| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reports on TikTok

Lin Yannian

College of Foreign Languages, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China

Corresponding Author: Lin Yannian, **E-mail**: 2580330367@qq.com

| **ABSTRACT**

Critical discourse analysis, as a discourse analysis method, is of great significance in revealing the relationship between power, ideology, and discourse hidden behind the language. As an essential way of disseminating information, news is always accepted by people without any bias, but the ideology contained in it is often overlooked by readers. Therefore, based on Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis model, this paper makes a critical analysis of six news reports on TikTok by CNN for the sake of exploring the ideology and political position hidden behind the text. The results show that the selected reports basically follow the principles of objectivity and truthfulness, but the truthfulness is limited and inevitably influenced by national ideology, with doubts and negative evaluations hidden between the lines.

1. Introduction

Newspapers have long been regarded as an important way for people to obtain the latest information due to their objectivity and sociality. However, reporters are often influenced by personal experience or the ideology of their country when reporting news, thus consciously or unconsciously presenting certain social ideologies to the audience in the lines of news. This directly or indirectly exerts an influence on news readers' thinking and has a guiding effect on their cognition and judgment. Therefore, the objectivity of news reports and the underlying ideology are worth exploring.

TikTok is a social media platform that allows users to create and share short-form videos. It has millions of users who spend hours scrolling through entertaining videos made by other users. As a software that is becoming increasingly popular on social media, TikTok has gradually become the focus of attention for domestic and foreign media. This study takes Cable News Network (CNN), which has good credibility and authority in the world, as the object of investigation and selects six news reports searched by "TikTok" as the keyword. Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis model, this paper makes a critical discourse analysis of news about TikTok from three aspects: text, discourse practice and social practice. The purpose of this article is to display TikTok's actual situation in foreign media, revealing the ideological and political stance hidden behind the text.

2. Theoretical Background

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) emerged in the late 1980s as a programmatic development in European discourse studies spearheaded by Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk and others (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). CDA states that discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned, and discourse is an opaque power object in modern societies (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Therefore, CDA aims to make it more visible and transparent.

The works of Fowler and Kress et al. (1979) were seminal in CDA because they first proposed the method of CDA (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Their works were based on the systemic-functional and social-semiotics linguistics of Halliday, whose linguistics methodology was still hailed as crucial to CDA practices because it offered clear and rigorous linguistics categories for analyzing the relationships between discourse and social meaning (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). As one of the most prominent representatives of CDA, Fairclough developed CDA on the basis of Fowler and Kress (Liu, 2008). He tried to find a new way to combine discourse analysis with social theory, that is, to absorb systemic functional linguistics and sociological theories and to propose a theoretical paradigm of CDA by internalizing these two theoretical frameworks (Liu, 2008). Fairclough (1992) believes that language is a part of society and a form of social practice, and any social practice can be restricted and influenced by the social environment. Based on this, he proposed three dimensions of discourse, including text, discourse practice and social practice (Fairclough, 1992).

In this model, text refers to the linguistic analysis of content (Fairclough, 1992). The second dimension, discourse practice, regards discourse as concrete linguistic objects that are produced, circulated, distributed, and consumed in society (Fairclough, 1992). Attention in this dimension should be given to the creation of the discourse and the interaction between authors and readers (Fairclough, 1992). Social practice emphasizes the dialectical relationship between language and power (Fairclough, 1992). These three parts are closely related, and each is indispensable to critical discourse analysis.

3. Analysis of news reports on TikTok
3.1 Text
The first dimension is "Text", which emphasizes the language description of texts. Fairclough believes that the analysis of language features in texts belongs to the micro level, which consists of four aspects: vocabulary, grammar, coherence, and text structure (Fairclough, 1992:73). The specific process usually involves wording, metaphor, transitivity, tense, voice, modality, and cohesive devices (Fairclough, 1992:74). Text analysis put forward by Fairclough mainly draws on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), as SFG defines language as meaning potential and focuses on studying the context in which language operates (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This view of language is in line with critical linguists' view that language serves ideology (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). According to SFG, language has three metafunctions, namely, ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function. In the following text analysis, on the basis of ideational function, two typical language features, namely wording and transitivity, are selected to describe the linguistic features of the selected news.

