

# Identification by Antithesis and Oppositional Discourse Reproduction in Chinese Space of New Media

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## *Abstract*

In the space of new media, all sorts of new media events which imply oppositional moods are written, presented repeatedly, and therefore form oppositional discourse. Strangers are able to come together as netizens due to their identification by antithesis, and construct an imagined community which allows them to “unite closely” and “speak in one voice”. Based on their imagined community, netizens are able to co-construct discourse presentation. This article argues that the critical step in reproduction of oppositional discourse is the providing of scripts. In order to enhance the tension of oppositional discourse, the events representation needs to be processed with overstating, such as making a scary story. The scripts of new media events are usually written according to a preset imaginative chain of “good people-bad people” under the influence of identification by antithesis.

*Keywords: identification by antithesis, new media, oppositional discourse, reproduction*

## **Introduction**

The discourse of new media has entered a new era with variety. The technology of Web 2.0 has enabled community comments to become the most common form of discourse in the space of new media. The most active period for these community comments is when there is major new media event. If we summarize recent new media events, we find the following hot topics: government officials’ acceptance of bribes, doctor-patient conflicts, and environmental issues. Different narratives of these topics are in competition for dominance of the discourse. Accordingly, the fields of public opinion are swiftly established, which is beneficial for the formation of oppositional identity. The narratives

of unfairness in China represent the public's anxiety as a whole. In the era of Web 2.0, netizens have obtained the right to express their comments in groups. However, the mechanism of free expression causes the spread of oppositional identity in the space of new media. We often notice that when a new media event happens, many different narratives proliferate. Protagonists of the events or other relevant observers often provide their versions of narratives for netizens. In this complex context, if the government or the protagonists do not handle the crisis professionally, the truth of the event can be buried in various lies and errors.

In Chinese space of new media, the free flow of narratives cannot be explained simply as the behavior of "trouble-makers"; it is actually a form of resistance from the fringes of Chinese society. Social scientists often attribute this resistance to an effort to the fight for self-interests among different social groups. However, the social scientists are overlooking the true nature of such resistance (Wang, 2010). Expressing dissatisfaction in the virtual space, which is actually to seek identification and support, is different from real resistant behaviors in society. Initiators of the hot topics generally have the obvious purpose of enlarging their influence and further constructing common beliefs among netizens. Why do resistant discourses become popular more easily in the new media space? When major news events happen, why are narratives by netizens often exaggerated with errors and even lies? In order to answer these questions, we need to borrow theories from rhetoric and social psychology; the ethics of media and communication are not enough to support our analysis. Thus, I will argue that the aforementioned phenomenon is closely associated with the rhetorical theory of "oppositional identification".

Oppositional identity is a term from rhetorical theory, and is similar to the term "resistance identification", which first appeared in Manuel Castells' book *The Power of Identity*. Castells argues that identity is people's source of meaning and experience; he understands identity as a process of constructing meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute or related set of cultural attributes, and is formed by those who are derogated or stigmatized (Castells, 2010, p. 6). McAdam Doug defined a social movement as an organized effort by people who are excluded, which is used to promote/resist innovation in social construction, and contains political participation with unsystematic forms (Doug, 1982, p. 25).

As long as there is dominant discourse in some space, there is the existence of an alternative discourse that resists that dominant discourse to some extent. This type of discourse is called resistant discourse (Liu, 2009; Cox, 2012). Resistant discourse is formed on the basis of the deprivation of localized voices; therefore, it is to challenge the legitimacy of the dominant discourse. The historical background of the origin of such discourse is complicated, and mostly relevant to the mechanism of a democratic society. For example, in the 1980s, in order to resist the phenomenon of major industrial groups manipulating mass media to promote nuclear energy, there were many anti-nuclear voices in Germany and the UK. British scholar John Downing referred to such space as an anti-discourse space (Downing, 1988, pp. 163-181). An anti-discourse space emphasizes

the alternative voices to resist the dominant discourse in order to establish a space to serve specific groups of people and their interests. For example, subcultures utilize body resistance to fight against traditional and conservative culture. In the new media space, the resistant discourse system is established due to the distrust for official mass media, which are controlled by the government. Habitual suspicion and societal anxiety in contemporary Chinese society provides the grounds to cultivate such distrust.

