

# Documentary Image Expression in Public Emergencies: A Case Study of Documentary Film "The Front Line"

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**Abstract:** In recent years, public emergencies represented by the outbreak of Corona Virus Disease 2019 have occurred frequently, and the world is undergoing profound changes unseen in a century. As the most authentic and timely image form, documentary film, which focuses on the documentary expression of public emergencies, plays a competitive, original, powerful, influential and leading role, has been widely concerned and affirmed by the industry and beyond. Taking the documentary film "The Front Line" as an example, combined with the author's personal thinking as the executive chief director of the film, this paper analyzes the film from the perspective of creation, argumentation, narrative means and speech methods, and conducts in-depth thinking and theoretical analysis of the documentary image expression in public emergencies.

**Key words:** documentary film; The Front Line; public emergencies

## 1. Introduction

It has been more than two years since the outbreak of Corona Virus Disease 2019 during the Spring Festival in 2020, and the world has always been in an era of Corona Virus Disease 2019 dispersion and repeated public health crises. Looking back at this period of time that has had a profound and lasting impact on the contemporary world, we can see that China has given full play to its institutional advantages and the strength of its people, and has been the first and best country to effectively control the Corona Virus Disease 2019. At the same time, as a responsible major country, China has fully supported the global fight against the Corona Virus Disease 2019, contributed its experience, helped the global economic recovery, and actively built a community with a shared future for mankind. The contributions made by China are widely recognized. In this process, China's news media and film and television institutions have played an important and positive role, making valuable explorations in building consensus within the whole society and spreading China's positive image to the outside world, showing the world China's ability and image in dealing with public emergencies.

President Xi Jinping pointed out that "we should strengthen the propaganda and public opinion work, coordinate online and offline, domestic and international, big and small events, better strengthen confidence, warm hearts, gather public support, and better maintain the overall stability of society." [1] In the face of the outbreak of Corona Virus Disease 2019, in order to comprehensively and deeply record the experience of the Chinese people struggling together, united as one, and united in one purpose, the documentary series "The Front Line" was jointly produced by China Population Communication Center and Youku under the guidance of the National Radio and Television Administration of the People's Republic of China and the National Health Commission of the PRC. As the only official documentary produced by China's National Health System, it presents a panoramic view of the grand scene of the Chinese people's anti-Corona Virus Disease 2019 with a professional standpoint, an objective perspective, a grand vision and humanistic feelings. After its broadcast, the film has received the attention and affirmation of dozens of mainstream media including People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, Learning Power and so on. The total clicks have exceeded 160 million times, which has a great impact and triggered wide discussion among the majority of internet users. This paper tries to combine the creation experience of "The Front Line" to explore the "skills" and "ways" of documentary image expression in public

emergencies, so as to provide reference for the creation and development of the same type of documentary.

## **2. The creation perspective of professionalism and authoritative position**

As of December 2021, the scale of Chinese netizens has reached 1.032 billion, and the Internet penetration rate has reached 73%.[2] The Internet has become the most important communication channel for Chinese people to understand news, obtain information and communicate. Social media, represented by Weibo, WeChat, and news clients, has increasingly strong social influence, and social media influencers have become opinion leaders of social hot events, and have become the focus of public attention. Their comments can even become the direction of public opinion, leading the public's attention and discussion topics. In many public emergencies in recent years, "We Media" often become the main force guiding public opinion in the initial stage. Due to the interest impulse and professional quality limitations of some "We Media", the information they spread is mixed, and inaccurate reports occur frequently, which leads to a surge in netizens' panic psychology. "The negative impact of panic will not only be reflected in the harm caused at the individual level, but also cause group panic, accelerating the spread and spread of panic." [3]

In order to cope with the noise and confusion of information in the Internet communication environment, eliminate panic in a timely manner, convey the facts of scientific authority, and help shape a healthy Internet environment, "The Front Line" has always adhered to the basic principles of truth, objectivity, professionalism and authority in the whole process of creation. The production team went deep into many Corona Virus Disease 2019 sites, close to the forefront of the event, and recorded the actual plight, without avoiding the public panic and crisis caused by poor information and ineffective management, and comprehensively and objectively recorded the fight against the Corona Virus Disease 2019 from the beginning of panic and chaos to the subsequent unity and the final victory. "Journalism professionalism in China should take public service as the core concept, become a principle that plays a normative role in operation and organization, and play a calling function in morality and spirit." [4] Upholding the concept of professionalism, the film focuses on enabling audiences to obtain "the right to know" and "the right to access" through the film. The film neither exaggerates disasters nor is blindly optimistic, making it more valuable to record the era and spread the truth.

