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Media Convergence for US-China Competition?
Comparative Case Studies of China Media Group and the U.S. Agency for Global Media

Abstract:
The present study provides a comparative analysis of the media convergence of China Media Group and US Agency for Global Media to illustrate the increasing US-China rivalry in international communication. It yields the following tentative findings: Both have been undergoing rigorous development at the technological and operational levels of convergence to enhance international communication; both are made to show more explicit loyalty to its official ideology, and both have become more monolithic via convergence; both have integrated their broadcasting services for an increasingly integrated market of information and news; both seem to be weaponizing itself against the other to fuel rivalry between the two nation-states rather than deepening mutual understanding and cooperation for mutual good and global good. The two case studies reveal that media convergence has not been able to liberate journalism from nationalistic constraints and transform it into an instrument to spawn new ideas and disseminate high-quality information and news for global public good.

Keywords
Media Convergence, China Media Group, US Agency for Global Media, Comparative Perspective

Introduction

With the transition into the age of hybrid media from the age of mass media since around 2000, media bodies in various countries have been going through a rigorous process of convergence among different media channels consisting of both traditional media and new media. Two most powerful, yet politically and culturally different, and strategically rivaling global powers, China as the largest developing country, and the US as the largest advanced country, are worth being examined as sites for a comparative study of media convergence strategies as the two nations’ strategies for international communication competition. Comparative studies of convergence of media bodies, particularly the ones with a heavy focus or a single focus on international communication controlled or directed by the national governments, could hopefully shed light on the nature of motives behind such convergence. This study has picked China Media Group (CMG), a major radio and TV network owned by the Chinese state and US Agency for Global Media (USAMG), the only radio and TV network owned by the US Government, for a comparative analysis. The former has a heavy focus on international communication and the latter has a single focus on international communication. The authors opine that CMG and USAMG are comparable because both are state-owned and government-controlled and doing such a comparative study under the framework of media convergence can generate some original insights into how state-owned media agencies can enhance the nation-state’s international influence on the other country and increase its global discourse power. The authors believe that the analytical framework of media convergence is well applied in international communication as media technology and international communication is closely related with each other, which could be reflected through magic bullet theory and uses and gratifications theory. From propaganda war during World War II to Voice of America, communication in a modern sense, including television,
internet, social media, and artificial intelligence, matters more due to media convergence rather than technology upgrade on its own. Therefore, it is inevitable that different types of media strength be taken advantage of to maximize the effect of international communication.

What does media convergence mean in contemporary China, a nation-state typically viewed as an authoritarian state against the global liberal regime? To what extent is it similar and different than other countries such as the US which is typically viewed as a leading liberal democracy? The recent birth of CMG is perhaps a most recent achievement of media convergence in contemporary China in the era of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Incidentally, USAGM has been incorporated as a noticeable result of media convergence by the US Government headed by Donald J. Trump almost simultaneously. A comparative analysis of the two cases of media convergence, one in China and the other in the US, would not only reveal similarities and differences in the inner workings of media convergence between these two cases, but also may offer clues to detect an emerging global trend of media convergence as a tool to enhance the international or global impact of the given nation-state’s international communication or discourse power. It would not only reveal strategies deployed by global rivals such as China and the US in competition against each other for global storytelling, but also may warn us against a possible polarization and a divided globalization as result of such media convergence strategies as an instrument for both the US and China to duel against each other.

Literature Review

**Media Convergence**

Literature on media convergence published both in English and Chinese so far seems to be varied and runs in many directions. First, there are scholarly debates about how to standardize the definition of news convergence. Some scholars think that news convergence is mainly about technological development promoted by digital tools such as the combination of traditional media and mobile communications. Others think that storytelling’s fundamental changes should be the core of news convergence (Nilsson, Nuldén, and Olsson, 2001; Dailey, Demo & Spillman, 2005). There are five types of media convergence identified by Gordon (2003), including ownership, tactical, structural, information-gathering, and presentation whereas Kolodzy (2009) points out three different types of media convergence, including technological, economic, and journalistic. Based upon theory of tactics (de Certeau, 1984), it is found that media convergence is closely related with journalistic mindset, social context, and political environment, especially the interaction between state and local media (Yin & Liu, 2014). Some scholars find that there are mainly five stages in the process of news organizations’ convergence. They include “cross-promotion, cloning, copetition, content sharing and full convergence” (Daily, Demo and Spillman, 2005). Sullivan and Jiang (2010) opine that the dynamics of media convergence includes four main steps, i.e.technology, utilization, commercialization, and structure based upon corporate strategy theory and classic diffusion theory. Jenkins (2004) points out nine important aspects for customers and media producers during media convergence process, including “revising audience measurement”, “regulating media content”, “redesigning the digital economy”, etc., and these will have a big impact upon industries, markets, technologies, etc.

**Effects of Media Convergence**

Regarding the effects and impacts brought about by media convergence, some researchers find out that mergers and acquisitions of traditional and news media can facilitate journalism’s convergence process in terms of news production and organization. These scholars provide definitions of news convergence such as “a series of behavior-based activities illustrating the interaction and co-operation stages of staff at newspapers, television stations and online organizations” (Garcia, 2009, p. 286). To be more specific, media
convergence, especially technological convergence, can exert a big impact on a media company’s structure, its business operations, as well as how journalists do their job. This can provide its audience unique values by closing the divide between managers and reporters, between web people and news people, and between the news department and the advertising department (Huang and Heider, 2007). Jenkins (2004) argues that media convergence in cultural studies is not only about technological shifts, but also a process linking and altering the relationship between all kinds of media, markets, industries, etc. The convergence procedure can represent negotiations and balance of media power and reshaping of media economy.

