Two Stories, One Narrative

A Narrative Analysis of the Coverage of Venezuela Crisis in CNN and China Daily

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Abstract: *This article is a narrative analysis of the news reports about the Venezuela Crisis published in the CNN and China Daily's official websites from January 30 to March 12, 2019. Looking into the plot line and characters of two news media's stories, the researcher has found that the two representative news producers, though holdingopposite stances, are using the same romance narrative to interpret the event. Two political characters, Guaido and Maduro, are the coresofthe stories and the people of Venezuela, including the refugees, havebeen turned into minor characters, which makes the event a "political game" played by Guaido and Maduro other than a humanitarian crisis.*

Keywords: *Narratives, CNN, China Daily, Venezuela Crisis*

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the continuous and severe economic depression, Venezuela is now deep in crisis. The people are suffering from a series of problems including hunger, diseases, crimes and rising death rates. Because of the disastrous circumstance for living, millions of them have decided to flee the country, which even caused a refugee crisis in Colombia.

The humanitarian crisis also triggered a political earthquake. The opposition leader Guaido refused to accept the latest won by Maduro and claimed himself as the president of Colombia. Soon, the presidential dispute became a key global agenda that divided the international community into supporters and opposers of Maduro. As what CNN said, "a diplomatic game of chicken" is being played by those powerful nations for their own interest, which is offering "two equally hopeless resolutions" rather than a constructive political dialogue for the benefits of Venezuelan people (Roth, 2019).

As the crisis could be viewed from both political and humanitarian perspective, how media covered the crisis becomes an interesting topic. The question of whether news media are focusing on the "horse-race" side of the crisis and defining it as a "diplomatic game" or "presidential game" around Maduro and Guaido, or paying more attention to the humanitarian side, trying to awake aglobal compassion with the "empathy framing" (Robinson, 2002) to help the suffering people, is worthy for discussion. In this paper, the author would try to find an answer with a narrative analysis of the coverage of the crisis in two news media: CNN of the U.S., the main supporter of Guaido, and China Daily of China, a major supporter of Maduro from January 30 to March 12.

2. NARRATIVE AND NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

First, it's essential to understand the concept of narrative. According to Ryan (2004), narrative is a mental representation of events that are causally connected as a plot and through which we could make sense of the world. In another word, narrative is a way that helps us define, interpret, and communicate what is happening in the world by putting a series of events in a causal sequence to imply how one leads to another. Accordingly, a narrative must contain three elements: plot, the causal logic that links the events; characters that participate in the events; transformation, a passage from one situation to another (Lawler, 2002 & Polletta, 1998).

Therefore, narrative analysis is a research method focusing on how events are connected in the form of stories by individuals or collectives to create a narrative meaning that could interpret the happenings in the world. Specifically, Neuendorf (2002) argues that most attention should be paid to the characters in narrative analysis while Ricoeur (1991) suggests the plot is the central element of a narrative. Though these two views look contradictory, they are actually sharing the same logic. Neuendorf (2002) further explains that the interest paid to characters should be specific in how they carry and developing the stories, so the study of characters is not simply about actions of the characters in the text, but also their "common character roles" (hero, villain…) and performance in a "linear sequence", which is in accordance with Ricoeur's (1991) argument that researchers should look for both narrative identities of the characters and how they carry a plot when studying the emplotment. In a word, the plot is the key subject for narrative analysis, and studying the characters is the way to understand it.

Indeed, narrative analysis is valuable in media studies. As an important supplement of framing analysis, it offers scholars a syntagmatic perspective to evaluate how political issues are interpreted by news media. It's essential to know one of the main purposes of narrative analysis is to understand the causality within the plot, which I believe is also an advantage of narrative analysis as it requires scholars to find out a relationship among the events to understand them as a whole rather than treat them as fragmented facts. Though the method is somehow a bit subjective, it's still a good way for us to get a deeper insight into both the political issues and its media interpretation. For the case like Venezuela crisis, narrative analysis is an appropriate method to choose, as it can help us understand not only what kind of story was told by media but also how the story was narrated to interpret this complex crisis concerning to political, economic, legal, and humanitarian aspects.

3. THE RETURN OF GUAIDO VS. VENEZUELA'S MADURO AGAINST INVASION

First, CNN and China Daily are holding different stances when reporting the Venezuela crisis. Due to its affiliation with the Chinese government, China Daily must be consistent with the voices of authority. While media from the U.S. and other western countries, though have more freedom to perform the roleas "the fourth estate", often replace objectivity with "empathy and critical framing" (Robinson, 2002) in reporting issues of democracy and human rights, and that means they always side with the opposition parties against the authoritarian regimes.

