A Framing Analysis of News Reports on the Canton Fair from SCMP and CGTN

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Abstract. Canton Fair, the biggest and the most long-standing trade fair of its kind in China, had attracted reports from various news outlets. As a Chinese government-affiliated news agency, CGTN is expected to report on the fair in a positive tone that aligns with official perspectives and provide detailed exclusive information. On the other hand, the South China Morning Post, being more editorially independent, is likely to report on the fair in a more subjective manner and insights from global perspectives. This paper revealed that news coverage on the Canton Fair from South China Morning Post (SCMP) and CGTN from 2020 to 2023. Based on the participatory observation in a news coverage production system of China, this study revealed that a useful strategy is built on a practice system in two different mediums. Such a system provides a theoretical foundation for medium to train reporters. In this process, the platform uses systematic methods to describe and solve problems with the help of big data technology. This paper mainly contributed to the development of different news agencies, while it issues about promotion to quality of news coverage.

Keywords: Framing Analysis, Canton Fair.

1. Introduction

China Import and Export Fair, commonly known as Canton Fair, is the largest trade exhibition in China. Established in 1957 as the only international trade gateway to break the sanctions and embargo opposed by the capitalist countries, the Canton Fair had become the epitome of Chinese international commercial communication, from struggling to striding. The fair plays a significant role in enhancing foreign trade and promoting globalization. Its symbolic position attracted attention from news agencies at home and abroad. In this paper, the author will analyze news coverage of reports from two different news outlets, South China Morning Post (SCMP) and CGTN about the Canton Fair from 2020 to 2023, and discuss the reasons and effects through the methodology of Framing Analysis.

2. Research Background

2.1 Canton Fair

Located in the center of the Zhujiang River delta, Guangzhou had long been the trade center of southern and even the whole China. Back to Qing Dynasty, the city was the only city permitted to have commercial communication with foreigners. In 1957, The Ministry of Commerce of China and the Guangdong Provincial Government initiated the Chinese Export Commodity Fair in Guangzhou against the blockage from Western countries. In the beginning, most of its guests were from other socialist countries (CFTC, 2006), then the chaotic time of Cultural Revolution greatly reduced its attendants. As China started its reform and opening-up policy in the 1970s, the fair soon revived and played a significant role in cultivating domestic economy in the irreversible trend of globalization. At its 100th session, the Premier Wen Jiabao announced that the Chinese Export Commodity Fair would be reoriented and renamed as China Import & Export Fair to serve both customers home and abroad as Chinese foreign trade gateway (Jin & Weber, 2008).

Revered as a symbol of China's external economic relations, this fair stands as a monument to the nation's progress in this domain. Its significance extends beyond being a platform for trade exchanges; rather, it serves as a reflection of China's profound transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one. Evidencing its global prominence, the Fair witnessed visits from 29 national
leaders at the presidential level and 84 officials at the vice premier level, hailing from 78 nations. Over time, the Fair transcended its initial role as a simple merchandise exchange platform, metamorphosing into an arena for promoting domestic brands on an international scale (CFTC, 2006).

In the past three years, Canton Fair was held only online due to the strict policy against Covid-19 pandemic, which blocked many foreign businessmen from attending the fair in person. As China reopened its border, guests overseas were able to meet with each other again. The host also expanded the Canton Fair Pavilion, making the long-awaited session this spring the biggest in exhibition area scale ever.

The fair received numerous reports from various news agencies, 2 news outlets are selected to make a comparative study in this paper.

2.2 South China Morning Post (SCMP)

The South China Morning Post (SCMP) is a leading English-language newspaper based in Hong Kong. It has a long and illustrious history, dating back to its founding in 1903. It was established by Tse Tsan-tai and Alfred Cunningham as a response to the need for an English-language newspaper that could cater to the British and international community in Hong Kong. Over the years, SCMP has evolved to become a vital source of news and information on Hong Kong, China, and global affairs.

Ownership: In 1987, SCMP was acquired by media tycoon Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. However, in 1993, the newspaper was sold to Robert Kuok, a prominent Malaysian-Chinese businessman, and founder of the Kuok Group. Now, SCMP is owned by Alibaba Group, a Chinese multinational conglomerate, after its acquisition in 2016.

