Riot on the Hill: International Coverage of a U.S. Insurrection Attempt

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Abstract

Thematic analysis of strategic narratives employed in news texts from 31 countries/regions on four continents showed how the January 6 insurrection was covered in places accustomed to being reprimanded by the United States about governance and human rights. The analysis turned on four overarching themes: *reputation of the U.S., depictions of the event, underlying causes of the event*, and the *political implications of the event*.

Keywords: capitol riot, Donald Trump, coup d'état, strategic narrative, soft power, January 6, 2021

Introduction

"Be there, will be wild!" So promised U.S. President Donald J. Trump in a tweet December 18, 2020, encouraging his supporters to rally in Washington, D.C. (Fuchs, 2021). Trump's months-long drumbeat of election fraud sowed seeds of distrust in the electoral process (Brewster, 2020; Frenkel, 2020; Sanchez, 2020). His insistence that he had won a second term was the animating force for the January 6, 2021, "Save America" rally (Fuchs, 2021). His "will be wild" invitation to followers reflected the tenor of a reality-defying political campaign that extended months beyond election day.

On January 6, 2021, Trump supporters massed in front of the White House to hear speakers, including Trump himself, before they violently breached the U.S. Capitol. This forced a rushed evacuation of lawmakers and staffers and interfered with their joint session to accept Electoral College ballots (Fuchs, 2021). The U.S. Capitol riot, documented by foreign and domestic journalists and even by participants using social media, led to police and protester injuries, four deaths, and vandalism. Trump supporters carried the Confederate battle flag inside the Capitol, which rebels never accomplished during the Civil War. The last time armed combatants breached the U.S. Capitol was during the War of 1812.

People around the world were shocked to see the violence, chaos, smoke bombs and selfies. The haze of tear gas and the flash-bangs of crowd control measures rose in a figurative immolation of Western idealism and supremacy. Internationally, journalists reported the swift international reaction. Political leaders offered context to their home audiences and condolences to the United States, whose promotion of democracy reflects its soft power. How were these scenes received among the countries accustomed to U.S. peacekeeping operations, lectures about democracy, and peaceful election exhortations? To understand how the crisis played out on the

world stage and the implications for the U.S. post-Cold War perception of itself as a "force for universal political good" (Mitchell, 2016, p. 16), we studied global digital news media articles reflecting coverage across four continents reflecting 31 nations or regions.

Theorization and Literature Review

Strategic Narratives and Soft Power

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle's (2013) concept of strategic narratives underscores the importance of the new media environment in which increasing numbers of people have access to social media and online information. Social media enables ordinary people to interact with political and media organizations and with each other. Although elites can no longer monopolize control over communication, political leaders use narratives strategically "to create commonsense understandings of the past, present, and future," to garner legitimacy for particular policies (p. xi) and to shape domestic and international actors' behaviors (p. 2). So foreign policy-makers pursue a twin-track strategy: They use the media ecologies of the day to emphasize topics and frames of national interest; and compete to shape these ecologies, whose infrastructure privileges certain voices and certain ways of communicating. Miskimmon, et al (2013) agree with Entman (2003) that political leaders, journalists, and other elites shape public opinion by framing (see Goffman, 1974). But while framing must be considered, they argue that frames lack the temporal and causal features of narratives, so cannot explain causes or future outcomes.

Miskimmon, et al. (2013; see also 2017, Roselle et al., 2014) interpret Nye's (2005) concept of "soft power" as referring to the shaping of geopolitical influence through images of a nation, which mainly result from strategic narratives. The connection between soft power and communication is crucial to our work. As a democratic hegemon, the United States is hostile to

efforts by foreign powers to cultivate democracy on its shores. By "persistently presenting itself as the arbiter of democracy" (Mitchell, 2016, p. 157), the United States ignores how its political dysfunction could attract repudiation and intervention abroad. Much of the U.S. post-war democratizing work has followed military intervention, including within the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya (all in our sample). Recipients of U.S. democratizing efforts often resentfully perceive the attention as suggesting they are weak and/or poor. With Russia seeing itself as a powerful bestower rather than a recipient of favor, President Vladimir Putin ejected USAID workers from Russia in 2012 (Mitchell, 2016). Now, the United States enjoys less opportunity for influence when preaching democracy (Mitchell, 2016). Russia and China exercise their own soft power in exporting ideals.

News Flows and U.S. world news

Considerable research looks at international news flows and the extent to which these reflect the politics, economy, and culture of the larger global system. Galtung and Ruge (1965) predicted national economic, social, and political agendas, as well as geographic characteristics determine the volume and kind of coverage a country gets in foreign news media. In the changed, post-Cold War era, Wu (2000) found that mainly trade volume and presence of international news agencies determined the volume of foreign news. The U.S. got by far the most coverage. Wu suggested that U.S. news gets picked up simply because it is about the U.S., with its political-economic strength, military muscle, and formidable media and cultural industries.

Researchers agree that U.S. news outlets' foreign coverage is uneven: countries not of strategic interest to the U.S. get little attention (Aalberg et al., 2013; Wu, 2000). This strategic deployment of resources was already found in 1956, when, looking at14 newspapers from

around the world, Schramm (1959) found that the amount of coverage was not proportional with a country's size (see also Gerbner & Marvanyi, 1977). It's also a matter of agenda-setting: the more coverage a nation gets, the more likely readers are to think the nation is vital to U.S. interests; the more negative coverage a nation gets, the more likely readers are to think negatively about the nation (Wanta et al., 2004). Compared to the control condition, experimental subjects who read news framing China as a U.S. competitor were less favorable to China; participants who read news about shared Chinese-U.S. interests had favorable opinions regarding China (Brewer, 2006). The same was true about Russia.

