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Which Exerts Greater Influence? Domestic vs. International News Media on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Projects in Myanmar

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Abstract

Previous studies have investigated media influence on public opinion regarding BRI projects in Myanmar but have not clarified whether domestic or international news media exert more influence. This study examines how the domestic and international news media set agendas for BRI projects in Myanmar. Two domestic news media outlets (ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy*) with 217 articles ($n = 217$) yielded 1436 attributes, whereas two international news outlets (Radio Free Asia and Voice of America) with 144 articles ($n = 144$) produced 1236 attributes. An online survey of 3000 Myanmar residents ($n = 3000$) was conducted to identify their public agendas. The independent t -test showed that domestic and international media emphasise BRI-related issues differently, while Spearman's rho indicates that international news media exhibit a stronger correlation with public opinion, suggesting greater influence. The findings revealed that international media focuses on 'strategic interests', whereas domestic media emphasises 'economic development' from BRI implementation. The findings suggest that the Myanmar government and Chinese investors should focus on specific BRI project issues, including strategic interests, local concerns, economic development, lack of transparency, and lack of coordination when responding to media narratives.

Keywords: domestic; international; news media; public opinion; agenda setting; BRI projects



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1. Introduction

Considering the increasing influence of news media in shaping public perceptions of global infrastructure initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multidisciplinary body of research has emerged. This research spans fields such as political economy, geopolitics, socioeconomics, environmental studies, and media effects. Given the BRI's potential to foster global economic development and enhance interpersonal connections between nations, it is crucial to consider international public opinion regarding this initiative. Consequently, the impact of news media on BRI projects has become a pertinent topic, particularly in terms of how media outlets engage in agenda setting to influence public perception of BRI projects. Studies have been conducted to examine public opinion and the extended agenda-setting effects on BRI projects in Myanmar, illustrating that news

media shape public opinion (Oo & Dai, 2024) and influence policy priorities through public sentiment, thereby affecting decision-making processes (Oo & Dai, 2025).

Building on previous works, critical questions persist regarding the differential emphasis placed by domestic and international news media on issues surrounding BRI projects in Myanmar. Additionally, it is imperative to determine which type of media exert a greater agenda-setting influence on public opinion concerning these projects. Addressing these inquiries will enable China and the host country, Myanmar, to discern which type of news media, domestic or international, most effectively shapes public agenda related to BRI projects, and how to strategically engage with these media outlets based on their editorial focus. It is essential to understand how domestic and international news media differentially establish news agendas related to global infrastructure development, thus thereby influencing public opinion.

Building on the foundational agenda-setting research conducted by M. McCombs and Shaw (1972) and Funkhouser (1973), which examined the significance of news media coverage in shaping public agendas, this study delineates the media agenda using survey methodologies to determine the public agenda (M. McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Funkhouser, 1973). Generally, individuals do not perceive international issues as significant when there is an increase in media coverage of domestic issues. The credibility of news outlets and nature of news coverage differentially affect public perceptions of issue importance. When individuals perceive the media as highly credible, they are more inclined to rely on it for information, thereby increasing their exposure to media messages and their susceptibility to agenda-setting effects (Wanta & Hu, 1994).

Given the credibility and resources of news media, along with their editorial focus on news coverage and vast followings, the agenda-setting effects of domestic and international news media on global issues can vary, thereby shaping public perceptions. The results of this study may help understand how domestic and international news media can establish an agenda and the differences in their approaches to forming a public strategy, a strong concept revealed by other studies. This provides statistical arguments that policymakers may need to consider the influence of domestic and international news media on shaping public opinion about global infrastructure initiatives, such as BRI projects. This study contributes to both theoretical foundations (M. McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and empirical knowledge. Theoretically, it enriches the existing understanding of the agenda-setting effects of both domestic and international news media on global infrastructure development. Empirically, it offers policy recommendations for both China and Myanmar to effectively engage with the media for the successful implementation of BRI projects.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Projects

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects aim to foster economic growth and establish trade routes, facilitating population connectivity and regional integration through agreements that involve most countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa. China views Myanmar, strategically positioned between China and India, as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia and a vital element of its BRI. A key feature of the BRI is the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which provides China with direct land access to the Indian Ocean. Between 1988 and 2016, China's direct investment in Myanmar reached USD 18.53 billion across nearly 130 projects, outpacing investments from all other countries and cementing China's role as a pivotal player in Myanmar's economy and trade (Balshan, 2016). By the end of 2017, the BRI significantly boosted Chinese investments in Myanmar, increasing from USD 481 million to USD 1.3 billion in 2017–2018 (Kobayashi & King, 2022). This de-

velopment significantly influenced the bilateral relationship between China and Myanmar owing to Myanmar's involvement in the BRI.

Scholars posited that the BRI presents opportunities for Myanmar's infrastructure and economic growth, aiming to enhance connectivity, trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds (Khin Kyi & Xiang, 2020; Oo & Dai, 2024, 2025; Teo et al., 2019). However, some researchers assume that the challenges include security risks, environmental concerns, financial sustainability, limited public knowledge, and alignment with the national priorities of host countries (Gyi, 2019; Malik, 2020; Myers, 2020). Gyi (2019) notes that Myanmar harbours concerns regarding sovereignty, control, and potential indebtedness to China, highlighting fears of falling into 'debt-trap diplomacy' (Gyi, 2019). Malik (2020) suggests that China's interest in maintaining a 'paukphaw' relationship with countries like Myanmar is primarily driven by its need for economic resources and geostrategic access to the Bay of Bengal (Malik, 2020). Similarly, some news media portrayed Chinese projects as driven by a geostrategic ambition to secure access to the Indian Ocean and expand shipping routes for oil supply from the Middle East. This would allow China to bypass the traditional sea lane of the Malacca Strait and potentially isolate India from the East (Myers, 2020). Gyi (2019) suggests that for the BRI to succeed, both Myanmar and China should engage and coordinate with local communities, addressing their concerns (Gyi, 2019). Malik (2020) argues that while BRI projects, such as railroads, highways, and pipelines may facilitate physical connectivity through China's economic integration and infrastructure development, political and security integration necessitates a harmonious alignment of interests, values, and vision (Malik, 2020).

