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| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

The Framing of Food Safety Crisis in Chinese Media Discourse: A Case Study of "Unif 100 Instant Noodles"

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| **ABSTRACT**

There have been several cases concerning the food safety crisis in China. In 2022, the Unif 100 Instant Noodles crisis broke out, triggering a heated debate on the Internet. Under the two frameworks, mainstream newspapers and public social media exhibit different characteristics. During the event's evolution in the three periods, the emphases of the two parties were also different. By trimming and analyzing the reports of China's mainstream newspapers and the posts of China's mainstream social platforms, starting from framing analysis and time node analysis, this paper studies the structure and power of contemporary Chinese food safety under different channels.

1. Introduction

On 15 March 2022, a video was revealed by the authorities on China's 315 Gala (Huang, 2022). The famous instant noodle brand "Unif 100 Instant Noodles" became the center of public discussion. It is reported by the media that the Chinese pickled cabbage of this instant noodle is produced in an extremely unhygienic way. According to the video, it was manufactured in a pot under the ground with workers stepping on the pickled cabbage. There are some cigarette ends and other unknown garbage in the pickle pot. This scandal reminds the public that similar food safety issues had happened before, which aroused the public's concern and intense media attention.

In light of these issues, this paper aims to explore the latest relationship between top-down authority context and bottom-up public context through a framing analysis of the most prominent microblogging platform in China, Sina Weibo, and the two most renowned newspapers, People's Daily and Guang Ming Daily, during the period of "Unif 100 Instant Noodles pickled cabbage on tiptoe" incident.

2. Literature Review

In recent decades, food safety problems have become a typical risk (Mythen, 2015), having brought public doubt and insecurity. All related stakeholders would adequately defend themselves in a risk to seek a favourable position. Therefore, the reports and further discussion of the incident rely immensely on the media broadcast and social discourse, involving both traditional and new media such as online social media platforms.

It is largely accepted that there exist two distinct kinds of social context in modern China: one is the traditional top-down context controlled by authority, and the other is the bottom-up public context (Kent et al., 2019). The first one usually refers to the dominant mass media (Yang, 2013), such as government-owned newspapers and TV channels, which promulgate the prevalent ideology of the country. The latter often indicates the discussion or forum in the online social media platform, representing different voices,

sometimes contradicting values with the public. Since these two contexts have fundamentally different natures, it is said that the dominant authority media and online platforms function distinctively in the ongoing process of an incident.

Power describes the social production of effects on people's behaviour and thoughts (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). The authority is used to define legitimate power or widely-approved power in a society. The discourse of power is used in this case when it comes to the differentiation between different levels of power due to social and political factors. There is a chain effect of the media's discourse of power (Karlberg, 2005). First, because of the distinctive power of different media channels, the access to the incidents varies. Therefore, the dominant group or the authority media often have large access to the truth and may partially control the news and public opinion.

In the past, the news released by the authorities was often prevailing and significant because of its high status and influence. The public's voice is limited because of the shortage of channels to state their viewpoints. However, in recent years, due to the surging number of social media platforms that provide stages for individuals to express their opinions, more outlets and platforms have been created for more open discussion and communication. As a result, the bottom-up sphere is gaining ground and becoming more influential. Therefore, the messages conveyed by the official mass media face challenges from social media platforms.

Since the food safety crisis is common in China, there is abundant research on this topic. The most notorious one is the 2008 Chinese milk scandal. However, the previous studies concentrated on the official and civil contexts' negotiation. It has been several years after the scandal and a few studies about the changing power between official discourse and social media civil course. In that case, this paper aims to investigate three questions:

1) What is the three sites' generic frame pattern like?
2) What is the three sties' issue-specific frame like?
3) Is there any change between the official media discourse and social media discourse?