"According to the halo effect, the information carried by rumors is confused and unknown to some extent, and users often have less information in the case of information asymmetry. Therefore, when the source of information has a high degree of credibility for the user, individuals tend to ignore the judgment of the content of the information itself." [5] In the initial stage of the outbreak of public emergencies, many false information is spread under the guise of well-known experts and authoritative figures, and then ferments into a public opinion storm. However, it should also be noted that the majority of netizens and audiences have an urgent need for authoritative information. Based on this understanding, in order to improve the credibility and authority of documentaries, make them more effective in communication, and eliminate the adverse effects of false and negative news on public opinion and the panic effect on ordinary people, it is particularly necessary to send the rational voice of opinion leaders and authoritative experts. Therefore, "The Front Line" has conducted in-depth tracking, shooting and documentary interviews with dozens of authoritative experts and front-line doctors, including Academician Wang Chen, President of the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences, Academician Qiao Jie, President of the Peking University Third Hospital, Professor Liu Zhengyin, Director of the Infectious Disease Department of Peking Union Medical College Hospital. Through recording their treatment of patients and introduction of Corona Virus Disease 2019 prevention measures, the authoritativeness, credibility and scientificity of the film have been greatly improved.

### 3. The self-positioning of mainstream value and news construction

The occurrence of emergencies such as the Corona Virus Disease 2019 outbreak is not only a test of the social governance ability and emergency response ability of governments at all levels in China, but also a test of the mainstream media's ability to respond to and guide public opinion. As an audio-visual form with both news attributes and film and television art attributes, documentaries should make a difference in taking social responsibility, spreading mainstream values and giving full play to the ability of news construction.

In recent years, the documentary produced by mainstream media has changed the traditional propaganda mode of "I say, you listen" in traditional theme documentaries, which "fits the current national political communication and the public's strong desire for the country's prosperity and the people's strength, and the national consensus, through the expression of mainstream ideology and the display of the national image, presents a commanding discourse commanding point"[6], showing the appearance and characteristics of "new mainstream documentary". For "The Front Line", the more targeted mainstream value is embodied in "Grasp the leading role and strengthen the positive energy on the Internet. Strengthen the tracking, research and judgment of public opinion, take the initiative to speak out and guide positively, strengthen the integration of communication and interaction, and let the positive energy always fill the cyberspace." [7] Therefore, in the film, there are not only calm records of facing the reality, but more stories that bring hope and confidence to the audience by showing the doctor's help to the pregnant woman with Corona Virus Disease 2019 to give birth to a new life, the moving confession of the recovered patient to the doctor in Wuhan Leishenshan Hospital, the warmth of the doctor and the patient in the module hospital, and the cooperation of the experts in the emergency room to save the patients on the verge of death. The humanistic feelings of "the four seasons rotate and life continues" are also vividly reflected in the film.

