



Article

Linguistic Analysis of News Title Strategies in Media Frame—A Case Study of “The Mueller Investigation” in the News Titles of *The New York Times* and Fox News

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Abstract: The United States Federal Bureau of Investigation had been investigating the relationship between Russian agents and members of Trump’s presidential campaign since July 2016 out of suspicions that the President-elect worked with Russia to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, which became a major news event in American media. The headlines from news media outlets illustrate the strategic use of language to shape opinions and frames. Conducted with the tools of System Functional Linguistics, in particular, the appraisal and ideation resources, based on the framing theory of Journalism Studies, this research aims to answer the two research questions: (1) What frames did *The New York Times* and Fox News construct in their coverage of the Mueller investigation? (2) What linguistic strategies did *The New York Times* and Fox News use respectively to construct their frames? It was found that *The New York Times* uses fewer evaluative tools than Fox News, but the expression of attitudes draws on the context in which they are presented and evaluation is expressed in a more sophisticated and refined manner. Fox News is more straightforward without hiding its own opinion and biases. This research is important in further understanding of the American media and their linguistic strategies in forming manipulative frames.

Keywords: framing theory; systemic functional linguistics; *The New York Times*; Fox News; news titles



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1. Introduction

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has been investigating the relationship between Russian agents and members of Trump’s presidential campaign since July 2016 out of suspicions that the President-elect worked with Russia to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In May 2017, Trump fired Comey, the FBI Director in charge of the investigation. From May 2017 to March 2019, political forces, in particular the Democratic Party, pushed forward the investigation led by Special Counsel Mueller, who used to be a federal attorney general. The investigation culminated with a 448-page report. The redacted version of the report was released to the public on 18 April 2019, redacting content that may affect matters under investigation and national security.¹ The Trump team believed the report “proved his innocence”, though the lengthy report suggested otherwise. The incident continued to escalate, before Mueller gave a 7h testimony at the Congress on 24 July 2019.² The investigation made headlines of American media and television news from the beginning, having a huge impact on American politics. As the event was top news in the United States, the media’s construction of a tendentious news frame based on their own positions has been explicitly reflected in this process, as shown by *The New York Times* and Fox News. The coverage of the event is an example for studying strategies in forming frames by the US media.

The New York Times was generally more inclined towards the idea that the findings of the Mueller investigation may prove detrimental to Trump. As an old American media outlet, its slogan is “All the News That’s Fit to Print”. It has not supported any Republican candidate since 1956 and has been supporting

Democratic candidates in all presidential elections since 1960.³ Therefore, it can be said that the newspaper is pro-Democratic Party.

Fox News is a paid American news channel owned by Murdoch, whose main target audience is the conservatives. It has supported the Republican Party, George W. Bush, and Trump, conducting “biased reporting” and discrediting Democrats.⁴

Trump’s Twitter posts and reports from major American media show that Fox News is an important source of information for Trump, essentially on Trump’s side. Meanwhile, Trump expressed disdain for conventional mainstream media such as *The New York Times* and CNN, accusing them of producing “Fake News”.

According to Benkler et al. (2018), there are many differences between mainstream, such as *The New York Times*, and center-left media versus right-wing media, such as Fox News, suggesting that the right-wing media ecosystem is distinct from mainstream and center-left media in its communication dynamics, lack of adherence to journalistic norms, and its ability to influence and shape public discourse towards a more radical and partisan viewpoint.

From a global perspective, American media, with their precision of English language constructing their opinions, and an event with distinct different opinions by the center-left and right-wing media will reveal much of how frames are constructed and opinions are formed with linguistic strategies, which, in turn, may also shed light on how to objectively approach media news as common people.

This research seeks to shed some light on the strategies of forming frames in the media by examining the headlines covering the event in *The New York Times* and Fox News. To this end, this paper seeks to answer the following two questions:

(1) What frames did *The New York Times* and Fox News construct in their coverage of the Mueller investigation?

(2) What linguistic strategies did *The New York Times* and Fox News use, respectively, to construct their frames?

It is found that the two media basically adopt negative attitudes towards events they cover. While social consensus are philosophies commonly accepted by the American general public, it is also the foundation on which manipulative frames are based. And the common frames adopted by both the media outlets are frame of law, of rights, of political parties, and of authority. And frames adopted only by *The New York Times* are the frame of humor and guilt, while the ones only by Fox News are conspiracy and fake news. The two media have applied advantageous and disadvantageous strategies in forming frames. And different process types are the major strategies the two media adopt in their manipulation of the frames and opinions along with appraisal words. In quantitative terms, the distribution of the number of various linguistic indicators reflects the tendency of the overall opinion and the construction of power relations in the media frame. *The New York Times* uses fewer evaluative tools than Fox News, but the expression of attitudes draws on the context in which they are presented and expresses evaluation in a more sophisticated and refined manner. Fox News is more straightforward without hiding its own opinion and biases. This research is important in further understanding of the American media and their linguistic strategies in forming manipulative frames.

2. Basics of Framing Theory

This paper adopts framing theory as the research foundation and linguistic tools for the analysis.

2.1. Framing Theory

In the political discourse of the media, in light of different goals, values, and communication priorities, the media often use varied “recontextualization” to report the same event, reflecting the orientation of different media to interpret the same event (Fairclough 1995, p. 41). The attitudes, positions and evaluations of *The New York Times* and Fox News on

the “Mueller investigation” reflect such recontextualization, which is also called “Framing theory” in news communication.

Framing theory plays a substantial role in several branches of social sciences. For example, in the early stage of framing theory, the influential sociologist Goffman (1986) believed that framing is an analytical tool for individuals to actively classify various events in life and interpret their meanings. Later, Gamson further developed this concept into the structure of the core point of practice that provides meaning or the formation of a story line with meaningful interpretation (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, p. 143; Pan and Kosicki 1993, p. 56). Psychological research believes that framing is to place information in a unique context, some of which will attract more individual attention. One possible result is that these elements of an issue play an indispensable role in influencing individual judgments or inferences (Pan and Kosicki 1993, p. 57).