3. Method
3.1 Framing
In this paper, framing analysis will be performed to compare the difference between mainstream mass media and public views during different stages of the case of "Unif 100 Instant Noodles pickled cabbage." Framing theory is widely used in the news and media domain. It indicates how the messages affect the audience's way of understanding the information. In other words, frames are the logic that functions to formulate the meaning, which is deemed as the purposeful choice of journalists. Therefore, the frame suggests how the media, as doorkeepers, arrange and display thoughts and affairs (Oliver et al., 2019).

Two kinds of media frames are used in this paper: generic frames and issue-specific frames, respectively. Generic frames are the typically predetermined categorization used to differentiate themes of social events. Compared with generic frames, issue-specific frames are more flexible since they are used to analyze the specific content and may be subjective due to different coders (Mahl & Guenther, 2021).

According to Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), there are five generic frames frequently used in the media: responsibility attribution, conflict, economic consequence, human interest, and morality. Attribution of responsibility focuses on which party is to blame; the conflict stresses the disagreement between different parties; economic consequence represents the economic impact on people's life; human interest stresses the emotional aspect of an issue; morality emphasizes the ethical aspect of an event. Wang (2018) proposed ten issue-specific frames in the "Cadmium-Tainted Rice Incident" case study, namely government actions, media involvement, experts, knowledge and policy understanding, government duty, daily influence, social influence, sarcasm, economic consequence, and reflection of the event. Since the "Cadmium-Tainted Rice Incident" has many similarities to the "Unif 100 Instant Noodles pickled cabbage case", this paper adopts the frames.

3.2 Data Collection
In this paper, three sites were chosen for the analysis: People's Daily, Guang ming Daily, and Sina Weibo. People's Daily and Guangming Daily are state-run, and the former is the largest news organization in China. Guangming Daily used to function as distributing political propaganda but reduced the political coverage and was replaced by cultural and social events for survival in recent years.

Weibo is a Chinese microblogging platform founded in 2009 and soon became one of China's most popular social platforms. Statistica (2022) states that it has more than 582 million monthly active users in the first quarter of 2022. Weibo has been the most influential platform in recent years compared to other online platforms. Because of the huge number of active users, it is so popular that the government nowadays even pays attention to the trending discussion on Weibo (Thomala, 2022).

The data were collected between 15 March 2022 and 31 May 2022. The news and microblogging became rare when it turned to May, so the last day of May is the closure of data collection. For People's Daily and Guangming Daily, the keywords are "Unif 100 pickled Cabbage" and "Mud Pot Pickled Cabbage" since each keyword only has 15 results. Weibo posts are categorized using different topics, so the chosen topic is "315 Unif 100 Instant Noodles", "Master Kong Pickled Cabbage Instant Noodle", " Unif 100 Instant Noodles Pickled Cabbage was surprisingly made in the mud pot", "Pickled Cabbage no longer be sold", and "how large the impact did Unif 100 Instant Noodles have on instant noodles?". Repeated posts are excluded from the data, and only original posts are counted. Wang (2013) proposed the three stages of social crisis, specifically the latent stage, outbreak stage, diffusion stage, and retrospective stage. This division was based on the period segmentation of crisis communication. The news and posts are too scarce to collect in the latent stage, so the data collection begins in the outbreak stage. At this stage, the crisis has happened and cannot be prevented. The outbreak stage of this case study is between 15 March 2022 and 16 March 2022, followed by the diffusion stage. During this period, the stakeholders take action and respond to the crisis and suit the period between 17 March and 31 March. From April to the end of May, the crisis can be seen as over, and the company's products began appearing on the shelf, which suits the retrospective stage. For each stage, there are ten news articles from People's Daily and Guangming Daily and 70 posts from Weibo. After data collection, the news and microblogs underwent the analysis of generic frames and issue-specific frames. Last but not least, there is an issue-specific comparison of data from three sites during different stages for further discussion (Pan & Meng, 2016).

