Changes of News Discourse in Editorials in China—Based on the Study of Chinese-language Editorials of Global Times

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Abstract. News discourse in editorials in China has undergone major changes. First, there is a shift in the discourse style. Editorials used to be serious, rigid and dogmatic, following one-way information flow, usually from the government down to the public. Now the news discourse moves toward a flexible style, working two-way communication by integrating public opinion into the editorials. Second, the editorial topics are more diversified. Not only political issues but also public concerns are given due attention to. Some topics once thought taboo have entered the public debate and editorials provide an unprecedented platform for the expression of such opinions. These changes instill a new life to the editorial and further build the editorial into a new public opinion sphere.

Introduction

Currently, Chinese media are more conscious of their duty of being a watch dog by getting involved in the public debate on hot issues. Different opinions can be heard, and even criticism toward the government policies can be seen on newspapers. Editorials, whose primary duty is to lead the public opinion, provide an unprecedented platform for the expression of opinions and create a new public opinion sphere for Chinese grassroots. Changes are occurring to Chinese journalism. But the dramatic changes can be found in editorials. This paper will use case study and textual analysis to examine these changes. The case in point is the Global Times.

The Chinese-language Global Times (GT) was founded on Jan. 3, 1993 and its English-language version was launched on Apr. 20, 2009. The Chinese version of the Global Times has a daily circulation of 1.5 million. It has established its readership among social elites and policy-makers. When these people open the Global Times, “they usually skip the front page news and turn to opinion page directly, then quickly indulge themselves in reading editorials and opinion articles.”[1] Global Times’ editorials enjoy popularity home and abroad. “GT’s editorials are acclaimed by the Chinese government, heeded by the foreign media and discussed hotly by the Chinese grassroots.”[2] Such credit goes against the stereotypic idea that editorials are too aloof to be favorably accepted by Chinese grassroots due to the official clichés and political teachings in editorials. However, dramatic changes happen to editorial writing in China, ranging from the discourse style to the topic selection. Let’s take GT’s Chinese-language editorials to illustrate what these changes are and how they occur.

Changes of the News Discourse Style

Style and News Discourse Style

Style is a property of language use that is difficult to define in precise terms. Style, in a traditional sense, is closely connected with “personal uniqueness and the aesthetics of language use.”[3] In his
book *News as Discourse*, Van Dijk defines style as “an indication or marker of social properties of speakers and of the socio-cultural situation of the speech event.”[4] Based on this definition, Van Dijk further classifies style into eight different types: personal style, ad hoc or momentous style, group style, contextual style, functional style, medium style, societal style and discourse type style.[5] This paper focuses on the discourse type style of GT’s Chinese-language editorials.

According to Van Dijk, discourse type style is “the set of specific stylistic features that are associated with a specific genre (conversation, everyday story, a law, or a public address).”[5] Every newspaper editorial develops its own discourse style as is shown in tone, texture and the way an editorial is written. In terms of discourse style of GT’s Chinese-language editorials, Hu Xijin, the editor-in-chief of the *Global Times* and also the leading writer of the editorials, said in an interview, “Since I took over the *Global Times*, its editorials have assumed a unique discourse style, that is, we write the way we talk and the words on the paper are exactly the words in our mind. We do not use officially formal languages, instead, we prefer simple languages. We try to assume an easy tone, but sometimes we cannot hold ourselves and say some rude words, but generally, we are becoming more and more rational and avoid those radical words.”[6] Hu’s way of writing an editorial conforms to the Western journalistic writing cannon: write the way you talk.[7] Under this guiding principle, GT’s editorials form a distinctive discourse style marked by four specific features.

**Features of Discourse Style of GT’s Editorials**

**Colloquialism.** When you read a Chinese version of GT’s editorial, you can finish it at one sitting. You practically find no obstacles in your reading. Everything comes out as it is. The readability is attributed to the colloquialism in writing. Hu Xijin, the leading writer of the editorial, once explained in an interview how they work out every editorial. “Every morning, the editor and I discuss and formulate a basic idea of what we are going to write for today’s editorial. Then, the editor will call the experts, inquiring about their opinions and ideas of the topic we are going to deal with. In the evening, the editor will present me with all sorts of information he has collected during the day. Sometimes the editor will write a draft. I will read all of them, including the experts’ opinions. After that, we work together to write the editorial. Usually I speak, the editor types my words into the computer. This is not simply recording, for the editor will correct my views by pointing out the contradiction or divergence I have either with the experts or with the information he gathered during the day.”[8] One speaks and the other records. This explains why the editorial takes a colloquial style. Here are two examples from our collected samples of GT’s Chinese-language editorials published in November 2015. For example, the South Korea-Japan relationship is “bumpy”; Japan dares to “play tough” in the trilateral tie among China, South Korea and Japan. Melvin Mencher, the author of the book *News Reporting and Writing*, remarked that the words with which the writer works should be from “the dialect of life.”[9] “Bumpy” and “play tough” are the dialect life. Writing an editorial in a colloquial style marks a breakthrough in traditional editorial writing which is repulsively formal and aloof. This is a big change for a state-run newspaper like the *Global Times*.

