



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i5/16678>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i5/16678

Received: 08 March 2023, **Revised:** 11 April 2023, **Accepted:** 24 April 2023

Published Online: 15 May 2023

In-Text Citation: (Di & Chinnasamy, 2023)

To Cite this Article: Di, H., & Chinnasamy, S. (2023). Reflection on the International Communication Experience of Mainstream Media in China: CGTN as a Setting Example. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(5), 2998 – 3007.

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Vol. 13, No. 5, 2023, Pg. 2998 – 3007

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



www.hrmars.com

ISSN: 2222-6990

Reflection on the International Communication Experience of Mainstream Media in China: CGTN as a Setting Example

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Abstract

With the development of new media, international communication has long been an important way for every country to deliver messages to the world. Platforms and high-quality content are needed for successful international communication. Only in this way, can we further narrow the distance between countries. In 2016, with the change of CCTV's international channel to CGTN (China Global Television Network), China has more and more opportunities to make its voice heard internationally, and Western countries are getting to know more about China. However, the Western media still holds a dominant position. China's mainstream media is still a "newborn calf" and has less of a chance than other countries for its voices to be heard. As a result, with insufficient international influence, it is not attractive to overseas users, which has restricted the development of international communication in China. This study aims to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of CGTN's international communication, discuss how China's mainstream media should improve its international communication, expand its influence, attract more overseas users, and better shape China's image.

Keywords: International Communication, Experience, China, CGTN, Mainstream Media, Reporting

Introduction

Due to the ideological differences, the western media always hold a biased attitude when reporting on China. China's media started from scratch and gradually established institutions of external communication. However, due to the backward platform and the primacy effect, it is difficult for China to change the stereotypes. According to Lippman's *Public Opinion*, "people live in a virtual environment jointly constructed by the media and individuals, which will have an impact on the real environment" stated Lippman (2006,p.29,124) Although most Western people don't know much about China, they are influenced by the local media and

biased against China. With the development of China, it is necessary for China to achieve a good international image. Only with the continuous development of CGTN can the Western countries change the stereotypes.

During the early period of New China, China did not attach great importance to international communication, and China's image was shaped by Western media passively. It wasn't until the mid-1950s, when the Xinhua News Agency began to build an international news agency, that China gradually began to voice. However, westerners' stereotypes have made China's foreign publicity very difficult.

With the improvement of China's national strength, the relationship between China and the world has become increasingly close. China needs to introduce itself to the world, while other countries have the desire to know about China. This two-directional relationship makes China consider international communication an important way to introduce itself, and also puts forward higher requirements for institutions of international communication. How to seize the initiative of international communication? The first step is to establish an independent international communication agency.

Under the dual effects of international and domestic environments, on September 1, 2016, CCTV English News Channel and English Record Channel officially launched the HD version. On December 31st, 2016, China Central Television English News Channel (CCTV-NEWS) was officially transformed to China Global Television Network (CGTN).

The Development and Current Status of CGTN

After the transformation, CGTN was aired in Chinese mainland, Hongkong, Macau, Malaysia, Singapore and the United States. At present, CGTN has 6 channels and 3 overseas branches. They are China International Television News Channel, Documentary Channel, Spanish Channel, French Channel, Arabic Channel and Russian Channel. Overseas branches include Africa Branch (located in Nairobi, Kenya), North America Branch (located in Washington, USA) and Europe Branch (located in London, England).

Apart from TV channels, CGTN also has an official website (www.cgtn.com). According to Alexa, a subsidiary of Amazon Company, in 90 days, CGTN's official website ranked 18,447 in all websites, while 90 days ago, CGTN ranked 22,563. Chinese users accounted for 18.1%, American users accounted for 14.8% and Indian users accounted for 9.9% of all visitors in the past 30 days.

On overseas social software, CGTN has long had official accounts. On May 2, 2013, CCTVNews created the official Facebook page, and officially changed its name to CGTN on December 31, 2016. At present, CGTN has a total of 100 million likes and a total of 100 million fans in Facebook. In addition, CGTN also opened an official account in Twitter in January 2013. At present, it has a total of about 14.04 million fans. CGTN also opened official accounts in Instagram and YouTube, which are loved by overseas users.

