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A Content Analysis of the *New York Times*' Coverage of Libya War

Wang Xueyan

摘要：自从人类有了战争，媒体就与之结下了不解之缘，媒体报道在战争中起着举足轻重的作用。战争报道的客观性与平衡性是媒体职业准则与责任所在。为了探讨美国媒体的战争报道特点，本文以美国最具影响力的报纸《纽约时报》为例，以议程设置理论为支撑，运用内容分析法对《纽约时报》关于利比亚战争的报道进行分析。结果发现，在稿源，发稿地等方面，其报道是趋于客观的；但在信源、议题分布等方面，其报道存在着不平衡。最后，论文对其报道倾向性的原因进行了深入剖析。

关键词：利比亚战争； 纽约时报； 内容分析

Abstract: Media have a special relationship with war since the appearance of war in human history. Media always play an important role in war. Being objective and balanced in war coverage is supposed to be media's professional ethics and responsibilities. In order to probe the characteristics of American media's war coverage, this paper takes the *New York Times*, America's most influential newspaper, as a sample, and analyzes its reports on Libya War within the framework of Agenda Setting Theory and Content Analysis. The paper comes to the conclusion that these reports turn to be almost objective with regard to the news sources and the places of news dispatches but unbalanced in terms of the information sources of reports and the distribution of issues. Subsequently, the reasons for the reportorial tendency are explored.

Key words: Libya War; the *New York Times*; Content Analysis

1. Introduction

"Everyday life provides sufficient experience and information. But for the more distant and abstract issues like the hostage in Iran..., the media are our limited windows on the world."^[1] "The media have the opportunity to dig out events of their own choice and decide upon issues that the public should know about."^[2] Moreover, in this information age, people are surrounded everyday

by hundreds of reports from kinds of media like the Internet, newspapers, magazines, televisions, radios and so on. As a result, people's opinions are influenced by media groups unconsciously. Media, as is called "the fourth estate", turns increasingly so powerful that researches on it become indispensable.

Media play an important role in many kinds of fields, especially in war. War always attracts people's attention and is regarded as the eternal theme of media as well. The information and reports about war have great effect on not only both the warring sides but also people who care the war and result of the war. Information has become a kind of sharp weapon in the war. So as a carrier of the information, media have become an indirect tool of winning the war in strategists' eyes as well.

In order to figure out the function of media in war coverage, there have been many scholars doing research on some reports about wars. Li Shenbo in *"The Interaction between Government and Media in Modern War"* explores the relations between the U.S. government and media during wars after WW II. Guo Ge in his paper *"On the United States Control and Utilization of Media in the Iraq War"* analyzes the U.S government and army's dominant role in media coverage of the war. Song Jin in his thesis *"The Study of American Journalistic freedom through war reports"* explores how much freedom that American media have in the reports on war and how much media is controlled by government during Vietnam War and Iraq War. Then he draws a conclusion that there is no absolute freedom of press especially during the war, when government will strengthen the control of media. Xu Xin's thesis *"Study of the Iraqi War report in American media"* also reveals the relation between American media and government in the war. And he draws a conclusion that media cover the war in rhythm with the government.

Either in the Vietnam War or Iraq War, the American media played the role as a watchdog of the government in the beginning and then changed attitude in order to protect national profits in the later term. That means almost all former researches done by these scholars suggest that American media reports on these wars are not objective enough. Perhaps because these wars were related to the great benefit of America, the media's position was so influenced by the government that they couldn't make objective reports. However, this thesis will study Libya War in which the United States doesn't join the battle as such a major role as America played in Vietnam War and Iraq War any more, but attended the war as a supporting role and gave the leadership to NATO

soon.

