

Research on the Emotional Communication Mechanism of Digital News

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Abstract

As emotional communication gains prominence in digital news production, scholars have increasingly re-examined its relationship with news objectivity. This study investigates how digital technology transforms emotional communication mechanisms, particularly focusing on their narrative and mobilization strategies. Through case analysis and sentiment analysis of 295 award-winning works from the China News Award, the research identifies key mechanisms: voice narratives and positive emotional rhetoric that cultivate specific atmospheres, alongside empathy, personalization, and immersive mobilization that expand audiences' "emotional imagination."

On a practical level, emotional communication is reshaping digital journalism by profoundly influencing production, circulation, and audience engagement. Theoretically, it broadens the epistemological and methodological scope of digital journalism, offering guidance for the industry to evolve toward a "human emotional civilization."

Keywords: digital news, emotional communication, emotional turn, emotional communication mechanism

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

With the rapid advancement of digital technology, emotional factors have become increasingly central to information dissemination and news production, prompting extensive scholarly exploration of emotional communication theories. Traditionally, news reports adhered to frameworks emphasizing objectivity, systematically excluding emotional elements to ensure fairness and accuracy (Robinson, S., & Culver, K. B. 2019). However, with the emergence of digital media, emotional narratives in journalism have undergone a significant shift—from "implicit" undertones to "explicit" articulations—marking a pivotal evolution in news reporting practices (Li & Ren, 2023).

Historically, emotional communication has subtly influenced journalism, exemplified by the "interesting value" sought by audiences. Award-winning news pieces illustrate how emotional strategies enhance social value recognition. For instance, disaster reporting that empathetically portrays victims' emotions does not compromise objectivity but instead fosters public understanding and societal consensus. Such approaches, rooted in humane reporting, promote alignment across societal strata while upholding journalistic integrity (Hou, 2023).

In the digital age, emotion has become a cornerstone of public communication, reshaping how audiences engage with societal issues. Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) emphasizes that media technology fundamentally alters emotional practices in journalism, driving the emergence of The Emotional Public Sphere. Similarly, Lewis and Saarni (1998) identify three pivotal roles for emotional strategies in news: fostering empathy, facilitating mobilization, and enhancing education. These dimensions infuse journalism with a humanistic spirit, elevating emotion as an integral aspect of news value.

Digital media technology profoundly influences emotional expression, necessitating in-depth analysis of its cultural, social, and institutional implications. Unlike the didactic tone of traditional news, digital journalism incorporates emotional narratives as an essential component of its production practices. Examining how media organizations construct emotional experiences for audiences offers valuable insights into contemporary challenges within the emotional dynamics of the news ecosystem (Tian, 2021).

1.2 Research Objectives

Digital technology has transformed news discourse, reshaped public information consumption habits, and redefined the authority of news through the creation of multifaceted scenarios. In the digital era, influenced by new media competition and the "post-truth" phenomenon, emotional communication has permeated all stages of news production, dissemination, and reception. Understanding the mechanisms of emotional communication is crucial for fostering emotional civilization and aligning media narratives with societal values. The pressing question is: How can mainstream media utilize emotional strategies to enhance the positive impact of news reporting while guiding the public toward embracing core values and identities (Cai et al., 2022)?

The rapid digitalization of the global news industry has catalyzed a paradigm shift, challenging traditional journalistic concepts and offering opportunities for theoretical exploration (Clough, 2008). This study focuses on two key objectives:

RO1: To examine emotional communication mechanisms through the lens of theory, subject, and paradigm. Using the "emotional turn" as a theoretical foundation, the study analyzes the features of emotional communication in the digital news works of the China News Award. It identifies strategies and explores the narrative and mobilization mechanisms that shape emotional communication in digital news.

RO2: To assess the risks and propose adjustment strategies for pervasive emotional communication. By reflecting on potential pitfalls, the study suggests practical measures to define boundaries and scales for emotional communication, ensuring ethical and impactful media practices in the digital era.

1.3 Research Significance

First, clarifying the relationship between the concept of journalistic objectivity and emotional tendencies in news reporting is essential for defining the boundaries of emotional communication. With the rise of social media, emotional elements in news have become increasingly prominent, drawing significant attention from researchers. However, the interplay between "emotion" and journalistic objectivity remains insufficiently understood. This study focuses on the phenomenon of emotional communication in digital news, analyzing the concept of "emotion" through the lens of objectivity. Such exploration will aid practitioners in establishing clearer boundaries for emotional communication, enabling the news industry to evolve in alignment with "human emotional civilization" (Chang, Jiang, & Tian, 2021). Moreover, this effort holds constructive significance for fostering a healthy news ecosystem and maintaining a balanced public opinion environment.

Second, addressing the challenges of emotional communication in the digital era is pivotal for advancing journalism theory and paradigms, particularly within the Chinese context. This study delves into the role, status, and value of emotion in news through conceptual analysis, theoretical frameworks, and case studies, while critically reflecting on potential risks such as emotional dislocation, fatigue, and overgeneralization. Investigating the relationship between journalism and emotion, uncovering emotional strategies in news, and examining the role of emotion in shaping public cognition and behavior are crucial for strengthening the influence of mainstream ideology and consolidating the cultural foundation of propaganda. In the digital age, only by embracing the new dimensions of emotional communication can we drive innovation within China's independent knowledge system of journalism and communication studies.

1.4 Literature Review

1.4.1 Current Research Status of Emotional Communication

Jiang and He (2016) defined emotional communication as "people interacting emotionally to achieve identification and meaning-sharing within a specific communication context." From this perspective, emotional communication transcends collective interactions, shaping emotional communities. Similarly, Li (2015) emphasized the integration of emotional cues in media works, enabling audiences to internalize cultural values and establish emotional connections. Zhang (2019) further highlighted emotional communication's role in integrating emotions into news reports to meet audience needs, fostering values, social consensus, and identity.

