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Comparison of China and US Media Coverage during 2022 Beijing Olympics

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Abstract

The Olympic Games are not only a grand event in the field of sports but also involve the display and competition of a country's comprehensive strength and image on the international stage. Therefore, every Olympic Games has become more like a "battlefield" for the media of all countries. Due to the increasing number of media outlets participating in reporting, different styles of reports have followed. The reasons behind these reports have covered political, economic, and cultural fields and have had a huge impact. This paper will study the framework construction, direction, and concept of mainstream media coverage of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games in China and the United States and analyze the reasons for their formation.

Keywords: Beijing Olympics, media, agenda, social system

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The Beijing Winter Olympics have become more and more involved with the media and are being treated as a medium to send messages and set the agenda. Olympics are no longer a purely competitive event between athletes but are being set up as various issues, and the media has become the agenda-setter and information disseminator. Cui argues that the epidemic has changed the way of communicating: more intensive public discussion and public opinion interaction between countries have become the focus of international political exchanges, while public life and diplomatic activities have come to a standstill (Cui, 2020). As a global stage for sports, the Beijing Winter Olympic Games have undoubtedly become the center of public opinion interaction and the stage for major issues.

1.2. Research Purposes

This article will take the mainstream media reports in China and the United States as an example to conduct research, mainly using the research methods of news text content analysis and literature collection and analysis. This paper will compare the reporting styles and contents of different media by analogy and summarize the direction and focus of both sides' reporting more objectively. At the same time, this paper will also analyze and compare the agenda framework, ideology, concept, and image building to further summarize the reasons for the

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differences in reporting styles between the two countries and how the Beijing Winter Olympics, as a medium, reflects the social and national needs of China and the United States.

2. Agenda Setting and Framing

2.1 Literature Review

After more than a hundred years of change, the modern Olympic Games have become the biggest, most important, and most prestigious international sports event in the world. The Olympic Games not only give the host city and country a chance and a strong push to grow quickly and in all areas, but they also give them a platform and a window to quickly and effectively spread their influence around the world. The 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing were a big step in the right direction for sports in our country. At this stage, public relations must play a crucial role in how Beijing presents its positive image to the world and how it successfully hosts this event that garners global attention. As a global media event, Beijing Winter Olympic Games is a platform to build China's national image and enhance China's voice as well as national pride. In the age of informatization and globalization, the ability to guide public opinion is the soft power of national communication. Media is the guider of public opinion.

At present, international academic circles have increasingly diversified their research perspectives on national image, and the research results have become richer. The national image includes not only the overall impression and evaluation of the country by the public but also the public's perception of the country's overall characteristics and attributes (Kang, M., & Yang, S. U., 2010; Castano, E., Bonacossa, A., & Gries, P., 2016; Li, X., & Chitty, N., 2009; Simonin, B. L., 2008). As a form of institutionalized social communication, mass communication has been incorporated into the orbit of the social system by the state. In China's internal and external communication, the mass media play an important role as the support of communication. Joseph Nye believes that "national soft power" is the country's unlimited influence on the world released by relying on the attractiveness of the political system, the appeal of the cultural mechanism, and the familiarity of the national image (Glaser, B. S., & Murphy, M. E., 2009). As a carrier of mass communication, the media can communicate internally and externally and convey the superiority of China's political system and cultural appeal through the establishment of a Chinese discourse system, thereby creating a good national image. For a long time, China's national image has been dominated by Western media, accompanied by negative images such as the "China threat theory" (yang, Y. E., & IU, X., 2012; peng, Z., 2004; Wang, Y., 2008). With the restructuring of Chinese media organizations, CGTN and other foreign propaganda media have gradually gained the right to speak and dominate, and China's external image has shifted from being "modeled by others" to being "created by itself." Therefore, media publicity is becoming more and more important. It is not only the elaboration of objective facts but also an important part of reflecting the image of the country.

