

A Discourse Analysis on the Reports of COVID-19 in China by American Mainstream Media

—Take CNN as an example

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the reports based on CNN's news coverage about the coronavirus situation in China from January to July 2020, combining the Frame Analysis with the theory of Critical Discourse Analysis. Through analyzing, it is concluded that the mainstream media in the United States have used a "fear" frame, "opposition" frame, "negative" frame and "blame" frame when reporting on the Covid-19 situation in China, and thus constructs China as the "other", creating a passive and chaotic image of China. This was deeply influenced by the rise of populism in the United States and the demand of finding a "scapegoat". In view of this, China's media should draw hints from the American media reporting frame and the characteristics of the American media discourse, as well as improve the function of media for overseas readers, and make the voice of the Chinese media heard by the world, and thus build a more positive national image of China.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Frame Analysis; CNN; Epidemic Reporting

1. Research Background and Methods

At the beginning of 2020, the novel coronavirus epidemic broke out on a global scale. As stated in the White Paper "Fighting Covid-19 China in Action" issued by the State Council Information Office in June, "The novel coronavirus epidemic is a major public health emergency with the fastest spread, the widest range of infections, and the most difficulty in prevention and control since the founding of People's Republic of China, which is a crisis as well as a big test for China." This epidemic not only involves China in the battlefield against the virus, but also trapped China in a chaotic discourse vortex. The U.S. media pays close attention to the outbreak in China and reports on it. However, news reports are by no means a pile of mechanical facts, but texts formed after screening by stakeholders through a set of ideological filters. In turn, it further constructs the public's cognition and steers the public opinion. In view of this, it is necessary to analyze the reports of the American mainstream media on the pandemic situation in China to help us uncover the hidden ideological veil. Only by analyzing the texture and structure of the language shell, can we understand the core of the language, explore the place where contradictions exist, and then find the possible space for dialogue between the two countries, and finally achieve the harmonious situation of pursued by Mr. Fei Xiaotong.

According to a survey conducted by Pew Research Center on January 17, 2020 called "U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided", it shows that 39% of American adults would turn to CNN for information. Although Democrats account for the majority of this group, it goes without saying in terms of CNN's influence. Therefore, I chose to take CNN as the object of analysis. By entering the keywords "China", "coronavirus" and

“COVID-19” on the official website of CNN from January 20 (When the leader of the high-level expert group of the National Health Commission, Zhong Nanshan, an academician of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, publicly confirmed for the first time that the virus can be transmitted from person to person, and since then, public opinion at home and abroad began to generate rapidly) to July 1 (When China’s epidemic situation began to be stabilized), a total of 3,526 reports were retrieved.

This shows that CNN has paid great attention to the epidemic in China. In order to ensure the scientificity and feasibility of the research, 50 reports were selected randomly among them, and through further manual screening, 10 highly relevant articles were established as the analysis texts, forming a small corpus. This article intends to interpret these news report, and explore its discourse frame, strategies, and the constructed image of China from the combined perspective of frame analysis and critical discourse analysis theory with the technical support of Antconc.

2.The Combination of Frame Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis

Frame theory was proposed in the West in the late 1970s as a communication theory. The concept of “frame” originated from the American anthropologist Bateson. By observing the “fighting” behavior of monkeys, he found that both monkeys and human beings are capable of judging whether it is a game or a fight in the true sense. Therefore, Bateson concluded that the situation implies a certain “interpretation rule” set by the communicator for the audience to understand the behavior of the subject, which is a “frame”.

In 1979, Canadian-American sociologist Irving Goffman published *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (hereinafter referred to as *Frame Analysis*), introducing the concept of “frame” to Sociocultural studies. He stated in the book *Frame Analysis* that “this book provides another analysis of social reality.” In Goffman’s view, people cannot objectively understand the world around them, and they need a “subject frame” as a “model” for interpretation. He interprets the frame as a cognitive structure that people use to recognize and interpret social life experiences, “it enables its users to locate, perceive, determine and name those seemingly infinite specific facts.”

In the field of news dissemination, “frame analysis” is a research method that can effectively and comprehensively study news reports. Entman.R.M., Todd Gitlin, etc. believe that the formation of a news frame is a process of “selection” and “prominence”. In the process of news production, “frame” can facilitate news producers to efficiently process and disseminate content to audiences. From social reality (events) to symbolic reality (news content) to subjective reality (receivers), there are certain “frames” that affect people’s cognition of “reality”. ②