Solomon (2007) viewed emotion as a behavior, not merely a state of consciousness, while Scheer (2021) proposed the concept of "emotional practice," focusing on mobilizing, naming, and regulating emotional values in media contexts. Hill's work, however, emphasizes the historical arousal of emotions but less on their practical expression, underscoring the importance of emotional practices in connecting diverse domains.

In the digital age, emotional practices extend beyond individual experiences to encompass complex collective behaviors. Scholars such as Chen, Gong, and Cai (2022) categorized digital mourning into "ontological" and "symbolic" forms—the former reflecting personal emotional bonds and the latter, empathetic practices toward symbolic figures or contributions. For instance, Zhou and Zhong (2020) analyzed comments on Dr. Li Wenliang's Weibo, illustrating how

digital platforms facilitate unique collective memory and symbolic mourning practices. These practices often integrate, constructing collective grief grounded in symbolic meanings.

Scholars have also linked emotional communication mechanisms to developments in body theory (Levine & Pizarro, 2004). Influenced by embodied communication and advancements in emotion research, modern understandings emphasize the dynamic interplay of feeling, thinking, emotion, and intuition within mental mechanisms (Jung, 1987). In digital media, emotional communication "overflows" naturally, integrating at individual, group, and societal levels, unhindered by digital media constraints (Döveling, 2018)

1.4.2 Research Status of Digital News

To define digital news, it is essential to begin with its foundation in digital journalism. Scholars often describe digital journalism as a transformative industry, reshaping traditional news through digital technology and modern tools like the Internet, computers, and communication systems. This industry encompasses diverse domains such as digital publishing, online news, mobile multimedia, and digital radio and television. Chang Jiang (2020) emphasized that digital affordance has unlocked the potential of the news industry, fostering a "multi-node network-pan-network system." This system integrates emotion, action, and networks to create new public information relationships. In this digital environment, the emotional connection between news practitioners and users becomes more prominent, with discourse strategies forming emotional bonds between network actors beyond the facts themselves (Wu, Fei, & Tian, 2015). Similarly, Zhang Zhian (2018) described the emerging "digital journalism" ecosystem, characterized by immersive experiences and mixed-media communication. However, this evolution also challenges traditional news values and concepts, introducing significant uncertainties.

Discussions on digital news often revolve around two key frameworks: News Ecology Theory and Actor-Network Theory. Both reflect the "social organism" analytical approach (Zhu, 2022). News Ecology Theory views digital news as an ecosystem involving production, dissemination, and consumption, with elements like audiences, practitioners, and media products playing critical roles (Ji, 2022). In contrast, Actor-Network Theory identifies actors, such as capital, technology, and users, as key agents, facilitating interactions directly or via intermediaries (Chang, Jiang, & He, 2022). These theories drive digital news evolution, creating opportunities for industry transformation. Peng (2021) noted that digital empowerment fosters new communication structures, transitioning from traditional media to blockchain and metaverse platforms. This gradual process reflects both technological advances and societal needs, signaling a paradigm shift in news production.

While current academic discussions on digital news have elevated journalism's academic standing and theoretical foundations, challenges remain. For digital journalism's future, researchers must critically examine news communication through the lens of human emotional needs, addressing the fundamental question of "what constitutes news."

1.5 Research Questions

RQ1: What are the current theoretical frameworks for understanding emotional communication?

RQ2: How do emotional communication mechanisms differ between traditional news and digital news?

RQ3: How is emotional communication practiced in digital news by mainstream media?

RQ4: What are the narrative strategies and mobilization mechanisms of emotional communication in digital news?

RQ5: What are the potential risks of emotional communication mechanisms in digital news?

RQ6: How can the risks of emotional communication in digital news be effectively mitigated?

2. Method

This study primarily adopts qualitative analysis methods, including case analysis and text sentiment analysis. Case analysis serves to extract insights from specific examples, thereby illustrating theoretical concepts and enhancing understanding of the research object. Within this approach, researchers collect data through diverse channels for empirical analysis and synthesize individual case materials to identify general or universal patterns. Accordingly, this paper selects 295 digital news pieces from the 29th to 33rd China News Awards (2019–2023) to conduct a comprehensive analysis of emotional communication in mainstream media. By examining typical cases, the study aims to elucidate how mainstream media employ emotional communication strategies to foster emotional resonance, ultimately using these cases to summarize the common features of emotional communication and uncover the structural dynamics underpinning emotional discourse.

The study also employs sentiment analysis to explore the emotional dynamics embedded within digital news content. The ROST Chinese Word Frequency Analysis software is utilized as the primary analytical tool. A custom sentiment

lexicon was developed by integrating existing resources, such as the Chinese Sentiment Dictionary and Hownet, with additional terms tailored to the dataset's unique linguistic characteristics. Sentiment keywords were categorized into three distinct groups: positive (e.g., praise, inspiration), negative (e.g., criticism, sadness), and neutral (e.g., factual, balanced). This classification was guided by semantic analysis and contextual relevance to the themes prevalent in digital news narratives. The analysis process combined automated sentiment tagging with manual validation. The ROST software identified sentiment terms across the dataset, and trained coders reviewed and refined a subset of annotations to resolve contextual ambiguities. Inter-coder reliability was rigorously assessed using Cohen’s Kappa, achieving a strong agreement score of 0.85, which affirmed the consistency of the coding process.

The dataset comprised 295 digital news articles spanning the 29th to 33rd China News Awards. Preprocessing steps included tokenization, removal of stop words, and extraction of high-frequency sentiment terms to ensure a clean and analyzable dataset. Statistical analyses were conducted to identify patterns and variations in sentiment usage. Descriptive statistics provided an overview of sentiment distributions, while one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to compare the use of sentiment rhetoric across different media types, including party media, market-oriented media, aggregated platforms, and portal websites. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons further identified significant differences between media types, offering valuable insights into how emotional strategies vary across these contexts. This systematic approach not only deepens our understanding of emotional communication in digital news but also establishes a robust framework for analyzing its narrative mechanisms and impact on audiences.

3. Results

With the rapid development of media convergence, the construction of emotional discourse in news media is accelerating. Emotional communication has become a core aspect of news practice, reshaping text expression through digital technology.