Major U.S. news outlets give Latin America far less coverage than its geographic proximity predicts (Weaver et al., 1984). *New York Times* and *Washington Post* op-eds and editorials about Latin America in 2011- 2012 centered on what was problematic for the United States, implying that editorial elites view Latin America as newsworthy only in the context of its relationship to the United States; a second focus was crime and corruption (Golan & Munno, 2014). U.S. news coverage results in U.S. audiences thinking of Mexicans as criminals and threats (Aguirre et al., 2011). Hafner-Burton and Ron (2013) claim a U.S. bias against Latin America results in disproportional news attention to human rights violations there while neglecting similar violations elsewhere.

U.S. media coverage of Africa often features patronizing, colonial tropes about poor governance, and negative frames related to crisis, corruption, disease, conflict, and undemocratic elections (de Beer, 2010; Domatob, 1994; Schraeder & Endless, 1998). These narratives offer "Afro-pessimism," i.e., a "tendency to homogenize the 'African tragedy,' concluding that Africa has neither the political will nor the capacity to deal with its problems" (Ahluwalia, 2000, p. 30).

U.S. and other Western news about African elections typically employ narratives that imply

undemocratic and illegitimate processes marred by civil unrest and violence (Behnke, 2019).

Guzman's (2016) analysis of news of anti-Mubarak protestors found that CNN

emphasized their education and democratic goals and rationalized protester violence as a

response to government aggression, while Fox and the AP framed anti-government protesters

more negatively early in the Arab Spring but gradually both moved to portraying them as

rational, fighting for democracy; secularism was associated with rationality. Western media

typically focused on human rights and personal stories of Arab Spring protest victims but rarely

expressed support when confronted with anti-establishment protestors who would fundamentally

change their countries' relationships with the West (Rasul & Asim, 2014).

International news about the US

Although far less research looks at international coverage of U.S. politics, a couple of

studies consider the issue of global attention to the U.S. President. McClory (2017) claims the

United States has been unique in showing the "Peaceful Transition of Power," making this the

symbol of American democracy and a model for the world; U.S. election processes demonstrate

to both internal and external audiences how democracy functions. McClory (2017) attributes the

significant global decline in the U.S. standing to narratives around the 2016 election. Farnsworth

et al. (2013) likewise say global audiences have "grown increasingly skeptical of White House

motives as a result of media reports that often condemn US leaders and policies" (p. 2). An

examination of how European newspapers covered the 2008 US Presidential election found that

temporal aspects, particularly the stage of the campaign and polling trends, were especially

influential (Vliegenthart et al., 2010).

Highly relevant here is Kluver et al. (2019), who also use Miskimmon et al. (2013) to suggest that media narratives provide "strategic narratives" that embody national geopolitical consensus. They applied this theory to international coverage of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and its immediate aftermath—notably, the other bookend to our study. They studied how China, Russia, Iran, and the Arab world frame news of global events to shore up local or national identities, political values, and processes, thereby strengthening their own preferred strategic narrative and promoting political change or stasis at global and local levels. The U.S. president is the most visible symbol of the United States for much of the world. Therefore, Kluver et al. (2019) say, foreign media narratives about the U.S. election provide insight into how other countries make sense of U.S. democracy and reflect local understandings regarding U.S. policy toward those nations:

> Because the election is the embodiment of U.S. political processes and values, which the United States actively propagates as a model for the world, it provides a unique opportunity for governments, media outlets, and individuals around the world to reflect upon, critique, or affirm U.S. politics… (p. 110).

They found near-contempt for the United States and its systems. For many Chinese, Russians, Iranians, and Arabs, the U.S. 2016 election confirmed the superiority of a less democratic system of governance: "Why should we yearn for democracy … when democracy leads to this kind of chaos?" Kluver et al. (2019) did find differences. For example, Russian media clearly preferred Trump. Arabic media clearly preferred Clinton. Nevertheless:

> Overwhelmingly, the election process, with all the scandals, red herrings, and weirdness, undermined the coherence of the larger U.S. strategic narrative about democracy. Media outlets consistently criticized the candidates, the values, and the processes of the election, and to much of the world, showed just what a sham U.S. politics is (p. 110).

Ultimately, the narrative paradigm demonstrates the role of global values in the contestation of strategic narratives.

Research questions

We asked two questions about January 6, 2021, as an unusual event that international media could leverage for their strategic narratives:

RQ1: How did coverage of the Capitol Riot unfold in countries used to hearing lectures by the United States?

RQ2: What did news outlets say about the impacts of the event on the U.S. image?

Method

Data

To draw a breadth of coverage of the January 6 riot, we sampled articles that ran January 6 through January 13, 2021. Articles from news outlets across five continents reflect international coverage especially in regions on which the U.S. has opined about electoral and human rights conditions. Locales were sampled from the following geopolitical regions:

- Latin America: Mexico, Venezuela, and Brazil

- East Africa: Kenya and Uganda

- West Africa: Nigeria

- Southern Africa: South Africa and Zimbabwe

- Asia Pacific: China, the Philippines, and Taiwan

- South/Central Asia: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan

- West Asia: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia

- Middle East: Turkey, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon

- Eastern Europe: Russia, Ukraine, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Belarus

- The Baltics: Lithuania and Estonia

Articles were a mixture of English-language and national languages, as detailed in Table 1.