## **Resistant Discourse Reproduction in New Media Space**

Various hidden oppositional identities are repeatedly expressed and reinforced, which finally lead to stereotypes. In oppositional identity, the two oppositional parties are pinned down: good versus bad people, ordinary people versus powerful elites, and poor versus rich people. In this kind of discourse, various social groups are simply separated into two oppositional parties. From the perspective of narratives, it is easier for two oppositional storylines to develop.

In this process, superficially, the producer of the adversarial discourse seems to be the original poster. Yet, every follower of this poster reproduces the oppositional discourse. The original poster provides original material for the reproduction, and others participate in reproducing such discourses through discussion. In the new media space, every time adversarial opinions are expressed, an adversarial discourse is reproduced. It is a reinforcement of a superficial narrative framework.

The reproduction of adversarial discourse has the following features:

### **1. From adversarial readings to the proactive release of information**

In the past, adversarial discourse was mainly produced in the new media space, which consisted primarily of sarcastic comments about the government-controlled media. With the development of smart-phones, *Weibo* (a micro-blogging platform), and *Weixin* (*Wechat*), netizens have become more proactive in terms of releasing information to resist official media, and expressing distrust in those media. As long as there are major news events, the visits to and releases in these new media will significantly increase.

### **2. Swift and emotional comments**

Many Chinese netizens have the desire to enjoy freedom of speech, but they often cannot express their opinions reasonably. They quickly release their comments, emotionally, without sufficiently understanding the truth of the events. In this way, they often tend to define the events predominantly. One of the representative examples is a news event about “a pregnant woman [that] died in surgery”, in August, 2014. The original version in *Weibo* said that “a pregnant woman died naked in surgery, covered with blood, and blood in her mouth, while all the doctors and nurses have gone missing”. Obviously, the dissatisfaction with medical doctors and nurses in the discourse which may mislead the audience is very strong. After its release, this piece on *Weibo* immediately attracted myriads of netizens

and was one of the most popular topics on the platform for several days. Almost all the netizens overwhelmingly criticized the hospital and doctors, triggering a public storm towards the hospital. However, after an objective professional medical investigation, this accident was considered a normal case, rather than a medical error. *Weibo* exercised its defining hegemony to mark this accident as a medical error, claiming that the doctors and nurses should take responsibility.

### **3. Exaggeration to attract attention**

The most common phenomenon in oppositional discourse is where initiators exaggerate the figures of injuries and deaths in order to attract the public's attention. For example, the number of injured in the 2012 fire in Tianjin, and the explosion in Kunshan in 2014, were exaggerated.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the initiators also produce hostile discourses against government officials and their children. For example, in the traffic accident at Hebei University, Qiming Li said that "My dad is Gang Li." Nobody knows when and to whom Li said such kind of arrogant words. The fact is Li's father Gang Li is a deputy chief of public security bureau of Baoding city of Hebei province. Just because of this, the sentence was quoted and emphasized, which implied that the oppositional discourse was produced with an anti-order mindset obviously, and discontent with the government.

For a long time, netizens have had stereotypes about specific social groups. For example, they think that almost all government officials accept bribes. They also think that city inspectors are similar to brigands, whereas medical doctors overlook the value of life. All these stereotypes lay the foundations for the oppositional discourse. Therefore, oppositional identities are developed according to these narrative frameworks. For example, hot topics such as "a traffic policeman lost his gun while having an affair with his female subordinate" and "a female university student accompanied officials for drinks and died due to brutal sexual abuse". In fact, these reports, many of which involved private or public interests, were not true. Some of them were created due to the dissatisfaction with the government, and some of them were created due to nationalism such as in the Diaoyu Island issue that happened in 2012.