The selection of digital news works from the China News Award as the research object is based on two key reasons: First, as the most authoritative national journalism award, it reflects the developmental achievements and leading role of Chinese journalism. Second, these award-winning works represent diverse fields such as economy and culture, providing rich, convincing case studies for examining emotional communication. Compared with traditional news, digital news is more interactive and employs technical tools to evoke audience emotions, making it more engaging and impactful.

This chapter analyzes the emotional communication mechanisms and value orientation in these award-winning digital works. By examining these works, the study aims to provide new insights into the theoretical and practical development of emotional communication in digital journalism.

3.1 Award Distribution Across Categories

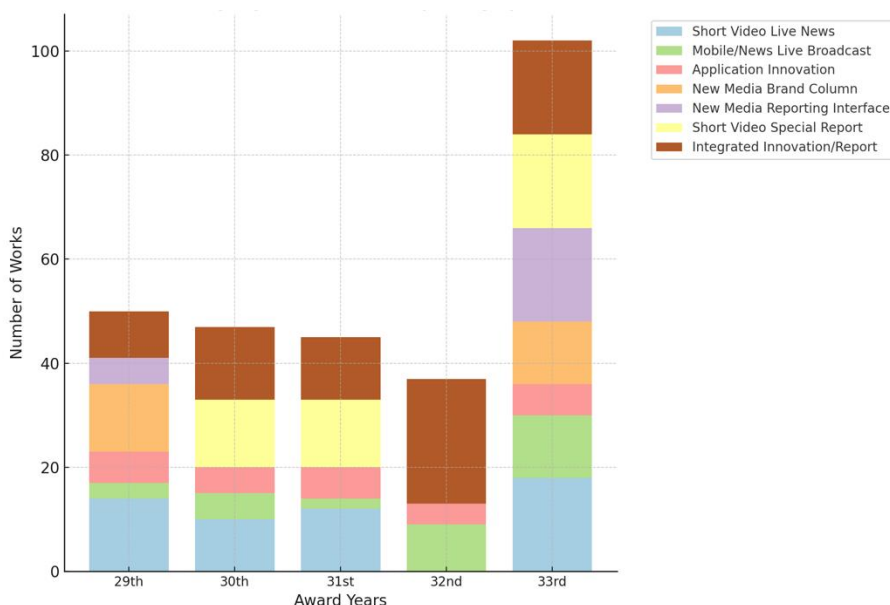


Figure 1. Categories and quantity of digital journalism works in China

Since the establishment of the award column for digital news works at the 28th "China News Awards", the award-winning selection of digital news can be divided into six categories, including new media reporting interface,

integrated innovation/reporting, mobile/news live broadcast, short video live news, new media brand columns, and short video special reports. This study collected digital news works of the China News Awards from 2019 to 2023 from the official website of the China Journalists Association. After excluding blank columns and withdrawn articles, a total of 295 news works were obtained. The specific distribution is shown in Figure 1.

3.1.1 Short Video News: Innovation and Interactivity

Short video news, a prominent category in the China News Award Digital News section, encompasses micro-documentaries, original short videos, sand painting animations, and documentary-style Vlogs. Representative works include the 32nd News Documentary "The Elk Returning to the Yangtze River" and the News Cartoon "Shibadong Village: On the Road to Happiness." These productions creatively depict real-life stories, blending innovative visual techniques with engaging narratives.

Short video news exhibits key features such as concise storytelling, approachable content creation, and robust dissemination capabilities. Its high interactivity fosters widespread audience engagement, making it a dominant and impactful format in digital journalism. This form of news production demonstrates how creative integration of multimedia elements can enhance public understanding and participation.

3.1.2 Live News: Mobile Live Broadcast and Real-Time Dissemination

Live news leverages digital technology to report and broadcast events in real time. This approach, characterized by "mobile live broadcast" and "real-time dissemination," offers several advantages. It enables users to access and participate in news coverage anytime and anywhere, significantly enhancing the convenience of information dissemination. Moreover, live news provides audiences with an enriched interactive experience, allowing real-time engagement through live video streams.

For instance, Hangzhou TV's comprehensive channel introduced a "panoramic live broadcast + 5G" solution, exemplified by the news production "Directly Witnessing the First 9-Hole Full Opening of the Xin'anjiang Reservoir Flood Discharge." This innovative approach delivered a seamless and immersive viewing experience, highlighting the potential of live news to combine technological advancements with audience-centric interaction.

3.1.3 Long Picture News: Comic Strip News

Long picture news provides a compelling sense of presence and impact, meeting the audience's visual consumption needs by combining images with concise summaries. This approach vividly and intuitively presents news content, enhancing its readability and engagement.

For example, Fujian Daily's production "Xia Dang Starts 'One-Click Beauty'! You Come to Help Her Change It" creatively reimagines old photographs based on geographical mappings. It highlights the bright prospects of poverty alleviation and rural revitalization, effectively using visuals to communicate a transformative narrative. Such works exemplify the potential of long picture news to convey complex stories with clarity and emotional resonance.

3.1.4 Interactive News: H5 News

H5 technology, as an advanced interactive platform, integrates multimedia elements such as audio, video, images, animations, and 3D scenes to create a more engaging and immersive experience for users. Through H5 news, users not only consume information but also gain extended insights through interactive content.

For example, "Written Place of Revolutionary Poetry, New Chapter of Poverty Alleviation by the Army", developed by the Liberation Army Daily Client, leverages the H5 framework to immerse audiences in a vivid and interactive digital environment. This approach significantly enhances user participation and interactivity, earning widespread social acclaim.

3.1.5 Immersive News: VR News, 360-degree Panoramic Image News

Immersive news transports audiences into a hybrid virtual-reality news environment, providing an innovative visual experience. This format utilizes cutting-edge technologies such as 3D modeling, virtual reality data, and MG animation to present complex information in a tangible and interactive manner. Audiences can virtually explore every detail of the event, making the news experience more vivid and personal.