4. Results

Table 1 Generic frames of newspaper articles

Frame	People's Daily	Guangming Daily	Total	
	n	n	n	%
Conflict	12	10	22	19
Human interest	10	8	18	15.5
Economic consequence	6	7	13	11.2
Morality	3	4	7	6
Responsibility	18	14	32	27.6
Fact	14	10	24	20.7

The generic frames of two newspaper articles are presented in Table 1. As can be noticed, 32 news articles out of 60 bring up the responsibility frame, emphasizing the accountability of the responsible company, and this frame constitutes nearly 28% of the overall generic frames. Considering that it is obvious to trace down which company should be blamed, official news deliberately points out the clear partnership between the pickled cabbage supplier Chaqi and the company. It stresses the main culprit of the incident to render the audience sound and resultful information.

Besides, two mainstream media frequently mention the fact frame (24 news reports), occupying 20.7% of all the generic frames. This may be because the official media endeavour to be authoritative and objective, reporting news that is recognized facts and faultless information. It is their job to present valid news that can inform all readers about the ongoing process of the event.

In addition, People's Daily and Guang Ming Daily emphasized the conflict frame. According to the collected data, it appears in 22 news reports and is 19% of all the generic frames. The conflict they discussed derives either from conflict between consumers and the company or between the company and pickled cabbage supplier Chaqi. Although such confrontation is distinct and severe, news reports seldom discuss the conflict between the problematic company and the China Food and Drug Administration (CFDA), namely the representation of the Chinese government, veiling the misstep and minimizing the responsibility of the government regarding this pressing issue.

The rest of the three frames are human interest, economic consequence, and morality, accounting for 15.5%, 11.2%, and 6%, respectively. This result conforms to the top-down framework, highlighting more the macroscope aspect of the incident and imparting knowledge to inform and reassure the audience. As for more emotional and humane aspects, such as human interest and morality, the official news media of China seems less likely to pay too much attention.

Table 2 presents data for the issue-specific frames of newspaper articles. This framework emphasizes discussing specific content in news reports and involves more subjectivity and flexibility. It can be noticed that the "knowledge and policy interpretation" frame is of the highest proportion (16.8%).

Table 2: Issue-specific frames of newspaper articles

Theme	People's Daily	Guangming Daily	Total	0
	n	n	n	%
Government action	9	10	19	12.8
Role of media and journalists	10	10	20	13.4
Role of experts	8	2	10	6.7
Knowledge and policy interpretation	15	10	25	16.8
Government responsibility	4	3	7	4.7
Economic impacts	2	4	6	4
Social impact	9	12	21	14.1
Everyday life impact	7	5	12	8.1
Reflection	8	8	16	10.7
Satire	7	6	13	8.7

Other frames that exceed 10% among all issue-specific frames are "social impact (14.1%)", "role of media and journalists (13.4%)", "government action (12.8%)", and "reflection (10.7%)". For issue-specific frames that are less than 10%, "satire (8.7%)", "everyday life impact (8.1%)", "role of experts (6.7%)", "government responsibility (4.7%)", and "economic impact (4%)" are counted into the less-stressed category.

Regarding knowledge and policy interpretation (16.8%), one might conclude that official news aims at directing the attention of the audience toward the regulatory and statutory facade of the event, broadening the scope of the issue toward a more general view of the overall food industry policies. This can be informative and useful in expanding readers' knowledge repertoire; however, it may eclipse the severe ramifications of a certain company and downplay the degree of severity of the main party.

For the least number of issue-specific frame economic impacts (4%), the range of influence on the overall economy in China arising from this issue is negligible compared to the social impact (14.1%) and everyday life impact (8.1%). Because Unif 100 Instant noodles are palatable and cost-effective, most Chinese of all age groups adore and probably purchase the brand many times. It would be unacceptable and revolting to know that such "national popular food" becomes delicious under workers' feet and is of no hygiene guarantee. Therefore, the social impact will surpass the economic impact. Even though there were huge financial losses after the event outbreak, such damage possibly only happened within the company.

