

Conversation in the News: Comparing News Coverage of Fukushima Water Dispute in AP and CGTN

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Abstract: This research paper examines and compares the coverage of the Fukushima water dispute by the Associated Press (AP) and China Global Television Network (CGTN). The study utilizes framing theory analysis to identify differences arising from biases and priorities in news reporting. The paper analyzes the framing used by both outlets and discusses variations in perspectives on Japan's plan and responsibility. It examines the attributions of different narratives and their impact on the audience in each country. Possible causes for these differences are explored, including geopolitical factors, political polarization, and cultural influences. The findings highlight the significant role of media in shaping public opinion and the importance of understanding the diverse influences that contribute to news coverage. The paper concludes that recognizing these influences and seeking diverse viewpoints is crucial for developing a comprehensive understanding of complex issues. However, it acknowledges the limitations of the analysis and highlights the need to consider editorial biases and commercial interests in news reporting.

Keywords: Fukushima water dispute, framing theory, Associated Press (AP), China Global Television Network (CGTN)

1. Introduction

The massive earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter Scale and subsequent tsunami struck the Northeast Pacific region of Japan on March 11, 2011, which resulted in the leakage of radioactive substance from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. It was the largest industrial disaster in human history since the Chernobyl accident, and the problem of the damaged Fukushima power plant remains an unsolved and ongoing event.

In April 2021, Japan announced plans to discharge the treated radioactive water into the sea from the destroyed Fukushima nuclear plant. This drastic move caused an uproar. The international media continually report updates on the status, and the anticipated effects and consequences. It seems that the Fukushima accident was considered a domestic concern for Japan but now become an international issue.

Media studies encompasses various important terms, such as framing, agenda-setting, and priming. While agenda-setting and priming focus on the choices made by journalists and the decisions of the audience [1], framing takes a different approach. It emphasizes that the way an issue is portrayed in

news reports can significantly impact how it is comprehended by the audience, highlighting the significance of the news story's presentation [2].

British anthropologist Gregory Bateson first used the term “frame” in his book *A Theory of Play and Fantasy* [3], and then American sociologist Erving Goffman [4] fully summarized the framing theory and applied it to the research in the field of cultural sociology journalism and communication. “Frame” refers to the cognitive structure people use to understand and interpret the external objective world, which can help people identify, perceive, confirm, and name an infinite number of facts, and the frame quietly creates a meaningful model for the public to understand things [5]. Frames are derived from the perspectives of journalists who determine what qualifies as newsworthy topics and political reality. They are also influenced by the activities of individuals and groups who promote specific interpretations of issues, as well as by the events and cultural contexts in which they operate [6]. Both political actors and journalists commonly utilize frames to portray political reality.

News frames can impact how citizens comprehend various political issues, including how they interpret issues, form public opinion, and show support for those issues [7][8][9]. Studies have demonstrated that the way news is presented affects how individuals perceive specific issues, as well as how they make behavioral decisions [10][11][12]. Communication scholars observed that audiences, especially those less knowledgeable on a particular subject, are more prone to accepting or aligning with the prevailing interpretations conveyed through media [13]. Framing theory suggests that media outlets can shape public perception of an issue by presenting the information within a particular frame or perspective. Moreover, most previous studies of framing theory have focused on either content (e.g., frames in news) or framing effects.

This paper aims to compare the coverage of the Fukushima water dispute by the Associated Press (AP) and China Global Television Network (CGTN), utilizing framing theory analysis to identify differences arising from their inherent biases and priorities. It analyzes the framing used by these outlets and discusses the differences in perspectives on Japan’s plan and responsibility, then focuses on the discussion of the attributions of different narratives and their impact on the audience of the two countries. Based on a review of previous studies, possible causes of relation with Japan, political polarization, and culture and ideologies are proposed. Comparing the coverage of the Fukushima water dispute by these two news organizations can help to develop a critical understanding of media systems, cultural influences, and the role of media in shaping public opinion.

2. AP and CGTN Coverage on Fukushima Water Dispute

The Associated Press (AP) and the China Global Television Network (CGTN) are two reputable news organizations with distinctive perspectives and focus. AP, an American news agency, is known for its extensive network of international correspondents. While CGTN is the international division of the state media outlet China Central Television (CCTV).

