

The Guiding Power of Media on Public Opinion in the Internet Age -- Focus on the Construction of National Image

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Abstract: The change in media communication methods has led to a transformation in the audience and the subject and object of information. The diversity of information sources has made everyone become a producer and influencer, which has resulted in a multitude of voices and the multilateralism of public opinion on the Internet, posing a greater challenge to the media guidance power. The focus of this paper is on the impact of media guidance on public opinion, especially in how countries use public opinion to construct their national image. It begins with a literature review of previous researches on media changes, the relationship between media guidance power and public opinion, and the self-definition and other-definition of national images. Then, news articles from China and the United States are selected to analyze the performance of media in shaping their national images through content analysis and comparative analysis, and summarize the generality and feasibility of media guidance of public opinion. There is a problem of small sample size as quantitative analysis is unfeasible due to the timeliness and large number of news items. It is hoped that better solutions can be explored in future research.

Keywords: media guidance, public opinion, national image construction

1. Introduction

The Internet era promotes the further development and diversification of communication technologies, from the “one-to-many”, monopolistic mass communication to “many-to-many” networked communication. The media ecology has entered an era of Omnimedia. Subsequently, the new media communication platform has bridged various differences, promoted exchanges at home and abroad, and demonstrated pluralistic participation, but also led to the diversification, complication and irrationality of public opinion, posing great challenges to the guidance of media. Especially in the globalization under the gradual development of information technology, countries pay more attention to the construction of national image from the Internet perspective. With the support of Internet, international news events convey a political ideology with a different focus and bias from traditional expressions, thus influencing the change of the international political picture, putting forward new requirements for enhancing the guidance of public opinion of mainstream media. At present, China’s international image is facing a situation of “other-definition” rather than “self-definition”. This kind of international discourse is not in line with its increasing international status. Therefore, the power

of media guidance needs to be explored to balance the relationship between the media and the audience.

This article focuses on the relationship between media guidance and public opinion in the Internet era, especially their impacts on the construction of national image. Through a literature review on the transformation of national image construction, factors influencing media guidance and the influence of media and public opinion on national image shaping, I found that the previous researches lack a categorization of guidance methods. The essence of the study is to explore how to tell the story of a country to the audience in order to achieve a positive image in the new Internet Age.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Transformation of National Image Construction under the Internet Perspective

Toffler mentioned the conflict and pressure as well as the rebirth and transformation brought by the wave of change [1]. He believed that the traditional group communication tools would be replaced by non-group communication tools with distinct characteristics in the revolution of information technology. The traditional unidirectional mass communication will be replaced by multi-directional networked communication, following the characteristics of wider dissemination scope, lower threshold, and more participation freedom. Subsequently, to some extent, results in the transformation of national image construction under the characteristics of the Internet.

Zhang & Jia summarized the transformation of the construction of new national image in three aspects: from written description to visual presentation, from single voice to multiple communication, and from information transmission to consciousness output [2]. The first two aspects can be interpreted as the expansion of communication channels and the deep integration of media [3], which symbolized a new Internet era of building a platform of multi-dimensional association to achieve the socialization, intelligentization and visualization of information dissemination. The third aspect is the core of today's international news communication. Gramsci defined ideology as false consciousness that represents the ruling class's interests depicted by media [4]. The Internet has changed this circumstance, making the government's propaganda dock with international Internet users directly. Accordingly, the purpose of communication developed into a product of cultural invasion and mutual penetration of ideology [2].

2.2. The Guidance Power of Media on Public Opinion

The impact of media on public opinion cannot be disputed [5]. News media can influence people's views on a certain event through copywriting or pictures. Li & Song linked the power of media with the power of discourse, and concluded that "the news media, as the subject, guides the audience as the object to redefine the world and construct order by virtue of its own discourse power" [6]. Shi cited Mark Granovetter's theory of Weak Ties. Given the characteristics of shallow intimacy and low emotional strength, weak ties can provide extensive and diversified information that allows the audience to revise and supplement the original ideas so that they are more valuable than strong ties [7]. The realization of the power media guidance is first reflected in the public's recognition of the news facts explained by the media. However, some phenomena appearing on the Internet, like the chain reaction caused by weak ties, make it more difficult to control the public to agree with the "facts" published by the media.

