

Analyzing the Narrative Framing Pitfalls of Social Media Based on Propaganda Model

Yufeng Ni *

Media and Journalism, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, England, The United Kingdom

* Corresponding Author Email: c2011366@newcastle.ac.uk

Abstract. Social media is a product of the web 2.0 era. It has always been regarded as a symbol of the spirit of "freedom" and "sharing" in this period. Early media optimists believed that social media would free democracy from the encroachment of mass media and expand the sphere of public opinion. With the development of digital technology and social media, the information content produced by the public on social media has the same dissemination ability as mass media to a certain extent. From a neoliberal perspective, such changes herald the overall rise of press freedom and freedom of opinion on social media. However, it remains to be seen whether social media can break through the social framework constructed by the mass media to achieve freedom of expression. Therefore, this paper explores this issue based on the classical theoretical frame in the political economy of the media-the Propaganda Model (PM). By selecting the "Bucha massacre" in the Russia-Ukraine conflict as the research object, and collecting and conducting qualitative research on the data of social media platforms, the results of this paper guide to an answer: with strong control from the mass media and social elites, it is difficult for social media to fulfill the expected breakthrough task it was entrusted with. The more serious situation is that contemporary social media has a great possibility of becoming a link in the propaganda framework.

Keywords: Social media; propaganda model; strategic narrative; the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

1. Introduction

The concept of social media was first born in the 1990s. According to a 2010 survey, the earliest use of the term social media appeared in 1994, when it was used to describe a social media platform called: Matisse, which was developed in Tokyo [1]. Since then, the concept of social media has gone through a long period of iteration, and the factors it contains and the spirits it displays have also changed during this process. As Tim O'Reilly proposed the Internet concept of Web 2.0 in 2004, which includes the concept of freedom, interaction, and participation, the thinking shown in the concept of social media has also undergone great changes. According to Thomas Aichner in 2019, from the summary of the evolution of the concept of social media, it can be clearly found that the concept of social media after 2004 is increasingly centered on individuals or individual users, and social media is gradually emphasizing the core spirit of individual rights and needs [1]. Thus, in 2013, Ellison and Boyd first emphasized the rights of users to publicly express their personal opinions in their concept of social media [2]. And Carr and Hayes' 2015 definition of social media formally included the freedom of "unfettered expression" of opinion [3]. Since then, social media has gradually become a subsistent symbol of free speech and opinion. For example, the Supreme Court of the United States recognized Facebook and Twitter as important occasions for users to exercise their freedom of speech rights under the First Amendment [4].

However, with the changing role and influence of social media in society, society, and academia have a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of this new media. Therefore, whether social media has become a free public opinion Space is questioned. Such worries are not unreasonable. The manipulation of public opinion space has been criticized in the process of media development. As early as the mass media era when newspapers, radio, and television were powerful disseminators of information, the strict content review mechanism, the emphasis on self-review for journalists, and a series of laws issued by various countries for the news industry have effectively established a complete public opinion manipulation system. These methods seem to have been useless on current social media. The huge number of publications on social media platforms make it almost impossible

for the review mechanism to function fully. The characteristics of user-generated content (UGC) also avoid self-censorship. The protection of citizens' freedom of speech also weakens the law's influence. However, this does not represent the disappearance of opinion control on social media, but rather highlights the need to explore new ways of manipulating public opinion and seeking to explain such manipulations. Based on this thinking, this paper establishes its research significance.

In terms of research content, this paper raises three main questions: 1) what kind of "mainstream narrative framework" does mass media construct? 2) Can social media shape independent perceptions under the influence of framing? 3) How did social media fall into control if it failed to break through the "mainstream narrative framework"? In order to answer these three questions, first of all, this paper mainly takes the discussions of the Bucha massacre on the American social media platform Quora as a research case, uses the case analysis method to analyze the content of the case, and constructs a data group in a qualitative way to show social media's degree of deviation from the "mainstream narrative framework" in the same topic. Secondly, the concept of "strategic narrative" will be introduced to explain the "construction of mainstream narrative framework". Finally, the classic model "propaganda model" in media political economics is going to be adopted as the theoretical framework to explain the manipulation of public opinion in social media.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Strategic Narrative

Lawrence Freedman precisely defines strategic narrative as "through a compelling storyline, events can be convincingly explained and inferences drawn from them"[5]. However, such a definition is still too vague for this article. Therefore, this article begins with understanding the important concept of "narrative", and constructs a clear framework for understanding "strategic narrative". Todorov defined narrative as a framework that allows humans to connect various apparently unrelated phenomena around a meaning. In simple terms, a narrative is a tool for connecting human practices and meanings [6]. Regarding the compositional factors of narrative, Kenneth Burke pointed out in his classic book "The Grammar of Motivation" (1969) that narrative requires an actor, an action, a goal or intention, a scene, and a tool [7]. On this basis, the role of narrative is reflected in the destruction of the original meaning of the target event and the method of constructing a new meaning. As Alister proposed, narratives enable humans to connect seemingly unrelated phenomena with some kind of causal transformation [8]. The end of this transformation gives meaning to all the parts of the whole, as sequences of human actions are given connection and whole meaning. Based on these thoughts on narrative, this paper has a more orderly understanding of strategic narrative: Strategic narrative refers to a narrative approach. This method is based on the premise of achieving a certain interest or purpose, and carries out targeted design and guidance on factors such as narrative actors, environment, and purpose, so as to gain domestic or international support for the solution proposed by the narrative party.