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an analytical method based on critical linguistics, which emerged in the late 1970s. CDA focuses on discovering the internal relationship between discourse and social structure from a critical perspective. CDA integrates the research results of various disciplines, based on the theory of linguistics, connecting with historical and social context, and using language analysis as a means to reveal the relationship between language and ideology. The root of CDA theory is mainly Halliday’s systemic functional grammar. Among them, the four most influential branches are Fowler’s critical linguistics, Fairclough’s sociocultural analysis method, van Dijk’s social cognitive analysis method and Ruth Wodak’s discourse-historical approach. One of the problems of CDA advocates Fairclough and other scholars is that “text is regarded as an end product, while the process of text generation and interpretation is often ignored.” The main body of critical discourse analysis now is still linguistics, and related research has been very mature. But if it is only put under the field of linguistics, the further development of critical discourse analysis theory will inevitably be hindered. The frame theory can inject fresh vitality into critical discourse analysis from the cognitive and social perspectives. The frame theory is mainly based on qualitative analysis while CDA is mainly on quantitative analysis; the frame theory starts from the macro level, but the CDA is mainly from the micro level; the frame theory is based on the cognitive structure, but the critical discourse analysis is derived from systemic functional linguistics. It seems that the two approaches belong to different fields, but in fact they reach the same goal by different routes, aiming to reveal the power relations, ideology and its construction process behind the discourse. Therefore, frame analysis and CDA can complement each other as a tool for discourse analysis.

3.Reporting Frames of the Pandemic Situation in China by American Mainstream Media

3.1 “Fear” frame

One of the reporting frames of the pandemic situation in China by CNN is “fear” frame, through which a panic attitude of the public and government towards public health emergencies is highlighted, and thus presents a chaotic image of China. In the selected texts, the words of “fear”, “fears”, “unease”, “panic” and “flurry” have appeared 13 times in total. (see Figure 1).

Words	Frequency
fear; fears	9
unease	1
panic	2
flurry	1
chaos	1

Figure 1

In the news story which is titled as China confirms new coronavirus can spread between humans reported by CNN on January 21, there is a section with the subtitle of Fears of major outbreak amid busy travel period. By deliberate setting of the title, the author highlighted the concept of “fear” and intended to create an atmosphere of chaos in China. In the news report entitled China new year plans scratched as Wuhan coronavirus spreads on January 24, the author used rhetorical devices such as “crowds were shoulder to shoulder as they waited for trains out of the city” and directly quoted individual micro blog users’ personal remarks as “Wuhan people, get out of Shanghai” and “Don’t sneak in and spread chaos” to exaggerate the uneasiness of the Chinese people. What’s more, it implies the divisive attitude and the sense of powerlessness towards chaos in China.

3.2 “Opposition” frame

The second frame adopted by CNN in its coverage of the outbreak in China is the “opposition” frame. In the reports of Western media, the group of “us” in their political ideas and China as the “other” are reflected everywhere. One of the strategies used to distinguish “us” group from the “other” is the naming strategy. The media can distinguish between the imaginary “China” and “America” by naming. As Gao Lina said, “People’s naming, description, and labeling of objective things do not necessarily reflect the characteristics and attributes of the things themselves. This is usually affected by people’s cognitive level and thoughts and emotions, because people’s different experiences and perceptions of the objective world will lead to different classification methods.” Therefore, the naming of things, events and processes is by no means a simple and objective classification operation, which reflects a certain ideological position.

In the selected texts, CNN named Academician Zhong Nanshan as “a Chinese government-appointed expert”, CCTV as “Chinese state-run CCTV”, and Xinhua News Agency as “state news agency Xinhua”. When quoting people’s daily, CNN defined it as “a state run newspaper” in the form of apposition. There are many such examples. These naming strategies seem to reflect the narrator’s rigorous attitude. However, further analysis shows that through these naming strategies and highlighting effects, the narrator “foregrounds” the ideological opposite aspects between China

and the United States. The US is skeptical and distrustful of Chinese officials. The author deliberately associates all terms with Chinese officials through the naming strategy, which not only weakens the authority of the quotation, but also has a questioning effect. In an imperceptible and unobvious way, China is portrayed as the “other”, which strengthens the dual opposition between China and the United States.

3.3 “Negative” frame

In reporting on China’s COVID-19, Western media are deeply trapped in the frame of “negative” reporting, using strategies such as “word selection” and “source selection” to create a passive and inaction image of China’s anti-epidemic landscape.

The American scholar Tuchman G used “Making News” to describe the production of news. She pointed out that Western media organizations would require journalists to use “direct quotations” reasonably to show objectivity. Herbert J. Gans, through a large number of investigation and analysis of CBS, NBC and other mainstream media, also concluded that the media will use a variety of means of expression, such as the selection and combination of facts, to complete seemingly objective and neutral news.

CNN is good at using citation methods. According to statistics, the word frequency of “said” in the corpus is as high as 85 times, “according” appears 17 times, and “reporting” appears 5 times (see Figure 2). These quotes will make the audience unconsciously believe what they are seeing. But if we look closely at its source, we will find that the narrator artificially processed the content through his/her personal perspective. For example, on January 22, Wuhan municipal government issued a notice on the implementation of measures related to wearing masks in public places: “operators of public places shall require customers entering their places to wear masks before entering, and set up eye-catching and clear tips for wearing masks at the entrance of the places; those who enter places without masks shall be dissuaded, and those who do not listen to the dissuasion shall be dealt with by authorities in accordance with their respective duties and laws” However, when it was quoted to CNN, there was only one last sentence left: “People who don’t obey the requirements shall be dealt with by authorities in accordance with their respective duties and laws”. Through conscious content tailoring, the humanistic care in the original notice has also been mercilessly castrated.

