

Political Discourse in the Knowledge Economy: Edutainment as a Genre

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Abstract: In the socio-political context of a strategic transformation of public diplomacy in China, non-governmental discourses such as intellectual discourses have been showing increasing visibility both online and offline, at home and abroad. Through a digital ethnographic approach, this study investigates the meaning-making of the political discourse that uses edutainment as a genre by foregrounding the media activities of a commercial media company branded by Guan Media and the media discourse of an involved intellectual. Social media are changing the normality of knowledge production and distribution and the traditional media communication logic. Whether it is market-based filter bubble and echo chamber, politically controlled censorship, or spontaneous grassroots engagement, what is important is why and how mainstream discourses are constructed because of these factors through social media as a new form of political communication. To show the complexity of media communication of political messages in China, micro-level close observation on highly visible forms of news production and distribution by non-government actors is necessary. There are two levels of analysis in this study: self-branding of researchers in the knowledge economy, and edutainment as a genre of political discourse. Multimodal discourse analysis is adopted to discover the specific discursive and media strategies through the theoretical lenses of knowledge-power structure and semiotics. The cooperation of commercial media companies and intellectuals from higher education is found to be promoting a new form of political communication, in which edutainment works as a genre for better media presentation. In the context of the knowledge economy, edutainment content adjusts to the ideological dynamics of the socio-political reality in China in the tide of globalization and digitalization. This study contributes to understanding the participation of non-governmental actors in political communication and public sentiment on politics when political communication has become more dynamic and better organized by adjusting to the new media age.

Keywords: knowledge economy; political discourse; self-branding; social media; edutainment

1. Introduction

Knowledge has been increasingly the main resource for ensuring economic growth in developed countries (World Bank 1998). With the rapid economic development and the popularity of online infrastructures in China, the variety of online learning has expanded to a wide range. According to an industry report (QuestMobile 2018), China's Generation Z (people born in 1995-2009) which is the biggest mobile internet user group, spent more time on learning apps than entertainment apps. This is a sign that the knowledge economy in China has become a part of everyday life and embedded in people's lifestyles. The range of knowledge can be very wide, from academic findings to fun facts. Different kinds of knowledge are targeted to different audience groups. This study is interested in the form and genre of the production and dissemination of political knowledge in this social context. To show the complexity of media communication of political messages in China, micro-level close observation on highly visible forms of knowledge production and distribution by non-government actors is necessary. Specifically, the content production strategy of a Chinese media company named *Guan Media* and one professor who has a series of knowledge videos about China's politics and economy published through *Guan Media* is observed and analyzed. There are two dimensions of the analysis in this study: self-branding of researchers in the knowledge economy, and edutainment as a genre of political discourse. Multimodal discourse analysis is adopted to discover the specific discursive and media strategies through the theoretical lenses of knowledge-power structure and semiotics.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Self-branding as a social media strategy in the knowledge economy

The self is regarded as a commodity for sale in the labor market (Hearn 2008). As part of enterprise culture, self-branding has now infiltrated the neoliberal knowledge economy (Bandinelli & Arvidsson 2013). Many studies about self-branding think of it as a device of self-promotion for marketing (e.g., Gandini 2016) and as a result of the rapid globalization of advanced consumer capitalism (Khamis, Ang & Welling 2017). In these studies, the rise of social media is another significant factor for the popularity of self-branding. Social media encourage the value of self-branding for the efficacy and visibility of the communication of ideas and values. Such communication enhances the scale of participation, which is often followed by market profit and more. The use of social media helps build up an individual reputation and promote self-branding behaviors through constructing a more

authentic self without the medium of institutions. However, it is important not to see self-branding as a purely individual activity even though Web 2.0 and the related techniques reflect a fragmented economy that celebrates individualism (Marwick 2013). Branding as one of the fundamentals of marketing has expanded to penetrate a wide range of life (Bandinelli & Arvidsson 2013). Self-branding in the knowledge economy is not only a strategy for individuals to stand out in the labor market, it also is a strategy to deliver social or cultural value to consumers and construct social identities through micro-marketing in micro-communities (Arvidsson 2011; Schroder 2009), which may then produce market profit and more. Therefore, we see a more salient “self” as knowledge providers whose goal is to achieve a good reputation and authenticity in communication on social media. Furthermore, self-branding enables new practices of sociality that are not limited to the branding of the self but act as marketing work that combines networking with the management of social relationships (Gandini 2016). For instance, individual videos and blogs of influencers which have become the main news sources of young people rely on social networking sites and apps such as Twitter and Instagram.