We know that in the ecology of the new media, the professionalism of journalism does not exist. The gate-keeping of news is very weak. Although platforms like *Weibo* and *Wechat* have obligation to censor and check the fact, it is really hard for them to discriminate which is true or not. In the face of various sources of information, they do not have enough time to do such kind of work; even if they can do, once the new media events happen in the space of new media, they do not have enough time to deal with it. Therefore, everyone enjoys free speech. Nobody spends time confirming the truth of the news. Exaggerating or even covering the truth has become a common phenomenon. Free from the traditional professionalism of journalism, news stories are no longer produced by the traditional procedures. They are no longer produced for informative communication, but serve as persuasive communication. These sorts of news stories seek attention, and thereby appear as explosive news (a kind of sensational news). If we look at popular new

media events, we find that these stories are delivered through *Weibo*, *Wechat*, and blogs, and thus, become the habitual adversarial discourse in the space of new media. A special phenomenon is that, after serious investigation, most of the events are found to be untrue. However, the oppositional identity never learns the lesson. They come back again and again.

## **Forms of Reproduction of Oppositional Identity**

Production of news stories in traditional journalism is different from that in the space of new media. Although these two practices have similarities, they are very different in terms of purposes and forms. The adversarial discourse is fundamentally a type of low-level resistance from the lower working class in Chinese society. According to their logic of resistance, they would like to fight against society's strong social groups. Therefore, their discourse naturally contains the purpose of competition, in order to control the dominant discourse in society. In the production process, netizens use the prepositioned framework to tell narratives. Since this discourse is not from official sources, it has the instinct to attract public attention, thus becoming diversified.

In the production process of identity, the most important thing is the narrative sources. These sources often contain the purposes of revenge and even conspiracy. Vladimir Propp, a Russian scholar, points out that narratives have various functions, though the number of functions is limited (Propp, 1968). The differences between narratives and non-narratives depend on whether there are any links. "If we only catch one moment of an event without understanding the order of the reasons and results, it is not a narrative" (Berger, 2000, pp. 26-27). How the storyline is developed in the narratives determines the meaning of the adversarial discourse. For example, the death of the pregnant woman linked another narration of the disappearance of medical doctors and nurses, which pointed to a lack of professionalism among them. When narratives are framed within their contexts, the meaning overcomes their specific elements.

Reproduced narratives usually differ from the original versions. For example, a netizen called "heartbroken old man" posted that "a homeless mother died with a three-year-old baby girl due to hunger in Xi'an." This post is a reproduction because the original version of the post was "a homeless mother died with a three-year-old baby girl, who rejected help." The reproduction purposefully omitted the other half of the sentence—"who rejected help". Through the omission, the post became more accusatory. Similar practices are very common in the reproduction of oppositional identity.

Original posters and netizens co-construct the forms and principles of such discourses. The imagined community plays a key role in the communication. They follow the posts and reinforce the interactions. In the example mentioned above, the police officer lost his gun, which was associated with his staying in a hotel with his subordinates. In this way, his loss of the gun had some reasonable explanation. Most of the netizens believe the reason why the police officer lost his gun has something to do with the illicit sexual

relations. When the event had drawn much public attention, and was slowly changed into an entertaining feast, the public's criticism became huge.

In the new media space, various news sources attempt to dominate the power to control the discourse of news events. The most common reproduction is to utilize those topics to talk about something else; the reproducers use news topics to release their dissatisfaction. For example, through circulating news of the death of the homeless woman, netizens expressed their dissatisfaction with the coldness of the government and the so-called experts. In other big news topics, narratives contain the dissatisfaction with the power gap between government officials and ordinary people. Government officials are always the object of criticizing. In the contexts of anti-government sentiments such discourses easily gain popularity and reconfirm the perception that government officials abuse their power.

In the reproduction of truths in news events, the process is very complicated. In order to attract more attention, netizens often use false information and even make up fake facts. For example, in the traffic accidents in Hebei University, netizens claimed that Gang Li owned more than five pieces of real estate. In the case of Jiaxin Yao homicide, rumors spread online about the litigant Yao's background as part of the second generation of a military or government official. Language can be a symbol of various phenomenon in a society, but it can also be the twisting of a society's various values and beliefs (Ni, 2005). Representation only gains meaning in meta-narratives, grand stories which attempt to associate all the smaller stories floating around. The current meta-narratives in China involve the following themes: anti-government, anti-wealth, and anti-intellectual. Based on these frameworks, the narratives of oppositional discourse often glorify the lower working class in China. For example, in the case of Junfeng Xia homicide, the pictures were not of Xia himself but someone else. Why was the post made like this? It was because netizens believed that Xia did not look like someone from a weak social group. It is not hard to see that this packaging process contains the mindsets of populism.

