

# Journalistic Ethical Practices Across Borders: Framing Analysis and Ethical Reflection on *China Daily's* Coverage of the MU5735 Air Crash

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## Abstract

Air crash reporting is one of the types of disaster news, which should follow the ethical guidelines of journalism. Under the theoretical perspective of Zang Guoren's three levels of news frame analysis, *China Daily's* news about the MU5735 air disaster presents the unique frame of China's mainstream foreign propaganda media in reporting China's sudden disaster events with various thematic frames and effective textual applications. Using frame analysis and case study analysis as research methods, the study explores the characteristics and ethical performance of *China Daily's* frames of reporting on the MU5735 air disaster. The study finds that *China Daily's* coverage of the disaster demonstrated the media's distinctive value stance and basically adhered to the ethical principles of journalism in disaster reporting, while at the same time there was a lack of constructive discourse.

**Keywords:** disaster reporting, journalism ethics, framework analysis

## 1. Introduction

At 14:38 on 21 March 2022, the Boeing 737 flight MU5735 of China Eastern Airlines crashed in Wuzhou City, Guangxi Province, killing all the 123 passengers and 9 crew members on board, and this sudden public disaster accident triggered the attention of a wide range of domestic and foreign audiences. Due to the complex causes, complicated terminology, and long investigation period, the news coverage of the crash is a long-lasting battle that requires both timeliness and accuracy, and should adhere to the relevant principles of journalistic ethics from the beginning to the end. As an authoritative foreign propaganda media in China, *China Daily*, in its coverage of the MU5735 crash, strictly followed the ethical principles of disaster reporting, and at the same time, it has a unique journalistic discourse that is different from that of China's domestic media.

## 2. Overview and Research Questions

### 2.1 Framing Theory and Journalistic Framing Research

Framing theory began with the study of human cognition and communication behaviour. In his book *Framing Analysis*, sociologist Goffman (1974) defined framing as a cognitive structure of people's perception of the external world, which provided a theoretical and methodological basis for the study of news framing. Scholar Van Dijk (1987) has proposed that the news media is not a descriptor or neutral coordinator of the real picture of social events, but is itself a cognitive frame builder of ideology. In the 1990s, frame theory was introduced into China's news and communication research, and scholars Chen Yang (2007) believe that the news frame is the principle or guideline constructed by the news media in the process of selecting and dealing with news events, and that selection and reorganisation are the most important factors in constructing news frames. Selection and reorganisation are the most important strategies for constructing news frames.

Framing analysis is an interpretivist research paradigm, and text-focused framing analysis is the core area of news framing research. Studies on news frame analysis methods include the critical discourse analysis of Van Dijk and Fairclough, the discursive structure analysis of Pan Zhongdang and Kocic, the "interpretive package" analysis of Gamson, and the three-level frame analysis of Zang Guoren. [1] Zang Guo-ren, a Taiwanese scholar, advocates three levels of news discourse frameworks: the high-level framework is a general statement of the main idea of the event; the middle-level framework includes the main event, previous events, history, results, effects, attribution, and evaluation; and the low-level framework is the news discourse, i.e., the use of linguistic symbols and rhetorical styles.

Zang Guoren's frame analysis theory adds a high-level analytical framework of the macroscopic theme of the event on the basis of Van Dijk's model of news discourse analysis at the middle and micro levels. Scholar Liu Xuan (2022) used Zang Guoren's framework of news analysis as a model to elaborate the thematic model of People's Daily's report on China's traditional culture; Liu Mingzheng (2021) also used the theory to analyse the framework of Xinjing Daily's news about crime; Han Hong (2016) combined quantitative content analysis to dismantle the framework of BBC's China-related news at various levels of reporting, including high-level issues, mid-level schematic structure, and low-level textual application. In the BBC's China-related news, including high-level issues, middle-level graphic structure and low-level text application. This framework is a clear and hierarchical analysis model, which is more in line with China's inductive textual parsing habits.

