Article

Media Influence and Public Opinion on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Projects in Myanmar: A First-Level Agenda-Setting Analysis

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Abstract: This study investigates the relationship between news media and public opinion on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Myanmar since media liberalization in 2011, using first-level agenda-setting theory. A mixed-method approach was employed: a quantitative content analysis of 217 articles from ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy*, identifying 1436 distinct frames on ten BRI-related issues, and a survey of 385 respondents to assess public opinion. Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between media coverage and public opinion. A strong positive correlation (rho = 0.87, $p < 0.05$) was found between increased media coverage and public opinion alignment regarding BRI-related issues. The findings highlight the significant influence of the media on the public perception of BRI projects in Myanmar, and contribute to media effects and agenda-setting theory, offering insights for stakeholders investigating the interplay between the media, public opinion, and international development. Further research is needed to explore the media's agenda-setting role in BRI project policy decisions in Myanmar.

Keywords: agenda-setting theory; media influence; public opinion; BRI projects; Myanmar

1. Introduction

The agenda-setting function of mass media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion by highlighting specific issues, thereby directing societal priorities. This concept is central to understanding how media coverage influences public discourse and opinion formation (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Lippmann (1922) described this process as the media shaping "the world outside and the pictures in our heads", emphasizing the profound impact of news media on public perceptions (Lippmann 1922). McCombs and Shaw's 1972 study further established that the media significantly influences public agendas by spotlighting key topics. Since its origin in the 1968 US presidential election, agenda-setting has been a pivotal research area in mass communication, explaining media effects across fields such as politics (McCombs and Shaw 1972), policy (Cook et al. 1983), business (Carroll and McCombs 2003), terrorism (Guo et al. 2015), the marketplace (Gobat et al. 2015; McCombs and Shaw 1993), environmental issues (Atwater et al. 1985), and tourism (Schweinsberg et al. 2017).

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is currently one of the most significant global issues attracting scholarly attention, particularly in agenda-setting research. Launched to boost global trade and economic growth through extensive infrastructure projects, the BRI has been widely studied in terms of its media influence in host countries. Many scholars have investigated the influence of the media on perceptions of BRI projects in host countries such as the European Union (Andrews 2020), Africa (Pratt and Isine 2023), Russia (Kuteleva and Vasiliev 2021), ASEAN (Zhang 2024), Indonesia (Masduki et al. 2023), Pakistan (Ittefaq et al. 2023), and Bangladesh (Rahman and Shehab 2023). Despite this extensive research,

a notable gap remains in the literature on BRI projects in Myanmar, particularly concerning the role of the media and communication (Oo et al. 2024).

Since the liberalization of Myanmar's media in 2011, local outlets have played a vital role in discussing domestic issues, including BRI projects. While various entities, such as Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs/NGOs), environmentalists, and activists, shape public opinion on China's BRI projects in Myanmar (Shieh 2022), the consensus indicates that the media remains a major influence by either highlighting or minimizing related news in its coverage. Although much attention has been paid to the geopolitical, environmental, and economic aspects of the BRI (Chanda 2021; Htwe 2020; Mark et al. 2020; Mostafanezhad et al. 2023), the influence of the media on public opinion remains underexplored. Following the suspension of the Myitsone Dam project in 2011 and the reassessment of the Kyaukphyu seaport project in 2017, public opinion was presumed to have significantly influenced BRI projects in Myanmar, highlighting the media's crucial role in shaping these views (Oo et al. 2024). Therefore, it is worthwhile to conduct an empirical study to examine the relationship between the news media and public opinion on BRI projects in Myanmar.

Previous agenda-setting studies (Takeshita 1993) have proven that agenda-setting theory is well suited for this empirical investigation. This study empirically investigates the relationship between news media and public opinion on BRI projects in Myanmar. Analyzing coverage from two key domestic media outlets, ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy*, this study examines the correlation between media reporting and public opinion on ten critical BRI-related issues. Utilizing first-level agenda-setting theory, the findings reveal a strong correlation between media coverage and public opinion, with *The Irrawaddy* having the greatest influence. The results highlight the media's pivotal role in shaping public discourse on international initiatives, with local implications.

2. Related Literature

In 2013, President Xi Jinping initiated the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to develop the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, aiming to enhance connectivity across Asia, Europe, and Africa (McBride and Chatzky 2023). According to the 2015 Vision and Action Report by the National Development and Reform Commission, the initiative emphasizes five primary routes that facilitate trade and communication (The State Council 2015). It includes the Silk Road Economic Belt, which links China with Europe through various regions, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which connects China's coastal ports to multiple continents (The State Council 2015). The BRI prioritizes trade liberalization, policy alignment, infrastructure development, financial cooperation, and cultural and institutional exchanges (Mark et al. 2020).