Therefore, if we discuss the CNN's coverage of the crisis from the angle of character casting, it would be easy to find that Guaido, the opposition leader against Maduro, is the protagonist of the current story. His actions and experience in the past three weeks have formed a clear plot line which could be concluded as "the Return of Guaido". The point could be proved by the following table of the news titles about Guaido:

Date	News Titles
Feb. 25	Pence will meet with Venezuelan opposition leader in Colombia
Feb. 27	Venezuelan opposition leader says he'll be back in the country by Monday despite threats
Feb. 27	Guaido: 'No doubt' I could be arrested upon return
Feb. 28	Venezuela's opposition leader says he will begin exercising his 'duties as president' (as soon as return)
Mar. 3	Tensions mount in Venezuela as Guaido seeks return to country
Mar. 4	Opposition leader Juan Guaido returns to Venezuela, risking arrest
Mar. 4	Venezuelan opposition leader mobbed at airport
Mar. 10	Venezuelan opposition leader will call for 'state of national emergency' as power blackout goes on
Mar. 11	Guaido: Venezuela has collapsed after major blackouts

The above coverage was collected from cnn.com

Obviously, these reports were under a clear linear order: First, Guaido suggested that he would return to Venezuela despite the risk; then, "tensions", which could be interpreted as the passion of the civil protesters, were rising in Venezuela; Next, Guaido kept his word and returned with ovation; Finally, Guaido started to shoulder his "duties as president". Altogether, these reports composed an episode of *The Return of Guaido* and a heroic character was created in the plot: the "risk of being arrested" faced by Guaido was highlighted repeatedly, which revealed Guaido's determination and bravery, as well as

constructed an image of a responsible leader who has earned the public support and is willing to sacrifice his personal safety for the public.

Specifically, a degree of romance writing was used in these reports, and the following quote in the news *Tensions mount in Venezuela as Guaido seeks return to country* was a typical example:

"… That, coupled with his increased profile, makes an arrest upon his return a possibility. A land crossing around the Colombian border town of Cucuta would be easy to do covertly… but it would require a long and dangerous drive to the capital Caracas, where he could be targeted by pro-Maduro gangs. A commercial flight into Caracas could be simply turned around by the Venezuelan authorities, and refused permission to land. No choices are good." (Walsh, 2019)

It's a little surprising there was a detailed description of the possible difficulties for Guaido's return in a report about tensions in Venezuela that even written under a "personalizing narrative logic" (Benson, 2013): the author seemed to wear the shoes of Guaido by making the comment "no choices are good". However, all difficulties mentioned were possibilities other than facts, which might lead to an impression that Guaido's journey was extremely dangerous (buthe actually arrived by plane safely and immediately met by EU diplomats).Moreover, "pro-Maduro gangs" appeared as a threat to Guaido's return, and in this way, Maduro has alluded as a potential murderer. Indeed, with obstacles and a negative character as the foil, Guaido's return looks braver with a brighter heroic image.

When CNN was making Guaido a hero against dictatorship for the public, a counter-narrative emerged in China Daily, and this time the protagonist became Maduro. The plot of a different story is shown in the following news about the crisis:

Date	News Titles
Jan. 30	US slaps sanctions on Venezuelan oil
Jan. 30	US 'childish' in conducting foreign policy, says Venezuela's Maduro
Feb. 3	Trump says sending military to Venezuela 'an option'
Feb. 10	Venezuela's Maduro leads military exercises
Feb. 19	Trump addresses Venezuelan community to pressure Maduro govt
Feb. 21	Maduro highlights morality, disposition of Venezuelan armed forces
Feb. 23	US increases pressure on Maduro gov't via 'humanitarian aid'
Feb. 25	Maduro vows to defend nation amid standoff
Feb. 26	US imposes sanctions on 4 Venezuelan state governors
Mar. 1	Venezuela to move state oil company's Lisbon office to Moscow
Mar. 12	US slaps sanctions on Russian bank over links with Venezuela

The above coverage was collected from chinadaily.com

China Daily's coverage looks like a "horse-race" (Hamby, 2019) under a clear mode of "first the U.S., then Maduro", and certainly China Daily has chosen its side in this race. The U.S. was frequently associated with the word "sanctions", while "humanitarian aid", the phrase that showed a positive role, was interpreted as political pressure. In this plot, the U.S. was in an active position, imposing sanctions, pressure, criticism, and threats, while Maduro was responding, defending and counterattacking passively. Meanwhile, China Daily used "Venezuela's" other than "Venezuelan president" as the prefix ion for Maduro, which indicates both of his legality and patriotism. Thus, the plotline could be concluded as of how "Venezuela's Maduro" led his country to defend the U.S. invasion.

In China Daily's story, Maduro was the hero. First, there were specific discourses to emphasize the legality of Maduro's presidency. The following quote was a typical example:"While tensions are mounting as Guaido's return posed a direct challenge to Maduro's elected government and could end with Guaido being arrested" (China Daily, 2019a). It's interesting the word "elected" was used to modify the government, which implied the government was chosen by people. And the questions about the corruption and unfairness of the election were ignored.