In the current digital age, news production done by either merged or non-merged media companies has been influenced by media convergence, technological convergence, and organizational convergence; such influence can change professional news practices and news genre development on different media platforms; media convergence can also be studied in its content convergence and role convergence (Huang, Davison, and Shreve, 2006; Erdal, 2007). Erdal (2007) points out that media convergence can be viewed as a melting process of information technologies as well as cultural and social convergence regarding cross-media communication and production, making news content sharing among different media platforms much easier. Media convergence is not only about the integration of technology and network platforms, but also about combination of services and markets through horizontal and vertical mergers and acquisitions of information industries and different business sectors (Chon, Choi, Barnett, Danowski & Joo, 2003).

For different types of media convergence, internet-television convergence is a prevalent strategic alliance in the U.S. in the early 21st century. During the alliance procedure, internet firms play a key role in providing knowledge-based resources while television provides property-based resources and the two are mutually complementary (Liu and Chan-Olmsted, 2003). In China, newspaper-Web and television-Web are most prevalent media convergence forms (Zhang, 2012). Strategic alliances between media and telecommunications companies are formed among several companies with the same goal of achieving business advantages, integrating corporate culture, and sharing risks through a combination of operational functions. Besides, corporate mergers and acquisitions are different from consolidation in that the former only allows the survival of one corporation (Chan-Olmsted, 1998). Regarding driving forces of media convergence in China, there are macro level factors such as regulatory boundaries, market competition, information technology, and meso-level factors such as state subsidies, sales of data, advertising, etc., leading to the widening gap between central-level and local-level news sites in media convergence (Zhang, 2012).

International Communication

Media convergence is important for China to strengthen its international communication and China’s international communication development also sheds light on its media convergence. From the China side, China Global Television Network (CGTN) has two main aims to achieve, i.e. embracing inclusive and open attitudes to show a panoramic and diverse China, and building a community with a shared future for mankind; the establishment of CMG after converging China Central Television, China National Radio and China Radio International would further strengthen China’s international communication capabilities based upon integrated communication and user-oriented strategies (Li & Wu, 2018). During the Covid-19 pandemic, China has applied four main strategies to enhance their security and protect their reputation to build both a positive China image and a slippage image of the U.S. on the global stage (Cull, 2022). The strategies include: (1) China portrays itself combating against the pandemic successfully. (2) China defines the other—the U.S., as a failure through the rhetorical hostility between China and the U.S. as well as disinformation and rumor.
circulation online. (3) China engages Japan and South Korea through their medical aid gifts sent to China and these gifts also contain rhetorical signals of friendship and good feeling. (4) China applies the strategy of multilateral partnership and cooperation with other countries and some international organizations, especially the WHO. Zhao (2020) also confirms that China’s state actors have provided a clear “us vs. U.S.” picture during the Covid-19 pandemic, which could influence global power dynamics. Besides, China’s state media, including People’s Daily, Xinhua News, CGTN, tend to compete with the U.S. global media on social media platforms such as Twitter. It is found that Chinese state media on Twitter mainly focus upon the reports on Chinese top leaders and what they have achieved and try to increase its influence by actively releasing tweets and retweets while the U.S. media enjoy more influence in news agenda setting (Nip & Sun, 2018). By comparing users of Weibo and Twitter, Deng and Yang find that Twitter users show more interest about the impact of Covid-19 on society’s science, technology, and economic development, and many Twitter accounts belong to political leaders and opinion leaders; whereas Weibo users are more concerned about public health, and information release is controlled by the government and state media (Deng & Yang, 2021).

**Portrayal of China in U.S. Media**

From the U.S. side, some scholars argue that the national discourse of the U.S. news media and their political rhetoric has depicted China as an exotic enemy other (Ooi & D’Arcangelis, 2017). When facing the national currency valuation squabble between China and the U.S., U.S. political rhetoric titled to paint China as a cheat due to China’s role of currency manipulator and China’s long-time historical image as the Yellow Peril. Regarding the issue of cyber intrusion, U.S. depicts China as a thief due to the security threats posed by China. Besides, the U.S. names China as a lawless bully when the two countries have maritime as well as exclusive economic zone disputes. Given the worsening rivalry between US and China, it is suggested that some academic research institutions and think tanks help promote transnational collaboration networks, including arts and culture networks, apply humanities networks between China and the U.S. through both diplomatic cultural projects on the government level, such as China’s State Administration for Cultural Heritage, as well as some folklore exchange activities (Albro, 2015). The previously dominant and hegemonic role of the U.S. in internet infrastructure, such as search engines, operating systems, browsers, etc. are increasingly tilting toward countries such as China, Europe, Brazil, and so on, indicating that the U.S. internet imperialism is losing its advantages (Winseck, 2017). It is also necessary to note that the development of information and communication technologies, or technological determinism, have certain limitations in addressing some social and human rights problems due to the political impact of ICTs on the state (Hughes, 2002).

**Public Diplomacy**

It is worth noting that contemporary public diplomacy relies more and more heavily on media convergence. Cull (2008) argues that there are mainly five components of public diplomacy such as “listening”, “advocacy”, “cultural diplomacy”, “exchange diplomacy” and “international broadcasting” (pp.31-32). To be more specific, public diplomacy requires us to listen carefully and systematically in the digital era, make advocacy according to policies and ideas to ensure credibility, facilitate intercultural communication online, and encourage international broadcasting in the era of YouTube. China utilizes international broadcasting to engage in conversations with international audiences by converging media technologies on diverse communication platforms, integrating international communication and politics to build China’s “soft power” (Rawnsley, 2015). Political power, market players and the public are three core interests existing among U.S.- China academic studies regarding public diplomacy. As a kind of soft power and elite-to-elite diplomacy by its nature, public
diplomacy aims to achieve a win-win result through collaboration between government and social actors (Xiong, 2013).