However, the media's ability to guide public opinion does not diminish. Lamp & Kepplinger found that "The intensity and tone of media Coverage directly influenced public opinion... the more often the media cover an issue, the more people believe it to be important; and the more often the media present certain opinions, and the more people adopt these opinions [8]." In addition, the specific model or framework of certain news media, which means the organization of the information

conveyed by the media will affect the judgment of the audience. For example, Wilkinson summarized the interpretive frameworks and stylistic conventions adopted by news media reports of catastrophic events, the components of which can be inferred to guide the audience's assessment of disaster risk [9]. It is also difficult for public opinion not to be influenced by the media. Western countries advocate "independent media", "freedom of the press" and "objectivity and neutrality", but capital will control the press and public opinion when media threaten the security of bourgeois ideology. Similarly, China's mainstream media also assume the responsibility of guiding the social opinions, which is also a priority of social public interests [10]. It is difficult to get rid of the artificial control of public opinion by the media, which proposed demands on the media for thinking about how to guide the construction of national image and positive public opinion, instead of just blocking and restricting speech and other means that cannot fundamentally solve the problem.

2.3. The "Self-definition" and "Other-definition" in National Image Construction

The national image is a product of the flow of information and the perception of a country by the outside world, which has been defined in a variety of ways by previous scholars. Boulding saw the national image as a combination of a country's perception of itself and other actors in the international system, the result of the input and output of information, as well as a "well-structured information capital" [11]. Guan concluded that the national image is a composite, a general evaluation and identification of the state itself, its behaviour and the results of its activities by both external and internal public [12]. Although scholars have different definitions of national image, it is certain that national image is an important part of soft power that includes both domestic and foreign perception. Zhang defined national image in relation to the media as "the output of a message emanating from a sovereign state system in the course of a campaign that is mirrored by the public under certain conditions and through a particular medium" [13]. Xu argued more directly that the national image is the image presented in news speech coverage, reflecting the key position of the media in the shaping of country's image [14].

The construction of a good international image therefore requires finding and making good use of various media platforms. Mass media coverage constructs a virtual reality for audiences to use as a reference and basis for understanding reality, but this mimetic environment has limitations and contrasts with the real world to a degree that affects audiences' perceptions [15]. If audiences do not have extensive direct experience with an issue or event, their understanding of the issue or event relies heavily on the narrative of the news media, i.e. the pseudo-environment constructed by the news media [16]. In the multiple open virtual fields of the Internet, however, the shaping of national image is a complex process of constant cognition, encoding and decoding by both communicators and receivers, rather than a real and objective response of a country [17]. Therefore, the shaping of national image can be manipulated to a certain extent. Li describes the manipulation of national image construction using the media as "the result of a mutual game between self-definition and other-definition, depending on the direction and strength of the respective forces of two of them. [18]"

The national image is shaped by specific actions of the government and various sectors of the population, i.e. the "self-definition" of the country. The development of national identity starts with self-definition [19]. A country can enhance its national image through its national media if it follows the right journalistic guidelines and conveys positive values. However, if the media fails to play a positive role, it can also damage the international image [20]. "Other-definition" is the image of a country that is presented in the press of other countries, which is often subjective [21], being affected by political, informed and human interventions, and can be biased in its portrayal of other countries, thus influencing the audience's judgement. Thus, differences emerge between self-definition and other-definition, but they each contains a part of the truth [22]. In the Internet age, therefore, a higher demand is placed on the country's media for "self-definition". However, it was found that there is no

categorization of the existing forms of media direction, which could be used to draw up a number of “routines” to deal with “other-definition” and to improve “self-definition”.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

Before deciding on a research methodology, I first analyse the commonalities and differences between “self-definition” and “other-definition” in journalism through the above literature review, then categorize and summarize how effective media direction can achieve the desired effect on public opinion. From this it can be seen that it is by reading and analyzing news reports from different countries to draw conclusions, hence the use of qualitative research methods, outlined here as content analysis, documentary research and comparative research.

Content analysis is the process of searching for news reports published by different countries about their own and other countries over the last five years. This is done by first collecting background information on positions, international relations and the context of the event, and then analyzing the content of the text for the positive and negative meanings of the words used, their frequency of occurrence and their contextual tone, and summarizing the commonalities and differences, but here the number of countries should be limited to two or three to ensure that they are not too broad.