**Simplicity.** Simplicity is another feature of GT’s news discourse. Firstly, simplicity is achieved via plain language. The writer of GT’s editorial prefers to use plain languages, which stays in agreement with its colloquial style. He Chongyuan, the former editor-in-chief of the *Global Times*, highlighted the simplicity of news discourse of the *Global Times* by saying, “We pursue a populist language style. We do not use highbrow expressions, neither do we use big or difficult words. We try to make our international news as tangible as the domestic news…Our readers remark that the *Global Times* is a worthy newspaper, shaking off the form of a communiqué or textbook. That’s why they like to read our paper.” He further added, “We have to make our language simple and vivid, catering to the readers who have not received a very good education.”[10] It’s a commonly observed rule in journalism to write simply. Rene J. Cappon, the senior journalist in the Associated Press, advised how to write simply, “Prefer the short word to the long. Prefer the familiar word to the fancy. Prefer the specific word to the abstract. Use no more words than necessary to make your meaning clear.”[11]
This is what GT’s editorial writers are now strictly practicing. Secondly, simplicity is achieved by reducing the sentence and the editorial to its essence. There was a time in the past when long editorials were preferred. For example, during the Cultural Revolution in China, an editorial could run as long as several thousand characters or even ten thousand characters. But now, editorials tend to be shorter. Generally an editorial runs two or three thousand characters long or even shorter. GT’s editorials average out to about 1200 characters per piece. Editorial headlines are short as well. A study of the 20 headlines collected in November 2015 shows that GT’s headlines average out to about 14 characters per piece, shorter than the general 17-to-25-character headline. According to a psychological research, the best visual field we are able to see without moving our eyes or head is 20 degrees, which means we can see six-to-seven-character headline clearly at one glance without moving our eyes.[10] Therefore, a headline cannot be very long. The shorter the headline is, the better it performs.

**Vividness.** The third stylistic feature of GT’s editorial discourse is vividness. The task of editorials is to persuade and publicize. Persuasion and publicity do not have to be dry and serious, as the traditional editorial writing was supposed to be. Editorials in China used to be serious, rigid and dogmatic, for they focused more on the top leaders’ talks, new policies and some important meetings, acting as the “mouth and tongue” of the Party and the government. In 2011, a nationwide campaign swept the journalism in China, aiming to change the current working style of journalists. Instead of being stay-at-office journalists, the journalists were asked to be on the run. They should run to where the event happens to get the first-hand news. The journalists were also required to change their writing style by learning the fresh and vivid languages from life. GT’s editorial writers cling to the motto that “we won’t die in peace if we cannot write something stunningly beautiful.”[12] Vividness is reached by the wide use of everyday language. Here are two examples from our collected samples. For instance, the writers don’t say “you are scared to death”, which is too cliché. Instead, they will say, “you are scared to piss in your pants.” In describing you’ve had enough of someone’s talk, the writers will say, “your ears begin to grow calluses because of his repeated talk.” These expressions are full of images. A senior editor said, “one basic rule of good writing: Show me, don’t tell me. Let me see what you see. Paint me a picture. Then I’ll follow you anywhere, even past the jump.”[13] GT’s editorials are good at painting pictures by using languages containing vivid images.

**Use of Rhetoric.** GT’s editorial writers like to use rhetoric and even make conscious efforts to do so. The rhetoric of discourse has to do with how we say things and what aesthetic function we want to engage in.[14] Yet, persuasive texts, like editorials, also need aesthetic function to reach the persuasive end. Van Dijk argues that “the use of rhetorical structures in the news depends on the goals and intended effects of communication.”[14] The editorial writers not only want to get the message across to the readers, but also want the readers to accept what they say, and even act on the message. In this sense, both illocutionary functions and perlocutionary effects are desired in an editorial writing. This is where rhetoric comes in. GT’s editorial writers have recourse to rhetoric to make abstract ideas concrete. The table below lists the rhetorical devices used in the 20 samples.