The 2024 white paper, "The Belt and Road Initiative: A Vital Support of the Global Community of Shared Future", highlights the BRI's objective of fostering a global community through political trust, economic integration, and cultural inclusiveness (The State Council 2024). As of June 2023, China has entered into agreements with over 150 countries and 30 international organizations from five continents under the BRI framework (The State Council 2024). The Third Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, 17–18 October 2023, facilitated deeper collaboration among the participating countries. The BRI seeks to boost global connectivity and cooperation through infrastructure and policy alignment, striving to bring together nations with varied ideologies and social structures, and promoting cooperation and collective progress.

Myanmar, a founding participant in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), possesses unique geographical features that are beneficial for global connectivity projects. Despite historically friendly relations, the 2011 suspension of the Myitsone Dam project strained ties, highlighting the impact of public opinion on bilateral initiatives (Bizikumarina and Zulkifli 2022). Nonetheless, the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), an integral component of the BRI, was launched in September 2018, following a Memorandum of Understanding signed at the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.

The 1700 km CMEC links Kunming in China's Yunnan Province with Mandalay, Yangon, and Kyaukphyu in Rakhine State, featuring key projects such as the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) deep-sea port, and the Myanmar–China Power Interconnection Project, to bolster Myanmar's regional trade and transport roles (Tian 2016).

While emphasizing the BRI projects, most studies focus on various factors, including geopolitics, international relations, economics, environmental conservation, social impact, trade, and finance, (Chanda 2021; Htwe 2020; Khin Kyi and Xiang 2020; Mark et al. 2020; Mostafanezhad et al. 2023), but often overlook the media's role in shaping public perception (Oo et al. 2024). Brüning (2021) addressed geopolitical and security implications, highlighting issues of national sovereignty and economic dependence (Brüning 2021; Goethe-Universitat Frankfurt am Main 2021). Khin Kyi and Xiang (2020) analyzed economic benefits and environmental challenges (Khin Kyi and Xiang 2020), while Chanda (2021) examined local protests and the risks associated with debt traps (Chanda 2021). McBride and Chatzky (2023) noted the potential of the BRI to extend China's influence across Asia, Europe, and Africa (McBride and Chatzky 2023), whereas Zhao (2020) emphasized its role in reshaping global economic and political landscapes and fostering new alliances (Zhao 2020). Chen et al. (2019) identified economic benefits for participating countries, such as increased trade, investment, and infrastructure development (Chen et al. 2019), and Ramasamy et al. (2017) demonstrated how the BRI facilitates market access and economic integration (Ramasamy et al. 2017). Sattar et al. (2022) discussed environmental challenges, including habitat destruction and carbon emissions (Sattar et al. 2022), whereas Mattioli (2023) explored social impacts, such as displacement and changes in socioeconomic dynamics in affected communities (Mattioli 2023). Oo et al. (2024) identified the primary factors that hinder the successful implementation of BRI projects in Myanmar, including "dept concern", Chinese strategic interests, local concern, lack of transparency, lack of coordination and negotiation with the local community, and political instability" (Oo et al. 2024).

Building upon previous works (Olinga-Shannon et al. 2024; Sattar et al. 2022; Gyi 2019; Demir 2022), this study identifies ten key issues pertaining to the BRI projects, namely "Chinese strategic interests", "Paukphaw relations", "debt concern", "public concern", "environmental concern", "lack of transparency", "lack of coordination", "infrastructure development", "regional connectivity", and "economic development". Although communication scholars have analyzed the portrayal of the BRI in various regions and the influence of this on public opinion, there is a notable lack of media studies on BRI projects in Southeast Asia, especially in the developing country of Myanmar. Thussu et al. (2018) highlighted variations in media narratives regarding the BRI across countries and regions (Thussu et al. 2018). In their study, titled "Media Perception of China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC): A Framing Analysis on Media Discourse on Chinese Investments in Myanmar", Oo et al. (2024) explored how news media framed public opinion regarding the Chinese projects in Myanmar, and recommended further studies on the media effects of the BRI projects in Myanmar in the future (Oo et al. 2024).

However, research on the agenda-setting effect of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects remains limited globally and in Southeast Asia, despite the BRI being a significant global infrastructure development platform. Examining the effects of the media on the BRI projects enriches our understanding of the BRI and provides innovative insights into agenda-setting effects in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, as most agenda-setting research centers on electoral phenomena, political, social, and economic events, and terrorism, the scarcity of studies on global development infrastructure platforms in developing countries underscores the significance of this research. Therefore, this study is considered pioneering in examining agenda-setting impacts in Myanmar (Oo et al. 2024), and a crucial ally and original participant of China's BRI.