It's well known that the *New York Times* is one of the most influential newspapers in the United States. It has enjoyed a good credibility and authority for a long time. It is also called a loyal record of the U.S. Besides, readers of the *New York Times* mostly come from the middle class in American society including intellectuals, state officials and some professional classes who own technical background, etc. In the United States, the middle class generally makes up around 60 percent to 70 percent of the population. Therefore, their voices consist of the mainstream of social views.^[3] As it can be seen that the *New York Times* is a representative of American media. From the beginning of Libya War, the *New York Times* paid much attention to it and reported its immediate situations in a large quantity. But as for this different war, what is the attitude of this influential newspaper? Whether the agenda setting of the *New York Times* on Libya War is proper or not? Is the news about this war in which the U.S plays a relatively supporting role not a leading role objective or not? With these questions, this paper will employ content analysis method to analyze the reports on Libya War in the *New York Times* in terms of the news sources, the places of news dispatches, the information source of reports, and the distribution of issues respectively.

2. Theory and Methodology

This part introduces the major theory and method applied in this paper specifically. Agenda Setting Theory is a general theory usually used to analyze mass media's reports. Similarly, Content Analysis is a kind of systematical analytical method which can get quantitative description about mass communication contents.

2.1 Agenda Setting Theory

"News not only can tell us what to think about but also can influence us how to think about it."

^[4]This saying shows the media agenda setting's function on people's ideas. "American journalist Theodore White mentions that the power of mass media sets the agenda of public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what people will talk and think about – "an authority that is only owned by tyrant, priest, party and officials in other countries".^[5] Agenda setting functions as a theoretical hypothesis first appeared in a thesis entitled *The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media Dissemination* by American Communication experts M.E. McCombs and Donald Shaw published in *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1972. Their work

summarizes the research about the influence which media reports have on common people during the presidential election in 1968. In order to know how much impact media agenda has on public agenda, McCombs and Shaw did a survey about the General Election. Based on their findings they put forward the Agenda Setting Theory in 1972.

“The Agenda Setting Theory includes three types of agenda setting: public agenda setting, media agenda setting and policy agenda setting.”^[6] This theory holds that mass communication can't determine people's specific ideas about certain events but they can affect people's attention on some facts and news in priority by providing information and setting related issues for people. According to Maxwell Maccombs, “a tight focus on a handful of issues conveys a strong message to the audience about what are the most important topics of the moment”.^[7] Therefore, Agenda Setting Theory also shows that the emphasis on facts and opinions mass communication puts is in proportion to audience's attention. Audience will change their ideas about something's importance because of the frequency, news sources of the reports provided by media. The coincidence between media agenda and the public agenda in terms of the importance of matters is not just simple. It has something with the frequency of contact with media. If a person often contact with mass communication,^[8] his personal agenda will have more consistency with media's agenda. What's more, this theory not only focuses on issues that media emphasize, but also pays attention to how the issues are expressed. Therefore, agenda setting has great influence on both audience's attitude and behavior.

The appearance of this theory has insignificant influence on researching mass communication. This theory^[8] reveals the powerful effects of mass communication on common people by investigating the role that mass communication plays in people's cognitive process to the environment. This theory also has been of some enlightening significances for investigating public media's opinion. It offers us a new angle of researching the relationship between media and society too.

2.2 Content Analysis

Content Analysis is a kind of objective and systematic analytical method which can obtain a quantitative description of some communication contents.^[9] This conception was put forward firstly by Bernard Berelson in 1952. Over the past decade, the symbols and messages contained in

the mass media have become increasingly popular research topics in both the academic sector and the private sector. For instance, public relations firms use content analysis to monitor the subject matter of company publications and *The Media Monitor* publishes periodic studies of how the media treat social and political issues.^[10] Generally, in the media study, the main purpose of the content analysis is to explore how news, drama, advertisement and entertainment reflect the social and cultural phenomenon and what is the significance of the reflection. Content Analysis can provide some information based on which, we can get the insight about what is highlighted and what is hidden in the media text. Content Analysis requires describing all factors of the text which are worthy researching. Then it requires calculating frequency of the specific factors and analyzing the relationship among these factors.

