
AI translation · View original & related papers at
chinaxiv.org/items/chinaxiv-202303.00770

Comparative Study of Chinese and British Disaster Reporting from a Framing Theory Perspective: A Case Study of Xinhua News Agency and BBC's Coverage of the Itaewon Stampede (Post-print)

Authors: Wang Yue

Date: 2023-03-24T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

This study adopts framing theory as its theoretical foundation. By analyzing the reporting quantity, volume, genre, target, themes, word frequency, orientation, and emotional tone of Xinhua News Agency and BBC's coverage of the Itaewon crowd crush incident, it is found that Xinhua's disaster reporting prominently features a government image frame, emphasizing timeliness and macro-level outcomes with a rigorous and solemn style, yet lacking in humanistic care. The BBC, conversely, highlights an individual attribute frame, focusing on details and emotional rendering, but with suboptimal timeliness, appearing somewhat vivid and radical. China's mainstream media should accelerate the pace of constructing Chinese discourse, learn from and reflect upon the reporting approaches of other international media, draw upon their strengths while compensating for weaknesses, and effectively articulate Chinese characteristics.

Full Text

A Comparative Study of Chinese and British Disaster Reporting from the Perspective of Framing Theory: A Case Study of Xinhua News Agency and BBC Coverage of the Itaewon Crowd Crush

(Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, 102600)

Abstract: This study employs framing theory to analyze Xinhua News Agency and BBC coverage of the Itaewon crowd crush, examining report quantity, vol-

ume, genre, subjects, themes, word frequency, tendency, and emotional tone. The findings reveal that Xinhua's disaster reporting foregrounds a government image frame, emphasizing timeliness and macro-level outcomes with a rigorous and solemn style, yet lacking in humanistic care. Conversely, the BBC highlights an individual attribute frame, focusing on details and emotional resonance, though its timeliness is inferior and its style somewhat vivid and radical. Chinese mainstream media should accelerate the construction of a Chinese discourse system, learn from and reflect upon the reporting approaches of other international media, draw on their strengths while avoiding their weaknesses, and effectively articulate Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: Framing Theory; Disaster Reporting; Chinese-British News Comparison; Xinhua News Agency; BBC

On the evening of October 29, 2022, a crowd crush occurred in the Itaewon district of Seoul's Yongsan District, South Korea, resulting in 156 deaths and 151 injuries, drawing worldwide attention. Early sociologist S. Fritz once noted that disaster refers to a social event occurring at a specific time and space that inflicts massive destruction and impact upon society or a region, causing loss of life and property and potentially leading to the collapse of social structures [1]. Disaster reporting differs from general news reporting in its suddenness, importance, public nature, and extreme harmfulness, requiring greater emphasis on authenticity, timeliness, humanistic care, and ethical considerations. Effective disaster reporting can convey accurate and organized information, soothe public emotions, and stabilize social order, whereas inadequate reporting may trigger panic and cause social unrest.

Goffman posited that frames serve as crucial mechanisms through which people transform social reality into subjective thought, representing the interpretive and cognitive structures that individuals or organizations apply to events [2]. News frames constitute specific principles by which media selectively process news facts, manifested through the symbolic system of news texts. Tuchman argued that "news frames help journalists write reports according to prevailing mainstream narratives while shaping readers' understanding of facts" [3]. Through different news frames, media convey facts to audiences, thereby generating divergent understandings of reality.

Research Object, Questions, and Methods

Research Object

The Itaewon crowd crush represents South Korea's deadliest accident since the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster, causing massive casualties. Among the numerous media outlets covering this incident, this study selected the British BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and China's Xinhua News Agency as research subjects. First, the BBC is the UK's largest news broadcasting organization and one of the world's largest, while Xinhua is China's national news agency and a global wire service; both are authoritative and representative media institu-

tions. Second, as a major safety incident that attracted global attention, the Itaewon event occurred in neither China nor the UK, making the two media outlets relatively comparable.