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2.2 Agenda setting for American media coverage

Through analyzing the agenda setting of the Beijing Olympic Games by American media, the negative agenda framework can be basically summarized as: human rights issues, women's rights, venue issues, artificial snow making, nationalism. For example, the article "Opening Ceremony: Best and Worst" reported by the New York Times emphasized that China is the "only one to differentiate the outfits its male and female athletes" (Friedman, 2022) and ignored the same situation in other countries. And the Los Angeles Times' article "Xi Jinping Sees the Beijing Olympics as Validation of His Power" (Su, 2022) fully combined politics with sports and wantonly criticized the human rights problems in Xinjiang, as well as soldiers being torchbearers and military threats. The positive agenda framework can be summarized as Chinese culture and opening ceremonies, volunteer culture, and organizing work and food. For example, the New York Post published an article, "Athletes reveal the best things they've eaten in the Olympic Bubble" (Associated Press, 2022), to show the diversity of food choices in the Olympic Village through the feedback of different athletes. The unwritten rule of US media coverage of the Beijing Winter Olympics is that they will report China objectively only if there is no conflict of interest, but they will always adhere to western journalistic values. Both the conflict between the Chinese minority's costume and Hanbok and the influence of artificial snowmaking prove that the objective standard of American media compromises with ideology, and ideology compromises with interest.

2.3 Agenda setting for Chinese media coverage

China's agenda framework differs to some extent from the course that the traditional media agenda has set. As the "mouthpiece" of government and national ideology, China's mainstream media concentrates on the expression of discourse related to the national cultural environment and political context and brings the targeted thinking model to the public. The Chinese media focuses on positive publicity, and its agenda framework is predominantly positive. The content of Chinese media and the government's propaganda is consistent and focuses on national image and national interests. While giving full play to the advantages of the host country, the media promoted the Olympic spirit of athletes, emphasized the importance of understanding and respect, and paid more attention to humanistic care. Moreover, Chinese media is adept at combining short videos uploaded to social media platforms with photos taken by (foreign) athletes to promote and refute the accusations of foreign media. For example, the short video filmed by American athlete Tessa Maud was used in Global Times' report "American snowboarder Tessa Maud moved by heartfelt greeting from Chinese Olympics volunteer at the opening ceremony" (Global Times, 2022) to prove the human touch of the Olympics village, which refuted the US media's description of the Winter Olympics village as a closed environment of indifference and loss of freedom.

Propaganda is generally considered unreliable in the US because it is a tool used by political parties to promote themselves. Therefore, American media's agenda setting focuses on communication and pays attention to the effect of communication, while Chinese media's agenda setting is based on positive propaganda. During the preparations and hosting of the

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Beijing Olympics, Chinese media coverage has been largely similar in its praise. Mainstream media coverage of China's success in preparation has often been subliminally laced with "Under the guidance of...", or "under the leadership of...", This kind of framework makes the atmosphere of propaganda comparatively strong. Compared with the reports of American media, the propagandism reporting framework of Chinese mainstream media is hard to attract audiences' attention. Even if it can attract the audience immediately through a leading sentence, it will still result in poor communication.

3. Analysis of ideology and keywords

Different social systems and ideologies lead to different understandings and agenda-setting in the media. The key words in the reports of the Beijing Olympic Games show that there are always deviations in the understanding between Chinese and American media.

3.1 Chinese media

For example, when Chinese media set up the topics of the Olympic Games, the key words are mainly "peace, friendship, cultural exchange, warmth, touching," and they repeatedly emphasize the slogans and ideas advocated or set by the government. As time passes, the audience will get tired easily. Reports like "A warm and touching event" (Ma & Zhang, 2022), "Opening the Olympics will bring Chinese culture and diverse cultures of the world together again" (Ren & Zhang, 2022), and "The Beijing Winter Olympics will illuminate the way forward for unity, peace, and friendship" (Qian, 2022) are all aimed at spreading the positive effects and social feedback brought by the Winter Olympics and arousing the patriotic enthusiasm and national confidence of Chinese people. Their titles are set up in a very official and general way, with similar formats. They have different contents, but they all return to the theme of praise, which makes readers feel tired while reading.