## 2.2 MU5735 Air Crash Reporting Study

Previous studies of mainstream media coverage of the MU5735 air disaster have focused on reflecting on the constructive utility of the domestic media in resolving the disaster (Dang Jun and Ma Junshu, 2023), focusing on value corrections to the logic of disaster news production (Gong Xinqiong, 2022), changing the core function of disaster reporting from dispassionate objectivity to emotional comfort in the era of new media (Qian Yanyan and Ge Xianlin, 2022) and the ethical dilemmas that existed in the reporting, such as intrusive grief (Tang Bing and Tang Yuanqing, 2022), and so on. and ethical dilemmas such as the intrusion of grief (Tang Bing and Tang Yuanqing, 2022). The domestic media's coverage of MU5735 included dynamic follow-up of the disaster, tracking of the cause of the accident, and easing of public panic, etc. Therefore, related studies on the reporting of the incident mainly focused on the practical functions of the news media. In contrast, Chinese foreign media for overseas audiences are committed to constructing the image of China as a great power based on humanism at the macro level, and the construction of macro issues, the sorting of events at the meso level, and the use of micro words and phrases in the coverage of the air disaster can all highlight Chinese culture's care for the fate of the individuals involved in the disaster, its cognitive mode and emotional attitude toward the disaster, and the responsibility and commitment of the Chinese government, but studies of Chinese foreign media coverage of disasters in China have mainly focused on the practical functions of the news media. However, there is a gap in the research on Chinese foreign media's coverage of disasters in China.

## 2.3 Research Questions

As an authoritative window for China's foreign propaganda, China Daily is a model for the study of China's international news reporting framework. By synthesising the discursive and textual frameworks of *China Daily's* coverage of the MU5735 crash, the study attempts to answer the following questions: first, the overall discursive characteristics of *China Daily's* coverage of the crash; second, what ethical principles of journalism have been embodied by China Daily in its practice of reporting the disaster, and what is the room for optimisation.

## 3. Research Design

### 3.1 Media Selection

Founded in 1995, China Daily is the earliest national English-language website in China, and has become a national comprehensive media website and the most influential English-language portal in China. As one of China's authoritative media for foreign propaganda, China Daily combines nationalism with global communication vision, and is tasked with the mission of telling China's story well to the international community. [2] China Daily not only plays an important role in constructing China's international image in the context of grand political and economic issues, but also excels in digging out the deep-rooted stories of people in the smallest details of Chinese society, and integrating diversified and innovative means to systematically tell China's solutions and experiences. For the study of the international reporting framework and text presentation of specific events in China, China Daily is of representative significance.

### 3.2 Sample Acquisition and Analysis

The lexisNexis database (global information news section) was searched for reports involving the keyword MU5735 in the China Daily news feeds, and a total of 42 valid samples were obtained. The study retained only the reports focusing on the MU5735 incident as the main topic, and excluded the reports focusing on other topics with incidental references to the incident, as well as the reports with no clear topic, so that a total of 37 valid samples were finally selected. After reading the samples one by one, it was verified that the headlines of the samples were able to capture the core theme of the news, and could be used as the unit of analysis for the high-level frames. The middle-level and low-level frames were analysed by integrating the words, sentences and paragraphs of the disassembled news articles in the samples.

#### 4. Framing Analysis of *China Daily's* Coverage of the MU5735 incident

##### 4.1 High Level: Reporting on the Main Framework

The high-level news frame refers to the main idea and intention of the event, usually in the form of a headline. For sudden public disasters, *China Daily* media should take the responsibility of disseminating official discourse, tracking the disaster, caring for the victims and their families, investigating the cause of the accident, and forming the media memory of the event. [3] According to the order of sample size, *China Daily's* reports on the MU5735 crash can be categorised as "cause of the accident", "official response", and "rescue situation", "family members of the victims" and "media memory", and the samples under each frame are arranged in the chronological order of news release.