The beginning of framing theory in communication research started from Anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who first defined the concept of framing as “a spatial and temporal bounding of a set of interactive messages” (Bateson 1972, p. 197). Researchers on communication further developed the theory of frame and framing in this field. A frame in a communication “organizes everyday reality” (Tuchman 1978, p. 193) by providing “meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, p. 143) and promoting “particular definitions and interpretations of political issues” (Shah et al. 2002, p. 343; Chong and Druckman 2007).

2.2. Function and Purpose of Framing

Entman (1993, p. 52) argued that the function of framing is to select certain aspects of a fact in the context of communication to make them more prominent in order to advance the definition of a particular issue, interpretation of causality, moral evaluation, and/or suggestions for dealing with the issue.

Apparently, framing is not only to “construct” facts, but more importantly, to promote political campaigns and achieve political goals through the construction of facts. Interest groups in the U.S. political process want to highlight the importance of their agendas, thus they will amplify their public policy issues in the news (Pan and Kosicki 1993, p. 55). The positions and attitudes of *The New York Times* and Fox News towards the “Mueller investigation” clearly reflect the above-mentioned feature.

2.3. Foundation of Framing

In news communication, framing can be seen as a strategy for constructing and understanding news discourse or as a feature of news discourse per se (Pan and Kosicki 1993, p. 57). It is defined to meaningfully construct social environments in a symbolic form by means of common and persistent organizing principles (Reese 2007, p. 150).

Framing is based on the “consensus” that already exists in society. In other words, the frame is generally not constructed from scratch or out of thin air, but based on the existing cognition, attitude, and values of the audience. In news, the social environment in which its discourse operates contains common social beliefs, which are widely accepted by the public as common sense or traditional wisdom (Pan and Kosicki 1993, p. 57). However, the media often express their attitudes and positions “implicitly” rather than “explicitly”, that is, many basic consensuses are hidden in the discourse in the form of “common sense” (Fairclough 1995, pp. 44–45). In the American media, the features that implicitly reflect the content of social consensus are particularly obvious.

Some scholars have also pointed out that framing is a part of the culture, which guides elites to construct information and influence journalists to choose information and present it in the text, thereby affecting the cognition and attitude of the audience (Matthes 2012, pp. 248–49). Clearly, framing relies on the basis of social consensus. The exploration of such a basis is conducive to have a deeper interpretation of the formation mechanism of frames, whereas the social consensus basis is also important for refining and analyzing frames. Surely, the abstraction and social specificity of social consensus make it difficult to

extract it. One possible path is to analyze the social cognition behind language through linguistic indicators by combining the analysis path of systemic functional linguistics to infer a more abstract social consensus.

2.4. Conditions of Framing

The media plays a vital role in enhancing public knowledge, shaping public awareness, forming values, determining social relations, and shaping social identity (Fairclough 1995, p. 44). But whether an individual is affected by a frame depends on a variety of factors, and the media cannot force the audience to follow its frame. What the media can do is to repeat or keep the frame of the agenda recurring to potentially influence the audience (Matthes 2012, pp. 250, 252; Entman et al. 2009).

The “Mueller investigation” is an event that lasted for about two years. During this process, it was continuously tracked and reported by different media based on its overall views and attitudes, which was in line with conditions of “frame repetition”. Although the basic attitude and position are determined and the event itself is gradually unfolding over time, there will be uncertainty in the strategy of forming frames. Therefore, a retrospective study on the reporting of this event is of some significance for the research on the framing of the American media.

2.5. Linguistic Strategy of Framing

The content contained in the frame is not only an argument, but also a position to which the argument is more inclined, and the position on an event is constructed in a specific form (Matthes 2012, p. 254). The discourse used in the frame is the direct bearer of meaning (Steinberg 1998, p. 845; Vicari 2010, p. 509). Therefore, the carrier that bears the frame in news is the discourse of news. From the perspective of linguistics, discourse framing often includes the use of words with different affective connotations, editing events rather than displaying events in a time-line manner, nominalizing the action process, and selectively presenting the action agent, metaphor, etc. (Fairclough 1995, pp. 83, 91, 112, 114).

In this paper, linguistic analysis relies on six tools of discourse analysis of System Functional Linguistics, including evaluation (attitudinal negotiation), concept (experience understanding), association (logical association), identification (tracking participants), textual periodicity (flow of information), and consultation (interaction in dialogue). In view of the research purpose of this study and the characteristics of headlines that are independent of news texts but exist in the context of news, the two tools of “evaluation” and “concept” are mainly used in this study. In addition to the analysis of the headlines, the content of the event is analyzed in combination with the context of the event.

Previous research on *The New York Times* and Fox News has inspired the current paper a lot. However, judging from the research distribution, there is limited research on the frame construction of media relating to domestic events in the United States. This paper attempts to use the tools of System Functional Linguistics to study the media reports of the US on its domestic events, hoping to gain a further understanding of linguistic strategies for the framing of American media.

3. Research Methods

The corpus for this study is all the news headlines with “Mueller” in *The New York Times* and Fox News from 1 January 2019 to 17 June 2019. The Mueller investigation lasted for nearly two years. A 448-page “redacted version” of the investigation report was released on 18 April 2019, which pushed the event to the climax of American news and public opinion. However, the event did not end but continued to ferment, and it still occupied the page or time slot of the American media in June 2019 when the author of this paper decided to systematically sort out the reports of this event and went to the library of Peking University on June 17 for data inquiry.