For instance, Xinhua News Agency's "Large Interactive Hand-Painted Scroll: A Brief History of Huaihe Zhuangtai for 40 Years" employs mobile-based technology and artistic hand-painted visuals to celebrate four decades of reform and opening-up. By seamlessly blending technology with storytelling, it creates an engaging narrative that resonates deeply with its audience.

3.2 Measurement of Emotional Factors in Digital News Works of China News Awards

The integration of emotional elements is a defining feature of digital news, enhancing comprehension, evoking resonance, and stimulating critical thinking. Emotional expressions amplify public opinion guidance, making news language more vivid and impactful. By analyzing these emotional factors, researchers gain insights into the strategies of news communication.

Building on Chen et al. (2019), this study evaluates emotional rhetoric—praise, exclamation, and negation—as key metrics for emotional intensity in news texts. Using emotional dictionary analysis and machine learning, the study quantified emotional rhetoric in award-winning digital news from the China News Awards over the past five years. A one-way ANOVA compared rhetoric across media types.

Resampling ensured balanced topic representation from winning media units, categorizing emotional rhetoric into four media types. Randomly selecting 25 works per category enabled a focused analysis of emotional rhetoric patterns, revealing strategic variations across diverse media platforms.

Table 1. Sentiment Rhetoric Usage Across Media Types

Media Type	Praise Mean	Praise SD	Praise CI	Interjection Mean	Interjection SD	Interjection CI	Negative Mean	Negative SD	Negative CI
Party Media	4.24	3.25	[3.89, 4.59]	1.31	1.01	[1.19, 1.43]	0.14	0.21	[0.12, 0.16]
Market-Oriented Media	3.15	2.17	[2.88, 3.42]	1.95	1.54	[1.78, 2.12]	1.05	0.86	[0.94, 1.16]
Portal Websites	2.47	2.46	[2.11, 2.83]	1.25	0.98	[1.13, 1.37]	0.28	0.47	[0.22, 0.34]
Aggregated Platforms	4.06	3.12	[3.72, 4.40]	1.78	1.33	[1.62, 1.94]	2.93	1.32	[2.75, 3.11]

As shown in Table 1, significant differences in the use of praise rhetoric across media types were observed, highlighting the distinctive emotional strategies employed by each group. Party media demonstrated the highest frequency of praise rhetoric, aligning with their focus on positive narratives to support ideological agendas. Aggregation platforms followed closely, while market-oriented media and portal websites exhibited significantly lower levels of praise rhetoric, reflecting their tendency to prioritize neutrality or critical perspectives to cater to diverse audiences. These patterns underscore how editorial goals influence the rhetorical choices across different media types.

3.2.1 Praise Rhetoric

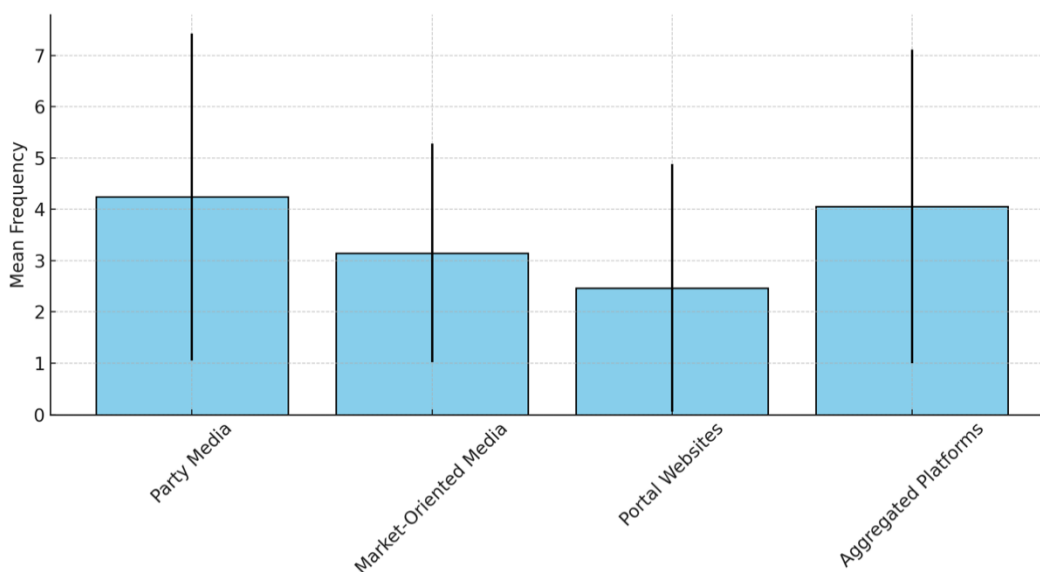


Figure 2. Mean Praise Rhetoric Usage Across Media Types

These findings are summarized in Figure 2, which visually highlights the significant differences across media types through a bar chart, illustrating the higher frequency of praise rhetoric in party media compared to other media types. Such insights underline the strategic role of emotional rhetoric in shaping public perceptions and influencing audience engagement.

