can be traced back to the 2015 Vision and Actions document. The five links in the Construction of the Belt and Road Initiative are: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people exchanges. This policy system later provided for cooperation in digital infrastructure, information sharing, technical standards and cross-border digital platforms [14].

The concept acquired a more explicit policy identity two years later. Rather than referring

only to a range of separate digital cooperation projects, official documents issued during the 2017 Belt and Road Forum presented the Digital Silk Road as a distinct component of the Belt and Road Initiative. The scope of cooperation was correspondingly broadened to include information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure, e-commerce, satellite and fibre-optic networks, digital trade, and related institutional arrangements. Since then, Chinese policy discourse has increasingly portrayed the Digital Silk Road as a mechanism for strengthening international digital cooperation while advancing the high-quality development of the Belt and Road Initiative.

2.2 Theoretical Origin of Framing Theory

Framing theory originated in the social sciences in the 1970s, first articulated by Erving Goffman in his work *Frame Analysis*, where he conceptualized frames as interpretive schemata that allow individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label events and situations. Goffman's sociological approach emphasized how meaning is organized in everyday experience, laying the foundation for framing studies in media and communication [15]. William Gamson and colleagues argued that frames are interpretive packages that give meaning to events, highlighting specific symbols, metaphors, and exemplars [16].

Framing theory emphasizes how the media influence public perception and attitudes toward events or issues by presenting information through specific frames. A frame refers to the selection and salience of certain aspects of perceived reality within a communicative text, thereby promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation for the issue being described [16]. Robert Entman provided a widely cited definition, identifying framing as a process of selection and salience: frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Entman's formulation further explains how media frames influence public discourse by making particular interpretations more salient than others. In his definition, framing involves not only selecting certain aspects of reality for emphasis but also organizing those elements in ways that shape how audiences interpret events and issues [6].

Framing theory has been widely adopted in

research on journalism, political communication, and public opinion because it provides a useful framework for examining how media construct meaning. More recently, it has also become an important analytical approach in studies of international communication. Researchers have applied framing analysis to examine how media represent major domestic and international events, revealing how different narrative strategies influence the interpretation of political issues, national identities, and international relations [17].

Within the field of international communication, framing analysis is particularly valuable for exploring the assumptions and value orientations embedded in news discourse. Media frames reflect not only editorial choices but also broader political, cultural, and institutional contexts. As participants in the international information environment, media organizations contribute to the construction of cross-cultural understanding while simultaneously reflecting the priorities and perspectives of the societies in which they operate [18].

2.3 Development and Implementation of the Digital Silk Road

Existing scholarship generally refers to the Digital Silk Road (DSR) as the digital component of the Belt and Road Initiative, which expands cooperation from traditional infrastructure to digital connectivity, cross-border data flow and technology governance [19]. Within China's policy system, the initiative aims to build digital infrastructure, promote cross-border digital trade and strengthen cooperation in information and communication technology. Official documents of the Belt and Road Initiative and the 2017 List of Deliverables for the Belt and Road Forum on International Cooperation have designated digital connectivity as one of the goals of the initiative, thus connecting the Digital Silk Road to the broader goals of infrastructure construction, trade facilitation, and people-to-people exchange. Therefore, scholars have gradually proposed a multi-dimensional policy system for the Digital Silk Road that integrates physical facilities, digital governance, technical norms and platform-based economic cooperation [20].

Empirical research has identified several recurring forms of Digital Silk Road cooperation, such as submarine and terrestrial

fibre-optic networks, data centres, cloud computing facilities, 5G infrastructure, smart-city projects, cross-border e-commerce platforms, and cooperation on technical standards for technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI) and telecommunications. Earlier studies have also pointed out that many of these projects involve close cooperation between government departments and Chinese technology companies, with public institutions providing policy support and enterprises undertaking the implementation and commercial operation [21,22].

An expanding body of empirical research has also studied the development effects of the Digital Silk Road. Panel data and quasi-experimental methods in quantitative research have shown that participation in the DSR (or the expanded Belt and Road Initiative) is positively correlated with improvements in ICT indicators, such as the speed of the Internet, broadband access and mobile network construction. Other studies have also found that investments in digital infrastructure are positively correlated with an expansion of bilateral trade and cross-border e-commerce; however, the magnitude of this effect varies by country and institutional system [23].