Both public diplomacy and international communication shoulder the responsibility to promote the development of soft power. China adopts a strategy called “borrow a boat to go to the sea” to strengthen international communication, and there are mainly four “boats”, including Chinese state media which need to facilitate external propaganda, non-state media with diverse communication technologies and platforms, foreign correspondents in China, and international media (Sun, 2015). Servaes (2012) finds that current studies of soft power, international communication, and public diplomacy mainly lie in the following areas such as multilateral public diplomacy, conceptualizing media relations, media’s impact upon reality, soft power of global public events and national image building, crisis communication, mass communication and public opinion, and a new public diplomacy. Chinese state-owned media play a major role in leading state-initiated public diplomacy through “relationship building and key participants network”, “public debates and participant-issue network”, “public diplomacy networks and attitude homophily”, and other NGOs and civil actors involving foreign practitioners generally hold negative attitudes towards China (p.3) (Jia & Li, 2020). Moreover, in the digital age, online public diplomacy has also changed audiences from passive message receivers to participants, which further requires the connectivity and exportation of shared values and ideas to establish a positive relationship and image building on the global stage (Zhong & Lu, 2013). Under the guidance of Chinese Communist Party propaganda, ideology and censorship, Chinese social media public diplomacy on Twitter demonstrates its aim to construct an international communication network, build a positive national image and virtual networks with China’s friendly countries as well as other partners, and applies the strategy of timid polyphony with certain restrictions on Twitter (Huang & Wang, 2019). For the U.S., the goal of its public diplomacy is to shape global media’s narrative and program international information networks to maximize its strategic interest and achieve its foreign policy objectives (Hayden, 2013). The way U.S. news frames China does impose a negative impact upon how Americans see China, and it leads to the fact that Chinese government initiates public relations campaigns across the globe against the smears led by the US media (Wei, Lo & Golan, 2017).

Scholars also explore significant implications of media convergence and raise questions such as: Who benefits from convergence and who opposes it? Academic research shows that although multiplatform news reporting is the dominant way for future news production, media companies are the biggest beneficiaries of media convergence while many news editors do not think that media convergence is beneficial to the news professionals and the public; the quality of multimedia work has been questioned since content demonstrated on a particular media platform may not be appropriate on another (Quinn, 2004; Huang, Davison, and Shreve, 2006). Some scholars argue that news convergence does not bring as much benefit as expected based on case studies of BBC newsroom development (Cottle and Ashton, 1999). They think that the pressures caused by media convergence on news practitioners tend to be much more in comparison with benefits brought about by multi-skilled and multi-media working practices. Changes of public broadcasting have four processes which include “convergence”, “globalization”, “privatization”, and “neoliberal thinking”, and technological and economic convergence might pose great challenges to the current public broadcasting model (Syvertsen, 2003, p.160). Both journalists and publishers need to find a good way to balance between telling audiences truths behind the story and making profits and gathering funds for news on different platforms (Quinn, 2004).
Major Research Gaps in Literature
Despite the multi-directionality of the literature as shown above, the past studies, especially studies published in English, seem to focus mostly on the convergence of media for profit in the West. The goal or purpose of such studies of media convergence, falling under the paradigm of media industry, is to enhance media influence and increase profit. However, there is a bare minimum of literature systematically touching upon media convergence and its relationship with public diplomacy, and international communication. The above literature shows that no comparative studies on the convergence of flagship national media bodies as strategic tools of international communication and public diplomacy employed by national governments such as Chinese Government and US Government have been found. Therefore, it needs to be pointed out that most media convergence centers on technical aspects. The existing literature does not define the goal of media convergence, lacks deep exploration of its nature and does not categorize different types of media convergence regarding different media types, including international communication media such as government-owned media like CMG and USAGM (VOA).

Yet, a critical comparative study of these two incommensurate, incompatible yet comparable global media bodies could offer a unique angle in gauging into and diagnosing the current structure and dynamics of US-China competition. Therefore, the following research questions are posed to address the gaps of research identified in the literature synthesized above:

(1) What does media convergence of state-owned/government-owned internationally oriented media bodies look like? How (similarly and differently) have Chinese Government and the US Government conducted media convergence as illustrated by CMG and USAGM respectively?

(2) What can be done to turn these media bodies from the mode of fueling rivalry through international communication to the mode of deepening mutual understandings and facilitating cooperation between the two countries if they are found to have been driving US-China rivalry and heightening global tensions?

Methodology and Theoretical Framework
The present study employs a comparative case study method infusing online ethnographic skills of data and information gathering. According to Knight (2001), a case study refers to “a rigorous, detailed, spatially bounded, temporally limited description and analysis of an event, process, place, or community intended by the researcher to exemplify a more general insight, principle, or theory”, and comparative study aims to explore “similarities revealed in different situations or cases sharing some common element(s) while differing in others” (p.7040). It can be well applied in studying newsroom convergence under its relatively complex context by relying upon records, interviews, and other sorts of documents (Erdal, 2011; García-Avilés, Kaltenbrunner & Meier, 2014). Case study is an ideal method for researchers to answer “how” and “why” questions and it generally includes single case, single case with embedded units, and multiple-case studies (Baxter & Jack, 2010). It has been identified that there are a series of different types of case study including explanatory, descriptive, exploratory, intrinsic, collective, and instrumental ones, and case study analysis techniques also consist of categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, explanation building, cross-case synthesis, pattern matching, logic models, time-series analysis, and so on (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Moreover, comparative analysis is important as it points out similarities and differences among research actors, and comparative analysis avoids excessively emphasizing unique features existing in the single case study (Gilboa, 2008). Therefore, in this study, we apply the method of case studies to USAGAM and CMG in exploring differences and similarities between the two and combine explanatory, exploratory and
descriptive case study techniques to answer how they conduct media convergence in the era of digital media and why they demonstrate different results of media convergence. The authors also follow a “structured focused comparison” proposed by George (2019) including time, purpose, media, government, public diplomacy instrument to do comparative case studies.

