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## Construction of Russia's National Image by European and American Media——Taking the Relevant Reports of Postprint

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### Abstract

Since the outbreak in February 2022, the Russia-Ukraine war has been attracting the attention of the whole world. As a typical event of confrontation between the camp and Russia, this modern war has shown unprecedented complexity, because it is not only a “weapon war”, but also a “public opinion war”. Under this background, will the news media of both camps, which aim at news professionalism, still abide by the principles and present objective, true and fair news reports to the audience? This article will focus on the official website of BBC news, taking the media's reports on the Russian-Ukrainian war as the research object, analyze its construction of Russia's national image, and bring enlightenment to international communication and national image construction.

### Full Text

### Preamble

#### Construction of Russia's National Image by European and American Media: A Case Study of BBC News Coverage of the Russia-Ukraine War

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**Abstract:** Since its outbreak in February 2022, the Russia-Ukraine war has captured global attention. As a typical event of inter-camp confrontation involving Russia, this modern conflict has demonstrated unprecedented complexity, manifesting not only as a “war of weapons” but also as a “war of public opinion.” Against this backdrop, can news media from both camps, which profess commitment to journalistic professionalism, still adhere to principles and deliver

objective, truthful, and fair reporting to audiences? This article examines BBC News' official website, analyzing its coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war to investigate how it constructs Russia's national image, thereby offering insights for international communication and national image building.

**Keywords:** Russia-Ukraine War, BBC News, Russia's national image construction

## 1 Introduction

Since Russia announced its “special military operation” against Ukraine in early 2022, this protracted and volatile conflict has remained deadlocked for over a year, characterized by multifaceted confrontations among all parties. This is not merely a “hot war” of live ammunition, but also an information war and public opinion war filled with rhetorical battles and undercurrents. Major European and American media outlets have reported on this conflict with varying perspectives, revealing more or less biased positions alongside ostensibly objective narratives, further obscuring the roles of the two warring parties. Did mainstream European and American media uphold journalistic professionalism in their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war? What principles guided their construction of other countries' national images? Were they objective and fair?

This article takes media representations of the Russia-Ukraine war as its entry point, focusing specifically on how BBC News—within the current Western context—presents Russia, a controversial nation, in its war coverage. Through multi-perspective observation and analysis, it seeks to illuminate the techniques employed by Western media in constructing images of other nations.

### 2.1 Literature Review on National Image Construction

The unique geopolitical and historical legacy of Russia and Ukraine predetermines tension between the two nations. The essence of the Russia-Ukraine issue represents a “global chess game”—a competition and confrontation between Western countries (represented by the NATO camp) and Russia. As early as 2014, following the initial Russian-Ukrainian conflict, scholars across various fields expressed professional perspectives on the incident and concerns about the truth behind it. Mainstream European and American media appeared to “lean” toward Ukraine, while discussions of Russia inevitably touched upon human rights and democracy, struggling to avoid stereotypical impressions of “dictatorship” and “hegemony.”

Numerous journalism and communication scholars have conducted in-depth research on the image construction of Russia and Ukraine from professional perspectives. In modern warfare, media's important position has become increasingly prominent, with public opinion evolving from an auxiliary factor affecting war's direction to one of the key determinants of victory. Chinese scholars Jing Xuemin and Ning Zhiyao (2023), in their work *New Features and New Trends*

of *International Political Communication Reflected in the “Russian-Ukrainian Conflict,”* argue that communication problems in war are ultimately problems of political communication. The subjects and objects of political communication are tied to different political purposes, ensuring that communication content contains political awareness of specific stands. Through political communication means, modern local wars fully influence international attitudes, profoundly affecting the national image of participating countries.

Cheng Xi (2022), in *Research on the Construction of China’s Image by Foreign Internet Celebrities from the Perspective of Frame Theory*, employs a “high, medium, and low-level analysis” based on “objective truth, symbolic truth, and subjective truth” to examine cases of how foreign netizens present China’s image on social media in the new media era. The study notes that differences exist in national images constructed at different levels, necessitating improved understanding and perception of a country through diverse channels and perspectives. Shang Qiufen and Niu Zeyi (2021), in *Russia’s National Image Construction Experience and Its Reference*, adopt an “other’s opinion” perspective, arguing that a country’s image forms primarily through two pathways: “self-shaping” and “other-shaping.” Russia once reversed international community stereotypes stemming from its historical origins through “self-shaping,” seizing initiative in international public opinion and offering enlightenment for multi-strategic diplomacy and multi-dimensional image building.