Literature research refers to a search of literature databases to analyse previous research on "self-definition" and "other-definition" as an expression of media leadership in the Internet era, to find out the impact on public opinion and to analyse whether it can be used to inform the classification and effect of public opinion in my research.

The comparison analysis method refers to a separate comparison of the characteristics of news reporting in two countries. In this case, China and the United States are chosen to analyse the various manifestations of media leadership from the perspectives of high/low-context, style and attitude, and to analyze the different measures taken by different countries between "self-definition" and "other-definition", and to explore whether there is anything to learn from each other.

In order to be more precise in this study, it may be possible to analyse the content of news reports in a quantitative way, for example by summarizing the frequency of occurrence of a certain lexical term as a criterion for determining media strategy, but the actual situation is subject to the process and results of the analysis.

3.2. Research Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. The first is the sheer volume of news coverage. With all the different news stories happening every day, it is difficult to sift through them and select the more typical cases, and with so many media and platforms in each country, they may end up being analyzed by the mainstream media only. Secondly, the categorization of guidance strategies is somewhat subjective, but where possible, I will seek to see if there is any such categorization in previous research to draw on.

3.3. Research questions

In light of the above, the previous studies have gradually changed their research following the change in communication. Most of them are from theoretical dimensions, mainly analyzing the factors and effects of media guidance on public opinion and how to lead a positive media guidance, especially on the “self-definition” and deal with the problem of “other-definition”. However, there is not much literature on the analysis and classification of the content of news coverage or other forms of media guidance. Ju’s analysis of the construction model of the official website of China Daily gave me some

ideas. Although there are thousands of news reports, it is possible to extract and categorize some cases, which to some extent fills a gap in the previous study.

Through the above analysis, my research questions are presented here:

- 1) Focusing on news coverage, what are the similarities and differences in media guidance between countries in self- and other-definition?
- 2) From what perspectives can we summarize the ways of effective media guidance and how to gradually guide the audience to achieve the desired effect on public opinion?

4. Findings

4.1. Textual Analysis

To make the contrast more obvious, China and the United States, the two countries with widely different styles and some political conflicts have been selected here.

In international news coverage, the media pays more attention to political events, such as economic developments, general elections, regional conflicts, etc. In November 2021, China and the United States engaged in a heated game of news articles on the issue of nuclear weapons. A selection of news from the authoritative US media, CNN and FOX, and a selection of Global Times and China Daily from China.

It started with the submission of an annual report on Military and Security Developments involving the People's Republic of China in 2021 from the US Department of Defense to the US Congress. The report stresses that China has gone further than expected in expanding its "nuclear Arsenal" in order to maximize its military capabilities, followed by an overwhelming amount of coverage and propaganda on the social media platform.

4.1.1. The Perspective of the United States

Here are some news titles: "Pentagon warns China is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal" [23], "Satellite images appear to show China is making significant progress developing missile silos that..." [24], "China's nuclear stockpile growing at 'accelerating pace', will have 1,000 warheads by 2030" [25]. These headlines use adjectives of degree, such as "accelerating", "significant", which are used to give the reader a preconceived and tense idea about China's development of nuclear weapons. Some of the words with an absolute tone are also used, such as "will" and "warn". The US, for its position, has no way of knowing the number of Chinese nuclear weapons being manufactured so its use of "will" rather than "maybe" is inaccurate, but "will", an affirmative tone is more cogent. This is a common practice in the US media to confuse the public opinion. The use of "warn", which is often used to warn of something bad happening, has already classified China's development of nuclear weapons as a threat and interfered with the international implications of China's move.

In the actual press release, the overall tone is set mainly by the use of vocabulary, which is reflected in the use of emotionally-charged words that are clearly positive and derogatory. The paragraphs are taken from the three press releases mentioned above: marks a dramatic increase from the projection in last year's China Military Power report", issued a stark warning about China's military progress stating it amounts to 'one of the largest shifts in global geostrategic power that the world has witnessed'", "China's ongoing development of the silos comes as the country is bolstering its military capabilities significantly", the bolded words here all relatively mdjectives with strong emotion, arguably the highest level of a certain type of emotion, which will have an exaggerated effect to affect readers who are not stand the Chinese position. The audience thus subconsciously believe the seriousness of China's development of nuclear weapons, and a shift in public opinion will occur. The US public opinion guiding strategy is also reflected in the imposition of ideology. For example, the word "aim" appears several times in the news, indicating that China is trying to "deter foreign