The articles were collected using Nexis Uni and Newsbank databases and websites of some individual news outlets. Database searches started with keyword queries for "Capitol" OR "Washington" OR "United States." Since the databases may not include some relevant news outlets, region experts on the research team manually searched local news websites. Op-eds, editorials and news stories were included but not wire articles or raw, breaking news updates. Purposive sampling identified one to four articles from each news outlet that contained any depth. The final corpus consisted of 122 news articles. All non-English articles were translated using Google Translate, checked by the researcher most familiar with the original language.

Approach to thematic analysis

The overarching themes emerged through an iterative process involving identifying key features of text segments (Guest et al., 2012). Each author coded five articles for a first round of inductive coding and mapped emerging themes in their areas of regional expertise. Each researcher then cross-referenced observed themes from different regions. During a group discussion, we categorized codes with similar characteristics, which were consolidated into a structure of overarching themes and subcategories (see Table 2). News articles, we found, utilized four overarching themes for the January 6 event: the reputation of the U.S., depiction of the event, underlying causes of the event, and the political implications of the event. A standardized codebook was developed to code articles on the subcategories and used to code the rest of the samples. A region expert was the primary coder for each article; at least one cross-checker ensured coding was consistent.

Findings

U.S. democracy: Weakened or resilient?

A central frame was the debate over the status of U.S. democracy. The sampled news coverage and commentary overwhelmingly framed the event as a mark of declining and weakening democracy. The event was treated as a watershed moment when violence displaced the U.S. tradition of peaceful transfer of democratic power. For example, one Russian news outlet described the event as "an irreparable blow" for American democracy. Mexican coverage described the U.S. as "a shaky and delegitimized democracy," operating "a setup typical of a banana democracy." Indian media outlets, meanwhile, often painted the events as an assault on democracy itself; one headline read, "4 dead, democracy wounded, as US stumbles out of Trump nightmare." A Brazilian article observed that the reputation of the U.S. had been so badly shattered that "today, no one would look at the U.S. and say, 'I want my country to work like this.'"

In particular, opinion pieces published in countries that were recently the site of controversial elections mocked America's fall from grace. A Russian op-ed cast the event as "a complete and final discredit of the two-century-old American democracy myth." Similarly, a Zimbabwean commentary stated the "US now stands for 'United States of Anarchy.'" A Kenyan commentary suggested American democracy had fallen from first-world to third-world status in four years. News content in Eastern European media also described the U.S. as a "third world country" and "banana state." Further, in Croatia and Serbia, the syntagm "cradle of democracy" was often ironically used to describe the U.S.

Nonetheless, while some writers dismissed U.S. democracy as a myth, news media from Ukraine (which has its own conflict with Russia), Nigeria, and Lebanon considered the January 6 event as proof of the resilience of U.S. democracy. U.S. institutions were lauded for being strong

enough to withstand the challenges posed by the rioting, often in contrast to the local institutions

perceived to be weaker. At least as compared to other countries, the U.S. was framed as the

one—if not the only—state that could withstand such an attack on its democracy. A Ukrainian

op-ed declared "America is the most powerful of the remaining empires; it can afford political

upheavals." In Bosnian media, that resilience theme emerged in the celebration of Vice President

Mike Pence as a "savior" of American democracy, putting the country's interest before that of his

boss. A Nigerian publication contrasted the strengths of U.S. institutions to local political

realities: American democracy successfully weathered the challenge posed by the January 6 riot,

"unlike Nigeria, which keeps on failing most democratic stress tests that she is exposed to, no

matter how faint it may be." A Filipino article quoted a tweet by the country's Foreign Affairs

that stated U.S. democracy was so strong that the country could "cope with a civil disturbance

and fight wars on 3 fronts if it wants to—and come out the winner." As summarized by a UAE

columnist, "the American legislative system passed this test."

Shattered image and diminished global standing

Many news articles suggested the U.S. lost its glory and its image was shattered abroad.

Some news stories detailed how American legislators needed to duck behind desks for safety,

after civilians overpowered security forces and breached the Capitol. Other articles referenced

humiliation and irony by using images of the U.S. Capitol surrounded by protestors, and

hundreds of security officers—images mostly associated with struggling and failed states.

Building on this perceived diminished global standing, the U.S. also was framed as having lost

the moral ground from which to preach democracy. News media criticized U.S. hypocrisy for

policing democracy around the world while failing to uphold democratic norms at home. For

instance, a Zimbabwean publication critiqued past U.S. sanctions and its criticism of

Zimbabwe's democracy. It quoted President Emmerson Mnangagwa, saying: "Yesterday's events

showed that the U.S. has no moral right to punish another nation under the guise of upholding

democracy."

Similarly, an Iranian article repeatedly used the word "irony" to describe January 6,

calling American democracy "a masquerade" and delegitimizing the U.S.'s international attempts

to spread democracy. Chinese media also mocked previous U.S. efforts to spread democracy and

noted that the U.S. finally had swallowed "the bitter fruit of 'democracy.'" According to one

Chinese opinion piece's blunt headline: "US should be careful of an 'American Spring.'" In

Uganda, where presidential campaigns were at fever pitch, the U.S. was urged to stay away from

upcoming elections and not lecture the country. One news article quoted a Ugandan cabinet

minister saying, "the Americans should not come here and try to teach us democracy."