However, most existing studies analyze communication effects based on a “propagandist-led” approach, seldom examining why audiences readily accept transmitted information from the recipient’s perspective instead of engaging in further rational criticism or rejection. Completing such a grand construction of “national image” in audiences’ hearts proves difficult to achieve rapidly through mass communication alone. Moreover, different countries possess varying national conditions, with significant differences in international relations and cultural backgrounds. Under changing international circumstances, certain special communication methods must exist that ultimately make communication effects “take root in people’s hearts.”

## 2.2 Literature Review on National Image Construction Under “Frame Theory”

Goffman introduced the concept of “framework” in 1974, referring to the knowledge structures people use to recognize and interpret objective reality, derived from existing experience and acquired information. He contended that framing represents a crucial mechanism for transforming social reality into subjective reality. Relying on specific frameworks, individuals can better classify, locate, and pre-store substantial information in their brains to build awareness of new phenomena. News framing directs audience attention toward certain aspects, forming fixed thinking patterns or deep agreement with particular ideas by influencing cognition and information processing/storage methods. Subtle input can easily constrain audiences’ cognitive activities regarding the subjective world,

causing them to ignore realities outside the frame.

Cheng Xi (2022), in *Research on the Construction of China's Image by "Foreign Internet Celebrities" from the Perspective of Frame Theory*, draws upon the three-level analysis method of news framework to organize propaganda content about China by "foreign Internet celebrities," exploring China's image construction from perspectives including themes, ideology, narrative strategies, and audio-visual language rhetoric. Compared with similar studies, this article considers both macro and micro perspectives, primarily analyzing national image communication effects from a micro viewpoint. However, the cases cited in the study feature communicators with objective standpoints and good intentions, failing to explain how communicators can make audiences naturally accept their viewpoints and achieve communication purposes under controversial premises.

## 2.3 Raising Questions

This article proceeds from "frame theory" to address the following questions: Did BBC News boldly and clearly express its position in reports on the Russia-Ukraine war? If so, how did it employ frame theory and internalize the "cultivation effect" in its communication to infiltrate concepts into its audience? Are traditional communication strategies still applicable in the specific context of warfare? Do other special factors exist that have altered transmission effects?

### 3.1.1 Research Questions

The research subject of this article is globally discussed and politically sensitive, making it a "perfect subject for news reports" that easily provokes deep reflection. As time progresses and war stages advance, will BBC News report on the Russia-Ukraine war from more diverse angles? Will the proportion of positive or negative evaluations of Russia's national image by BBC News show a "one-sided" trend? Has BBC News successfully structured its news framework in its communication strategy? Will its dissemination effect on Russia's national image construction become increasingly significant?

In response to these questions, this article will conduct research on the study object based on frame theory. To verify these questions, this study will adopt content analysis methodology, sampling reports and conducting data analysis.

### 3.1.2 Sampling Method

This paper examines Russia's national image in BBC News Network's coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war as its research object. The author selected all relevant reports within a specified time range as the research sample, employing content analysis method for coding design. As the UK's mainstream media with a long history and profound credentials, BBC holds relatively high influence in European and American media circles, accurately reflecting European and American

countries' reactions to the Russia-Ukraine war, thus proving relatively representative.

According to official news certification and authoritative media reports from various countries, the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war occurred on February 24, 2022. Considering media's capacity to observe changes and capture hotspots, they would certainly conduct effective pre-publicity and follow-up coverage before and after the war's outbreak. Therefore, to comprehensively collect and study reports with various characteristics, this paper set the sample selection timeframe from the pre-war period to approximately one year after the outbreak.

