

Narrative Strategy and Communication Value of Medical Documentary Program in TV

Taking the *Life Unlimited* as an Example

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ABSTRACT

This paper systematically analyzes the strategies in narrative language, narrative perspective and narrative structure of the program *Life Unlimited* in Hunan Satellite TV, and focuses on the communication value of the program, the author points out that this type of program not only presents the current situation of medical resources in China, but also constructs the media image of medical staff. It can not only popularize a large amount of medical knowledge to the audience, but also enhance the understanding of both doctors and patients. Finally, the positive concern and exploration of the themes of "life, senility, illness, death" and "human nature" in this kind of program also convey a kind of unceasing life force to the public.

Keywords: *Medical documentary program, Narrative strategy, Communication value, Life Unlimited*

1. THE PROGRAM INTRODUCTION OF THE LIFE UNLIMITED

Life Unlimited is a large-scale documentary program of medical care observation co-produced by Hunan Satellite TV and Houghton Street Media. This program has selected three bustling hospitals including Peking University First Hospital, Beijing Chaoyang Hospital and Beijing Children's Hospital and focused on three departments of gynaecology & obstetrics, paediatrics and emergency in which place life is born, grows and is in the balance. The special life field of hospitals can reflect various things about life.

The program *Life Unlimited* has received constantly rising number of audiences since its inception in Hunan Satellite TV on April 2, 2018. The topics like #Admirable love story of grandma and grandpa, #I want her to live for another five years, #to save money, the elderly was frozen to serious illness without turning on the air conditioner, and #doctors in the emergency department rescued the seriously ill father were among the micro-blog hot search list for 8 times. Within four days, #Life Unlimited attracted 25.94 million visitors in micro-blog. This program has been independently forwarded and praised by the mainstream media such as People's Daily Online, Guangming Online, Beijing News and Global Times. Among them, the video "the seventy-year-old grandma accidentally swallowed dentures, and her husband made confession of love emotionally" was forwarded and commented by many official new media such as *People's*

Daily Online, China Youth On Line, Global Times and Xinhua Net and had over 15 million plays in a short time. "The admirable love story" aroused strong resonance among netizens. Besides, the video "thanks to joint efforts of doctors and family members, the grandma miraculously revived after half an hour's cardiac arrest" was forwarded by many official micro-blog sites of *Nanfang Daily, Morning Post*, etc. and the topic was among the hot search list of micro-blogs. Some netizens commented: "after watching this program, I have truly realized the meaning of living in the moment".

2. NARRATIVE STRATEGY ANALYSIS OF THE LIFE UNLIMITED

2.1. Diversified Presentation of Sound-Picture Relationship

2.1.1. The use of lots of actual sound

Since it is a documentary program of observation, the requirement for the quality and quantity of actual sound is relatively high. *Life Unlimited* is shot with fixed cameras plus field cameras for interviews. For better sound recording, the program division predicted the travel routes and major activity areas of all patients. Firstly, the areas having cameras were equipped with environmental microphones, making sure the basic sound could be recorded. In Beijing Chaoyang Hospital, more than 50

environmental microphones were installed. Secondly, doctors and nurses who got the highlighted shooting wore wireless microphones, namely the so called "Honey Bee". For instance, the guide desk was a must pass for patients, because patients with their families who just arrived at the hospital needed to tell the state of illness here. And nurses at the guide desk always wore the microphone. Finally, if the floor director group quickly convinced some patients to be shot, the patients and their families would wear microphones. The field camera was used to shoot medical staff and patients and conduct in-depth interviews. In the program, the use of lots of actual sound deeply depicted the characters, which intensified the narration of the story and played a visible role in enhancing and setting off the expression of the true feelings of the characters.

2.1.2. *A combination of interviews and commentary*

Life Unlimited used the narrative mode of interviews with explanation. Such narrative mode had three effects: first, the introduction of interviews meant less explanation, which reduced the impact of the producers' subjective feelings on the factualness of the program. Second, recollections of interviewees during the interview made the transition of past, present and future narrative time and space tighter and smoother, raising the tension of works. Thirdly, interviews with explanation could regulate the inner emotion and narrative rhythm of works, better fitting audio-visual psychology of audiences. For example, the episode *The Second Child* interviewed four families about the reasons, results and feelings of having the second child. With the supplement and deepening of the commentary, the narrative space was extended, which comprehensively and profoundly presented a series of external and internal changes of several families after having the second child.