There are three typical theoretical models in international communication and public diplomacy studies, i.e., the Basic Cold War model, the Domestic PR model, and the Nonstate Transnational model (Gilboa, 2008). The Basic Cold War model is generally used in rivaling countries and is weaponized with information and propaganda campaigns. This model is mainly used in global national image building and public attitude shaping to pursue an advantageous position in global ideological battle fields. Different from the Basic Cold War model, the Domestic PR model relies upon local public relations firms, support groups and lobbyists to achieve its desired goals. Strategic public diplomacy is one example emerging from the Domestic PR model. The Nonstate Transnational mode integrates a wide range of actors including NGOs, activity groups and relevant individuals and promotes public diplomacy through international media agencies and networks. Among these three models, the Basic Cold War model fits well in our research, but it lacks a more comprehensive perspective to link different actors. The cascading activation model proposed by Entman (2004) integrates media, international communication, policy, public opinion all together. Cascading activation model is a top-down model originally examining how information flowing from the administration level (White House/State/Defense) to other elites (congressional members/experts/ex-officials) to media (journalists/news organizations) to news frames (framing words and images) to the public (Polls). It aims to explore how news media influence public diplomacy and foreign policy. Therefore, in this paper, we use a theoretical framework combining the Basic Cold War model and the cascading activation model.

We have selected USAGM and CMG as two cases of media convergence for international communication for the following reasons: First, the US and China are two most powerful countries in the world which exemplify the current global status of media convergence. Second, we have chosen the two media bodies as both are state-owned and both are major tools of international communication to advance the agenda of its own state respectively. Finally, the two media bodies are compatible in size and comparable in function. Description and analysis of media convergence of these two cases is conducted at the following three levels: the first level is of materials and instruments based on the development of new media techniques; the second level is of business operations; and the third level is of ideological convergence (Ding, 2011). Both the American case of media convergence and the Chinese case of media convergence are analyzed at the above levels in comparison and contrast to shed light on the structure and dynamics of interaction between the two superpowers.

Case Studies of Media Convergence: CMG vs. USAGM
In this section, we would like to do a comparative analysis of media convergence in China and the U.S. based on the development of CMG and the USAGM. The description and analysis of each of the two cases is done with the above review of literature as the backdrop and at the following four levels respectively, including technological, organizational, ideological and policy levels.
Media convergence in China has made big strides in recent years, especially during 2018 when CCTV, China National Radio, and CRI were consolidated into China Media Group (CMG). Traced back to these three TV and radio stations’ historical development, the birth of CMG has come a long way. CCTV was established in 1958 as Beijing TV station, and its key program *Xinwen Lianbo* (meaning the News Hour) began its broadcast on air in 1976. China Network Television began broadcasting in 2009 on multi-terminal platforms including network television, IP television, mobile television, and internet television. It covers more than 190 countries across the globe. Since 2016, CGTN, as an overseas branch of CCTV, has been in operation with a clear objective to promote international communication in the form of a TV station, social media platform, and a video news agency all in one. CGTN opened its channel not only on domestic social media platforms, but also on major social media overseas such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. Besides the headquarters of CGTN located in Beijing, China, it has also set up CGTN America in Washington DC (established in 2012), CGTN Africa in Nairobi, Kenya (also established in 2021, and CGTN Europe in London, UK (launched in October 2019).

Central People’s Broadcasting Station started its broadcasting in 1940. It has changed its name to the “Voice of China” since 2004. It is the most influential and authoritative radio station in China. CRI, used to be called the Yan’an Xinhua Radio Station, currently uses 65 different languages to broadcast news almost globally 24 hours a day. The convergence of these three TV and radio stations has facilitated the incoming era of All Media, and the concept of “Central Kitchen” in media convergence has been invented and implemented with the basic principle of “one source of news collection, diverse ways of news production”. Media convergence of these three major Chinese media combining television, radio, and online media sources, is intended to enhance its multi-platform communication capability, multi-channel coverability, and public credibility of new media. In the following, we will analyze CMG media convergence from the perspective of technological development, organization, policy-making, and ideological guidance.

Technology Level of Media Convergence
CMG is under direct ideological guidance by CPC’s Department of Publicity and is placed administratively and logistically under the purview of the State Council. The founding of CMG was officially announced in Beijing, China on March 21, 2018. As CGTN reports: “The CMG now comes under the Publicity Department and is tasked with the enhancement of China's international broadcasting capacities and promoting the convergence of the three platforms.” (CGTN, 2018). For media convergence based upon the case of CCTV, it should be noted that convergence has not only occurred among different media platforms, but it is also illustrated by CCTV’s partnership with some other private business organizations or some other private short-video entertainment platforms such as TikTok which many young people are addicted to. CCTV’s media convergence has also been collaborating with some business platforms, such as Taobao and Alipay in 2020 since the occurrence of the pandemic of COVID-19.

