



A Study of the Differences in Disaster Reporting Between China and the United States- the People's Daily and the New York Times as Examples

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Abstract. Disasters are so closely linked to human life that there is no guarantee of avoiding them, regardless of the country in which they occur. After the 21st century, disaster reports have come into the limelight more frequently. When society is facing a crisis and human survival is challenged, the media has to play the function of meeting the information needs of the audience and play the role of correctly guiding social opinion. This paper attempts to analyse the similarities and differences between Chinese and American mainstream media in the expression of disaster reporting, using a combination of qualitative case text comparative interpretation and quantitative data analysis as the main research method, starting from specific cases, and trying to identify and analyse the reasons behind, in order to provide some feasible suggestions for Chinese media's international disaster reporting.

Keywords: Disaster reports · People's Daily · New York Times · Comparative study · Expression study

1 Definition of Concepts

1.1 On Disasters and Impacts

Regarding disasters, the public typically associates them with natural occurrences, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and mudslides. However, in the Modern Chinese Dictionary, a disaster is defined as “severe harm and suffering resulting from either natural or human-made catastrophes.” [1] Therefore, disasters encompass not only natural incidents, but also those caused by humans, such as car accidents, fires, air crashes, and terrorist attacks. The effects of disasters are complex, and news coverage of them is multifaceted. Disaster news coverage involves three primary areas: first, reporting on the disaster itself; second, covering the response and relief efforts; and third, reporting on the post-disaster impact, reflection, and reconstruction. These three areas also serve as the main focus in later data analysis of disaster coverage.

1.2 About the Mainstream Media

According to Mr. Yu's perspective, the term "mainstream media" refers to media outlets that cater to the most influential members of society, particularly those with decision-making power, intellectual prowess, and purchasing influence. In other words, mainstream media is characterized by its high quality and ability to attract this specific audience as its primary market demand. [2] Under this definition, the media in China, such as the People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency and CCTV would all fall under the category of "mainstream media." This paper concurs with this definition, and as such, will confine its analysis within this scope. This study has chosen the People's Daily and the New York Times as exemplars of their respective mainstream media in China and the United States, and will undertake a comparative analysis of their reporting on a shared disaster event. As the official publication of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the People's Daily boasts a vast readership and exerts significant influence within the country. Conversely, the New York Times, a leading liberal newspaper in the United States, holds considerable sway and is widely considered the most influential newspaper in the country. Following his analysis of editorials in American newspapers, Michael Tomasky observed that liberal newspapers tend to align more closely with the policies of the Democratic government, yet they remain willing to offer critical commentary when they oppose specific government policies.[3].

2 Research Notes

2.1 Literature Review

The research literature on disaster journalism in recent years has included three main areas.

One aspect pertains to the history and contemporary landscape of disaster news coverage in China. For instance, Tao Ying's research titled "A Study on the Evolution of Disaster Reporting Philosophy in People's Daily since the 1990s - A Case Study of Two Flood Reports in 1998 and 2016," highlights three key shifts in the disaster reporting philosophy of People's Daily. First, there has been a movement from disaster relief propaganda to a more scientific understanding of disasters. Second, the philosophy of human-centeredness in reporting has been further developed. Finally, there has been a transition from an ecological concept of the struggle between nature and humanity to a harmonious concept of the unity between nature and humanity.

From a business perspective, the second comparison examines disaster news coverage in China and other countries. For instance, Xue Jing's article "A Comparative Analysis of the Coverage of the Great East Japan Earthquake in the People's Daily and the New York Times" identifies the differences in coverage due to the distinct characteristics of media in China and the West, the varying values held by the two newspapers, and the differing cultural environments in which the Chinese and Western media operate. Additionally, the article argues for more objective standards and tendencies in international reporting, as well as for newspapers to play a stronger role in guiding social opinion. To achieve this, the level of investigative reporting in the media should be improved, with a greater emphasis on in-depth reporting and commentary.

The third aspect centers on the ethical dilemmas surrounding disaster reporting. Using Tang Yongfeng's article "A Study of News Bias in the Reporting of Major Sudden Disaster Events - Taking the Tianjin Binhai Explosion as an Example" as a case study, the author contends that news bias persists in China's coverage of disaster events, influenced by factors such as news control and the desire for entertainment value. This bias manifests through dramatization and fragmentation of news, a preference for personal stories, and an emphasis on authority figures. Furthermore, this journalistic bias varies across different forms of media.

2.2 Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this paper involves a combination of qualitative comparative reading of case texts and quantitative data analysis. Through qualitative comparative reading, the study presents a visual comparison of the differences in the expression of events and the bias evident in specific representations. In contrast, quantitative data analysis is utilized to support further elaboration and argumentation of the findings.

To select reports for this study, English disaster news texts were retrieved from the Factiva database using the relevant disaster name keyword. Similarly, Chinese disaster news texts were obtained from the People's Daily full-text database using the same keyword search. The article compares and analyzes the discrepancies between the two major media outlets with regards to the quantity, sources, focus, and genre of the chosen disaster stories, as well as the underlying reasons for these differences.

