

Critical Discourse Analysis of the Portuguese Media's Coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative: The Case of Portuguese Mainstream Media, Público

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Abstract: Since 2013, when the Belt and Road Initiative was proposed by China, this transnational cooperation initiative has attracted a lot of attention and discussion on a global scale. Portugal has been one of the EU countries actively supporting the Belt and Road Initiative and has signed a formal cooperation agreement with China. Coverage of the Belt and Road initiative has become a window into Portugal's attitude and impression of China. This work uses newspaper-based data from Público to deconstruct the attitudes of the main Portuguese media towards the Belt and Road Initiative in terms of language use, discursive practices, and social practices, using content analysis and critical discourse analysis. The results show that Público uses both positive and negative terms in its coverage of the Belt and Road initiative, reflecting a complex attitude towards it. Criticism of the Belt and Road initiative reflects concern that Chinese policies could affect Portugal's national interests, including concerns about human rights and environmental protection, among others. In general, media coverage of the Belt and Road initiative in Portugal has been both approving and supportive, as well as critical and challenging, and this attitude is closely related to Portugal's international policies, economic interests, and social values. Analysis of this coverage provides a better understanding of the complex global impact of international cooperation projects such as the "One Belt, One Road" initiative and the way they are presented in the media of different countries.

Keywords: Belt and Road; Critical discourse analysis; Media discourse; International politics

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1. Introduction

Since China first proposed the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, this transnational cooperation initiative has attracted widespread global attention and debate. The Belt and Road Initiative aims to promote economic cooperation and connectivity between countries along the route, covering a wide range of areas such as infrastructure construction, trade, and cultural exchanges. On the international scene, the mainstream media's coverage of the Belt and Road

Initiative has also provided a rich and diverse picture. Some media praised the driving force and potential of the Initiative, considering that it brings development opportunities to the countries along the route, while others expressed reservations and concerns about possible geopolitical implications and economic risks.

As one of the important links between China and Europe, Portugal has long been interested in the Belt and Road initiative, having signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China in 2018, making it one of the few European countries to sign the Belt and Road co-construction document. Media coverage of the content of the Belt and Road initiative is a window that reflects Portuguese opinion on the initiative. What do the Portuguese media think about China's Belt and Road strategy? Unfortunately, there are fewer studies on the coverage of Belt and Road by the Portuguese media, and some academics have analyzed it from this perspective, but a complete timeline of the dynamics of the process is lacking^[1]. Based on this, this article poses the research question: How does the Portuguese media coverage of the Belt and Road initiative reflect the impression that the Portuguese media have of China?

By understanding the attitudes and tendencies of the Portuguese media, it is possible to gain a better understanding of current international relations and provide a reference for the promotion of transnational cooperation. In this sense, this article takes the Portuguese *Público* as its object of study and carries out a comprehensive analysis and critical study of the discourse of its reports on China's Belt and Road strategy from the introduction of Belt and Road to the present day, to reveal its main points of view and opinions on China's Belt and Road strategy. The study aims to reveal the main points of view and perceptions about China's Belt and Road strategy. In this way, the study responds to the general objective: To analyze the content of *Público*'s coverage of the Belt and Road initiative between 2013 and 2024, to understand the impression that the Portuguese media have of the initiative and China. The specific objectives are: To collect and visualize the texts and trends of *Público*'s coverage over the last 10 years; To apply the established theories to study *Público*'s reporting strategies on the Belt and Road issue; To explore the changes in the frequency, attitudes, and content of Portuguese media coverage of the Belt and Road initiative over a 10-year period and study their possible causes.

The article is structured as follows: Chapter 1 presents the background and purpose of the study and describes the international significance of the Belt and Road Initiative. Chapter 2 details the research methodology used, including critical discourse analysis and the data extraction process. Chapter 3 analyzes the volume and trends of the public's coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative, providing data to support an understanding of the level of media attention. Chapter 4 explores how the coverage shaped public understanding of the initiative through lexical choices and rhetorical strategies. Chapter 5 discusses the discursive practices in the coverage, including the use of intertextuality and quotation, and analyzes their relevance to the socio-political context. Chapter 6 analyzes the coverage from the point of view of social practices and explores how it reflects and influences Portuguese-Chinese relations. The final chapter summarizes the results of the research and discusses its contribution to the study of international journalistic information. Through the progressive development of these chapters, the work reveals the relationship between media coverage and international political and economic dynamics.