Another intriguing phenomenon is the low degree of attendance of government enrollment in the news reports. "Government responsibility" makes up less than 5% of all the issue-specific frames in two newspaper media. As said, the authority media strive to distract the audience's attention and focus more on the issue's superficial and peripheral side, such as explaining laws and policies for mere knowledge reserve. The core problem has not been touched on and presented in front of the media: the lack of governmental supervision or an incredibly high level of tolerance of the food and health administration towards these big enterprises. The data somewhat implies the preferential inclination of these state-owned journals.

Notably, the two news media channels involve a certain degree of "reflection (10.7%)" and "satire (8.7%)", adding more individual opinions and even a sense of humour to news reports. This may be due to the need to invoke the reader's emotions and better connect with the audience when they read the article. News reports try to create an invisible relationship with the readers, arousing feelings and pathos that help the media tighten the intimate bonds between the upper media and the masses.

Table 3: Generic Frames of Weibo Messages

Frame	n	%
Conflict	31	20.2
Human interest	65	42.5
Economic consequence	3	2
Morality	14	9.1
Responsibility	32	21
Fact	8	5.2

The generic frames of Sina Weibo messages are presented in Table 3. Specifically, the human interest frame appeared to be 42.5% of the total number. It is an apparent representation that the Weibo platform is a human-oriented and subjective medium for idea expression and emotional outlets. Also, netizens (net citizens) are concerned about the responsibility the company and the government should take, the "responsibility" frame constituting over 20% of the generic frames. Besides, they are presenting ideas

that outline the conflict (20.2%) among Unif 100 consumers, the company, and the governmental supervision departments. Comparatively, "morality" (9.1%), "fact" (5.2%), and "economic consequence" (2%) in total comprise less than 20% of the overall generic frames, indicating that netizens seldomly care about the putative facts or the macroeconomic impact.

Table 4: Issue-specific Frames of Weibo Messages

Theme	n	%
Government action	0	0
Role of media and journalists	5	2.6
Role of experts	3	1.5
Knowledge and policy interpretation	8	4.1
Government responsibility	12	6.2
Economic impacts	3	1.5
Social impact	13	6.7
Everyday life impact	46	23.7
Reflection	40	20.7
Satire	64	33

The issue-specific frames of Weibo messages are delineated in Table 4. When involving more flexibility and arbitrariness, the traits of this unofficial platform become more remarkable. Notably, the "satire" frame reaches 33% of all issue-specific frames. Netizens are most inclined to lampoon the involved company, creating what is called "Duanzi" around the breaking incident and trying to lighten the pessimistic atmosphere. They even make fun of themselves because they once ate so many packs of Unif 100 instant noodles without getting sick, a lucky mentality of escaping from the contaminated food.

Apart from producing "Duanzi" and messages involving self-mocking tones, "everyday life impact" and "reflection" take up 23.7% and 20.7% of all the frames. In sharp contrast to the official media, which is information-oriented, individuals on Weibo care most about the changes and impact the incident brought to themselves. They feel enthusiastic about revealing their everyday routines (23.7%) with Unif 100: some condemning "I have eaten Unif 100 for years, and now I will never touch it again", and some crying that "I have just eaten Unif 100 this morning", aiming at dispelling negative moods and arousing sympathy. In addition, some reflect (20.7%) seriously about the nature or essence of this food crisis, striving to solve the problem through the open platform, or they want to bring out the ineffectiveness of the government by offering self-approved solutions.

Interestingly, the 200 Weibo messages did not contain any content related to government action (0%), and only a total of 3% is contributed by "role of experts (1.5%)" and "economic impact (1.5%)". Therefore, Weibo users seemed unlikely to discuss issues too official or formal, and they did not emphasize the macro aspect of the issue.

