

The Image Narrative and Innovative Communication of Hero of the Times

-- Taking the WeChat Public Website of People's Daily as an Example

Kexin Jiang, Jing Li

Shaanxi University of Science and Technology, Xi 'an, 710021, China

Abstract. Mainstream media are paying more and more attention to the importance of image journalism in their innovative news reporting. This paper analyses the mainstream media's pictorial narrative of the heroes of the times and their image construction strategies through the pictorial coverage of the heroes of the times on the WeChat public website of the People's Daily. The main focus is on the photographic composition, image colour and rhetoric of the heroes of the times, analyzing the innovations in contemporary heroic image narratives and their implications for Internet communication.

Keywords: People's Daily WeChat Public Website; Hero of the Times; Graphic narrative; Innovative communication.

1. Introduction

With the deep development of media integration, the text-driven content production of traditional paper media has gradually shifted to the exploration of visual news in new media, and images have become important news materials. Images are silent visual texts, as W.J.T. Michel argues in Image Theory, "At the roof of the idea "image/text" in both psychoanalysis and film theory is the figure of a heterogeneous field of (self)representation and the process by which its disjunctions are at once concealed and revealed. "[1] Yet the news is reported in pictorial texts, which assume the function of conveying a textual narrative in a comprehensive and multi-layered manner. The images combine aesthetic photography with down-to-earth documentation, breaking away from the textual content layout dominated by copying, adapting, and carrying traditional media texts. Through a stylized and differentiated route, it conveys the cultural value of image narratives and opens up a visual communication model for mainstream media.

Among the many mainstream media exploring image journalism, the WeChat public website of the People's Daily, an organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, which mainly publishes news and news commentary, is more typical in its image coverage. After a revamp on New Year's Day 2019, the artistry, spatiality and newsworthiness of news images on People's Daily's WeChat public website have been enhanced. Moreover, as a new phenomenon, the pictorial coverage of the heroes of the times has an important role in presenting heroic images and promoting the spirit of heroism. Starting from the images of heroes published on the WeChat public website of People's Daily, this article attempts to analyze the construction of the image of heroes by image reporting and the innovative communication of heroes through the image narrative approach.

2. The Pictorial Narrative of the New Age Hero and its Image Construction

2.1 Balanced narratives of folk heroes

Folk heroes are ordinary people who see justice in their everyday lives and choose to give a helping hand in times of crisis. The People's Daily WeChat public website reported on many representative folk heroes, such as Razinibayka, who died saving a child who fell into a frozen river; Liu Yining, an art student who blocked a knife with his bare hands but could no longer play the piano; the journalist who approached the thugs to save a hostage, and Master Dong, who advised passengers to take a

nucleic acid test to interrupt the chain of transmission of the epidemic. Their heroic deeds have been widely circulated through images.

When reporting on the personal deeds of folk heroes, People's Daily WeChat focuses on describing the scene with documentary images of "live surveillance + follow-up interviews", while following up on the daily life of the individual heroes to balance the rhythm of the graphic narrative.

In "Knocked continuously with a safety hammer, he stopped in pain to save 39 people!" released on January 15, 2021, in which surveillance motion pictures restore the entire process of a male passenger violently hitting the driver Li Cai on the head with an onboard safety hammer. The body language of the driver, who quickly grabs the steering wheel to prevent loss of control of the vehicle in the face of sudden violence, can be clearly seen in the monitor motion picture, which has a strong visual impact. The news report places the interview photo of Li Cai's bandaged head at the end, pointing to the state of the hero's life after the unexpected event, balancing the audience's psychology and playing a positive role in guiding mainstream culture with images and stabilizing the real ecology.

2.2 Visual metaphors for combat heroes in images

News images have a visual metaphorical function." The 'image' or metaphor, when the proximity of two terms (one obvious, the other less so) calls for imagination and discovery in response to the unquestionable commonality between them, can also be a very rich, unexpected, creative and even cognitively empowering form of expression." [2] In particular, the presentation of images of war heroes, soldiers defending their country and medical personnel fighting on the front line today can trigger retrospective memory points and become an important form of visual rhetoric. The WeChat public website of the People's Daily has reported a large number of images related to combat heroes, such as the border guards in the Karakorum Mountains, the two police officers who died in the fight against drugs, Zhang Congshun and his son Zhang Ziquan; Wang Wei, the defender of the sea and air in the South China Sea; the epidemic fighter Wu Xiaoyan and academician Zhong Nanshan. A review of these popular pictorial representations of combat heroes reveals a distinctive metaphorical character in their content. When viewing the images, the audience can perceive the subject's emotions through details such as the geographical environment in which the person is located and their facial expressions, and receive the visual power conveyed by the image medium, guiding the positive transmission of social emotions.