3. Theoretical Framework

Walter Lippmann's seminal work, *Public Opinion* (1922), contends that the media plays a central role in shaping our mental images of the distant world of public affairs, particularly those matters beyond our direct experience (Lippmann 1922). Inspired by Lippmann, the agenda-setting theory investigates how the importance assigned to topics by the media is transferred to public perception (McCombs and Reynolds 2002). The theory posits that the salience of media coverage directly influences what the audience considers significant (Dunn 2009), effectively guiding "what to think about" and "how to think about it" (M. E. McCombs 1992). At the first level, agenda-setting theory demonstrates how media coverage shapes public perceptions of key issues (Camaj 2014). It highlights how the emphasis placed on various public matters, political candidates, and organizations by the media leads the public to view these issues as significant (Takeshita 1993). By elevating the prominence of certain topics on the public agenda, the media dictates what is perceived as vital (McCombs and Shaw 1972); consequently, the public often regards media-highlighted topics as crucial. This theory suggests that mass media significantly shapes social reality, as many events lie beyond our direct experience, making us reliant on media representations.

While the first level draws attention to issues, the second enhances public understanding by focusing on particular aspects (Carroll and McCombs 2003). Second-level agenda-setting, which emerged during the 1976 election (Weaver 1981b), expands the theory by addressing the prominence of attributes associated with issues. Studies have shown that public concern spans both national and local issues across different countries (Brosius and Kepplinger 1992; Canel et al. 1996; Rey Lennon 1998; Takeshita 1993). This stage of the theory explains that the media not only sets the agenda by selecting issues, but also by framing these issues through placing an emphasis on specific attributes. This framing significantly influences the public agenda (M. E. McCombs 1992). Attribute agenda-setting affects public understanding in both the substantive and evaluative dimensions (Ghanem 2013; McCombs et al. 1997; Takeshita 1993). A crucial part of the news agenda involves the perspectives and frames used by journalists, which highlight certain attributes while ignoring others (Dunn 2009). Second-level agenda-setting describes how the media emphasizes the specific attributes of issues or objects (Golan and Wanta 2001). Agenda-setting theory has evolved to include three interconnected agendas: the media, public, and policy agendas, all of which influence each other (Rogers et al. 1993). Recently, network agenda-setting (NAS) has emerged as a third level, focusing on interactions among media outlets and how they shape the public agenda (Guo 2013).

According to Guo et al. (2015), this theory involves a hierarchical ranking of objects and attribute salience that is transferred from the media to the public agenda at both levels (Guo et al. 2015). McCombs and Shaw's influential study, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media" (1972), is foundational in agenda-setting research, illustrating a significant correlation between media emphasis and voter perception during the 1968 presidential campaign, with a +0.98 correlation between the salience of five issues on the media agenda and their perceived importance on the public agenda (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Additional significant studies have corroborated this finding, demonstrating robust correlations between media coverage and public responses across diverse contexts. Funkhouser's (1973) seminal study revealed a strong correlation (+0.78) between media coverage of public issues in major news magazines and public responses to Gallup's "most important problem" question, indicating the media's substantial role in shaping public priorities (Funkhouser 1973). Building upon this work, Winter and Eyal (1981) found a strong positive correlation (+0.71) between media agendas and public concern over a long period (1954–1976), reinforcing the media's role in shaping public issue salience (Winter and Eyal 1981). Takeshita and Mikami's (1995) study in Pamplona, Spain, further investigated local issue salience, identifying correlations of +0.90 with the primary newspaper and +0.66, with television news, for issues such as unemployment (Takeshita and Mikami 1995). Similarly, McCombes et al. (2000) demonstrated a +0.72 alignment between media and voter perceptions of candidate attributes, thus substantiating the media's influence in shaping both issue and attribute

agendas (McCombes et al. 2000). Carroll and McCombs (2003) also found significant correlations between media coverage and public opinion concerning major corporations (Carroll and McCombs 2003). Ireri et al. (2017) observed a lower correlation (+0.30) between 2013 and 2014 in Kenya, suggesting limited media influence on public priorities (Ireri et al. 2017). Applying first-level agenda-setting theory, he investigated the influence of two Kenyan national newspapers on public opinion regarding six issues, revealing a perfect correlation (+1) between the newspapers' agendas.