Organization Level of Media Convergence
CMG, made up of CCTV in Chinese and CGTN in foreign languages and the Central People’s Broadcasting Station consisting of CNR and CRI in foreign languages, is presided by Mr. Shen Haixiong, a member of the Communist Party of China Central Commission and Vice-Minister of CPC’s Department of Publicity. Shen served as a seasoned head journalist of Xinhua News Agency station in Zhejiang Province for about a year during Xi Jinping’s
tenure as Party Secretary of Zhejiang Province in 2003-2007. He seems to have followed Mr. Xi to Shanghai as a head journalist of Xinhua News Agency Station in Shanghai when Mr. Xi moved to Shanghai as its Party Secretary in 2007. Shen later served as “Propaganda Czar” of Guangdong Province (2015-2018). Currently, Shen specifically serves as founding President & Editor-Chief of CMG and CCTV/CGTN as well as Secretary of its CPC Party Group. Before the consolidation, CCTV and China National Radio-cum CRI were separate state-run media bodies of equal status—the bureau level, under the supervision of PRC’s National Radio and Television Administration, a cabinet branch of the State Council.

Today, CMG, a state-owned media enterprise, accorded the vice-ministerial power by the CPC Central Commission, reports directly both to CPC’s Department of Publicity and the State Council while following the market principles as much as possible. So, to a certain extent, this consolidation can be viewed as a strategy to not only converge radio and TV and integrate domestic journalism and global journalism, but also streamline bureaucracy, slash cost, better meet the market demands and reap the desirable social effects in the name of Voice of China (VOC) (Jia, 2018). However, as this convergence is still at its initial stage, CMG does not seem to have developed its own official website yet. CCTV, CGTN, CNR and CRI still run their websites separately with each acknowledging its affiliation and subordination to CMG.

Policy Level of Media Convergence
From the perspective of national policy on propaganda guidance, President Xi has instructed journalists to facilitate media convergence of traditional media and new media so as to actively set agendas and enhance CPC and the Chinese Government’s capability for public opinion. In 2014, media convergence has been elevated as a national strategy, and Instructions about Promoting Media Convergence of Traditional Media and New Media has been officially published (Xinwen Lianbo, 2014). This document has identified the direction of the future development, objectives, and requirements of the media convergence task, such as the construction of several large media corporations and a globally impactful modern communication system. In the subsequent years, two largest media news agencies of China, namely People’s Daily and Xinhua News Agency have released their separate online apps to provide audiences better experience and more convenient exposure to news reports. Furthermore, in 2019, President Xi emphasized the significance of “All Media”, especially “the Four Wholes Media” (siquan meiti) on the dimensions of whole-time, whole-technology, whole-society, and whole-ecology (Jiang, 2019) to enhance the power of the state propaganda.

Ideology Level of Media Convergence
Last, but not least, the convergence and consolidation of CCTV and CNR-cum CRI into CMG can be also viewed as an effort to consolidate CPC’s embedded ideology and unify China’s voice via VOC. This convergence is consistent with, and functions as an inevitable result of the consolidation of power at the top of CPC and Chinese Government with Xi as the core of CPC. In most likelihood targeting against this effort of development and globalization, particularly the effort to globally communicate about China by CPC and Chinese Government, US President Donald J. Trump branded Chinese media as “Chinese state-driven influence operations” such as CGTN America, a global arm of CMG, as foreign mission and forced it to have been registered as such under US Department of Justice (Wong, 2020). This act empowered the Trump administration to limit and curb, monitor, and counteract its influences in the US as a kind of so-called “sharp power” (National Endowment for Democracy, 2017). The Biden administration insists upon the role of USAGM to conduct news reports and spread U.S. values in countries with limited press
resources and lack of freedom of press. Facing the damages to both the economy and the U.S. global image as well as the growing pandemic of disinformation brought about by both the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of Trumpian populism, USAGM would play a more important role in advancing the Biden strategy of US global alliance building and international communication by ensuring “objective and balanced” reporting.

The special significance accorded to media convergence of CMG is most recently illustrated by the establishment of The Center for Convergence Development (CCD) by CMG on August 17, 2020. CCD is said to play the role of CMG’s in-house think tank to navigate this media submarine into the deep and blue waters of the new media oceans, according to CMG President Shen Haixiong. Shen assigns the following three tasks for CCD to accomplish: 1). focusing on designing and creating “the people-centered” programs; 2) creating incentives for media big Vs and viral programs such as direct broadcast programs; 3) cultivating and recruiting a team of politically trustworthy and globally competitive personnel with special talent on convergence. CCD is not only intended to be the brain trust for strategizing and deepening CMG convergence, but also for meta-convergence in that it would study and reflect on past convergence thinking and actions so that convergence can be revolutionized in thinking and action. After all, CMG’s goal is to make itself a global brand on par with top global media brands such as CNN or BBC. The founding of CCD is apparently charged to strategize this mission.

**U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) as a Result of Convergence**

USAGM consists of the following five media organizations, according to its official website: Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Office of Cuba, Radio Free Asia, and Middle East Broadcasting Networks, covering all the continents around the world except Africa and the Pacific Region. “The mission of USAGM is to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy.” USAGM was founded on August 12, 2020, due to a larger effort of modernizing and even globalizing the functions of Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) which was formed on August 11, 1995. The founding of USAGM took place less than five months (144 days) after the founding of CMG in China. Given the fact that the Trump administration had already branded China and Russia as “competitors” or “a rivals” in its National Security Strategy issued on December 18, 2017, this act can be seen as an effort by Trump to outdo China and Russia in its increasingly ideological/propaganda war against China and Russia via global media (White House, 2017).

President Biden has inherited and deepened President Trump’s ideological war against China by building a global democracy alliance. According to Summit for Democracy Summary of Proceedings released by the White House (2021), there are three main tasks under global democracy alliance: (1). countering against authoritarianism and strengthening the power of democracy; (2). cracking down upon corruption; (3). promoting human rights around the globe. A perusal of the VOA website at www. vocchinese.com reveals that unsurprisingly, such themes are closely covered and amplified by the Chinese branch of VOA.