President Xi Jinping pointed out at the All-Army Political Work Conference on October 31, 2014, that history cannot be forgotten and that the heroic sacrifices of soldiers are always worthy of respect and remembrance. The People's Daily WeChat public website provokes audiences to remember heroes through visual metaphors of heroic acts of sacrifice. In "This film was shown for one person only! This last gesture brings tears to the eyes", in which the image shows the back of the old man Li Huawu, an anti-American aid veteran, raising his disabled arm in salute after watching the film "Changjin Lake". The composition of the photo combines the back of the old man with the film's caption "The great spirit of resistance to the U.S.A. is everlasting! The great martyrs of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army will never be forgotten!" This is a metaphor for the blood of the soldiers in the revolutionary era, which has led to a happy life today.

2.3 A storytelling narrative of a hero in a specialist field

The People's Daily WeChat focuses on people who have made significant achievements in science, medicine and education, digging up the stories behind the people and using image news for feature stories. Whether it is Yu Min, the father of the hydrogen bomb, Yuan Longping, is an expert in hybrid rice breeding. Tu Youyou, a Nobel Prize winner in medicine. Zhang Guimei, a female high school headmaster deep in the mountains, or Zhai Zhigang, Wang Yaping and Ye Fuguang, who boarded Shenzhou VII to explore the universe, their stories are all of the great propaganda and educational significance.

As the General Secretary of the Central Political Bureau noted at the 30th collective study, "we should accelerate the creation of a Chinese narrative system and discourse, use Chinese theory to

explain Chinese practice, use Chinese practice to sublimate Chinese theory, create new concepts, new categories, and new expressions that integrate China and abroad, and convey the Chinese story more clearly and fully." [4] In its pictorial coverage of these heroes in their fields of expertise, People's Daily WeChat focuses on the coherence of the content, the storytelling of the images and the cumulative aggregation effect of the character material. Since November 30, 2019, the WeChat public website of People's Daily has published a series of image-based reports on Zhang Guimei, linking her educational career into complete storytelling imagery, outlining the storyline of a complete timeline and showing Zhang Guimei's deeds and spirit in all aspects. The People's Daily WeChat public website uses a coherent image narrative to interpret localized hero stories in various fields of expertise for the news audience, creating a popular image of heroes in the new media environment.

3. Innovation in the narrative of the heroic image of the times

3.1 Aesthetics of composition with new media tendencies

In recent years, photographic images in the mainstream media have been broadly divided between everyday displays and artistic photography, clearly distinguishing between folk photography and media images. Artistic photography in the mainstream media emphasizes the role of photographic techniques in news reporting, often using visual and close-up images for photographic compositions. In terms of innovation in the reporting of heroic images, the picture of Zhong Nanshan on the high-speed train to Wuhan (Fig. 1) in the report "These 51 pictures make people want to cry" was published and widely disseminated on WeChat and Weibo, triggering a multitude of retweets and comments, with a single WeChat article receiving 100,000+ views. New media is able to quantify audience feedback that reflects the ability to communicate images and the effectiveness of communication in a way that traditional paper media cannot match. This photo of 84-year-old academic Zhong Nanshan using the high-speed train to catch up on his sleep uses an anthropomorphic perspective and a large diagonal composition to extend the range of vision in the relatively long carriage, showing the humanistic care and strong "heroism complex" of a doctor.



Fig. 1 Academician Zhong Nanshan on the train to Wuhan

3.2 Visual differentiation of image colors

In new media imagery, the color of the image is different from the norm, breaking the audience's perceptions and 'rediscovering' the expressive meaning of the image. The People's Daily's WeChat public number, published on January 29, 2019, "The whole army hangs images of heroes and models,

officially launched! , using images of heroes such as Zhang Sid, Dong Cunrui, Huang Jiguang, Suning and Lei Feng printed by the Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission to promote the glorious deeds of heroes. Based on the style of paintings created in the 1950s and 1960s, this image is painted in oil with highly saturated, bright oil colors, evoking the heroic contributions and sacrifices of the war years, and inspiring admiration. The images break down the natural symbolism of colour into a package designed for inward communication in the process of image perception, restoring the minimalist label of colour prominence and making the historical discourse of images more visible.

In addition, the People's Daily WeChat public website's coverage of deceased heroes features a coherent news content output with contrasting visual images in both colour and black and white to show past and present stories, respectively. This storied concatenation of images enhances the audience's perception of colour and provokes a sense of engagement with the hero's life experiences.

3.3 The rhetorical nature of heroic pictures

News images are highly rhetorical, and the rhetorical use of pictorial symbols with similar thematic content can deepen the impression of the audience. "Clear love, as evidenced by the stones of Karakorum!" published on February 22, 2021, on the WeChat public website of the People's Daily (Fig. 2), shows stones of various shapes and sizes with the national emblem, national flag, party flag, and geographically marked scenery and patriotic words painted by border guards and soldiers. Karakorum's stones symbolize the warriors' oath, symbolising their loyalty to the Party, their steadfastness and their determination to defend the country. These are pictorial symbols that stir up strong patriotic feelings. It can be said that the use of image rhetoric enables the audience to quickly grasp the image's message and comprehend its rhetorical meaning in the shortest possible time.