At the same time, the Digital Silk Road has also been mentioned in recent discussions at the international level on politics and policy. Different areas have varying degrees of recognition for initiative among the public. Many developing countries are interested in its development prospects, but some Western governments and scholars have also raised concerns about problems such as technology governance, digital dependence and strategic competition. Other areas, such as the European Union, ASEAN, and parts of the Middle East, have generally taken a more mixed or context-specific stance [24]. Scholars have also added that DSR now includes issues of global standard-setting, data governance and technological regulation, etc [25]. Therefore, the debates present two competing narratives: promoting digital connectivity and development opportunities, and enhancing governance, sovereignty and addressing geopolitical competition.

2.4 Media Representation and International Communication of the National Strategies

Applied studies of media coverage of the Digital

Silk Road and the whole Belt and Road Initiative have found several recurring framing patterns. Official and state-affiliated media generally focus on economic development, international cooperation and mutual benefits, and also highlight issues such as digital connectivity, infrastructure construction and technological innovation [26]. Comparative studies have shown that China's external communications tend to promote successful projects and partnership stories, and problems involving conflicts or politics are more likely to be framed within the context of global politics rather than as significant news [21].

China Daily is one of the top English-language newspapers in China, so it has received much attention from scholars across the country. The first studies on this problem have indicated that newspapers are one of the main ways official policies are spread abroad. Comparative studies of China Daily and prominent Western newspapers have found that they differ in the choice of subjects, evaluative expressions and discourse strategies, as well as their institutional positions and goals for communication [26]. Research on Belt and Road reporting also shows that China Daily frequently uses development-oriented, partnership-focused and technology-related frames when informing overseas readers about the initiative [27].

Methodologically, recently many scholars have integrated framing analysis with content analysis and other computational techniques, such as semantic network analysis, to explore the spread of news frames and the connections among core concepts in large amounts of text [6,28]. Based on the above research, the present study integrates content analysis with high-frequency word statistics and semantic network analysis to explore how China Daily presents the Digital Silk Road through various framing strategies. Focusing on the English-language coverage of newspapers, this study will expand the scope of previous research into the foreign communication of China's digital development.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Object and Sample Selection

This study examines news reports on the Digital Silk Road published by China Daily. The dataset covers the period from April 2019 to August 2025, beginning with the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation and ending

with the 2025 World Internet Conference Digital Silk Road Development Forum. This period captures both the implementation of the Digital Silk Road following its early policy development and the rapid expansion of China's digital economy and international digital cooperation in recent years. As a result, the dataset provides a suitable basis for examining how China Daily has framed the initiative over time.

3.2 Research Method and Procedure

This paper will use content analysis to study how China Daily covers the Digital Silk Road. All news reports in the dataset have been coded according to a coding scheme developed based on the strategic goals and main contents of the Digital Silk Road. Variables in the code include publication date, headline, article type and frame category.

The coded data were then used to explore the distribution of various frames and how they changed over time to show the development of media coverage. To understand the attributes of these frames in more detail, high-frequency word analysis and semantic network analysis were performed. The above analysis shows the main themes, conceptual connections and framing modes in which China Daily has covered the Digital Silk Road.

3.3 Frame Construction

Based on the theoretical system and the results of content analysis, five main frames have been identified in China Daily's coverage of the Digital Silk Road in this study.

The system of international relations and cooperation serves as a platform to connect with and cooperate with partner countries along the Belt and Road, as well as other parts of the world, by participating in many-party talks and building alliances. The Digital Economy and Industrial Cooperation framework links the Digital Silk Road to the expansion of the digital economy, industrial integration, and trade facilitation, and is thus expected to drive economic growth and practical cooperation.

The national strategy and image frame place the initiative within China's overall development plan and connect it to the theme of international responsibility and nation-building. At the forefront of the new round of technological development and innovation are artificial intelligence, big data and 5G; these will provide

strong support for promoting the progress of China's digitalisation. Finally, the activities and forum achievements frame centers on international summits, forums and multilateral exchanges, and present these events as evidence of the institutional development of the Digital Silk Road and China's growing participation in global digital governance.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Overview of Coverage

Between April 2019 and August 2025, China Daily published 214 reports on the Digital Silk Road. It is all sorts of news in many forms. Commentaries (75) and news reports (60) account for the largest proportion of the dataset, and video news (9), video interviews (8), and poster-style content (6) are relatively infrequent. The many types of reports indicate that China Daily uses a combination of traditional news and multimedia communication. Commentaries offer a platform for discussing policies and deep-seated issues, but videos and other visual media have been widely employed to spread the information about the Digital Silk Road globally, showing that the official communication approach is adapting to the trend of digital media.

