Official "Micro-Narration" and Folk "Re-Creation": The Evolution of "Belt and Road" Documentaries on Short Video Platforms

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Abstract: The advent of the digital age has made short videos an increasingly important media form, with platforms represented by Douyin occupying a significant amount of users' time. Many official accounts have also begun to build their images and publish specific content on various platforms. The grand narrative of the "Belt and Road" Initiative has undergone a profound communicative evolution after entering short video platforms such as Douyin and Bilibili. Based on Henry Jenkins' theories of "transmedia storytelling" and "participatory culture", this paper explores the communication strategies contributed by official discourse and folk narratives to "Belt and Road" documentaries on short video platforms. By analyzing how these two narrative forces interact, supplement, and reinforce each other, the study aims to uncover the innovative paths through which the BRI's values and stories are effectively conveyed to broader, younger audiences in the digital era.

Keywords: The Belt and Road; Documentaries; Short Videos; Transmedia Storytelling; Participatory Culture

1. Introduction

In 2013, Chinese President proposed the building of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" during his visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia respectively. To date, the "Belt and Road" Initiative has continued to thrive, making great contributions to the world and benefiting people. As a window to showcase the national image to the world, documentaries on the theme of the "Belt and Road" have emerged as the times require. Over the past decade, a large number of rich and exquisitely produced documentaries have been released, building bridges for cultural exchanges among countries along the route. Documentaries such as "Hexi Corridor" (2015), "The Silk Road, Our Story" (2017), "My Youth on the Silk Road" (2018), and "The Road to Prosperity" (2023) have constructed one story world after another on traditional media platforms, actively demonstrating the achievements of the development of human historical civilization. However, in the tide of the digital age, these grand narratives have inevitably entered short video platforms, and their narrative models and strategies have undergone profound changes. Official discourse and folk narratives are intertwined and infiltrated with each other, jointly constructing the story world of the "Belt and Road".

2. Official-Led "Micro-Narration" Strategy

Transmedia storytelling theory emphasizes that a unified story world needs to be co-constructed through multiple media platforms, with each medium contributing to the overall narrative in its unique way [1]. The "Belt and Road" Initiative benefits all countries and the world. For a long time, its narrative discourse has been dominated by the official, with communication platforms mainly concentrated on television media, which are characterized by authority and grandeur. However, in response to the communication laws of new media and the aesthetic needs of Generation Z audiences, under the framework of transmedia storytelling, official media have innovatively adopted the "micro-narration" strategy for short video platforms. It is not a simple division of grand narratives, but a refined narrative model that actively follows the characteristics of various platforms to attract user participation in the process of co-constructing the story world.

2.1 "Instantaneous" Editing of Core Content

In the context of all-media, there is a vast market and constantly evolving technologies, it has opened up a vast space for progress in documentaries and given birth to brand-new production methods. The way of operation [2]. Short video platforms emerging with Generation Z are quite different from previous traditional media platforms, featuring "short, concise, and fast" content. How to capture audiences' attention with exciting visual content in a short period of time is a common pursuit of creators. Therefore, official media on Douyin have taken the initiative to fragmentarily edit documentaries that are several hours long, extracting independent and infectious "story moments". These "instantaneous" edits no longer pursue rigorous and linear discussions, but convey macro values through micro-narratives and scenes.

The official CCTV account on Douyin released a series of short videos from "The Road to Prosperity". One of them focuses on the well-drilling project funded by China for rural areas in Senegal, covering 12 regions of Senegal and solving the drinking water problem for one-seventh of the country's population. The first 10 seconds of the video are striking. The vertical screen format magnifies key elements, with "dry ground" and "gushing water sources" dominating the view, forming a sharp contrast. Accompanied by the voice-over of a Chinese engineer: "We are also very moved, feeling like a long drought receiving timely rain." At the end, Senegalese children shout "Thank you" to the camera. Through the approach of seeing the big from the small, this short video naturally reveals the warm friendship between China and Senegal, and also demonstrates the Chinese wisdom of "cultivating one's moral character in solitude when poor, and benefiting the world when prosperous". At the same time, this editing strategy focuses on small figures, small stories, and real emotions, allowing the "Belt and Road" Initiative to embody the wisdom of "a community with a shared future for mankind" in "instantaneous" clips.