Research Questions

This study investigates how the mainstream media of China and the UK differ in their reporting frames and discourse when covering disasters in other countries, how these news frames manifest in news texts, and what ideological and political interests they respectively reflect.

Research Methods

This paper examines BBC and Xinhua News Agency mobile app coverage of the Itaewon crowd crush, collecting 31 relevant reports published between October 30 and November 8, 2022—16 from Xinhua and 15 from the BBC. From the perspective of framing theory, the study employs content analysis and comparative research methods. Based on framing theory, the analysis proceeds along the dimensions of report quantity, genre, subjects, content, tendency, and emotional tone to draw conclusions.

News Reporting Analysis and Comparison

Reporting Volume and Genre

R. M. Entman's empirical research on news frames found that the volume control mechanism constitutes the "foundation" of frame construction, primarily functioning to amplify or downplay the importance or impact of a news event through control over reporting volume and sequence. Dividing the event into three phases based on temporal distance from the incident—the outbreak period (October 29-30), the continuation period (October 31-November 3), and the decline period (November 4-8)—the study obtained statistics on report quantity, length, and proportions from both media outlets across these phases.

As shown in Table 1, Xinhua's reports were almost entirely concentrated in the outbreak period, reaching a single-day peak on October 30 (14 articles), whereas BBC's reports concentrated in the continuation period. Xinhua's initial reporting was more timely and abundant, while the BBC demonstrated greater initiative in follow-up coverage.

Table 2 reveals that although Xinhua and the BBC produced similar overall numbers of reports during the October 30-November 8 period, significant differences existed in word count, with the BBC's average article length exceeding Xinhua's by more than twofold. Due to differing national interests, British mainstream media devoted greater coverage volume to the Itaewon crowd crush than did Chinese mainstream media.

Table 3 shows that Xinhua's reporting predominantly employed the news brief

genre, with fewer other categories, while the BBC utilized a richer variety of genres, including news briefs, features, news specials, and exclusive interviews.

Reporting Subjects

The selection of reporting subjects reveals the emphasis of news frames, while reporting content constitutes the most direct manifestation of news frames. After eliminating reports without clear subjects from the 31 articles, the following table was compiled.

In contrast, the BBC's selection of reporting subjects was more diverse and micro-level. Xinhua primarily reported from broad perspectives such as casualties, government authorities, and the Korean public, whereas the BBC opted for individual perspectives including victims' relatives, police officers involved in rescue efforts, and other personal viewpoints. Notably, one BBC report focused on "victims' belongings" as its subject, using rich text and images to display items left behind at the scene—handbags lost in the crush, trampled shoes, mobile phones—thereby indirectly conveying the horror of the accident through the lens of these artifacts.

Reporting Content

Reporting Themes Overall, Xinhua's reporting most frequently covered the overall casualty situation, response measures by Chinese national leaders and the Foreign Ministry, and rescue operations by South Korean fire and police departments, adopting broad and macro perspectives while providing minimal coverage of the accident's causes and details. For instance, eight reports simply announced casualty figures, while articles such as "Foreign Ministry Urgently Handles Chinese Citizens' Deaths in South Korea's Itaewon Crowd Crush" and "Xi Jinping Sends Condolence Message to South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol over Seoul Crowd Crush, Li Keqiang Sends Message to South Korean Prime Minister Han Duck-soo" took the Chinese government and leaders as reporting subjects, carrying political and diplomatic propaganda overtones.