Words	Frequency
said	85
according	17
reporting	5

Figure 2

The presentation of the content can also reflect CNN’s negative reporting attitude towards the epidemic situation in China. When reporting on CNN, through deliberate vocabulary selection and content presentation, it showed its negative attitude towards China. After introducing China’s anti-epidemic measures on January 14, the narrator presented an “inaction China” by adding the following sentence: The measures were only imposed five weeks after the onset of the outbreak, with countless passengers having left the city without screening. The author uses the word “only” here, which connotes a strong emotional attitude, to show the narrator’s condemnation of China. However, the fact is that at the end of December 2019, the Wuhan Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Hubei Province detected cases of pneumonia of unknown cause, and then launched immediately a series of investigations and response measures. There is no such thing as “measures only after 5 weeks.”

3.4 “blame” frame

With the development of the epidemic situation at home and abroad, the frame of COVID-19 related reports of China in Western media has also shifted. The fourth frame is gradually pushed to the central position, which is the “blame” frame. Of course, each frame is not mutually exclusive, but an intertwined whole. In the continuous development of events, the specific frame will be highlighted according to the needs of the reporter, while the rest will be hidden to a relatively weak position. In the “blame” framework, the other three frameworks are also permeated and influence each other.

By inputting “blame”, “responsibility” and “responsible” in Antconc, the frequency of output is 6, 3 and 3 times respectively. All of these words appeared after March 25, when the number of new cases in China slowed down and in the United States surged. While if we input “cooperation” for retrieval, The word frequency is only 2 times. In the face of the increasing domestic epidemic numbers, the United States first considers not to strengthen cooperation with China, nor to face this difficulty together, but to go all out to hold China accountable and involve China in the “blame game” between China and the United States. On the one hand, it goes against the demeanor of a major country, and more importantly, it intensifies the contradiction between the two countries and causes irreparable consequences for the joint fight against the epidemic.

4.The Causes of Biased Reporting

In the United States, the media is considered to be the fourth pillar of the country after the parliament, the executive and the judiciary. American media also often claim to report freely and impartially. However, just as Foucault said, “discourse” is the essential power of knowledge production and development, not just the carrier or expression tool. Media discourse is essentially an accomplice of the American bourgeoisie, controlled by capital and mainstream ideology and ideas as well as speaks for it. American media has created a negative image of China as “the other”, and pointed the contradiction directly to China through various narrative methods and discourse strategies. Fundamentally, it is due to the intensification of internal contradictions in the United States and the transfer demand. After World War II, the development of the American financial industry and the promotion of the capitalist system made wealth concentrated in the hands of a very small number of elites. The gap between the rich and the poor, and the gap between urban and rural areas, has made the bottom American people unable to obtain the hope and strength of survival in reality. They can only pin their hopes on the gloriously isolated United States in the early 20th century. And Trump’s slogan like “make America great again”, group retreating behavior and anti-intellectual ideas coincide with the hopes of these Americans.

As a powerful competitor, China has become the goal of the United States to pass on its own contradictions. In the context of the Sino-US trade war, China’s public health emergency has undoubtedly become an outlet for American politicians and the media. Just as Cai Fang said, judging from the history of western countries, whenever large-scale wars, natural disasters, and pandemics occur, they are accompanied by a series of actions such as concealing the truth of the cause and severity of the incident, stigmatizing competitive countries or ethnic groups (such as Jews) as traditional scapegoats, taking the opportunity to attack political competitors, and generalizing ideology to various fields and all aspects of social life, etc., resulting in all kinds of nationalism and populism, unusual government initiatives and absurd social behaviors. In this sense, it is not difficult to understand the rise of American populism and the trend of ultra-right populism transitioning into the mainstream discourse. Ruth Vodak pointed out that the threat scene is constructed. It arises when the homeland or “we” is threatened by “others”. The “other” refers to strangers inside and outside the society. The United States needs to incarnate China as a “scapegoat”, set it as a window for resolving internal contradictions, and construct it as an “other” to ease its own stress in epidemic management. The “fear” frame created by the United States is actually based on its own fears.

5.Conclusion

The Western media adopted multiple frames when reporting on China’s COVID-19 situation, which constructed a chaotic state of the Chinese government and people in the face of emergencies, and constructed an inactive and

negative China as the “other”. But at the same time, we should note that these frames are affected by the different ideology, history, culture, and beliefs of the two countries. We cannot simply attribute it all to the deliberate processing of the media. These prejudices exist more in the unconsciousness of media workers. Therefore, for China’s media, it should not take a confrontational stance when reporting, and need to actively engage in dialogue with overseas readers. According to the reporting frames of the American media, the Chinese media should use facts as the basis to guide the trend of public opinion in accordance with the discourse characteristics of the American media, continue to strengthen the role of media tailored to overseas readers, improve the discourse power of Chinese media, constantly enhance the strength of China’s public opinion struggle, and build a positive image of China.

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