2.2 Cross-Platform Extension of Narrative Matrix

One of the core characteristics of "transmedia storytelling" is the expansion of narrative space, that is, "media content existing on multiple platforms is a kind of narrative extension, not just an adaptation from one medium to another"

[3]. Therefore, successful cross-platform extension is not a random expansion, but a strategic deployment of different narrative functions on different platforms to achieve better communication effects. In the communication practice of the "Belt and Road" Initiative, official media have tailored content forms and narrative methods in line with the communication characteristics of platforms such as YouTube, WeChat Official Accounts, Douyin, and Bilibili based on the differences in user portraits, thereby realizing the effective construction and cross-platform extension of the narrative matrix.

For example, the official of the documentary "Infinite Road" has adopted a transmedia extension strategy combining "main content" and "behind-the-scenes footage" on YouTube, a global video platform, to build a three-dimensional narrative matrix. The main part of "Infinite Road" takes the form of on-site visits by the host, traveling to six provinces in China and seven "Belt and Road" countries including Madagascar, Egypt, and Greece, showcasing China's achievements in poverty alleviation and the development changes of countries along the "Belt and Road". In addition, the official TVB account has also released interview footage of the host Chan Pui-yi on YouTube, forming a narrative supplement and cross-platform extension to the main content. In the interview, she mentioned that "China's poverty alleviation speed has been questioned internationally, and it is an obligation and even a responsibility to respond to Western media with actions." This design not only enriches the character image but also forms a complement to the main content at the value level, enhancing the appeal of the narrative theme. As of November 6, 2025, this clip has received 738 likes and 13,000 views. It shows the unknown stories behind the documentary and conveys China's true voice to the international community.

On the WeChat Official Account platform, official narratives focus on "lightweight and visualizable" content. CCTV News launched the "A Glimpse of the World in One Picture" series of articles, condensing complex project information of China-Malaysia co-built "Belt and Road" cooperation projects. Presented with exquisite photographic pictures, accurate data descriptions, and concise text, it achieves "instant understanding" of information, which is

suitable for dissemination in Moments and chats. This form liberates the "Belt and Road" Initiative from long reports and grand narratives, which is very much in line with WeChat users' habits of quickly browsing and acquiring information, and facilitates many user groups who are willing to capture national policy trends in real-time.

2.3 Enrichment of Narrative Dimensions through Digital Technology

Transmedia storytelling is not a simple adaptation, but the construction of a rich "story world". Different media platforms are responsible for telling different parts and perspectives of this world. In recent years, with the rapid development of digital simulation technology and wearable devices, digital narrative methods have been continuously improved [4]. Documentaries on the "Belt and Road" theme have continuously expanded their image creation thinking, enriched audio-visual expression methods, and met the diverse aesthetic experience needs of current users. On short video platforms, innovative expressions at the digital technology level are undoubtedly an eye-catching means. Therefore, the "Belt and Road" documentary clips released by the official have focused on interactive H5 and AR technologies, allowing audiences to "enter" the documentary scenes as if they were on the spot and gain a rich immersive experience.

Youku Video's documentary "The Wind Rises in the East", a tribute to the 10th anniversary of the "Belt and Road" Initiative, condenses China's development and achievements over the past decade. The quick overview version released by China Audiovisual on Bilibili on October 19, 2023, is a section of it. The short film innovatively uses XR technology to create Lili, a digital human from the virtual world, who leads the audience to "travel" through ancient and modern times along the Silk Road. This setting transforms the audience from viewers to experiencers, greatly enhancing their sense of participation. In the short film, the digital human constantly meets Western Regions dancers, foreign chefs, and others on the ancient Silk Road constructed by XR technology, and each time it ends abruptly after the climax, attracting the audience to think about what the complete story world is like.

