Study on characters reports of mainstream media of the COVID-19 from a semiotic perspective

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Abstract. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, the mainstream media have produced multi-angle and all-round character reports. In order to study the mainstream media's strategy of character reporting in COVID-19, and to make recommendations for the mainstream media to optimize their strategies. This study, adopting a semiotic perspective, uses content analysis to analyse the content of 186 media reports from People's Daily, Xinhua Daily and China Youth Daily during the 76 days from 23 January 2020 when Wuhan was closed to the public to 8 April 2020 when the city was unsealed. This study derived the basic composition of characters in mainstream media coverage, and also analysed the characteristics and tendencies in mainstream media character coverage based on this, and found that the mainstream media adopted a civilian perspective and a comprehensive character composition in this public health event; it showed similar characteristics in terms of reporting style, and overall showed strong coding characteristics.

Keywords: Character reporting; Semiotics; Mainstream media; COVID-19.

1. Introduction

After the outbreak of the COVID-19, mass of content in online public opinion took on a negative stance, causing great distress to the epidemic prevention work. In the new media environment, where the public opinion environment, media layout and communication paths have changed dramatically, how to shape the media image of people through character reports, convey mainstream values, inform progress and help fight the epidemic has become the highlight, focus and difficulty in the news reporting .

"The construction of a media image is a production activity led by the mass media." [1] In the pre-planning of character reporting, mainstream media must consider constructing which character' media images can improve the communication effect, and how to construct media images to enhance the infectiousness and readability of the reports. In terms of character selection, some scholars have researched the characteristics of pluralism in reporting in COVID-19 based on market-oriented media [2]; while in terms of character building, some scholars have explored the ways of constructing media images of typical figures [3] and some scholars have explored the reporting strategies of health care workers. [4] However, relatively less attention has been paid, in the past literature, to the production of news texts and the process of symbolisation.

In the process of constructing and symbolising media images by news content producers, meaning is produced and communicated to the recipient, and when the meaning is accepted by the recipient, the desired communication effect is achieved. In journalistic communication, people stories often combine the 'signifier' of people, i.e. their appearance, activities and words, with the deeper 'signified' of people, i.e. their qualities, values and ideas, in order to construct symbols of people. However, in the process of actual communication, there may be inconsistencies in coding and translation, so it is important to plan the content and construction of the 'signifier' in advance, so that the character symbols meet the purpose of communication at different levels of 'signified'. The process of symbol construction is analysed. The process of analysing the construction of symbols is also an analysis of news texts, which can help to explore the biases and motivations behind news discourse in the process of representing and constructing reality. In conclusion, it is also significant to interpret the construction of media images of epidemic figures by the mainstream media from a semiotic perspective.

2. Research questions

Based on the issues mentioned above, this study will use the analysis of mainstream media coverage of the epidemic to draw a group portrait of the figure mapping of media coverage in the COVID-19, derive the participation of multiple character in COVID-19, depict the characteristics of the identity and reporting style of mainstream media assignment coverage in major public health events, and use this to explore the mode of construction of figure media images conducted by mainstream media, and then study the coding patterns of symbolisation, as well as the ways in multiple energetic meanings (episodic meanings, embedded meanings, and myth meaning) are produced and the deeper reasons behind them.

3. Research Methodology and Process

Based on the semiotic perspective, this study will adopt the content analysis method and take 192 articles on people in People's Daily, Xinhua Daily and China Youth Daily from January 23rd to April 8th as the sample for content analysis, and after screening, the total number of valid samples is 186, including People's Daily (65), Xinhua News (61) and China Youth Daily (60). The content analysis category will analyse the way and meaning of the construction of "character symbols" in their media images in terms of basic information, report forms and textual contents according to the research questions and framework theory, and the two coders will produce valid data for descriptive statistical analysis after coding and internal reliability testing respectively. The final results are shown in Table 1, and the media images of the characters were then constructed. Afterwards, typical cases were then selected for case studies to explore the underlying reasons behind the strategies adopted in the process of representing and constructing reality in news texts.

Table 1. Statistics relating to mainstream media coverage of people

	Basic information about the characters																**Coverage**											
	Identity in the epidemic						Age						Gender		The Face of the		Type of discourse				Coverage Topics in Focus				Coverage of tonality			
	Medical	Patients	Volunteers	Public	Corporate	General	Children	Juvenile	Youth	Middle age	Elderly	Unknown	Male	Female	Individuals	Groups	Communic	Oral	Special	Exclusive	Life	Work	Emotional	Specific	Proof	Neutral	Not
Number	76	15	26	37	15	17	11	9	98	39	20	9	100	86	102	84	109	36	19	22	34	69	26	57	63	123	0
Percentage	41%	8%	14%	20%	8%	9%	6%	5%	53%	21%	11%	5%	54%	46%	55%	45%	59%	36%	10%	12%	18%	37%	15%	30%	34%	66%	0%

