

# The International Communication and Narrative Breakthrough of CGTN's Documentary the Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan

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**Abstract:** The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan, who was released by CGTN (China Global Television Network), as a panoramic documentary on the battle against “Covid-19”, has evoked worldwide repercussions, therefore provided a successful example of news documentaries in public emergencies. This paper tries to analyze the innovation of this work in three aspects: communication characteristic, perspective selection and narrative style, so as to explore its successful experience in international communication.

## 1. Introduction

At 10 a.m. on January 23, Wuhan went into lockdown. This was done to stop a deadly virus from spreading further across the nation. It was one day before Chinese New Year's Eve, a major travel day for people planning to return home for the holidays. As the first be launched bilingual documentary in such a thema, *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan*, who is dedicated to all those who've been battling tirelessly against the COVID-19 virus in order to keep the epidemic at bay, and has got a tremendous response in global communication. Up to about 165 overseas media platforms have rebroadcasted this documentary, including ABC (American Broadcasting Corporation), channel 4 television station of Britain, TV5 MONDE of France, TGCOM24 television station of Italy, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Asahi television station of Japan. Within 10 days of the broadcast, the number of viewers exceeded 20 million, of which about a quarter were overseas. After watching, a great deal of foreign netizens commented positively not only on this documentary, but also the whole event that Chinese people's fighting against “Covid-19”.

This work, who has made use of heterogeneous and creative techniques on representation, would possibly bring a number of illuminating new ideas in news documentaries' creation, especially on the theme of public emergencies.

## 2. The Integrated Thoughts of the Work in the Time of Media Convergence

In the new media era, that is to say, the time of media convergence, the steadily improved technology of internet and terminal has deeply changed the traditional reading habits of the audience. As a result, behaviors of “cross-screen reading” and “interactive reading”, reversely promoting the diversified development of media functions and forms, have been forcing the traditional media and the new media to complement and infiltrate into each other in the communication path for media integration. This phenomenon makes the relationship between news publishers and audiences change from one-way “publishing-accepting” to two-way “interaction-oriented”. In this sense, in the process of news content selection and production, publishers would properly often prefer to focus on feedback of audience and estimation of channel effects, and even directly to take audience perspective as the cut-in point of news contents. Therefore, comparing with “Who” and “Says What” of the classic “Lasswell's 5W model” in communication science, publishers in the era of media convergence tend to pay more attention to “To Whom”, “In Which Channel” and “With What Effect” and consider them as the preconditions of the formers.[1]

In these three aspects, “The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan” has presented a strong sense of

overall plan and achieved several positive results. As referred to the audience, the documentary has obviously reflected an international awareness, such as a sound editing of “Covid-19” reports from various countries, the citation of Mr. Bruce Aylward (the Assistant Director-General of the World Health Organization) and the graphic demonstration with international practice. These serious of actions shows that the audience's perspective has been taken into consideration by the creator already in the process of material selection.

In terms of channels, besides CGTN TV channels, official websites and apps, CGTN official accounts of overseas social platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, have also released the documentary at the same time. The popularity of these three media platforms abroad is similar to domestic Tiktok, WeChat and microblog, of which audience is characterized by stable user stickiness and high activity. So it has soon obtained a considerable viewing rate and high interaction, form which was not hard to see an effect oriented strategy.

Then turn to the effects, foreign netizens showed mostly “thanks” or “moved” after watching. One of them even compared the characters in the documentary with the typical hero image “Superman” in western films - “This time, the hero did not wear a cape, but wore a mask.”. In his eyes, “A mask” has become a new symbol of heros. But here, “A mask” is much different form “a cape”, it is not some kind of costumes or props on stage, instead, people wearing masks is a real situation in the news events. In the “role” positioning, all these “mask heroes” are not “justice messengers” with full of artistic exaggeration in western movies, but just each real individual in true life. So, this time, “heros” are no more artistic creation, but real existence. Under the background of a public emergency, in the psychological environment of “fear”, each person performs his or her own duties and live an orderly life.

So severals scenes how Wuhaners fighting against “Covie-19” was truthfully displayed in *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan*, which has conveyed the opposition and coexistence of disaster and order and achieved the tension effect of “sublime” among ordinary people, so that the audience can be reverberated empathically to the intuitive shock of aesthetic experience from the “sublime sense”.