##### 4.1.1 Accident Attribution Framework: Identifying the Causes of Accidents

The causes of air accidents are complex and involve specialised vocabulary in the aviation field, and thus cannot be accurately condensed in news headlines, which are often presented as summaries, such as "causes under investigation". The accident attribution framework accounts for the highest proportion of the research sample, including searching and analysing black box data and accountability of the Boeing 737 model. The black box, short for aircraft flight data recorder, enables investigators to investigate the cause of the crash through the flight data recorded by the black box, which is the focus of the frame. The Boeing 737, the company responsible for the crash, is also the focus of *China Daily's* coverage. This sample of thematic frames spanned a wide range of stories, and the media continued to track the causes of the crash long after the fervour of the incident had died down, directing international audiences to the incident over the long term.

Table 1. Sample matrix of the thematic framework "Accident attribution"

M1.1: Assistance prepared for investigation
M1.2: Authorities continue search for second black box after plane crash
M1.3: Crashed aircraft's black box found
M1.4: Damaged black boxes being analyzed
M1.6: Search for answers continues a year after fatal plane crash
M1.7: More time needed to determine cause of air crash
M1.8: No abnormalities yet discovered in MU5735 investigation
M1.9: Fight crash investigation to continue
M1.10: Investigation work continues for MU5735 as 'black boxes' are analyzed
M1.11: Probe into flight MU5735 crash still undergoing

##### 4.1.2 Official Response Framework: Outreach Effectiveness

As official releases are the main way for the public to obtain breaking news information, the timeliness and appropriateness of official responses have a direct bearing on the government's image and credibility. Taking news headlines as the sample unit, the official responses cited in the *China Daily* report include the Chinese government, Boeing, China Eastern Airlines, and the *China Daily* media itself. The official responses in the sample are mainly framed by the Chinese government, reflecting the core function of *China Daily* as a mainstream foreign propaganda media in China. *China Daily* followed the progress of the rescue operation and transmitted the responses to overseas in a timely manner, demonstrating that the Chinese government attaches great importance to the progress of the rescue operation, the situation at the scene, and the aviation safety issues arising from the disaster.

Table 2. Sample matrix of "official response" thematic frames

official response to the subject	Sample news headlines
The Government of China	M2.1: Chinese officials provide updates on plane crash
	M2.2: Data unit on second flight recorder in good shape, officials say
	M2.3: Coming up: News conference on rescue work after MU5735 crash
	M2.4: CPC calls for national work safety probe
	M2.5: China continues in-depth investigation of Wuzhou aircraft crash
	M2.6: Regulator calls for complete flight safety
other subjects	M2.7: Boeing vows full support after crash in S China
	M2.8: Pilots in good health, experienced: Airline

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M2.9: Fact check on viral posts about plane crash  
M2.10: Expert: Black boxes take time to study

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#### 4.1.3 Rescue Situation Framework: News-Based

The concept of "news orientation" stresses the importance of informing the public in a timely manner about the original circumstances of an event, based on the general principles of truthfulness, objectivity and timeliness of information. The function of information is to eliminate uncertainty. [4] China Daily dispatched reporters to the front line to obtain on-site information, integrated information resources from various channels to set the issue of the incident for the whole world, and based on this, followed up the rescue and casualty situation of the crash in real time, grasped the scale of the disaster scene appropriately, and responded in time to the most important concerns of domestic and foreign audiences.

Table 3. Sample matrix for the thematic framework "Rescue situation"

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M3.1: Plane carrying 132 crashes
M3.2: No survivors of crash found
M3.3: Rescue, recovery efforts continue in airline crash
M3.4: Rescue and investigation work continue at crash site
M3.5: Searchers find debris, crew items, some remains in center of crash site
M3.6: Personal belongings of plane crash victims found
M3.7: Identity of 120 people onboard the crashed plane confirmed
M3.8: Search for plane crash survivors suspended by heavy rain

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#### 4.1.4 The Framework for the Families of the Victims: A Demonstration of Humanistic Concern

The families of the victims are the most affected by the disaster, and the comfort and compensation of the families is a manifestation of the humanistic concern of the society, and the care for the families of the victims is a manifestation of the humanistic spirit of journalism as a "humanistic science". *China Daily's* report on the families of the victims of the MU5735 plane crash was neutral and objective, with no overtly emotive text used to create an atmosphere of sympathy. Instead, it used the words of experts to calmly analyse what kind of assistance the families of the victims needed in terms of financial compensation or psychological counselling, and guided various sectors in solving the practical problems faced by the families.