intervention” or “surpass US global influence”, and asserting that China “could eventually launch nuclear weapons”. These kinds of claims can only be considered a subjective assumption by the US, but are directly imposed on the purpose of China’s actions. Although there is no evidence to support their certainties, it has the effect of raising tensions with a strong and definite tone. Meanwhile, the similarity at the end of these reports is that they mentioned the sensitive, controversial topics about China, such as COVID-19 and the Taiwan issue. Although not related to the nuclear weapons affair, this rehashing of old stories has a sense of a nightmare repeating, and only serves to reshake the reader’s position, thus holding the partiality of public opinion in this game.

The U.S. attitude is evident, namely that it is hostile to China’s development of nuclear weapons. Since the reported concerns have always been what the implications would be for the United States, like “displace US alliances and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region”, “similar to the United States’ own triad”, “it aims to surpass US global influence”, these sentences also implicitly place China in opposition to the United States, even though the Chinese side has not explicitly stated the purpose of developing nuclear weapons.

4.1.2. The Perspective of China

Through the analysis of Chinese press releases on this matter during the same period, it was concluded that China’s strategy for dealing with the US coverage was to: firstly, pointed out that the perception of United States was “a wild and biased speculation”; secondly, shifting the focus to the US by citing its status as “the largest and most advanced nuclear arsenal in the world” and the US initiatives in international affairs for its own nuclear weapons development; thirdly, contrasting China’s behavior with that of the United States, stating that the purpose of China’s nuclear weapons development” is solely for safeguarding national sovereignty, security and development interests”; finally, concludes with another comparison with the United States, indicating China’s attitude.

Take two releases from Global Times and China Daily as samples, New Pentagon report hypes ‘Chinese nuclear threat’ to serve US hegemonic goals and Pentagon scaremongering in bid to justify US’ aggressive nuclear policy, it can be seen that the Chinese side has changed its usual implicit style of diplomacy and has made a positive counter-attack to the US side. It is also reflected in the diction, which is the same as the American form, using words with strong emotions and degrees. For example, “hype”, “hegemonic”, “scaremonger”, “aggressive” in these titles are all the pejorative terms to show China’s disagreement with the US’ reports.

Without going into too many other examples about vocabulary, here are some of the different ways in which China as a responding party and as the initiator of the conflict are expressed in the news, that is the use of contrast to portray the US as bossier. For example, the use of antonyms: “While the US possesses the world’s largest, most advanced nuclear arsenal” vs “The number of Chinese nuclear warheads is only very small compared to the US’, and China’s means to deliver them are also very limited”, to emphasize the disparity of power between the two sides. The other is the use of data to give the reader a more visual impression: “The US is the biggest nuclear threat in the world, as it owns 5,550 nuclear warheads as of early 2021”, “...and that it may have 1,000 nuclear warheads by the end of the decade...”. To enhance credibility, the data in the Chinese news are cited with the source, like “citing data from international think tanks”, which makes them more convincing than the US figures that are based on mere speculation.

4.2. Contrastive Analysis

Country’s political stand greatly influences the international news reports, but it is important to be consistent in reporting on a particular issue to convince audiences.

In March 2020, The New York Times posted a story on its official social media account about China's lockdown and quarantine policy in Wuhan, accusing that "its campaign has come at great cost to people's livelihoods and personal liberties". At the same time, Italy was also closed, followed by a tweet in which The New York Times praised Italy's closure as "risking its economy in an effort to contain Europe's worst coronavirus outbreak". There are many more instances of double standards in the US media, but such biased reporting can have a sense of inconsistency and affect the credibility of the media. Therefore, netizens from all over the world have commented their own views, many of which were critical of the NYT's tweets, something like "an example of double standard that can be quoted in textbook".

When the mass "Occupy Central" movement took place in Hong Kong in 2014, it was first reported by the Western media as a "citizens' movement for electoral rights" with massive understatement, even though the demonstration had seriously affected the order of Hong Kong. However, when similar Occupy movements occurred in the UK and the US, the media were silent.

