Theoretical Reflection on Meaning Production of Media Discourse in Intercultural Communications

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Abstract: Media discourse in the context of intercultural communications is an important channel that countries and cultures use to communicate. It is also a process of meaning interpretation and knowledge production, which exerts a great impact on the establishment of the world's cultural order. This paper discusses media discourse in intercultural communications theoretically from the perspective of knowledge production, media dialogue and meaning construction. It is suggested that an effective ideographic mechanism be developed and improved, and the essential meaning of Chinese culture be initiatively exported and integrated into a knowledge system of cognition and understanding about the world to promote the understanding and exchange between China and other countries and to help create an equal and reasonable world cultural order.

Keywords: media discourse; meaning construction; knowledge production; dialogue

In the current context of media globalization, it is increasingly indispensable for a country or nation to get integrated into the diversified world by constructing its existence and expressing itself through media discourse in intercultural communications. During intercultural communications of media discourse, meaning is interpreted and established through the exchanges and becomes an integral part of knowledge production. It should be noticed that when meaning and knowledge production are incorporated into the structure of media discourse power, they become relevant to the creation of the world cultural order and pivotal for the cultural

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status and position of a country or nation in the world.

It can be seen from the current situation that imbalance is a prominent issue in the world's pattern of media discourse communications. The right to interpret world meaning and to construct knowledge is monopolized and controlled by those with advantageous media discourse power due to abundant financial resources and communication technologies. Overall, media discourse is dominated by developed western countries such as the US and the UK while other countries are generally in a marginal position. Statistics show that 80%—90% of global media discourse communications are monopolized by western media organizations while China's media communication in mandarin only accounts for about 5% of the world's total, indicating noticeably weak media discourse power and communication influence. Faced with the reality that the right to interpret meaning and construct knowledge is almost completely monopolized by western media organizations which have dominant media discourse power, we need to ponder how to effectively communicate the essential meanings of Chinese culture in media discourse communications to supplement and improve the global cognitive perspective and knowledge system.

1. Reviewing media discourse in intercultural communications from the perspective of knowledge production

With the extensive application of media technologies, knowledge production is mixed with and even equivalent to information and meaning production of media discourse. People in modern times acquire knowledge mainly from the discourse produced by the media industry. Therefore, countries or blocs which possess the power to spread

their discourse grasp and take hold of the power for cultural knowledge production to a large extent. In fact, competition for meaning production of media discourse equals competition for cultural knowledge production.

According to Edward Said, knowledge itself is by no means stable. He argued that there is no interpretation, understanding or knowledge that is not concerned with interests (Said, 2009, p. 212). Knowledge about the social world differs from that about the natural world. All knowledge concerning humanities and societies is the product of the interpretation of historical information, the importance of which depends on people's judgment and elucidation. Knowledge about humanities and societies gains its status through different approaches. Some approaches are intellectual-oriented, some are socially or politically concerned. Interpretation is one of the means to produce knowledge about humanities and societies. It is the activity that a subject conducts deliberately to shape and form its target audience. It certainly takes place in a specific time and space, and is performed by the subject with a specific objective, at a specific position against a specific background or situation, and in a worldly, historical and context-based manner. The identity and purpose of the interpreter highly determines the content of knowledge interpretation. The so-called "objective," "neutral" and "detached" interpretation of knowledge never exists since the interpreter is always positioned in a specific time and space and a complex hierarchical relation, and has its specific interests. "Interpretation is a sort of social activity, and is inevitably related to its context, which either empowers it as knowledge or judges that it is unqualified for being regarded as knowledge. For any interpretation, its context should not be neglected. Interpretation is not complete without interpreting its context" (Said, 2009, p. 211). Most facts and meanings that are interpreted as

knowledge about society are taken as the common sense of mankind, i.e., the accumulation of common experiences and ideologies. When interpretation of knowledge is incorporated into a power structure, the systematic and conscious production of knowledge about humanities and societies is in fact the establishment of the power to interpret world significance and construct a cultural order.