Despite its ownership by Chinese capital, SCMP has maintained a reputation for editorial independence and balanced reporting. The newspaper strives to provide fair and objective coverage of regional and international news, while also offering insightful analysis and commentary. SCMP also covers a broad range of topics, including politics, business, economy, culture, technology, and sports and particularly renowned for its in-depth reporting on China-related issues, offering valuable insights into the political, economic, and social developments in Mainland China.

2.3 China Global Television Network (CGTN)

CGTN, also officially known as China Global Television Network, is a Chinese Government-affiliated international media organization based in Beijing, China. Much younger than SCMP, CGTN was launched on December 31, 2016, as part of a major restructuring of China Central Television (CCTV), the state broadcaster of China. The rebranding aimed to enhance CCTV's international presence and better engage with global audiences.

As a state-owned media organization, CGTN operates under the supervision of China's central authorities. While it aims to present China's perspectives and publicize Chinese official opinions, it also claims to maintain editorial independence and adheres to professional journalistic standards.

CGTN endeavors to serve as a conduit for presenting China's perspectives and voice to the world, imparting international viewers with insights into the nation's contemporary development. To achieve a broad global reach, the network broadcasts its content across the world and maintains an influential digital footprint through its official website and active presence on diverse social media platforms.

In summary, SCMP is an independent English-language newspaper with diverse coverage, while CGTN is a state-controlled media outlet that represents the Chinese government's perspective on global news and events.

3. Framing Analysis

News is anything but a true reflection of reality (Fourie, 2001). Despite journalistic and media outlets' assertions of their commitment to accuracy, fairness, and comprehensiveness in reporting, the existence of a completely neutral news medium remains elusive. This is attributed to the inherent limitations of language and communication, which inherently shape the presentation of events,
emphasizing certain aspects while obscuring others, thus influencing readers' understanding and cognitive perception. To describe this process is framing analysis.

Goffman (1974) introduces the concept of a "frame" as the guiding principles of organization that govern social events and our subjective engagement with them. These cognitive "schemata of interpretation" aid individuals in locating, perceiving, identifying, and labelling everyday occurrences (Goffman, 1974: 21). In the context of journalism, journalists utilize frames to structure portions of the everyday world, with each segment representing an arbitrary slice or cut from the continuous flow of ongoing activities (Goffman, 1974: 10-11). Tuchman also define news frames as “An occurrence is transformed into an event, and an event is transformed into a news story. The news frame organizes everyday reality and the news frame is part and parcel of everyday reality, for the public character of news is an essential feature of news.” (Tuchman, 1978: 193)

As said by Entman (2007: 4) in his frequently referenced definition, framing encompasses the process of carefully selecting a limited number of elements from perceived reality and constructing a coherent narrative that emphasizes the relationships between these elements to advance a specific interpretation.

Framing analysis is usually used as a qualitative methodology on news and media studies. Wimmer and Dominick’s (2006: 117-118) consider that news framing analysis contains 4 steps:
- Comparative assignment of incidents to categories (or frames);
- Elaboration and refinement of categories/frames;
- Searching for relationships and themes among categories/frames; and
- Simplifying and integrating data into a coherent theoretical structure.

4. Comparative Study on News from SCMP & CGTN

4.1 Research Objects

Following the structure above this paper selected 5 news about Canton Fair from SCMP, they are:
1. Chinese exporters upbeat as Canton Fair opens to foreign visitors for first time in 3 years published 15 April, 2023
2. China’s Canton Fair sees exporters turn ‘more aggressive’, with foreign buyers at a premium published 24 April, 2023
3. China warned of severe, complicated foreign trade situation ahead of Canton Fair amid falling orders published 4 April, 2023
4. China’s exporters turn to green production, Made in Vietnam to attract new orders at Canton Fair published 10 May, 2023
5. China’s exporters, foreign investors fear being left in the dark as Canton Fair goes online only published 1 April, 2022

And another 5 from CGTN:
1. 133rd Canton Fair sees strong demand for procurement published 4 May, 2023
2. Chart of the Day: The 133rd Canton Fair saw $21.7 billion export turnover published 5 May, 2023
3. 2023 Canton Fair: Effective strategies for managing supply chains in China published 21 April, 2023
4. 2023 Canton Fair: Trade expo concludes in south China published 6 May, 2023
5. Canton Fair 2022 opens online, boosting international trade connections published 15 April 2022

It is worth mentioning that the 5 selected news from SCMP are almost all the news can be retrieved from its official website and google news, while CGTN produced a great lot of news reports about the fair else than the 5 reports mentioned above. And for each outlet, one report from 2022 was selected to make a comparison with other reports from 2023.
4.2 Coverage Analysis

The reports' contents are sorted into different subjects in the table below according to their themes and topics. Through the table, we can see which topic was included in the reports of certain news outlets and which was not.