Table 4. Sample matrix of thematic frames for "families of the victims"

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M4.1: Family members of crash victims accommodated, given assistance: Airline
M4.2: Support provided for families following fatal crash
M4.3: Compensation process launched for families of crash victims
M4.4: Counseling provided to families of flight accident victims

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#### 4.1.5 Media Memory Frames: Constructing Collective Memory

The mass media is the bearer and constructor of collective memory. In the long period after the disaster, the media retraced the course of the disaster in a reminiscent mode, constructed the audience's collective memory of the disaster, and reflected deeply on the safety issues derived from the disaster. [5] At the later stage of the accident, i.e., after the search and rescue work had ended and public opinion had subsided, China Daily reported the silent ceremony for the crash, the memories of the rescuers, and the call for aviation safety in plain language, and endeavoured to construct a global collective memory of the MU5735 crash.

Table 5. Sample matrix of thematic frames for "media memory"

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M5.1: Mourns victims of plane crash
M5.2: Emphasis must be on safety first at all times
M5.3: Diary records painstaking rescue efforts after air crash
M5.4: Mourning ceremony held for crash victims in China

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#### 4.2 Medium Level: Structural Framework for Reporting

According to Zang Guoren, the same elements of news events will have different meanings when they are arranged and reorganised in the dimensions of time progression and importance. The medium-level structure consists of the following elements: main event, previous event, history, outcome, impact, attribution and evaluation. Prior events, history, outcomes are the time series before and after the occurrence of the main event, and attribution and assessment are the cause judgement of the main event. [6] The structural framework of *China Daily's* mid-level report on the MU5735 incident can be analysed in terms of textual interpretation and integration of prior events, outcomes, impacts, attribution and assessment.

##### 4.2.1 Prior Events and History

Prior events and history are events that have a direct correlation or causality with the events that preceded them. *China Daily* reported on 23 March that in 2020 there were 17 accidents involving Boeing 737s worldwide, two of which resulted in fatalities. Under the support of public opinion's "heat-sensitive effect", the China Eastern Airlines crash disaster will surely cause the international Boeing 737 company to be deeply accountable. Citing similar disasters in "previous incidents" with the Boeing 737, *China Daily* emphasised the seriousness of the accident while urging Boeing to push ahead with safety reforms for the aircraft.

##### 4.2.2 Results and Impacts

Outcomes and impacts, i.e., the relevant consequences of an event, are divided into short-term and long-term effects. In addition to the negative impact of the disaster itself, news of a disaster is also likely to cause general public anxiety, further aggravating public opinion in a "risk society" where the diversity of risks is increasing and uncertainty is pronounced. *China Daily* has attempted to defuse social anxiety about flight safety by repeatedly making safety-related statements, such as "flight safety will affect social stability and concern thousands of families", in an effort to draw the attention of all sectors of society to the issue of aviation safety and to strengthen civil aviation security to ensure flight safety.

##### 4.2.3 Attribution and Assessment

Owing to the complexity and length of the investigation process, no detailed information on the cause of the accident has yet been released. The *China Daily* devoted the most space to samples of the investigation into the cause of the crash, mainly covering the specific investigative work of the investigators into the cause of the accident, such as on-site investigation, data verification, personnel interviews, experimental analyses, and dismantling and analyses of the black box data, which is essentially presenting the rigorous and responsible investigative attitude of the Chinese officials towards the incident.

#### 4.3 Low Level: Micro-Discourse Frameworks

The concept of low-level frame, i.e. the sentence-making of news text, is close to the microstructure of the discourse proposed by Van Dijk in the study of news discourse. In the comparative study of Chinese and foreign news texts, scholars believe that China's news discourse presents a straightforward and direct style of media tendency, while Western media texts tend to indirectly and implicitly side-step the media's position. [7] The study selects the micro-discourse framework of *China Daily*, which is different from that of the domestic media, and analyses the characteristics of the media in the low-level discourse.