2.2. Propaganda Model

The concept of the propaganda model (PM) was first established by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in 1988. In their book "Manufacturing Consent," the two scholars build this model on the basis of critical Marxism in political economy. They think that PM is a function of private commercial media, power and money are served by it [9]. More precisely, the PM sees the media as a tool for channeling public opinion in the service of the "special interests" of the power elite. It is impossible to give a deep and unbiased critique of a government or regulatory monopoly. The PM identified the process of making news and created a news production system known as the "Five Filters", which includes ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and anti-Communism and fear [9]. Both scholars agree that these five elements are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, continually filtering news content until "only a clean residue remains suitable for printing". These five filters actually represent

how the media have been completely prevented from the ability of self-thinking and independent reporting from the five aspects of economy, politics, news sources, elites, and national will.

3. Background Information

Bucha City is located 37 kilometers northwest of Kiev city center and is a strategically important town. On April 2, 2022, after the Russian army withdrew completely, when the Ukrainian army entered Bucha, they found that the roads of this small town were piled up with corpses of civilians, and a large number of dead civilians were tied up with their backhands. The victims included men, women and children. This tragic battlefield scene has aroused huge repercussions in the world's public opinion pattern. Russia, Ukraine and the relevant public opinion environment accused each other that the other party should be responsible for this behavior. China and other countries strongly demand to restore of the facts. However, until today, the Butchar massacre has still not been able to form a definite investigation result.

4. Method

This paper mainly adopts the qualitative research method and chooses case study as the main research method. In terms of case selection, this paper primarily uses the discussion on the American social media platform Quora about the "Bucha massacre" that occurred in the town of Bucha in Kiev during the Russo-Ukrainian War as a research case. In terms of specific sample selection, this article collects discussion entries on the authenticity of the Bucha massacre on the American social media Quora:

"Who holds the truth regarding the alleged Bucha massacre/genocide in Ukraine, and why?"

"Is it 100% true that Russian forces committed a massacre of Ukrainian civilians in the city called Bucha? Russia says Ukrainians did the massacre and are blaming Russia."

The responses under the two entries constitute the sample group. The selection conditions of the sample group are the first 20 answers of likes, comments, and forwarding under the entry, a total of 40 pieces of data. After data collection, 20 samples were cross-selected as the final data set. In terms of qualitative aspects, the obtained data groups will be qualitatively classified according to the nationality and the attitude of the answers, so as to intuitively find out whether there are samples that deviate from the media narrative framework in the social media environment, and the scale of this deviation. According to the judgment of scale, it can be found whether social media has achieved a breakthrough in the public opinion framework constructed by mass media and to what extent.

5. Result

According to the data, although social media in European and American countries can accommodate views that are different from mainstream narratives, social media still cannot escape the control of strategic narratives from mass media. Among the 20 selected answers coming from Europe, America, and Ukraine, those who supported Russia's responsibility for the massacre accounted for 60% of the sample (12 answers); while only 20% of the samples questioned the current media narrative (4 answers); the remaining 20% (4 answers) asked to restore the truth. And when researching the comment section of opposing views, a large number of comments are found to refute or insult these views that are contrary to the "mainstream narrative". It is clear that viewpoints in social media have also been integrated into the framework of strategic narratives to refute and suppress opposing viewpoints. As Herman and Chomsky foresaw in their 2002 reprint of "Manufacturing Consent", the two scholars believed that the convergence of the Internet and new technologies would resolve some of the barriers to media democratization, but they argued that the right to speak on social media is still controlled within the framework of public opinion jointly constructed by mass media and social elites [10].

6. Discussion

The formation of differences in public opinion is due to the joint action of various elements. However, regarding one of the most important reasons for this situation, this paper believes that it is the joint effect of strategic narrative and propaganda mode. Therefore, it is necessary to determine what kind of strategic narrative was formed in this case. But before starting the analysis, it must be mentioned that although the concept of strategic narrative is mainly applied to international research occasions to explain the relationship between the actions of countries and the image of countries, applying it to the construction of domestic public opinion frameworks like this article is not groundbreaking. Strategic narrative is also applicable today to the study of how to form a unified opinion and thinking in the country. For example, Ringsmose studied in 2011 how NATO used strategic narratives to gain domestic support for its troops in Afghanistan [11].