Some authors contend that the BRI could set a new benchmark for addressing the environmental impacts of global infrastructure development provided that policies are effectively implemented and harmonised with those of other regions (Teo et al., 2019). As noted by Khin Kyi and Xiang (2020), the people of Myanmar anticipate that the BRI will offer numerous advantages, such as the establishment of a free-trade economic zone, the development of new businesses and job opportunities, alleviation of local job shortages and poverty, technological advancements, improved transportation and tourism systems, and strengthened relations with China, among others (Khin Kyi & Xiang, 2020).

In their research titled 'Media Perception of China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC): Framing Analysis of Media Discourse on Chinese Investments in Myanmar,' Oo et al. (2024) propose that media influence can significantly shape public opinion regarding Chinese investments. They underscored public concern and political instability as key factors that may hinder the successful implementation of BRI projects (Oo et al., 2024). Thus, various researchers have analysed how the media influences people or communities' opinions and their vision of BRI projects and the impact they have on the policymaking process (Oo & Dai, 2024, 2025). However, the question remains as to whether international or domestic news media wield more influence over issues related to the BRI projects in Myanmar. Therefore, this study builds on previous research to examine the differing emphases between international and domestic news media, which are closely tied to public opinion about BRI projects in Myanmar and their editorial approaches.

2.2. Previous Studies on Domestic and International Media

International media reach a broad audience and are often more reliable, making them influential in shaping shared opinions and policies, particularly on global issues such as geopolitics, climate change (Barkemeyer et al., 2017), and other international development efforts (Oo & Dai, 2024, 2025). Research indicates that international media often wield greater agenda-setting power than domestic media do (Alam, 2016; Wanta & Hu, 1993). This is largely because they address issues that transcend national borders, such

as international conflict, terrorism, and environmental challenges. Such global influence is primarily supported by well-established media outlets that possess the resources and infrastructure necessary to disseminate content across regions, thereby affecting global public concern.

One of the primary distinctions between international and domestic news coverage lies not just in the scope of coverage but, more importantly, in the tone, framing, and priorities assigned to the issues presented. [Wanta and Hu \(1993\)](#) demonstrated that American citizens are significantly influenced by the media's agenda setting regarding world affairs, particularly through US-centric outlets such as The New York Times and networks such as CBS, ABC, and NBC. Stories with high conflict intensity, such as those related to terrorism and international crime, significantly affect public concern ([Wanta & Hu, 1993](#)). This observation underscores the tendency for international concerns, particularly those involving powerful states, to capture more societal attention than abstract international issues. It also emphasises the significance of how international news is attributed, whether as tangible conflict or as a distant, abstract concern, and the level of seriousness with which the questioning community chooses to perceive it.

[Arif and Hayat \(2018\)](#) emphasised the ideological differences between international media outlets such as Al Jazeera English (AJE) and BBC News in their coverage of China's domestic politics. The AJE portrayed China in a more favourable light, emphasising its political reforms and economic strength, while the BBC focused on authoritarianism and political conflicts, reflecting the geopolitical biases of their respective regions. These differences illustrate how international media can shape global issues and alter perceptions worldwide. ([Arif & Hayat, 2018](#)).

[Alam \(2016\)](#) contended that international media, wielding significant political power, can profoundly shape public opinion on global issues. The media's influence stems not only from its credibility but also from its ability to frame narratives about world events, sometimes even distorting the truth through selective reporting. For instance, the way international news media covered events such as the Bangladesh Liberation War or the post-9/11 portrayal of Muslims illustrates how media can sway foreign perceptions to endorse nationalistic views. Consequently, as an agenda setter, international media play a crucial role in shaping the interpretation of global affairs for both the general public and policymakers ([Alam, 2016](#)).

[Barkemeyer et al. \(2017\)](#) argued that while media events of international significance such as climate change conferences are globally important, their significance is shaped by national issues ([Barkemeyer et al., 2017](#)). While international media can serve as a platform to raise awareness of issues such as climate change, domestic media may emphasise different concerns, thereby setting the agenda in line with national standards and preferences. This illustrates the complex interdependence of the international and domestic media in shaping and interpreting the world.

[Van Dijk \(2013\)](#) explored the standardised traits of international news reporting, highlighting its alignment with the global journalism code. This approach prioritises certain events and employs a consistent structure to bolster international journalism's credibility and uniformity. Such standardisation allows international media to present a cohesive worldview of foreign events. However, the portrayal of these events is still influenced by variations in ideological interpretation, particularly in the editorial content of media outlets, which shapes the general public's understanding of the situation ([Van Dijk, 2013](#)). [López-Paredes and Carrillo-Andrade \(2025\)](#) highlighted digital illiteracy's role in exacerbating disinformation within ultramediated environments, particularly in Ecuador ([López-Paredes & Carrillo-Andrade, 2025](#)). While international media wield agenda-setting power through global issues, disinformation often remains unaddressed

in nations with high digital illiteracy. Digital media impact in Ecuador shows how media consumption affects public perceptions, emphasising the need for educational strategies to bridge the digital divide, as barriers limit media literacy and shape how individuals internalise media agendas.

In summary, previous studies provide compelling evidence of the significant influence exerted by international media compared with domestic media on international society. Beyond its credibility and access to media resources, international news media's strong agenda-setting role distinguishes it from domestic news media. These studies collectively illustrate how international and domestic media addresses and sets the agenda for global issues, highlighting the differences between them. Previous research suggests that international news media wield more influence not only because of their resources and capacity but also because of their relevance to global issues and populations. Building on these empirical findings, this study examines the differing emphases of the two media types on the global issue of the BRI, asserting that international news media possesses greater agenda-setting power than domestic news media (Alam, 2016; Wanta & Hu, 1993).