Both news outlets are expected to cover the basics of the Fukushima water dispute, including the decision to release the water into the sea and the potential environmental and health impacts. Yet, they rely heavily on official statements and commentary from experts to support their arguments. The depth of coverage and the viewpoints presented may differ notably. AP is expected to provide a broader range of perspectives, incorporating viewpoints from various stakeholders and governments involved. CGTN may also offer international sources but is less likely to provide the same diversity of perspectives.

To compare the news coverage in AP and CGTN, we can start with the frequency of different frames used in their coverage. It appears that the AP coverage focuses more on the concerns about the environmental impact, the potential impact on Fukushima's image and reputation, and the controversy on the issue.

On the other hand, the CGTN coverage tends to highlight the issue as an obstacle to decommissioning, the search for alternative solutions, and the potential impact on fishermen and opposition surrounding the wastewater release from both local residents and international critics.

AP may provide a neutral insight into ongoing international discussions and cooperation regarding the Fukushima water issue. The coverage may focus on conveying the technical aspects of the issue, and responses from different actors involved, highlighting the global implications.

Comparatively, CGTN may focus more on the opposition to Japan's plan. It could highlight the concerns and protests raised by Pacific Island nations and Japanese fishing communities, emphasizing potential environmental and health risks, to marine life and public health [14].

AP might scrutinize Japan's process of the Fukushima water issue, and the framing might include a broader perspective. Considering international standards, Japan's recovery efforts from the nuclear disaster. Nonetheless, the exact responsibility for ensuring the safe disposal of contaminated water is not addressed.

CGTN's framing may emphasize the potential threats posed by Japan's decision and hold Japan accountable for its actions. The coverage might highlight that interview with dissent, official denial, and obligation and assessment gap in the release plan, implying Japan is not taking sufficient consideration or consulting neighboring countries appropriately.

3. Discussion

In the case of the Fukushima water dispute, it can be seen that certain differences in the framing used by AP and CGTN due to their inherent biases and priorities. Both may have a specific agenda or narrative to promote. The differences can be attributed to geopolitical factors between China, the United States, and the reporting country (Japan), the influence of political polarization, and cultural perspectives.

3.1. Geopolitics

Geopolitics involves analyzing the interplay between geography, power, and international relations [15]. Those considerations often impact the framing of news stories, as news agencies cater to the interests and viewpoints of the countries they represent. Geopolitical rivalries and historical tensions between countries can influence how news agencies frame their coverage.

It is clear that the US is further away from the Pacific Ocean, which is the discharge site, than China. So, it is also plausible that AP remains a balanced approach to reporting. As an independent international news agency, AP aims to provide news coverage that appeals to a global audience [16]. AP may prioritize presenting the analysis that resonates with a diverse set of readers worldwide. On a deeper level, the US maintains strong diplomatic ties with Japan. AP, as an American news agency, may align its coverage with the interests of the United States and Japan, and also may prioritize maintaining good US-Japan alliance relations on the issue. This could result in framing the Fukushima water issue in a way that emphasizes Japan's transparency, adherence to international standards, and the endorsement of its actions by U.S. authorities, enabling them to provide a favorable view of the situation. Its bias might lean towards prioritizing the perspectives of stakeholders like the Japanese government, scientific experts, and international organizations.

Geographically, China is sharing the same ocean with Japan. "Japan's selfish act will transfer pollution risk to its neighbors and surrounding environment," said Li, China's permanent representative to the United Nations. Hence, with a tense heart, CGTN could present a more critical view of Japan's handling of the Fukushima water situation. Coverage may tend to emphasize limitations and deficiencies, concerns regarding the impact on the environment, food safety, or public health. Historically indeed, China has a complex relationship with Japan, tensions have existed

between the two countries due to territorial disputes and historical grievances. CGTN would primarily cater to a Chinese audience and is influenced by the cultural and ideological perspectives prevalent in China [17]. CGTN, a Chinese news agency, may approach the Fukushima water issue with a perspective that raises concerns about potential risks and criticizes Japan's handling of the situation. This framing could be influenced by the ongoing geopolitical dynamics between the two countries.

3.2. Political Polarization

Political polarization refers to distinct political factions with opposing views and ideologies. It has multiple manifestations, wherein consistency reflects the average level of internal consistency between individuals' ideology, affiliation, and specific political beliefs [18]. In the case of the Fukushima water dispute, political polarization could play a role.

