

A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Disaster News in Chinese and American Media

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Mass media has become an important platform for countries to connect with the outside world and exchange information. However, due to the differences in values, beliefs, and conventions of each country, misunderstandings are likely to occur in the processes of reading, translation, and communication. Catastrophic news, as an indispensable part of news reporting, is worth studying, especially the differences in this kind of news between China and American, to find out the cultural reasons leading to inconsistencies. This study selects some of the disaster reports in People's Daily and Washington Post to examine what are reported and how they are reported, and then uses Hofstede's Theory of Cultural Dimension to explore the cultural values reflected in the different features of Chinese and American catastrophic news. The results show that China and the US are quite different in power distance, collectivism or individualism, and uncertainty avoidance.

Keywords: disaster reports, cultural differences, Hofstede's Theory of Cultural Dimension

Introduction

The Significance of the Study

Through the comparative study of the differences between the reports of catastrophe in China and America, we can have some insights into the reports of such events in these two different cultural contexts. With a deeper knowledge, the situations of those areas and people suffering from natural disasters can be effectively conveyed, which is conducive to arousing people's sympathy, making more people and governments devote themselves to disaster relief work, and providing support for disaster areas.

Literature Review

Abroad, many researchers have devoted themselves to the study of disaster coverage since mid-20th century. Crystal and Davy (1969) summarized the features of disaster news reports from a stylistic perspective. Brook (1979) also contributed a lot to the disaster coverage through stylistic study. Hall (1980) finally conducted the study from a socio-cultural perspective. He indicated that the messages in the news are connected with a complicated intention and they are ideology-free. He (1996) stated that the news reporting is a complicated process as it should select and classify topics according to the intention of agents they serve. Cox, Long, Jones, and Handler (2008) published an article, and it researched the disastrous news discourse of forest fires from the perspective of critical discourse analysis.

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The research carried out in China started from mid 1990s. Although started late, Chinese scholars have made considerable progress in this aspect. Ren (2002) used the method of functional stylistics to make a comparative analysis of China and the US aviation collision disaster reports selected from different newspapers. Unlike the schools before, she is almost the first one who compared the disaster news in different social context. Shen (2003) put forward the principle of disaster news. In his view, the news media should avoid carrying content that can easily stimulate readers' senses. Zhang (2007) summarized the writing skills of disaster news based on the first-hand English news corpus. He found that compared with other types of news, disaster news has its unique features in headlines, introductory remarks, and content language.

From the summary of the former researches, it is not difficult to find that most scholars mainly focus on the study in a stylistic or journalistic way instead of the social-cultural way, and this phenomenon highlights the importance of studying disaster news from a cross-cultural perspective.

The Objective and Research Questions of the Study

The objective of this study is to figure out the different characteristics of disaster news between China and America. On this foundation, we try to analyze the intercultural causes result in these differences based on Hofstede's Theory.

In order to achieve the above purpose, the following research questions are put forward:

1. What differences exist between Chinese and American disaster news?
2. What social values are reflected in the differences of news report about disaster events?

Research Method

Data Collection

As the data and citation source of the paper, the authenticity of the information must be guaranteed. The Washington Post is the largest and oldest newspaper in Washington, which gained international prestige, and it is especially good at reporting on domestic political developments. People's Daily is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the CPC. In 1992, it was the top 10 newspapers in the world by UNESCO. Therefore, the news used in the following articles comes from the two websites: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>; <http://www.paper.people.com.cn/>.

In order to make a better comparison, the scope of the materials used for comparison should be determined first. Camp Fire in California and the typhoon "Component" in South China were both natural disasters which endangered the security of lives and property in the afflicted areas. Therefore, the paper focuses on these two disasters, collects 58 reports about Camp Fire from Nov. 9th to Nov. 30th and 56 reports about typhoon from Sep. 12th to Dec. 27th, and then tries to figure out the differences between America and China disaster news.

Research Methodology

This paper mainly adopts quantitative and categorized methods to collect data. Through reading, categorizing, and analyzing the data obtained, the researcher can find out some differences between Chinese and America disaster reports, and use the theories mentioned below to analyze the causes for the differences.

Theoretical Framework

This paper makes use of the Theory of Cultural Dimensions. Hofstede (1980) conducted a survey among 117,000 IBM employees to explore the differences of cultural value in different cultures. He proposed four dimensions for cultural differences study: Power Distance, Collectivism versus Individualism, Masculinity

versus Femininity, and Uncertainty Avoidance. Hofstede (1991) added the fifth dimension named Long-Term Orientation versus Short-Term Orientation, and finally in 2010, he put forward the last dimension, Indulgence versus Restraint. So far, a complete theoretical system of cross-cultural research has been formed.