The U.S. was criticized for a double standard, treating its own rioters differently than

those abroad. For example, Chinese media challenged how American politicians appreciated

Hong Kong protests as "beautiful" but condemned the January 6 rioters. An editorial in a

state-owned Zimbabwean newspaper also suggested the U.S. should not be so quick to legitimate

claims of voter fraud in other countries, just as it dismissed Trump's claims. The hypocrisy

charge was also visible in Afghani media: one article called out U.S. hypocrisy for its treatment

of Middle Eastern countries who have encountered similar democratic crises. The same Afghani

editorial noted, "the U.S. rulers should not dare to ridicule demonstrations in the world

particularly in the so-called 'Third World' countries as barbaric acts as Thursday's incident in

Washington D.C. was the most ridiculous in the most developed country." News and

commentary in some countries including Zimbabwe and Uganda went a step further, suggesting

their own democracies were just as good, if not stronger than, America's. "What transpired at

Capitol Hill has not happened in any third world nation which they portray as being backward,"

a Zimbabwean newspaper reported.

A Serbia writer challenged the credibility and underscored the hypocrisy of U.S.-based

institutions (namely Freedom House) in the context of a local protest: "It would be very

interesting if we got a report from Freedom House or some similar American organization, which

would compare the actions of the state in front of the parliaments in Belgrade in July and

Washington in January. We believe that the Belgrade action would now be assessed as flawless."

Labelling the event and actors

News media mostly employed highly charged phrases and negative language in

describing the event, coalescing around four sub-themes. Unsurprisingly, many descriptions of

the event acknowledged the violence witnessed on January 6. Terminologies used to convey the

idea of violence include "chaos," "mayhem," "vandalism," "storming of the U.S. Capitol,"

"security crisis," "acts of barbarism," "rampage," "scenes of violence," "brutal rebellion," and

"invasion." The January 6 event was also described as an act intended to overthrow the U.S.

government. This was mostly conveyed through phrases such as "coup," "coup d'état," and

"insurrection," as well as comparisons with attempts to overthrow governments in other parts of

the world. For example, a Filipino editorial opened with the headline: "Coup d'etat in America."

A Croatian columnist stated: "The country, which exported democracy, yesterday exported a

coup d'etat via live broadcast to the world. Furthermore, Serbian media described participants of

the January 6 event as being interested in "overthrowing the US government."

News outlets also framed the January 6 event as unusual and even historic. A Serbian

news outlet noted that the event "shocked and appalled the entire democratic world"; a UAE

columnist observed, "the world is stunned"; and a Pakistani outlet reported the event had

"shell-shocked not only the American public but also the rest of the world." Similarly, a Mexican

outlet reported that "the chaos and scenes never seen in Washington … left the world surprised."

A Venezuelan op-ed described surprise in how January 6 events unfolded: "While I was

surprised that the 'law and order' voters dared to reach these extremes, I still thought that they

would stop before it became an actual rebellion." Likewise, a Pakistani outlet posited that while

the events witnessed in the U.S. Capitol would be somewhat normal in some jurisdictions, they

"were quite shocking" coming from the U.S. Notably, some descriptions converged around the

idea of terrorism. Indian media, for example, referred to the riots as a "domestic terror attack."

An American columnist in a Lithuanian newspaper noted that "a large group of Donald Trump

supporters committed an act of domestic terrorism by invading the Congress." The terrorism

sub-theme was also implied when Croatian, Lithuanian, UAE, Filipino, and Afghanistan writers

referred to the January 6 participants as "terrorists" or "domestic terrorists."

January 6 participants were described in mostly unflattering and sometimes strong

language, including extremists, mob, right-wing hardliners, and potential domestic terrorists. For

example, Taiwanese media commentary described the active participants on January 6 as a

"mob" and "seditionist terrorists"; a Bosnian commentator labelled them "a raging mob" and

"invaders"; and in Brazil, where President Jair Bolsanaro is called "the Trump of the Tropics,"

journalists described the actors as "vandals" and "militants." Indian media, meanwhile, described

the protestors as "white supremacists," "thugs," and "racists," and, at one point dismissively

referring to them as "flotsam and jetsam" washing up on the steps of the United States Capitol

Building. However, an Afghani piece suggested the January 6 actors were not actual Trump

supporters. Brazilian media quoted government officials who praised participants; for example,

Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ernesto Araújo was quoted describing the actors as "good citizens" exercising their right to question the electoral process. Similarly, a Nigerian article described Trump and his supporters as "protesting against electoral malpractice." However, this favorable framing of the actors was minimal compared to the more dominant negative descriptors.

Some news content featured relatively mild terminology, such as the frequent use of the word "protestors" in Chinese media. Notably, news media content across different geographies employed descriptors that tied the actors to Trump. These included descriptors such as "goons allied to disgraced U.S. President Donald Trump," "pro-Trump supporters," "pro-Trump Americans," "pro-Trump extremists," "supporters of Trump invasion of the Capitol," "Trumpists," "Trump supporters," "MAGA extremists," and "die-hard supporters" of Trump.