3. Folk Users' Participation in "Re-Creation"

The official-led "micro-narration" strategy aims to attract users from different platforms to watch and even participate in new narrative dimensions. This phenomenon is called "participatory culture" by Jenkins, which means that under the background of the popularization of digital technology, users have transformed from passive consumers to active participants, reconstructing the logic of cultural production through content re-creation, social interaction, and collective collaboration [5]. On short video platforms, folk users have transformed from passive viewers of "Belt and Road" documentaries to participants and experiencers. Through sending bullet screens, comments, reposts, UGC content co-creation, and other forms, they have injected diverse visual and emotional warmth into the originally grand and serious themes of the documentaries, becoming a powerful supplement and extension of official narratives.

3.1 Bullet Screen Culture: Meaning Production in Real-Time Interaction

The term "bullet comments" originated on niconico, referring to the way comments are directly presented on videos. As the largest bullet-screen video website in China at present, Bilibili has rich and diverse bullet-screen resources, providing abundant corpora for the study of bullet-screen language [6]. On short video platforms, bullet screens, comments, and messages are their unique interactive methods, which have changed the one-way output and communication mode of traditional media. These real-time communications and interactions are similar to the "apparatus of appeal" theory proposed by reception aesthetician Wolfgang Iser. Iser believes that the key to this "apparatus of appeal" lies in the "blanks" in the work that attract the audience to actively participate in the work, experience the aesthetic value of the work through their own association, imagination, and re-creation, and the meaning of the work is generated in the process of interaction between the text and the reader [7]. However, the content in documentary works cannot be all-inclusive, and there will always be restrained and blank parts, which precisely become the motivation to stimulate the audience's participation in interpretation. When users send real-time comments through bullet screens, they are actually completing the process of "aesthetic re-creation" as Iser said.

Their curiosity and desire to explore are the prerequisites and foundations for completing the construction of the work's meaning.

In the trailer of "Departing from Jakarta-Bandung: A Documentary of Southeast Asia's First High-speed Railway" released by CGTN on Douyin, when the commentary mentioned that "Chinese technology gives priority to efficiency", a large number of interactive contents emerged in the bullet screens. Some users left messages such as "China has given the world friendship and common development!"; others shared their personal experiences: "This is the place where I used to work. I hope I can take the high-speed railway built by the Chinese in the near future." These bullet screens are neither simple echoes of official narratives nor the generation of independent meanings, but through real-time interaction, the meaning of the "Belt and Road" Initiative has sunk into individual experiences, enhancing the proximity and appeal of the narrative.

The "Faraway Home" series videos released by Bilibili users have triggered widespread praise and discussions. The bullet screen content is rich in characteristics, with emotional resonance accounting for a relatively large proportion, such as "Cloud travel is so healing", "Great, my childhood memories", "The theme song is particularly nice", "I like all series of 'Faraway Home'". Users share their viewing experiences in real-time through bullet screens, forming a strong emotional atmosphere among each other. Knowledge-based bullet screens also account for a part. Some users left messages such as "Horgos was an important post on the ancient Silk Road, and now it is still a key node of the China-Europe Railway Express." In addition, there are bullet screen messages of interactive teasing and rational discussion, triggering supplements and discussions from other users. Among these successive bullet screens, a friendly communication community about the "Belt and Road" story has been formed.

3.2 UGC Content Co-Creation: Narrative Extension in Diverse Expressions

Bullet screen culture is an immediate interaction, while UGC content co-creation represents more diverse participation. The core characteristics of UGC are extensiveness and authenticity. Users can publish content through various media platforms, thereby extending the breadth of "Belt and Road" stories. According to research, on social media platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili, and Weibo, there are knowledge bloggers sharing relevant historical and cultural knowledge, and foreign friends talking about the specific changes brought by the Initiative to their countries. These contents, starting from individual emotions and experiences, provide more diverse perspectives for the "Belt and Road" story. Therefore, UGC content forms an extension of official narratives.