Second, Maduro's voices were massively used as quotes to create a heroic but rational personal image. It's a bit ironic that the corrupted and cruel dictator in the western media was turned into a defender of the country and a peacemaker. For instance:

"He also said he would not back down and would defend the country from any attack with his life, if necessary. 'My life is devoted to the defense of the country, in whatever circumstance I will never bend, I will never give up,' Maduro said." (China Daily, 2019b)

"I am ready to sit down at the negotiating table with the opposition so that we can speak for the good of Venezuela, for the sake of peace and the country's future" (China Daily, 2019c)

On the other hand, the villain's role was given to the U.S. instead of Guaido. China Daily was making obvious attempts to blame the U.S. for the chaos. When discussing the economic hardships, China Daily (2019a) quotes the comment from a Venezuelan political analyst who believes "US interference is making matters worse". In the meantime, Guaido was treated as a minor character with much fewer appearances than Maduro and always attached to the U.S. with a prefix ion like "Trump administration's recognition of" to emphasize his presidency was recognized by the U.S. despite he has many other supporters in the globe.

To summarize, CNN and China Daily have formed a "narrative battle" between *The Return of Guaido* and *Venezuela's Maduro against Invasion*, but they actually told a similar heroic exploit: a hero willing to sacrifice (Guaido/Maduro), fights against a powerful villain (Dictator/Invader), for public good (human rights/sovereignty). Therefore, although having completely different plot lines, their stories were under the same logic of romance narrative.

4. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER THINKING: THE PEOPLE AS THE MINOR CHARACTER

As the above analysis showed, CNN and China Daily told their stories centering on two actors by building two heroic images, which also reveals their emphasis to interpret the conjuncture as a presidential crisis or a political game rather than a humanitarian crisis. Therefore, the people were treated as a minor character, and always as a lead-in to the political debate or the righteous appeal made by the hero. For instance, in CNN's news *huge power outage leaves most of Venezuela in darkness*, the description of the difficult life due to the blackout was followed closely by a debate among Guaido and Maduro of "Corruption vs. Coup". The intention of this article might be more about forming a political debate or criticism, which can be summarized by a quote from Pompeo in the news: "No food. No medicine. Now, no power. Next, no Maduro." (Pozzebon and Britton, 2019)

Also, a small thematic analysis of the news titles of the crisis reports from Feb 10 to March 11could also be used to prove the point:

Themes of the News Titles in CNN's (top) and China Daily's (bottom) Reports

Themes	Number
Voices from the U.S. Officials and Politicians	17
Voices from Guaido and the Opposition Protests	13
Voices from Maduro and Venezuela Government	8
Conditionof the Suffering people	7
Discussion in UN	1
Other	7

Themes	Number
Voices from Maduro and Venezuela Government	14
Voices from The U.S. Officials and Politicians	9
Voices from Chinese Government	6
Discussion in UN	6
Voices from Guaido and the Opposition Protests	2
Condition of the Suffering people	1
Other	5

Data was collected with the search engine of the cnn.com and chinadaily.com

Indeed, news titles don't include all the information in the news: Guaido, Maduro, the voices from the U.S. and Chinese government as well as Venezuelan people's miserable life were often interweaving in one piece of news. However, news titles could still reveal journalistic and editorial decisions on which piece of information is the most important or attractive one to highlight. During this period of reporting, Guaido, Maduro, U.S., and China were placed in a more notable position than suffering people, which implies the people is only a minor character in the story. Besides, it's interesting to notice the voices from the U.S. and Chinese government frequently appeared in the news titles, which endowed the two with a positive role of deuteragonist that supported the hero against the villain.

It's not a surprise that the people were overlooked in China Daily as human rights are never the main concern for Chinese media. However, the CNN's coverage was not a common case: in the 2017

Rohingya crisis, there were a series of reports in CNN highlighting the poor living conditions of refugees as the prior problem to solve, while in Venezuela crisis, the refugees were reported in a fragmented way though the overall number of Venezuelan refugees are much bigger than the Rohingyas. Considering Venezuela's geographical closeness to the U.S. and its relationship to the country's global opponent like China and Russia, a deduction could be made that national interest rather than humanitarian concern is the factor that drives journalists and editors to interpret the crisis as a "political game".

If a mainstream international media, operating in a democratic country that worships human rights greatly, still inclines to focus more on political instead of the humanitarian aspect of a "man-made crisis" (Waghorn, 2018), the performance of news media in other countries, especially those autocratic ones, is also predictable. Therefore, the change pointed out by Volkmer (2002) and Cottle (2009) that media are expanding their national views, replacing "foreign" with "international", and creating a kind of "cosmopolitan" compassion in the crisis, is a myth in the global media outlet. To a great extent, global issues and crises are still reported under a narrowed national frame.

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