Blame

While the January 6 event was attributed to a variety of actors and circumstances, news coverage and commentary overwhelmingly apportioned most of the blame on then-President Donald Trump. Direct or implicit blame was evident in labelling the active participants as "pro-President Trump supporters." Among the materials explicitly faulting Trump for inciting the event, a Zimbabwean editorial argued Trump had spoken to thousands of people and after "inflaming them in a speech launched them towards the Capitol building"; it added, "Mr. Trump carries a lot of the blame." A Mexican news outlet referred to a "revolt fueled by the president himself"; it asserted, "The assault on Congress came shortly after the protesters had been harangued … by the outgoing president, who repeated the string of unfounded fraud allegations that he has insisted on since his defeat was confirmed." Likewise, Indian media outlets firmly

affixed blame to Trump; one described him as a "disgraced President who was blamed across the

political spectrum for igniting violence." Similarly, Ukrainian media framed Trump as the "one

person responsible for absolutely everything that happened," citing Trump's tweets before and

during the event, and his perceived reluctance to dissuade his supporters from violence. A

Taiwanese article argued that the event was a "pathetic last gasp" of Trumpian virulence in

challenging democracy. Among media in Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Trump

was vilified as a "jerk," "coward," "dangerous ignoramus," "fool," "shameful," and

"irresponsible." Nonetheless, some post-Soviet countries sympathized with Trump, framing him

as "only an indicator of the problem, and not the problem itself." A Belarussian columnist

defended Trump, arguing that "the fierce persecution of the president … is beyond common

sense and only deepens the existing conflict." Likewise defending Trump, Armenian media

suggested someone else behind the scenes "provoked crowd frenzy"; Trump merely "found

himself" cast as villain."

Blame was also extended to Trump supporters, Republican and Democratic party

politicians, failed economic policies that had disenfranchised some Americans, neoliberalism,

interventionism, the exploitation of the democratic system by politicians for self-interest,

globalization, the rise of China, and failed U.S. military policies. Some Serbian media regarded

the problem as an extension of U.S. white supremacy; Croatian media described it as a

"culmination of a multi-year political agony" worldwide. The American political class were also

lambasted in a Lithuanian op-ed stating, "too many politicians in the United States fan the flames

of unhealthy division and conflict." Likewise, a Bangladeshi commentator opined that a

"dangerous anti-democratic mindset has been reared by the Republican party for quite some

time." An Azerbaijani newspaper cited a Ukranian source who heard "exclamations and orders in

Russian" in a video recorded at the Capitol as back-up for its "very serious suspicions" about

Moscow's involvement in the insurrection. The Ukrainian source's accusation of Russian

involvement could be understood in the context of the drawn-out conflict between Ukraine and

Russia since 2014. Interestingly, Russian media blamed U.S. institutions for failing to address

Trump's voter fraud concerns, questioned the transparency of U.S elections, and accused

Democrats of destroying the U.S. political system in a quest to defeat Trump. Meanwhile, some

Middle Eastern news outlets accused social media companies of either over-regulating or

under-regulating their platforms. An Saudi Arabian op-ed condemned social media companies

for enabling the spread of conspiracy theories and hatred that fueled the January 6 events and

other incidents across the globe. Demanding more regulation, the author singled out Facebook as

"the platform on which makeshift militias organized to attack Rohingya communities." In

contrast, an Iranian news outlet criticized Twitter's allegedly double standard in banning Trump

after January 6 but ignoring Trump's previous threats to attack Iranian cultural sites.

 Historic and metaphorical references

       International news media reportage drew on several important historic moments and

metaphors to make sense of January 6. Iconic moments of political stress mentioned included the

1963 assassination of President John Kennedy, Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, and the 1995

bombing of an Oklahoma City government building. Croatian and Serbian narratives referenced

communism and socialism, and compared Trump to both modern-day (Putin and Xi Jinping) and

historical (Lenin, Napoleon, Mussolini and Franco) authoritarian leaders. The events were

compared to the rise of fascism, Nazi Germany and the Bolsheviks' assault on the Winter Palace.

Russian media offered comparisons to the 1993 political stand-off between the Russian

president Boris Yeltsin and parliament that ended only after military forces stepped in. Armenian

media referenced internal protests that began in fall 2020: "The main characters in both places were … supporters of all-crushing brute force with a noticeable lack of brains."

Some Nigerian media, meanwhile, contrasted the riots with historical political conflict there: "Nigeria is in its 22 years of unbroken democratic practice, dating back to 1999 when the military regime was terminated." Afghani media referred to Leninism to emphasize Trump's sycophantism and willingness to subvert the rule of law. To analyze the event's deep-rooted causes, Taiwanese media referenced 19th-century U.S. nationalism and the Republican Party's 1968 "Southern strategy." A Brazilian commentator predicted the U.S. would remain divided after January 6: "the national unity that existed after 9/11 and Pearl Harbor no longer exists."

International implications

News media also engaged with the likely international implications and impact of January 6. A Venezuelan op-ed called the event a "blow not only to American democracy, but to democracy everywhere." Some Chinese media framed the event as evidence of receding Western power and the rise of alternative non-democratic systems. Relatedly, a Brazilian commentary discussed the likely reorganization of the hierarchy of power in the global stage, noting that the U.S. faces the unsuitable mix of its eroding soft power and a much more challenging geopolitical environment in which China is flourishing. The author wondered: "Would this then be a great opportunity for Beijing to turn the tables against Washington?" A Taiwanese news outlet warned that the rioting could occur elsewhere and urged attention to similar social problems abroad that could escalate if not handled properly. Others also worried that the events would inspire authoritarian regimes in other parts of the world. For example, a Bangladeshi commentator

observed that "authoritarian rulers will find excuses and try to justify their actions using these images … the worrying lesson is, if it is possible in the U.S., it can happen anywhere."