### **Identification by Antithesis: Motivation for Reproduction of Oppositional Identity**

Oppositional identity is not formed within only a day or two. It is produced from a long-term distrust of the government and dissatisfaction with social reality. When various conflicts are not solved for a long period, habitual doubts and societal anxiety would accumulate. Various types of dissatisfaction and unfairness that already exist in the society become the basis for adversarial discourse. In the new media space, this dissatisfaction is enlarged into widespread public opinion and even Internet language violence. A lot of insults, attacks, and cyber manhunting are based on the dissatisfaction (Chen, 2009, p. 333). The limitless Internet violence is fundamentally a resistance.

In theory, there's only one real version about the event, but usually, in cyber space, different presentations via different media outlets have many different versions. Before

the truths are discovered, narratives are constructed through imagined chains. The new media discourse, due to its wide audience and a framework which pretends to be fair and justified, easily attracts people. Government officials, policemen, doctors, and experts are constructed as the oppositional party to the ordinary public. Post initiators know that in this way they can draw support from many people. Although the communities are invisible, when news events appear, they are able to quickly identify together. British scholar S. Hall points out that in spite of the differences in social class, gender, and race, people identify with positions in construction and are then able to gain meaning from them (Hall, 2003, p. 57).

Why does this happen? According to Kenneth Burke, there are three strategies for identification: identification by sympathy, identification by antithesis, and identification by inaccuracy (Burke, 1998, p. 161). Identification by antithesis seems to be the most common in the new media space, because netizens believe that they have common enemies so that they can unite together. In the space of new media, people often see city inspectors, police officers, doctors, rich persons, and experts such as professors and scholars as their objects of opposition; once an event involving someone from one of the categories listed above takes place, netizens will tend to stand for the vulnerable group, at least at first, and criticize the opposites without regard to who is actually in the right. Patricia Turner believes that social movements development needs to have a common mindset (Turner, 1994, p. 276). The initiation of this common mindset often originates from symbolic news events and their relevant rumors.

In the new media space, there isn't a real political community; the so-called community is an imagined entity. Similar emotions (usually negative emotions such as anger and dissatisfaction) are the links that associate such virtual communities. A nation is an imagined community, as B. Anderson points out, one which is constructed as limited and sovereign (Anderson, 2003, p. 5). Netizens unite because of similar emotions and mindset. They build a struggling "imagined community" for identification by antithesis. Thus, they no longer feel that they are alone, because they can release their emotions and participate in reproduction of oppositional identity. Their strategic framing serves to create an imagined community based on identification by antithesis.

## **Conclusion**

The origin of oppositional identity has its historical background. In the West, many ordinary people want to express their dissatisfaction with politicians. Therefore, their discourses are fundamentally a way of populism. It is a common phenomenon across the world that oppositional identity exists in society. However, a different social system determines the uniqueness of oppositional identity in China. Due to massive numbers of participants, the reproductions of oppositional identities are reinforced again and again. Although there are some positive comments online, many of these discourses express their distrust in governmental media. On the other hand, this reflects that the participants

have a strong sense of citizenship.

With the development of technology facilitated new media, anti-intellectual discourses are becoming more and more popular. Their common themes are anti-expert, anti-government, and anti-wealth. The participants often consider themselves fighters for the public cause; however, in fact, they use rumors and even lies to manipulate the public. These behaviors are not beneficial to the development of the democratic processes in China. The most urgent crisis in online communities is identification through antithesis, which often forms imagined communities and manipulates public opinions. In order to deal with public discourses, it is not enough to manage the mass media. Communication through new media should be considered as a systematic project. The government should make greater efforts toward the transparency of information, so as to build public trust and deal with crises in communication. Only when the social environment is fair and just, will adversarial discourse lose its grounds for development.

### Note

- 1 According to CCTV investigation, 10 people were killed, and 16 people injured in the fire disaster that happened in Ji county of Tianjin in 2012. According to Xinhua News Agency, the Kunshan explosion that happened in 2014 caused 75 people killed, and more than 150 people injured.

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