3. Theoretical Framework

Walter Lippmann's 'The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads' introduces the foundational concept that identifies the agenda-setting power of media in shaping public opinion (Lippmann, 1922). It emphasises that media does not allow people to form opinions based on real-world experiences, but instead encourages them to think about what the media wants. The basis of the agenda-setting theory emerged in The Chapel Hill study of 1968, which emphasised the agenda-setting role in shaping voters' opinions during the 1972 presidential election in the United States (M. McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Over time, agenda-setting theory has evolved significantly into 'first level,' 'second level,' 'third level,' 'reverse,' and 'network' agenda setting.

This theoretical framework primarily focuses on the first and second levels of the agenda-setting theory, which are more commonly employed by traditional media. The first level emphasises the salience of an issue or object, whereas the second highlights the salience of the attributes of an issue or object. In other words, the first level tells people 'what to think about' (Lippmann, 1922), whereas the second level asks them 'how to think about' it (M. McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This distinction clearly differentiates between the two levels of agenda-setting levels. Guo et al. (2015) elucidated that these first two levels of agenda-setting theory illustrate a hierarchical transfer of the salience of individual issues and attributes from the media to the public agenda (Guo et al., 2015). In this context, a set of issues or attributes can be highlighted or ignored in the media agenda in order to influence public opinion.

Despite their influence, news media are constrained by factors such as the reliability of their reports and the use of specific news attributes to shape public priorities. If a topic fails to capture the public interest, it will not be prioritised on the agenda, even with media attention. Nevertheless, media coverage plays a crucial role in setting the agenda, as both the public and media are actively involved in this process. M. McCombs (1997) found that news media can emphasise the significance of an issue or object in influencing public opinion, thereby affecting processes by shaping perceptions and building consensus (M. McCombs, 1997). When certain attributes of an issue or object are heavily highlighted in the news coverage, they are likely to become relatively important to the public. Ultimately, this leads to an increase in the perceived importance of the issue or object. This process begins with media attention directed at specific objects or issues such as public issues, figures, and institutions, and the public relies on these cues, thereby shaping public opinion (Carroll & McCombs, 2003).

The agenda-setting role of mass media influences not only individuals' attitudes and behaviours, but also the political, economic, social, and intellectual life of a nation, as well as international events or issues (Shaw, 1979). Previous studies have explored the agenda-setting effect on global issues such as terrorism, environmental and climate changes, and global pandemics, while some research has concentrated on global infrastructure developments, particularly BRI projects in Myanmar (Oo et al., 2024; Oo & Dai, 2024, 2025). However, there remains a gap in understanding how news media—both international and domestic, set the agenda and which media align more closely with public opinion regarding BRI projects in Myanmar. In other words, it is essential to determine which media are more correlated with public opinion on the issues surrounding the BRI projects in Myanmar. This study advances this line of inquiry by exploring the gap regarding whether domestic or international news media has a more significant agenda-setting impact on global economic development infrastructure projects. Wanta and Hu (1994) suggested that when individuals perceive the media as highly credible, they tend to increase their consumption and become more susceptible to agenda setting (Wanta & Hu, 1994). Conversely, it can be argued that if the media demonstrates more pronounced agenda-setting effects on specific issues, they may be perceived as more credible. Building on previous research, this study explores the following two hypotheses (H1 and H2):

H1. *Domestic and international news media set agendas for BRI projects in Myanmar with a focus on editorial policies.*

H2. *International news media have a more significant relationship with public opinion regarding BRI projects than domestic media outlets.*

Within the theoretical framework, this study utilises the first-level agenda-setting concept to explore two hypotheses, focusing on the perceived significance of issues related to BRI projects in Myanmar as reported by both international and domestic news media. H1 prompts an examination of how these two media types set agendas differently, emphasising different issues in their editorial policies, while H2 investigates which media type aligns more closely with public opinion, indicating greater influence. Specifically, this study aims to identify the correlation and alignment between the issues highlighted in news coverage, referred to as the media agenda, and those perceived in public opinion, known as the public agenda. Based on previous agenda-setting studies, the correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda is considered to be an effect of the media on public opinion (Oo & Dai, 2024, 2025). Therefore, a stronger correlation between both news media should be regarded as having a greater influence on public opinion.

4. Materials and Methods

Guided by hypotheses and a theoretical framework, this study employed two data collection methods: content analysis and online surveys. Initially, the study conducted a content analysis of the selected articles to determine the news agenda, followed by an online survey with 3000 respondents ($n = 3000$). This study selected two international news media outlets, Radio Free Asia (RFA) and Voice of America (VOA), and two domestic outlets, ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy*. Irrawaddy was chosen as the domestic news source because of its esteemed coverage, substantial following, and diverse perspectives. In contrast, Radio Free Asia (RFA) and Voice of America (VOA) were selected for their global reach, credibility among Myanmar audiences, and focus on Myanmar's political and economic realities, including China's investments. Established in 1990, The Irrawaddy boasts of approximately 24 million online readers, whereas ELEVEN, founded in 2005, has over 21 million followers. Given Myanmar's 53 million populations, these figures have significantly influenced public

opinion. RFA, launched in 1996 with US support, has amassed millions of Facebook followers and disseminated information in nine languages via satellite, shortwave radio, and online platforms. The VOA operates as a global broadcaster, reaching 236 million individuals with over 40 language programs, including Myanmar.

Before the selection process, criteria were established to ensure the appropriate choice of news media and to minimise potential biases. Six criteria were set to select news media: first, the use of the Myanmar language; second, an editorial policy that emphasises China-related issues in Myanmar; third, significant influence with a large readership in Myanmar; fourth, political stances either opposing or aligning with China; fifth, the year of establishment (prior to 2011); and sixth, data availability covering the study period (2011–2024). By applying these criteria, four news media outlets were selected, and further editorial analysis was conducted on these outlets to identify any limitations of the study.