The bias in the attitude of the official media is therefore not conducive to the control of public opinion. Everyone has formed their own judgement in the Internet era so that it is no longer a one-way process of receiving information output from the official media. Therefore, the official media should pay attention to the fairness of their reporting, even if there are some political factors, but excessive reporting can lose the dominance of public opinion, which counts against the construction of the national image.

5. Discussion

5.1. Synthesis of Key Results

In the following section we synthesize our results. This study focuses on analyzing the methods through which the media influence public opinion from news reports and the similarities and differences between media self-definition and other-definition. By textual and contrastive analysis, selecting reports on the same event in different countries and analyzing the similarities and differences in the characteristics of the reports to summarize the commonalities of public opinion guiding the construction of national image. In total we proposed four core propositions.

Proposition 1. Vocabulary is the most common means of influencing public opinion.

The media often use exaggerated words to express attitudes, especially words with strong emotional overtones, usually adjectives or adverbs. These words can subliminally influence the reader's judgement, which is in line with Lamp & Kepplinger's findings, the more emphatic they are, the more receptive the audience is [8].

Proposition 2. International news coverage abroad is framed and has a certain uniformity.

China's feedback on the US coverage has a uniform template, with a programmed template for countering the US media coverage one by one, similar to what Wilkinson calls the news format for disaster coverage, which helps to manage the crisis and steer public opinion in the right direction [9].

Proposition 3. Accuracy of news data influences public opinion.

A reference to the source of the data would raise the credibility of the report, whereas data based on speculation would lose credibility and thus affect the international image.

Proposition 4. News perspectives and stands make a difference in reporting, but should be as fair as possible.

Claret shows that informational differences occur in the reporting of self-definition and other-definition, which contain certain truths in each party that are influenced by international political stands [22]. The media should be as impartial as possible in order to be accepted by the public.

5.2. Contributions and Limitations

The contribution of our study is mainly to give a brief overview of the literature on the media guidance, from the difficulties to the possibilities of guiding public opinion; and to focus on the construction of national image influenced by public opinion. In previous studies, national image construction has not been systematically considered as a module, nor has the means used in journalism been analyzed from the texts. Our study makes up for the gap in this field by summarizing the considerations and generalities of public opinion guidance in international image construction, which helps to understand the complex and diverse psychology of public opinion in the Internet era and provides implications for media guidance in national image construction.

Our limitations are obvious to some extent. Firstly, it is less convenient to conduct a quantitative study due to the sheer number of news reports and the feature of a textual attribute study; secondly, two countries with distinctive styles were selected for comparison to make the results of the study apparent, which might have yielded different conclusions if countries with more de-escalated conflicts had been selected; thirdly, the small number of events selected for the sample might have resulted in exceptional cases, but there is still some applicability.

6. Conclusion

The non-group communication triggered by the Internet era has led to a wider and faster spread of information and a richer channel for reception, so public opinion in this era is an explosive change and development, which has put forward higher requirements for the guidance of the news media, especially on the perspective of national image construction in the international stage.

The study begins with a three-pronged approach to the literature on the guiding power of media: first, I summarized the transformation of national image construction in line with changes in communication methods. Then, listed some previous studies on the guiding power of media on public opinion. Finally, it returns to the definition of national image, concluding that the self- and other-definition of national images in the media. In the research phase, reports from both China and the United States were selected as the main objects of analysis, using textual and comparative analysis to explore the impact of the media's approach to public opinion in news reporting in external publicity. The analysis concludes that media guidance influences public opinion mainly through textual vocabulary, the organizational framework of the full text, linguistic style, rigorism and scientificity. It fills a gap in the study of media guidance in shaping a country's national image, and summarizes the way to win public opinion in the battle of journalism generally. At the same time, this study also has certain shortcomings, such as small sample size and lack of quantitative research. It is hoped that in future studies, the sample size can be increased and a variety of types of reports can be selected.

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Appendix:

New Pentagon report hypes "Chinese nuclear threat" to serve US hegemonic goals. (n.d.). Global Times. Retrieved September 19, 2022, from <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1238200.shtml>

Pentagon scaremongering in bid to justify US' aggressive nuclear policy: China Daily editorial. (n.d.). Opinion - Chinadaily.Com.Cn. Retrieved September 19, 2022, from <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202111/08/WS6189117ba310cdd39bc74121.html>