It is now much more clear that, the success of this documentary thanks to its integration of accurate positioning of audience, diversification of media platforms and empathy effect. In addition, the breakthrough and innovation of narrative style also plays an important role in its success, which is reflected in the perspective selection and narrative techniques.

### **3. The Integration of “Documentary”, “Fact” and “Truth”**

Starting from the panoramic view of the city with fog, the main camera was constantly moving and switching: closed subway stations, empty streets, unmanned campus, cold streets, unimpeded tunnels, each picture showed a scene which was not commensurate with a metropolis with a population of ten million.

At the same time, voices from different characters switched and interrupted: “ticket suspension”, “city closure”, “Wuhan”, “the epidemic”, “fear”, each word pointed at the same event – “Covid 19”.

The use of a group of “Kande” photography, the flowing perspective, the dislocated effects of the sounds and the pictures, exposed several aspects of the incident. In addition to creating a real tension and anxiety, this fragmentary preview also implied the orientation of the whole film's perspective: no main camera represented the objective perspective, that is, the “dehumanization” perspective, while the voice of the characters were reflecting the individual experience perspective of the event center as the “witness” perspective.[2] The two perspectives were parallel, indicating that the narrative of the whole film would be interwoven with them two. Therefore, the author did not choose a subjective omniscient perspective to enhance the persuasiveness of “Pseudo Environment”, nor did he blindly pursue a depersonalized of “naturalism” to emphasize the absolute objectivity of narration. No matter from which angle, the creator had never view himself as an “Erudite”. [3]

In addition, there is no obvious logical order between the subjective and objective literatures, but only a time axis as the main line, which made the narrative effect under the dual-perspective more

likely to avoid the subjective one. It did not exclude individual experience, but take it as supplementary materials or components of some kind of subject investigation. Because of this, speakers in the film did not have to provide the so-called representative or typical image, but only expressed himself truthfully.

In particular, voices and images of the cast members “appeared” for many times in the film, which made themselves also become the “witness” of the event. In the first story of the film, the interviewer and the interviewee (a migrant worker who couldn't return to his hometown due to the “closure of the city”) broke the traditional face-to-face interview pattern and sat on the same side. The image was more similar to a conversation between friends than an interview. Such scenes showed that the creators defined themselves as “witness” of the event. That is to say, they were not “watching”, but “experiencing”. This dynamic perspective tried to tell us that there was no absolute “bystander” in this public emergency. Therefore, the perspective of “witness” here was neither “I saw” nor “who saw”, The attitudes hidden in “seeing” was instead restored to the self-presentating of the facts, that is, “what things are as they are” in phenomenology. This kind of participation attitude and natural style just endowed the work with more convincing effects than the so-called “omniscient” or “objective” ones.

Therefore, to a large extent, *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* has stripped away all kinds of prejudice, thus highly integrated “documentary”, “fact” and “truth”.

#### **4. Breakthrough and Innovation of “Pseudo Environment” and “Micro-Narration”**

##### **4.1 “Narrative Proliferation” of “Pseudo Environment”**

There is a famous saying in the critical circle: “a thousand readers make a thousand Hamlets”. This sentence is also applicable in the media. The same event shows different aspects to the observers from different standpoints and perspectives, the results of it are accordingly different. Therefore, in news reports, especially documentaries, the authenticity and integrity of events often carries some characteristics of subjective perspective.

Although this work has consciously avoided from it, the individual perspectives it selected also have to face this problem. This is not biased, but the limited perspective makes the facts in the subject's cognition the same as some limited facts. In order to ensure the integrity of the narrative, the creators need to complete the fact for the audience and create a real atmosphere of the whole event, which, at some point, is Walter Lippmann's “Pseudo Environment”.