**Organization Level of Media Convergence**

In similarity to PRC’s state-owned media bodies, US Government-owned media agencies went through many structural changes as well, according to the official website of USAGM. VOA began its broadcasting in February 1942; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty went on the air on July 4, 1950, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting with its Radio and TV Martí started broadcasting in 1985 and 1990, respectively; Radio Free Asia debuted on March 12, 1996; and the Arabic-language stations Alhurra Television and Radio Sawa of the Middle East
Broadcasting Networks were launched in 2004. In 1990, the first three broadcasting services began their management convergence within the newly created Bureau of Broadcasting under the US Information Agency. The first Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) was sworn in on August 11, 1995, during the Clinton administration. On August 22, 2018, BBG was upgraded to USAGM under the Trump administration.

**Ideology Level of Media Convergence**

VOA, as a major branch and gold brand of USAGM, plays a significant role in the current U.S. broadcasting media system. Statistics show that VOA broadcasts its news in more than 40 different languages, and its global audience reaches around 280 million people per week (Widakuswara, 2020). As an internationally influential news agency serving as a tool of major public diplomacy for the US government, USAGM mainly targets overseas audiences and aims to enhance U.S. soft power around the world. To enhance the credibility of U.S.’ international communication, The US Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, known as the Smith-Mundt Act, was modified, and the Obama administration signed into law the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act which went into effect on July 2, 2013. One of its eye-catching changes include allowing news broadcasted by U.S. news agencies to be received by its domestic audiences. This also demonstrates the Obama administration’s arguably smart governance strategy to integrate the domestic and global markets of ideas and information to make its international communication appear less propagandistic. According to USAGM, previously called Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), its international broadcast services basically include VOA, Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia, Office of Cuba Broadcasting, etc. USAGM has upgraded and sharpened its focus on international communication, which drew our attention in our efforts to study media convergence and its relationship with international communication.

However, USAGM also faces public criticism, particularly from the right-wing media such as Fox News and Breitbart News in that both allege that VOA, a major media channel of USAGM, promotes foreign propaganda using money from American taxpayers, and it does not speak for its citizens in comparison to its initial promise to “tell America’s story and present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively” (White House Foreign Policy, 2020). President Trump is also dissatisfied with VOA since Democratic Party is said to always set up obstacles to prevent him from establishing USAGM as the parent agency supervising VOA with which President Trump could control media voice, promote his isolationist and unilateralistic ideas and policies, and combat and counteract the media reports criticizing his policies as the “fake news”.

**Policy Level of Media Convergence**

Even though VOA faces great pressure from the Trump administration, some scholars claim that VOA has done its best to maintain objective reporting and is seen as a role model for free press (Cowan and Glassman, 2020). This is also confirmed by other media experts who list three major missions of VOA as follows: 1) producing news rather than doing propaganda; 2) delivering “a full and fair picture of American life”; 3) and promoting public diplomacy in its articulation and facilitation of the discussions on U.S. foreign policy (Bayles and Gedmin, 2020). However, since President Trump appointed Michael Pack, a conservative film maker, as CEO of USAGM, with its news reaching 350 million audience members in 61 languages, in June 2020, Pack started a rash of high-level dismissals at the international broadcasts it oversees” (Laura, 2020) which threatened the objective reporting style these media have maintained over the past decades.

What is even more disconcerting is that USAGM reportedly began to “transform the agency into an ideological mouthpiece to promote Donald Trump in advance of the
The Guardian quotes Eliot Engel, the chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, as saying, while documenting several initial attempts by USAGM broadcasters to explicitly promote Trump’s reelection campaign messages (Borger, 2020). Since President Biden moved into the White House, he removed Michael Pack, a veteran VOA journalist and USAGM CEO, and Robert Reilly, former VOA director (from December 2020 to January 2021) named by Trump in 2021, and appointed Kelu Chao as USAGM CEO in 2021, a seasoned Chinese American journalist. Biden’s appointment of Chao illustrates that Biden has put China on top of his priority list in waging a media and ideological war against global “autocracy”.

Technology Level of Media Convergence

VOA has also undergone its media convergence, especially in technological development. Back in the late 1980s, VOA changed from a single broadcasting media platform to a multi-media platform with the rapid development of technology, such as satellite transmission technology. VOA received generous funding from US Government to upgrade its digital broadcasting system, including upgrading and completing radio transmission facilities in developing countries such as Morocco, Kuwait, and Botswana, etc. It became the first global broadcasting company to deliver radio programs by using satellite circuit in the history of mankind (VOA History, 2017). Moreover, VOA added television service into its initial broadcasting system and opened regional television programs broadcasted in Cuba, Afghanistan, Europe, and China, which could increase its global impact. It merged the broadcasting and television services to launch one-hour Mandarin telecast “China Forum TV” as the first media convergence product in September 1994 and used satellite systems to introduce interactive television and built its sister agency WORLDNET Television and several interactive broadcast connecting studios. The successful launch of “China Forum TV” and VOA’s Arabic Branch’s released simulcast program “Dialogue with the West” facilitated the speed to build TV studio 47, and launch news simulcasts in Farsi, Arabic, Mandarin, Serbian, and so on. All these illustrate the typical media convergence of VOA development combining TV and radio together (VOA History, 2017).

Internet technology grew rapidly in the 1990s, and thus created opportunities for media convergence in the incoming new era. To better manage and consolidate U.S.’ programming services, VOA, WORLDNET Television, Film Service, and Radio and TV Marti have been regarded as one cohesive network under the control of U.S. Information Agency in 1991. Even though VOA faced challenges of freely conducting international communication from the Smith-Mundt Act which prohibits domestic news dissemination of international broadcasting news from reaching overseas audiences, VOA was the first global broadcasters in the world which provided internet news service in as early as 1994. In 2004, satellite television service Worldnet Television and Film Service were merged into VOA to not only reduce costs, but also attract an increasing number of TV audiences. In 2010, VOA’s newly updated comprehensive net site www.VOANews.com came online with its branching radio stations of different languages. Up to now, according to its official statistics, VOA has “50 radio studios and 14 television studios for live broadcasts and for producing programs” (VOA History, 2017). VOA has now provided its audiences news from multiple platforms in the era of media convergence, including radio, TV, official news websites and social media portals such as Facebook and YouTube.