Bubbles and the micromarketing function of social media are designed to create communities and groups. In the political context of new public diplomacy in China, we see growing micro-communities of political knowledge production and distribution. In this context, we can also see how intellectuals participate in a collaborative circle, a network of peers, reacting on and responding to the words of the other (Heynders 2016). Making use of the networking and grouping features of social media, intellectuals have more potential to expand the visibility of their ideas and knowledge. They combine and effectuate media activities such as hyperlinks, hashtags, citing, or simply showing up in the same media activities. Reputation as social capital is mobilized and implemented by professionals embedded within a network of personal contacts (Gandini 2016). This is to say, even though self-branding is a key tool used by professionals to keep focused contact with the audiences since such relations are the basis for social networks and public performances, the ideas, and visibility of professionals rely on networking to get promoted. Besides the networking via online infrastructures, the link with governmental discourse also helps attract attention and facilitates the spread of values. In a global neoliberal environment, the collaboration between higher education and governments has been deepened in the knowledge economy because higher education has contributed more to policymaking (Olssen & Peters 2005). The new form of public engagement encourages intellectuals to mediate and facilitate messages of others, especially of governmental discourses. This partly explains why intellectual discourse has become a major component of non-governmental political communication.

2.2 Edutainment as a genre of political discourse

The advent and popularity of television were regarded as providing a new medium for delivering political information while offering consumers a wide array of new ways to use their leisure time (Gentzkow 2006). What comes with the new way of life brought by television is the culture of entertainment. In the era of Web 2.0, entertainment has become an even intensely active word in many fields besides politics. The entertainment of learning has been widely discussed in education where a new word was created: edutainment. Edutainment is named as a hybrid type that is based on visualizing and animation made with the formats like games, diegetic things, and visual materials (Buckingham & Scanlon 2001). It is a style of teaching and learning through various media technologies based on the idea of combining playing and learning (Rapeepisarn, et al. 2006). In the context that expert discourse and content industry have been reshaped through the form of web-mediated knowledge dissemination, edutainment is not only associated with games, but also online videos in which hybrid multilingual and multimodal online texts are utilized (Santini 2015). Edutainment is now working as a genre of learning knowledge by which expert discourse is re-mediate in online edutainment videos with a mixed feature of formal and informal register and closer interaction with the audiences (Santini 2015).

However, studies on edutainment often focus on its pedagogical approaches and values instead of seeing it as a new genre of knowledge dissemination. First of all, we need to define knowledge. In a newly published industry report (TopKlout 2021) on the “knowledge related content” on Chinese main social media and websites, besides traditional-defined professional knowledge such as school subjects, natural sciences, finance, and arts, the knowledge ecosystem online has expanded widely including practical life skills. People have been eager to learn with the guide of media platforms that aim to improve content value, user value, platform value, and business value through purchasing knowledge-related products. Knowledge in the digital era has become an umbrella word covering facts, skills, science, humanities, and everything people find useful but don’t know yet. In Foucault (1972)’s power-knowledge structure, knowledge is a key means of exercising power to mobilize various economic, social and cultural resources. In such relation, discursive formations allow some thoughts and actions but occlude others, which means knowledge itself is an ideological work. The dissemination of political discourse

in the form of edutainment, therefore, deserves a closer look at its cultural and social codes. There has been a long debate on whether humanities and social sciences can be regarded as a science like natural sciences. One thing clear is that knowledge in politics and culture cannot avoid the confrontation with subjectivity and value judgment. The patterns of actions concerning politics-related knowledge show how experts in these fields make meaning of the social world and at the same time how they shape the social world.

The above report also points out that the engagement of individual scholars has become a new trend. Self-branding fits well with the form of edutainment in the traditional teacher-centered education approach. However, in the knowledge economy, the content design and production of edutainment are strongly consumer-centered. With the three characteristics: teacher-centered approach of education, consumer-centered content production, and ideological values embedded in academic analysis and hard facts, edutainment can be seen as a new structuring of political knowledge and a new genre of political discourse.