In Hofstede's Theory of Cultural Dimension, he holds that culture is not an individual characteristic, but a common psychological process of a group with the same education and life experience in a certain environment. He believes that it is the differences in these six dimensions that lead to different lifestyles of people from different cultural backgrounds. Since this paper is a cross-cultural analysis of the differences between Chinese and American disaster news, the theoretical framework is very consistent and thematic.

Research Results

According to the information obtained, this article makes a comparative analysis from these four perspectives: the theme of news, the source of information, the attitude of selecting material and linguistic feature.

The Themes of Disaster News

Table 1

The Classification of Themes of the Disaster News

Topic	Disaster influences	Relief operations	Reflection after disaster	Responsibility investigation	Touching stories and assistances
People's Daily	7	16	14	1	18
Washington Post	32	3	12	5	6

In the process of reporting the wildfire, journalists paid more attention to the damage the fire brings, and the proportion of the bad influences is up to 55.2%. Different from America, reporters in China preferred to concentrate on the great effort our government paid in disaster relief and moving deeds. The sum of these two kinds accounts for 60.7% of all reports. To sum up, the Washington Post's coverage of the incident is more sensational and shows more negative emotions to the public, while the People's Daily is more inclined to express warm relationships of the society.

Source of Information

Table 2

The Source of Information Used in the Disaster News

Source	Public	Government	Authority	Others
People's Daily	14	24	14	4
Washington Post	26	17	13	2

In reporting California wildfires, the main source of news is the people in the affected areas to show the suffering of the affected people, and the total ratio is about 44.8%. On the contrary, in the reporting of typhoon "Component", about 42.8% sources of information are from government agencies. Also, interviewing the people in authority is another important method to acknowledge the information.

The Attitude Towards Disaster

Most of the reports on California Mountain Fire in the Washington Post highlight the damage caused by the disaster by describing the detailed information. The lines are full of confusion and pain. However, the reports about the typhoon in the website of People's Daily usually are filled with hopes, and spoke highly of the

work of government. Comparing the attitudes to the content of the reports, the disaster reports in America always are negative while those in China tend to be positive. In addition to the content of the article, the titles of these reports can also display the different attitudes.

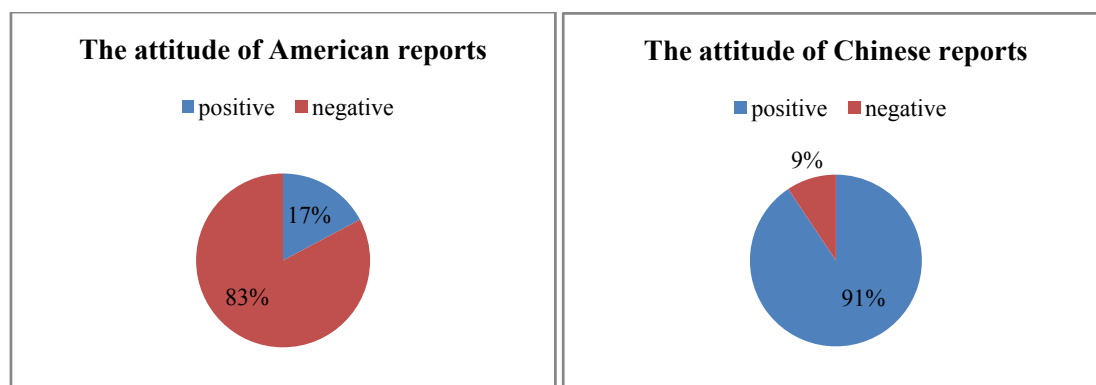


Figure 1. The attitudes to the content of the disaster reports

Linguistic Features

In terms of narrative style, most American reports tend to be of multi-narrative style, whereas in China, reporters generally adopt one-dimensional narrative style. In other words, there always be more than one narrator expressing their own opinions and experiences in America reports; news is showed by first-person narration. Things are quite different in China, for there is usually only one narrative subject (the journalist) in the report. Mostly, readers understand the event described in third-person narration.

As for the writing style, Chinese reports generally use written language and longer sentences, and go straight to the theme, striving to achieve the purpose of writing in the simplest language. But in American reports, short sentences and colloquial language are often used, and therefore, readers, stimulated by shocking and erotic content, are able to comprehend them through detailed descriptions.