3.2.2 Interjection Rhetoric

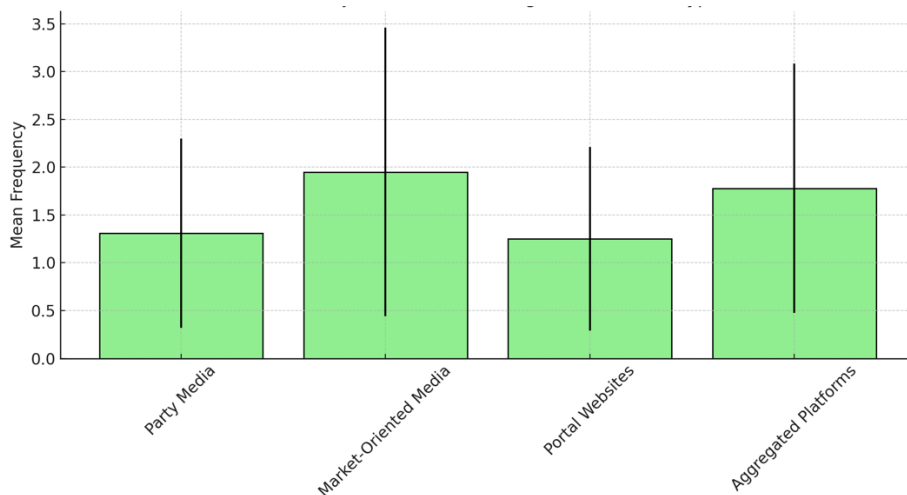


Figure 3. Mean Interjection Rhetoric Usage Across Media Types

Interjection rhetoric demonstrates significant variability across media types, reflecting their distinct communication strategies. As summarized in Table 1, market-oriented and aggregation platform media exhibit higher usage of interjections, leveraging them to evoke emotional resonance and engage audiences. In contrast, party media and portal websites adopt a more restrained approach, aligning with their institutional roles and formal communication styles. These findings highlight how different media types strategically use rhetorical techniques to cater to their editorial objectives and audience expectations. Figure 3 visually underscores these differences, showcasing the varying rhetorical strategies across media types.

3.2.3 Negative Rhetoric

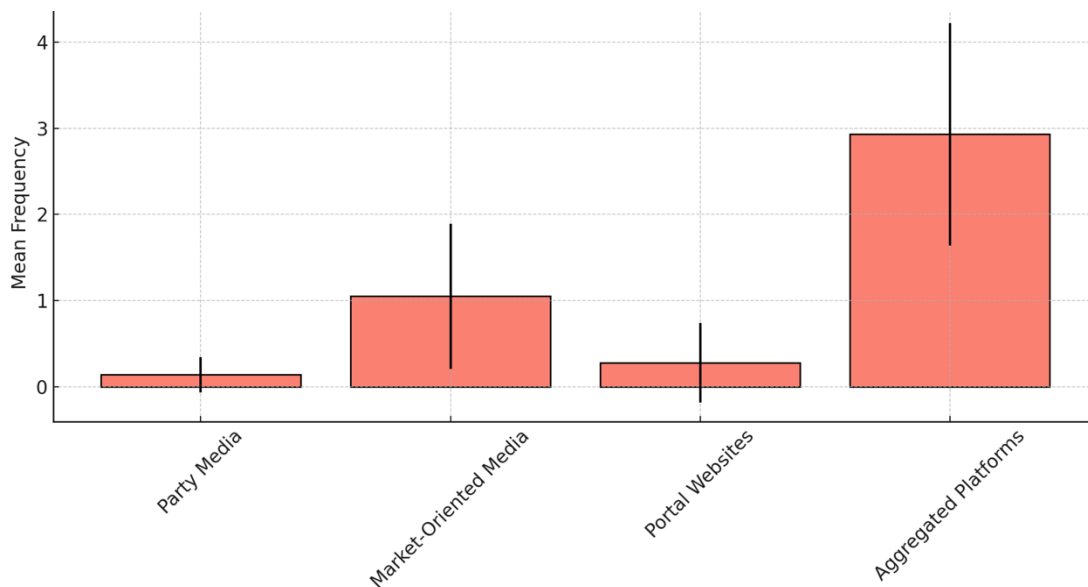


Figure 4. Mean Negative Rhetoric Usage Across Media Types

Negative rhetoric varies significantly across the four media types, as shown in Table 1. Aggregation platforms exhibit the highest levels, leveraging sensationalism to attract attention and drive engagement. In contrast, party media maintain a restrained tone, prioritizing political neutrality and ideological alignment. Portal websites adopt a more balanced approach, minimizing negativity to appeal to a broader audience.

These differences reflect distinct editorial strategies, with each media type tailoring emotional rhetoric to align with its objectives and audience expectations. Figure 4 visually highlights these variations, offering a clear comparison of rhetorical strategies.

3.3 Technological Innovations in Digital News

Digital technology, as the driving force behind media integration, provides a robust infrastructure for merging news production and fostering a multi-discourse system. Zhan and Zhu (2021) analyzed the technological innovations in selected works from the 28th to 31st China News Awards Media Convergence Awards. Building on this research, this study incorporates technical applications from the 32nd and 33rd China News Awards to expand and refine the analysis.

Table 2. The Part of new media technology of China News Award digital news works

Technology Application	Name	Presentation Format	Award Year
AR, VR, MR, Digital Virtual Scenes	6397 km of Guardianship	Interactive Infographics	30th
	Yangtze River Economic Belt Ecological Environment Report	Interactive Infographics	33rd
SVG Interactive Infographics	50 Years, Look at China's Answer Sheet!	H5	32nd
	Happiness Photo Gallery	H5	29th
	Small Healthy Life in the Phone	H5	32nd
AI (Artificial Intelligence), Fusion Creation	This Qingming Festival, Help Families Find Martyrs	AI	32nd
	Peak Witness: 2020 Zhufeng Summit Measurement	Mobile Live Broadcast	31st
	The Fourth Dimension: See the 'Seeds of Wealth' Grow	Microvideo + AI	32nd
	Technological Innovation Leading the Future"	Data News Special	33rd
Satellite Sensing, Photography, Digital Painting	Through the River, Thousand-Year Old Villages' Joys	Mobile Broadcast + Drone	29th
	Solo Flight! Fire Dragon Lantern Live Broadcast	Drone	31st
	China's Poverty Alleviation Panorama	Data Visualization	33rd
Short Video, 3D Projection, Human Reporting	Golden Dragon Vlog of Shibadong: After Poverty Relief	3D Projection	30th
	Data 70 Years: Visualized Data News Short Video Series	Short Video	30th
	Comprehensive Well-off Final Year	All-media Special	33rd

In Table 2, technologies such as 3D projection modeling, artificial intelligence (AI), and virtual reality (VR) represent key breakthroughs in converged news innovation. Additionally, the application of CG and SVG technologies highlights the "technical affordances" that empower the news industry with enhanced cross-media capabilities, interactivity, engagement, and content aggregation (Chang, Jiang, & Tian, 2020).