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<th>Rhetorical Devices</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
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<tr>
<td>simile</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>metaphor</td>
<td>34</td>
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<tr>
<td>analogy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personification</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metonymy</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>overstatement</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>irony</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>sarcasm</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total number</td>
<td>52</td>
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Altogether 52 rhetorical devices are used in 20 pieces of editorials. That means every editorial contains at least 2 rhetorical devices. Rhetorical devices usually carry vivid images. For instance, one sample compares waging the Second Gulf War to “stirring up a horns’ nest.” Rhetorical devices like this communicate not only information, but also attitudes and emotions. It is believed that “facts are better represented and memorized if they involve or arouse strong emotions.”[15]

To sum up, GT’s editorial discourse style is more like a talk than a textbook or communique the traditional editorial was supposed to be, yet the editorial talk is full of vivid images and rhetorical devices, making it readable and tangible to readers of all levels.

Changes of Editorial Topics

A Wider Range of Topics. A common problem in editorials in China’s newspapers, especially in the newspapers run by the state is that the editorial topics invariably follow the Party lines and policies, top officials’ talks and guidelines, or resolutions and documents passed by important meetings. The information flow used to be one way, from the government down to the public. The general public can hardly find their voice in the editorial. Another factor which contributes to the narrow editorial topics is that it is safer to talk about those routine topics. You don’t have to worry about taboos and don’ts. Out of such concerns, editorial writers would rather reprint an editorial from the authoritative paper like People’s Daily than write one on their own, which produces the highly similar editorial in almost every newspaper in response to a big political event in China. For example, there were 57 editorials published by 28 province-level, city-level, autonomous-region-level state-run newspapers in January 2000, among which, three editorials were about the New Year’s address, one about the incorporation’s rise out of poverty, the rest of the editorials about the People’s Congress and Political Consultative Conference held on the local level and some other important meetings. Such conference reports accounted for 93% of all those 57 editorials.[16] The homogeneity of editorial topics in the state-run newspapers cried for a change to keep up with the increasingly diversified public opinions. Some major newspapers in China took the lead to break the homogeneity. Take the Global Times for example. Though attached to the state-run newspaper, People’s Daily, the Global Times is financially independent. This financial independence grants the editors more freedom to run the newspaper, which is reflected by the diversity of topics discussed in editorials. Initially, international issues were the focus of GT’s editorials. Later on, with the pressing needs of Chinese readers, the editors have to give due attention to domestic issues. For example, among the 20 samples published in November 2015, five editorials are about international issues, four about China’s relationship with its neighboring countries, another four about foreign interference with South China Sea, two about Taiwan, the remaining five about domestic issues. It can be seen that GT’s editorial topics cover a wide range of people’s concerns and become more diversified.

Touch of Topics Once Thought Taboo. As public opinion in China becomes more diversified, editorials begin to stray into the area once thought taboo, for example, child AIDS victims, forced demolition and the fight against corruption. In 2013, Hu Xijin, the editor-in-chief of the Global Times, blamed Chinese environmental authorities for failing to disclose “state secret” statistics on the country’s soil pollution. The newspaper went so far as to devote much space to the political dissent, Ai Weiwei. When Ai Weiwei was arrested in 2011, People’s Daily, the authoritative paper like People’s Daily kept silent. Nanfang Metropolis Daily, a pro-liberal newspaper, published a commentary to commemorate the three-year anniversary of Wenchuan earthquake, but its hidden intention was to pay a tribute to Ai Weiwei. Later on, with the pressing needs of Chinese readers, the editors have to give due attention to domestic issues. For example, among the 20 samples published in November 2015, five editorials are about international issues, four about China’s relationship with its neighboring countries, another four about foreign interference with South China Sea, two about Taiwan, the remaining five about domestic issues. It can be seen that GT’s editorial topics cover a wide range of people’s concerns and become more diversified.

As a Wall Street Journal commented, “Global Times…is a remarkable innovation…the English edition strays into realms once thought taboo.”[18] The Wall Street Journal has a different opinion, “…the tone of the English version is less strident than its Chinese version and the paper has been developing something of a reputation for fairly insightful stories that don’t simply hew to the Party line and
discussing topics such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown and Internet censorship.”[19] GT’s editorial, among other things, becomes the most cited source of all news stories printed on the Global Times by world media.[8] Under the spur of editorials, Global Times is transformed from a “news” paper to an “opinion” paper and rises to be the “new mainstream newspaper of modern China.”[1]

Summary

Editorial writing in China has shaken off the traditional homogenous pattern of being serious, rigid and dogmatic and becomes more diversified. The diversity of editorial news discourse reflects the diversity of social thinking. As a result, the diversity of social thinking brings about the diversity of public opinions and editorials provide such an unprecedented platform for the expression of such opinions. Therefore, changes of editorials are positive. They instill a new life to the editorial and further build the editorial into a new public opinion sphere.

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