2. Methodology

Following the research objectives, the methods used in this study are mainly the content analysis method and the quantitative word frequency analysis method based on the theory of critical discourse analysis. One of the methods of quantitative word frequency analysis is specifically the use of statistical methods to identify patterns

and trends in textual data.

During the data collection phase, this article used the Público website's tagging tool (Search) to define the time period of the study from January 1, 2013 to April 11, 2024. After an experimental search and analysis of the searches, the search terms "a Rota da Seda" ("the Silk Road") "a nova Rota da Seda" ("the new Silk Road") "uma cintura, uma estrada" (Belt and Road) "uma faixa, uma rota" ("one lane, one route") were selected as search terms, which resulted in 46 articles on the Belt and Road as analytical texts to analyze the Portuguese media's perception of the initiative.

The main Portuguese media include Público, Lusa, RTP, Expresso, Diário de Notícias and Correio da Manhã. Público, the source of this article, has repeatedly been among the best-selling newspapers in Portugal, which has a large circulation and reaches a large number of readers ^[2]. In addition, it has already been named European Online Media of the Year ^[3]. Público has a major influence on the social and political sphere in Portugal and Europe. Therefore, using the newspaper as a vehicle is one of the best options for studying the attitudes of the main Portuguese media towards the Belt and Road initiative.

This study mainly adopts the theoretical perspective of critical discourse analysis, which germinated in the late 1970s when Western linguists, represented by Roger Fowler, began to highlight the relationship between language and power ^[4]. Over time, there was a gradual discursive turn in ADC from the 1980s onwards, more concerned with analyzing social practices and combining linguistic analysis with social criticism. During this period, Norman Fairclough proposed, such as describing the various linguistic features of the text, explaining the process of text production, and explaining the dialectical relationship between discursive practice and sociocultural practice, step by step, to explore how discourse is affected by social context, cultural factors and historical conditions ^[5].

Taking into account the systematic nature of Fairclough's three-dimensional framing theory and the compatibility of the present study, this article will draw on this theory to explore the coverage of Belt and Road in Público in three dimensions: at the textual level, to describe its linguistic characteristics in terms of choice of vocabulary, rhetoric, and so on; at the level of discursive practice, to explain the process of generating the text in terms of intertextuality analysis; and at the level of social practice, to interpret the text in the light of current international power and socio-cultural relations. At the level of discursive practice, the process of text generation is explained through the analysis of intertextuality; at the level of social practice, the text is interpreted in the light of current international power and socio-cultural relations.

3. Volume and trends of media coverage

As shown in **Figure 1**, this article statistically analyzes the number of reports on the Belt and Road Initiative in Público. Specifically, between 2016 and 2017, there were only two reports per year, reflecting the fact that the initiative had not yet attracted widespread attention in Portugal. In 2018, the number of reports rose sharply to 19, making it the highest number of reports in recent years. This is mainly because, during the Chairman of the People's Republic of China's visit to Portugal in 2018, several cooperation agreements were signed, some of which involved Portugal's cooperation plans in the economic sector, which attracted a great deal of media attention. In 2019, the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Portugal and China inspired a deepening of Sino-Portuguese relations in the Portuguese media, with the number of reports remaining at a high level. From 2020 to the present, attention to the Belt and Road Initiative continues to decline, reflecting a trend of diminishing importance of the initiative, both in Portugal and internationally.

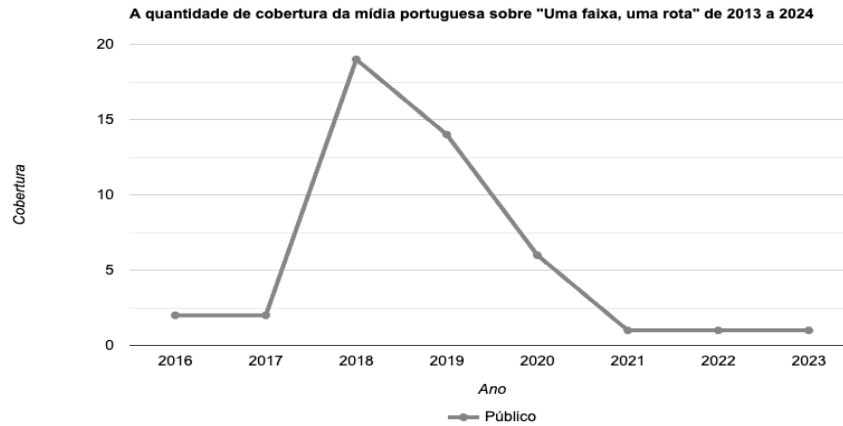


Figure 1. The amount of Portuguese media coverage of Belt and Road from 2013 to 2024.