3.1.1 Wording
Different words can reflect different attitudes. Van Dijk (1988: 177) believes that wording is an obvious aspect of news discourse, as implicit ideologies can be inferred from the wording. Therefore, the wording in CNN may reflect the reporter's perspective, attitude, and value orientation towards different events.

This article first uses AntConc, a corpus analysis software, to analyze the selected news and extracts 10 keywords according to the order of keyness, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Keywords list of selected news

Rank	Frequency	Keyness	Keyword
1	73	131.547	tiktok
2	15	27.030	data
3	14	25.228	app
4	14	25.228	creators
5	19	23.114	platform
6	12	21.624	texas
7	14	18.923	users
8	13	17.263	ban
9	9	16.218	lawsuit
10	9	16.218	public

It can be seen from the keywords that the foreign media reports on TikTok are relatively objective. Among the 10 keywords, 5 are related introductions to TikTok, such as platform, creators and users.

(1)   TikTok will now allow <u>users</u> to post text-only content for the first time
(2)   The video streaming <u>platform</u> said it would broaden "options for <u>creators</u> to share their ideas and express their creativity."

In these two examples, "user" and "creator" are people who use TikTok, and "platform" refers to TikTok itself, which are indispensable elements to introduce TikTok. These two examples objectively introduce the update of TikTok, that is, posting text-only content, and the advantage it brings to users or creators, that is, broadening options for creators to convey themselves. Reading these examples, news readers will learn about TikTok's steady development and continuous innovation and then have a positive impression of TikTok. From this, it can be seen that foreign media reports on TikTok are relatively objective.

However, the remaining 5 keywords reflect some of the debates around TikTok, such as data security and Texas' ban on TikTok.

(3) The Knight Institute lawsuit notes that <u>Texas</u> has not imposed a <u>ban</u> on other online platforms that collect similar user <u>data</u>.

Some keywords, such as data and Texas, originally do not have negative meanings. However, because of a series of debates around TikTok, especially most of which are negative, such as data security, these words are endowed with some negative meanings invisibly. Furthermore, in the news reports, they constantly reminded news readers of these debates about TikTok, then news readers will inevitably hold a neutral or doubtful instead of positive attitude towards TikTok. For example, in example 3, the report objectively states that Texas has not imposed a ban on other online platforms. Although TikTok does not exist in this sentence, people will still think that TikTok is banned by Texas due to data security. Furthermore, compared with the attitude of Texas towards other online platforms, TikTok's image in the eyes of readers is even worse. Therefore, the reports of foreign media on TikTok are not completely neutral. The continuous emergence of negative words constantly reminds readers of the negative news of TikTok, which further exerts an influence on people's attitudes towards TikTok.

3.1.2 Transitivity
Transitivity divides what people see, hear, and do in the real world into several processes that are manifested in clauses, including material processes, verbal processes, mental processes, relational processes, behavioral processes, and existential processes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Each process has three elements: process, participants, and environmental components related to the process (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). In actual use, language users subtly convey their intended meaning by selecting different processes and setting the positions of participants and relevant environmental components.

For the sake of better understanding the attitude of foreign media towards TikTok, this paper uses UAM, a corpus analysis software, to classify the six selected news reports about TikTok based on the six processes of transitivity. The results show that there are 280 clauses in total, and the process distribution is mainly concentrated in material processes (68.57%), relational processes (14.29%), and verbal processes (11.07%), with mental processes (5.71%) and existential processes (0.36%) accounting for the least proportion and no behavioral processes. In the following text analysis, typical examples of material processes and relational processes will be displayed.

(4) TikTok <u>facilitated</u> $4.4 billion of transactions across Southeast Asia last year, up from $600 million in 2021
(5) The app has not <u>faced</u> major bans on government devices, but it <u>has been</u> <u>scrutinized</u> over its content.