Content Analysis of the media reports has some steps. Firstly, choose media or the range of content. Secondly, choose the source of the text and select the range of date. Lastly, choose the relatively specific valued content. As for this paper which analyzes the *New York Times'* coverage of Libya War, it chooses the reports of the *New York Times* on Libya War as the media text and choose the range of date from March 20, 2011 to October 31, 2011. The aspects of the news sources, the places of news dispatches, the information source of reports and the distribution of issues are chosen as the specific valued contents which should be analyzed in detail.

3.Data Analysis

Libya War began on March 20, 2011, lasted for almost seven months, and ended on October 31, 2011, involving lots of countries and organizations such as the United States, France, NATO, United Nations and so on. The statistic data provided by this thesis is based on the *New York Times'* official website. From March 20 to October 31, 2011, there are 467 reports on Libya war in the *New York Times*. Among these 467 reports, there are 48 ones in the Front Page, which indicates the importance of Libya War for this newspaper. These massive reports show the close attention the *New York Times* pays to this war. This part will analyze these reports in terms of the news sources, the places of news dispatches, the information source of reports, and the distribution of issues.

3.1 News Sources

According to the statistics of the sources of 467 reports, we can find that the sources of the reports are various.

Table of the News Source

News Sources	Number	Percentage
The <i>New York Times</i>	308	66 %
Reuters	10	2.1 %
The Associated Press	9	1.9 %
Agency France Press	1	0.2 %
Freelance writer	80	17.2 %
Reader	30	6.4 %
Anonymity	29	6.2%

From the above table, we can see these reports are mainly written by the *New York Times*’ journalists. This kind of source accounts for around 66 percent. Another big source is freelance writers, accounting for 17.1percent. Besides, the *New York Times* is willing to share other media’s idea. Therefore, it also uses the reports from Reuters, the Associated Press and Agency France Press, which shows that the *New York Times* has a strong inclusiveness. It is worthwhile pointing out that the *New York Times* emphasizes readers’ reflection too. There are 30 articles from the letters of readers and 29 from anonymity. Providing the voices of common people should be an important issue for every medium. From the perspective of the statistics, the variety of reports’ sources implies that the *New York Times* is an objective media in this respect.

3.2 Places of News Dispatches

According to the places of news dispatches, we can judge whether the report is edited on spot. Generally speaking, the reports edited on spot are very reliable. The places of news dispatches are charted as follows.

Table of Places of News Dispatches

Place	Number	Percentage
The scene	89	19%
U.S (New York, Washington, etc.)	11	2.4%
Other places	11	2.4%
Anonymity	356	76.2%

The scene in the table refers to the place where events happen. Based on the data, we know

that most of the reports are not edited from the original place. 356 reports don't mark the places of the news' source at all. These anonymous articles are mainly edited by the editorial department after organizing the news from news agency carefully rather than editing casually or phonily. Except the anonymous ones, there are also lots of reports dispatched from the scene. To be specific, among these 89 news reports, there are about 95 percent reports distributed from Libya. Furthermore, sometimes one article's information is from several places. For example, coverage on October 25 entitled *In Libya, Massacre Site Is Cleaned Up, Not Investigated* is reported by Kareem Fahim re from Surt (a city in the north of Libya), Adam Nossiter from Benghazi (a city of Libya), Libya and Rick Gladstone from New York. This news with three sources bears witness to the professionalism and objectiveness in the *New York Times*. From these data, we know that the *New York Times* does send many journalists to the front line of the war to make news report in order to get the first hand and real materials. It is evident that the *New York Times* makes efforts to report the real situation about the war as objectively as possible.