Comparison and Contrast

In putting these two media convergence cases of China’s CMG and USAGM into mutual relief, we find that despite the vast ideological, political, and cultural differences between
China and the US, they share similarities in many aspects of media convergence such as follows:

Firstly, both nations’ media described in the cases above are state-owned or government-directed, despite that China’s media bodies are predominantly public in partnership with some private commercial media such as Alibaba and Tencent, illustrating minority market shares of commercial media in the Chinese society. The US’ media bodies are predominantly private and commercial with a minority share of the government-ownership. In this case, USAGM is under as such control by the US Government while CMG is under the control of Chinese Government.

Secondly, both emerged in the context of war. PRC’s media started out in Yan’an, a cradle of CPC revolution in Shaanxi, China where CPC was leading a revolution to overthrow the Nationalist Government of Republic of China and fight against the Japanese invaders. VOA, the first broadcasting service of the US, began to assist the US in its fight against Nazism during the World War II for the first time.

Thirdly, both evolved and grew in bureaucratic structure as each government saw fit in the given evolving contexts and periods of time each found itself in respectively. Such an evolution and growth were both muddy and zigzag, even tumultuous at times, according to the descriptions of the two cases above.

Fourthly, both have been adapting to the emergence of new information and communication technologies and producing their content based on convergence media platforms such as radio, television, social media, and the internet, etc. On one hand, nowadays, daily news previously presented on traditional media such as newspapers now reach targeted global audiences in the languages of the targeted audiences through mobile news apps and social media websites in real time. On the other hand, news content can be updated all the time and therefore can be produced much more efficiently.

Fifthly, both are cases of media development to enhance international communication, with CMG to a more limited extent than some of the broadcasting services of USAGM. Different media platforms employed by the media services of each government cater to the needs of a broader range of audiences of diverse backgrounds around the world.

Sixthly, both seem to go global or go further global and set to compete for mutual influence and seek to enhance its own nation’s international or global influence. While the US has been going global for the past 77 years with its government-controlled broadcasting services to propagate its own views of freedom and democracy since its inception with the start of VOA in February 1943, China’s state-owned broadcasting services began to add an arm of international communication as an official strategy in the name of VOC and CGTN on March 21, 2018 to tell China stories to the world. In our judgement, the elevation and augmentation of BBG to USAGM only 144 days after China’s inauguration of CMG is no coincidence. It clearly suggests that it is the USG’s move to strengthen its international communication to maintain its absolute superior status in the global media arena above and beyond globally rising players such as RT, Al Jazeera, and mostly recently the birth of China’s CMG/VOC.

Lastly, both the media agencies seem to have been personally branded to some extent respectively by their own head of state. Both are accorded special significance as a major tool to help set each head of state’s own political and policy agendas respectively as both the heads of state take communication, and consequentially self-image and national image especially seriously. While the birth of CMG could have been motivated by President Xi who has been trying to elevate China from a rich China to a powerful China, the establishment of USAGM could have been motivated by Trump’s MAGA.

However, China and the U.S. have different political and media systems. Therefore, they have different objectives of media convergence in some ways. The establishment of
CMG as an achievement of the media convergence described in the case study above aims to both help consolidate the voice and power of the CPC in governing an increasingly diverse Chinese society and let more global audience hear China’s voice and China stories in an increasingly divided and antagonistic world. In contrast, media convergence in VOA/USAGM aims to effectively spread the liberal ideology of the US (with exception of Trump attempting to shift it to his populist ideology) and set its global agendas in a world in which the US increasingly finds itself face an increasingly skeptical audience with the US perceived as a declining superpower.

Furthermore, in the age of US-China rivalry, we find that CMG defended against the attacks on China by key cabinet members of the Trump administration and to a lesser extent the Biden-Harris administration. We also find that CMG was fending off the downpour of negativity on China and CPC by the mainstream predominantly private American media selectively echoed with a sharper focus by the Chinese program of VOA targeting the Chinese audience. For example, CCTV, CMG’s broadcasting services in Chinese with the domestic audience as its target audience, has branded US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo who arguably unfairly criticized China and CPC as “the public enemy of humanity”. This branding reportedly made the Secretary feel the pinch. CGTN, CMG’s global arm of broadcasting services in 61 foreign languages, on the other hand, also sharpened its focus on each of its targeted audiences. For example, CGTN in English not only runs a variety of news programs such as English 24, but also business and culture programs. Its public affairs fora such as the noted The Point with Liu Xin and CGTN Opinions offer pointed opinions, refuting or correcting the arguably unfair criticisms against China or CPC by both opinionated remarks of politicians, opinion leaders such as news anchors and journalists predominantly from the US and to some extent a few other US allies. Most importantly, CGTN has been telling the world stories about major accomplishments in China during the recent years such as a nation-wide campaign against poverty reduction, the Belt & Road Initiative, China’s combat against COVID-19, and China’s global assistance in the fight against COVID-19, and so on.