3. Data and methods

Guan Media is the main observatory subject of this study. It is a Chinese commercial media company founded in 2016, mainly producing short videos concerning humanity and scientific topic. It has been showing growing media visibility on both YouTube and one of the biggest Chinese video platforms bilibili. In 2020, it was evaluated as the second place in the rank of “the Most Influential Uploader in Science section of bilibili in June” (wjam123456 2020). Its YouTube channel is established in 2017 and is named by *Guan Video* owning 559,000 followers and more than 168 million views (retrieved on 2021-12-01). Most of its videos on YouTube are in Chinese and are updated later than on bilibili, which means the main audiences of its YouTube channel are Chinese living abroad. Either for YouTube or bilibili, in the diaspora of Chinese, young people are the main users. Understanding the feature of the audiences of *Guan Media* videos is important for the analysis of the media strategy and content design of this media brand. Multimodal discourse analysis is used as the analytical tool in the investigation of the self-branding strategy and the features of edutainment as a genre of political discourse with a focus on the activities and media products of one scholar on YouTube channel of *Guan Media*.

4. A case study on *Guan Media*

4.1 Self-branding and edutainment in expert discourse

Self-branding is the main character of *Guan Media's* video programs. More and more scholars are launching their programs under the channel of *Guan Media*. On the home page of the YouTube channel of *Guan Media*, the images of three professors are put into the center as shown in figure 1. One of them is Professor CHEN Ping wearing a t-shirt printed with the following sentence: “Do what the Americans do. Don’t do what the Americans say”.



Figure 1: The background image of the home page of Guan Media on YouTube. Retrieved on 2021-07-23
<https://www.youtube.com/c/GuanVideo%E8%A7%82%E8%A7%86%E9%A2%91%E5%B7%A5%E4%BD%9C%E5%AE%A4/playlists>

The deliberate choosing of this particular photo in which Professor CHEN wearing this t-shirt, which is casual but with a strong and straightforward statement, indexes a clear value judgment and the recognition of such value by *Guan Media*. The printed t-shirt is part of American culture and t-shirt messages are a visual testimony to the identities of wearers (Danna 1992). Scholars on *Guan Media* have a common feature: pro-government stance. The flow of knowledge is largely dependent on the cultural and organizational contexts in which people are encouraged to develop and share their knowledge (Clarke 2001). A Chinese pro-government professor wearing

an American culture product on which text is printed in English indexes a multilayer of meanings. The text portrays America as a country that doesn't walk the talk. English as a lingua franca is used to declare the indistinctive attitude both at home and abroad. It is intertextual with his branding slogan shown in the introduction of *Guan Media* in figure 1: "Professor CHEN Ping, a physicist who is researching on economics. Have a thorough knowledge of both China and the west. Create a philosophy of my own. Update on every Tuesday". The multilingual capability increases the authority of his arguments. The discourse forms a value that when you criticize the west on the basis that knows about the west, your arguments become more trustworthy. Besides, as discussed, the main group of audiences of the YouTube channel of *Guan Media* is Chinese living abroad. English t-shirt is better for further dissemination. Below the videos of Professor Chen, there is a link to an online shop selling cultural products such as t-shirts and mugs branded by the professor as shown in figure 2. It is a good reflection of how edutainment products receive profits. Furthermore, the statement is connected to the nationalist discourse that is invoked by the recent trade war between the US and narratives such as "China threat". In the power struggle of the US and China, expert discourses are significant to the way the ordinary people understand the situation and values of each other's country.

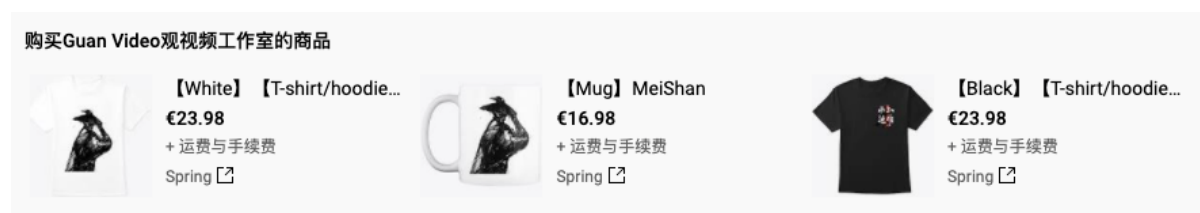


Figure 2: The link below Professor CHEN's videos on Guan Media channel on YouTube for selling cultural products such as t-shirts and mugs branded by him. Retrieved on 2021-07-23.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRhlulbOrjQ&list=PLr0JU8OOrK4gITvl8MCMli5kdc1zyl2Gx>