Table 1.1

Comparison of the number of fans on overseas social platforms

	Fans on Facebook	Registration Time (Twitter)	Fans on Twitter	Fans on YouTube
CGTN	100 million	January 2013	14.04 million	1.57 million
BBC	52.53 million	February 2007	27.77 million	8.56 million
Russia Today	5.95 million	August 2009	3.07 million	3.84 million
KBS	3.61 million	July 2010	410 thousand	770 thousand

As can be seen from the table, although CGTN registered the official account late, it developed much faster than that of Russian and Korean media. It is worth noting that China and South Korea are both Asian countries, and both of them are engaged in international communication, while CGTN has already been ahead of KBS by a large margin. However, the gap between CGTN and BBC is still large. "CGTN's audience is mostly from Asian countries, while BBC attracts a large international audience." stated Luo Xue (2018,p.92-94). On balance, CGTN should focus on YouTube video news.

CGTN's Experience in Attracting Overseas Users under the background of International Communication

Since CGTN registered official accounts on overseas social platforms, it has attracted a large group of followers by daily postings. In the era of "Attention Economy", CGTN's official accounts have a good click-through rate and gain a large number of comments, likes and reposts, which shows that the CGTN's international communication has achieved some initial results.

Table 1.2

CGTN's highest record of interaction within one day on overseas social platforms

	Twitter	Facebook
Likes	728	6781
Comments	52	358
Reposts	319	371

Media Convergence can Maximize the Advantages

Even though CGTN belongs to mass media, its users need to abide by the rules made by social media. In contrast, the official website created by CGTN has not so many restrictions, and it can design the content according to its own needs. The official website and social media together form a new media cluster of CGTN's international communication, which can be linked to each other's websites. The integration of various media not only makes CGTN occupy a place in the world, but also attracts more audiences by taking advantage of different platforms such as following ideas:

(I) The official website shows an encouraging picture

On the official website of CGTN, there are many sections, such as World section, China section, Europe section, as well as social life section, politics section, culture section, sports section, etc. CGTN divides news into different categories so that users can click on the corresponding sections according to their needs. In addition, the news on the official website is also more concentrated. Compared to Facebook and Twitter, the official website of CGTN does not delete outdated news. In this way, users can find yesterday's news easily.

(II) Attract active users in Facebook

According to the official data released by Facebook in 2019, there were 1.66 billion daily active users in December. In view of this, CGTN's strategy is to make better use of the "game rule" and increase "user stickiness". Besides posts, photos and videos, CGTN can also launch online activities on Facebook. The latest online activity of CGTN is from February 11th to March 12th, 2020. The content of the activity is Victory Over Virus: Make "w" gesture to support Wuhan. 3,496 users are interested in participating, and 56 users share. For the users who interact with

the homepage the most, they can get the badge of "Super Fans", and the number of super fans has been growing. If users have strong interest in CGTN, they can choose to join the Fan Club. At present, there are more than 300 fans. The CGTN can use a series of functions of Facebook to interact with users, and will attract more active users as time goes by.