This study employs first-level agenda-setting theory to examine how news media shapes public perceptions of Chinese investments in Myanmar, particularly within the BRI framework. Recognizing the media's significant influence on public opinion, as evidenced in prior agenda-setting research, this study fills a gap in mass communication scholarship by focusing on the BRI in Southeast Asia and other developing countries. The analysis compares coverage of the BRI project by two leading Myanmar news outlets, ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy*, to identify differences in reporting. It also explores the correlation between media coverage and public opinion, with the aim of determining which newspapers have a greater impact on public perception. Guided by agenda-setting theory, the research is structured around the following specific research questions and hypotheses.

Research Questions (RQs):

RQ1: How do the two news media outlets, ELEVEN *and The Irrawaddy, compare in their coverage of ten issues related to the BRI projects in Myanmar?*

RQ2: Which news outlets exerted greater influence on public opinion concerning the ten issues related to the Chinese projects in Myanmar?

RQ3: Is there a correlation between media coverage of Chinese projects in Myanmar and public opinion?

Hypotheses (Hs):

Hypothesis (H1): *A significant distinction exists between the issues related to Chinese projects published in* ELEVEN *and The Irrawaddy during the study period.*

Hypothesis (H2): *The issues covered in news media coverage of the BRI projects are reflected in the opinions expressed by Myanmar's population.*

4. Materials and Methods

The use of content analysis and surveys in agenda-setting research dates back to the seminal 1968 study conducted in Chapel Hill, North Carolina (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Subsequent studies have utilized these data collection techniques to confirm the relationship between the media and public agendas (Carroll and McCombs 2003; Dunn 2009; Ghanem 2013; Ireri 2009; McCombs et al. 1997; Takeshita 1993). This study used quantitative content analysis and surveys to examine the influence of the media on public opinion regarding the BRI projects in Myanmar. The content analysis assessed media focus, while the surveys gauged public sentiment on ten previously identified BRI-related issues in Myanmar. These issues include "Chinese interest", "Paukphaw relations", "debt concern", "environmental concern", "public concern", "lack of transparency", "lack of coordination", "infrastructure development", "regional connectivity", and "economic development". R software (version 4.3.1) with RStudio (version 2024.09.1+394) as the integrated development environment was used for the analysis. The dataset used for this study, which forms the basis of all analyses, is provided in the Supplementary Materials (S1).

Quantitative content analysis is a prevalent method in communication research that quantifies explicit communication content systematically and objectively (Berelson 1952). Krippendorff (1989) states that content analysis examines texts to generate replicable and valid inferences about their context (Krippendorff 1989). This study analyzed texts from two major Myanmar news outlets, ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy*, selected for their influence on public opinion and their focus on domestic issues, particularly Chinese projects in Myanmar. These outlets were chosen because of their significant readership, credible news coverage, and differing political orientations. *The Irrawaddy* is viewed as pro-resistance,

whereas ELEVEN leans pro-government. Following the military takeover, *The Irrawaddy* emphasized resistance movements, whereas ELEVEN supported the government (Myat and Aung 2022). ELEVEN, founded in 2005, has more than 21 million followers, whereas *The Irrawaddy*, which was established in 1990, has approximately 24 million online readers. Given Myanmar's population of 53 million, these numbers have had a substantial impact on public opinion.

The research period spans from 2011, when Myanmar commenced its democratic transition, to 2024, encompassing media coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. This study employed a random selection of news articles, including editorials, analyses, and opinion pieces, pertaining to the Chinese projects, while excluding other types of stories and those unrelated to the BRI initiatives. Each news article served as a unit of analysis, with 88 stories (N = 88) from ELEVEN and 129 stories (N = 129) from *The Irrawaddy* comprising the respective sample sizes within the specified time frame, which were subsequently subjected to content analysis. Two postgraduate students in communication studies were engaged as coders and trained to analyze the text of each unit. To ensure intercoder reliability, the coders were provided with coding books, schemes, and sheets, along with an explanation of the coding guidelines. Subsequently, they underwent a preliminary intercoder reliability test on 20% of the sampled articles (30 from ELEVEN and 43 from *The Irrawaddy*), which fell within the acceptable range for such evaluations (Lovejoy et al. 2016). The pretest yielded an average intercoder reliability coefficient of 0.85, within the acceptable Kappa range (0.75 to 0.85). The reliability coefficients for individual issues were as follows: strategic interest (0.79); Paukphaw relations (0.92); debt concern (0.92); environmental concern (0.88); 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). The final coding of 217 articles (88 from ELEVEN and 129 from *The Irrawaddy*) resulted in 1,436 frames across the ten issues, with ELEVEN contributing 476 frames (33%) and *The Irrawaddy* contributing 959 frames (67%).