After preliminary browsing, the author found that the BBC News website's search function remains imperfect, with manually searched entries producing rather confusing results. However, during sample article reading, reports were clearly arranged chronologically and covered a wide range of fields, showing no obvious patterns in perspective selection, content, or genre, facilitating sampling flexibility. Therefore, to ensure objectivity and fairness in sample collection and completeness and effectiveness of sample content, this paper decided to use Python data capture technology to capture and list all samples under the topics of "Russia," "Ukraine," and "War in Ukraine."

By manually eliminating texts that fell outside the time scope, had insufficient word frequency, or were not directly related to the Russia-Ukraine war topic, and removing duplicates separately, the author obtained 2,911 search results. The author conducted systematic sampling of the total sample, using eight days as a cycle for report start and end dates across the total number of days, taking an equal number of samples for each cycle (depending on website availability). After sampling, 143 valid samples were obtained.

### 3.1.3 Code Table

In this study, variable X was downscaled into time, spanning from the war's outbreak to early April 2023.

Variable Y was downscaled into reporting perspective, coverage genre, coverage content, subject of interest, coverage frame, national image building, and coverage format.

-1 Code Table

First-level Category	Second-level Category	Remarks
<b>Reporting Perspective</b>	1=Military	Battle process, node battle situations, battle clues, events affecting battle progress, comparison of military strength between the two sides, etc.
	2=Humanities	Mainly focuses on people's livelihood stories in Russia and Ukraine under the war background
	3=Politics	International attitudes and state relations
	4=Economy	War-related economic and financial policies, changes, consequences, etc.

First-level Category	Second-level Category	Remarks
<b>Report Genre</b>	5=Sports	Sports events, decisions, or disputes affected by war
	6=Society	Public medical charity assistance, public arts and entertainment activities, etc.
	7=Other	Broad fields such as science and technology, media, history
	1=News	Brief status reports
	2=Communications	Include documentaries, casual notes, interviews with relevant people, etc.
	3=News feature	Intercept typical or special space-time scenes and describe them in detail

First-level Category	Second-level Category	Remarks
	4=Criticism	Comments on an aspect of the war from various perspectives
	5=Interview	Conduct interviews and exclusive interviews with people who speak out about the war
	6=Other	Comprehensive forms or columns, short documentaries, etc.
<b>Report Content</b>	1=Interpretation of situation	Including war progress stages, background, specific details, stories of related characters, etc.

First-level Category	Second-level Category	Remarks
	2=Official releases	Official statements, policy releases or actions, positions, etc. of countries and the United Nations on war
	3=Response public	People from all over the world express opinions or positions through narration, comments, appeals, dynamic releases, etc.
	4=Derivatives from wars	Emergencies, character stories, aid operations, public events, etc. with war as theme, root cause, or trigger

First-level Category	Second-level Category	Remarks
	5=Related international politics	Statements, comments, talks, and actions of the United Nations and countries worldwide on wars
<b>Concerned Subject</b>	6=Other	
	1=Russian official	Country as a whole, government officials, politicians, official media, army and soldiers, etc.
	2=Ukrainian official 3=Russian people	Ordinary people (including refugees) and unofficial people in Russia and Ukraine
	4=Ukrainian people	

First-level Category	Second-level Category	Remarks
	5=Experts	Experts in various fields who interpret and comment on political, economic, military, and cultural issues related to war
	6=The battle itself	Objectively stated battle situation
	7=Other	Officials, people in other countries, and relevant people, things, and objects affected by the war, related to the war, or who have views on the war or comment on it
<b>Reporting Frame</b>	1=Factual frame	Objectively report war progress, details, etc.

First-level Category	Second-level Category	Remarks
	2=Emotional frame	With obvious emotional color, expressing condemnation, anger, pity, regret, support, etc.
	3=Discussion frame	Discuss current warfare status, future development trends, and problems reflected at various levels
	4=Consequence frame	The impact of war on international relations, possible social consequences, waves of public opinion, changes in people's lives, etc.
	5=Interpretation frame	The title adopts the form of asking questions, with questions answered in the article

First-level Category	Second-level Category	Remarks
<b>National Image Building</b>	1=Russia Positive / Ukraine Negative	Positive Shaping: Complimentary words or positions of support appear
	2=Russia negative / Ukraine positive	Negative Shaping: Using critical or derogatory words
	3=Neutral or not involved	Neutral or not involved: Narrative or description objectively and pertinently, without clearly expressing a position or attitude; report content does not involve or has nothing to do with shaping the country's image
<b>Report Format</b>	1=Graphic report 2=Video report 3=Graphic+video report	