China News Award digital works enhance narratives by blending text and visuals, enabling intuitive understanding of news events. For instance, the 29th award-winning piece, *Spanning 40 Years, the Car of 2019 is Coming*, utilizes hand-painted street scenes to reconstruct historical moments, effectively combining text and imagery for a fresh narrative approach.

Sound elements significantly contribute to digital news storytelling, immersing audiences through synchronized audio, character speech, animation effects, natural sounds, and background music (Wang, H., & Li, J., 2021). A prominent example is the 30th award-winning piece, *50 Years, Look at the Answer Sheet Submitted by China!*, which integrates era-specific music with news content, creating a compelling auditory experience.

H5 technology further elevates audience engagement, offering seamless interaction with news content. The 32nd award-winning work, *Answerer*, demonstrates this by integrating H5 with multimedia, including one long video, five short videos, and 29 picture books, to produce an emotionally engaging micro-animation.

Video and animation techniques provide an immersive grasp of news narratives. *Shibadong Village: On the Road to Happiness*, a 32nd award-winning work, exemplifies this by combining comic-style storytelling with ideological depth,

informative content, and artistic expression. The piece vividly portrays the village's transformation and highlights the visionary leadership driving its success.

3.4 Statistics of Award-winning Units and High-frequency Words of Digital News Works of China News Awards

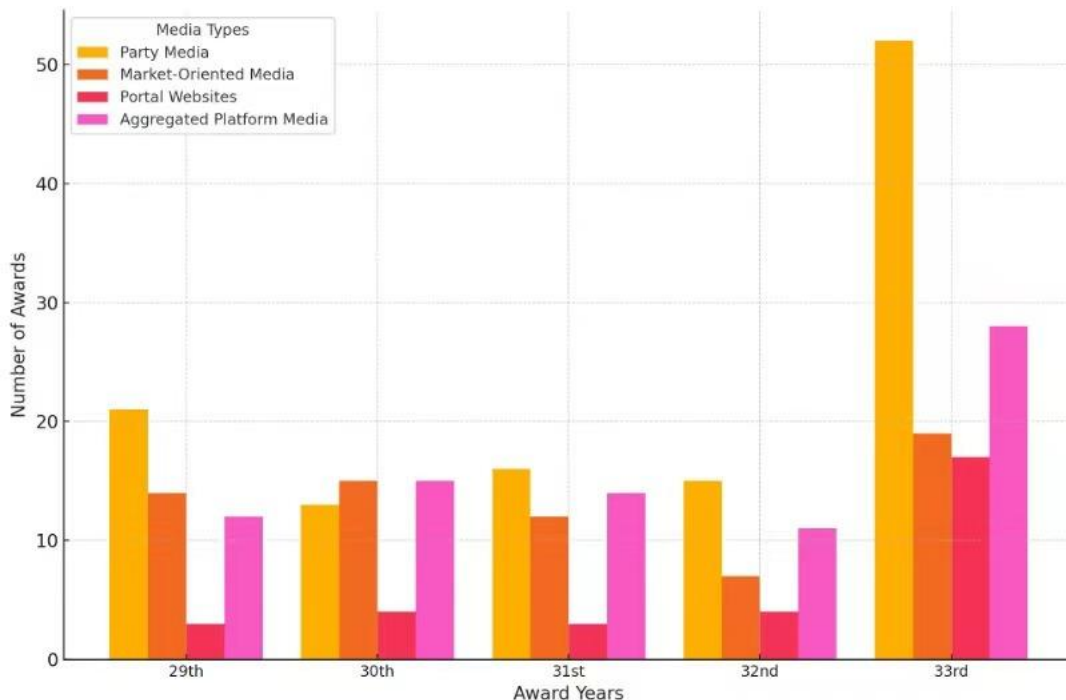


Figure 5. Award Distribution Across Media Types (29th to 33rd Awards)

This section provides preliminary statistics on the publishing units of the digital news works from the China News Awards, offering insights into the evolving layout of integrated media development. As shown in Figure 5, data from the China Media Group indicates that Party media represent the highest proportion of award-winning works, followed by aggregation platforms, market-oriented media, and portal websites. Notably, the number of awards garnered by Party media and market-oriented media has steadily increased in recent years. This trend highlights the Party media's leadership in advancing China's media convergence strategy. Major outlets like CCTV, People's Daily, and Xinhua News Agency have leveraged their institutional advantages to strengthen the communication power, influence, and credibility of mainstream media.

Meanwhile, aggregation platforms, market-oriented media, and portal websites, driven by advancements in media convergence, have also begun establishing comprehensive all-media communication systems through technological empowerment. This reflects the growing diversification and technological sophistication within China's media landscape.



Figure 6. High-Frequency Words in Digital News Works

The high-frequency words reveal the focal points of the emotional discourse construction mechanism in the China News Awards. Based on the latest list of award-winning works from the China Journalists Association, this study identified 295 digital works awarded at the 29th to 33rd China News Awards. The comments accompanying these works were manually curated and processed using ROST Chinese word frequency analysis software. To enhance segmentation accuracy, a second round of word frequency analysis was conducted. The final high-frequency word results from the annual comments are presented in Figure 6.

Through an analysis of high-frequency words in the award-winning digital news works from the China News Awards, two key patterns emerge. First, these works prominently showcase themes of the times, underscoring the responsibility of news media to capture the societal pulse. For instance, recurring motifs such as “national unity,” “poverty alleviation,” and “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese dream” reflect core socialist values. These themes highlight the alignment of news narratives with contemporary societal priorities.

Second, the consistent use of positive and empowering language, including terms like “great,” “struggle,” “open,” “new era,” and “spirit,” imbues these works with emotional resonance and impact. Such language not only enhances the communicative power of the news but also strengthens its capacity to inspire and mobilize audiences.