Although AP is viewed as a neutral news agency, its reporting can still be influenced by the dominant political atmosphere in the US, potentially leading to biased reporting. For example, anti-nuclear activists may influence their coverage. It is noteworthy that several objections to the planned release are reported, but in an unreasonable way when reporting China's remark. AP writer accused China of seeking to undermine Japan's global standing because of its alliance with the US and the Japanese invasion of China in the last century [19].

CGTN, being a state-owned media outlet, is likely to prioritize the perspective and interests of China and Chinese citizens. The government may have specific objectives in shaping public opinion through CGTN's reporting. The issue might be viewed through the lens of China-Japan relations, with potential nationalist sentiments influencing CGTN's coverage, it aims to influence public opinion and potentially put pressure on the Japanese government. Meanwhile, as it should be, CGTN took countermeasures against AP's inappropriate speech by recording an issue of *Headline Buster*, a particular news program, pointing out AP's irrational attribution.

Political polarization indeed influences the framing used in news coverage. This is because media outlets often cater to specific political ideologies or target audiences, which can result in biased reporting or the use of framing techniques to shape how stories are presented. In a polarized environment, news organizations may frame stories in a way that supports their particular ideological stance or appeals to their audience's existing beliefs. It might lead to the omission of certain perspectives or the amplification of specific narratives, ultimately shaping public opinion. Additionally, the rise of social media and online echo chambers has exacerbated political polarization. People tend to consume news that aligns with their existing beliefs, reinforcing their own biases. This phenomenon puts pressure on news organizations to provide content that appeals to the preferences and expectations of their target audience. This selective presentation of information can reinforce existing beliefs and attitudes, leading to increased polarization [20].

3.3. Cultural Perspectives

Different cultural and ideological backgrounds can shape how news organizations perceive and interpret events [21]. Culture plays a significant role in shaping how news is reported, interpreted, and communicated. The framing used by AP from the US and CGTN from China in their news coverage of the Fukushima water dispute in Japan differs due to cultural and ideological factors. These differences can be attributed to the contrasting perspectives of collectivist and individualist cultures.

Collectivist cultures, which are commonly found in East Asian societies like China, tend to prioritize the collective good over individual interests. They emphasize group harmony, cooperation, and social cohesion. In collectivist cultures, news coverage might focus on the potential impact on the community, shared responsibilities, and the need to maintain stability within society. In this

context, CGTN's coverage may focus on the collective impact and potential risks associated with the release of Fukushima water into the ocean. They might emphasize the concerns of local fishermen, the overall environmental impact, and the potential harm to nearby communities. CGTN could also take a collectivist approach, emphasizing Japan's responsibility to ensure the well-being of its citizens and neighboring countries.

In contrast, individualistic cultures, like the American culture in Western societies, tend to place more emphasis on individual rights and autonomy. Individualistic cultures value personal freedom, independence, and individual achievement. Influenced by an individualistic perspective, AP's coverage may highlight the scientific assessments and explanations provided by Japanese authorities and experts regarding the safety measures taken in treating the radioactive water. They might also consider concerns related to transparency, health risks, and impacts on individuals, the economic impact on the fishing industry, both domestically and internationally.

4. Conclusions

The differences in framing between AP and CGTN can have a significant impact on the public's perception of the Fukushima water issue. Different narratives, priorities, and biases can shape how people understand and interpret the information presented to them. Audiences relying on AP might tend to view the issue as a technical matter with potential risks, while those depending on CGTN might perceive it as a contentious issue with Japan facing criticism or possible blame. This divergence in framing can contribute to public polarization as people form opinions based on the information they are exposed to, leading to misunderstandings or heightened tensions between different countries.

By and large, the diversity of conversation in the Fukushima discharge issue in AP and CGTN can be observed from the viewpoint of each side and the focus on Japan's responsibility. These framing differences arise as a result of the biases and preferences of the respective news outlets and countries, reflected in international relations, political polarization, and lastly cultural perspectives. Considering these geopolitical, political, and cultural factors, it's expected to see divergent framings in the news coverage. Recognizing these influences and seeking diverse viewpoints is essential for developing a more nuanced understanding of complex issues.

It is important to note that this analysis is limited to the information provided in the referenced articles and may not provide a comprehensive overview of all frames used in the coverage. On the whole, it is crucial to acknowledge that a wide range of factors can influence news coverage, such as editorial biases and commercial interests. Whereas understanding underlying political context and interests provides valuable insights into the portrayal of the Fukushima water dispute in China and the US.

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