These news media were presumably careful in choosing which world leaders and national leaders to use as news sources. Leaders mostly condemned the events as an attack on the concept of democracy. For instance, Zimbabwean media quoted UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson saying; "The United States stands for democracy around the world, and it is now vital that there should be a peaceful and orderly transfer of power," and cited the French foreign minister describing the events as a "a grave attack against democracy." An Indian publication exclusively quoted British Commonwealth leaders. Nigerian articles frequently cited regional or global powers such as Iran, China, and Russia. The granularity of source selection also varied, with some publications quoting only top-level leaders such as prime ministers and presidents, while others cited a wider variety of sources such as parliamentary or congressional members, political cabinet members, executives of nonprofit organizations, party officials, and journalists.

Implications for Local (National) Politics

News media content also contemplated the implications for local politics and democracy. For instance, one Indian article discussed how political instability in the U.S. might affect Indian foreign policy with Russia; another compared Trump's actions toward supporters and political enemies to similar actions by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Parallels were drawn between ongoing protests within the U.S. and India. Nigerian coverage questioned the very idea of democracy as a desirable form of government. One newspaper quoted a University of Lagos professor who asked, "If America, one of the greatest democratic states, has become the way it is today, shouldn't the international system begin to think of other alternatives?"

Mexican coverage highlighted Trumpian tendencies in its own president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), warning that America's woes could come home to roost "because Presidents López Obrador and Donald Trump are like two drops of water; because AMLO bet all his political capital on Trump's re-election, because they are far from being Democrats and because they are two crazy people with power." Again, some Brazil coverage drew parallels with its own President, "an extreme-right wing radical, unpredictable, loyal to Donald Trump and capable of making decisions contrary to his own country's interests." Conceding "lots of fraud claims" in American elections, one writer suggested these statements could negatively impact relations between Brazilian leaders and incoming U.S. President Joe Biden. Brazil's Minister of Foreign Affairs Ernesto Araújo used January 6 to advocate paper ballots for Brazil's 2022 elections.

News media in the Middle East expressed hope that U.S. attention to domestic issues would cause decreased American presence in the region. Bosnian media offered a cautionary tale. Local politicians repeatedly warned that "no matter how powerful and important they are, political leaders are never stronger than the state and the people." Contrastingly, a Zimbabwean op-ed used the January 6 event to dismiss voter fraud claims launched by the opposition after the country's last election. Notably, South African and Filipino news media described the active involvement of their nationals in the January 6 event as unfortunate and embarrassing.

Race and Racism

Race and racism in U.S. society also emerged as a frame, particularly in critiques of Trump, in contrasting security forces' actions on January 6 to prior Black Lives Matter protests, and in explaining U.S. society. An Iranian article advocated transitional justice, arguing that

"systemic inequality is a defining feature of American democracy, as is white privilege."

Likewise, Indian news media described the protesters as "racist, white supremacist louts" and

pointed out how rioters waving Confederate flags and erecting gallows in front of the Capitol

drew on the history of racial lynching. A Zimbabwean newspaper described the U.S. as

"intrinsically a racist society."

A Turkish article ran with the title "This is America," making reference to Donald

Glover's song illustrating "the racial disparity of trying to make money and being a black person

in America." In South Africa, with its history of apartheid, news media described the January 6

event as a "whitelash" against racial liberty, and accused the Republican Party for a decades-long

project to reversing gains made by African Americans; January 6 participants were said to have

been "driven by racist rage" and Trump was accused of leaving the legacy of "a society where

those who are fighting to preserve white supremacy are emboldened enough to equate their

anarchy to a moral revolution."

Discussion

This comparative study set out to analyze how countries around the world who have

previously been lectured to by the U.S. about democratic governance reported the January 6

event. We examined 122 articles published by 71 media outlets in 31 countries and regions, and

observed four overarching themes: the tarnished *reputation of the U.S.* and weakened

democracy; *depiction of the event* as an unlawful and violent attack on American institutions

committed by Trump supporters; *underlying causes of the event* as rooted both in Trump and his

extremist supporters and in the U.S. history of racism; and international and local *political*

implications. Although some news media discussed the enduring strength of U.S. institutions and

democracy, most of the coverage represented January 6 as evidence of weakening democracy. This decline of U.S. democracy was described as lowering the status of America to that of countries it has previously lectured about democracy and democratic governance. The U.S. was thus discussed as having lost its moral high ground to preach democracy and criticize elections abroad. The approach of some international news media in our sample mirrored that typically employed by U.S. media reporting on faulty elections and dictatorial leaders in the third world. Several reports used elected leaders of Western states to express concern and call for the peaceful transfer of power--a common theme of U.S. leaders when Global South dictators refuse to vacate power.