Table 1: Categorize the content of the story according to the theme and topic of the story

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>SCMP</th>
<th>CGTN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Order Value</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Western Importers Declined</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendant Number</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orders Slowly Moved to Southeast Asia</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held Online During the Coronavirus Pandemic</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China’s Exports Rose Compared with a Year Earlier</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shipments to the United States Fell by 6.5 percent</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canton Fair History</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence from Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022 Desperate for Order</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022 covid restrictions</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience Provided in Online Exhibition 2022</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biggest Exhibition Pavilion</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibition Zone Changes</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export Turnover</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table also reveals that the report emphasis of SCMP and CGTN is quite different.

In analyzing the report from both media outlets concerning the Canton Fair, several commonalities emerge. Both SCMP and CGTN cover essential details such as the total order value, number of attendants, and the fair's historical background. Additionally, they both address significant factors influencing the event, such as international affairs like the Ukraine War and the China-US Trade War. However, differences in emphasis are noticeable. CGTN tends to highlight the Canton Fair's longstanding and prominent stature when discussing its history, while SCMP provides only concise mention of its status.

Regarding the decision to hold the fair online, SCMP attributes it to China's strict COVID policy, while CGTN emphasizes the pleasure of reopening and moving forward rather than dwelling on past limitations. Taking a more international perspective, SCMP delves into interactions between the Canton Fair and other countries, including the gradual shift of the supply chain to Southeast Asia and the impact on customers from Western countries and US shipments. On the other hand, CGTN offers more detailed information on exhibition zone arrangements, site expansion, and the aid provided during past online sessions.
In their portrayal of the 2022 event, the media outlets adopt contrasting tones. SCMP describes it as "dark" with exporters "desperate for foreign customers" during online sessions. In contrast, CGTN provides limited coverage on why the fairs were exclusively held online, while focusing more on the actions taken by the host and the government. Notably, the sources of interviews also diverge. SCMP features interviews with businesspersons from ordinary firms and factories, whereas CGTN prioritizes individuals in higher positions, such as CEOs and heads of various organizations.

Overall, the two media outlets approach their reporting from distinct perspectives, with SCMP aiming to convey the voices of business and CGTN highlighting official viewpoints and actions. These differences can be attributed to the outlets' editorial policies, target audiences, and ownership.

4.3 A Tentative Reason

In line with numerous other Chinese media, CGTN consistently prioritizes broadcasting China's achievements and developments, aligning with official publications from China's central government. This orientation leads to a notable focus on government actions, typically presented in a positive way. Within China's media landscape, the majority of legal news outlets operate under varying degrees of control by central or local authorities, constraining journalists' scope to report beyond prescribed topics. Thanks to its intimate relationship with central authority, CGTN's access to detailed information directly from officials is a significant feature of its reporting.

Conversely, the South China Morning Post (SCMP) maintains a distinct reputation for its editorial independence, affording it the flexibility to present the Canton Fair in an optimistic manner while also critically assessing potential risks and unsatisfactory aspects of the Chinese economy. Also, adopted by news outlets worldwide, this balanced reporting strategy contributes to gaining readers' trust. Additionally, SCMP's letters on the Canton Fair delve beyond the specific event, offering insights to describe and predict the future trajectory of the Chinese and world economy. With English-speaking audiences forming its primary subscriber base, SCMP approaches event interpretation from a Western perspective to foster familiarity, resulting in divergent understandings compared to CGTN.

5. Conclusion

This paper retrieved 10 news reports about China’s biggest trade fair, the Canton Fair from the South China Morning Post (SCMP) and China Global Television Network (CGTN), and made a framing analysis. CGTN tends to report the Fair in an optimistic way with exclusive detailed information that provided by government, while ignoring the negative aspects, to promote China's international reputation. Having a higher degree of editorial independence, SCMP is capable to report the fair from diverse perspectives. With a more international reader group, SCMP prefer describing issues from a broader sight with research on potential effects that specific event, like the Canton Fair, could bring.

As with any reputable news outlet, it is important for us to approach media consumption with a critical mind, cross-referencing information, and seeking diverse perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of complex issues

Reference