The Trump administration, however, was attempting to use USAGM to promote Trumpism, consisting of his economic nationalism, white supremacy, anti-China, and anti-communist Cold War agendas. While the evidence for such action was not omnipresent, it was growing in USAGM’s effort to support Trump’s reelection campaign though its broadcasting services since his recent appointment of Michael Pack as its CEO (Welna, 2020). Obviously, if Trump eventually had won his bid for a second term of the presidency through a recount of the votes and lawsuits, Trump would not have been too shy to turn USAGM as his war machine to trumpet Trumpism globally and trumpet a cold or hot war against China. In June 2021 when the G-7 Summit was held in Milan, Italy, US President Biden called for taking a more tough and aggressive stance towards China, especially regarding issues of human rights and global trade and announced to the public his strategy of “Build Back Better World” (B3W), an infrastructure financing initiative to rival against China’s BRI. Such remarks by President Biden and his efforts to build the anti-China global democracy alliance were found to have been reported and amplified by the Chinese Branch of VOC at www.vocchinese.com at the time.

To illustrate how USAGM operates, especially since Trump’s appointment of Pack as the new CEO of USAGM, the authors offer a brief evaluation of the news programs of VOA in Chinese. VOA started its Chinese broadcasting services to China (first Republic of China then RPC) since 1942. While CMG’s CGTN reaches its targeted audience in 61 languages, VOA broadcasts news in 47 languages. Explicit about its ideological underpinning, VOA Chinese is anti-communist in general and anti-CPC specifically. Its news coverage tends to propagate the dominant ideology of the US consisting of values such as democracy, human
rights, rule of law and the like, showcasing the US as “the shining city on the hill”. Given its mission, VOA Chinese programs have consistently been created with this ideology in mind. For example, its signature dialogue programs such as “Wetalk on Current Affairs” (Shishi Dajiatan) and “Heated Exchanges” (Jiaodian Duihua) would almost always invite pro-liberal scholars or anti-CPC political activists and Chinese dissidents in exile, consistently running counter to its charter (U.S. Agency of Global Media, 2020; U.S. Agency of Global Media, 2020) which emphasizes the principles of VOA reporting as “accurate, objective, and comprehensive”, “balanced” and ‘responsible”. Since President Trump took control of USAGM in June 2020, it is found that VOC Chinese programs had begun to cover more on the decoupling acts of US-China relations initiated by the Trump-Pence-Pompeo corollary in a more affirmative tone in more and more instances. Obviously, Trumpism was on the rise then and discernably endorsed by VOA in its reporting perhaps under the influence of President Trump’’s appointee Michael Pack, the CEO of USAGM since June 2020.

In consistency with the Biden administration’s strategy to compete against China, VOA in Chinese and USAGM in general seem to take more aggressive and even hostile coverage on China with its most recent coverage of China on Biden’s Asia trip. During Biden’s Asia trip in spring 2022, VOA has released four reports on its official website, including two video-based reports titled with “Biden Ends Asia Trip with Warning to China” (Widakuswara, 2022) and “On Asia Trip, Biden Takes Tough Stance on China” (Gallo, 2022), and two text-based reports titled with “What to Expect from Biden’s Trip to Asia” (Widakuswara, 2022) and “Biden Ends Asia Trip with Warning Seen as Signal to China” (Widakuswara, 2022).

Discussion and Conclusion

Through a comparative study of the convergence of the two state-owned media under direct control of each of its government, the authors have found that media convergence is a strategy to assemble all available resources, be it technological, operational, and ideological/intellectual, to set up agendas more effectively, achieve more influence and power over its rivals or competitors in winning the hearts and minds of the target audience in the international context and the global arena of information and ideas. The logic lies in that the punch of a convergence media is more impactful. However, it may run the risk of homogenizing ideas, promoting unilateral thinking, and trumping diversity in news reports and in interpreting world affairs. Especially given the fact that these two cases involve the two most powerful countries in the world, there is a likelihood that the self-empowerment by each would not only run the risk of groupthink, but also run the risk of creating animosity between the two nations and peoples. As a matter of fact, the growing mutual animosity between the US and China is already happening, partly due to the polarization and dueling function each nation’s media have been playing towards each other. Media convergence may be contributing to such polarization as evidenced by the two case studies above. Therefore, it is the authors’ hope that both the countries and indeed other countries as well, should rethink and go beyond media convergence in making their own media go global. The survival of the world of sanity as we know it, depends more and more on a shared future. Converged media bodies such as CMG and USAGM must go above and beyond national agendas and ideologies, convey good will, learn to cultivate humility, value diversity, report on common challenges of humanity such as pandemics, climate change, control of nuclear weapons and so on in cultivating a shared, livable, and sustainable future for mankind. The time is now or never.

Theoretically speaking, all media agencies need to undergo media convergence, a historically evolving process, for its survival, expansion for international influence. Both USAGM and CMG, for example, are constantly evolving to enhance their international or
global influence respectively. These case studies illustrate that it is important to identify the purpose of media convergence, whether it is for profit, for global public good, or for nationalistic purposes. The authors argue that state-owned media with an agenda for international communication should relax its nationalistic tone and posture, work towards building more mutual understandings, create more global public goods, and contribute to the improvement of the human condition. For different types of international media across the globe, media convergence plays an important role in technological competence among U.S-China public opinion warfare. We believe that media convergence can enhance intercultural understanding on the global stage, achieve more consensus between countries if it is willed. On the contrary, waging propaganda war and fueling more rivalry is not beneficial to both US and China and the entire world. It is hoped that this study, based on the comparative studies of the two cases, constitutes an initiative to create a new theory which may be called “an international communication of media convergence”.

Comparative research on media convergence of state-owned media bodies for the purpose of international communication is a new area of inquiry. Using the inductive method, the present study is an exploratory one putting the US and China into mutual relief. Due to space limitations, perhaps the present study raises more questions than answers. Future studies along this line could gather more in-depth field research data via immersion inside CMG and USAGM to further test the initial findings of this study.
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