“Virtual environment”, is also known as “Pseudo Environment”. What it means is not fiction, but a narrative technique of reasonably reconstructing the huge, complex and short-term “real environment” because of people's limited cognition of “real environment”. In this sense, “virtual environment” is actually the cognition and understanding of “real environment” that people can achieve with their own limitations.[2]

In a very unique way, *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* has created a “Pseudo Environment of battling against “Covie-19”, which has reduced the marks of “construction” to a very low level and made the environment in the film extremely close to the “real environment”. Unlike constructing a full story, this work has replaced the whole with fragmentation, through which the story can be presented as it was. Except that, the time axis has formed a Wuhan's “We Media”, which has turned “limited perspective” of “thousands of faces” into “individual reality” of “self proliferation”. It is just such kind of individualized “Pseudo Environment” that changes “realism” from cold objective facts to warm humanity.

In addition, the characters in the film are not only the “protagonist” of the symbolic event in the “Pseudo Environment”, but also the relative audience at the center of the event. The overlapping effect of this kind of identities actually accepts more relative audience at the center of the event as a co-creator of the “Pseudo Environment”, so that the starting point of the “Pseudo Environment” has already included the audience's perspective and psychology.

Therefore, the narrative style of this documentary is fragmented, which is not contrary to its journalistic and documentary features. It is just the seemingly disordered materials that shows the

orderly overall stories in Wuhan. Moreover, besides the “events”, its narrative style has inspired the transmission of “emotion” and achieved the “narrative proliferation”.

#### 4.2 “Big Pattern” in the Time View of “Micro-Narration”

The main style of this story is simple and less rendering. Except for some photography skills at the very beginning of the film, there is almost no rhetoric or exaggeration in it. As mentioned above, the individual utterance in this film is mainly based on the characters’ own personal experience and understanding in the event. This kind of individual perspectives and its authenticity reflect certain “micro-narrative” characteristics in the category of narratology, that is, to let the characters and events present themselves with their “original ecology” appearance.

“Great men, even during their lifetime, are usually known to the public only through a fictitious personality.”[3] This is caused by the fact that the “great-narrative” or “macro-narrative” usually focuses on the “public image” of heroes. On the opposite, the “micro-narrative” often focuses on the specific people in specific events, the true appearance and concrete expression of individuals in real life. It aims at the “meta-narrative” (or “grand narrative”) which often “reconstructs” the characters and events due to the needs of certain historical background. In another word, the “micro-narrative” is some reduction of the “meta-narrative”, that is, the reduction of historical orientation to “things the way they are”.

To some extent, the typicalization of characters is actually some kind of “meta-narrative”, for example, a specific individual would be often “refined” to identify the common characteristics unconsciously. In such a process, the real individual is most likely deviated from its original appearance and become some kind of “otherness”, thus, the meaning be given is as a result also distorted. In this sense, the characters in this film have avoided from their typicalization, which has made them more authentic.

On the other hand, the “micro-narrative” style of this film is also reflected in its view of time. The whole film started from the sound of a clock, at the same time, the electronic calendar showed a date, January the 23rd. The title has simulated an effect of “progressive tense”, through which the rhythm of physical time can be broken and a more urgent psychological rhythm can be formed, so as to draw the audience into the time field of the film and directly face the developing events, in other words, to make the audience to experience, but not only to watch.

The “time axis” formed by electronic calendars has placed each “present” in the whole time of the events concerned, and created a “resonance space” for the audience by taking the subjective time as some kind of intermediary, that is, centralizing, instantaneously tensing the memories of each observer on the time of the event, so as to make them to become those “silent” present. Ripe with this metaphor, the film has told that there are actually no “bystanders” and “outsiders” in a public event.

The intertwining of “the present” and “the time axis”, the alternatively coexist of characters’ self-report and narration, also leads to an effective integration of dual perspectives in the same work, that is, “interpretation” and “participation”, so as to make sure that the “micro-narrative” never lose a “big pattern”.

#### 5. Conclusion

Taking time axis as a main clue, *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* has faithfully restored the experiences and feelings of ordinary medical staff and the public during this battling against the “Covid-19”. As a news documentary in international communication, it has broken through the limitation of forms and types, realized the integration of mass communication, channel communication and effect communication with the platform of “OGC + media invergence”, and returned to an original perspective and narrative style, which has created a “Pseudo Environment” with strong sense of reality. All of these aspects can probably provide a positive experience for the creation in news documentaries and the media behavior in public emergencies in the future.

## **References**

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