#### 4 Research Findings and Discussion Points

A total of 143 samples were coded for this content analysis. Through data analysis results and against this coding design's criteria, several patterns emerge

in BBC News' coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war. The reporting predominantly adopts a humanistic perspective, focusing on people's lives in both countries within the war context, accounting for 40% of coverage. This is followed by military and political perspectives, which concentrate on war progress and the conflict's impact on bilateral or international relations, respectively. In terms of reporting genre, concise news comprises the highest percentage at 43%, followed by newsletters at 36%. Regarding content, war-related content accounts for the highest percentage at 31%, followed by public reaction and war-related derivatives. In terms of subjects, BBC News coverage primarily focuses on "other" and "Russian official" categories.

From the reporting frame perspective, over 50% of BBC News' Russia-Ukraine war reports primarily employ the factual frame, while nearly 30% utilize the emotional frame, revealing more pronounced emotions in reporting. Regarding national image, BBC tends to present characteristics of "a negative image of Russia but a positive image of Ukraine," aligning with mainstream European and American media attitudes. In terms of report format, 90% of news reports appear as graphic reports, displaying the war's current situation and people's lives through vivid, intuitive images supplemented by detailed text.

Additionally, reports under the explanatory framework provide substantial practical popular science content. BBC's analysis of relevant political and military issues proves vivid, logical, and targeted, deepening audience understanding of war background figures, battle situation analysis, and war scene perception.

#### **4.1 Using a Humanistic Perspective to Access Popular Discourse**

A major feature of the reporting involves employing a humanistic perspective, targeting ordinary citizens of both warring nations as news subjects, demonstrating living conditions of people with diverse occupations, identities, and personalities within the war context. This unique content display method brings multi-perspective interest to reading, allowing observation of major events through small perspectives and reflecting a grander narrative pattern through minor details. However, these reports are not purely humanistic stories. They portray people as either righteous, loving, or innocent, ultimately pointing to one purpose: reflecting war's brutality and the injustice of Russia's "invasion," with the former tendency emerging as an outgrowth of the latter. This theme expresses itself through various forms, including newsletters, interviews, features, and even columns, covering diverse topics with unique writing styles. Creators draw upon accounts from war survivors and follow-up reports to enhance news content credibility. These reports leverage the human instinct to sympathize with the weak and glorify justice, thereby provoking increasingly strong dissatisfaction with the negative subject. The gradually built framework, though not appearing to inculcate specific positions or viewpoints, actually aligns with audience perceptions under the framework of Russia's negative image. This achieves interaction between transmission and reception, successfully transforming social

reality and psychologically reconstructing reality, thereby completing reinforcement of Russia's negative image and solidification of this perception.

## 4.2 Relying on the Emotional Framework to Guide Audience Reading

Obviously, the factual framework alone could not fully satisfy the communication effect desired for Russia's national image construction. Therefore, BBC fully leveraged the emotional frame's role, using resonance from universal prayers for peace and common emotions of family and friendship to present various people's livelihood stories during the war in professional and artistic ways. This enables readers to deeply feel war's evil and profound suffering, providing convenient premises for image building of both warring parties.

Beyond the countries and peoples directly involved in the war, BBC News also attaches great importance to reporting international attitudes and evaluations of the war and related military-political trends. BBC's subtle approach to framing news for its audience provides further assurance for communication approach effectiveness.

## 4.3 The High Malleability of National Image

This study employs content analysis methodology to examine characteristics of BBC News Network's Russia-Ukraine war reports based on frame theory, attempting to answer strategic questions in Russia's national image construction process.