3.2 American media

On the other hand, American media mostly chooses "human rights, (dis)trust, infiltration, crisis, chaos, oppression, aggression... as keywords. They prefer to use rhetorical questions as the title to catch the attention of audiences. These articles make the audience unwittingly accept the "trap" set by the media by constantly emphasizing keywords or vague answers to titles. For example, in CBS's article "How Green Can Beijing's 'Green Olympics' really be?" (CBS News, 2022) and VOA's article "Beijing Winter Olympics in the eyes of South Koreans: 'Hanbok Cultural Project', 'Unfair penalizing'" (Ge, 2022), they used inflammatory language and highly subjective words such as "irresponsible", "fake" and "backlash" to attract readers. As a result, even though the report may present some neutral ideas, readers are still easily influenced by headlines and keywords to read and think from a negative standpoint. Media coverage of the two countries cannot transcend their own social systems.

In the coverage of the Beijing Olympics, the American media treated ideology higher than objective standards, and they often defined before recognizing. For example, the CBS report mentioned above was published on January 3, before the ceremony, and the US media had

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already defined the phenomenon of artificial snowmaking before the opening ceremony ("Beijing is extremely water-stressed", "artificial ice and snow could worsen the water woes"), even though the interviewees said that the water used in the Winter Olympics would not affect the water used by Beijing residents. The western democratic values inherent in the American media have unconsciously become the yardstick to dominate and measure their views on international media. They still regard themselves as opinion leaders, and their reporting angle is more inclined to the thinking of local protectionism, given the nature of cultural hegemony. They try to change public perception through the media, take advantage of the stereotypes of audiences, and capture the interests of the market. Savannah Guthrie, an NBC anchor, was attacked as working for the Chinese government when she praised the selection of Uighur athletes as torchbearers in Beijing's opening ceremony, and American freestyle skier Aaron Brunk said he was banned for praising the Olympics on Twitter. Therefore, negative reports on China in the United States depend on the values and popular views of American society. American media coverage of a country is determined by social attitudes and stereotypes about the country.

4. A Comparison of Conceptual Differences between Chinese and American Media in Reporting

The Chinese and American media have different concepts (BBC News, 2019); therefore, their news reports have obvious differences. The Chinese media tends to report positively, while the American media tends to report negatively. The American media tends to channel negative information. They treat the media as a platform to supervise the government and maintain fairness and democracy, so they are more interested in negative news. They believe that there are a lot of dark sides to society, and it is the media's responsibility to monitor and reflect the dark sides of society. As long as the negative information is timely, fully, and comprehensively reported, the harm of the negative information to society will be reduced to a minimum, and the social order will not be disturbed. However, Chinese media tends to block negative information (Xia, Zheng, and He, 2021), believing that even if there is a dark side to society, reporting negative news will inevitably lead to social chaos and panic. In case of major emergencies, the media should try their best to prevent information from being transmitted so as to reduce the adverse impact of negative news on society. Chinese media believe that it is the responsibility of the media to stabilize people's feelings. Positive publicity can inspire people's enthusiasm for life and confidence in the government. The article "At Beijing Press Conferences, the Questions Tell Their Own Story" (Keh, 2022) shows the difference in purpose between Chinese and American media: the US media asked questions for accountability and to expose the doping problem, while the Chinese media asked questions to show a vibrant Olympic village and a positive service attitude. "Reporters from outlets outside China often ask indelicate questions about what is awry. In between, domestic reporters query his Chinese counterparts about all that is well" (Keh, 2022). Therefore, the coverage of the Winter Olympics by Chinese and American media reflects a partial truth.

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At the same time, most of the American media is privately held, which determines its pursuit of profits; therefore, the audience's hobbies, curiosities, and interests become an important basis for their reports. In terms of values and ideologies, there are huge differences between China and the United States, which directly affect the attitude of the media. The United States advocates democracy and freedom and believes that individual rights are paramount. The obscure words used by the American media in their reports indirectly lead to the long-standing bias against China. Due to the different angles of their reports, it is difficult for readers to have a good impression of or trust in China. "There were 12 questions asked in English on Saturday, and 11 were about a doping scandal. There were seven questions asked in Chinese, and they were about, basically, anything else" (Keh, 2022). Reading through the report, the questions raised by the Chinese media were still Olympics-related, such as those about service and food in the Olympic Village. The report also pointed out that the Chinese spokesman did not answer the reporter's question about whether the performance of the athletes was good or bad but instead led the topic to mutual respect, which also reflects that questions asked by the media are purposeful with expected answers.