Two international news media outlets, RFA and VOA, broadcast Myanmar programs that highlight Myanmar's political, economic, social, and environmental issues. Although both are affiliated with the US, they adopt different editorial stances regarding BRI projects. While both focus primarily on strategic influences, VOA emphasises social and environmental issues, whereas RFA concentrates on the economic and political aspects related to the BRI. Their news coverage specifically targeted Chinese projects in Myanmar, highlighting the potential geopolitical, financial, environmental, and social risks. Editorials, analyses, opinions, and special coverage of these two international news media platforms have gained popularity in Myanmar. Compared to other domestic news media, ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy* met the selection criteria for this study. Both focus on China-related issues in Myanmar but with differing editorial perspectives. ELEVEN primarily examines the relationship between China and Myanmar, whereas *Irrawaddy* focuses on economic, social, and environmental issues related to China.

This study meticulously selected news articles related to BRI projects in Myanmar, spanning the period from 2011 to 2024. It focused exclusively on three types of news coverage—editorials, analyses, and opinion pieces—which served as the units of analysis for this research. A total of 88 articles were deliberately chosen from ELEVEN and 129 from *The Irrawaddy*, amounting to 127 ($n = 127$) and 144 ($n = 144$), respectively. Building on previous research, this study identified ten significant issues related to BRI projects in Myanmar for content analysis. These issues encompassed 'strategic interest,' 'paukphaw relations,' 'debt concern,' 'environmental concern,' 'local concern,' 'lack of transparency,' 'lack of coordination,' 'infrastructure development,' 'regional connectivity,' and 'economic development.' To ensure consistency and reliability in coding, this study developed a codebook comprising a coding scheme, guidelines, and a coding sheet. Once established, two coders with master's degrees who had prior coding experience were invited to participate. After thorough consultation, the coders coded the first 25 articles from each news media outlet to test the inter-coder reliability (Lovejoy et al., 2016). The results confirmed a reliability value of 0.85, falling within the Kappa range (0.75 to 0.85), for various factors: strategic interest (0.79), paukphaw relations (0.92), debt concern (0.92), environmental concern (0.89), public concern (0.83), lack of transparency (0.91), lack of coordination (0.89), infrastructure development (0.86), regional connectivity (0.86), and economic development (0.75). After achieving an average reliability value between 0.75 and 0.85, the two coders proceeded to code all the selected articles.

By aligning the context, timeframe, and observations from the content analysis, the study crafted a questionnaire for an online survey. The questions primarily focused on ten key issues associated with BRI projects in Myanmar. To ensure data validity, reliability, and consistency, the questionnaire for the online surveys included the following critical questions: 'How did you become aware of the BRI projects in Myanmar?' 'How frequently

do you engage with news from outlets such as The Irrawaddy or ELEVEN?’ ‘What issues related to Chinese (BRI) projects in Myanmar have captured your attention or raised your concerns over the years?’ ‘What intrigues or worries you about the BRI projects in Myanmar?’ The survey employed a combination of Likert scale items, multiple-choice responses, ratings questions, and close and open-ended prompts.

Following the development of the questionnaire, a pilot test involving 150 respondents was conducted to assess its consistency and reliability prior to distribution. After the pilot study, the questionnaire was thoroughly revised and distributed to 3350 respondents by using Google Forms. The study collected responses from 3298 participants, after excluding disqualified responses. After removing unqualified responses and invalid data, a sample size of 3000 responses ($n = 3000$) was established. A survey administration team was formed to oversee the entire procedure. They were trained to conduct an online survey while ensuring that ethical considerations for the human participants were upheld.

To test the hypotheses, the study utilises two analytical methods: an independent t -test to assess the editorial strategies of the two media types, and Spearman’s rho analysis to explore the correlation between domestic or international news media and public opinion. Considering other factors influencing public opinion on BRI projects, this study incorporates demographic cross-tabs tabulation, thereby enriching the data and strengthening the research. The analyses were conducted using R software (version 4.3.1) with RStudio (version 2024.09.1+394) as the integrated development environment. The dataset used for this study, which underpins all analyses, is available in the Supplementary Materials (S1).

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. News Coverages of Four Selected (Domestic and International) News Media

Table 1 presents the issues covered by both the domestic (ELEVEN, The Irrawaddy) and international media (RFA, VOA). International news outlets emphasise China’s ‘strategic interest’ in Chinese BRI initiatives, while domestic media focus on ‘local concerns’ related to BRI projects. Although they address other issues, such as environmental risks, lack of transparency, the need for coordination, and financial risks, the VOA and RFA primarily underscore how the BRI enhances China’s strategic interests by granting access to the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean. Conversely, the theme of ‘strategic interest’ dominates international media coverage, underscoring Myanmar’s geopolitical importance, especially concerning the CMEC and the Kyaukphyu seaport, which enabled China to circumvent the Malacca Strait. This focus may stem from the editorial policies of RFA and VOA, which primarily emphasise China’s strategic role in the region and beyond. In contrast, domestic news outlets, such as ELVEN and The Irrawaddy, concentrate on ‘local concerns’, underscoring the apprehensions of local communities regarding potential risks such as land acquisition, displacement, and inequitable benefits that may arise from the implementation of BRI projects (Myint, 2017). Most of their domestic news coverage focuses primarily on economic, social, and environmental issues related to BRI projects, emphasising the lack of transparency and the need for coordination with local communities. Since the suspension of the Myitsone Dam Project, international news media have increasingly reported on local concerns, such as protests against Chinese investments in Myanmar (RFA, 2018).

Both domestic and international news media acknowledge the advantages of enhanced infrastructure, trade, and investments, making ‘economic development’ a priority in their coverage. Domestic news often focuses on local economic benefits (Gyi, 2019), while the international media considers Myanmar’s role in global trade and China’s strategic interests. As BRI projects foster infrastructure and economic growth, the media underscores potential benefits such as job creation, improved regional trade, and local engagement (Phyo, 2018).

Table 1. Issue frequency distribution between domestic (ELEVEN, *The Irrawaddy*) and international news media (RFA, VOA).