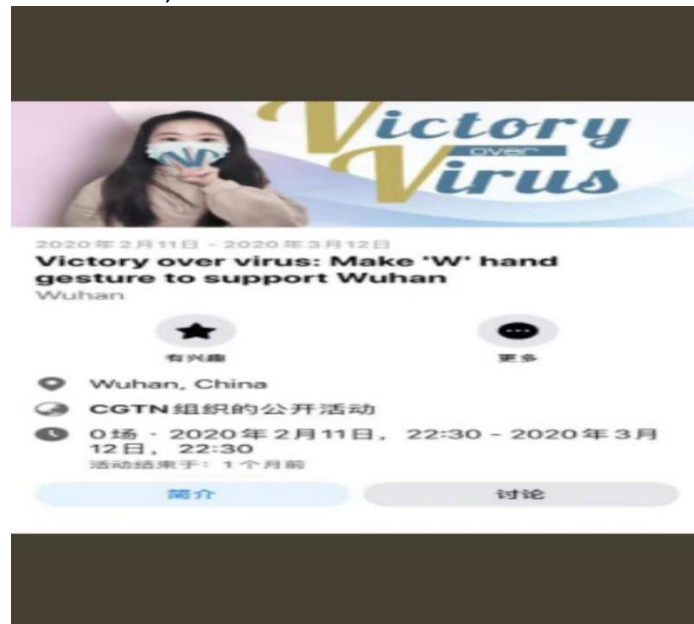


Figure 1.1 Online activities posted by CGTN's official account (Facebook)

(III) Publish special reports in Twitter

Twitter has less users than Facebook, with a total of 1.3 billion accounts, but only 328 million are active. Compared with paying attention to the number of users, it's more important to focus on active users and attract new users. There is a "moment" section on Twitter, and CGTN posts some breaking news in this section. On January 8th, 2020, CGTN released the moment when Iran attacked the air base in Iraq, and the follow-up reports were also put together. The "instant" function is actually equivalent to a special report, but the length is short, which is convenient for users to quickly understand the cause, process and result of events.



Figure 1.2 The moment CGTN posted on Twitter about Iran's attack on the Iraqi air base

The "moment" section is different from tweets. The information distributed by tweets is scattered, while the "moment" section is concentrated and convenient, so users don't need to flip through them one by one. CGTN is actually a gathering place for comprehensive news.

Audience Analysis: Accurately Understand the Cognitive Framework of Users

As an international media, CGTN must re-analyze its users if it wants to attract more attention. Of course, audiences include not only overseas users, but also Chinese users.

"Benevolence" is the core of Confucian culture and Chinese people are introverted, which is reflected in Chinese journalism. Chinese journalism has always focused on human interest and the portrayal of details. For example, during the epidemic, the media focused on the medical staff who went to Hubei. News reports of this kind celebrate selflessness and dedication, and will undoubtedly earn tears and praise from audiences.

"Qian Zhaohe argues in his *Essence of Western Culture* that Western culture is for knowledge rather than practicality, preferring to explore the reasons behind phenomena, focusing on rational thinking and strict definition of concepts, having a strong skeptical and critical spirit, and aspiring to democracy, freedom, equality and human rights." stated Wang Xiaoyang(2012,p217-218)The different cultures of China and the West are particularly prominent in reports about catastrophic accidents.

China's mainstream media reported on the epidemic, with the theme of rescue groups, hospitals, charities and patients, emphasizing how important national interests are. The mainstream media pays more attention to the collective consciousness of the people who share a bitter hatred of the epidemic. It can be found that China's media are more inclined to guide Chinese people to respond to the epidemic with a positive attitude. Western media, on the other hand, paid more attention to the damage caused by the epidemic. Against the cultural background of individualism, most Western media report on negative events. This is precisely the collision between Chinese and Western cultures in news reporting.

It is because of the different ways of thinking between Chinese and western audiences that higher requirements are put forward for CGTN. If CGTN doesn't change its reporting mode, overseas users may have a "confrontational interpretation" of the reports. However, the report mode currently explored by CGTN is a good answer. CGTN's Facebook and Twitter posts are mostly newsletters. Because of the news genre and the word limit of the platform, most of these reports are short and accurate, and conform to the cognitive framework of overseas users. The report of the epidemic pays more attention to the record of facts, which can attract the attention of western audiences. Moreover, it is often accompanied by short videos, which makes the reports more intuitive which is illustrated as below.

The Point: How were the first cases of COVID-19 dealt with by Wuhan?

Share      



Figure 1.3 Videos in CGTN official website (There are many similar videos)

Multi-source Voices Had Improved the Credibility

The following method can improve the credibility a lot. That is to give more opportunities for Western people to speak out on the online platform, and collect the views of all parties. In the T-house commentary section of the CGTN, we can find that many commentators are from western countries. They are not only commentators, but also analysts of political and international relations, and the former editor-in-chief of *Dagens Nyheter*. They are experts in their respective fields and have quite a few supporters. When they speak with the help of CGTN, they act as a bridge between the platform and the audience, which can attract overseas

users. Therefore, using multi-source voices is one of the ways to quickly open the door to international communication.