The national interest is the fundamental factor in media reports. Although the American media is outwardly independent of the government, the government still skillfully controls the mainstream media through a series of hard and soft measures, and the American media always maintains the same position and arguments with the American government. Both the initial boycott reported in the Beijing Winter Olympics report and Gu Ailing's narrative reporting that is based on geopolitics are enough to prove the American media's attitude. Chinese mainstream media is state-owned. They always insist that the news media play the role of "mouthpiece" between government and the people, and they basically follow the concept of dissemination and propaganda (Shuang, 2020). At the same time, Chinese media has a "limit" that Western media cannot understand. The Chinese media, most of which can attend the Winter Olympics press conference, is state-owned, and they are sensitive to some words, which are also reflected in The New York Times' report. For example, the Chinese media is very concerned about the nationality of the athletes. They will correct the use of "foreign national teammates" (Keh, 2022) to describe naturalized ice hockey players. It can be seen that the government is an important source of information for the media, and the media are easier to influence by the government on the international stage. Moreover, the government can restrict the reports in certain ways, so the reports written by both Chinese and American media are inevitably one-sided.

5. Self-Created and Other-Created Images of China

As an important platform to build China's international image in the Winter Olympic Games, public opinion communication includes two aspects: self-created and other-created. China, the host of the Olympics, no doubt hopes to enhance its international image and enhance its international influence through these two aspects. Other-Created refers to the evaluation and construction of other countries' images by foreign media according to national interest,

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emotion, and consciousness. It is influenced by factors such as ideology. The United States places a premium on the image of countries in which it has interests. This is one of the ways China's image is being distorted by American media. Meanwhile, American media dominates global information to a large extent; therefore, China's national image is largely dependent on the American mainstream media. However, American media believes that controversial news helps increase sales, and media is a business activity. Negative reports in American media can better reflect human nature and are more popular with audiences. The commercial value of negative news and agendas is far greater than that of positive news.

Therefore, some negative articles published by American media are intentionally and unintentionally affecting China's image on the international stage. Self-Created refers to how local media creates the image of their own country through news reports. The Chinese media has long had a habit of taking news cues from official documents and setting the agenda to shape the country's image for itself. During the Beijing Olympic Games, Chinese media self-created a national image by setting up various topics and making the significance of the Olympic Games go beyond sports itself. It can be said that Chinese media has condensed the power of public unity and let the readers become the supervisors of social interaction through media. Organizers, volunteers, athletes, referees, and audiences have all participated in shaping the national image, and audiences have become the power behind constructing the national image through media. For Chinese media, hosting the games can focus the world's attention. Therefore, the news report actively shows the positive national image, which aims to improve the influence of international communication, the affinity of China's image, the persuasiveness of China's discourse, and the guidance power of world opinion. Chinese media has been emphasizing the Olympics' concept of "green, sharing, open, and honest" (Jin, 2021) and reporting on green high-tech products in depth to present an image of a responsible country that adheres to peaceful and green development to foreign audiences.

6. Conclusion

Although both Chinese and American media mainly focus on athletes and sports events, American media also pay more attention to negative reports. They are better at getting people interested, using catchy headlines and keywords to get more people to read, and focusing on their own interests and how well the market is doing. In contrast, Chinese media is keen to report on the athletes' lives and services in the Olympic Village to create a good reputation for the Beijing Olympic Games and show the soft power of culture, art, and technology involved in the Winter Olympics. Chinese media report the Winter Olympics in a diversified way. American media, on the other hand, takes advantage of the political nature of the Winter Olympics to magnify the differences between ideologies and the opposition of national interests. The Chinese media is committed to arousing patriotism and cultural confidence among the people and expanding positive publicity. American media intentionally adds negative content without verification in a framework setting. Beijing Winter Olympics as a medium, both Chinese and American media are trying to use it to convey information

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constructed by their own country's actual needs and social ideology. To sum up, both media should report objectively, guide the audience with rational public opinion, and broaden the scope of reporting.

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