The retrieval method is to use Lexis Advance to conduct a keyword search of “Mueller” within the scope of “Headline” of the corresponding media. The search result shows that

in the past two years, *The New York Times* has a total of 858 pieces of news, and Fox News has a total of 687 pieces. Irrelevant and repeated news is removed and the remaining news is sorted out in chronological order. As a result, 273 valid headlines in *The New York Times* and 268 in Fox News between 1 January 2019 and 17 June 2019 were obtained. The number of news headlined with “Mueller” in the two media is roughly equal. However, due to the characteristics of Fox News as a TV media outlet, Fox News has a larger news capacity compared with *The New York Times* as a print media outlet, so a report of Fox News often contains more than “one” headline with “Mueller”, and the news headline often comprises more other events in it. Taking small sentences (or the noun phrase with full meaning) as the standard of division, the clauses with “Mueller” are selected for analysis while the irrelevant contents are eliminated.

The New York Times is a print media outlet while Fox News is a TV media outlet. There are differences in media attributes, and it is difficult to conduct comparative research in the traditional sense. Nevertheless, the organized news texts in the database make it possible to conduct retrospective research of the texts, and moreover, the media with different communication vehicles have text comparability.

The most significant content, tendentious opinions, attitudes, and viewpoints in the news are generally reflected in the news headlines. Therefore, frame extraction and analysis in this study was explored mainly by means of analyzing the headlines of the reports and conducting qualitative analysis in conjunction with the news contents.

The linguistic analysis of framing strategy is mainly conducted by analyzing the linguistic strategies in news headlines with the discourse analysis tools of the Sydney School of System Functional Linguistics to reflect the relatively distinct language strategies of framing. For example, through the evaluation system in discourse analysis, the attitude and position of the media on the event is clearly displayed; through the process analysis in discourse analysis, different participants are found in the core or non-core position in different types of actions; and through the analysis of relationship between people and events, the objects that are presented or not presented in the texts are found out. All of these provide more precise analytical tools for the discourse strategy of frame formation in the media.

4. Analysis and Findings

The New York Times is more inclined to the contents that may be found in the Mueller investigation unfavorable to Trump in terms of overall rhetoric, and it prefers to the Democratic Party in terms of political orientation, whereas Fox News supports the Republican Party, George W. Bush, and the Trump administration. Their positions are also quite clearly reflected in the frame formation of the event reports.

After tracking and researching the news event and analyzing news headlines, supplemented by the textual analysis of news reports, it was found that the news frames of the two media outlets were constructed partially in the same way and partially in their own independent manners. As shown in the literature, the frame is formed on the basis of the general consensus of society. In the process of analyzing the frame, the understanding of the social consensus basis is also essential, which will be reconstructed in the analysis of this study.

4.1. Common News Frames of the Two Media Outlets

4.1.1. Frame of Law

I. Social Consensus Basis for this Frame

Abidance by law is a basic social consensus. In the ongoing news event, the frame of law is at the center of the dispute between two dissenting opinions. Although the same frame is adopted, there is a difference in the propensity of the two media outlets under this frame, that is, *The New York Times* believed that Trump violated the law, while Fox News held that Trump did not violate the law.

II. Analysis of Frequency

In the frame of law, a more distinct indicator is that there is a difference in the presentation of “Mueller” synonymous with law in the two media outlets.

New York Times

Mueller participating in the “action” refers to “Mueller” being a participant in the action semantically.

In the contents related to “Mueller”, except for “Friday briefing” and “Monday briefing”, “Mueller” appears 265 times in total. Specifically, it appears 113 times in Mueller report, including 43 times as a subject, 22 times as a prepositional object, 12 times as a verbal object, while it appears 4 times as a verbal object and 8 times as a subject in Robert Mueller. In addition to Mueller report, in which it appears most frequently, Mueller, as the “active” agent, appears 30 times in the forms of “Mueller’s X” (X for noun) and “Mueller X”, and Mueller’s or Mueller appears 33 times as an adjective that defines the range. If Mueller is regarded as the participant of the action when it serves as the subject or the prepositional object, and Robert Mueller serves as the verbal object or the subject, it participates in the “action” 119 times while it does not participate 146 times. In other words, even if Mueller does not initiate the action, 45% of *The New York Times* headlines “drag him” into the action, indicating that in the headlines of *The New York Times*, Mueller plays the role of an agent or a recipient, as well as the role of “defining” the scope of what is being discussed (see Table 1).

Table 1. Mueller in “action”.

	Mueller participating in the “action”	Mueller not participating in the “action”
<i>New York Times</i>	119 (45%)	146 (55%)
Fox News	121 (32%)	256 (68%)

Fox News

Among 264 news headlines, Mueller report (including Robert Mueller report, Mueller report findings) appears 211 times in 151 news titles; Mueller, as the subject, appears 51 times in 37 news titles; Mueller, as a preposition object, appears 19 times in 18 news titles; Mueller, as a verb object, appears 13 times in 12 news titles; Mueller’s appears 30 times in 28 news titles. Mueller investigation(s) appears 17 times; Mueller team 6 times; and Mueller indictment(s) 4 times. In addition to Mueller report, which appears most frequently, Mueller, as the “active” actor appears 38 times in the forms of “Mueller’s X” and “Mueller X”. And Mueller’s or Mueller appears 45 times as adjectives that define the range. If Mueller is regarded as the participant of actions when Mueller serves as the subject and as the prepositional object, and Robert Mueller serves as the verb object and as the subject, Mueller takes part in “actions” 121 times. When Mueller appears to define the “range”, including in “Mueller report” and other forms, it appears 256 times. That is to say, in all the times when Mueller appeared, only 32% of the occurrences suggest “action”, while 68% only appear as “background”, without emphasis on his actions (see Table 1).

The ratio is different from that of *The New York Times*. This shows that *The New York Times* gives Mueller a relatively more prominent position in the headlines and “shapes” him as an active participant in language.