2.2. *Skillful Use of Montage*

Life Unlimited adopted the narrative technique of parallel montage. On one hand, parallel montage could make the work stay focused on the topic, increase the amount of information, and enhance the rhythm through editing. On the other hand, this technique presented the clues in parallel, which set off and contrast one another, producing strong artistic appeal.^[1] The program *Life Unlimited* used 101 fixed cameras, which were divided into 9 footages for recording, producing 216 hours of video materials each day. With so many footages and materials, the narrative technique of parallel montage could well condense the length of the program. In each episode, the narration of different stories of characters could increase the amount of information of the program, avoid tedium, and meanwhile arouse resonance among audiences more easily. For example, in the episode *tumble*, we can see the program used parallel montage to skillfully connect the three cases which included "Li Yingli's falling and hurting herself

because of drinking, which led to serious consequences of subarachnoid hemorrhage", "the elderly Li Qingui's upper limb fracture caused by falling", and "80-year-old Ou Bangu's bone splitting caused by falling". The three cases echoed, corroborated and set off one another in the hospital, which not only increased the amount of information of the program, but also emphasized the topic expressed in the program, arousing the emotions and empathy of the audiences.

In the post production, *Life Unlimited* vividly showed doctors' tough choices, and the expectation and hesitation of patients' families. The program put more emphasis on plot editing, suspense and story lines, and characters' personality, avoid being too straightforward for documentary works. For example, in the episode *Multiple Choice*, the doctor had to make choices of treatment when the 44-year-old Liu Shouquan may be suffocated to death because of trachea hemorrhage not handled properly, family members had to make choices of treatment when the 44-year-old Li Li was diagnosed with severe renal failure, and parents had to make choices when the 1-year-old Shuoshuo was diagnosed with congenital pulmonary dysplasia. The program presented the choices that three groups of patients had to face one by one and the suspense unfolded. What exactly supported them to face the crucial choices in life? What would be the results? The parallel editing of the three patients' stories produced strong artistic appeal with the stories setting off one another, which successfully attracted the attention of the audience.

2.3. *Clever Combination of Omniscient and Limited Perspective*

In order to tell true and objective stories, the documentary program of medical care *Life Unlimited* narrated from the omniscient perspective. At the same time, for comprehensive, profound and specific narration, the program also narrated from the limited perspectives of doctors, patients, family members of patients. Telling the patients' cases from the doctor's perspective revealed the responsibilities and reflections of doctors. From the perspective of patients and their family members, their feelings during the process of the treatment of disease were expressed. The flow between multiple perspectives aroused the reflection and interrogation of the audiences.

2.3.1 *Narration from the omniscient perspective*

"The omniscient perspective refers to the ubiquitous, all-knowing and omnipotent perspective of the narrator. The narrator has a high degree of freedom, and narrates with universal commentaries from an all-round, multiple perspective and multiple space-time perspective."^[2] The shooting of the documentary program of medical care happened mainly in the hospital, which was a special place. Firstly, people do not know much about the hospital

which is a special institution. Especially, they have little contact with important places of medical care like the operating room, the delivery room and the emergency room. In most cases, they gained abstract understanding of these places from some channels such as text descriptions, pictures and drama scenes. Such understanding is limited in information and is easy stretch the facts with too much imagination. Secondly, currently the domestic doctor-patient relationship tends to be tense as a whole and an increasing number of people are biased and stigmatized towards hospitals and doctors. The program division *Life Unlimited* totally shot in three hospitals more than 400 stories with extended time-space, complex character composition and storytelling topics. Therefore, the use of the omniscient perspective can not only unfold the three-dimensional characters and well-developed stories by describing characters and events in a multi-dimensional, multi-perspective and multiple space-time way, but also improve the credibility and expressiveness of the works.