The BBC's reporting perspective was more "microscopic," offering more thorough analysis of the accident's causes and course, with news angle selections that emphasized mobilizing readers' emotions. For example, the three reports "Itaewon crush: Five friends went out for Halloween; only two came home," "Itaewon crush: 'It could have been me,'" and "Itaewon crush: The policeman who tried to stop Seoul's Halloween disaster" respectively interviewed victims' relatives, disaster survivors, and rescue police officers, constructing narratives from individual perspectives. The article "South Korea Halloween crush: Who were the victims?" introduced the names, ages, occupations, and hobbies of ten victims, demonstrating respect and mourning for the deceased while respecting families' consent to disclose victims' privacy. "Itaewon crush: Anxious warnings turn into screams of terror in emergency calls" devoted over 1,000 words to a detailed description of the accident's progression, presenting three stages through

the subheadings “The crowd builds up,” “Falling and stumbling,” and “The final hour.” “South Korea Halloween crush: The lost belongings in pictures” introduced with photographs the items people lost at the scene, many belonging to victims now deceased. This article’s unique perspective, 切入 through victims’ lost belongings, made the horror of the accident self-evident while powerfully mobilizing readers’ emotions.

Word Frequency Statistics Tables 5 and 6 reveal that in BBC reporting, nouns centered on “people” such as “people” and “police” appeared with the highest frequency, whereas Xinhua was more cautious in its discussion of “police.” The Itaewon crowd crush occurred against the backdrop of Halloween celebrations, but because Halloween carries religious connotations and “ghost/spirit” 色彩 incompatible with China’s mainstream ideology, Xinhua’s reports rarely used “Halloween,” while the BBC’s reports ranked “Halloween” seventh in frequency. Xinhua’s reporting featured “death” and “injury” as high-frequency terms, but this was not the case in BBC reporting, indicating that Xinhua’s disaster reporting emphasizes disaster outcomes, while the BBC focuses more on background, process, causes, and details. Additionally, “young” appeared among the BBC’s high-frequency words, reflecting its greater emphasis on in-depth depiction of individual victims.

Tendency and Emotional Tone News reporting tendency always exists objectively, and emotional tone can be categorized as positive, neutral, or negative. The two media outlets’ news headlines clearly reflect their tendencies and emotional tones, both demonstrating condemnation of the South Korean government and rescue departments to varying degrees. For instance, Xinhua’s headline “Emergency response team arrived only after 85 minutes! Yoon Suk-yeol apologizes for Itaewon crowd crush” exhibits clear negative emotional tone, using “only after” and an exclamation mark to imply the slowness and inadequacy of South Korea’s rescue departments. Similarly, BBC reports such as “Seoul crush: Police admit inadequate response” and “Itaewon crush: First emergency call came hours before crush” belong to the negative emotional tone category. Furthermore, BBC headlines more frequently employed emotional and negative terminology such as “Shock,” “anger,” “inadequate,” “Anxious,” “terror,” “sorrow,” “let down,” and “protest”—word choices that never appeared in Xinhua headlines, demonstrating Xinhua’s more composed and objective reporting.

Research Conclusions

Xinhua News Agency and the BBC’s disaster reporting on the Itaewon crowd crush exhibited distinct news frame characteristics.

First, Xinhua foregrounded a government image frame, while the BBC highlighted an individual attribute frame. On one hand, Xinhua’s reports focused on governmental subject behavior, such as South Korean fire department rescue operations, President Yoon Suk-yeol’s attitude, and police investigation actions,

primarily presenting negative emotional tones regarding the fire department's untimely rescue efforts. On the other hand, Xinhua's reporting also constructed frames presenting the Chinese government image, such as "Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang send condolence messages to South Korean leaders," and frames depicting an efficient government, such as "Chinese Foreign Ministry urgently handles Chinese citizens' deaths" and "Chinese Embassy in South Korea's consular department activates emergency mechanisms." The BBC, conversely, provided detailed coverage of survivors and victims, with more vivid news language and visual information. Victims' attributes as "human beings" became clearer, highlighting the incident's nature as a "tragedy" and easily generating resonance and empathy among audiences.