Subsequently to content analysis, online surveys were conducted to collect data on general public opinion regarding issues related to China's BRI projects in Myanmar. This study did not focus on the perceptions of specific interest groups that may differ from one another. Research surveys for systematic quantitative data collection are prevalent in communication and media studies (Mishra 2013). Such surveys often explore media content and audience behavior, offering valuable insights into audience preferences and the societal impact of media messages (Chaffee 2001). An analysis of 479 survey research articles from leading mass communication journals revealed significant variations in survey modes and sampling methods, with a predominance of non-probability sampling (Ha et al. 2015). Given Myanmar's rising number of Internet users (Kemp 2024), an online survey was conducted to effectively collect data from a geographically diverse national sample. Participants were selected from urban, rural, and city areas using a stratified random sampling technique, to ensure representation by age, sex, education, and location, thus improving the generalizability of the results. The survey targeted respondents aged 18–65 years and above from various demographic backgrounds and locations.

The questionnaire focused on ten issues related to the BRI projects in Myanmar from 2011 to 2024, analyzed by two news outlets. Conducting surveys in this manner poses a challenge because it lacks time series records typical of agenda-setting studies, such as those in Gallup polls (Funkhouser 1973; Winter and Eyal 1981). Therefore, to ensure the validity of the data, key questions related to the media agenda were incorporated into the questionnaire: "How did you learn about the BRI projects in Myanmar?", "How frequently do you read news covered by news outlets such as *The Irrawaddy* or ELEVEN?", and "What issues impress or concern you regarding Chinese (BRI) projects in Myanmar throughout the years?" The survey employed a combination of a Likert scale, multiple choice, rating, and open-ended questions to capture a range of data. Conducted with a 95% confidence level and a ±5% margin of error (Krejcie and Morgan 1970), the survey sampled 385 respondents from a population of 300,000, ensuring a diverse mix of genders

and educational backgrounds. The survey was administered through online questionnaires, using Google Forms to maximize the reach and response rates. A pilot test with 50 respondents was conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of the survey instrument, identify ambiguities, and allow for necessary revisions to improve its clarity and effectiveness.

Following existing communication studies, this study employed Spearman's rho rank-order correlation to determine the relationship between news media topics and survey respondents' reactions. This statistical method measures the strength of the association between two sets of rankings, with a correlation coefficient ranging from −1 (indicating a perfect negative correlation) to +1 (indicating a perfect positive correlation) (Weaver 1981a). Spearman's rho has been a central component in agenda-setting effect research over the years, and has been widely used in various studies to measure media effects on public opinion (Ireri 2009; McCombs et al. 1997; Guo et al. 2015; Golan and Wanta 2001), so is also valid for use in this study. R software was used as an analytical tool for data analysis.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Comparison of News Coverages Between ELEVEN and The Irrawaddy

First, the study analyzed news coverage of ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy* on ten BRI project issues in Myanmar. The dataset supporting all analyses and tables presented in this section is available in the Supplementary Materials (S1). Table 1 shows their coverage, highlighting differences in editorial focus and frequency. *The Irrawaddy* accounted for 959 out of the 1436 frames analyzed (66.8%), while ELEVEN covered 477 frames (33.2%), with a more evenly distribution but less frequent coverage. These discrepancies reflect differing editorial priorities, audience interests, and resource allocations. The significant variation in issue frequency between ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy* illustrates the media's role in shaping discourse on international projects, in line with agenda-setting theory, which posits that media presentation influences public perception and issue prioritization (Goffman 1974).

Table 1. Issue frequency distribution between ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy*.

Issue	ELEVEN	*The Irrawaddy*	Total	Percent of Issues
Strategic Interest	36	124	160	11.1
Paukphaw Relations	59	108	167	11.6
Debt concern	27	38	65	4.5
Environmental Concern	46	69	115	8
Local Concern	73	133	206	14.5
Lack of Transparency	35	48	83	5.8
Lack of Coordination	56	79	135	9.4
Infrastructure Development	50	113	163	11.4
Regional Connectivity	47	97	143	9.9
Economic Development	48	150	198	13.8
Total	477	959	1436	100

The Irrawaddy consistently covers a broader range of topics, particularly strategic interests, local concerns, and economic development, whereas ELEVEN primarily focuses on the issues of Paukphaw relations, local concerns, lack of coordination, and infrastructure development. However, both news outlets report the issue of "local concern" as the most significant issue, while presenting "debt concern" as the least significant issue, highlighting the issue salience of agenda-setting effects. In Myanmar, news media have increasingly highlighted local issues, such as land appropriations, property deprivation, inequitable agreements, and employment displacement, related to China's BRI projects, especially after the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port project agreement and the establishment of the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) were signed in 2015 and 2017, respectively (Oo et al. 2024). Scholars, political figures, civil society organizations, and NGOs have also stressed these local concerns (Shieh 2022),

which have been publicized through media channels. In contrast, the "debt trap" concept gained traction after China's 99-year lease of Sri Lanka's port, but remained less prevalent among Myanmar's population.