The study found that BBC News did not directly describe images of the two warring parties and made fewer overall evaluations, trying to avoid excessive disclosure of positions and attitudes in news discourse. In reports that did not mention Russia's image, they often called for anti-war sentiments and peace. They proved especially adept at reporting wars from humanistic perspectives, avoiding excessive grand, unfamiliar, and serious communication content that might weaken communication effects. Instead, they began from familiar, specific, and common human emotions, creating emotional connections for audiences and breaking down communication barriers. BBC News provides detailed background interpretation covering politics, military, people, and more, invisibly building a complete rational framework and filling it with emotional content. This makes it difficult for readers with "human emotions" to break out of such a seemingly transparent "cocoon."

Additionally, BBC News Network obviously made more negative comments on Russia's national image. Or rather, from the war's beginning, BBC had already set a "negative" tone for Russia, making subsequent deviation difficult. The loyal audience of Ukrainian war reports not only deeply understood the war through all-round interpretation but also outlined general contours of each subject: "unjust" Russia, "tenaciously resisting" Ukraine, "deeply suffering"

refugees, NATO countries that “spared no expense to help.” All subsequent reports only deepened and solidified these impressions while following the war’s progression. Under “post-truth politics,” emotion more likely becomes a criterion for judging right and wrong, forming solid cognition. The website provides long-term audiences with content aligned with their views and interests.

Audiences’ own judgment and attitudes gradually weaken, as they tend to follow and chase content. The cultivation effect continuously strengthens throughout this process, reinforcing connotation effects and making the communication effect of this national image building increasingly significant.

## 5.1 Summary

It remains difficult to judge whether image construction and comments on Russia in BBC reports are completely subjective. Due to media ideology and values, its news discourse must contain certain tendencies. The political position of the country and the social status of the media also doom BBC News to become one of the media weapons for the NATO camp to compete with the Russian government and media.

Therefore, this study’s main purpose is to demonstrate the important role of “other-shaping” in national image construction. Under circumstances of increasingly frequent international exchanges and diversified international communication channels, it becomes necessary to pay attention to external evaluation, understanding one’s national image from an “other’s perspective” in the international arena. In other words, with growing international exchange frequency and diversified communication channels, we should emphasize external evaluation, understanding our country’s image under the international lens from “other’s perspective,” making timely affirmation or criticism, and sending signals of cooperation, exchange, mutual benefit, and win-win outcomes. On the other hand, this proves that “self-shaping” remains fundamental, especially in the context of rapidly developing network communication where communication content scale is huge and truth becomes difficult to distinguish. The only way to maintain communication discourse initiative and prevent it from falling into others’ hands is to be “one step ahead” and gain a favorable position.

At the 30th collective study of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed constructing the “five forces” of international communication, providing fundamental guidelines and direction for improving China’s international communication capacity in the new era. Breaking old frameworks and using reform achievements of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, along with an active and open communication attitude, to convey China’s newly constructed national image to the world has become one of China’s important international communication tasks today. Against the background of the “Russia-Ukraine War,” the construction of Russia’s national image by European and American media, represented by BBC News, has also provided profound inspiration for building an international

communication narrative system with national characteristics and promoting communication and cooperation with international media on new media platforms. Simultaneously, we should also focus on improving foreign propaganda levels, enhancing international communication influence, strengthening national cultural soft power and national competitiveness, enabling us to remain invincible in public opinion fields under any special context.

## 5.2 Reflection

This research still contains certain deficiencies. First, the research method remains relatively simple, with results primarily deriving from individual analysis of numerous texts, potentially containing subjective deviations in understanding and narration. Due to practical factors such as environmental considerations and warfare's special nature, conducting field verification of research object sources proves difficult. Future research should adopt more convincing and creative methods, such as conducting interviews with relevant people and media to collect first-hand materials. Therefore, in future writing and research, we should focus on collecting extensive information and multiple supporting evidence.

Second, regarding sample selection, ensuring maximum accuracy requires samples with the largest possible numbers. However, this study encountered overall irregularity in sample timing and lacked more refined topic classification, resulting in arbitrary sample selection and making subsequent analysis prone to large variations. The author will continue improving in subsequent writing processes to develop more appropriate sample selection methods.

Finally, regarding theoretical analysis, this paper addresses fewer professionally relevant theories, mainly utilizing frame theory. While the theory fits well with the study, it cannot fully explain the issues raised at the study's beginning. This reflects weakness in professional theoretical aspects requiring further study.

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