For example, Bilibili UP owner "Qin Feng Shuo" produced an explanatory video "How Awesome is the China-Laos Railway? In Just 2 Days, Laos Changed Its Destiny Against All Odds, and Its Economy Took Off" targeting the China-Laos Railway project mentioned in "The Road of Friendship". Combining geographical knowledge and economic data, it analyzes the actual impact of the project on countries along the route. For example, how the railway breaks Laos' predicament of being a "landlocked country" and how it drives the development of industries along the route. This kind of UGC content enriches the in-depth information needs of some users with a professional perspective and detailed knowledge, interprets the concept of "joint construction and shared benefits" in an intuitive way, and makes the macro Initiative perceptible.

4. Dialogue and Tension between the Two Narratives

Stuart Hall's "encoding/decoding" theory provides a unique perspective for us to understand this interaction. Between the "encoding" of official discourse and the "decoding" of folk users, there are three interaction modes: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional [8]. In the short video communication of "Belt and Road" documentaries, the official has constructed Chinese stories centered on cooperation and development through various forms of "encoding", while the majority of folk users have participated in this dialogue through active "decoding". Different decoding methods collide and infiltrate each other in platform communication. It is this dynamic and multi-level dialogue that makes the narrative of the "Belt and Road" a continuous and enriching process of meaning co-construction. According to Hall's "encoding/decoding" theory, "encoding" refers to the process by which

information disseminators transform the messages, intentions or viewpoints they convey into codes with specific rules. "Decoding" refers to the process where the information recipient interprets the above code according to specific rules to understand the sender's intention and the content of the information [9].

4.1 Dominant Mode: Proactively Constructing a Narrative Community

In the dominant mode, the decoding direction of folk users is consistent with the encoding intention of official discourse, and the two jointly construct a positive narrative of the "Belt and Road". The formation of this mode benefits from the official "micro-narration" strategy's accurate grasp of public emotions. For example, in "Infinite Home": China's Aid Construction in Madagascar released by Chan Pui-yi on YouTube, some users commented: "Aid construction seems to be gratuitous, but in fact, we have gained a lot. The political gains are unquestionable. Economically, the people of the aided countries welcome Chinese investment and business, which is a win-win result." "Giving a man a fish is not as good as teaching him to fish. Only then can the world have an 'infinite road'. Thank you, Pui-yi and her team." These interpretations are highly consistent with the official encoding intention of "joint construction and shared benefits". In the comment section of the short video of the "Belt and Road" documentary, this clip has received 220,000 views, with 90% of users liking it.

On short video platforms, the official can adopt a dominant strategy more in line with Generation Z's narrative style. Firstly, starting from emotional resonance, present "Belt and Road" stories through real characters, on-site pictures, and personal narratives, avoiding the sense of distance caused by direct publicity, transforming grand narratives into specific and perceptible small-person stories. While the audience feels resonance, they can also understand the true connotation of the Initiative. Secondly, establish an interactive mechanism. Official accounts can encourage the audience to actively participate in interactions through topic challenges, displaying high-quality comments, and actively replying to comments. The official can also gain unique ideas and perspectives from folk users in the released content.

4.2 Negotiated Mode: From One-way to Dialogue

In negotiated decoding, folk users do not fully submit to official encoding, but conduct personalized interpretation combined with their own experiences on the basis of core values, shifting from a one-way output to a multi-dimensional dialogue mode. For example, the core encoding meaning of CCTV News' "A Glimpse of the World in One Picture" article about the East Coast Rail Link is "cooperation promotes economic development". When folk users repost it, some focus on the difficulty of engineering technology, leaving messages such as "Chinese infrastructure is awesome", some associate it with the cultural origins between China and Malaysia, and some travel enthusiasts from a personal perspective leave messages such as "It will be more convenient to go to Malaysia in the future". These interpretations integrate individual perspectives and diverse needs, making official narratives closer to people's livelihood. This interactive negotiated mode transforms the "Belt and Road" narrative from one-way policy publicity to two-way interaction.