Issue Attributes	ELEVEN	<i>The Irrawaddy</i>	RFA	VOA	Total	Percent	Rank
Strategic Interest	36	124	103	145	408	15.27	1
Debt Concern	27	38	8	28	101	3.78	10
Environmental Concern	47	69	18	58	192	7.18	9
Local Concern	73	133	81	109	396	14.82	2
Lack of Transparency	35	48	36	97	216	8.1	7
Lack of Coordination	56	79	65	79	279	10.44	5
Infrastructure Development	50	113	68	69	300	11.23	4
Regional Connectivity	46	97	39	41	223	8.34	6
Economic Development	48	150	81	73	352	13.17	3
Paukphaw Relations	59	108	24	14	205	7.67	8
Total	477	959	523	713	2672	100	

Note: data were collected from news articles on the four selected news media.

Although environmental concerns have not been frequently emphasised in news coverage since the suspension of the Myitsone Dam, they remain crucial in shaping public perceptions (ELEVEN, 2019a). Most international media coverage focuses on potential environmental risks, such as air pollution affecting local populations near copper mine areas, marine pollution around the Kyaukphyu seaport and its special economic zones, and land acquisition along oil and gas pipelines. In contrast, domestic news media emphasises issues such as deforestation, biodiversity loss, pollution along the Irrawaddy River, and potential land acquisition along the CMEC (Lwin, 2019a). In this regard, both types of news media suggest balancing development with environmental protection. International news outlets emphasise governance issues such as transparency and coordination with local communities because of their political implications compared to domestic ones, ELEVEN, and *The Irrawaddy*. Both domestic and international news coverage highlight protests at Kyaukphyu seaport projects, New Yangon City, and other Chinese-led projects because of a lack of transparency (Lwin, 2019b).

Despite concerns about the financial risks associated with the BRI, the issue of ‘China’s debt concern’ receives less emphasis on both domestic and international news coverage compared than other topics. While acknowledging infrastructure development and regional connectivity as key benefits of BRI projects, both international and domestic news media underscore Myanmar’s strategic location and play a significant role in enhancing regional connectivity. Most international news coverage underscores that this strategic location facilitates China’s strategic interests in the region, raising potential geopolitical concerns, whereas domestic news media emphasise the geopolitical benefits of Myanmar in terms of improving its socioeconomic development. This difference may arise from the editorial stance of the two types of news. Compared to ELEVEN, *Irrawaddy* adopted a more sceptical stance toward China’s investments in Myanmar.

According to the issue rankings, ‘strategic interest’ is prioritised the most, while debt concerns receive the least attention in their coverage. Issues related to local concerns and ‘economic development’ have been emphasised consistently. This suggests that both domestic and international news outlets shape the agenda based on their preferred focus on the public, rather than reflecting individuals’ actual observations.

5.2. Issues Prioritised in News Coverages of Domestic vs. International News Media

Table 2 displays a statistical evaluation conducted using independent *t*-tests to assess the prioritisation of BRI issues by domestic (ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy*) and international news media (RFA and VOA). Editorial differences have emerged between domestic and

international news media reporting on BRI projects in Myanmar, which likely affect public opinion and government policies.

Table 2. Independence *t*-tests comparing the significance of issue frequency between domestic and international news media.

Issues	Domestic News (Mean)	International News (Mean)	Confidence Interval Lower	Confident Interval Upper	<i>t</i> -Value	<i>p</i> -Value
Strategic Interest	0.74	1.72	−1.15	−0.82	−12.04	$p < 0.05$
Debt Concern	0.30	0.25	−0.07	0.17	0.79	$p > 0.05$
Environmental Concern	0.53	0.53	−0.17	0.18	0.08	$p > 0.05$
Local Concern	0.95	1.32	−0.55	−0.19	−4.09	$p < 0.05$
Lack of Transparency	0.38	0.92	−0.70	−0.38	−6.80	$p < 0.05$
Lack of Coordination	0.62	1.00	−0.51	−0.25	−5.69	$p < 0.05$
Infrastructure Development	0.75	0.95	−0.33	−0.07	−3.13	$p < 0.05$
Regional Connectivity	0.66	0.56	−0.03	0.24	1.49	$p > 0.05$
Economic Development	0.91	1.07	−0.29	−0.02	−2.27	$p < 0.05$
Paukphaw Relations	0.77	0.26	0.34	0.67	5.99	$p < 0.05$

Source: Statistical results generated using RStudio software (version 2024.09.1+394).

The geopolitical significance of BRI issues received more attention from international news media (VOA and RFA) than from domestic news outlets (ELEVEN and The Irrawaddy). International media coverage of strategic interests differs from domestic coverage at a highly significant level according to the -12.04 *t*-value and $p < 0.05$ *p*-value. With an average value of 1.7, international news media have demonstrated a greater emphasis on ‘strategic interest’ than domestic news outlets. This suggests that the international media view Myanmar’s role through a geopolitical lens, highlighting its strategic location between China, India, Southeast Asia, and the Indo-Pacific region (Lenskyi, 2020). In contrast, domestic media focuses more on local and economic aspects and pays less attention to Myanmar’s strategic position. This difference arises from the editorial policies of the two types of media. The emphasis on strategic interests may lead the international community to perceive Myanmar as a significant geopolitical player, potentially aligning it with China’s strategic objectives (Naing, 2022), while ‘local concern’ may contribute to the notion of ‘Chinese influences’ in Myanmar through the BRI.

Domestic news media, such as ELEVEN and The Irrawaddy, prioritise issues impacting the local community, with ‘local concern’ prominently featured in their coverage, as indicated by a *t*-value of -4.08 and a *p*-value of $p < 0.05$. However, domestic news outlets have a lower average (0.94) than international news media outlets (1.31), suggesting that international outlets have more resources at their disposal. International news media tends to focus more on the social and cultural impacts of BRI projects, including land displacement, job loss, land grabbing, and community disruption (RFA, 2020). While both types of media acknowledge these challenges, international outlets address them with greater urgency, possibly due to concerns about Myanmar’s social stability.

