

Framing strategies and power dynamics in news discourses: a Critical Discourse Analysis of a diplomatic incident

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Abstract. This study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how news reports of a diplomatic incident construct competing ideological narratives and reflect underlying power relations. By analyzing articles from *China Daily* and *The New York Times*, we identify distinct framing strategies: *China Daily* frames the event as an unjustified provocation threatening bilateral relations, while *The New York Times* frames it as a necessary response to national security concerns. This article argues that these frames are not neutral representations but strategic discursive practices that serve to reinforce the respective national interests and ideological positions of these two countries in the global arena. The research findings underscore the role of news media as a site of ideological contestation and power negotiation in international relations.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, ideological framing, power relations, news discourse, Fairclough's three-dimensional model

1. Introduction

The closure of the Chinese Consulate in Houston in July 2020 was a pivotal moment in the ongoing deterioration of Sino-U.S. relations, attracting significant media attention worldwide. News media, as primary mediators of information, play a crucial role in shaping public perception of international events. However, as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) scholars argue, news discourse is never neutral; it is embedded within broader social and political structures and serves to reproduce or challenge existing power relations [1, 2].

This study adopts Fairclough's [3] three-dimensional CDA model in 1995 to analyze news reports from *China Daily* and *The New York Times* on the consulate closure. By examining the interplay between text, discursive practice, and social practice, we aim to uncover how these media outlets construct competing ideological narratives and how these narratives reflect the power struggles between China and the U.S. in the global information order.

The following section reviews the theoretical framework of CDA and its application to the study of media discourse and power relations.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA

Fairclough's model in 1995 provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing discourse as a form of social practice. It consists of three interrelated dimensions:

(1) Textual analysis: Focuses on the linguistic features of the text, such as vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structure.

(2) Discursive practice analysis: Examines the processes of text production, distribution, and consumption.

(3) Social practice analysis: Connects the discourse to broader social, cultural, and political structures and power relations.

This model allows us to move beyond a purely linguistic analysis to understand how discursive choices are shaped by and contribute to social and political realities.

2.2. Ideological framing in news discourse

Building on CDA, media framing theory [4] suggests that media outlets select and emphasize certain aspects of an event while downplaying others, thereby constructing specific frames that guide public understanding. In the context of international news, these frames are often influenced by national ideologies and power dynamics [5], serving to promote the interests and values of the media's home country.

This study applies Fairclough's model to analyze the ideological framing strategies employed by *China Daily* and *The New York Times* in their coverage of the Houston consulate closure.

3. Methodology

A qualitative content analysis was conducted on a purposive sample of 10 articles from *China Daily* and 8 articles from *The New York Times*, published between July and August 2020. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes, lexical choices, and rhetorical strategies used to frame the consulate closure. The data was interpreted through the lens of Fairclough's three-dimensional model, linking textual features to their discursive and social implications [6].

The following section presents the findings of the analysis, focusing on the distinct ideological frames constructed by the two media outlets.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. *China Daily*: framing the event as a provocation

China Daily consistently framed the consulate closure as an unjustified and provocative act by the U.S. government. Key strategies included:

(1) Emphasizing bilateral damage: Frequent references to the negative impact of the closure on Sino-U.S. relations and cooperation.

(2) Highlighting legal violations: Descriptions of the U.S. action as a breach of international law and diplomatic norms.

(3) Portraying China as a victim: Language that positioned China as the innocent party in the conflict, merely responding to U.S. aggression.

These framing strategies reflect *China Daily's* role as an official media outlet, seeking to defend China's national image and interests on the global stage.

4.2. *The New York Times*: framing the event as a security response

In contrast, *The New York Times* framed the closure as a necessary and justified response to alleged Chinese espionage activities. Key strategies included:

- (1) Emphasizing national security: Frequent references to the threat posed by Chinese intelligence operations to U.S. national security.
- (2) Citing official sources: Reliance on statements from U.S. government officials to legitimize the action.
- (3) Portraying the U.S. as a defender: Language that positioned the U.S. as taking decisive action to protect its interests and citizens.

These framing strategies reflect *The New York Times'* role as a leading Western media outlet, operating within a broader discourse that constructs China as a potential threat to U.S. hegemony.

4.3. Power relations and ideological contestation

The contrasting frames employed by *China Daily* and *The New York Times* are not merely differences in perspective but are reflective of the broader power relations between China and the U.S. *China Daily's* frame challenges the existing Western-dominated international order and asserts China's growing influence, while *The New York Times'* frame seeks to maintain U.S. hegemony and justify its actions as necessary for global leadership. In this sense, the news discourse on the consulate closure becomes a site of ideological contestation and power negotiation between the two nations.

These findings demonstrate how news media serve as active agents in the construction and negotiation of ideological narratives and power relations in international politics.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown how *China Daily* and *The New York Times* construct distinct ideological frames in their coverage of the Houston consulate closure, reflecting the competing national interests and power relations between China and the U.S. By applying Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, we have been able to uncover the complex interplay between textual features, discursive practices, and social structures in shaping these narratives.

The research findings highlight the importance of critical media literacy in understanding the ideological underpinnings of news discourse, particularly in the context of international conflict. Future research could extend this analysis to include a wider range of media outlets and explore the impact of these frames on public opinion and foreign policy.

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