2.3.2 Narration from the limited perspective

The documentary program of medical care *Life Unlimited* aimed to closely record the daily work of doctors, depict the outpatients in the hospital, and reflect different types of doctor-patient relationships. Thus, beside the narration from the omniscient perspective, the program also narrated from the limited perspective of doctors, patients and their family members. From the perspective of doctors in the hospital, we can see the efforts, persistence, pressure and responsibilities of doctors. From the perspective of patients and their family members, the personality of characters and the whole process of the occurrence and development of the event can be presented in a more comprehensive way. In addition, the audience can be closer to the story field through the narration of the event itself or the participants, which can arouse the audience's reflection and increase the factualness and credibility of the narration.

2.4 The aggregate effect of sectional Narrative

Life Unlimited used the narration of the plate-type structure. "The so-called plate-type structure is a structure that divides different contents into different parts which may be irrelevant with each other or transform from one to another according to characters, time, regions or topics." [3] Among 36 episodes of the program *Life Unlimited*, there are more than 400 stories, 19680 hours of video materials for the whole season, and 547 hours of materials for a single episode. Because of too much materials, which made the narration of the program more difficult, before the shooting of the program was officially started, the director division had already presupposed 50-60 topics such as family-related topics, topics of popularization of science, and medical staff-related topics.

Each episode of the 36 episodes of *Life Unlimited* was a plate and each plate had a topic. Different episodes seemed to be irrelevant but all expressed a general topic of the program. For example, there seemed to be no obvious external connection among the titles of different episodes such as "The First Time", "Heart of the Family", "Best Efforts" and "I have my body fixed in the hospital", but they were stories all centered around the hospital and based on various things about life. What's more, each episode of the program selected to tell stories with social significance and tension, which could ensure that the whole film is compact and powerful even if there was no formal connection between different plates.

3. COMMUNICATION VALUE ANALYSIS OF THE *LIFE UNLIMITED*

3.1 Presentation of Current Medical Resources

In our country, seeing a doctor is not always easy. In the final analysis, it is the imbalance between people's growing demand for medical services and the supply of services. Since the high-level hospitals are mostly located in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other provincial capital cities, they have high-quality medical services and management, as well as high technical level and efficiency. Meanwhile, their reputation brought by high-quality resources attracts a large number of patients, resulting in piles of patients seeking medical treatment, doctors working intensively, and uneven distribution of medical resources, etc. *Life Unlimited* vividly showed what the situation was like. For example, in the episode *Emergency in No Hurry*, it introduced that Division of Emergency Medicine of Beijing Chaoyang Hospital responsible for most part of Dongcheng Strict in Beijing, received more than 500 new patients each day. But there were not enough beds and devices in the emergency room and it took time for doctors to diagnose, so it was inevitable for patients to wait. This episode focused on the daily work of doctors in the emergency department. They needed to work continuously for 12 hours on average and working overtime had become a commonplace. Sometimes in case of emergency, they had to rush to the hospital immediately for treatment regardless of time and place. The program truly presented the current situation of medical care including insufficient supply of medical resources, tremendous work intensity of doctors, etc. In the understanding of Zeng Rong, the program producer, the important goal of the medical reform is to allocate high-quality medical resources efficiently, so that patients living in different cities have the opportunity to get effective treatment, and medical resources can be allocated in a more reasonable way. Zeng Rong once said that "we hope to spread the information of medical reforms through *Life Unlimited*, so that people can make rational use of medical resources from their own point of view."

3.2 Construction of the Image of Medical Staff

In the footage of the documentary program of medical care, doctors and nurses presented their images in reality, which closed the distance with the audiences.^[4] Through the program, the audiences were able to truly understand the busy medical staff in the hospital rather than follow the crowd to judge them based on fictional plots and exaggerated reports.

Life Unlimited truly recorded the calmness, tenacity, efforts and persistence of medical staff under working conditions with high intensity and high pressure, truly presented the medical staff's professionalism and sense of mission in face of patients, their joy and pride when patients were cured, and their impotence and pain in face of the failure of treatment, and showed us a three-dimensional and "ordinary" image of doctors.