***Editor's note:** Tom Fowdy is a British political and international relations analyst and a graduate of Durham and Oxford universities. He writes on topics pertaining to China, the DPRK, Britain, and the U.S. The article reflects the author's opinions, and not necessarily the views of CGTN.*

***Editor's note:** Hans Bergstrom, a former editor-in-chief of Dagens Nyheter, Sweden's leading daily newspaper, is a professor of political science at the University of Gothenburg and a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences. The article reflects the author's opinions and not necessarily the views of CGTN.*

Figure 1.4 The editor of CGTN introduces the author's identity

Comments are different from news reports. Audiences see more of the opinions of commentators. Posting articles by Chinese commentators will be mistaken for "brainwashing" by overseas users, which will lead to resentment from overseas users

CGTN mostly adopts the articles of Western commentators, which can prevent overseas users from falling into the deadlock of "instinctive rejection" of China, and leave room for them to think about the articles.

It's not the first time for CGTN to spread voices with the help of foreigners. Once upon a time, Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China* let the whole world know about the Chinese revolution led by the Red Army of Chinese Workers and Peasants and the Communist Party of China (CPC), and helped China win the understanding and support of the general public. "It's very important to tell the good story of China, spread the voice of China, innovate ways of expression, and let the Western media regard China as a society that is progressing all the time. Of course, there are many other ways to spread multi-source voices." stated Yu Xianjun(2019,p5) CGTN also provides opportunities for users to speak. In addition to passively reading the news, users can also actively send emails to CGTN's mailbox to comment.

Reflection on the Mainstream Media's Promoting the International Communication Agendas

Setting the Direction and Attract Target Users

It's very important for the media to set the right direction, and any small problems may leave a bad impression on audiences. Take CCTV News as an example. Facing the "double standards" of the New York Times, CCTV news released tweets. However, the background music of the video is funny, which is completely inconsistent with the serious content. In the face of international events, CCTV News' tweets are not in line with its position and will lead to the loss of audiences. Therefore, only by setting the right direction can CCTV attract more audiences. Only in this way can CCTV successfully launch its international communication activities.

According to Alexa's keyword analysis of CGTN's website, there are 263,000 keyword opportunities, which are customized keywords for attracting more traffic to users; There are 196,000 keyword gaps; There are 32,000 optimization opportunities, which are keywords that are very popular; There are 27,000 easy-to-rank keywords, which are keywords that can improve the competitiveness of CGTN.

It is not difficult to see that CGTN has a large number of keyword gaps and lost a lot of traffic. In 2016, when CGTN was founded, its slogan was "See the Difference". And unlike the

mainstream media in China, CGTN will actively respond to international discussions about China, so that the world will find it special.

On December 6th, 2019, CGTN uploaded a special documentary *Frontier of Anti-Terrorism in Xinjiang, China*. The introduction is as follows: Xinjiang, China, is located at the crossroads of central Asia. Extremism and terrorism are putting Chinese people at risk. What price will the government and the people pay? In nearly an hour, many cases and pictures were published for the first time. On Bilibili, the number of plays of this documentary reached 3.533 million. According to the official YouTube account, the number of plays reached 250,000, which undoubtedly gained broad attention at home and abroad.