3 Implications for Our Reporting

Since the year 2000, Chinese media has reported on numerous disasters, including the SARS virus, the 2008 snowstorm, the Wenchuan earthquake, and the Tianjin steam explosion. These experiences have facilitated learning and improvement in disaster reporting. However, it is acknowledged that there remains a significant disparity between the quality of Chinese and American media coverage. Therefore, it is imperative that we adopt an open-minded approach and strive to learn from the exemplary practices of American media in order to enhance our own disaster reporting capabilities.

3.1 Digging Deeper into the Story

With the constant evolution of communication technologies, the time gap between news media reports is rapidly diminishing. As a result, the media is compelled to not only report factual information but also generate innovative reporting perspectives and delve deeper into stories to differentiate itself from competitors and attract a wider audience. In China, disaster reporting faces a primary issue of homogeneity in subject matter, which requires an improvement in both the depth and breadth of coverage. Analysis of previous disaster reports from People's Daily reveals a predominance of factual statements on relief efforts and government instructions, with an overrepresentation of positive reports that reduces coverage on other aspects of the disaster, such as reflections on aftermath

and discussions on relief work deficiencies. To address this issue, continuous tracking reports can be implemented to meet the evolving needs of audiences in the face of rapidly changing messages during catastrophic events. Through this dynamic process, media can utilize combined and continuous reporting to maximize the public's right to information.

The second issue concerns the genre of disaster reporting, where there is an overabundance of news reports, a moderate number of newsletters, and an insufficient amount of commentary sections. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the news, explanatory information could be added in addition to factual reporting. Furthermore, the reliance on authoritative news in domestic newspaper coverage results in a small proportion of editorials that are not given enough attention, despite representing the newspaper's position and views and contributing to its image formation. The lack of image building makes it challenging for a newspaper to distinguish itself and captivate its audience. Additionally, it fails to reflect the voice of the grassroots, hindering its ability to resonate with the public and diminishes its impact.

3.2 Focus on the Humanities

The humanistic sentiment necessitates upholding the value system that prioritizes individuals as the benchmark in all endeavors, emphasizing the significance of respecting, comprehending, and caring for people, and placing human welfare at the forefront. [4] Sudden and severe catastrophic events attract significant public attention, prompting audiences to seek prompt information about the disaster due to human empathy. Such information includes details on the disaster area, casualties, the situation of affected individuals, and updates on donations, relief and aid efforts, as well as dissemination of preventative measures to minimize the damage of the disaster. Thus, in disaster reporting, the media can adopt a humanistic approach in the following ways.

Regarding the Japanese earthquake and nuclear power plant leak, the Chinese media prioritized the government's standpoint, the impact of the nuclear leak on China, and the government's response measures. In contrast, the American media reported from the people's point of view, placing more emphasis on the victims' circumstances in the disaster. The US media's approach of highlighting the personal experiences of those affected by the disaster provides valuable insight into the human aspect of the catastrophe, showcasing the resilience of life and love and various ways in which humanistic concerns manifest in reporting. This perspective can serve as a model for disaster reporting.

To elaborate, the primary focus of disaster reporting media is on the victims themselves, highlighting their psychological state and shifting the perspective to their point of view, their lives, and their surroundings. However, interviews should be conducted with caution to avoid disrupting the relief efforts, respecting interviewees' privacy, understanding their emotions, and refraining from exploiting their experiences and feelings for the sake of reporting to prevent causing them further harm. Communication scholar Berser has categorized three types of privacy: physical privacy, which entails preserving personal freedom; mental or communication privacy, which involves safeguarding the recording and expression of thoughts and emotions; and private information privacy, which requires protecting medical and financial data from disclosure. [5] In a report, it is crucial to avoid including excessively graphic and disturbing images of the disaster

scene. Pictures and interviews related to the victims should prioritize the interviewees' preferences, employ appropriate language and carefully screen the content, with special attention to safeguarding the privacy of minors.

In addition, it is crucial to consider the psychological needs of the audience when selecting coverage material and to establish a connection between the audience and the victims to ensure that the coverage evokes empathy and conveys positive energy. A humanistic approach also involves addressing the victims' emotional wounds and aiding them in rebuilding their lives. Thus, disaster reports may also impart scientific knowledge regarding disaster response by consulting experts and scholars, and offer means of psychological support to mitigate the harm caused by the traumatic event. Moreover, the reportage should be continuous and thorough, extending beyond the immediate aftermath of the disaster to encompass the victims' rebuilding process and potential challenges, which the media should bring to public attention and address with the government, thereby fulfilling a watchdog role. Additionally, it is important to reflect upon the consequences of the disaster, and the media should offer their own perspectives and analysis regarding possible issues in response to the news, providing thought-provoking and valuable content for the public.

4 Conclusion

Since 2000, China has experienced several disasters, including the SARS virus, the 2008 snowstorm, the Wenchuan earthquake, and the Tianjin steam explosion, which have highlighted the importance of disaster information in society. It is essential to recognize the role of the media in disseminating this information. Although the Chinese media has been improving in disaster reporting, there are still considerable differences between the Chinese and US media in terms of their nature, cultural background, and journalistic values. Thus, it is essential to understand these differences and learn from best practices in the US to improve disaster reporting in China. Chinese newspapers can enhance their coverage by expanding their news sources, delving deeper into the story, focusing on humanistic concerns, and improving communication with readers. This article provides a preliminary analysis of the differences in disaster reporting between the Chinese and American mainstream media, but further research is needed to explore related issues.

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