The material process is a "doing" process, which is mainly expressed by verbs; the "performer" of the action is called the "actor", and the "object" of the action is called the "goal". The material process is usually utilized to objectively record the process of events. In the selected news report, material processes account for more than half of the entire process distribution. On the one hand, the extensive use of verbs such as "facilitated, faced" in the report reflects that CNN can follow the requirements of objectivity in reporting the current situation of TikTok and show the real development of TikTok to the public. On the other hand, in example 5, "has been scrutinized," uses the passive voice, which highlights the goal and deliberately hides the actor. This, to some extent, weakens the description of actions and instead emphasizes more the impact of the action. In this example, the reporter does not point out which countries scrutinize the content of TikTok. However, it emphasized that TikTok is scrutinized, which to some extent made the influence of scrutinization more serious, thus affecting the attitude of readers toward TikTok.

(6) It further argues that a ban doesn't "meaningfully" constrain China's ability to collect sensitive data about Americans because this data <u>is widely available</u> from other data brokers.

The relational process is used to describe the attributes and characteristics of things, so analyzing the relational process can convey foreign media's understanding of TikTok. Example 6 is originally a verbal process, but it is presented through a relational process in selected news reports. This sentence mainly shows the views against the prohibition of TikTok in Texas, but this opinion partly acquiesces to the view that China is collecting American data, which is imperceptibly conveyed to the readers. As a result, it will affect the readers' attitude towards China, including the attitude towards TikTok from China.

3.2 Discourse practice

Discourse practice focuses on how texts are generated, disseminated, and accepted. Fairclough pays particular attention to the intertextuality of the text; that is, any text is the absorption and transformation of other texts (Fairclough, 1992). Through intertextual analysis, researchers can establish connections between discourses and social and cultural changes and finally achieve the ultimate goal of studying society through language.

The form of reporting is an essential method to achieve discourse practice. According to Fairclough (1992), it can be divided into two types: direct discourse and indirect discourse. The former is a completely faithful way of quoting the original discourse, usually with quotation marks, keeping the content and tense unchanged. The latter involves processing language forms on the basis of preserving content, and its expression and wording are determined by the reporter. Therefore, analyzing the form of CNN's reporting is conducive to reflecting its position and attitude toward TikTok. The results show that there are 22 direct quotations, accounting for 59.46%, and 15 indirect quotations, accounting for 40.54%.

(7) "Like it or not, TikTok is an immensely popular communications platform, and its policies and practices are influencing culture and politics around the world," said Dave Karpf, a Coalition for Independent Technology Research board member and associate professor in the George Washington University School of Media and Public Affairs. "It's important that scholars and researchers be able to study the platform and illuminate the risks associated with it. Ironically, Texas's misguided ban is impeding our members from studying the very risks that Texas says it wants to address."

Generally speaking, the more direct the speeches, the higher the degree of objectivity and credibility. Therefore, the six selected articles use a large number of direct speeches, which, to some extent, makes the report more objective and shows readers a relatively objective image of TikTok. For instance, "TikTok is an immensely popular communications platform" cited in example 7.

However, compared with indirect speech, direct speech is more appealing and can fully reproduce the style and characteristics of the original discourse and attract readers' attention. Example 7 directly quotes Dave's words, expressing that TikTok is an influential platform. This sentence seems to oppose the prohibition of TikTok, but the use of words such as "like it or not, politics, risks" implies some negative meanings. First, "like it or not", to some extent, conveys the view that there are many people who still do not accept TikTok. Secondly, "politics" and other political words seem to remind readers of the political events caused by the debate about TikTok's data security problems. Then, the second direct speech in example 7 even points out that understanding TikTok can further illuminate the risks related to it. This, to some extent, acquiesces to the view that TikTok will bring crisis. It is worth noting that reporters give a detailed description of the speaker's position, which makes his language more convincing. As a result, readers will tend to be influenced by his opinion, especially those negative ones toward TikTok, which is not conducive to the establishment of a positive image of TikTok.