As mentioned earlier, “Mueller” is synonymous with “law”. From the analysis courseware, in terms of linguistics, under the frame of laws, *The New York Times* attempts to entitle Mueller to more power while Fox News tries to avoid highlighting his power.

III. Case Study

Some cases saliently reflect this frame. For example, because Trump administration officials failed to testify according to the summons of Congress, Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives, declared “constitutional crisis”.

New York Times

Pelosi Declares “Constitutional Crisis”

Fox News

Dems Declare “Constitutional Crisis” Over Mueller Report Showdown

The New York Times places more emphasis on the “Speaker” declaring “constitutional” crisis to imply the authority and neutrality of the declaration. However, Fox News brings into focus the “Democratic Party”, of which the Speaker is a member and leads to association with bipartisan disputes. Fox News also emphasized that this incident was caused by the showdown of the “Mueller Report”.

The piece of news reported by the ABC (American Broadcasting Corporation) is titled “Showdown over Mueller report is a ‘constitutional crisis,’ Pelosi says, but resists calls to impeach Trump”. This title says much more and remains in a relatively neutral position.

Both the expression of “Mueller” and the linguistic construction of the “Constitutional Crisis” reflect the importance these two media outlets have attached to the frame of laws and their positions in the news event coverage under this frame.

IV. Language Polishing Strategy

When constructing such a frame, the media have adopted distinct language polishing strategies.

(a) Polishing of “Hard News”

From the perspective of the relationship between the medium and the recipient, employing the mode of “agent-medium-process”⁵ is more dynamic and conveys the impression of facts-based “hard news”. But in closer analysis of the content, some titles still express the views or attitudes of the news media or the opinions the media have cited.

From the analysis of the “agent-medium-process” mode, the medium and agent are the main participants of the two actions. But the analysis of meaning shows that there are no actual actions being taken between them and that the mode is used to express the opinions of the media (see Table 2).

Table 2. Agent-Process-Medium.

	Agent	Process	Medium	Circumstance
Fox News	Did	Bob Mueller	Kill	The Institution Of The Special Counsel For Good

(a) Polishing of “Coming Straight to the Point”

The appraisal resources⁶ in the title are the kind of language resource that expresses feelings and attitudes most directly. Therefore, by choosing and using words expressing certain feelings and attitudes, the author tries to polish the language to “come straight to the point”.

Here, “apolitical” is the appraisal of “Mueller”, while “admirably” is the amplification of the adjective “apolitical”, indicating the media believe that the Mueller investigation is objective without any political strings attached (see Table 3).

Table 3. Medium-Process-Range.

	Medium	Process	Range
<i>The New York Times</i>	Mueller	Is	Admirably Apolitical

(a) Polishing of “Seeming Unintentional”

“Circumstance” is a peripheral element in the action process. By placing certain content in the titles, the news writer intends to bring the audience’s attention to the content,

while by embedding it in the “circumstance”, the author attempts to reduce its importance. Such choices seem “unintentional” but are “with deliberate intentions”.

Standing Where Barr Cleared Trump on Obstruction, Mueller Makes a Different Case

In this example, the underlined part is the “circumstance”. From the perspective of linguistics, “circumstance” should be a peripheral element of the action process, but in this example, the “circumstance” represents important information, indicating that Barr and Mueller disagree on the issue.

4.1.2. Frame of Rights

I. Social Consensus Basis for the Frame

The frame of rights is a significant frame in the report of this event. Both media outlets have constructed a frame of rights in their respective reports, including the public’s right to know.

Moreover, in the report of “people”, the media respect the rights of the reported figures to avoid a direct “final verdict” as the appraisal. In the meantime, the two media adopt certain linguistic strategies to present their positions on this event.

II. Analysis of Frequency

New York Times

- Judgment

“Individual” appears 24 times in 20 items, among which 6 times in 5 items are positive while the rest are all negative. In the positive items, “warrior” is the only noun while the rest are all adjectives, which explicitly indicate attitudes. In the negative items, nine are verbs, three are adjectives, and six are nouns, among which only one verb is an indirect expression while the rest are all direct expression of attitudes (see Table 4).

Table 4. Judgment and Appreciation of *New York Times*.

Appraisal	Type	Amount	Example
Judgment	Personal (positive)	6	warrior, admirably apolitical, cautious, calm
	Personal (negative)	18	wimp, frantic, fixation, shameless, botched
	Moral (positive)	4	by the rule, protect, integrity
	Moral (negative)	31	whitewash, committed a crime, obstruction of justice, conspired
Appreciation	66		underlying, greatest memory, thorny, aftermath

“Morality” appears 35 times in 30 items, among which 19 are verbs, 15 are nouns, and 1 is an adjective. (See Table 4).

Generally, in all the resources containing attitude towards “people” in the news titles of *The New York Times*, verbs appear in the largest amount. Though verbs can be used to directly express feelings, adjectives are comparatively in a better position to indicate an attitude towards a person in a more direct and explicit way. The feelings expressed through verbs are more “subtle” and less direct than those indicated by adjectives.

Appreciation

Appreciation appears 66 times in 57 items, among which 36 are adjectives, 24 are nouns (some appear in the form of “adjective + noun”), 3 are verbs, and 1 is an adverb. This indicates that the primary vocabulary resource for appreciation is adjectives (see Table 4).

Compared with verbs, adjectives show the features of events and things in a more direct way, or rather, more directly express the media’s judgment of such features. But feel-

ings and judgment of attitudes are mainly expressed through verbs to indirectly express attitudes towards people. This demonstrates that *The New York Times* adopts different strategies to express attitudes towards people and events.

Fox News

A. Judgment

The judgment of “individual” is hardly positive, only expressed through 2 nouns, 5 verbs, and 1 adjective, while 11 nouns, 39 verbs, and 2 adjectives are negative (see Table 5). It can be concluded that when making judgment about people, Fox News and *The New York Times* adopt similar strategies of employing more verbs instead of adjectives as sources of attitudes. We may infer that the media are more inclined to use relatively indirect expressions when drawing conclusions about people.