4.2 Frame Types and Proportional Analysis

The first is the International Relations and Cooperation Framework; there are 79 such reports. The multi-level platform for the Digital Silk Road's international cooperation, regional connectivity and global governance is shown here. The second in the Digital Economy and Industrial Cooperation framework is a category of 50 reports on digital infrastructure, cross-border e-commerce and industrial transformation. The National Strategy and Image Frame appear in 43 reports, and the Digital Silk Road is thus placed within the broader development plan for China, connected to narratives of national image and international influence. At the same time, the list of new technologies developed and innovated in the Technological Development and Innovation framework (25 reports) includes artificial intelligence, 5G and blockchain, and the Activities and Forum Achievements framework (17 reports) lists major diplomatic events and multilateral exchanges, such as the Belt and Road Forum and the World Internet Conference.

Collectively, the distribution of frames shows that China Daily mainly presents the Digital Silk Road through stories of international cooperation and economic development. Themes related to national strategy, technological innovation and international affairs are relatively infrequent but support the main frames by providing a wider policy background.

The distribution of the time for these reports is also rising steadily. Annual coverage increased from 17 reports in 2019 to 50 in 2024, and 35 reports had already been published by August 2025. Media attention did not increase steadily; rather, it expanded gradually and then accelerated after 2022.

From 2019 to 2021, reporting remained relatively limited, corresponding to the early stage of the Digital Silk Road's policy development. From 2022 onward, however, coverage increased markedly. This growth coincided with several important events, including the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2023 and successive editions of the World Internet Conference, both of which provided additional opportunities for media attention and policy communication. The year 2024 marked the peak of reporting, underscoring the Digital Silk Road's elevated priority within both national strategic communication and global media discourse. Although 2025 has not yet concluded, the 35 reports published by August already suggest the issue's sustained prominence and stability in China's international communication agenda.

4.3 High-Frequency Word Analysis and Semantic Features

As it is shown in Table 1, high-frequency word analysis of China Daily on the "Digital Silk Road" reveals a distinct narrative pattern characterized by the interconnection of "nation—cooperation—technology—international". Among the five frames, the term "China" consistently appears as a high-frequency word,

highlighting the prominence of the national actor in related coverage and reflecting the media's centralization of national strategy in its narrative construction. Simultaneously, the frequent occurrence of words such as "cooperation", "development", "digital", and "global" underscores the dual logic of strategic initiative and international collaboration embedded in the Digital Silk Road discourse.

Based on the individual frames, the International Relations and Cooperation frame mainly contains words such as "cooperation", "countries", "road" and "trade", along with geographically or nationally specific words like "Asia", "Africa", "Kazakhstan" and "ASEAN". The distribution shows that the Digital Silk Road aims to expand overseas and promote multilateral cooperation; therefore, China will work with countries along the Belt and Road Initiative through trade, energy and infrastructure cooperation. Among the above frames, this one places more emphasis on building state-to-state relations and shows cooperation scenarios repeatedly to demonstrate China's cooperative attitude in foreign relations. At the same time, the Digital Economy and Industrial Cooperation framework also employs words such as "digital", "economy", "trade", "infrastructure" and "cross-border" to refer to economic and industrial activities. The International Relations and Cooperation system covers the broad goal of foreign relations and cooperates at the government level; the Digital Economy and Industrial Cooperation system is for actualisation. The coverage in this frame links the Digital Silk Road with cross-border e-commerce, digital infrastructure and data services, and shows these activities in concrete forms of international cooperation. Reports show how the digital projects promote industrial cooperation and market integration in practice, rather than just presenting abstract ideas of connectivity.