4. Analysis of the three-dimensional framework of Portuguese media coverage of the Belt and Road project

4.1. Text

4.1.1. Vocabulary selection strategies

The choice of vocabulary is a fundamental aspect of the language use process and plays an important role, especially in discourse ^[6].

According to **Figures 2 and 3**, in addition to “China”, which is directly related to the Belt and Road, countries and regions are also the focus of the Portuguese media. Important countries and regions along the Belt and Road, such as the United States (51 occurrences/word frequency), Asia (30 words), Macau (28 words), Africa (22 words), Russia (18 words), Pakistan (16 words), Spain (10 words), have a word intensity of more than 10 words. The Portuguese media also focused on the economic construction promised or carried out by Belt and Road, regional development, and China’s multilateral relations with the countries that adhere to Belt and Road, as well as a certain attention to leaders.



Figure 2. Heat word cloud graph

| | | | |
|-----------------|-----|------------------|----|
| China | 549 | Agreement | 15 |
| Portugal | 198 | Technique | 15 |
| Country | 154 | Framework | 15 |
| President | 121 | Military | 15 |
| Europe | 97 | Head of state | 14 |
| Economy | 84 | Risks | 14 |
| relationship | 74 | Energy | 17 |
| OneBelt | 64 | District | 13 |
| Beijing | 62 | Communist | 13 |
| USA | 51 | Order | 13 |
| International | 48 | Sines | 12 |
| Chairman | 47 | Prime Minister | 12 |
| Politics | 43 | Anniversary | 12 |
| European Union | 42 | Society | 12 |
| Global | 42 | Benefits | 12 |
| Strategy | 42 | Scope | 12 |
| World | 41 | Antonio | 12 |
| Projects | 40 | Group | 12 |
| Government | 38 | Crisis | 12 |
| Field | 35 | Myanmar | 11 |
| Both countries | 36 | Multilateralism | 11 |
| Plans | 33 | Partners | 11 |
| Company | 33 | Member countries | 10 |
| Infrastructure | 33 | Policy | 10 |
| Asia | 30 | Finance | 10 |
| Problems | 30 | Spain | 10 |
| Lisbon | 29 | Mode | 10 |
| Macau | 28 | Attitude | 10 |
| Leaders | 26 | Business | 10 |
| Aspects | 24 | Atlantic | 10 |
| Forum | 23 | Environment | 10 |
| Route | 22 | History | 10 |
| Africa | 22 | Foreign Policy | 10 |
| Goals | 22 | Representatives | 9 |
| Port | 21 | Invasion | 9 |
| Influence | 21 | Network | 8 |
| Partnerships | 21 | Agency | 8 |
| Memorandum | 20 | Expasion | 8 |
| Allies | 20 | Integration | 8 |
| Markets | 20 | Parliamentary | 8 |
| Human Rights | 19 | Air | 8 |
| Situation | 19 | West | 8 |
| Russia | 18 | India | 7 |
| Debt | 17 | University | 7 |
| Center | 17 | Digital | 7 |
| Stance | 17 | Gold | 5 |
| Institutions | 16 | Useful | 4 |
| Partner | 16 | Free trade | 3 |
| Status | 16 | Worries | 3 |
| State visit | 16 | Mutual benefit | 2 |
| Portuguese-Sino | 16 | Opportunities | 1 |

Figure 3. Keyword frequency statistic

The lexical choice is also closely related to pragmatic function. According to functional linguistics, depending on the purpose and context of language use, users can choose different words to achieve different pragmatic goals. The intensive occurrence of the same/similar vocabulary as a way of describing the same thing aims to emphasize and highlight certain characteristics of the object being modified, thus drawing attention to it ^[7].