3.3 Information Sources of Reports

The information source of a report means the source of quotations. The interviewee's idea is an important witness to the news event. The media should be very serious with information source. American news scholars Melvin Mentze says "The quality of a report depends on the quality of the information source."^[11] Although the media can't guarantee to do everything correctly in terms of war coverage, it still should make sure that every information has its source. Therefore, the media should pay attention to the information source when reporting news, especially about some sensitive information during the war, which is necessary to guarantee the objectivity of news and beneficial to media's self-protection as well.^[12]

Table of Information Sources of Reports

The information source of reports\month	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	Total
NATO's officials	26	58	16	17	1	3	13	134
Libyan government and military officials	14	26	15	9	0	13	4	81
The official of Libyan Rebels	6	26	6	6	6	13	26	98
The military of Libyan Rebels	11	29	8	2	2	10	8	70
American government	80	33	14	42	5	13	7	194
American military officials	23	21	4	9	0	2	2	61
People who support Qaddafi	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
People who oppose Qaddafi	8	10	3	0	2	0	7	30
People whose attitude is not clear	2	10	3	2	2	5	8	32
International organizations	7	20	7	2	1	2	4	43
Other news agency and newspaper	4	10	2	3	2	5	4	30
Related experts	5	7	7	6	0	2	5	32
Rescue workers	0	2	2	0	0	1	1	6
Others	2	2	3	4	0	3	2	16

According to the statistical data in the table, the kinds of data about the international organizations, some newspapers, related experts and rescue workers and so on shows these reports

do involved many views of other sides. Their respective number is 43, 30, 32, 6 and 16. Though singly, every number is small, their total number is 127, which accounts for over 15 percent of the total. So the reports show objectivity in some sense. On the other hand, it's easy to find that most of the information source of the reports comes from the NATO's officials and the American government. The numbers are respectively 134 and 194. Adding the number of American military, the total number is 389. This amazing number indicates that the opinions and statements of NATO and American make up the main contents of almost all the reports, which may mean that the *New York Times* stand on American side. Besides, the total number from the Libyan rebels' officials and military officials is 168, which is much bigger than the number of Libyan government and military officials. This data indicates that the reports of the *New York Times* stand for more attitudes of rebels than Libyan government. As we all know that the allies help the rebels to fight against Qaddafi's government. To sum up, we can reckon that the *New York Times* does stand on the side against Qaddafi. That the number of the information source from the people who support Qaddafi is zero can also testify this result. Undoubtedly, it's impossible that no one support Qaddafi. In sum, the *New York Times* conducts a selection about the information sources to exclude people who support Qaddafi. In these terms, the *New York Times* on this war are not objective.

3.4 Distribution of Issues

Among 467 reports from March to October, there are kinds of related issues which can be divided into sixteen parts as follows.

Table of Distribution of Issues

Issues	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	Total
Attitude of America	12	4	4	13	1	3	4		41
Attitude of the Rebels	1	5	4	2	4	1	1	1	19
Opinions of international organizations	1		2	2			2		7
Attitude of NATO	5	7	1	10			4	1	28
Estimates of the campaign	3								3
Attitude of Russia	1		1				1		3
Evolverment of the war	13	17	11	7	2	10	1		61

Civilian's casualty	2	3	5	2		3			15
Qaddafi's tyranny									
Consequence of the war	1	1	1	2	1		3		9
Attitude of Qaddafi's government	1			1		1	1		4
Economic influence			2			2	2		6
Attitude of China				2					2
New government's strategy							7		7
Congress's attitudes towards Obama's handling of Libya	Approval	8							
	Disapproval	13							
Others	3		1	2			1	1	8

In this table, it is obvious to find that the issues of the *New York Times* reports are widely distributed, which means these reports on Libya War are related to various aspects. Among the sixteen categories of issues, there is one issue which appears only in March. It's the issue about the Congress's attitudes towards Obama's handling of Libya. This issue suggests there is a fierce debate between Obama and the Congress on Libya policy. The *New York Times* devotes many pages to reporting this debate. There are eight reports about the approval of Obama's policy on Libya and 13 about the disapproval. The policy on Libya has something with American national interests, so we can see the *New York Times* values national interests very much. The large scale of reports aims to protect the realization of national interests. As American leadership on Libya War was given to NATO in the end of March, this debate came to an end. After the agreement was reached between President Obama and the Congress, the American government united as a whole to release policy.