6.1. Strategic Narrative Framework Analysis

Based on the collection of reports from the U.S. and Ukrainian media after the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense announced the Bucha massacre on April 3, this article restores the narrative framework of the European and American media headed by the United States and Ukraine. This framework emphasizes that the Bucha massacre was caused by the active behavior of the Russian military, and it also rendered an inhumane, cruel image of Russian soldiers. More importantly, within this framework, the Bucha massacre was portrayed as a "war crime" and tried to tie the situation on the Ukrainian battlefield with European interests, emphasizing the significance of Russia's defeat to world peace. First of all, in terms of the selection of "actors", since the narrative theme is the war crimes committed by the Russian military, the selection of "actors" was determined to be the survivors of Bucha Town and the Russian military; and the setting of the "scene" is also placed on Bucha which became the former Russian-occupied area in the context of the conflict and violence during the Russian-Ukrainian War; the description of the "action" highlighted the Russian military's cruelty to the residents of the small town of Bucha in order to arouse domestic public opinion Russia's disgust and Ukraine's sympathy; finally, on the "solution", it emphasized war support to help Ukraine fight back against Russia, and completed the so-called support for "just acts". In terms of actual cases, the New York Times journalists Daniel Berehulak and Carlotta Gall's report about Bucha is representative of the framework. This report draws heavily on interviews with local residents describing how Russian soldiers "sadistically" killed Residents of the town; Russian snipers killing civilians for no reason; a large number of Ukrainian women were imprisoned by Russian soldiers and suffered sexual abuse [12]. The result of such a strategic narrative is straightforward. A large number of member states of the European Union and developed countries in the world have expelled Russian diplomats in their own countries, and France and other countries have announced sanctions against Russia [13].

6.2. Propaganda Model Framework Analysis

So how does the public opinion environment in Europe and the United States use the propaganda model to block speech effectively? According to the above introduction to the propaganda model, the working principle of this theoretical framework can be basically restored. The propaganda model assumes that the media (mainstream media in most cases) with the ability to dominate public opinion will join the market. Either it is privately controlled or it joins a large corporation and becomes a media conglomerate. Based on this premise, the media relies on advertising to make money, and the acquisition of information is controlled by the government and enterprises, losing the ability to report and investigate independently. Therefore, the power and wealth of the society form a situation of control and suppression of the media. The media needs to guide public opinion for the "privileged class" and attack countries or opinions with different social ideologies. Returning to the case of this article, in the current operation of social media, the operating mode mentioned in the book "Manufacturing Consent" by Herman and Chomsky is still retained, that is, the media is controlled

by rich people and managers, and strictly directed by market profit orientation. First of all, the world's major social media such as Ins, Twitter and Facebook, all suppressed the public opinion that questioned the Bucha investigation out of consideration of the interests of local public opinion, such as the former chief weapons inspector of the United Nations in Iraq, the former U.S. Marine Corps intelligence Official Scott Ritter's Twitter account was blocked for questioning [14]. In Ritter's earlier tweets, he mentioned that "Biden is trying to shift the responsibility for the Bucha incident to Russia." After posting related tweets, his account was banned by Twitter. The reason why Ritter's account was blocked is that he challenged the "orthodox narrative" of the "Bucha Massacre" in the European and American public opinion environment. Secondly, in the study of the speeches on Quora in this paper, the results find a large number of views that claim Russia is the culprit of the Butcher massacre. These opinions basically cited content released by mainstream media in Europe and the United States, such as the BBC and NBC, as their evidence. This situation somewhat indicates social media's inability to produce results through independent investigation and echoes the war narrative described earlier in this article. Finally, in view of Russia's relations with Europe and the United States, attacking Russia has become the current "political consciousness" of the United States determined by the market [15]. In view of the above points, it can be found that the public opinion environment about the "Bucha Massacre" of social media in Europe and the United States is controlled by the propaganda model.

7. Conclusion

This paper mainly discusses whether social media can break the control of strategic narrative constructed by mass media from the perspective of the propaganda model in the social media era. Basing on this thought, this paper tries to prove that the freedom of speech in social media is a kind of "bounded freedom" through the combination of strategic narrative and propaganda mode. On the premise of this assumption, this paper proves this point by studying the public opinion environment about the "Bucha massacre" in American social media. This paper provides perspective on the current manner in which public opinion is manipulated on social media and the ways in which it seeks to explain this manipulation. However, this paper also has flaws in the research and theoretical framework. First of all, there are few samples in the research data collection, which has potential bias problems. Second, due to the selection of strategic narrative and propaganda models in the theoretical framework, this paper naturally inherited the problem of ignoring the subjective initiative of the media in the two frameworks, and formed an overly pessimistic understanding of social media. In terms of future research suggestions, this article actually includes a modernization test of the classic model "propaganda model." Since the propaganda model was born in the Cold War period, the current academic circles have doubts about the use of this ancient model. However, the use of the propaganda model in this study proves the powerful effect of the propaganda model in the current social media public opinion environment research. Therefore, future researchers can consider conducting more research from the perspective of the combination of social media and propaganda model.

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