Discussion

This research revealed the different values of power distance, collectivism or individualism, and uncertainty avoidance in these two countries.

Power Distance

From the different themes, we can see that China's disaster reports often cite the authoritative information from government departments, government staff, or experts more frequently than those in the United States. However, reporters in the United States are more willing to interview ordinary people. In China's disaster reports, most of the quotations are from authorities because the government has greater control over the media and people would love to trust them which are the legacy of thousands of years of feudal society. The United States is a capitalist country. The newspaper industry basically belongs to private enterprises. Meanwhile, American newspapers often quote the words of ordinary people, even if they are attacks on politicians, so we can speculate that there is not such a strong and universal worship of authority.

According to Hofstede's Theory of Cultural Dimensions, countries with larger power distance usually show a worship of authority. There are great inequalities among classes, especially the inequality of discourse power. By comparing the power distance of these two countries, it is not difficult to find that China's power distance is larger than that of the United States.

Collectivism/Individualism

In American disaster news reports, the narrative subject is pluralistic, and there are many narrative subjects in a report which is rarely taken place in reports in China. In the disaster report in China, there is usually only one person who can narrate. If someone else's words are meant to be conveyed, they are almost relayed by reporters. This is because American society attaches great importance to individualism, which is reflected in the fact that the newspaper pays great attention to the feelings of individuals in an accident. However, China's reports usually describe the general situation of the residents in disaster areas, with fewer close-ups and more attention to the collective situations, and convey the light of the disaster to the public from an overall perspective.

Based on Hofstede's theory, in the individualistic society, people pay more attention to individual development, while in the collectivist society, people's collective consciousness is stronger, and it is easier to think from the collective perspective. This is also a great difference between China and the United States in catastrophic news. Thus, we can infer that China is a country which focuses more on the collectivism than American.

Uncertainty Avoidance

According to the investigation of the news about California wildfire and typhoon "Component", the author finds that the reports in the United States mainly focus on the situation and impact of disasters, especially the damage and inconvenience to the lives of the victims, of which the proportion of negative news was as high as 83%. In China, most of the reports concentrate on post-disaster rescue, reconstruction, and touching stories at the time of the disaster. What is even more surprising is that the percentage of the positive news is as high as 91%.

In countries with strong uncertainty avoidance, uncertainty in life is considered a constant threat, and exposure to dangers and taboos is basically not allowed. Chinese have a strong fear of unknown and unfamiliar risks. Therefore, when disasters come, the Chinese media always introduce the negative news briefly and vigorously publicize the positive news, so as to reduce people's panic, encourage people to fight against disasters, and meet new life. In the United States, people are comfortable with uncertain environments and unfamiliar risks, and tolerant of exposure to dangerous things. In order to pursue stimulation, ordinary people are more willing to get in touch with something unusual. In order to increase circulation, American newspapers and magazines cater to readers' needs actively, resulting in the phenomenon that negative news far exceeds positive news. Therefore, in the degree of uncertainty avoidance, the United States is much stronger when compared to China.

Conclusion

Brief Summary

Generally speaking, this paper adopts the methods of qualitative and quantitative analysis to figure out the cultural differences of disaster news between China and the US. The results indicate that China is a country with the characteristics of obedience to superiors and authorities, thus the power distance being large. At the same time, the people tend to think collectively. Americans are influenced by Christian culture and industrial civilization, thus preferring to care more about the protection of individual rights. They are also not afraid to challenge authority, and the power distance in this country is small. Although China and America are different

in many ways, people should face up to these differences, avoid contradictions caused by differences, and better understand both sides in order to achieve common progress.

Limitations of the Present Study

This study has made some contributions to the relevant research fields, but due to various reasons, there are still some limitations. First of all, although one of the most representative newspapers in China or the United States is selected for comparison in this study, the different reporting styles of newspapers in different countries may affect the conclusions of this study. Secondly, due to limited resources, the collected cross-cultural research materials on disaster news reports at home and abroad are insufficient, and which may also affect the validity of this study.

Suggestions for Further Study

Therefore, more efforts should be made to improve the research in this field of study in the future. First, a broader study should be conducted on different types of newspapers in both China and the US, and the sample size be increased so as to reduce the influence of different reporting styles on this study. Secondly, the access to research data should constantly be expanded so that sufficient effective research materials can be obtained and the credibility of the research be improved.

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