3.5 Narrative Mechanisms of Emotional Communication

The emotional value in news is conveyed through media such as pictures, videos, and sounds, all of which possess the potential to touch the audience. Ihlebæk and Holter (2021) define this concept as “emotional production,” where media content evokes emotions like sympathy, excitement, sadness, or anger. These symbolic elements not only convey cultural significance but also guide audience behavior. Similarly, Du (2018) emphasizes that journalism, rooted in human values, should focus on “people” and use emotions to foster understanding and communication. For instance, digital media has inspired subcultures such as Buddhist culture, Koi subculture, and two-dimensional culture, uncovering emotional values beneficial to mainstream culture.

News media also trigger emotional awakening, referred to as “emotional potentiality” (Yuan, 2022). Symbols, videos, and stories ignite emotional responses, such as a photo of a Syrian refugee child or a video about a personal inspirational journey, both of which deeply resonate with audiences (Barberá-Tomás, Castelló, De Bakker, & Zietsma, 2019). The digital media era amplifies this impact through user-generated content (UGC), professional-generated content (PGC), and cooperative content (PUGC), accelerating the diffusion of emotions (Ren, Liu, & Zhang, 2013).

Emotional diffusion in news operates through three primary characteristics. First, it is unidirectional, as both traditional and digital media consistently “transmit emotion” (Chang, Jiang, & Tian, 2021). Second, it is social, fostering shared emotional experiences during interactions. Lastly, it is situational, influenced by audience feedback and contextual factors. For example, interactive features like comment sections allow journalists to shape audience attitudes effectively. Although seemingly chaotic, emotional diffusion is regulated by societal values and norms. Major crises or events that provoke “moral shocks” often trigger the most powerful emotional responses, driving broader dissemination and engagement (Forman-Barzilai, 2005).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1 Discussion

The findings of this study align with Wahl-Jorgensen's (2020) assertion that emotional communication plays a pivotal role in contemporary digital news narratives. Similar to the concept of emotional public spheres in Western media, Chinese digital news strategically employs emotional communication to foster public engagement and empathy. However, unlike Western outlets that often leverage emotions to polarize opinions or mobilize political action, Chinese media primarily focus on fostering social cohesion and aligning narratives with national priorities. For instance, the frequent use of positive emotional rhetoric in Chinese party media reflects a deliberate effort to promote ideological alignment, contrasting with the diverse emotional strategies observed in market-driven Western outlets such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*.

The socio-political and cultural context of China significantly shapes these findings, as emotional communication in Chinese news aligns with Confucian values emphasizing harmony and collective well-being. While this study highlights unique patterns of emotional mobilization in Chinese digital news, these patterns may not fully translate to cultures with individualistic or adversarial media ecosystems. For instance, the emphasis on positive emotional narratives by party media may be less relevant in societies where media prioritize critiquing power structures. Future cross-cultural studies are needed to determine whether the mechanisms of emotional communication observed here are culturally specific or exhibit universal applicability.

4.1.1 Emotional Generation Schema

The emotional value in news works is conveyed through media such as pictures, videos, and sounds, which inherently possess the potential to engage audiences. Ihlebæk and Holter (2021) describe this phenomenon as "emotional production," wherein media content evokes emotions such as sympathy, excitement, sadness, or anger. These symbolic elements not only reflect cultural significance but also influence audience behavior. Similarly, Du (2018) highlights that journalism, grounded in humanistic values, should center on "people," utilizing emotions as a medium to enhance understanding and communication. For instance, digital media has fostered the rise of subcultures such as Buddhist culture, Koi subculture, and two-dimensional culture, showcasing emotional values that resonate with mainstream audiences.

News media also trigger "emotional potentiality," as defined by Yuan (2022), wherein symbols, videos, and stories evoke deep emotional responses. The digital media era has amplified this phenomenon through user-generated content (UGC), professional-generated content (PGC), and cooperative content (PUGC), all of which accelerate emotional dissemination (Ren et al., 2013).

Emotional diffusion in news operates through three key characteristics. First, it is unidirectional, with both traditional and digital media consistently transmitting emotions. Second, it is inherently social, as shared emotions emerge during interactions. Third, it is situational, shaped by the context of dissemination and audience feedback (Chang, Jiang, & Tian, 2021). For instance, interactive features such as comment sections or entertainment elements allow journalists to shape audience attitudes effectively.

While emotional diffusion may appear chaotic, it is often regulated by societal norms and values. Individuals are more likely to emotionally engage with events of personal relevance or significant societal importance, such as major crises that induce "moral shocks" (Forman-Barzilai, 2005). These events evoke strong emotional responses, driving wider dissemination and heightened audience engagement.

4.1.2 Reconstruction of the Meaning of Digital News and Mobilization of Acceptance

In the realm of digital news, emotional dimensions differ significantly from those in traditional journalism, primarily in two aspects. First, digital news prioritizes topics centered on "contradiction" and "division," enhancing the visibility of debates. This shift reflects evolving professional standards in news production, where the discourse now integrates "exploring emotions" with "presenting facts." Such an approach increasingly influences societal self-identity, especially in specific formats like disaster reporting. Here, emotions—whether sympathy, sadness, or grief—not only connect audiences but also serve as a driving force for collective memory and action. The dissemination of digital news operates as an emotional dialogue between individuals and societal realities, creating an emotional atmosphere rather than merely reproducing objective facts. Through the reconstruction of "practical emotions," digital news fulfills the audience's emotional needs.

From the "acceptance of public emotions" perspective, audiences engage actively with digital news by leveraging emotions as a starting point to construct personal understanding and emotional identification. This process fosters memory creation and deepens connections with digital narratives. Simultaneously, the "mobilization of public emotions" is facilitated by technological advancements and the Internet's infrastructure. By editing real events into

emotionally charged narratives, digital news stimulates public discourse and reinforces the media's role in shaping public spaces. However, achieving a balance between public interest and emotional mobilization is crucial in this process.