(8) TikTok has 8,000 employees in Southeast Asia and 2 million small vendors selling their wares on its platform in Indonesia, the region's biggest economy, he <u>added</u>.

(9) TikTok has repeatedly denied that it has ever shared data with the Chinese government and has <u>said</u> the company would not do so if asked.

CNN also used indirect speech in its reports on TikTok. On the one hand, these indirect speeches make the reports more objective because of the use of reporting verbs without subjectivity, such as "said, added, reported". On the other hand, indirect speech makes discourse less appealing. For example, example 8 and example 9 indirectly report the achievements of TikTok and TikTok's determination not to share data with the Chinese government. However, compared with the great appeal of direct speech, the achievements and determination of TikTok described by indirect speeches are less appealing and do not leave a deep impression on readers, which influences the establishment of a positive image of TikTok.

3.3 Social practice

In addition to textual and discourse practice, an explanation of social practice is also essential. Fairclough (1992) has repeatedly emphasized his view on language as a social practice, and the two are closely related. More specifically, social practice emphasizes more on exploring the broader socio-cultural context in which language operates, including the political, economic, and cultural backgrounds.

At the political level, in the context of globalization, peaceful development is the theme of the times. Therefore, as a platform with good credibility and authority, CNN can witness TikTok's continuous innovation and progress and thus report it to readers. But, the US government believes that TikTok poses a national security risk. The main reason is that TikTok's head office, ByteDance, is headquartered in China. Therefore, the US government believes that the Chinese government may use TikTok to collect personal

information and data of US users, posing a threat to US national security. Consequently, when reporting, CNN will consciously or unconsciously judge TikTok based on national interests, implying its threat to the security of the United States.

At the economic level, the US government believes that the rise of TikTok may pose a threat to the commercial interests of companies and even economic development in the United States. However, there is still economic cooperation between China and the United States, and China's position as the largest creditor of the United States will not change in the short term. For all these reasons, the United States seeks a balance between positive and negative news when reporting TikTok from China.

At the cultural level, the US government believes that the Chinese government is promoting Chinese culture and values through platforms such as TikTok. This may pose a threat to the culture and values of the United States, leading to a decline in its global influence. In addition, CNN's reporting method and value orientation are deeply influenced by the mainstream culture of the United States. Thus, when reporting TikTok, it may imply some negative news, although it is not true.

4. Conclusion

Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis model, this paper makes a critical analysis of six news reports on TikTok by CNN from three aspects: wording and transitivity in text practice, the form of reporting in discourse practice, and the interpretation of social background in discourse practice. The results show that the selected reports basically follow the principles of objectivity and truthfulness, but the truthfulness is limited and inevitably influenced by national ideology, with doubts and negative evaluations hidden between the lines. Van Dijk (1988:129) believes that news reports not only exert an influence on the public's perception of various things but also shape their cognitive structure. Therefore, after reading this study, it is hoped that readers can enhance their critical thinking ability so as to prevent external ideologies from manipulating readers' perception or cognitive structure through language in news reading. In addition, despite the findings of this study, there are some limitations. First, the number of news reports selected in this article is not that large, so the results may not be generalizable. Secondly, the interpretation of news reports may be subjective and lacks quantitative analysis of a large number of corpora, which is objective. Therefore, future research is expected to be improved on the basis of these limitations and studies these news texts from other, more insightful perspectives, such as multimodal discourse analysis.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

[1] Blommaert, J. & Bulcaen, C., (2000). Critical discourse analysis, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, (29), 447-466.
[2] Chouliaraki, L. & Fairclough, N. (1999). *Discourse in Late Modernity: Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
[3] Fairclough, N., (1992). *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
[4] Halliday, M. A. K. & C. M. I. M. Matthiessen. (2014). *Halliday's Introduction of Functional Grammar (4th Ed)*. New York & London Routelege.
[5] Van Dijk, T. A., (1988). *News as Discourse*. Hisllsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
[6] 刘立华, (2008), 批评性话语分析概览, *外语学刊*, (3), 555-564.