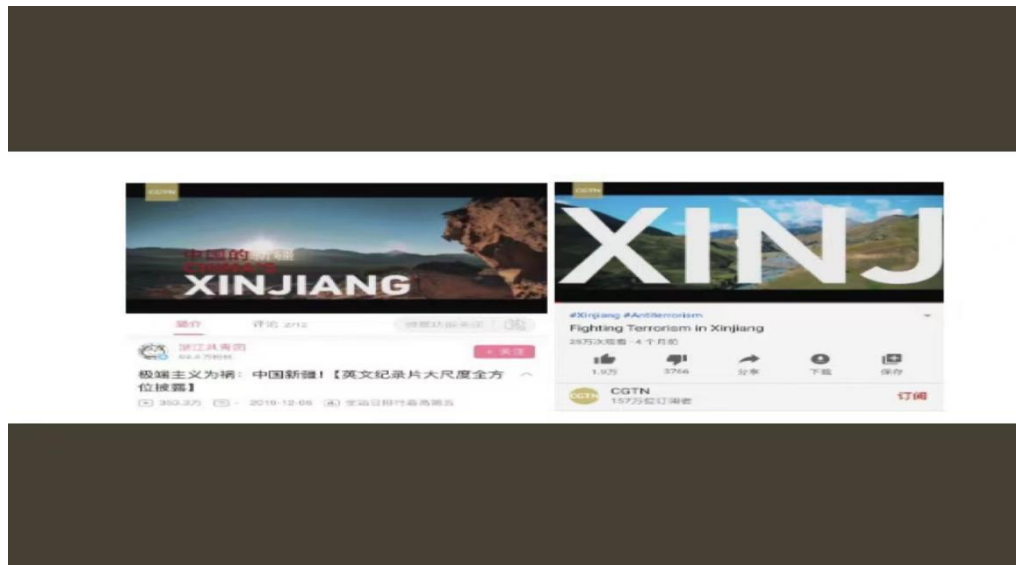


Figure 1.5 Records of *Frontier of Anti-Terrorism in Xinjiang, China* on Chinese and foreign video platforms

This documentary not only responds to the debates on issues of Xinjiang, but also shows many real cases in Xinjiang. If we try to search it on Google, we will find it was released by CGTN. However, there are quite a few keyword gaps. How should we treat them? It's very simple. We can analyze it through "See the Difference". Even though there are many reports about the same event in the world, we can make detailed reports from the Asian countries we know or directly from China. Only when the domestic media know the national conditions best can they find news that other Western media can't. If the mainstream media work hard on this point, it will only be a matter of time before they have greater influence in the world.

Introducing the TV Programs with Characteristics and Carry out In-depth Exchanges

CGTN's most well-known TV program recently is the debate between U.S. and China anchors about the trade war. On May 30th, 2019, Liu Xin, the host of CGTN, was invited by Trish Regan, the anchorwoman of Fox Business Channel in the United States, to participate in The Intelligence Report with Trish Regan via satellite connection. The two sides had a 16-minute conversation, which attracted great attention. According to statistics, CGTN has published 182 related reports on "conversation between Liu Xin and Tracy", which have been read 48.05 million times worldwide and visited by users 42.48 million times. "Many international media such as BBC and The New York Times also pay close attention to it." stated Jianxia (2019,p52-54)

By analyzing this debate, we can draw the following conclusions: First, CGTN has not many TV programs with characteristics; Second, there is no in-depth communication mode in CGTN. If the mainstream media wants to occupy a place in international communication, it must make more efforts in TV programs. Third, TV programs can attract overseas users.

To a large extent, the TV programs we introduce to the world are “self-talking”. Except that the language is changed to English, it adopts the mode of Chinese TV programs, which is only a change in form but not in content. However, the TV programs for foreigners must be inclusive. In other words, it is necessary to carry out in-depth communication with internationally renowned scholars and hosts, etc. This will not only increase exposure to the TV programs, but also make it easier for overseas users to understand China.

What we need to understand is that in an era when the relationship between countries is becoming more and more close, we should not only participate in global communication, but also take the initiative. This kind of dialogue has nothing to do with political games, but simply the exchange and collision between cultures.

Conclusion

As the vanguard of international communication, CGTN has indeed made a big breakthrough. Both the report on Hong Kong issue and the documentary *Frontier of Anti-Terrorism in Xinjiang, China* have played an important role in spreading China's voice to the world. According to CGTN's experience and reflection, the mainstream media must continue to innovate the mode of international communication. In addition, it is necessary to adhere to the cognitive framework of overseas users and make good use of communication skills. Faced with the complex social environment, we need to open up to the world, go along with the historical tide of globalization, and report good stories about China.

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