With a few notable exceptions, the sampled media outlets usually portrayed January 6 events as an unlawful, violent attack on American institutions. Depictions of participants ranged from disorganized mobs vandalizing the Capitol to domestic terrorists or insurrectionists attempting to stage a *de facto* coup d'état at the orders of a disgraced strongman, a notion seen commonly in U.S. media portrayals of social and political crises abroad. The clear consensus was that, even when media outlets defended the Jan. 6 participants' actions, the rioting was abhorrent and conflict-ridden. A handful of media outlets portrayed the actors and activities as civil demonstrations: one Nigerian newspaper described it as a "protest against electoral malpractice," while Brazilian media quoted its foreign minister as describing the protestors as "good citizens." January 6 nevertheless remained portrayed primarily as the result of something gone wrong in democracy.

In explaining the underlying causes of the insurrection, media outlets most frequently faulted Trump himself: he had made baseless, fraudulent claims about electoral fraud and incited violence. His political supporters were similarly culpable. They were accused of being

extremists, insurrectionists, right-wing hardliners, and militants uninterested in the democratic

process, as evidenced by their backing of a figure who the media largely ridiculed as illegitimate.

Somewhat less common, though visible, was coverage identifying the U.S. political climate as

ultimately at fault, particularly laying responsibility on Republicans and on the partisan press.

For instance, an Indian outlet condemned the 100 Congressional Republicans who voted against

certifying the electoral results, describing them as committing "treason" or "sedition." Even

moderate Republicans who spoke against Trump and his supporters were pilloried; the outlet

derided them for resistance "after four years of enabling and acquiescence through silence."

Other related, underlying causes of the Capitol Riot, as reported abroad, included failed

economic policies that had left millions of Americans disenfranchised and a history of racism

and white supremacy as conditions that allowed politicians such as Trump to flourish. More

explicitly authoritarian nations, meanwhile, frequently described the underlying cause of the

unrest as the fundamental failure of democratic governance and the West's waning strength. A

Chinese outlet described the events as "the bitter fruit of 'democracy.'" In many cases, the

underlying causes were portrayed as systemic issues not easily fixed.

Given that a global superpower can cause instability, the political implications of the

January 6 event at the local and international level were understandably also key . While

international political news sources such as heads of government focused on the need to

safeguard democratic norms, narratives also manifested around the fallibility of democracy.

Implications for local politics revealed even more interesting narratives, ranging from using the

January 6 event as a threat to "strongmen" who frustrate democracy, to using it to tacitly support

dictators. A state-owned newspaper in Zimbabwe strenuously argued that since Trump's claims

of voter fraud had been widely dismissed, a similar stance should be adopted when such

accusations emerge in countries like Zimbabwe: Dismissing Trump's voter fraud claims while entertaining similar claims made by the Zimbabwean opposition in 2018 was a double standard. In Uganda, where President Yoweri Museveni has ruled for 35 years, government officials were quoted as dismissing U.S. involvement in Uganda's upcoming election. It appears that journalists in countries where voter fraud claims are common and democracy is arguably weaker used the January 6 event to dismiss calls for electoral transparency and accountability.

Among the implications of these findings are ones that relate to foreign policy and international diplomacy, given that widespread perception of the weakening of both the public image of the United States and the actual stability and integrity of its institutions could lead to significant socioeconomic and political realignments globally. This could come in the form of a loss of so-called U.S. "soft power," or an ability to achieve foreign policy goals through persuasion and co-option. Soft power is significantly affected by a nation's ability to maintain a strong positive image with the people it seeks to influence (Nye, 2005; Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2012). This is particularly true in regions where the United States has historically relied on soft power to affect change, many of which were studied here. As belief in U.S. exceptionalism fades, and as the image of the United States as a stabilizing force in the geopolitical landscape falters, international willingness to follow America's lead declines. While hardly a new development—Nye identified a decline in the ability of the United States to project soft power as early as the late 1980s—the widespread perception and portrayal of American decline by international media outlets included in this study does suggest an added dimension to this loss of power. Indeed, several of the countries mentioned here have challenged American exceptionalism, sometimes covertly and other times quite overtly (see Gilmore & Rowling, 2017). In a process that Trump likely accelerated but that also predated him (Layne, 2018),

China and Russia have demonstrated themselves as quite ready to challenge and even subsume the hegemonic soft power of the United States.

The portrayal of the United States as a weakened geopolitical entity facing unrest and disarray could also provide authoritarian and autocratic leaders/governments with substantial justification for their own anti-democratic actions and agendas. With the tarnishing of the image of American democracy, long held up as a gold standard of democratic governance, these actors can make claims against the efficacy of democratic systems with some legitimacy, as samples from Chinese and Russian media in this study demonstrated. Similarly, this portrayal could provide right-wing populist actors such as Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and India's Narendra Modi with counter-examples. The minority portrayal of Trump and his supporters as justified actors, meanwhile, could propel similar actions elsewhere. According to Brazilian journalists, members of Bolsonaro's cabinet advocated using similar strategies to those employed by Trump. Russian journalists highlighted the reaction of Trump and his supporters as justified responses to electoral concerns, a method that could certainly be adapted into Russian politics. In these areas, the American soft power vacuum could have major domestic implications.

Limitations, future research, and conclusion

This study offers substantive findings but has several limitations that could be addressed. While an analysis of 122 articles across 71 publications in 31 countries and other regions yielded useful data, most regions were represented by one or two publications; several potentially useful publications' articles were not considered due to access limitations. Additionally, sampling methods were convenience-based, with the availability of articles within select news databases and public-facing websites a primary determining criterion for inclusion in the sample. Including more publications/articles from each region would, in addition to increasing potential sources of

useful data points, provide for a more robust sample. Second, this study only examined

text-based media content. Analysis of visuals, audio, and other media formats could provide

additional important context. More research is needed to draw stronger conclusions about the

implications of this international news framing. While the 122 texts collected here represent

valuable data, they are not necessarily representative of their locales.