Table 1. High-Frequency Word Analysis of China Daily's Coverage of the Digital Silk Road

International relations and cooperation frame		Digital economy and industrial cooperation frame		National strategy and image frame		Technological development and innovation frame		Activities and forum achievements frame	
China	1496	digital	627	China	1852	China	266	digital	125
cooperation	681	China	470	cooperation	1146	digital	191	China	78
digital	544	countries	223	countries	1032	AI	145	development	63
countries	476	development	222	development	926	global	125	forum	52
development	440	economy	197	road	861	development	106	WIC	50
road	390	cooperation	186	international	714	cooperation	94	cooperation	44

economic	312	global	173	global	621	road	88	ASEAN	33
global	307	trade	165	digital	514	countries	84	internet	30
Chinese	237	international	122	world	430	world	54	new	29
trade	231	infrastructure	118	economic	391	international	50	conference	28
economy	228	commerce	117	more	383	Chinese	48	economy	25
Africa	217	economic	112	all	382	technology	47	province	24
world	201	cross-border	108	internet	381	infrastructure	44	building	24
Asean	192	data	106	new	358	governance	43	international	23
international	184	Chinese	100	people	355	technological	40	shared	22
infrastructure	163	world	99	economy	323	percent	39	world	22
relations	138	percent	89	other	307	innovation	39	connectivity	21
investment	135	technology	88	cyberspace	291	economy	38	global	18
Kazakhstan	128	growth	88	trade	288	new	33	more	18
energy	115	service	74	shared	257	forum	31	updated	17
Asia	110	business	73	information	245	daily	29	summit	16
technology	108	internet	70	community	241	technologies	29	future	16
south	101	billion	68	future	220	health	27	Quanzhou	15
strategic	101	market	64	security	216	data	27	Shaanxi	15
growth	101	enterprise	60	technology	211	updated	26	integration	13

The National Strategy and Image Frame are of a general nature. Frequently occurring terms such as road, international, world, strategy and people indicate that the Digital Silk Road falls under China's broader national development plan and the Belt and Road Initiative. Words such as "international" and "world" appear frequently in the discourse on global governance to show that China actively participates in international development and public goods, and is no longer just a participant in the process of digital cooperation.

The framework of technological development and innovation focuses on the new-generation technologies more prominently. High-frequency terms such as AI, the Internet, innovation, cyberspace and governance show that media attention has moved beyond technological progress to cover broader governance problems in the digital era. By connecting the themes of digital governance and technological standards with the Digital Silk Road, China Daily shows that China is a first-class country in constructing a future digital environment.

The Activities and Forum Achievements frame differs from the others by focusing on overseas meetings and diplomatic talks. Frequent mentions of terms such as forum, WIC, summit and conference suggest that the main international events serve as important platforms for communicating the goals and results of the Digital Silk Road. Do not select particular projects; instead, this framework will be employed to organize a series of multilateral consultations on the start-up.

Together, these five frames constitute the whole but have multiple ends. Although each frame focuses on a different part of the Digital Silk Road, together they show that this initiative is about international cooperation, economic development, technological innovation and national strategy. Changes in high-frequency words among different frames reflect changes in the topic of discussion, and their collective focus on development and connection provides consistent coverage of the Digital Silk Road in China Daily.

4.4 Semantic Network Construction and Relationship Analysis

(1) International relations and cooperation frame
Within the International Relations and Cooperation frame, the four main nodes in the network are China, digital, cooperation and development; together, they constitute the foundation of China Daily's representation of the Digital Silk Road. Around these concepts, words such as ASEAN, the United States, region, bilateral, Kazakhstan, Africa, partnership, and global expand the geographical and political scope of the discourse, showing that the initiative is for cooperation among many regions and parties.

The Connections of these keywords are in a uniform frame pattern. In addition to focusing on the technology of digital connectivity, some reports have begun to connect cooperation with development and now view the Digital Silk Road as a means to promote regional integration and common economic prosperity. References to

bilateral partnerships and international cooperation have also promoted the application of digital cooperation in responding to uneven development and rising demands for digitalisation.

The Evaluation Dimension of this frame is also stand-alone. Repeatedly mentioned are cooperation, mutual trust and joint development to demonstrate the benefits of collaboration for both parties and to show that China is actively participating in international cooperation. At the same time, the appearance of terms such as "United States" and "region" introduces an implicit comparison between China's preferred model of open cooperation and alternative paths for going global, but this contrast is not presented directly in the report.