Against the background of media globalization, people rely heavily on media discourse to acquire knowledge about the external world, but such knowledge is a representation and interpretation through media discourse rather than a direct and concrete presentation of the matter concerned. To put it another way, all knowledge about society, culture, civilization and other aspects, is based on circumstantial evidence and a context where the producer of the media discourse is in a mixture of time, space, historical or political situation, capacity of the subject itself and so on. The production of such knowledge mainly concerns the social need. "What is regarded as knowledge is as a matter of fact a mix of things. The decisive factor is mainly the external instead of the internal need" (Said, 2009, p. 215). People satisfy the need for a society to operate in a certain order or structure through knowledge production. With its expression of things and meanings that it endows things with, media discourse, as interpretation and denomination of the world or society, has become an integral part of knowledge acquisition for people during their cognitive processing of information. When such knowledge takes effect, the power behind them also takes effect.

Harold Innis analyzed the control of media over knowledge production and its relationship with power. He developed the concept of "monopolies of knowledge," which refers to the phenomenon that a bloc becomes a political or cultural authority and further develops a social power because it controls a dominating media outlet and has the capacity to use the media for its purpose and thus monopolize the production and dissemination of social information and human knowledge and owns exclusive power to interpret meanings to the world. Gaye Tuchman (2008) holds that media discourse is a kind of social resource and is constructed as analytical understanding of social life, intellectual interpretation as well as a power resource since power "is realized through disseminating certain knowledge and suppressing certain concepts. Power is also strengthened since knowledge acts as a constituent of social action resources" (p. 199). A monopoly of knowledge based on media communications breaks the space-time structure of civilization and disrupts the balanced order. "… a monopoly or oligopoly of knowledge is built up to the point where equilibrium is disturbed" (Innis, 2013, p. 2). Cultural diversity will be threatened by monopolies of knowledge based on media communications and any civilization may suffer from mechanized disruption of its knowledge due to media technologies. With the formation of a monopoly of knowledge based on media communications, the structure for acquiring knowledge will develop under a monopoly as well. People are shrouded in the knowledge network of media discourse production and dissemination and are informed and educated, or restrained from the possibility of obtaining more knowledge. They gradually lose their abilities to acquire and understand knowledge by themselves, as well as their capabilities to judge cognition and produce knowledge in the fields that they understand. In the end, the media monopoly of knowledge formed under the influence of economic and political power will affect the timeliness of cultural knowledge and block its links to the tradition to a certain extent. During intercultural communication of media discourse, media monopoly of knowledge signifies

the establishment of media power and a cultural order.

In the current world of media globalization which features advanced media technologies, people can get more access to media and information, but monopolies of knowledge still exist. Media, as an important social resource, is in the hands of a small number of people with power while most of the public have no control over media or the opportunity to give feedback. Monopolies of knowledge thus exist in an understated way. It is hard for people living in this modern era to break away from the "Hermeneutic circle" of knowledge generated by media discourse. Since people are constantly exposed to media in their daily lives, they get used to accepting, without critical thinking, and take for granted knowledge produced by media discourse and seldom investigate or criticize the meaning of information dissemination and media discourse and the motivation, process and effect of knowledge production. According to Innis, it is inevitable that knowledge and information would become commodities in such a media monopolized mechanism permeated by commercialism. Professional teams of media organizations generate viewpoints, opinions and knowledge for mankind and cause people to become the prey of knowledge produced by media through streams of media discourse while such knowledge may be irrelevant to the truth, people's real experience and daily matters.