The shooting of *Life Unlimited* was not to showcase the particular personality of an individual medical worker, but to get the big pictures from personal details. It reflected the working status of the whole group by showing the daily life of one or several typical medical workers and built the image of this profession, especially the image of young doctors. The episodes shot from the perspective of doctors included *Challenge for the Doctor*, *Road to the Doctor*, and *If I Have Another Chance to Take the College Entrance Examination*. The program focused on departments of gynaecology & obstetrics, paediatrics and emergency and emphatically described routine and typical examples of young doctors like Yang Jun, Ge Ming, Yang Huixia and Mei Xue rescuing patients, saving lives and fighting against diseases, bringing out their original intention of practicing medicine, working experiences and feelings. In the program, doctors are no longer holy or strange. Instead, they are like our friends striving for ideals and life. They are a little extraordinary because they respect life, adhere to the mission, bear the responsibilities and never forget the original intention.

3.3 Popularization of Medical Knowledge

The program *Life Unlimited*, by presenting real patients and cases, popularized to the audience medical health knowledge which was mainly covered in the commentaries and interviews with the doctors. For example, in the episode *The Deadly Nuts*, children of four families were admitted to the hospital at the Spring Festival Eve for the same reason – they ate nuts. In this regard, the doctor told the audiences about the case that children under three years old shall not eat nuts, children swallowing the nut by mistake might lead to bad consequences, and it is hoped parents shall prevent such accidents. What's more, *Life Unlimited* specially offered a new plate named "Popularization of Science by the Doctor", each episode of which echoed its content with the topic of each episode of the program. It shared 36 medical knowledge points that were closely related to public health, so as to help improve the popularization of

medical science and medical literacy of the public. For example, the episode *Face it with a smile* shared with the audience premonitory symptoms of acute myocardial infarction and the coping methods after the onset of the disease. At the same time, it also used some animation to present a more watchable and interesting program.

3.4 Improvement of Doctor-patient Relationship

"The doctor-patient relationship should be based on dialogues rather than confrontation. In face of disease, doctors, patients and the family members should be on the same side."^[5] The conflicts between doctors and patients are mostly due to the poor communication between the two sides. Wang Tong, the chief content officer of Houghton Street Media and the chief director and writer of *Life Unlimited*, said that he hoped to bridge the gap of "communication" between doctors and patients by telling true stories of doctors, patients and family members of patients in the program. From *Life Unlimited*, we could see that the doctor Yang Huixia visited the ward for many times to appease the pregnant mothers. Before the operation, the attending doctor repeatedly informed the patient's family members of the potential problems and risks of the operation so as to get their opinions and understanding. Faced with patients who did not cooperate with the treatment, the doctor made rational analysis and detailed explanation. Such scene is a commonplace for the hospitals and doctors but uncommon for the audience. It is such a real but uncommon scene that enables the audience to directly feel the sweetness and bitterness of medical staff. Through the particularity and empathy behind each story, the program let the public treat the doctor-patient relationship in a more calm and objective way, which might have the power to ease tensions between doctors and patients.

3.5 Passing on Power of Life

The documentary program of medical care *Life Unlimited*, by focusing on critical moments of life including birth, growth and emergency, covered the total life cycle of Chinese people. It enabled the public face up to such matters as birth, death, illness and old age and learn to keep fit and cherish life. In the program, there were elderly pregnant women who wanted to give birth to a child by risking their own lives, new parents who were happy but helpless to have a child, young children who struggled for life with small bodies but unyielding will, and a couple of the golden marriage who supported each other to get over the disease...The program expressed deep emotions through short stories. By shooting a corner of the hospital, the program used vivid stories to describe the fragility and tenacity of life, as well as the goodness and beauty of human nature. It strived to say that behind every extension of life, there were the courage and

determination of doctors, patients and family members of patients to fight against diseases, which were all the source of vitality. Only when people understand the meaning of life can they have life unlimited.

4. CONCLUSION

The *Life Unlimited* has received a lot of media attention, retweets and hot reviews, as well as praise and support from the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, the China Association for Science and Technology and other institutions, this is closely related to its features in narrative language, visual angle and structure as well as its rich social value.

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