  While this study focused on the development of strategic narratives from a media studies

standpoint, the concept of soft power has important implications in other disciplines, such as

political science and international studies. An interdisciplinary approach to the design could

yield a more holistic account of how and when international news constrains the ability of the

U.S. to project soft power. Future research could also elaborate on specific elements of these

findings that were necessarily condensed for reasons of space, such as differences in portrayals

of the events of January 6 based on the political system or the ideological bent of the

government. Comparative research might systematically focus on how different ideological or

cultural identities overdetermined how news coverage was presented and acted upon. Finally,

interviews with journalists who wrote the sampled articles could provide additional dimensions.

  This analysis provides important insights into how members of the international

community discuss political turmoil within the United States, particularly those members with a

history of being lectured on democracy by the U.S. These perspectives influence how the United

States is regarded on the international stage and how a crisis in a global superpower can prompt

domestic change. Countries across the political/democratic spectrum deployed their own

strategic narratives in ways that suited both their local and international agendas.

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Table 1. Characteristics of the sampled news outlets.

Yucatan Times (Mexico)	English	Private
El Debate (Mexico)	Spanish	Private
Caracas Chronicles (Venezuela)	English	Independent
El Universal (Venezuela)	Spanish	Private
A Tarde (Brazil)	Portuguese	Private
Globo (Brazil)	Portuguese	Private
Folha de Sao Paolo (Brazil)	Portuguese	Private
People's Daily [English edition] (China)	English	Party-owned
Global Times (China)	English	Party-owned
Taipei Times (Taiwan)	English	Private
The Daily Nation (Kenya)	English	Private
The Star (Kenya)	English	Private
The Herald (Zimbabwe)	English	State-owned
NewsDay (Zimbabwe)	English	Private
The Monitor (Uganda)	English	Private
Times of India (India)	English	Private
Telegraph (India)	English	Private
The Hindu (India)	English	Private
Dawn (Pakistan)	English	Private
The News International (Pakistan)	English	Private
The Express Tribune (Pakistan)	English	Private/*New York Times* partnership
The Daily Star (Bangladesh)	English	Private

The Financial Express (Bangladesh)	English	Private
The Guardian (Nigeria)	English	Private
Vanguard (Nigeria)	English	Private
24sata.hr (Croatia)	Croatian	Private
Index.hr (Croatia)	Croatian	Private
Klix.ba (B&H)	Bosnian	Private
Dnevni avaz (avaz.ba) (B&H)	Bosnian	Private
Kurir.rs (Serbia)	Serbian	Private
Blic.rs (Serbia)	Serbian	Private
Rossiiskaya Gazeta (Russia)	Russian	State-owned
Argumenty i Fakty (Russia)	Russian	Private
Izvestia (Russia)	Russian	Private
RIA (Russia)	Russian	State-owned
European Truth (Ukraine)	English, Ukranian	Other
Zerkalo Nedeli (Ukraine)	Russian	Private
Liga.net (Ukraine)	Russian	Private
The Star (South Africa)	English	Private
Business Day (South Africa)	English	Private
The Citizen (South Africa)	English	Private
Independent Online (South Africa)	English	Mixed
Sowetan (South Africa)	English	Private
Sputnik (Armenia)	Russian	State-owned
Aravot (Armenia)	Russian	Private

Haqqin.az (Azerbaijan)	Russian	NGO "For Human Rights"
Kaspiy.az (Azerbaijan)	Russian	Private
Zerkalo.az (Azerbaijan)	Russian	Private
Naviny.by (Belarus)	Russian	Private
Sb.by (Belarus)	Russian	State-owned
Ekho Kavkaza (Georgia)	Russian	Regional version of RFE/RL
Gruzia Online/Aspny.ge(Georgia)	Russian	Private
Kvirispalitra.ge (Georgia)	Georgian	Private
Saarte Haal (Estonia)	Estonian	Private
Postimees (Estonia)	Russian	Private
Delfi (Estonia)	Russian	Private
Lrytas.lt (Lithuania)	Lithuanian	Private
Respublica.lt (Lithuania)	Lithuanian	Private
Delfi (Lithuania)	English	Private
Manila Bulletin (Philippines)	English	Private
Philippines Daily Inquirer (Philippines)	English	Private
Afghanistan Times (Afghanistan)	English	Private
Daily Outlook Afghanistan	English	Private
Tehran Times (Iran)	English	Private
Iran Daily (Iran)	English	Private
The Daily Star (Lebanon)	English	Private
Arab News (Saudi Arabia)	English	Private
Khaleej Times (UAE)	English	Private

Hurriyet.com.tr (Turkey)	Turkish	Private
CNN Türk online (Turkey)	Turkish	Private
Sondakika.com (Turkey)	Turkish	Private
Trtworld.com (Turkey)	English	State-owned

Table 2. Structure of overarching themes and subcategories

Overarching theme	Subcategories
The reputation of the U.S.	Resilience of U.S. democracy
	Weakening international image
Depiction of the event	Labelling of the event
	Description of actors
Underlying causes of the event	Blame
	Historic and metaphorical references
	Race and Racism
Political implications	Implications on international politics
	Implications on domestic politics