Table 5: Issue-specific frames of newspaper and Weibo messages during different stages

Theme	Outbreak Stage		Diffusion Stage		Retrospective Stage	
	Newspaper	Weibo	Newspaper	Weibo	Newspaper	Weibo
Government action	2 (4.75%)	0 (0%)	8 (13.56%)	0 (0%)	9 (18.75%)	0 (0%)
Role of media and journalists	7 (16.7%)	3 (3.95%)	7 (11.86%)	0 (0%)	6 (12.5%)	2 (3.65%)
Role of experts	4 (9.5%)	1 (1.3%)	5 (8.5%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.1%)	2 (3.65%)
Knowledge and policy interpretation	11 (26.2%)	4 (5.3%)	7 (11.86%)	2 (3.2%)	7 (14.6%)	2 (3.65%)
Government responsibility	2 (4.75%)	6 (7.9%)	4 (6.7%)	4 (6.3%)	1 (2.1%)	2 (3.65%)
Economic impacts	1 (2.4%)	1 (1.3%)	2 (3.4%)	1 (1.6%)	3 (6.25%)	1 (1.8%)
Social impact	7 (16.7%)	3 (3.95%)	8 (13.56%)	5 (8%)	6 (12.5%)	5 (9.1%)
Everyday life impact	2 (4.8%)	21 (27.6%)	5 (8.5%)	14 (22.2%)	5 (10.4%)	11 (20%)
Reflection	3 (7.1%)	14 (18.4%)	8 (13.56%)	14 (22.2%)	5 (10.4%)	12 (21.8%)
Satire	3 (7.1%)	23 (30.3%)	5 (8.5%)	23 (36.5%)	5 (10.4%)	18 (32.7%)

The issue-specific frames of both newspaper articles and Weibo messages during three pivotal stages of the event are recorded in Table 5. There are unique characteristics and surprisingly similar patterns portraying the three different stages of the Unif 100 incident. During the outbreak stage (15 March-16 March), the two newspapers emphasized most "knowledge and policy interpretation (26.2%)", while Sina Weibo focused mainly on "satire (30.3%)" and paid little attention to "government action (0%)". In the second stage, the diffusion stage (17 March-31 March), the two newspapers had a relatively balanced distribution of all issue-specific frames, with "government action", "social impact", and "reflection" summing the most and taking up 13.56% for each of the three frames. However, for Weibo, the "satire" frame remains the biggest proportion, constituting 36.5% of the data. In contrast, no data was given to "government action", "role of media and journalists", and "role of experts". Transitioning to the last

stage, the retrospective stage (1 April-31 May), People's Daily and Guang Ming Daily still highlighted the frame of "government action (18.75%)" when Weibo did not discuss "government action" at all; instead, it consistently continued to discuss hotly regarding "satire (32.7%)".

To observe more closely, throughout the three stages of the Unif 100 crisis, opinions on Sina Weibo were not concerned about how the government acted (0%) towards the company. Still, they enjoyed mocking the issue (over 30% for all three stages) and made fun of the company's missteps. This demonstrates that netizens in modern Chinese crises become reluctant to stand at the centre of the storm and discuss food issues online; rather, they would be more likely to be onlookers or bystanders, making statements that are merely scratching the surface or even deepening the conflict.

On the other hand, the focus of mainstream official media is constantly adjusting to keep up with the most important information. For the outbreak stage, two newspapers emphasized the laws and policies related to criminality, disseminating legal knowledge and highlighting the effective national policies to settle such issues. In the diffusion and retrospective stage, the Unif 100 crisis has subsided, and official departments have started investigating and taking up responsibilities. Hence, the media shifted focus to the efficacy and actions of the government, reassuring the public that the authority was working on the issue and it would be solved immediately.

5. Discussion

The findings mentioned above show that official national news and Weibo microblogs exhibit divergent characteristics during different stages. It is found that "responsibility" accounts for the largest proportion of official media among all the generic frames, followed by the second largest "fact" frame. Unlike official media, Weibo posts indicate an overwhelming percentage of human interest, which takes up around 50%, and conflict's second largest proportion.