Table 5. Judgment and Appreciation of Fox News.

Appraisal	Type	Amount	Example
Judgment	Personal (positive)	8	pundits, credibility, transparent, fields
	Personal (negative)	52	threatening, desperate, hysteria, contradict
	Moral (positive)	2	integrity, pleaded not guilty
	Moral (negative)	88	witch hunt, obstruction of justice, double standards, collusion
Appreciation	209		one-sided, unprecedented assault, unredacted, meltdown

In terms of “morality”, only two negative items appear, which are “integrity” and “plead not guilty”. However, 68 nouns, 19 verbs, and 1 adjective are negative (see Table 5). This indicates that Fox News uses nouns as the main resource to convey negative moral judgment. Except “knock out”, the remaining items are all “coming straight to the point”. Compared with *The New York Times*, the news titles of the Fox News have a more negative undertone.

B. Appreciation

In appreciation, there are 109 adjectives, 87 nouns (quite a number of which appear in the form of “adjective + noun”, suggesting more adjectives in actual quantity), 4 verbs, and 9 adverbs (or phrases serving as adverbs) (see Table 5).

Generally, when making negative judgment about people, these two media avoid directness (by avoiding adjectives) and instead adopt indirect forms (by using verbs). As seen in the analysis of linguistic indicators, the general comments and opinions on people are expressed in the form of verbs, rather than adjectives that directly indicate preferences. This may reflect the basic attitude of paying people respect as a social consensus and serves as a means of displaying the objective and neutral position of the media as much as possible.

III. Case Study

The frame of rights presents itself in different forms and in different levels of intensity in these two media. For example, *The New York Times* highlights the public’s rights to know and in a more intense way, while Fox News emphasizes the rights of Donald Trump.

The New York Times employs this frame intensively during the period immediately before and after the release of the Muller Report. The main linguistic strategy is to use such personal pronouns as “we”, “you”, or “Americans agree”, inviting readers to directly engage in the construction of the frame of rights. Typical titles include “4 Disturbing Details You May Have Missed in the Mueller Report”, “We’re Done Waiting for Mueller’s Report” and “Will We Ever See Mueller’s Report on Trump? Maybe.”

However, Fox News employs a different means of constructing the frame of rights by interpreting stages of Muller investigation from its own perspective. Its discourse strategy focuses on quoting opinions and comments, making up 65% of all clauses. The frame of rights is directly related to Donald Trump, as an attempt to emphasize the due rights of the President, which can be seen in such report as “New Mueller Probe Revelations Explain Trump’s Rage”.

IV. Language Polishing Strategy of “Speaking through Others’ Mouths”

Expressing opinions and attitudes by quoting leaves the impression of being objective and fair and granting someone the rights to say. This can be measured by “projection⁷”, an indicator among language indicators.

New York Times

Of the 273 news titles, 145 are not projected, indicating that the narrator is the media itself, while 128 are projected, accounting for 47% of the total. However, in cases of projection, the narrator is still the media, and the difference lies in the fact that the media sounds more persuasive by quoting others’ opinions. In this way, *The New York Times* attempts to show that it does not just present its own opinions, but also “discusses” with other sources of “voice”.

Fox News

Of the 299 news titles, 195 have projections, accounting for about 65% of the total. In terms of projection, Fox News reports significantly more quotes or sources identified as others’ than *The New York Times*.

For example, the news title “Mueller Report: No Collusion” implies the rights of Donald Trump, which is an evident distortion of the intention of the Mueller Report. This means that quoting, even in news titles, may probably lead to misunderstanding, distortion, or deliberate misinterpretation out of context.

In comparison, *The New York Times* is more direct in conveying its opinions, while Fox News prefers to “speak through others’ mouths”. Judging from the credibility of arguments, *The New York Times* seems to voice its opinions in a slightly stronger way. Therefore, to some extent, “projecting” more viewpoints and information sources does not necessarily make arguments more convincing.

4.1.3. Frame of Political Parties

I. Social Consensus Basis for the Frame

Bipartisan rivalry and shared interests are reality in the politics of the United States. It seems difficult to write reports involving American high-level officials without commenting on the bipartisan relations. It is even more so in the news event covered by this paper as the two media both build the frame of political parties.

II. Analysis of Frequency

New York Times

Among the 273 news titles⁸, the Democratic Party appears 13 times and Democrats such as Hilliary Clinton appear 10 times, totally 23 times. The Republican Party to which Donald Trump belongs appears twice, and other Republicans such as McConnell appear 15 times, totally 17 times (see Table 6). In analysis, the Democratic Party appears 50% more than the Republican Party. In cases when party members’ names were specifically mentioned, four more names of the Republican Party members appears than those of the Democratic Party. This finding suggests that while the overall absolute number remains relatively balanced, the Republican Party enjoys more exposure in the news titles, partly because the mentioned Republicans sat for Mueller investigation.

Table 6. Frequency of political parties.

	Republican Party	Democratic Party
<i>New York Times</i>	17	23
Fox News	62	91

Fox News

Among the 275 news titles⁹, the Democratic Party and Democrats appear 69 times, and Democrats such as Hilliary Clinton appear 22 times, totaling 91 times. The Republican Party to which Donald Trump belongs appears 3 times, and other Republicans such as Giuliani appear 59 times, totaling 62 times (see Table 6). That is, the Democratic Party appears 47% more than the Republican Party, which is a similar situation to *The New York Times*. In detailed analysis, 37 more Republicans' names were mentioned than those of the Democrats. However, Fox News mentioned the specific names mainly because they were interviewed by Fox News, and also the media needed to highlight the opinions of these specific people. In other words, the Fox News actually gives the Republican Party more opportunities to be heard in its titles.