An analysis of news coverage shows that ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy* differed in their focus on "strategic interest" and "economic development". ELEVEN primarily highlighted Chinese "strategic interest", while *The Irrawaddy* underscored the "economic development" potential of the BRI projects. This distinction illustrates the agenda-setting effects of news outlets, demonstrating how they prioritize issues they consider to be important for public attention (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Table 1 demonstrates notable differences in how ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy* reported on the Chinese projects in Myanmar. *The Irrawaddy's* extensive and frequent coverage of critical issues appears to be a deliberate effort to shape public opinion, whereas ELEVEN's balanced but infrequent reporting reflects a different editorial strategy. These findings enhance our understanding of the influence of the media on public perception, especially concerning foreign investments and their local impacts.

5.2. Issues Prioritized in the Coverages of ELEVEN and The Irrawaddy

The study further examined significant differences in issue prioritization between ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy*, supporting Hypothesis 1 *(H1): "A significant distinction exists between the issues concerning Chinese projects published in* ELEVEN *and* The Irrawaddy *during the study period".* As shown in Table 2, the independent *t*-test indicated notable differences in news coverage by both outlets on several issues. *The Irrawaddy* placed significantly more emphasis on strategic interest (t = −4.77, *p* < 0.05), infrastructure development (t = −3.06, *p* < 0.05), regional connectivity (t = −2.59, *p* < 0.05), and economic development (t = −5.68, *p* < 0.05). In actuality, *The Irrawaddy's* report focused on the Memoranda of Understanding and agreements related to the Chinese projects signed by the Chinese and Myanmar governments, highlighting the policy implications of these agreements on the aforementioned issues for Myanmar's population. For example, during President Xi Jinping's visit to Nay Pyi Taw in 2019 for the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations, the outlet's coverage emphasized China's strategic goals, implications, and contributions to economic and infrastructure advancements (Lwin 2020).

Table 2. Independence *t*-tests comparing the significance of issue frequency between ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy*.

Issue	ELEVEN	*The Irrawaddy*	Confidence Interval	Significance
Strategic Interest	M = 0.40	M = 0.96	−0.77 to −0.32	t = −4.77, *p* < 0.05
Paukphaw Relations	M = 0.67	M = 0.83	−0.43 to 0.10	t = −1.21, *p* > 0.05
Debt Concern	M = 0.30	M = 0.29	−0.18 to 0.21	t = 0.12, *p* > 0.05
Environmental Concern	M = 0.52	M = 0.53	−0.24 to 0.22	t = 0.10, *p* > 0.05
Local Concern	M = 0.2	M = 1	−0.45 to 0.05	t = −1.5, *p* > 0.05
Lack of Transparency	M = 0.39	M = 0.37	−0.14 to 0.19	t = 0.29, *p* > 0.05
Lack of Coordination	M = 0.63	M = 0.61	−0.15 to 0.20	t = 0.26, *p* > 0.05
Infrastructure Development	M = 0.56	M = 0.87	−0.50 to −0.10	t = −3.06, *p* < 0.05
Regional Connectivity	M = 0.52	M = 0.75	−0.40 to 0.05	t = −2.59, *p* < 0.05
Economic Development	M = 0.54	M = 1.16	−0.83 to −0.40	t = −5.68, *p* < 0.05

Conversely, both news outlets exhibited similar coverage frequencies for topics such as Paukphaw relations, debt concerns, environmental concerns, local issues, lack of transparency, and insufficient coordination. This uniformity may suggest a common editorial position or reader interest, highlighting the significance of these matters in public discourse. These findings contribute substantially to the body of knowledge on media agenda-setting and framing in developing nations that experience significant foreign investments, such as the BRI. In Myanmar, issues such as Chinese loans, environmental preservation, local apprehensions about land seizures, opacity surrounding Chinese projects, and the necessity for collaboration with local populations are becoming prevalent concerns (Shieh 2022). Consequently, we postulate that the two news outlets shared their emphasis on these topics in order to shape public opinion, which is a crucial finding.