Facing the reality of media monopoly of knowledge production, we should notice that the process of intercultural communications of media discourse is inundated with competition among media discourse production organizations for the power to interpret meanings and construct their desired order. Through intercultural communications of media discourse, those organizations convert their interpretation of the world and a variety of information into a certain knowledge system which corresponds to and matches a specific power structure to consolidate the existing structure of world interests. Such a system of meanings and knowledge constructed by monopolizing media discourse power would definitely have its limitations in intercultural communications of media discourse — bias in interpretation and blind spots of knowledge, as Walter Lippmann (2006) writes, "Knowledge must not come from the conscience but from the environment with which that conscience deals. When men act on the principle of intelligence they go out to find the facts and to make their wisdom. When they ignore it, they go inside themselves and find only what is there. They elaborate their prejudice, instead of increasing their knowledge" (p. 281). We should construct a series of meanings through media discourse communications to establish a reasonable intercultural communication pattern for media discourse in our specific communication practice. We should participate in the establishment of a new order for international communications from a new angle of knowledge production to provide intercultural communications of media discourse around the world with a new perspective. We should integrate our meaning production of media discourse into the world's new system of knowledge production so as to participate in reconstructing the order of world meaning and culture.

2. Dialogue is the return of the essence of media discourse in intercultural communications

Today's world is like a giant and organic system generated by interactions and close links among different countries and nations. Interpretation with preference to any participants may cause explicit or implicit influence on the whole system. Any value hypothesis on equality, progress and development

of the world without reliance on this system will turn out to be empty talk. If disequilibrium of media discourse communications among different civilizations and cultures is to be eliminated to transform the closed and dissident circle of meaning into an open circulatory system of meaning to restore the knowledge ecology of the world, then the disadvantaged should be provided with a greater space for media discourse so that they can receive impartial cognition and understanding.

People living in different space and time can cognize and understand each other through "dialogues", a basic feature of communication, to overcome the limitation of acquiring knowledge through direct experience. That is why communication is of great importance to people. The reason why "dialogue" is crucial to media discourse communication lies in the fact that meanings undergo dynamic changes in communication and exchange among people and "dialogue" can pass on meanings among different parties involved in the communication, bring together different views and opinions to generate new meanings, reach new consensus, gradually expand common vision of knowledge and constantly deepen mutual cognitions and understandings. David Bohm (1996) argued that mankind usually comprehend the world in a fragmentary way and he compared such fragmentation to "a watch that has been smashed into random pieces. These pieces are quite different from the parts that have gone into the making of the watch. The parts have an integral relationship to one another, resulting in a functional whole." He mentioned that "the generic thought processes of humanity incline toward perceiving the world in a fragmentary way, 'breaking things up which are not really separate.' Such perception necessarily results in a world of nations, economies, religions, value systems, and 'selves' that are fundamentally at odds with one another" (p. 8).The significance of intercultural communications of

media discourse lies in that different views and knowledge are pooled together to form a structured relationship that is complementary, mutually corrective, corroborative and extending so that the truth per se can be revealed more clearly in such dynamic construction of meaning.

In the globalization era that sees tremendous development of media technologies and ever-growing diversity and openness in the world, dialogues and understandings should be promoted among different countries and cultures. It is the historical trend that dialogues rather than conflicts are more and more pursued among countries, cultures and civilizations and it is the external condition for dialogue to be reemployed as the essential means of communication. In the meantime, domineering discourse power is increasingly questioned and challenged. The return of media discourse to dialogue is also an objective need and a realistic demand for the development of media communications. Whether it is the general trend of the world's development or the logic of individual existence, it is ultimately determined that dialogue is the fundamental aim. Specifically, the awareness of dialogue in intercultural communications of media discourse is shown in the efforts that parties involved in the communication have made to meet the needs of people in different time and space for dialogues. Moreover, they establish a discourse platform that satisfies the needs for all parties' participation, interactions and identification through dialogues and exchanges among the parties. It can be observed that it is in the process of dialogues and interactions among people and civilizations that meaning and knowledge have been established and supplemented since ancient times so that the subjects can communicate and interact smoothly and effectively. Especially in the current world when high-tech and global communication technologies of media have enabled information, meaning and knowledge to