##### 4.3.1 China's Image-Building Discourse

Maintaining China's international image is the responsibility of China's mainstream foreign propaganda media, and it is also an important feature that distinguishes their news frames from those of the domestic media. The *China Daily* mentioned three times that the accident had ended the national flight safety record of 11 years without a fatal accident in mainland China, and reported continuously on the process of rescue and rehabilitation work directed by State leaders, as well as on the actual situation in which members of the police and the armed police force, the Civil Aviation Administration of China, the Ministry of Emergency Management and other parties had rushed to the scene of the accident to assist in the rescue effort. These words highlight the absolute importance that Chinese officials attach to the issue of aviation safety, demonstrate the nationalistic spirit of all sectors of Chinese society, and realistically and objectively portray a positive international image of China. [8]

##### 4.3.2 People's Security Discourse

"People's safety" is a core component of China's overall national outlook, and it is also an ethical principle that should be emphasised above all else in disaster reporting. *China Daily* has repeatedly quoted State leaders, the head of the Civil Aviation Administration of China and other subjects, stressing that China's aviation industry must

adhere to the principle of putting people's lives and safety first, and calling for the strengthening of professional training for flight crews and pilots, thus demonstrating China's resolute attitude to safeguarding people's safety.

#### 4.3.3 Storied Folk Discourse

A newsletter published by the People's Daily on 31 March quoted the "rescue diary" of a firefighter in Guangxi, which recounted the firefighter's arduous and unforgettable rescue process in the accident and vividly described the psychological process and emotional state of the character. The newsletter does not depict the gruesome situation at the accident site, but tells in simple words how the rescuers "put in a hundred times more effort and tried their best" to participate in the rescue. Compared with official documents and announcements, the storytelling from the public is more vivid and persuasive.

### 5. Conclusions: Ethical Reflections on the Coverage of the Air Crash

Journalism ethics is a universal principle that journalists have been following for a long time in their information dissemination activities, and it is also a social norm that has been formed in the practice of journalism society to regulate mutual relations. Disaster news is the subject of ethical journalism, the first publisher of the latest disaster news, and an important intermediary and carrier of disaster and relief information. *China Daily's* coverage of the MU5735 disaster is basically in line with journalistic ethics, but there is still room for optimisation.

Journalism ethics includes the principles of life first, least harm, and moderation. The study found that *China Daily's* adherence to the ethical principles of disaster journalism is reflected in the following aspects: firstly, the report always stresses the importance of people's life safety and the safety of civil aviation flights in China, and calls for the organisation of a nationwide flight safety audit to ensure people's life safety. Secondly, in the framework of the report about the families of the victims, *China Daily* seldom involves words describing the grief and emotions of the families, which may lead to the problem of "intrusive grief", but only analyses objectively that the families of the victims should receive economic and psychological assistance, and calls on the relevant departments to set up a psychological counselling institution in the local area to alleviate the psychological harm caused by the accident to the families of the victims. Thirdly, the report does not depict the victims' families as being in need of financial and psychological assistance. Thirdly, the report does not contain any sensationalist remarks such as depicting the tragic situation at the disaster site, but rather reports on the accident scene in a calm and solemn manner, with appropriate and reasonable wordings in the description of details, in line with the principle of moderation in journalistic ethics.

Constructive news discourse means that on the basis of presenting facts, news discourse should actively provide positive emotions and solutions, so as to make the whole public opinion field realise positive presentation and objective discussion. [9] In disaster reporting, news discourse should clearly answer the questions of "why" and "what to do", avoid vague and uncertain expressions, and give readers a stable and positive psychological implication. However, *China Daily's* coverage of the incident was mostly confined to the official press conference and the attitude and actions of the Chinese leaders towards the accident, without informing the audience of specific ways to avoid safety risks and constructive discourse leading to positive actions.

Journalism ethics not only comes from the subjective moral judgement of journalists, but also from the value deduction process in the practice of news production, and the news text can intuitively reflect the results of this deduction process. The study of news ethics in news discourse can also introduce the time dimension to analyse whether news texts reflect different ethical principles in different periods of time during the disaster.

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