

Media in China: Constructing “War Narrative” in
Natural Disaster Coverage

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Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Abstract

This study examines how media can be used in contributing to control ongoing crises following large-scale natural disasters. In investigating this research question this study conducts two case studies. Set in the context of the contemporary Chinese nationalistic culture this study dissects how Chinese media enhances crisis control by controlling the meaning of it. This thesis firstly takes a historical overview of the negotiations between discursive power and the control of information about natural disasters in Chinese media. Based on this cultural background, this study then conducts a case study of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake to examine how Chinese media is used to enhance crisis control in the context of contemporary Chinese nationalistic culture. In order to examine the research question in a global context this study also briefly examines the Australian media's coverage of the 2013 Tasmanian Bushfire.

A substantial corpus of data is built up and a systematic approach is designed in this study. In the case study of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, the corpus of primary data is constituted by media texts from the state-controlled Chinese media, including the *Sichuan Daily*, *People Net*, *Southern Weekly*, *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily* and *Xinhua Net*. In the 2013 Tasmanian bushfire coverage in Southern Australia, the corpus of data includes media texts collected from *The Australian* and *The Mercury*. Both sets of primary data include texts released during the period when the events were intensely traced by the media and the public. In analyzing these data a systematic theoretic framework is set up consisting of the theories of representation, discourse and power, identity, cultural identity, national cultural identity, media framing and narratives. The analytic method designed in this study is discourse analysis supplemented by cluster criticism adaptable to processing units of textual expressions in this study.

Through investigation this study finds that a war narrative and a discourse of resistance ensued, that are constructed to represent meaning of shared cultural identity from which a cohesive sense of belonging is generated and therefore the sense of crisis is reduced and relieved. In the war narrative, disorderly information in the natural disaster crisis is narrated, framed, and discursively formulated into a storytelling about the war of resistance from “we” as a collective identity to the disaster as an imagined “invader” and “the Other”. In this interactive process of resistance the negative information is transferred to “the Other” and positive representation of “the heroic Chinese” or “the Tasmanians” as invincible, creates a cohesive sense of belonging which can relieve the disorientation and panic. It is found out that these signifying practices discursively engage with the broad social culture of Chinese nationalism. This thesis sees this discursive process as a power-driven practice structured to modulate and integrate the imaginations of the public about the event and therefore enforce crisis control. With these findings, this thesis produces an extended knowledge about the role of media and its mediated meaning production in contributing to crisis control in natural disaster situations. The two case studies in this thesis illustrate how frameworks underpinning the discourse of resistance and the construction of a war narrative can be applied to enhance disaster relief.

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