The interplay between media and audiences in the digital news ecosystem underpins the construction of an "emotional structure." Technologies such as VR/AR/MR, combined with multimedia formats like short videos, animations, and sound effects, enhance the "sense of presence" and "interactivity" in news content. For example, The New York Times has pioneered collaborations with major sports websites, Twitter, and Facebook to integrate VR/AR/MR into reporting. Their digital product, I Stand The Stadium, features innovations such as rotating Screen Displays, wearable Hydrogen Screens, and Video Cameras, enabling audiences to experience events from a first-person perspective. This immersive approach fosters a relaxed and engaging user experience, thereby reinforcing an emotional structure unique to digital journalism.

4.1.3 Risk Manifestations of the Emotional Communication Mechanism of Digital News

In traditional news professionalism, "emotion" and "objectivity" have often been viewed as mutually exclusive. However, in the digital media environment, emotion has become a central communication strategy. While emotional communication enhances audience engagement, unchecked use can lead to "emotional polarization" and "fatigue," underscoring the need to evaluate its societal impact critically.

The rapid evolution of news media raises concerns about the erosion of public value due to excessive emotionalization. Embedding emotions in news risks distorting facts and undermining credibility. For instance, exaggerated emotional rhetoric, as seen in the Yulin pregnant woman tragedy, fueled misinformation and hindered meaningful dialogue. Conversely, balanced emotional rhetoric, such as in Comprehensive Well-Off Final Year, successfully evoked collective pride while maintaining factual accuracy, showcasing the potential of well-calibrated strategies.

Digital news also promotes the "pan-emotionalization" of public discourse, with adverse effects in two areas. First, the Internet amplifies sensational content aligned with audience expectations, such as "curiosity" or "ugliness" trends. Without timely corrections, such narratives risk spreading misinformation and undermining social cohesion. Second, pan-emotionalization encourages passive "clicktivism" over meaningful action, as noted by Wang (2019) in his analysis of emotional tweets on platforms like Mi Meng's public account.

As information dissemination diversifies, media increasingly prioritize content catering to public emotional needs. In the post-truth era, emotion becomes a selling point, with terms like "touching" or "tears" driving traffic. This commodification reduces news to "fast-moving consumer goods," compromising trust and journalistic integrity. International comparisons highlight contrasting uses of emotion: while the Black Lives Matter movement employs emotional narratives for political mobilization, memorial coverage of Dr. Li Wenliang in China fosters national unity. These cases illustrate how emotional communication shapes public discourse in culturally distinct ways.

Unchecked emotional communication risks triggering "emotional inflation" and diminishing media credibility. While exaggerated strategies attract short-term attention, they often fail to mobilize meaningful public action, eroding trust in mainstream media. Balanced approaches, as demonstrated in successful examples, are crucial to sustaining the integrity and effectiveness of emotional communication in digital news.

4.1.4 Adjustment Path of Emotional Communication Mechanism of Digital News

Journalists should establish a new concept of constructive news to enhance public discourse. The rise of constructive journalism offers a fresh perspective for the news industry, emphasizing positive psychology and problem-solving as reporting goals. By fostering correct news values, constructive journalism encourages public participation in societal affairs and builds a platform for dialogue between the government and the public. Unlike traditional news focused on propaganda, constructive journalism combines emotion and reason to address complex social problems, fostering positive emotions and inspiring meaningful actions.

Digital news practitioners should enhance public news communication by leveraging digital technology to expand emotional narratives. Emotional communication in news must strike a balance, avoiding amplification or distortion that leads to emotional deviation. Diverse emotional expressions should cater to varied audience needs, integrating meaningful emotional elements to foster engagement and positive social impact. For instance, focusing on human-centered storytelling and positive emotions can deepen the audience's connection to the news and enhance their sense of identity and belonging.

For party media, balancing emotional mobilization with objectivity is essential to maintain credibility. Constructive journalism could help engage younger audiences through a combination of problem-solving and emotional storytelling. Market-oriented and aggregation platform media, on the other hand, can enhance user interaction by using data-driven

tools to analyze audience sentiment and adjust emotional tones, avoiding sensationalism and upholding journalistic integrity.

4.2 Conclusion

The rise of digitalization has amplified the role of emotions in news, enabling journalists to effectively convey opinions and emotions through advanced media technologies. The organizational structure built on Internet infrastructure has disrupted traditional ecological rules, positioning the "emotional turn" in digital news as a new narrative framework. As Miyalu and Wang (2022) suggest, this emotional shift can be analyzed through Peters' "Media as Infrastructure" perspective. Understanding digital communication and emotional dynamics among diverse media platforms remains an area for academic exploration. Xia (2021) notes that "mediatization" subtly shapes the social order through "media prototypes," influencing human behavior, cognition, and emotional responses. In this context, emotional communication in news plays a pivotal role in shaping public sentiment and addressing challenges in emotional governance (Dong, 2022).

Chang and Tian (2021) emphasize that emotional governance represents a critical concept for the next generation of digital news. This concept involves not only using emotions to address ethical dilemmas in journalism but also fostering stable relationships between journalists and the profession. By enhancing journalists' motivation to better serve their audience, emotional governance can bridge gaps in public discourse. While Western journalism traditionally emphasizes rationality and objectivity, often sidelining emotions, recent research in emotional sociology and politics has integrated emotions into governance frameworks. In contrast, China's cultural heritage places significant value on emotional education, leveraging it to promote social cohesion and collective progress. Emotional governance is thus integral to rallying public support and advancing societal harmony.

Despite its potential, emotional governance in journalism requires further theoretical development. This study highlights the importance of integrating emotional communication into the broader framework of "social governance," thereby reimagining the professional scope of journalism. However, the theoretical framework of emotional communication in news remains in its infancy, with limited research available for reference. This study focuses on emotional reproduction methods and strategies in digital news, lacking insights into audience perspectives. Future research could explore how audiences perceive and accept emotional narratives, developing more robust metrics to evaluate these interactions. These aspects are essential for advancing theoretical and practical understandings of emotional communication in digital journalism.

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Authors contributions

Li Xiao was responsible for original draft preparation and project administration. Mastura Mahamed and Rosmiza Bidin contributed to reviewing and editing the manuscript. Mastura Mahamed supervised the project and also participated in project administration. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. There are no special agreements concerning authorship in this study.

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