flow among different races, cultures and civilizations in a scale and a speed that are unprecedented in history. If the flow is only a one-way flow of media discourse, or is only limited to the interpretation and spread of meaning from one perspective, it is very likely to form what Jürgen Habermas defines as the "systematically distorted communication," or in other words, power control of ideology. According to Habermas, "Ideology is an assortment of 'systematically distorted communications' caused by unbalanced power relations. Such distorted communication is manifested through language, action and social activity. Language is important in that it is the means for people to let their messages flow, to interact and communicate. With language as the medium, people can communicate with one another and create history" (Jin, 1994). Real relationship of understanding between subjects is inevitably a relationship of dialogue. Dialogue in media discourse communication is a kind of public discourse behavior in the communication and interaction between subjects. In the process of inter-subject dialogue, meanings flow, meet, collide and merge to open a wide range of perspectives and broader knowledge space for the subjects so they can feel the richness and diversity of the world, form a new shared vision, and reach a deeper understanding based on this shared knowledge.

As the channel for communicating and interacting over the span of different time and space, intercultural communications of media discourse certainly play a significant role in creating dialogues across the world. During continuous media dialogues, all the parties are open-minded toward each other, listening to each other's voices, acquiring new cognitions and enriching new ideas. This is the source of vigor for the world culture. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the establishment of meaning and the realization of value of one party depend on those of the other party in a dialogue. Any loss in a party's

meaning leads to a loss in the other party's. This principle applies to any country, nation or culture in the world.

The generation and application of knowledge always take place on the social basis of inter-subject dialogues. People rely on knowledge to understand the world and ideology also depends on knowledge to function. In addition to producing and disseminating media discourse, people collect their experience and standardize meanings to produce knowledge. When media organizations produce and reproduce knowledge as social resources, they are subject to specific professional procedures and norms. Therefore, such activities are also the legitimized reproduction of the identification with social reality and the production and reproduction of the power structure. A media discourse context should be created in order to break down monopolies of knowledge and bias of media in intercultural communications to make media communications return to dialogues and that a dialogue relation should be developed to enable people to understand the world from more perspectives and to enrich our knowledge so that the subjects can reach a higher level of communication and mutual understanding on the basis of the fusion of their horizons.

3. Building and disseminating a meaning system during intercultural communications of media discourse

World meaning and knowledge systems should be constructed by all the members of the world instead of being defined by hegemony. With the rapid development of communication technologies and the advent of the globalization era, intercultural communications has become ubiquitous in inter-country exchange. Every country or civilization is entitled to send out their voices so that the

other countries can understand their history and culture and respect their values and concepts. Any monologue that stays shut from and hardly speaks to the outside world can only lead to isolation or a lost culture amid the strong influence of an external dominant culture.

It is in the global communication system that a country spreads its messages. Only by integrating into the world communication system can a communication subject survive in the globalization context of media communications, though each subject may have different political, economic and cultural backgrounds. Otherwise it will lose its opportunity or right to express itself in an equal position due to a disadvantaged status imposed on it through exclusion and repression. On the other hand, as Li Bin (2013) argues, "What is communicated does not necessarily equal what is accepted; what is accepted does not necessarily equal what is understood; what is understood does not necessarily equal what is endorsed. If the development of communication only solves the problem of the circulation of symbols, real communication and understanding among people are subject to reconstruction and exposure of meaning" (p. 163). According to the Dialogue Theory, as long as a subject is willing to reach out to establish relations with other subjects via dialogues, its meaning and value as an entity may undergo positive change in the dialogues. This principle also applies to media discourse communications. As a meaning field, media discourse field is an open system which keeps passing on information and meanings to the external environment and interacting with it. If the media discourse field is considered a dissipative

structure,[①] when there is information or energy exchange between the internal and external in the field, it is very likely a new structure will take shape in the system. Inference can thus be made because it is not utterly impossible to change established public opinion orientation and media bias of the media discourse field. From continuous flow of various opinions in the public opinion field to an ultimate orderly state with the formation of a mainstream viewpoint, a certain self-organizing rule must exist inherently. For producers of media discourse, it is important to identify the essential issues of public opinion to guide the orientation and to output meanings at a good timing to form a meaning flow and system of a certain scale. Especially when media discourse power of a subject is in a passive state, if the subject can be open-minded during intercultural communications of media discourse, if it can take the initiative to have dialogues with others and to offer its perspective for viewing and cognizing things, if it can participate actively in communication activities, reshape the pattern or image of public opinion, and guide people to perceive and understand things to realize effective communications, it will thus gain more understanding.