In the following seven months, there are still many reports about the attitude of America on Libya War. The total number is 41, which are the second largest among these issues' numbers. That shows America still plays an important part in the war though it claims itself a supporting role in it. As for the issue about the attitude of NATO, there are 28 reports related it too, which shows this leading role in Libya war does take a lot of action. The largest number among the reports is 61, which is about the evolvement of the war. The reports in this issue mainly tell readers the progress of the war. As for the war's situation, it can't be avoided talking casualties.

The *New York Times* also pays much attention to this aspect. There are 15 reports about civilian's casualties and these reports reveal the cruelty of the war and reflect the suffering of common people and media's concern about these innocent civilians. Besides the attitudes of America and NATO, there are many opinions from other sides. As for the two warring sides, the attitudes of the Rebels and the Qaddafi's government should be reported equally. But the news reports show an apparent stress on one side of the two— the rebels. As is shown in the table, there are 19 reports about the attitude of the rebels but only four reports in seven months related to Qaddafi's government's attitude. In the late period of the war, the *New York Times* also reports something about the new government which is established by the Rebels temporarily in September. And the number of reports is seven. Since it's obvious that America intervenes in the war in order to help the Rebels to repeal Qaddafi's tyranny, it's easy to understand that the representative of American media the *New York Times* pays more attention to the Rebels' attitude and stands on their side. By contrast, so few reports about Qaddafi government's attitude reflect the tendency of these reports. What's more, there are nine reports about Qaddafi's tyranny, which shows the newspapers' strong opposition to Qaddafi.

Besides NATO which is mentioned before, there are opinions of other international organizations such as the United Nations, Arab League and so on. There are seven reports about this. The attitudes of some other countries are reported too. For example, there are three reports about Russia and two about China. The *New York Times* also notes the voices from developing countries. As the war continues, there appear some speculations and estimates about the war. There are three reports about the estimates of the war at the beginning of the war, then nine reports about the consequences the war brings and seven reports particularly related to the economic influence the war brings about. The rest eight reports are about other issues.

From these specific analysis, we can draw a conclusion that the issues the *New York Times*' news reports covered are comprehensive involving many aspects, which means the *New York Times*' cares opinions from diverse sides, but the news reports about the attitude of Qaddafi's side, which is one of the two warring sides, are not adequate, because the numbers of reports about the two opposite sides obviously have very big disparity. Thus from this perspective, the *New York Times*' news reports on Libya War are unbalanced.

4. Factors Influencing the Agenda Setting of the War Coverage

According to the above specific analysis, the news reports on Libya War of the *New York Times* are objective in terms of the sources of articles and the places of news dispatches. But they still have unbalance in terms of the information source of reports and the distribution of issues. This paper will analyze reasons for this result in terms of professionalism, American national interests and ideological prejudice.

4.1 Journalistic Professionalism

According to the statistics data above, we know that the reports do have something objective but also contain something not balanced enough. In terms of the news sources and the places of news dispatches, the reports are objective. The objectivity of the news reports accords with journalistic professionalism. Journalistic Professionalism originates in the United States. In the middle and late 19th century, with the disintegration of party newspapers, and commercialization and sensationalism of media, journalistic professionalism rose. Then the middle of the 20th century saw its rapid development, due to the strong stimulation from American democratic government, the principle of empirical science and citizens will, it developed fast and became the dominant discourse which can interpret and evaluate journalism. In 1947, the freedom of the press committee headed by hutchins made a report called "*A Free and Responsible Press*" and put forward the idea of professionalisem formally : "we suggest that we should regard our occupation as the public services in professional level."^[13] The aim of journalistic professionalism is to serve all the people, rather than certian interest groups. Its most outstanding characteristic is the faith in the objectivity of news. It believes that we can report news neither on the side of party nor certain groups.^[14] Core features of journalistic professionalism mainly include the following four aspects: Firstly, the media plays the role of public instruments, and the goal of news institution is to serve all the people. Secondly, journalists should be social observers and reporters who reflect facts rather than participants or agitators in some interest groups. Thirdly, journalists are the gatekeepers in the process of information circulation. Their judgement criteria is the neutral standard of news value rather than personal likes and dislikes or prejudices from some intertest groups. Lastly, the truth and freedom of news should be guaranteed. Journalists can't be limited or threatened by any authority except laws and rules in news industry.