The above solutions in this system are also cooperative rather than competitive. Some reports have shown that multilateral platforms, bilateral cooperation and regional cooperation mechanisms are effective ways to extend the Digital Silk Road, and continuous institutional collaboration is expected to advance all-weather global digital connectivity.

(2) Digital economy and industrial cooperation frame

Within the Digital Economy and Industrial Cooperation frame, the connected concepts in the semantic network are Belt and Road, construction, development, digital, economy, cooperation and China. The above core nodes are frequently accompanied by words such as "services", "trade", "market", "growth", and "projects", which show that the main content of the speech revolves around economic development through digital cooperation. In addition to the international relations and cooperation system, more attention has also been paid to the actual construction of digital services at the industrial and market levels.

Based on the above keywords, we know that the Digital Silk Road is a way to promote cross-border trade and improve digital services by opening up new market opportunities. Rather than generally mentioning "strategic cooperation", the reports specify how digital technology will be applied to build a particular project, expand its market, and promote trade. The above model connects digital cooperation to the overall development and industrial restructuring of the area.

The evaluation attributes of this system are ideas of open-mindedness, inclusivity and mutual

benefit. Reports have consistently shown that digital connectivity and economic integration are in line with the overall trend of development in the world, and thus, the Digital Silk Road offers various countries and regions opportunities. The frequent co-occurrence of the Belt and Road and the Digital Silk Road also indicates their continuity, and digital cooperation is thus part of China's overall development plan.

The policy-oriented narratives in this system focus on expanding digital infrastructure, cross-border e-commerce and digital trade. The above priorities are shown by references to specific projects and institutional cooperation, and in practice, long-term cooperation has not been based on strategic rhetoric alone. In short, this frame moves away from the general goals of the Digital Silk Road to show specific economic activities and highlights their actual benefits for industrial cooperation and regional development.

(3) National strategy and image frame

Under the National Strategy and Image, the centre of the semantic network is a system of "construction, cooperation, China, development, nation and global". These nodes are associated with terms such as openness, innovation, building a community with a shared future for mankind, mechanisms, organisational exchange, signing and domains, and form a discourse that connects national development with international governance. More weight has been given to China's strategic position and its role in the development of international organisations in the current period.

Given the semantic connections among these keywords, the Digital Silk Road has been added to China's main list of foreign policy goals. In addition to economic cooperation, the reports also mention the theme of global connectivity and shared development and governance innovation. References to the idea of building a community with a shared future for all people further align the Digital Silk Road with China's overall objectives of international cooperation and global governance.

The other type of a framework is institutional cooperation. Frequent mentions of mechanisms, overseas cooperation and signing agreements indicate that the media present these institutional arrangements as the main way to promote the initiative. Through these links, the Digital Silk Road has been shown to be a construction project for digital infrastructure as well as a platform for promoting international cooperation

and improving governance.

The features of the system in terms of evaluation are openness, innovation and mutual benefit. Repeatedly mentioning the construction of a community with a shared future for all people is to show that China is willing to contribute to the development of the world and actively participate in global governance. Together, the above strategic and normative factors show that China is also a responsible member of the international community.

Policy-oriented Narratives promote long-term institutional cooperation through agreements, multilateral exchanges and cross-sectoral collaboration. Instead of listing the policies individually, all the reports have repeatedly put forward long-term institutional cooperation as the foundation for the future development of the Digital Silk Road. Together, these pictures show that the initiative is in line with China's national strategy and a way for China to take a more active role in global governance.

(4) Technological development and innovation frame

In the frame of Technological Development and Innovation, the centre of the semantic network is an interconnected concept system including Silk Road, China, innovation, digital, technology, and development. Frequent occurrences of terms such as construction, infrastructure, artificial intelligence and governance indicate a higher degree of technological focus in the discourse; thus, it can be inferred that digital innovation forms the foundation for China Daily's depiction of the Digital Silk Road.

The connections among the above keywords suggest that the initiative is the result of changes in technology, rather than being solely due to economic or diplomatic cooperation. Digital technology has consistently been associated with infrastructure modernisation, innovation capacity and long-term development, and therefore appears to be a prerequisite for extending the Digital Silk Road. Therefore, technology functions are not supports but rather attributes that can be featured in the front-end interface.