In Público's coverage of the Belt and Road initiative, by searching a self-constructed corpus, the study found that, in 2018, coverage of the Belt and Road initiative was repeatedly described using positive terms, such as "complementarity", "mutual benefit", "opportunity", "multilateralism", "free trade", "scientific cooperation", "two-way cooperation", and "global governance." These terms were accompanied by the words "positive", "appreciated", "useful", and "welcome" as feedback. These words conveyed support and recognition of the Belt and Road Initiative as a new opportunity and platform for international cooperation that would help strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation between countries and promote global development.

However, in 2019, the reports featured modifiers with distinctly negative semantic rhymes and similar meanings, such as "distrust", "threat", and "controversy." "Concern", "challenge", and "negative" are intensive and recurrent. They imply a series of negative elements and challenges, including doubts about the true intentions of China's initiatives, as well as concerns about the risks and challenges that some countries may face. The frequent occurrence of these negative qualifiers can lead to a more cautious and skeptical public attitude towards the Belt and Road Initiative.

4.1.2. Analogy and contrast

Teun A. van Dijk, a linguist and expert in discourse analysis, emphasizes the important role of metaphor and analogy in discourse. He points out that metaphors and analogies can help people understand and perceive information better by linking abstract concepts to concrete images. Metaphors and analogies are widely used in political and social discourse and have an impact on the formation of ideas and concepts^[8].

The initial media coverage of the "Belt and Road" initiative used analogies that suggested a neutral attitude and a strategy of strategic ambiguity. The author compares China's current Belt and Road Initiative with the Marshall Plan, which supported European reconstruction after the Second World War. The Marshall Plan was a loan program proposed by North America to help European countries rebuild their economies. China's current Belt and Road Initiative, on the other hand, is described as a massive investment program that exceeds the Marshall Plan by more than ten times^[9].

In 2017, the general analogy of China's Belt and Road Initiative with the Marshall Plan to support the reconstruction of Europe shows that the media is still in the early stages of basic understanding and analysis. "The Marshall Plan is a neutral term for Europe, with mixed feelings. On the one hand, the European perception of the Marshall Plan was that the Americans had helped Europe rebuild after the war, but on the other hand, the Marshall Plan was a way for the US to achieve a certain degree of political and economic control over Europe. This gives an idea of the Portuguese media's perception of Belt and Road at the time, that the Belt and Road policy was seen as bringing some opportunities, but the media believed that it could be a challenge for Europe and that it was also important to prevent Chinese capital from infiltrating and controlling Europe^[10]."

4.1.3. Metaphor

Critical discourse analysis considers the crucial role of rhetoric in discourse. Van Dijk points out that rhetorical devices not only increase the expressive and persuasive power of language but can also be used to highlight the author's point of view and attitude, as well as to stimulate emotional resonance in the reader^[11].

In the news, the Chinese President "owns it all". Comment by the head of division at the MFA is "regrettable", says minister, diplomat Paulo Chávez did not hide his joy at the Chinese President's arrival in Portugal. Paulo Chávez, Director of the Information and Press Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

can be seen using the metaphor “The dragon has landed” to describe the arrival of the Chinese President in Portugal. This metaphor is often used to designate the arrival of an authoritative or important figure, suggesting the Chinese President’s importance and influence. The metaphor of the Chinese President as a “dragon” can suggest his nobility, majesty, and power, echoing the symbolism of the dragon in Chinese culture. This analogy not only highlights the feelings of respect and joy for the president of China but also gives his arrival a special symbolic meaning.

4.1.4. Using the highest level

The more advanced expressions can be used to emphasize the importance, influence, or uniqueness of something ^[12]. At the same time, the media can also use these modifiers to emphasize the impact and exclusivity of their coverage, thus reinforcing their discourse.

Portuguese media coverage of China’s Belt and Road initiative in 2018 involved the use of some of the most highly rated terms, such as “the best period in history” and “the biggest market.” The use of “most” modifiers aims to highlight China’s distinctive characteristics and status in different aspects. For example, through the use of “the best period in history”, the author seeks to highlight the current uniqueness and favorable state of relations between the two countries, praising the progress and achievements of relations ^[13].