Second, Xinhua emphasized timeliness and macro-level outcomes, while the BBC emphasized details and emotional rendering. Xinhua produced extensive coverage during the outbreak period (October 29-30), accounting for 87% of all reports on this incident, with rapid updates—14 reports on October 30 alone, averaging one update every 1-2 hours. For breaking news, higher timeliness equals higher news value. In Xinhua's reporting, seven articles used casualty figures as headlines, with victims mostly appearing as a "collective group," fulfilling an information-dissemination function but lacking humanistic care. The BBC's frame did not center on casualty data but rather focused on every individual connected to the crowd crush, including victims, rescue police officers, and survivors. Reports such as "Seoul police officer's sorrow over Halloween crush," "Itaewon crush: Five friends went out for Halloween; only two came home," and "Itaewon crush: 'It could have been me'" all adopted personal perspectives, displaying greater human interest. Victims were no longer cold statistics but living individuals. Simultaneously, this frame better achieved emotional rendering—when people appeared in concrete form, they more effectively triggered audience imagination, resonance, and compassion.

Third, Xinhua's reporting style was rigorous and solemn, while the BBC's style was vivid and radical. As a global news agency and the "eyes, ears, and voice" of the Party and people, Xinhua plays a pivotal role in disseminating latest information and guiding public opinion. Its reporting must reflect accuracy and authority to convince audiences, employing concise and objective news language that forms a rigorous and solemn style. However, this style can only present a cold form of mourning, with weaker humanistic care. The BBC frequently used emotional terms such as "Shock," "anger," and "let down" in this coverage, easily inciting audience emotions in disaster reporting and tending toward questioning and condemnation. This style moves people through emotion, being more vivid and highly moving, strongly expressing profound mourning for victims.

This study, from the perspective of framing theory, analyzed Xinhua News Agency and BBC coverage of the Itaewon crowd crush across dimensions of quantity, volume, genre, subjects, themes, word frequency, tendency, and emotional tone. The findings indicate that Xinhua foregrounded a government im-

age frame, emphasizing timeliness and macro-level outcomes with a rigorous and solemn style but lacking humanistic care. The BBC highlighted an individual attribute frame, emphasizing details and emotional rendering, but with inferior timeliness and a somewhat vivid and radical style. The differences between Chinese and British media disaster reporting frames stem from divergent ideologies, cultural backgrounds, and media functions. The 20th Party Congress report proposed enhancing the influence of Chinese civilization, accelerating the construction of a Chinese discourse and narrative system, strengthening international communication capacity building, comprehensively improving international communication effectiveness, and forming international discourse power commensurate with China's comprehensive national strength and international status. At present, China's external communication work is increasingly important, and mainstream media should accelerate the pace of building Chinese discourse, learn from and reflect upon the reporting approaches of other international media, draw on their strengths while avoiding their weaknesses, and effectively articulate Chinese characteristics.

References

- [1] Xu Wei, Li Xiaomeng. Problems and Reporting Principles in Disaster News[J]. News Outpost, 2018(01): 37-38.
- [2] Xiao Wei. On Erving Goffman's Framing Thought[J]. International Press, 2010, 32(12): 30-36. DOI: 10.13495/j.cnki.cjjc.2010.12.022.
- [3] Tuchman, G. Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality[M]. New York: Free Press, 1978.
- [4] Zou Chenchen. The Paradigm of Resistance: A Discourse Comparison of International News Reporting[J]. Science and Technology Communication, 2021, 13(17): 51-54. DOI: 10.16607/j.cnki.1674-6708.2021.17.016.
- [5] Lin Zilin. A Comparative Study of Chinese and Western News from the Perspective of Framing Theory: A Case Study of Financial Times and Caixin's Coverage of the "Wannacry" Ransomware[J]. China Newspaper Industry, 2018(10): 52-54. DOI: 10.13854/j.cnki.cni.2018.10.025.
- [6] Li Jianwei, Fu Shengkai. A Comparative Analysis of Natural Disaster Reporting Between Central and Local Media from the Perspective of Framing Theory: A Case Study of People's Daily and Henan Daily's Coverage of Henan's Torrential Rain[J]. Journalism Lover, 2022(08): 25-27. DOI: 10.16017/j.cnki.xwzhz.2022.08.041.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.