At the same time, technological innovation and digital governance have also worked closely together. References to artificial intelligence, governance and infrastructure indicate that media coverage also includes discussions of institutional capacity and governance mechanisms. Through these connections, the

reports show that China's technological development has promoted the digitalisation of its own country and also participated in the broader process of international cooperation and digital governance.

The Evaluation Criteria for the Frame are Innovation, Technological Openness and Knowledge Sharing. Recently, most of the reports have pointed out that artificial intelligence, digital governance and related technologies are now essential topics for cross-border cooperation around the world, and China has taken the initiative in innovation to actively build global digital standards. At present, the focus of competition is no longer technology but collaboration for common prosperity through innovation.

Policy-related Narratives focus on building digital infrastructure, promoting the application of new-generation technologies and strengthening cooperation with foreign countries in digital governance. In short, the semantic network shows that the Digital Silk Road is a technology-driven initiative that combines innovation, infrastructure construction and institutional cooperation under a common system of digital construction.

(5) Activities and forum achievements frame

In the Activities and Forum Achievements frame, the centre of the semantic network is the concepts of Silk Road, connectivity, digital and development. Frequent terms such as forum, World Internet Conference (WIC), ASEAN, summit, exchange, sharing and integration show that major international events are frequently covered in China Daily's reports on the Digital Silk Road. Rather than building new infrastructure or promoting new technologies, most of the forums for dialogue and international cooperation under this system will be conferences and other multilateral platforms.

The connections among these keywords suggest that the organisation of the discourse is based on repeated overseas exchanges. Frequent mentions in forums, at summits and in dialogues, link the Digital Silk Road with continuous diplomatic talks and institutional cooperation. Thus, the conference can be regarded as a platform for communication, and at the same time, we will boost cooperation and build regional connectivity.

Another feature of this frame is that it also prompts several parties to take part. References to the World Internet Conference, ASEAN, and

other international platforms have extended the network of regional and global cooperation for the Digital Silk Road. Repeatedly connecting these events with the ideas of sharing and cooperation has created a story of openness, mutual learning and joint development, and shown that China is an active participant in multilateral talks and digital governance.

Going forward, in light of the above, future forward-looking narratives will continue to emphasise the importance of promoting the construction of the international forum, strengthening regional cooperation mechanisms, and advancing policy dialogue and experience sharing in an ongoing manner. Instead of showing the Digital Silk Road as a fixed national initiative, the reports present it as an evolving process of international cooperation that continuously enhances its legitimacy and influence through institutional coordination and repeated multilateral engagements.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates how China Daily represents the Digital Silk Road between 2019 and 2025 through a combination of content analysis, high-frequency word analysis, and semantic network analysis within a framing perspective. The results show that the newspaper constructs the Digital Silk Road through five interconnected frames: International Relations and Cooperation, Digital Economy and Industrial Cooperation, National Strategy and Image, Technological Development and Innovation, and Activities and Forum Achievements. Although each frame presents a different feature of the initiative, together they form an integrated picture of the Digital Silk Road as a platform for international cooperation, digital development and global integration.

Based on the above analysis, these frames operate at different levels. The system of international relations and cooperation promotes multilateral cooperation and cross-border cooperation; the system of the digital economy and industrial cooperation will promote practical initiatives such as building digital infrastructure and cross-border e-commerce. The National Strategy and Image Frame place the Digital Silk Road within China's all-round vision of international cooperation and global governance, and the Technological Development and Innovation Frame connect this initiative with new-generation technologies and digital

transformation. On the other hand, the Activities and Forum Achievements frame focuses on how international forums and multilateral talks have been used to promote cooperation and spread the goals of the initiative.

High-frequency word analysis and semantic network analysis have also shown that concepts such as China, cooperation, development and technology are frequently mentioned in the five frames. Although there are various focuses on the subjects, the repeated connections among them support a unified system of ideas that consistently presents the Digital Silk Road as a cooperative and development-oriented project. China Daily does not focus on geopolitics; instead, it shows how countries cooperate economically and technologically, etc, in many other areas.

The above results offer support for the study of media framing and international communication by showing how the official media employ complementary narrative strategies in reporting on a large-scale international project. In short, the above studies show that media framing influences both people's views on infrastructure and technology construction, as well as how national development plans are presented abroad.

Reference

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