The modifier “more” can also hide some negative impacts, such as “China is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases” in some reports from 2019 ^[14]. “This was and remains the world’s largest dictatorship in contemporary history” ^[15]. “China is already the world’s largest bilateral creditor” ^[16]. In doing so, the author expresses a negative assessment of China, indicating their attitude, position, or even prejudice towards China and reinforcing a certain stereotype of China. These absolute and particularly strong descriptions of a certain aspect are usually exaggerated or inaccurate.

If the use of the highest level reflects a strong sentiment in the Portuguese media over some time, be it positive or negative, this use of the highest level may ignore some of the complexities or negative impacts, for example, mentioning that China is the “biggest market” may ignore the competitiveness and challenges of the Chinese market. Referring to China as the “largest emitter of greenhouse gases” may ignore China’s efforts or challenges to reduce emissions.

4.2. Discursive practices

According to Butler, discursive practices emphasize the role of language as a social and cultural reflection, encompassing particular knowledge, values, and power relations ^[17]. Intertextuality, a term introduced by Kristeva, highlights the assimilation and transformation of discourse into any discourse, especially in journalism, where news is constructed from a variety of sources ^[18]. This creates a virtual discursive world full of ideologies and power relations.

Intertextuality in discursive practices reflects social, cultural, and historical complexities and enriches senses and meanings ^[19]. An important manifestation is the direct quotation, which clarifies the position and ideology of the media, such as *Público*, in its coverage of the Belt and Road initiative.

For example, in “Portugal and the New China: The Government is not abandoning strong relations”, Carlos Rodrigues, from the Center for Asian Studies at the University of Aveiro, states that the relationship between China and Portugal has reached one of its highest points and announces a new wave of Chinese investment in Portugal ^[20]. There is also a sense of dialogue and interrelationship: President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa

is quoted as saying that relations with China are positive and irreplaceably complementary to relations with traditional allies. This recurrence of optimistic phrases shapes a positive image of the Chinese investor.

4.3. Social practice

In critical discourse analysis, social practice is often considered an important concept in discourse analysis to explore how discourse reflects, maintains, or alters power relations, ideologies, and cultural values in society^[21].

4.4. Possible analyses of the epochal/social context and a certain type of turning point

There is a strong link between speech and society, history and culture. Durkheim argues that the collective consciousness of society and culture is expressed in language and symbols. The author emphasizes the determining role of the social context, in which discourse, as one of the symbolic systems, reflects the shared values and cognitive patterns of society^[22]. The Portuguese media has a clear global orientation towards Portugal, and there was a clear change in attitudes and perceptions of relations with China between 2018 and 2019, a change that took place in the context of specific events.

4.4.1. Shift to a more cautious view of China's Belt and Road policy

Portugal had a special feeling towards China during the Chinese president's visit to Portugal in 2018 and the signing of the Belt and Road Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), seeing it as a traditional ally or special partner with whom it had "something very special" and an "irreplaceable fraternity"^[23]. However, over time, and especially after the takeover bid for EDP by the Chinese group Three Gorges, the media and the Portuguese government gradually began to emphasize the difference between allies and partners, viewing them more cautiously. The media and the Portuguese government have begun to emphasize the difference between allies and partners, looking at them more cautiously, such as "having an alliance is one thing, having a partnership is another. We have alliances with the United States, with Canada too. We have a partnership with China, not an alliance. This is Portugal's position on the Belt and Road initiative"^[24]. There has also been a change in the description of US and Chinese policies in the coverage of the Belt and Road initiative. From "prioritizing the United States, the US government opposing the defense of common global interests", "an isolationist US government", "defending Beijing's multilateralism and free trade" to China being given the name of "international expansion"^[25-27]. This may be related to the adjustment of the Portuguese government's policy towards China after the publication of the EU's policy report on China in 2019^[28]. At the same time, Portugal became more cautious about Chinese investment after the failure of a Chinese takeover bid, despite several reports in the Portuguese media in 2018 about Portugal's desire to become more involved in the Chinese economy^[23].