5.1 Top-Down Discourse and Bottom-Up Discourses

The official media system in China has always been viewed as the channel to generate social consensus and reinforce government authority (Esarey, 2005). With various propaganda and censorship, the government can control public opinion since citizens can only access limited views and news resources. However, such government control status faces challenges in developing different online social media platforms. In the world of the Internet, the participants are always invisible (Li, 2010), which gives them the freedom to express their attitudes. The data manifests that the public focuses on emotional factors and concerns rather than facts. Researchers introduced the dichotomy system contexts, which are top-down and bottom-up contexts in present China society. Official mass media are considered the top-down context, while the social media sphere tends to be the bottom-up context. Compared with the unified judgment, the bottom-up context is likely to manifest controversial attitudes and fragmented messages of the different communities (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2003).

5.2 Changing Power between Official and Civil Discourse

Regarding the issue-specific frames during different periods, official media stress knowledge and policy in the outbreak stage, then emphasize the government action in the latter two stages. This phenomenon corresponds to the image and purpose of the government. Through reporting the policies and government action, the political party can ensure their dominant voice in social incidents and maintain their credibility.

It is noteworthy that sarcasm/satire contributes to the biggest percentage during these three stages. Enormous posts can be found to question the trustworthiness of the food manufacturer and government regulation. Li (2010) mentioned that the Internet endows the public with unprecedented power and reattributes the power to some extent. This power reattribution can be seen in the open competition among different entities. In the past, the official mass media was seen as the "elite" and grasped the right to facts and solutions, which caused an unequal status of information, power, and voice channel between the authorities and the public(Ramanathan & Hoon, 2015). However, the Internet breaks the boundary of time and space limitation, bringing the fact to the public.

Consequently, multiple attitudes, competition, and confrontation appear on the Internet. Traditionally, the public has a stable trust in the "elite". Still, they have started to question the liability of official mass media after receiving more information and multiple attitudes. Online users tend to demonstrate objection, doubt, and indifference when encountering the official discourse to exercise their power in social events. In light of these issues, many researchers suggest that official media should release the latest updates constantly to rebuild authority and trust. The authority has adopted these methods in the crisis communication process, that's why there is a high proportion of "fact" and "responsibility" among all the frames. Nonetheless, sometimes this strategy may backfire since it may seem to defend authority in the public view. A successful case demonstrates that involvement is key to mitigating the conflict between two groups. Authority should involve the public and ensure that the key facts are sufficiently exposed to the public.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, significant differences exist between traditional mainstream media and emerging interactive media. Traditional media prefer to discuss issues from a macro aspect, analyzing problems from the government's perspective rather than from citizens. However, the emerging new media constructed issues in a real tone closer to everyday life. Instead of focusing on government actions and solving problems, they prefer to be outsiders and indifferent discussants even if they are involved in food crises.

Although people originally gather information from the mass media and understand the context of certain issues, their personal opinions are often based on their own life experiences and individual will. Even if the mainstream media reports contain sentimental personal remarks, the masses will refute or question different opinions based on their personal experience. This is because the increasingly interactive social platforms and the nature of anonymity, and the low cost of information exchange endow netizens with the universal right of equal communication (Guo, 2022). In a virtual environment where this sense of freedom can be fully exerted, people begin to express themselves more freely.

Of course, it is easy for the audience to discover that the mainstream media is also developing more interactivity. Viewers can see that many daily newspapers or official platforms have discussion columns below the news section. This may be a compromise made by the official media or an implicit attempt to obtain a greater voice. No matter how the official media evolves, there will eventually be differences between official mass media and social media. Still, in the future, it is assumed that such a gap will become smaller and smaller, considering that the weight of power between the upper authority and the public will be distributed more equally than before. It is also intriguing to hypothesize that in the future, public discourse will take place in a uniform platform disregarding whether it is authority or public, but a fusion of two with more open, realistic, and down-to-earth discussions.

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