III. Case Study

The choice of certain words, such as Dems and House Dems, as in the news "Dems Still Refuse to Accept Mueller's Findings", can sometimes be a subtle way of the Fox News to express grudge against the Democratic Party. Some titles are derogatory to Democrats, such as "Clinton's Unsolicited Advice on Mueller report". From the overall frame adopted by Fox News, which is a conservative media outlet, the media has been unfriendly to the Democratic Party and treated the party with a kind of "contempt" by calling the party members "Dems" and "House Dems".

IV. Language Polishing Strategy of "Correlating the Unrelated"

In the above-mentioned mode of "actor-process-range", the "range" may not necessarily be impacted by the "action process", meaning that no actual actor-recipient relationship exists or even real "intersection" between the actor, which is the most critical participant in the title and the "range" (see Table 7). The role of the actor is mainly to provide an attitude and opinion. *The New York Times* has more such "opinion-oriented" titles, which may indicate that the media reports tend to focus on opinions. This finding is consistent with previous studies. That is to say, the actor is not related with the participants in the range per se, but they are "forcibly correlated" by the media to express its opinions.

Table 7. Medium-Process-Range.

	Medium	Process	Range
<i>New York Times</i>	Hillary Clinton	Blasts	Trump, Barr and Parts of Mueller Report

4.1.4. Frame of Authority

I. Social Consensus Basis for the Frame

Americans generally hold respect for the important positions of the country. On this premise, out of consideration of history and reality, when the public finds the incumbent fails to meet the requirement of the position in terms of his or her attitude and morality among others, the social consensus is a distinctly paradoxical attitude showing contempt for the incumbent and respect for the position.

The news event covered by this paper is so significant that media reports show different attitudes towards authority. And the reports by these two media are evidently distinct.

II. Analysis of Frequency

In the news titles of *The New York Times*, “Trump”, the core figure of the event, appears 53 times and “President” appears 4 times (see Table 8). But “President” and “Trump” seldom appears simultaneously. “Trump” is more seen in the news titles of *The New York Times*, which address the President directly by his family name. It may be a result of the fact that the print media has such limited space that they have to abbreviate to save space and a choice of media based on their appraisal whether it is necessary to indicate Trump’s title.

Table 8. Frequency of authority.

	Trump	President	Barr	A.G./Attorney General
New York Times	53	4	31	5
Fox News	66	32	53	45
CNN ¹⁰	584	115		

The overall practice of *The New York Times* is to omit the titles of officials in its news titles. This paper cites the report of the attorney general, the representative of the American judicial branch as a comparison. Barr appears 31 times, while Attorney General appears only five times (see Table 8). In this case, ratio between Attorney General and Barr is still higher than that between President and Trump. The reason may be that, on the one hand, Barr is not as “popular” as Trump, and on the other hand, Barr enjoys higher reputation than Trump in *The New York Times*.

In the reports of the Fox News, “Trump”, the core figure, appears 66 times and President appears 32 times. Its news titles generally indicate the identity of the figures in a relatively explicit way. “President” seldom appears alone, meaning that for half of the time that “Trump” appears, it appears in the phrase “President Trump”. This is completely different from the style of *The New York Times*. On the one hand, this may be because the TV media have more space for news titles than their print media counterparts and also Fox News shows more respect for Donald Trump.

To confirm this hypothesis that the news titles of TV media are more inclined to add titles when mentioning people, this paper studies the reports of CNN with “Mueller” in the news title between 1 January 2019 and 17 June 2019, as a comparison. The paper finds that “Trump” appears 584 times and “President Trump” appears 115 times; around 20% of the time, “Trump” was addressed with his title, while the ratio is around 50% in Fox News (see Table 8). CNN, which always boasts objectivity and neutrality, was called “Fake News” by Trump. CNN thus does not hold Trump in particular respect. The frequent appearance of the title of “President” in Fox News suggests the media’s firm support for Donald Trump.

In Fox News, Barr appears 53 times, and Attorney General and its abbreviations A.G. and AG appear 45 times. The ratio is higher than the collocation of President and Trump. It suggests that Fox News pays more attention to reminding the audience of the title of a relatively important but not equally well-known figure. The attorney general played an important leading role in the investigation, and he later made speeches and summaries that were favorable to Donald Trump. This may also be the very reason why Fox News places special emphasis on this title: citing the voice of authority.

III. Case Study

The White House, the presidential office and residence, has always been the symbol and embodiment of America’s state authority and the highest administrative power. However, the two news media have employed subtle language strategies in their coverage of the same event, resulting in completely different landscapes of power. An example is as blow: New York Times

This is a special way of language processing. If the phrase “for the White House” is replaced by “by White House”, the White House will become a core element as the “agent”

(see Table 9). But as the preposition “for” is chosen here, from the perspective of process type, “Mueller results” are not regarded as the “agent” engaged in the core action, but the “White house” is regarded as the “beneficiary” in the periphery of the action relationship. By doing so, the importance of the “White House” is downplayed and the importance of the “Mueller result” is highlighted.

Table 9. Agent-Process-Beneficiary.

Agent	Process	Beneficiary
Mueller Results	Were Previewed	For White House

Fox News

“Attorney General Barr: No Plans To Submit Mueller Report To White House For Review”

In this example, the verb relevant to the White House is “submit . . . to . . .”, implying that a less powerful party delivering something to a more powerful one, rendering the White House a higher power status.

“White House Wants to See Mueller Report Before Release”

This is the structure of “Medium-Process-Range”, i.e., “White House” is the center of the action (see Table 10).

Table 10. Medium-Process-Range.

Medium	Process	Range
White House	Wants	to See Mueller Report Before Release

Both media outlets chose verbs that suggest power relations with “White House” and placed them in the positions of core and non-core elements. Therefore, from the linguistic perspective, it achieves the effect of giving it more power or reducing its power. This is a typical example of constructing a frame through process type resources rather than judgement resources in a language.