4.4.2. Consultations on Portugal's position in the global context

The Portuguese media, such as *Público*, has positioned Portugal in the global context as an important link between Europe and Africa, placing the successful implementation of the Belt and Road in Africa, in particular, in the context of Portugal's political assistance. Or, emphasizing Portugal's deep historical and cultural ties in Africa and its significant influence in several Portuguese-speaking countries, it is argued that this makes Portugal an important partner for China on the African continent^[31]. The Portuguese newspaper *Público* also highlights the fact that Portugal is also a member of the European Union, "a privileged gateway to the European

Community”, and is in a position to exert influence in European and international affairs, which is why it argues that Portugal has a strong presence in the various regions of its new trade routes ^[32].

4.5. Interaction between the various elements

Coverage of the Belt and Road initiative in the Portuguese media has not been limited to the economic project alone but has focused on various issues, such as debt, large loans, trade imbalances, economic colonization, Chinese invasion and international expansion, human rights, as well as the environment, particularly climate change. Reflecting the complex interactions between various elements, including economic, political, geostrategic, and environmental aspects, these reports are important for understanding the impacts and challenges of the Belt and Road project.

4.5.1. Economy and politics

Público’s reports often use the issue of debt to associate the “Belt and Road” initiative with politics. For example, the number of reports on China’s huge loans and even on the debt traps for countries along Belt and Road, which have plunged these countries into economic dependence: “The specter of the ‘debt trap’ is now growing stronger. These countries are heavily indebted, insolvent, and more vulnerable to China’s growing influence” ^[33]. In this case, China was accused of economic colonization and external expansion, affecting the sovereignty and development of these countries through means such as debt traps ^[34]. China is thus portrayed as using the debt issue to gain strategic influence over these countries, thus strengthening its military presence in the region.

4.5.2. Economy and armed forces

Público frequently warns that trade cooperation can bring economic benefits and influence to China, but it can also be accompanied by military expansionist objectives. For example, in the report “Pakistan, the Shortcut for China to Reach the world even faster”, Público highlights the possibility of China using trade cooperation to gain access to military bases and ports in certain countries, thus strengthening its military presence and influence in the region ^[34].

4.5.3. Economy and environment

Another important theme was the environment. A series of news stories on Belt and Road explored international cooperation and standards related to environmental protection, as well as China’s role and responsibilities in this regard. Media coverage of the first official visit by a Chinese leader to Portugal was positive, with one story noting that Beijing had made combating climate change one of its priorities and was committed to meeting the objectives of the Paris Agreement signed in 2015. This reflects the importance that the Chinese government attaches to protecting the environment and its awareness of climate change issues ^[35]. The Chinese President, and the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, co-chaired a panel on the environment and sustainable development at the second Belt and Road Forum in 2019, organized by China and attended by the President of the Republic of Portugal, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa. The coverage of environmental issues in the Belt and Road initiative during this period was neutral. In this context, in addition to Portugal’s possible desire to maintain or strengthen its cooperative relationship with China as host of the Forum, it may have wished to maintain neutrality in media coverage to demonstrate the openness and inclusiveness of its dialogue platforms

and attract the participation of a wider range of countries and stakeholders ^[36].

5. Conclusion

Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional analytical framework, this article explores the various factors that contribute to the coverage of Belt and Road in the Portuguese media. Through a bottom-up analysis of textual, discursive, and social practices, the article concludes that Portuguese media coverage of the Belt and Road initiative constructs a vivid image of China that presents both opportunities and challenges through lexical choices, rhetorical, hierarchical, and ideological dimensions. There is a strong correlation between reporting trends and the social context, influenced by ideology, social events, and so on. The Portuguese public's attitude towards China's Belt and Road strategy has been both positive and negative, with a more "cautious" shift in the color of coverage of China's Belt and Road strategy in the Portuguese public's mainstream media. The "cautious" change is mainly related to multiple factors, such as EU strategic decision-making, human rights incidents/environmental concerns, and so on, revealing a dynamic adjustment process.

Due to the time and space constraints of the thesis, the media subject is limited to Público, which may result in a lack of analysis of the coverage of other Portuguese media and the construction of the image of the Chinese Belt and Road initiative. Other media may have different reporting perspectives, positions, and influence, so the conclusions may not be sufficiently representative. Based on the limitations and conclusions of this study, it could inspire future researchers to carry out similar studies on a wider range of media, to provide relevant policymakers with certain references to help them better understand the image-building of China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Portuguese media and to take into account the factors of media influence on relevant policymaking.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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