In the outbreak stage of public emergencies, due to the loud voices and the complexity of information in the public opinion field, negative news is more likely to attract attention and cause transmission and spread, resulting in the spread of negative and panic emotions. Therefore, it is more necessary to guide constructive news to provide the audience with emotional relief channels and confidence to overcome difficulties. In the creation of "The Front Line", the following principles are followed: first, the members of the creative team understand the scientific Corona Virus Disease 2019 prevention knowledge and the development process of the Corona Virus Disease 2019 through contact with the central medical team for Aid to Hubei, the doctors from other provinces and regions and the local medical staff in Wuhan, and gain positive propagandist psychology on the basis of their firm confidence in defeating the Corona Virus Disease 2019. In the shooting, they objectively record the difficulties in the Corona Virus Disease 2019 prevention and control, and look at the progress of the Corona Virus Disease 2019 with a calm lens, which not only has the care of realism, but also has the judgment of seeking truth from facts; second, the background and tone of the documentary are bright and positive. No matter the shooting object, the story case or the shooting scene are chosen, they are not aimed at attracting attention, rendering suffering, or pursuing ratings, but based on showing the selfless and fearless of the front-line medical staff, the unity of the whole nation, and the tough dedication of the Wuhan citizens. Pass on the positive aspects of the fight against Corona Virus Disease 2019 to the audience, showing the courage, wisdom, and strength of humanity in the face of difficulties and challenges, thereby inspiring positive emotions and uplifting spirits among the audience; third, the foothold is located in "promoting public discussion, bridging social rifts and promoting social collaboration" [8] and other aspects. The film crew took a huge risk to go deep into the front line of the Corona Virus Disease 2019, answering the doubts of the audience in the form of pictures. The audience participates in film discussions through bullet screens and other means, and conducts real-time exchanges and discussions with other viewers, enhancing the interactivity of the viewing experience and helping the audience better understand and accept the information and cultural values conveyed by the film. This gives the film itself more meaning.

#### 4. Narrative Methods of Direct Film and Objective Presentation

As we all know, "authenticity" is the first attribute of documentaries, and it is also the foundation for documentaries to become "a national photo album" and a window to look back at historical events. However, in the development process of Chinese documentaries, the cognition of the presentation means of documentary authenticity is gradually deepened. The birth of documentary since the founding of New China directly inherited the documentary creation concept and production mode of the former Soviet Union. For a long time, the Gleason model, visualized political theory, picture with commentary, position preset and theme first were the only way to create documentaries. Especially for documentaries broadcast through mainstream media, due to their strong ideological content, mission of propaganda and education, and the need to reach the general public, they rely heavily on narration and images to complete the construction of meaning and convey ideas.

However, the final form of the documentary "The Front Line" abandoned the commonly used and widely accepted commentary form, and adopted the direct film method that completely relies on the scene shooting images and the simultaneous sound recording to achieve the image establishment. The reason for adopting such an expression method is closely related to the subjective and objective background in the process of film creation:

On the objective level, after the outbreak of the Corona Virus Disease 2019, the film crew rushed to the front line for shooting at the first time. Post-production and early shooting overlap in time and are separated by thousands of miles in space. The intermittent transmission of image materials makes the post-editing team subject to the reality of emergencies and the rapid development of the Corona Virus Disease 2019, and it is difficult to establish a three-dimensional and detailed comprehensive understanding of the situation in a short time, which makes it difficult to implement the traditional way of writing commentary or shooting plan and then steadily executing the shooting plan.

On the subjective level, the film creation team tends to make bold innovations and exploratory practices in the creation mode and expression methods of documentaries. Especially in the face of such public emergencies, the public opinion field is full of noise and irrational voices for a long time. The film creation team realizes that the traditional "Grierson model" is closed and strongly prepositioned in narrative, which is not conducive to the dissemination of the film in a wider range and acceptance by more audiences. After careful thinking, the film creation team decided to abandon the commentary and adopt the expression method of direct film for creation. "The most important feature of 'Direct Cinema' is the lack of intervention, or non-involvement, in the people and events being narrated. But it is different from the pure 'life stream film', which still requires a complete narrative structure and a dramatic plot." [9] The core shooting concept of the shooting manual formulated by the shooting team of The Front Line is never to interfere with the development process of the event, and never to affect the doctor's treatment and diagnosis and treatment activities due to the shooting. Therefore, the film creation team takes the way of standing guard for a long time, patiently following the shooting and waiting for the right time to obtain image materials during the shooting, which makes the film have the charm of in-depth observation and the value of extremely close to the truth of the event.