Fig. 2 Stones in the Karakorum Mountains

4. The contemporary value of innovative communication of heroic images

4.1 Constructing the discursive nodes inherent in images to spread patriotic content

The so-called "discourse nodes" in the communication sense are keywords that are summarised by the mainstream media as reflecting the culture and ideology of the country. The critical positioning of our mainstream media as a discourse node dominated by Chinese thinking can lead to the content of integrated media articles and image reports. Since the outbreak of the New Crown epidemic in 2020, mainstream media have integrated heroic images into their new media communication platforms, reinforcing the spiritual power of heroes through the content nodes of images, such as coverage of the country's concerted fight against the epidemic, which can guide audiences to focus on heroes and enhance patriotic feelings. In the face of history, "The images, sounds, smells and sensations have their own independent existence and identity, and yet at the same time they are part of our bodies, the image worlds inside us and our desire." [5] The combination of anti-epidemic and image-contextualized content that demonstrates the spirit of heroism makes the heroic image a

common value pursuit and spiritual pillar for the entire population, transforming it into a permanent common national memory.

4.2 Leveraging technological innovation to enhance the effectiveness of news communication in the post-information age

The advent of the post-information age has made the narrowcasting concept the dominant content creation in the all-media image. The expansion of the reach of the mass media's reach implies a change in the individualized content of the narrowcasting mindset. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out during the 12th collective study of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2019 that "full media has continued to develop, with the emergence of full media, holographic media, full media, full-effect media, and information that is ubiquitous, omnipresent and unused." [6]

When the People's Daily WeChat public website reported on the image of heroes, the use of full-media image technology, breaking through the boundaries of time and space, physical, subject, and traditional functions, and diversifying the communication patterns of information on the receiving end of individuals became the main tone of new media development. "The post-information age will remove the limits of geography, just as 'hypertext' broke free of the limits of printed space. Digital life will increasingly not need to rely on a specific time and place, and now even transmitting 'locations' is becoming possible." [7] For the third year in a row, the WeChat public website of People's Daily used H5 technology to mobilize the whole society to provide clues for the search for the martyrs' families. Images, motion pictures, short videos, comics, H5 and other full-media communication methods to spread the images of heroes, achieving the integration of multi-platform content redistribution. Meanwhile, image information is changed from one-way display to two-way interactive communication, which is conducive to the technical changes in the narrowcasting format and enhances the audience stickiness of mainstream media under the Internet platform.

4.3 A silent language of pictures to clarify the inner emotions of heroic images

The mainstream media in the Internet environment has explored multiple forms of traditional language and image combination communication. The text-dominated image model is gradually becoming the main way of visually receiving news content. The WeChat public website of the People's Daily reported on heroic images in a language diagram that met the needs of young people to receive fragmented information at the high-intensity pace of their lives and accurately conveyed the intent of the article. The use of screenshots of audience comments to highlight public attitudes to events is a new way of combining language and graphics. "Today, Yuan Longping's statue is filled with flowers", published by the WeChat public website of People's Daily on September 23, 2021, intersperses the traditional text-driven speech picture mode with screenshots of netizens' comments on the microblogging platform in a silent state, combined with comments from WeChat users, to convey the nation's mourning and remembrance of Yuan. Silent Language Graphics aims to break the user experience limited by the platform through an interactive format, explaining the connotations of hero images to all people and creating an emotional echo of empathy.

5. Conclusion: The value and significance of the dissemination of images of heroes of our time

In recent years, the reading habits of new media users have changed, resulting in the emergence of the era of image reading. Through the narrative and communication model of images, mainstream media is actively recreating its "first-reporter status". This phenomenon not only facilitates the mainstream media's initiative to filter, clean and integrate the Internet environment but also facilitates the transformation of content from text transmission to visual communication, reflecting the multi-dimensional shift of news from "words to inform" to "pictures to impress". Visual symbols are only a medium and a way of expression. The core remains the subject matter recorded by the visual

symbols, the emotional atmosphere expressed and the story of the scene conveyed. However, the expansion of visual communication of images needs to be accompanied by textual aids to avoid the inertia of superficial understanding caused by progressively deeper communication of images. In recent years, the practice of mainstream media hero reporting has focused on innovation, as exemplified by the WeChat public website of People's Daily, with the aid of images, expressing heroes' character traits and rich inner worlds as ordinary individuals by tying emotions, actions and scenes together, encouraging audiences to feel patriotic. It can be seen that improving news presentation in terms of the audiovisual experience of mainstream media and the audience's demand for new media will certainly promote better development of mainstream media in new media platforms.

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