Significant differences are evident in issues such as the ‘lack of transparency’ and ‘lack of coordination.’ International news media attribute greater importance to ‘lack of transparency’ (mean of 0.92) compared to domestic outlets (0.38), with a *t*-value of -6.8 and $p < 0.05$. Similarly, the issue of ‘lack of coordination’ is more prominently highlighted by international media (mean of 1) than by domestic outlets (0.62), with a *t*-value of -5.69 , $p < 0.05$. This underscores the fact that international news media places stronger emphasis on the governance and coordination of BRI projects (Alam, 2016). In contrast, domestic news media focus less on these issues, prioritising concerns such as land displacement,

job loss, and community disruption (Lwin, 2019b). This discrepancy may lead to differing perspectives between international and local views on Myanmar's project management.

No significant differences were observed in the coverage of 'debt concern' and 'environmental concern' by the domestic and international news media ($p > 0.05$). This indicates that while these concerns are recognised, they are not central to the narrative surrounding Myanmar's BRI projects, likely because of the emphasis on economic development potential (Lwin, 2018). Statistical analysis of the infrastructure and economic development reports revealed two patterns. Reporting on 'infrastructure development' receives less attention from domestic media (mean = 0.75) compared to international media (0.95), as indicated by a t -value of -3.13 and $p < 0.05$. The analysis also shows that domestic news media places greater emphasis on 'economic development' (with an average score of 0.91) than international media (1.1), with a t -value of -2.27 and $p < 0.05$. This demonstrates that domestic media highlights BRI's advantages through improved infrastructure development and employment generation (Oo & Dai, 2024).

The issue of 'paukphaw relations' which primarily define the brotherhood between China and Myanmar, reveals a significant disparity, evidenced by a t -value of 5.99 and $p < 0.05$. Domestic news media (mean = 0.76) and international news media (mean = 0.26) demonstrate differing capacities and editorial strategies for reporting Myanmar–China ties. This highlights the importance of these ties within domestic media narratives concerning BRI projects, while international news media tend to emphasise the practical aspects of bilateral relations.

A statistical study revealed that domestic and international news media portrayed BRI activities differently, highlighting their distinct editorial stances and interests. International news reports focus on Myanmar's strategic role in global affairs and its political implications, while domestic media emphasise economic achievements and local impacts (Gyi, 2019). These differences underscore the varying priorities that shape the BRI coverage, stressing the importance of considering both perspectives. Although domestic news outlets prioritise local concerns less frequently than international ones, these issues remain central to their coverage. This suggests that international news media wield more influence and possess greater resources and capabilities. The findings suggest that Myanmar should balance domestic and international expectations, while addressing local issues and geopolitical considerations (Oo et al., 2024).

5.3. Ranks Order Between Domestic and International News Media and Public Opinion

Table 3 outlines the public agenda (PA) on ten key issues related to BRI projects in Myanmar, based on responses from 3000 participants in online surveys. Among these issues, 'Strategic interest' emerged as the top priority for the public, while the concern over 'debt' was deemed less significant. Respondents expressed apprehension about the potential risks of BRI projects, emphasising the importance of 'local concerns.' Conversely, they acknowledged the BRI's contribution to Myanmar's 'economic development', while also considering the potential social and environmental risks stemming from the government's 'lack of transparency' and the necessity for 'coordination' with local communities in implementing the BRI projects. Additionally, Myanmar citizens believe that the successful execution of the BRI will lead to infrastructure development, while viewing 'paukphaw relations' as less critical. This table reflects the public's perceptions of BRI project issues, mirroring coverage in the news media.

Table 4 presents a comparison of the prioritisation of ten key issues across domestic and international media coverage, as well as public opinion. In other words, it examines three agendas: the domestic media agenda (DMA), international media agenda (IMA), and public agenda (PA). The noticeable differences in issue prioritisation between international

and domestic news coverage highlight distinct editorial strategies and focus areas. Except for ‘debt concern’ and ‘environmental concern’, the rankings of issues in domestic and international news vary, indicating that their interests and focal points may be influenced by their objectives to shape public opinion and perceptions.

Table 3. Issue frequency distribution of the Myanmar (public opinion).

Issues	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Strategic Interest	1934	13.75	1
Debt Concern	404	2.87	10
Environmental Concern	1387	9.86	6
Local Concern	1855	13.19	2
Lack of Transparency	1564	11.12	4
Lack of Coordination	1327	9.44	7
Infrastructure Development	1532	10.89	5
Regional Connectivity	1111	7.9	9
Economic Development	1734	12.33	3
Paukphaw Relations	1216	8.65	8
	14,064	100	

Note: data were collected from online surveys of 3000 Myanmar citizens.

Table 4. Issue ranks of domestic versus international news media and public opinion.

Issues	Domestic News Media	International News Media	Public Opinion
Strategic Interest	5	1	1
Debt Concern	10	10	10
Environmental Concern	8	8	6
Local Concern	1	2	2
Lack of Transparency	9	6	4
Lack of Coordination	7	4	7
Infrastructure Development	4	5	5
Regional Connectivity	6	7	9
Economic Development	2	3	3
Paukphaw Relations	3	9	8

Note: ranks are based on data collected from four selected news media sources and surveys.

Interestingly, the rankings for ‘local concerns, infrastructure development, regional connectivity, and economic development’ were remarkably similar across both domestic and international news coverage. This similarity suggests a shared understanding between the two media types regarding the prioritisation of these issues for their audiences. Essentially, comparable rankings indicate a common perception of the importance of these topics in news coverage by both the domestic and international media. Meanwhile, the differences in coverage highlight Myanmar’s challenge in balancing internal priorities, such as ‘public concerns’ and ‘economic development,’ with external ‘strategic interests.’

The primary distinction in their news coverage lies in the disparity between the issues of ‘strategic interest’ and ‘paukphaw relations’, which emerge as outliers compared with other topics. This anomaly may be attributed to three factors: first, the affiliation of the two international news media, RFA and VOA, with the United States, which is engaged in strategic competition in the region and beyond; second, the editorial policy of domestic news media, particularly ‘ELEVEN,’ which is currently based in Myanmar; and third, although The Irrawaddy, now based outside Myanmar, maintains a firm stance against China, the study spans a long period from 2011 to 2024, which might have influenced adjustments in their news coverage. This should be considered a limitation of this study, given its extended time span and evolving political patterns.