4. Research findings

4.1 Characteristics of the subject of the character reports

4.1.1 A comprehensive and rich sample of characters, from a civilian perspective

In the sample for this study, there were 76 articles (41%) on health care workers, followed by public officials and volunteers, ordinary citizens and patients respectively. The selection of topics ranged from the initial focus on healthcare workers and volunteers to ordinary people from all walks of life, such as the builders of the Vulcan Mountain Hospital, the ferrymen who transported supplies and the hairdressers who provided free services, and basically achieved full coverage in terms of basic demographic variables such as age and gender, with young people and middle-aged people accounting for most of the coverage as they were the main force in the fight against the epidemic. The richness and comprehensiveness of the selection of topics ensures a comprehensive coverage of the progress of the epidemic and reflects the situation of Anti-epidemic for all population.

madopt the grand narrative model of 'family and nation ideals', ignoring the consciousness of individuals in the grand narrative and aiming to build a collective memory with national identity. In the case of the COVID-19, the study found that the mainstream media focused more on the ordinary people involved in the front line of the epidemic, including frontline medical staff, people who stood by their posts, volunteers, etc. The reports from a civilian perspective in special situations, while retaining the symbolic characteristics of the characters, make them more rounded and 'grounded', easier to interpret and identify with, giving audiences a stronger sense of immersion, and playing a great role in improving communication effects and guiding public opinion.

4.1.2 Individual and group in parallel, constructing group memory

The two main categories of people stories are individual and group, with 102 individual reports (54%) and 84 group reports (46%) in the sample. The individual stories are mainly focused on a specific person, while the group stories are mostly about similar and concentrated groups of people, such as health care workers and volunteers, and the media image of a group is constructed by placing the individual in the group. This part of the portrait report tends to select the common parts of the characters in the 'signifier', so that the 'signified' established is representative, reducing the uncertainty of the audience in the process of decoding, and the deeper meaning can be more easily conveyed through the surface text.

The combination of individual and group portraits creates a matrix of content that breaks the limitations of the previous coverage of single content, and enables readers to gain a deeper understanding of the people covered through the coverage of their similar but not identical experiences in the context of a particular era, thus achieving the desired communication effect.

4.2 Characteristics of character reporting strategies

4.2.1 A rich variety of text types: correspondence is predominant, with extensive use of oral narratives and plainly authentic narratives.

This study uses Xie and Chen's [5] definition of the classification of news reports, which classifies character reports into news, feature stories, newsletters, interviews, surveys, and narrative reviews. Based on this, and taking into account the actual situation, this study selected newsletters, oral reports, feature articles and interviews as the categories for content analysis. In the statistical sample for this project, there were 109 newsletters (59%), 36 oral accounts (19%), 19 feature articles (10%), and 22 interviews (12%).

The different genre choices also reflect the mainstream media's orientation towards the construction of social reality. Most of the reports use newsletters to report news events in detail and to create character symbols, which are more grounded and easier to interpret and identify with. The experiences of those involved in the fight against the epidemic are more often reported in the form of first-person oral accounts, with colloquial language and storytelling to make the meaning they give more accessible to the audience; reports on the personalities of authorities generally take the form of

dialogues and interviews, which can establish the authoritative and rational media image of the personalities while conveying the message of epidemic prevention; for reports on the typical personalities of experts, the mainstream media also consciously carry out the establishment of opinion leaders at special times, such as the all-round reports on Nanshan Zhong and Wenhong Zhang, etc. The diversity of reporting genres is conducive to expanding the scope of news discussion, advancing in tandem with hot events, guiding public opinion according to different needs, stabilising public sentiment, and making the coverage of personalities reach people's hearts.

4.2.2 Reports presenting similar styles and content expressions: focusing on real life and moving people with real emotions

In a semiotic perspective, any text is divided into two unfolding directions, the combinatory axis and the convergent axis. According to Saussure, texts produce meaning through the combination of symbols, and the ideational act of any symbol must unfold in a biaxial relationship. When multiple texts are biased towards the aggregation axis, the text becomes richer in style and more varied in its ideational levels, thus leading to a wide decoding space; while when the bias of a symbolic text tends towards the combination axis, the content of the text tends to be uniform in style, so that the arrangement is conducive to the transmission of a particular when the bias of the symbolic text is close to the combinatorial axis, the content of the text is unified and the arrangement is conducive to the transmission of a particular value or content.