To make good use of the negotiated mode, the official should not only be satisfied with the transmission of information but also strive to create an open and inclusive field, actively stimulate diverse interpretations from the folk, and thus co-enrich and deepen the value of the core narrative with the public. Firstly, take the initiative to set open topics to guide meaning co-creation. Official accounts can strategically launch some open discussion topics. For example, when releasing the achievements of "Belt and Road" projects, they can set topics such as "The Changes of the Silk Road in My Eyes" and "If I Were a Transnational Project Engineer". Folk users can share personal insights and associated imaginations from different dimensions such as culture, life, and occupation. Secondly, cultivate "Chief Dialogue Officers". On social media, the official image needs a personalized "interface". It is crucial to cultivate a Chief Dialogue Officer or operation team who can interact, has a sense of internet, and even can "use memes". Such a role can interact affectionately with users in the comment section and "highlight" and like high-quality secondary creations, which can not only effectively eliminate the rigid impression of official discourse but also enhance users' sense of community belonging.

4.3 Oppositional Mode: From Defense to Guidance

The oppositional mode refers to when the audience decodes media information, they will establish another interpretation framework based on their own positions, making the decoding result run counter to the meaning conveyed by the encoder, thus completely subverting the encoder's communication intention. Although this mode accounts for a small proportion, it has become an important part of narrative tension. YouTube has a diverse user base, with audiences from more than 100 countries around the world converging here, making it the main medium for the oppositional mode. It is inevitable that information is mixed and difficult to distinguish between true and false. Due to cultural differences and the diversity of international audiences, there has been a certain degree of cultural discount, and some works have triggered cultural misunderstandings and cognitive biases among overseas audiences. Some negative comments focus on video quality, subtitle translation, narrative rhythm, etc. For "Belt and Road" Episode 1: Common Destiny on China Zone-Documentary Channel, there are comments such as "Unfortunately, there are no Chinese subtitles", "The introduction is a bit too long", "The background music is too loud, covering the commentary", and "Some part of this video has a voice issue".

At the same time, there are malicious smears by anti-China forces, such as spreading false remarks such as "The Belt and Road does more harm than good" and "Shoddy projects". For example, the account "Financial Cold Eye" released a video of Kenyan people taking to the streets to protest, without providing any real information or evidence, but with the commentary "The Belt and Road has ruined Kenya, leaving it heavily in debt". It can be seen that such users who spread rumors based on personal stance issues still account for a small proportion on YouTube, which has a negative impact on the international image of the "Belt and Road".

Faced with the "oppositional mode", official media should change from "blocking" to "guiding" to effectively guide international public opinion. Firstly, establish an active response mechanism. For factual criticisms, such as video production technology, subtitles, and audio issues, sincerely accept and improve them. Secondly, construct a diverse discourse world. Proactively build a world composed of official discourse, expert discourse, and folk discourse. For example, invite international engineers to explain project technical standards and record the improved living standards of local people. These diverse perspectives can demonstrate professionalism and authenticity, avoiding most unfounded prejudices. Finally, attach importance to preliminary research. In the initial stage of project planning and communication, actively understand the historical memory and real people's livelihood of the target countries through social surveys, big data public opinion analysis, and overseas investigation teams. The concept of "cultural discount" was first proposed by Colin Hoskins and R.Mirus in 1988 based on cross-cultural communication. It refers to the communication phenomenon where the value of cultural products decreases due to differences in cultural background when they are disseminated across markets. This concept clearly states that the factors influencing cultural discounts include language barriers, differences in cultural symbols, narrative styles, and differences in values, etc. [10]. This way of doing homework in advance can avoid information misunderstandings caused by cultural discount.

5. Conclusion

In the short video era, the communication methods of "Belt and Road" documentaries are undergoing an evolution in line with the times. To adapt to platform rules and the communication characteristics of short videos, official discourse has taken the initiative to shift from "grand narrative" to "micro-dialogue". Here, ordinary users have transformed from traditional one-way receivers to co-constructors of meaning. Folk users can also use platforms to participate in dialogues and conduct secondary creations. The official and the folk have formed a mutually influential and complementary balance through interweaving and interaction, jointly contributing to the communication of "Belt and Road" documentaries.

Acknowledgements

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