Regarding the alignment of domestic media coverage with public opinion, the issues of ‘debt concern’ and the need for ‘coordination’ in news reporting align closely with public perception, indicating a strong relationship between the domestic media agenda and the public agenda. Similarly, local concerns, infrastructure development, and economic progress have shown significant correspondence with the perceptions of Myanmar people regarding BRI projects.

International media agendas are more closely aligned with public priorities regarding BRI projects than are domestic agendas. Notably, the issues highlighted by the news media often mirror public opinion, suggesting that the agenda-setting effect significantly influences the views of the general population. International media coverage and survey results concerning BRI projects closely align with the five major issues that rank comparatively high in both international media and public agendas: ‘strategic interest,’ ‘debt concern,’ ‘local concern,’ ‘infrastructure development,’ and ‘economic development.’ Except for the issue of ‘lack of coordination,’ other topics such as ‘environmental concern,’ ‘regional connectivity,’ and ‘paukphaw relations’ within the international media agenda closely correspond with public perceptions. This indicates that the prominence of issues emphasised by international news media has a more substantial impact on public perception than that highlighted by domestic news media.

5.4. Correlations Between Domestic and International News Media and Public Opinion

Table 5 presents outputs of correlations between domestic and international news media and public opinion. Spearman’s rank-order correlation between domestic news media coverage and public opinion on BRI projects is not statistically significant. This finding indicates that there is no statistically significant relationship between the domestic media agenda (DMA) and the public agenda (PA), although there may be some accidental alignment. In practical terms, while there is some concordance in the prioritisation of issues related to BRI projects by both the media and the public, this correlation may be coincidental, as the *p*-value exceeds the conventional significance threshold of 0.05. The 95% confidence interval, ranging from −0.13 to 0.90, reinforces the assumption that there is no statistically significant correlation between what domestic media covers and what the public perceives about BRI projects in Myanmar.

Table 5. Spearman’s rank correlation tests.

Test	Spearman’s Rho Correlation	Test Statistic (S)	<i>p</i> -Value	99% Confidence Interval	Comparison
Domestic news media & Public opinion	0.50	82	<i>p</i> > 0.05	−0.13 to 0.90	Moderate positive correlation
International news media & Public opinion	0.87	22	<i>p</i> < 0.05	0.39 to 0.98	Strong positive correlation

Source: Statistical results generated using RStudio software (version 2024.09.1+394).

By contrast, a comparison of international news media coverage and public opinion on BRI projects in Myanmar revealed a Spearman’s rho value of 0.86, indicating a strong positive correlation. This correlation is notably stronger than that between domestic news media and public opinion. The test statistic (*S*) = 22 and the *p*-value (*p* < 0.05) confirmed the statistical significance of this correlation. This signifies a statistically significant relationship between the international media agenda (IMA) and the public agenda (PA). The 95% confidence interval, ranging from 0.39 to 0.98, excludes zero, further affirming the strength of the correlation.

The primary difference between the two analyses was the strength of the correlation. The correlation between the domestic media agenda (DMA) and public agenda (PA) was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$), whereas the correlation between the international media agenda (IMA) and public agenda (PA) was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This indicates that the relationship between international news media and public opinion on issues related to BRI projects in Myanmar is statistically stronger and more robust than the relationship between domestic news media and public opinion. In terms of the traditional concept of the agenda-setting effect, it can be assumed that international news media exerts a greater influence on public opinion (Wanta & Hu, 1993) regarding BRI projects in Myanmar. Although the results did not necessarily define the correlation for each issue, they are sufficient to conclude that there is a significant relationship between what international news media prioritise in their coverage of BRI projects and how these issues are perceived by the public in Myanmar.

From a theoretical standpoint, a low correlation between domestic news media coverage and media opinion indicates that domestic media have less agenda-setting power than international news media. This suggests that the issues emphasised by domestic news media do not resonate as strongly with the public, highlighting the divergence between media focus and popular interests. These findings imply that international news sources capture public sentiment more accurately, whereas domestic media contribute less to shaping public views on BRI projects. In other words, international rather than domestic media exerted a stronger agenda-setting influence on public opinion regarding BRI initiatives in Myanmar. Nevertheless, both types of news media showed a positive correlation with public opinion. Figure 1 illustrates the pairwise correlations between them.

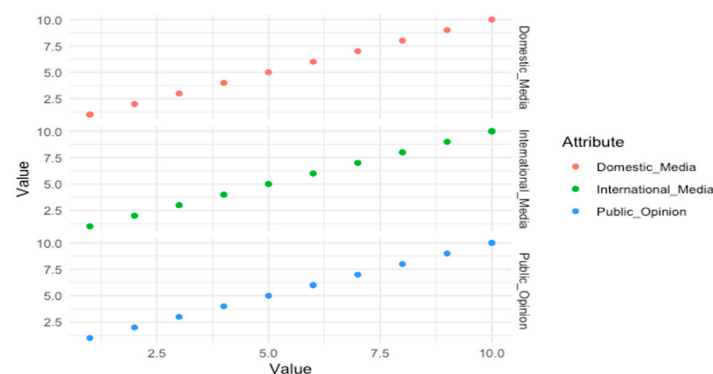


Figure 1. Pairwise scatter plots: domestic, international news media and public opinion.

5.5. Considerations of Other Factors

Considering the concept of agenda-setting effects on public opinion, the study may explore further research to identify any relationships between key demographic factors, such as gender, age, region, education, and media consumption, as independent variables, and public opinion on BRI projects as the dependent variable. This approach not only provides evidence of how other factors influence public opinion regarding BRI projects in Myanmar, but also enriches the data supporting the main idea of news media effects. However, to remain aligned with the primary objective, this study leaves room for future research, such as multivariate or multinomial regression, to examine the effects of other factors on public opinion on the BRI.