In the meantime, we should realize that the receivers' understanding of the communicated meanings is determined by their specific historical and cultural backgrounds, and that such understanding is not fixed or closed and may gradually change in the dialogues with the elapse of time. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1999) believed that understanding starts from pre-understood ideas generated by tradition and authority, which constitute the "horizon of understanding." Right

① The theory of dissipative structures is a physics theory proposed by Ilya Prigogine, a Belgian scientist in the 1970s. It refers to a non-linear open system far from equilibrium (whether it is a physical, chemical, biological or even social and economic system) changes from a chaotic disorder to display order in time, space or function by continually exchanging substance and energy with the outside world until the change of a certain parameter within the system reaches to a specific threshold value so that abrupt change, i.e., nonequilibrim phase change may take place in the system through fluctuation. As a new discipline revealing the law of self-organized movement in complex systems and featuring strong methodological function, the theory, its concepts and methods are applicable to interpreting both natural and social phenomena.

from the outset, one's understanding gets into the horizon based on his or her pre-understood ideas. During media discourse communications, people constantly expand their bounds of cognition and broaden their horizon of knowledge. Therefore, a subject's "mind may stick to historical prejudices or preconceptions, but it can also change and remove certain prejudices, especially those inappropriate ones derived from acquired experience. Subjects stay open-minded during their participation in understanding and exchanging with the world. On the one hand, they expand the creation of legitimate prejudice; on the other hand, they constantly change and correct wrong prejudices" (pp.63-71). The point is that one subject has to take the initiative to be open to another and that real exchange is impossible without such active openness to one another, as Gadamer said, "Mutual affiliation with one another means listening to one another" (p. 464). People begin to become suspicious and start to believe some sources of hearsay when the things that they try to understand are not transparent enough to them. Therefore, we advocate taking the initiative to speak out and disclose meanings, and that is referred to as information transparency in communication studies.

Based on the above analysis, in intercultural communications of media discourse, we should take the initiative to speak out, make dialogue and break down the structural silence in the international public opinion field, and that we should recognize that simple output of concepts and symbols cannot make them organically embedded in the world's knowledge system or structure. We should attach importance to the output of "meanings" to form a steady flow of meanings, to open "ourselves" to the world, to gradually establish a complete set of meaning systems to generate a certain scale of media discourse flow to adapt to changes in the context and environment of the era. In the meantime, we should conduct intercultural communications in a

level-by-level and step-by-step manner to gradually make more positive discourse interactions with the international community in more aspects. We should reduce or eliminate misunderstanding and misinterpretation by the international community in our discourse interaction to reach a broader consensus. We should open a new dimension for thinking and meaning interpretation to fully express more comprehensive experience and cognition of mankind.

4. Conclusion

For the entire history of mankind, the real foundation lies in that people engage in social interactions through language to achieve mutual understanding and cooperation. With the development of media science and technology, instant communications across time and space has become a reality. The world has entered the era of globalization of media communication. Interaction and competition among nations and cultures have relied more on strategies and resources for organizing media discourse and constructing meaning. In the face of such a reality of communications, we need to establish and improve our mechanisms for expressing our media discourse and to output a system of meanings that demonstrates core values of the Chinese nation and has universal significance. During meaning production of media discourse and intercultural communications, we should export the authentic meaning of ourselves to integrate it into the meaning and knowledge systems of the entire world and to promote the development of richness and integrity of the world's cognition and understanding. In a nutshell, we emphasize that intercultural communications of media discourse is aimed at realizing equal dialogue on the spiritual level, seeking for the sharing of meaning, expanding knowledge horizons, reaching consensus on values

at more levels, resolving barriers and conflicts, and achieving further mutual cognitions and understandings to establish among countries, among nations, among cultures, and among populations discourse channels that are effective and conducive to communications among the parties.

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