According to the results of the content analysis, the combined axis of the reports of people in the COVID-19 is more homogeneous, which leads to a more uniform expression of content and themes in the texts. The largest number of stories in the sample focused on the work of the person covered (69) and on a specific event (57), accounting for 37% and 30%, followed by the life of the person covered (34) and finally by the emotions of the person covered (26). The overall distribution is relatively even. In terms of the choice of topics, it can be seen that, due to the negative emotions such as anxiety and panic generated by the public at the early stage of the outbreak of the COVID-19, the mainstream media hope to portray typical figures through character reports, so as to achieve the exemplary effect of gathering strength. Therefore, the selection of the discourse carries similar aims and characteristics. Apart from introducing the work done by the characters in fighting the epidemic, it also focuses on the touching stories and sincere emotions of the characters in the context of the times. Although the uniaxial operation makes the multiple texts appear monolithic and boring, it effectively serves the mainstream media's communication purpose of helping to prevent the epidemic through reporting, while the diversity of the characters chosen also dissolves this singularity in expression and textual treatment.

4.2.3 Strong coding of characters and strong links between meaning and symbols

In studying how the mainstream media constructs the media image of characaters, this study focuses on the process of symbolic code arrangement and symbolic meaning formation, symbols are the product of social practice and a method of reproducing social reality. The strength of the meaning attributed by the encoder determines whether the meaning is transmitted and whether the media image is effectively constructed.

The study found that mainstream media coverage of personalities was characterised by strong coding and a clear definition of the media image of personalities. In terms of the tone of coverage, the reports were all concentrated in positive (63 articles) and neutral (123 articles) tones, with no negative or dubious articles yet. In addition, in terms of specific textual content, the mainstream media used mostly positive terms for the characters, indicating the identity of the characters while establishing a strong link between the energetic meaning of the characters and their spiritual symbolism and symbolic meaning, such as "selfless dedication", "not afraid of risks", "responsible" and "responsible". "responsibility", etc. Even in texts with a predominantly neutral tone, a large number of positive and affirmative textual symbols appear. In the study sample, despite the differences in content, choice of material and genre, the overall symbolic construction and meaning attributed to the texts are generally the same. The strong coding of the media coverage of the

characters provides a clear guide for the audience to decode, so the constructed media images of the characters can be interpreted by the audience with the same meaning outside the news field.

5. Character symbolic exclusion in mainstream media

After textual analysis of a sample of specific stories, the study found that some journalists produce content that creates exclusion between symbols, so mainstream media need to refine and deliberate on the referring symbols that appear in their stories. When shaping the symbols of characters, it is important to consider whether the media image will be interfered with by the content of the text used. If there is an exclusion between signifiers, the encoder and decoder will decode in different fields, which will hinder the mythological meaning behind it, then the meaning given by the communicator will be suppressed by the meaning perceived by the audience itself, resulting in an adversarial decoding situation.

For example, in a report published by China News Network on 9 February 2020, 'Hair is too much of an obstacle', two pictures of female healthcare workers on deployment and a scene of female healthcare workers cutting their hair were used in this story, which led to questions being raised about the willingness of those involved. In term of this topic, the local mainstream media, Daily Gansu, published a report on a similar topic, which prompted the public to speak out and resist the report too, arguing that it was 'hurtful to women'. In the planning stage of the report, it was hoped to create a symbol of the female health care worker, and the mythical meaning behind it was 'willingness to give and sacrifice', while when analysing the nature of the report, it was clear that the key conflict was between the 'female' role and the 'shaving' role. When analysing the nature of the news, it is clear that the key conflict is between the role of the 'woman' and the act of 'shaving the head'. Therefore in dealing with this conflict, it is important to anticipate the ways in which the audience might decode the character. This study suggests that the audience will comprehend this report from at least two perspectives, 'female' and 'medical', and therefore needs to ensure that the user is receptive to the coder's intentions from both perspectives. In the role of the 'women', they make sacrifices, and in the role of the 'nurses', the reasons for these sacrifices must be explained. It is more important to show the bravery and dedication of the characters than the painful expressions of the haircut, thus reducing the audience's resistance and avoiding ambiguous decoding.

In the planning stage of a story about a major public health event, the first thing that mainstream media need to consider is whether the content is consistent with the media's communication style and whether there will be ambiguity when the content is decoded by the audience. In addition to the above-mentioned gender symbols and the exclusion of the fight against the epidemic, some of the texts in the study also deal with the relationship between doctors and patients, the conflict between the fight against the epidemic and normal working life, etc., and need to be coded correctly when producing the content.

6. Conclusion

In the context of the fight against the epidemic, mainstream media make timely adjustments in character reports, taking into account the needs of their audiences and shaping the media image of people from a civilian perspective, and through the professional behaviour of the characters in the group portrait, the participation and spirituality of ordinary people in the fight against the epidemic can be better demonstrated. As a key bridge between the government and the public, the mainstream media also need to consider whether the coding guidance in the preliminary planning matches the behaviour of the audience in decoding, and how to cleverly use the reporting strategy to make a character report that suits the needs of the audience and the times, which also poses a new challenge to journalists.

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