The outcomes align with agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw 1972) and framing theory (Entman 1993), indicating that the two news outlets established an issue agenda to influence public perceptions of Chinese investments in Myanmar by emphasizing certain issues while disregarding others. In summary, the results presented in Table 2 underscore the media's vital role in shaping public discourse on international projects in developing countries, emphasizing the importance of media diversity in gauging public opinion. Furthermore, it can be inferred that the media employed agenda-setting effects to influence public sentiment by prioritizing specific issues, potentially impacting the policymaking process.

5.3. Correlations Between Combined News Media and Public Opinion

This phase of the research examined the relationship between news coverage by ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy*, and public opinion regarding ten BRI-project-related issues. The analysis initially explored the correlation between combined news coverage and public sentiment, followed by separate examinations of the correlations between ELEVEN's coverage and public opinion, as well as *The Irrawaddy's* coverage and public opinion. Spearman's rho rank-order was used to determine the correlation between media coverage and public perceptions. Table 3 illustrates the rank order of the ten issues between the combined agenda and public opinion, supporting *H2: "The issues covered in news media coverage of BRI projects are reflected in the opinions expressed by Myanmar's population"*. The table reveals similarities between the two news outlets' coverage and public opinion on the ten BRI project issues, indicating the influence of the media on people's perceptions. Paukphaw relations, environmental concern, local concern, and economic development share identical rankings of 3, 8, 1, and 2, respectively. This suggests that the prominence of the issues presented by the two news outlets is reflected in public perception, confirming that the media shapes public concern by emphasizing specific issues (McCombs and Shaw 1972).

Table 3. Issue ranks for combined news media and public opinion.

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

Examination of the correlation between the issue rankings in ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy* revealed a robust and significant positive association (Spearman's rho = +0.8787879, *p*-value = 0.001977 ($p < 0.05$)). This finding indicates a strong alignment between media coverage and public perception regarding the ten issues related to the BRI projects, highlighting the considerable influence of media narratives on public discourse in Myanmar. Most of Myanmar's news consumers perceive the importance of issues or topics in a manner consistent with their presentations in news media. This phenomenon can be attributed to the increased accessibility of news sources to Myanmar's population following the introduction of media liberalization in 2011, in conjunction with ongoing advancements in mass media technology (Kemp 2024).

It is also noteworthy that this finding expands the application of the agenda-setting theory to global infrastructure development platforms, particularly in developing countries, where foreign investments are crucial. The findings also emphasize the media's role in framing public debates and setting the national agenda, particularly concerning foreign investments, thereby reinforcing the media's influence on public opinion and policy (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Moreover, this research emphasizes how media framing influences public opinion, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of media-related impacts on global economic relationships (Entman 1993). These findings strongly indicate that the media significantly shapes public perceptions of Chinese investments in Myanmar, highlighting the need to critically evaluate media narratives in contexts in which foreign investments impact national interests and economic development.

5.4. Correlations Between ELEVEN and Public Attributes

This study also investigated the impact of the ELEVEN news outlet on public opinion regarding the Chinese BRI initiatives in Myanmar. Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to evaluate the relationship between the issue rankings of ELEVEN and public sentiments. Table 4 displays the ranking of the issues and their corresponding public perceptions. The analysis yielded a rho (ρ) value of +0.4424242 (+0.44), suggesting a moderately positive correlation between the media issue and public opinion rankings. Nevertheless, a *p*-value of 0.2042 ($p > 0.05$) indicated that the correlation was not statistically significant. This finding implies that while a moderate correlation exists, the relationship is not statistically robust, suggesting that factors beyond media coverage influence public opinion (M. McCombs 2002). It can be inferred that this aligns with wider research on the intricate interplay of cultural, social, and economic elements in molding public perception.

Table 4. Issue ranks of ELEVEN and Public Opinion.

Issue	ELEVEN's Issue Rank	Public Opinion Issue Rank
Strategic Interest	8	4
Paukphaw Relations	2	3
Debt Concern	10	9
Environmental Concern	7	8
Local Concern	1	1
Lack of Transparency	9	7
Lack of Coordination	3	10
Infrastructure Development	4	6
Regional Connectivity	6	5
Economic Development	5	2

Table 4 illustrates the discrepancies between ELEVEN's issue prioritization and public sentiment; for instance, "strategic interest" is ranked eighth by ELEVEN but fourth by the public, whilst "economic development" is ranked fifth by ELEVEN and second by the public. These data suggest that ELEVEN influences public opinion, but does not entirely reflect public priorities on critical issues. Nevertheless, the modest correlation and absence of statistical significance underscore the limitations of media influence, implying that

although the media can shape perceptions, its agenda-setting capacity is neither unlimited nor the sole factor. Consequently, one may infer that the media is merely one of several elements that contribute to the formation of public opinion (Entman 1993). In conclusion, the outcome of a moderate positive correlation without statistical significance enhances our understanding of the complex role of the media in shaping public discourse, particularly concerning international economic issues.