There are 219 episodes of the playlist of Professor CHEN Ping on the YouTube channel of *Guan Media* (retrieved on 2021-12-02). The topics of these videos can be roughly categorized as Chinese domestic politics, international politics, political economics, physics, biology, education, law, and commentary videos on hot-spot issues. The wide range of the video contents is a representation of the colorful academic experiences of the scholar. According to Research Gate (n.d.), Professor CHEN's research covers monetary economics, financial economics, economic complexity, law, and economics. He got his doctor's degree in physics in the US. According to Peking University (n.d.), his research areas are even wider including cultural anthropology and history of science, etc. In general, his videos on *Guan Media* share the following features:

Content-wise: 1) The use of statistics (especially non-China sources). 2) The comparison between China and the US. 3) Upholding the Chinese political system. 4) Interdisciplinary analysis.

Video-making-wise: 1) Home bookshelf as a background. 2) The use of a typical speaker-centered lecture mode. 3) The use of visual aids in (relevant supporting photos and video footages in between his talks). 4) Mostly 5-20 minutes long.



Figure 3: Part of the intro of the integrated video of Professor CHEN Ping about the 2019 Hong Kong protest on the channel of *Guan Media* on YouTube, showing the self-branding of Professor CHEN Ping as "Sword discussion on Mei Mount". Retrieved on 2021-11-23.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RryhO_ViQI&list=PLr0JU8OOrK4gITvl8MCMli5kdc1zyl2Gx&index=6

Professor CHEN has an alias *Swordman on Mei Mount* (Meishan jianke 眉山剑客). His video programs are branded accordingly by *Sword discussion on Mei Mount* (Meishan lunjian 眉山论剑) as illustrated in figure 3. He explained that it is inspired by his working experience as a railway worker in the Mount Mei area from 1968 to 1974 during the Cultural Revolution (Chen Ping: Why do I address myself Meishan jianke and Jimo Qiucuo 2020). He started to teach himself economics from then and that five-year overturned his understanding of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* because even in the chaotic time, the railway system was still well-managed strictly by the country which is different from Smith's laissez-faire approach. The personal experience, casual dressing style, the use of theory and statistics, the interdisciplinary academic background are all modes adopted in his videos and are signs indexing his discourse of supporting the political system of the Chinese government.

5. Is knowledge neutral? The moral authority of political knowledge

This section is about the observation of another media strategy adopted by *Guan Media* on YouTube. Benson (2015: 83-84) concluded three characteristics of YouTube as text: YouTube pages deploy multiple semiotic modes; YouTube pages are products of multiple authorship; YouTube pages are highly dynamic in the sense that the text of the page constantly changes in response to user and machine-generated input. Signs are addressed as multimodal objects rather than linguistic ones (Blommaert 2013). In the interface of every video in the channel of *Guan Media* on YouTube, we can see a written title given by *Guan Media* (the user of YouTube) below the image and above the number of views (alter automatically based on views) and uploading date (machine-generated texts). *Guan Media's* branding practices on the page of YouTube are embedded in the multimodal context of YouTube. What is different and noticeable is the semiotic sign of a red cross **X** in front of the title of some videos uploaded by *Guan Media* on YouTube. As illustrated in figure 4, *Guan Media* made a playlist with a collection of these red-cross-tagged videos. In the observation of the special semiotic mode of **X**, this part seeks to understand this highly visible symbol from the perspective of its authorship and dynamics through the analysis of the interaction between *Guan Media*, YouTube, and the audiences of *Guan Media* on YouTube.