IV. Language Polishing Strategy—“Objective” Polishing

Except for using judgmental resources for “polishing”, some news titles containing no judgement words hid their attitudes and connotations in the consistent context of the news media or in the context of local discourse.

The New York Times, for example,

“What Watergate Prosecutors Had That Mueller Didn’t”

It implies something that Mueller “should have done but did not” with hidden criticism.

“The Mueller Report, Vol. 1 & 2”

The two-volume report implicitly says that the content is long and possibly very informative.

Fox News

“The Constitutionality of The Mueller Report”

Though here is no expression of “yes or no”, “constitutionality” refers to whether it “conforms to the Constitution”, with the implicit attitude that it does not conform to the Constitution.

4.2. Respective News Frames of the Two Media

Apart from taking different positions in their mutual news frames, both media have their respective frames, with the aim of expressing their own views and achieving the effect of “empowering” or “disempowering” from the perspective of audience. No explicit mutual news frame or common positions have been discovered in the research.

4.2.1. Frames of *The New York Times*

A. *The New York Times*—the Frame of Humor

By exposing the object of humor to the public eye, and by using humor and satire, the object of humor is thus exposed thoroughly to the “panoramic” public view while the object itself holds the single perspective “from within the mountain”, thus decreasing the power of the object of humor.

For instance,

“Stephen Colbert Catches Himself Putting All His Eggs in the Mueller Report Basket”

“Trevor Noah Likens the Mueller Report to Maroon 5’s Tattooed Frontman”

Both Stephen Colbert and Trevor Noah are representatives of the talk show of American political humor. Their quoted views showcase the attitudes of the media while creating humor in a serious topic. The use of a humor frame in serious media is prudent and limited, but the frame is effective and often generates a “finishing touch” in the news coverage.

B. Guilt Frame

One of the core contents of the Mueller Report is whether Trump has any act of collusion with Russia in the election. “Russia” appeared 13 times in the titles; the relevant Russian people and incident 7 times; the entirety accounted for 7% of all the news titles. This compares to 29 times of “Russia” and 8 times of the relevant people and incident in Fox News, covering 8.5% of the total number of news (432) or 14% (if the number were calculated as 268). In other words, the coverage ratio of “Russia” in both media is relatively close. *The New York Times* leans towards Trump’s responsibility, while Fox News prefers to hold the Democrats accountable for the “incident”.

In the coverage of the event, much of the content refers to, implies, or guides the audience to the fact that Trump and his team members were involved in other crimes.

Such as:

“Will There Be Smoking Guns in the Mueller Report?”

“Justice Dept. Agrees to Turn Over Key Mueller Evidence to House”

“Why Barr Can’t Whitewash the Mueller Report”

“Trump is Against Letting Mueller Offer Testimony”

“Breaking Silence, Mueller Declines to Absolve Trump”

“The Trump Campaign Conspired With the Russians. Mueller Proved It.”

4.2.2. Frames of Fox News

Since Fox News stands for the Trump side that was under investigation, part of its frame serves as the response to the view of its opposing side. In terms of content, there is a high degree of consistency between its standpoint and attitude and the frame in Trump’s tweets (Kreis 2017).

A. “Conspiracy” Framework

In this frame, the strategy adopted by Fox News is to use the same words as in Trump’s tweets such as “witchhunt”, showing hostile persecution of Trump by the political opposition.

Such as,

“Mueller’s One-Sided Witch Hunt Exposed”

“Subpoena Stunts, Contempt Vote, And Mueller Hysteria: Exposing The Democrats’ Endless Witch Hunts”

B. “Fake News” Framework

“Fake News” is a consistent comment Trump used on the mainstream media (Rosenfeld 2019, p. 1). Fox News aligns itself with the positions and refutes the objectivity of the report in American mainstream media.

Such as,

“CNN Hosts In Denial Over Mueller Report Findings”

“NYT’s Krugman Refuses To Accept Mueller’s Findings”

5. Conclusions

After the previous analysis, the author tries to answer two research questions.

5.1. Research Question 1: What Frames Did The New York Times and Fox News Construct in Their Coverage of the Mueller Investigation?

In the overall analysis, *The New York Times* and Fox News adopted some frames of similar themes based on social consensus, such as legal, rights, political parties, and authority frames, all of which meet the basic conditions of repetitiveness and social consensus of frames. And the media, according to their own positions, expressed their ideas and opinions on the same events in their frames. At the same time, both media have established their own “unique” frames according to their own positions, including the humor frame of *The New York Times*, the “conspiracy” frame of Fox News, and the “fake news” frame, etc.

This illustrates the fact that the American media has adopted a more refined frame strategy in constructing frames that distinguish different positions on the basis of social consensus. These were established through frame repetition and achieved through linguistic strategies. This on the one hand eliminates the need to derive explanations for positions, and on the other hand tends to resonate with the audience. It is both a starting point for reporting differences and also the basis for manipulating public opinion. This can be further explored in future studies.

5.2. Research Question 2: What Linguistic Strategies Did The New York Times and Fox News Use Respectively to Construct Their Frames?

The linguistic strategies adopted in the respective framing processes of *The New York Times* and Fox News are closely related to the frames used. First, in quantitative terms, the distribution of the number of various linguistic indicators reflects the tendency of the overall opinion and the construction of power relations in the media frame—for example, placing different people and items in core and non-core positions in the action process and whether using titles are linguistic “manipulations” of power to create “empowering” or “disempowering” effects. Most of the linguistic strategies, rather by directly using evaluative words, are implemented through different types of action processes, which is a kind of “implicit” guidance, attempting to present an “objective” image of the media.