^[15]It emphasizes the news reports must be objective, real and multiple. The spirit of professionalism is a standard that mass media should obey in any circumstances. Even during the war, journalists should still abide by the journalistic professionalism to make coverage and still report the news as truly, fairly and objectively as possible. They should reflect the fact of the war truly both in details and on the whole. The right to know should be kept as well in the war. The media should have the power to interview and get information freely and independently in the news communication rather than succumb to the forces of the government or military. All of these rules of the professionalism influence the agenda setting of the *New York Times* news reports on Libya War. So the *New York Times* does try to involve more voices from different sides and try to get news from scene to make its agenda setting more proper and objective.

4.2 American National Interests

War is the continuation of the politics, so reports about the war can't be purely objective. Eisenhower, the American commander in chief in World War II, said: "Public opinion can win the war. I always regard the journalists who are sent to my headquarters as supernumerary officers." in a rally of newspaper editors.^[17] Obviously, media is a very important means of communication for the government, especially in the war which is a special period as well as closely related to national interests. The aspect of the agenda setting which is not objective has its complex reasons. American national interests are one of the great concerns for the media in coverage of war. Different from the former two which were launched by America, Libya War is a civil war at the beginning. "There is only one percent of the American oil coming from Libya",^[18] which seems Libya does not have direct interests relationship with America either. However, Libya occupies a significant geographic position. America pays so much attention to Libya because it is an important area to control Mediterranean region. The Mediterranean is located in the cross area of American three major commands' jurisdiction (European command, central command, the command). Therefore, Libya is a strategic focus area for America.^[19] Thus, America still chooses to join the war in order to avoid its hegemony declining in the Middle East. "Mindful of the risks and costs of military action, we are naturally reluctant to use force to solve the world's many challenges. But when our interests and values are at stake, we have a responsibility to act." President Obama said.^[20] From these words, we can get that Obama thinks Libya has been a threat

to American interests. In order to protect American national interests, President Obama decides to intervene in the war. From the table of the distribution of issues, we can find there are some discussions between the Congress and President Obama in the beginning of the war. Some Republicans oppose President Obama's policy very much. Though there is an agreement reached between Obama and the Congress, America gives the leadership of the war to NATO and is willing to be the supporting role in the war in the end of March 2011. In fact, America still plays an important role in Libya War. The *New York Times* reports these initial political words conflict in order to figure out what are American real interests and how to protect it. The following reports in the rest of seven months are also based on the national interest. Because media like the *New York Times* also value national interest very much as the government, the agenda setting of the *New York Times* on Libya War is influenced a lot by national interests. So the agenda setting in terms of the information source of reports and the distribution of issues are not balanced enough. That's why the information source of the reports mostly comes from America, NATO and the rebels. That's why the issues of reports are mostly about the attitude of the U.S, NATO and the rebels towards this war.

4.3 Ideological Prejudice

Characteristics of American society including "openness" "diversity" and "free speech" are all covered with a strong ideological color. The mainstream of American media and academia consider the mainstream ideology that means protecting the national security as the general ideology. Moreover, they hold the idea that America should fight or oppose against non-American ideological countries. For a long time, the main standard that Americans judge other countries is the degree of democracy and freedom in one country.^[21] As for this paper, another factor influencing the agenda setting of the *New York Times* is American ideological prejudice towards Qaddafi's government. In American opinion, Qaddafi's government is a kind of tyranny which should be repealed. American ideology requires Libya to establish democratic government system. "For more than four decades, the Libyan people have been ruled by a tyrant – Moammar Gaddafi. He has denied his people freedom, exploited their wealth, murdered opponents at home and abroad, and terrorized innocent people around the world." "The democratic impulses that are dawning across the region would be eclipsed by the darkest form of dictatorship, as repressive leaders