The shooting method of Direct Cinema brings a more objective perspective, but it does not mean that the film should be at the expense of story and watching. In fact, due to the use of such a presentation method, the film is more open and effective in communication, and also encourages more audiences to think through watching the film, and then trigger in-depth discussion. At the same time, Because of the use of long-term surveillance shooting method, the film creation team captured a large number of unexpected live materials. For example, in the process of photographing the 10,000 family banquet held by Baibuting community, which accommodates thousands of community residents, the film creation team encountered Zhu Peijun, an 80-year-old retired nurse from Wuhan Union Hospital. Out of professional sensitivity, the film creation team decided to change the original plan and started to track and shoot Zhu Peijun. It truly recorded the story that

because her daughter was a doctor in Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, she had to go to buy medicine alone. It deeply showed the moving scenes of the people from all walks of life in Wuhan self-restraint, self-isolation and cooperation in fighting the Corona Virus Disease 2019, which moved countless audiences.

## **5. Speech Methods of the Grand Background and Individual Perspective**

The documentary "The Front Line" takes the public emergency of the Corona Virus Disease 2019 sweeping China and the world as the background, it truly records the real state of Wuhan, which is in the vortex of the epidemic, after the outbreak of Corona Virus Disease 2019, showing its great test for our country and nation, and then showing the patriotic spirit, the national will and the magnificent power of cohesion of public opinion in the national war against the Corona Virus Disease 2019. The film shows the spirit of the whole nation, united as one, never saying success without victory, and depicts the touching story of the medical staff in white armor going backward to against the Corona Virus Disease 2019. In terms of creative theme, the film upholds the national will, embodies mainstream ideology, highlights the national image, and eulogizes patriotism. At the same time, the film adheres to the unity of ideological and artistic elements, takes the outbreak of the Corona Virus Disease 2019 as the narrative field, and through the characters and stories in the fight against the Corona Virus Disease 2019, the whole film is structured and runs through, promoting the evolution of the story and writing the fate of the characters. Starting from the typical characters at multiple levels, through thrilling scenes and gripping structures, the film tells the story of twists and turns and life on the line.

The documentary "The Front Line" introduces the concept of new historicism into the creation, and at the same time, in the grand narrative background field and the narration of authoritative experts and scholars, more vivid characters and typical stories are integrated into the film. As a cultural trend of thought, the basic theory of new historicism is "intertextuality". New historicist scholars point out that "history is full of faults, and history is composed of discourse"[10]. Because of the high emphasis on the historical "intertextuality" of the new historicism, it believes that the formation of historical facts is composed of a variety of complex discourse narrators. In the nearly 40 cases shown in the whole film "The Front Line", more are the enthusiasts who set up the public welfare volunteer team, the express boy who picks up and delivers doctors to and from Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, the grass-roots cadres who still stick to the front line of the community under pressure, the ordinary migrant workers who donate all their income, the intubation team members who fight day and night in Leishenshan Hospital, and the medical work that comes from all over the country. They are doctors, nurses, patients, volunteers, express boys, policemen, community residents, ferry drivers, grass-roots staff, and ordinary Wuhan citizens. They have different images and professions, but they are all fighting in the front line of the fight against the Corona Virus Disease 2019. Through these characteristic characters, with one or a magnificent, or vivid, or ordinary individual lives, they form the life groups in the grand picture of fighting the Corona Virus Disease 2019, and show the big pattern, era and feelings reflected behind them. In this way, "The Front Line" shows the big realm through the little people and reflects the grand background by relying on concrete events, making the film more artistic tension and emotional appeal.

## **6. Conclusion**

Due to time constraints, technical limitations and documentary ethical regulations, "The Front Line" also has problems such as different narrative styles, limited story development and insufficient in-depth exploration in the final image. However, as a panoramic documentary about China's fight against the Corona Virus Disease 2019, the film crew faced unknown risks and did not shrink from difficulties in order to record the most authentic story after the outbreak of Corona Virus Disease 2019. The film crew went deep into 7 hospitals and 4 mobile field hospitals in Wuhan,

followed the lives of 18 medical assistance teams including the National Medical Team to Hubei and many ordinary Wuhan citizens, and better completed the mission and responsibility of the documentary "painting the portrait of China in the era and resonating with the world". A lot of exploration and attempts at the creative level of the film have also produced good social effects and feedback recognition from the audience, and triggered the audience's reflection and discussion on social issues. As a historical image archive of major public emergencies, and witnessed the process of China's fight against the epidemic, showing the world China's ability and image in dealing with public emergencies. The film's creative experience and success or failure also provides reference for similar theme creation and peer exploration practice.

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