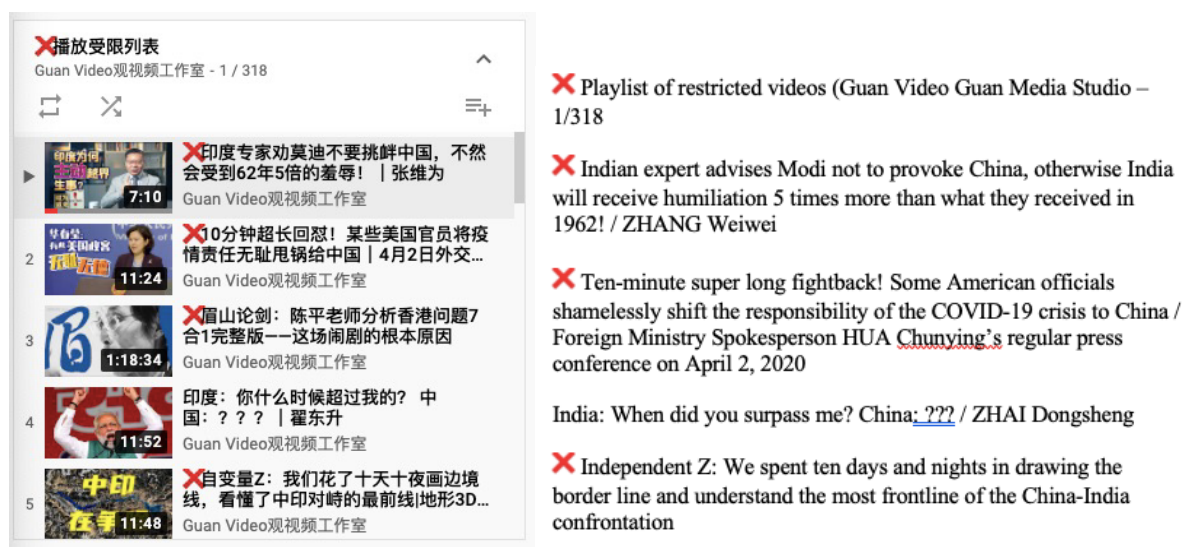


Figure 4: *Guan Media* collected all the videos that are claimed to be restricted by YouTube in one playlist. Retrieved on 2020-10-12.

Many of the videos are given a red cross icon in the lists as **X**. According to *Guan Media's* explanation shown in Figures 6-7, these videos are limited because of YouTube's monetization policy. YouTube explains the monetization policy as content that is not suitable for ads will result in a "limited or no ads" monetization state. *Guan Media* addresses the restriction as "yellow icon incident" instead of "red icon incident". What is the yellow icon? According to the "advertiser-friendly content guidelines" given by YouTube (n.d.),

[users] will see the "limited or no ads" icons ( or ) when [they]'ve turned on monetization for a video, but our automated systems or policy specialists believe that video does not meet our advertiser-friendly content guidelines.

Therefore, the yellow icon  given by YouTube to its users is only seen in the backstage data of the channel. The red cross  is given by *Guan Media* to inform its audiences about the possible unfairness that it has received from the influential western media platform YouTube. McKenna and Graham (2000) suggest that the value of technocrats will be expressed in discourse that promotes their interests. As one of the biggest technology companies in the world, YouTube makes its meaning of many regulations in figure 5 through the monetization policy and holds the right to define the actions of its users under its structure. We don't know the exact category of the red-tagged videos in this case as shown in figure 7. What is clear is that if the yellow icon is a form of promoting the interests of YouTube, the red icon is a form to reconceptualize the meaning-making process of YouTube by reminding people that values are never absent in discourses.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inappropriate language • Violence • Adult content • Shocking content • Harmful or dangerous acts • Hateful & derogatory content • Recreational drugs and drug-related content | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firearms-related content • Controversial issues • Sensitive events • Incendiary and demeaning • Tobacco-related content • Adult themes in family content |
|---|---|

Figure 5: The main topics that are not advertiser-friendly defined by YouTube. Retrieved on 2021-06-28.
<https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6162278#zippy=>

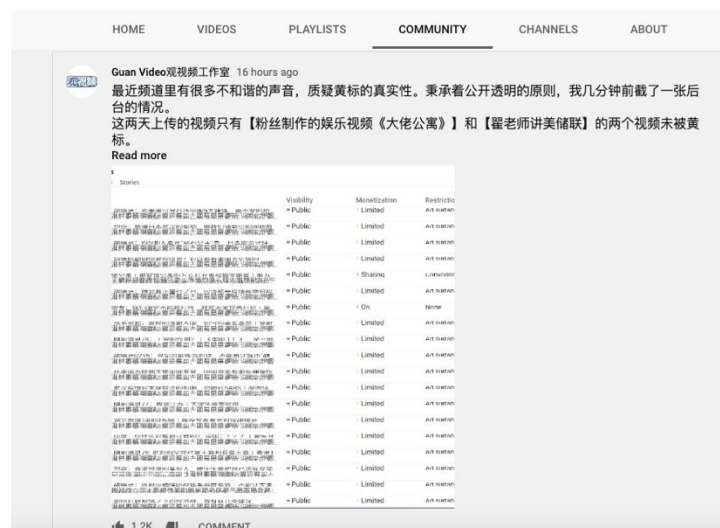


Figure 6: *Guan Media*'s reply to some netizens who questioned the facticity of the restriction. *Guan Media* displayed a part of its backstage data to prove those videos were indeed limited because of the monetization policy. Retrieved on 2020-02-10.