Table 6 presents the cross-tabulations of the key demographic factors that may influence public opinion regarding BRI projects in Myanmar. According to the table, female respondents have a more negative perspective on BRI projects than their male counterparts do. In terms of age, both middle-aged and young adults tend to have negative views

on BRI projects rather than positive views. Compared to respondents residing in rural areas, those in urban areas are more sceptical about the BRI, while individuals with college-level education are also likely to view the BRI negatively. Interestingly, respondents with high media consumption tended to view the BRI negatively, unlike those with low media consumption. This indicates a media effect on public opinion regarding BRI projects in Myanmar, supporting the core concept of this study, ‘media effects on public opinion.’

Table 6. Cross-tabulations of demographics on public opinion.

Variable		Negative	Neutral	Positive	Total
Gender	Female	868	359	213	1440
	Male	1003	367	190	1600
Age	Elder aged	53	10	5	68
	Middle aged	619	215	145	979
	Young adult	1199	501	253	1953
Region	City	457	148	78	683
	Rural	506	201	126	833
	Urban	908	377	199	1484
Education	High school	23	21	9	53
	College	1532	614	344	2490
	Post graduate	316	91	50	457
Media Consumption	Low	565	293	157	1015
	Medium	853	344	202	1399
	High	453	89	44	586

6. Conclusions

Building on previous research, this study explored the effects of two new media types on public opinion regarding BRI projects in Myanmar. The primary aim of this study is to contribute to the existing knowledge on the agenda-setting effect involving both international and domestic media outlets concerning the global infrastructure initiative of the BRI in a developing country, Myanmar. In pursuing its hypotheses, the study focused on the agenda-setting effects of the two media types on public opinion about the key issues of the BRI projects being implemented in Myanmar, rather than generalising the two types of news media. This study identified limitations in selecting both domestic and international news media, as it was challenging to find eligible news media that met the study’s selection criteria. These limitations include the editorial scope, language usability, political affiliation, reliability for readership, data availability, and duration of service to cover the study period.

This study revealed that various news media outlets have distinct editorial policies, each focusing on different areas. International news media primarily emphasise issues related to the BRI through the lens of geopolitical interests, such as regional concerns, Chinese influence, Myanmar’s strategic location, and China’s strategic interests. In contrast, domestic news media focus mainly on local issues, including potential land acquisitions, possible displacement, marine pollution, and similar concerns while underscoring economic benefits to Myanmar (Phyo, 2018). Consequently, the study found that the international media agenda (IMA) prioritised the issue of ‘strategic interest,’ while domestic news media (DMA) placed a higher emphasis on ‘local concern’ (Gyi, 2019).

Both types of news media, along with public opinion, share similar views on ‘strategic interest,’ ‘local concern,’ and ‘economic development.’ Economic development is vital in Myanmar owing to its pivotal role in the BRI, underscoring the need for increased economic growth for the local population (Oo et al., 2024). Debt concerns are considered the least significant by both domestic and international news outlets. The media and the

public prioritise ‘paukphaw relations’ differently, reflecting varying levels of interest in Myanmar–China relations.

The international media’s emphasis on strategic interests suggests that Myanmar’s policy approach prioritises its role within the BRI framework. Myanmar’s policymakers may favour strategies that strengthen strategic ties with China and promote regional integration. Given the media’s coverage of Myanmar’s geopolitical position (ELEVEN, 2019b), the government advocates infrastructure development to enhance trade routes, ports, and transport corridors, thereby facilitating regional integration. The focus on ‘local concern’ by both domestic and international news media indicates that Myanmar’s government and Chinese investors may face pressure (RFA, 2023) to ensure the BRI does not disproportionately impact vulnerable groups (Myint, 2017). These concerns may lead to policies that prioritise social security and community engagement. Conversely, coverage by both types of news media suggests that the Myanmar government prioritised public infrastructure development to serve local communities and advance economic policies. Additionally, media attention to ‘paukphaw relations’ highlights how the bilateral relationship between Myanmar and China affects (Tingshu & Meyer, 2020), and contributes to the successful implementation of BRI projects.

In line with previous research on agenda-setting effects, this study employed the Spearman’s rho *t*-test to assess the correlation between the domestic media agenda (DMA), international media agenda (IMA), and public agenda (PA). Additionally, an independent *t*-test was used to identify the different editorial stances or issues emphasised by the two types of news media. This study demonstrates that the two media types, each with distinct editorial policies (Barkemeyer et al., 2017), focused on different aspects of the BRI projects in Myanmar. The most notable outliers were issues of ‘strategic interest’ and ‘paukphaw relations’, which underscored differing editorial perspectives. The results of the Spearman’s rho *t*-test revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between the international media agenda (IMA) and the public agenda (PA) (Carroll & McCombs, 2003), whereas the domestic media agenda (DMA) showed no significant relationship with the public agenda. From a theoretical standpoint, this suggests that international news media exerts a greater agenda-setting influence on public opinion (Wanta & Hu, 1994) concerning key issues of BRI projects in Myanmar. However, regarding the term ‘alignment’, both media types exhibited similar alignments on specific issues of the BRI projects in Myanmar. The findings indicate that the Myanmar government and Chinese investors should concentrate on specific BRI project issues perceived by the international media, particularly strategic interests, while also addressing local concerns, economic development, lack of transparency, and lack of coordination in response to media narratives.

Considering its limitations, the study acknowledged several constraints: the influence of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in shaping public opinion; the necessity to account for other factors that might impact public opinion on the BRI, such as age, gender, region, education, and media consumption; and the importance of examining media pattern changes in response to a country’s evolving governance system. Consequently, this study suggests that future research should explore the role of social media in shaping public opinion on BRI projects in Myanmar and investigate the changing media patterns. Furthermore, recognising the nature of correlation analysis, the study also recommends using experimental or longitudinal designs in future research to establish causal relationships.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/journalmedia6040158/s1>, File S1: Dataset for analysis.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. Due to the nature of the study, which involved content analysis of news coverage from two domestic and two international news outlets and an online survey of Myanmar residents, and the absence of personal data utilisation, in accordance with the laws of Myanmar, the study was deemed exempt from ethics committee approval. Ethics Committee approval from Shenzhen University was not required, as the research conducted outside China and did not involve sensitive personal data.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all the subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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