5.5. Correlations Between The Irrawaddy and Public Opinion

Finally, this study explored the correlations between *The Irrawaddy's* issue rankings and public opinion on China's BRI projects in Myanmar, using Spearman's rank-order correlation. Table 5 displays the ranking of the issues and their corresponding public perceptions. The analysis revealed a rho (ρ) value of +0.8545455 (+0.85), indicating a strong positive correlation with a statistically significant *p*-value of 0.003505 ($p < 0.05$). This suggests that a significant relationship between media reporting and public opinion is unlikely to be due to chance, highlighting *The Irrawaddy's* significant influence on public perception. This substantial rho value highlights the media's significant role in molding public sentiment regarding crucial matters associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Myanmar. One can deduce that *The Irrawaddy's* news reports placed greater emphasis on BRI-related topics compared to ELEVEN, resulting in a more pronounced influence on public perceptions. Consequently, *The Irrawaddy's* agenda-setting effects concerning the BRI projects appear to be more potent and efficacious, particularly regarding obstructive issues (Irrawaddy 2021). This suggests that Myanmar's population tends to rely more heavily on *The Irrawaddy* than on ELEVEN for information on these matters.

Table 5. Issue ranks of *The Irrawaddy* and public opinion.

Issues	*The Irrawaddy's* Issue Rank	Public Opinion Issue Rank
Strategic Interest	3	4
Paukphaw Relations	5	3
Debt Concern	10	9
Environmental Concern	8	8
Local Concern	2	1
Lack of Transparency	9	7
Lack of Coordination	7	10
Infrastructure Development	4	6
Regional Connectivity	6	5
Economic Development	1	2

The alignment between *The Irrawaddy's* issue prioritization and public concerns emphasizes the media's agenda-setting role. For instance, "economic development" is ranked most important by *The Irrawaddy* and second by the public, showing a close alignment. Both the media and the public rank "environmental concern" eighth, indicating a direct match in perceived importance, and illustrating *The Irrawaddy's* significant influence on public perception, guiding attention to prioritized issues. These results support media effects theory, particularly agenda-setting, which suggests that topics emphasized by the media are often seen as the most important topics by the public (Dearing and Rogers 1988). The statistically significant correlation observed in the findings corroborates the notion that the *The Irrawaddy's* media coverage can both reflect and influence public concerns, particularly regarding crucial national issues such as foreign investments.

In conclusion, the data presented in Table 5 offer compelling evidence of a strong positive relationship between *The Irrawaddy's* issue ranking and public opinion. This underscores the media's vital role in molding public discourse on national and economic matters, especially concerning global infrastructure initiatives such as the BRI. These results contribute to a deeper comprehension of how the media influence public perception,

emphasizing the considerable impact that news outlets have on setting the public agenda in Myanmar. All datasets supporting the results and interpretations presented in this section are available in the Supplementary Materials (S1).

This study explored the impact of media coverage by ELEVEN and *The Irrawaddy* on public opinion regarding China's BRI projects in Myanmar from 2011 to 2024, focusing on ten crucial aspects. The results indicated a significant correlation between media issue rankings and public opinion rankings, with *The Irrawaddy* exerting a stronger influence, owing to its comprehensive coverage. This study contributes to agenda-setting theory by showcasing the media's role in guiding public attention and framing discussions on international infrastructure initiatives with local implications. The study refines agenda-setting theory in suggesting that the media not only reflects, but also shapes public opinion, by highlighting specific issues (McCombs and Shaw 1972) related to "global infrastructure initiatives". This study significantly extends prior research on agenda-setting effects concerning the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Myanmar, a developing Southeast Asian country. Future research should examine broader agenda-setting impacts on the BRI projects, considering media influence, public sentiment, and policy priorities, which have both theoretical and practical significance in Myanmar. However, this study's focus on domestic outlets and its limited sample size may limit the global relevance of its findings. Future studies should include international media sources, such as Radio Free Asia and Voice of America, with a larger sample size, to provide a more comprehensive view in relation to Chinese investments in Myanmar. Moreover, integrating second-level agenda-setting theory could elucidate the influence of media framing on public opinion (Ghanem 2013) and policy priorities. This study demonstrates the media's crucial role in shaping public perceptions of BRI projects in Myanmar, and underscores the necessity for a critical examination of media narratives, particularly concerning foreign investments affecting national interests (Oo et al. 2024); thus, it provides important insights for policymakers, media professionals, and researchers studying the media, public opinion, and international development nexus.

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