According to Benson (2015), the three characteristics of YouTube discussed above exist with a premise of treating YouTube as a social media and YouTube pages as products of mediated social interaction. To understand the logic of the interaction, we need to put it in the context of the social morality represented by the action of counter-censorship.

In the discussion among the followers of the channel in the commentary area below the videos illustrated in figure 8, many of them read the red cross as an unfair algorithm or censorship to Chinese political voices from a pro-CPC perspective. The topic of censorship is often discussed in western media communication and academia about China and on most occasions as a factual basis to criticize Chinese politics and propaganda. Androustopoulos (2013: 50) comments that '[a]lthough each textual bit on a YouTube page can be viewed as a distinct textual unit, videos and comments co-occur in a patterned way and are interrelated in meaning making'. In a sign, meaning and form are focused on one entity (Kress 2010). The red cross shown on the YouTube page recontextualizes the formation and effects of censorship by informing people that censorship and

demonetization can be the same thing in different discourses. It has a symbolic and highly recognizable meaning that the pro-CPC voices are intentionally restricted and suppressed.



Figure 7: A zoom in on the texts in figure 6 which were sent by *Guan Media* in the community area on YouTube (designed for the discussion between the channel and its followers in the form of written interaction). Retrieved on 2020-02-10.



Guan Video Studio:

Our videos are seriously restricted from the backstage. We hope that you can help us spread our videos by forward, liking and commenting!

Steve L:

Sh*t! Professor Ping CHEN's talks are based on facts and are restricted, while the non-sense accusation from the U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo that 1 million Uighurs are imprisoned in detention camp in Xinjiang has been received by the west as facts. YouTube is disgusting!

Ital73:

I'm a Hongkonger. I don't agree with general election. People who rule HK should be patriot HongKongers. Those who support the independence of HK should not be allowed to become legislators or chief executive.

Huangxingtu:

I don't know about the situation of other languages. But as long as a Chinese video is tagged with the red cross , I regard it as a symbol of truths, facts, and the disclosure of the bad things done by the West!

Figure 8: Comments of the audiences of the videos that are tagged with the red cross in the channel of *Guan Media* on YouTube. Retrieved on 2020-02-12.

The reception of the audience shows the effectiveness of the semiotic tool. Just as some people presume that what is censored are truths, many audiences of *Guan Media* presume that what's red-tagged are truths, see figure 8. In the public sphere of YouTube as an intermediary, messages about the meaning and value of censorship are across the communication among YouTube, video uploaders, and audiences. The three actors are interrelated and their role as message sender and message receiver is dynamic and interchangeable in the communicative discourse constructed by structured multimodal semiotic resources. Moreover, from the perception of the netizen Steve L (in figure 8), scholars present their knowledge and professionalism in political issues in the videos, which wins the trust from its followers and results in comparison between their pro-CPC discourse and the western politicians' critical discourse about the leadership of the CPC. The online infrastructures of YouTube and the feature of multi-authorship of it provide affordances for the interaction of Chinese media, western media, Chinese audiences, and western audiences about the meaning of a pair of moral concepts: censorship and counter-censorship.

6. Conclusion and discussion

This study explores edutainment as a genre of political discourse used by non-governmental organizations, in specific, university scholars, and commercial media platforms. The members of the *Guan media* community are aware of the advantage of using digital technology and the globalized context. The online visibility of their activities is based on the bigger social context of the power struggle between China and the US in the international arena. The features of edutainment are shown through intellectuals' scientific use of data and statistics, their identity as professionals, their language register, their self-branding strategy, and dressing style, which are all resources to construct the genre of their linguistic activity. In turn, the resources they use are indexical to their identity as intellectuals. Self-branding and the genre of edutainment as two dimensions of communication determine the scope and scale of social interaction of political discourse in the knowledge economy. The cooperation between commercial media companies and researchers from higher education, and their major presence and position as knowledge producers and disseminators underline new media activities and strategies in the context of knowledge economy and globalization. Edutainment as a genre of political discourse enhances the authority of political knowledge, which is never neutral and without value judgments. In the context of the knowledge economy, this cooperation provides edutainment content adjusting to the ideological dynamics of the socio-political reality in China in the tide of globalization and digitalization. This study contributes to understanding the participation of non-governmental actors in political communication and public sentiment on politics when political communication has become more dynamic and well-organized by adjusting to the new trends in the new media age.

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