From the indicators of the System Functional Linguistics analysis, both *The New York Times* and Fox News are dominated by negative expressions in their attitudes, with Fox News having a higher percentage of negative ratings. This is related to the nature of the reported events themselves and also to the general negative tone of the news coverage of both media (Doris A. and Dunaway 2018, p. 23).

In terms of the linguistic effects of the frame strategy, *The New York Times* uses fewer evaluative tools than *Fox News*, but the expression of attitudes draws on the context in which they are presented and expresses evaluation in a more sophisticated and refined manner. Fox News is more straightforward without hiding its own opinion and biases.

In terms of “Mueller” as the core element of the search, *The New York Times*, compared to Fox News, emphasizes Mueller more as the actor or the recipient of action, while the latter places Mueller more in the “contextual element”. This is partly related to the power relationship between the two media in terms of the opinions they represent in the overall incident, and partly related to the caliber of reporting. *The New York Times* is more inclined to the idea that Trump’s side has wrongdoings, which is consistent with the original intention of the official investigation, and therefore has always respected the official representative of the investigation “Mueller” and recognized his authority. It has only slightly expressed dissatisfaction until after the release of the Mueller Report.

The Trump side, supported by Fox News, is under investigation and at a disadvantaged position. Therefore, until 2019¹¹, the strategy used was to undermine Mueller’s authority, with titles such as “Robert Mueller’s Witch Hunt; Democrats Pushed Narrative That President Trump May Fire Mueller; President Trump Will Not Fire Mueller Despite Recent Warnings By Democrats; Red Flags For Anti-Trump Bias In Mueller Probe” among

others. And after the release of the Mueller Report, no indictment was filed against Trump, and again it began to recognize Mueller's authority with headlines like "Complete Exoneration, Trump Touts Mueller Report's No-Collusion Conclusion". After Mueller's refusal, *Fox News* questioned his authority with the title "Mueller Appears To Create New Legal Standard With 'Not Exonerated' Remarks". Therefore, on the one hand, it respected the official, but at the same time, it questioned the legitimacy of the investigation and conclusion, showing certain contradiction in its attitude towards Mueller, explaining why there was inconsistency in its frame strategy.

The United States is entering a "post-truth" era, characterized by defiance of the sources of intellectual authority, reliance on conspiracy theories, emphasis on intuition and candor, disregard for complexity and precision, and contempt for all forms of pre-existing knowledge and knowledge disseminators. The essence of the era is a bipartisan struggle over who is the intellectual authority, who has better methods of inquiry, and whose evidence is more admissible in today's America of increasing partisan divide (Rosenfeld 2019, pp. 9, 15, 23). It is this "post-truth" era that gives the U.S. media more room for "opinion manipulation," with each employing various strategies to gain the most favorable position in public opinion based on the event itself.

Therefore, in this post-truth era, promoting media literacy is important for people to understand how to use the media information they acquire. For instance, with the "filter bubble" as the main source of information of the people, it is important to perform fact-checking on matter of importance. It is also important to be able to read "overtone" from news titles, which will probably lead to a question mark on some matters. And from a global perspective, while American media sets a good example of precise language use in expressing opinions and serves as an English-learning source to many non-native speakers, it is also important to be critical in media consumption in order to avoid biased opinions on matters.

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Notes

- ¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special_Counsel_investigation_\(2017%E2%80%932019\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special_Counsel_investigation_(2017%E2%80%932019)) and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mueller_Report (accessed on 18 August 2019).
- ² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/24/us/politics/mueller-testimony-takeaways.html> (accessed on 1 August 2019).
- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_York_Times (accessed on 18 August 2019).
- ⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fox_News (accessed on 18 August 2019).
- ⁵ This study analyzes the core relations of clauses. In the meantime, noun phrases, a smaller form than clauses, appear in news titles with a high proportion. Therefore, the noun phrases are listed as a separate type. In the core relations within the clause, the core participant in the process is the Medium, "without which there would be no process" (Martin and Rose 2014, p. 91; Halliday 2008, p. 284). Therefore, the most fundamental and core process is "Medium-Process". Different types of Process show the different strategies in the frames of the media. Meanwhile, other participants may be involved in the process, including the Agent that instigates the process. The process can also be extended to a third participant, known as a Beneficiary (Martin and Rose 2014, pp. 91–92). Beneficiary is not a focus of this study while Agent appears frequently. Therefore, they are studied together in the type of "Agent-Medium-Process". Moreover, a process may be initiated by the Medium and extended to a second participant that is not affected by the process, known as a Range (Martin and Rose 2014, p. 94). In this specific study, the mode "Medium-Process-Range" appears most frequently and thus listed as one same action process. Associated with a process are various kinds of circumstances, including time, place, cause, role, means, matter, range, and accompaniment. The Circumstance is in a relatively marginal place of the core relations and could appear in any process.
- ⁶ Appraisal (attitude negotiated) is a system of interpersonal meanings. We use the resources of appraisal for negotiating our social relationships, by telling our listeners how we feel about things and people. There are three aspects of appraisal, including attitudes, how they are amplified, and their sources. Three main attitudes are affect, judgment, and appreciation (Martin and Rose 2014, pp. 25–26). Affect is to evaluate the narrator's feelings towards others. Affect can be expressed directly or implied and

can be positive or negative. It can also be personal or moral (Martin and Rose 2014, pp. 32–36). Appreciation is mainly people’s attitudes toward things, which can be positive or negative (Martin and Rose 2014, pp. 37–42). Appreciation can be regarded as the “institutionalization” of affect and its distinction from affect should be made according to co-text.

7 Projection means explicitly quotes someone’s opinions.

8 If multiple key words simultaneously appear, it is still regarded as one title, because some news pieces contain multiple action processes.

9 Same as the above. If measured by action processes, the Fox News has 432 pieces of such news report.

10 The data of CNN here is only used for the purpose of comparison.

11 The scope of news beyond the headlines examined in this article.

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