



# Analysis of the Narrative Strategies of the Epidemic Documentary — Taking Documentary *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* as an Example

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**Abstract:** The epidemic documentary *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* was filmed by CGTN and has received a lot of view counts and influence since its broadcast, with more than 100 million global broadcasts receiving widespread recognition from the audience. This paper deeply analyzes the content of the documentary. It uses the relevant theories of narratology to conduct a detailed study of *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* to further explore the narrative strategies of the epidemic documentaries.

**Keywords:** documentary, narration, strategy analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, there have been endless international debates about its origin. Under such an international environment, CGTN, the main venue for China's external propaganda, took the lead in launching the documentary *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* to tell and convey the absolute state of China's epidemic to the international community and change the stigmatization and poor judgment of some people about China. Previously, there were many documentaries with the epidemic as their theme, but none of them had the same outstanding dissemination effect as *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan*. Therefore, it is of great significance to study its narrative strategy.

## 2. Narrative Analysis-Objectivity and Truth Coexist

The documentary *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* takes the actual state of life of various groups of people in Wuhan after the city was in lockdown as the main content and mainly focuses on healthcare workers, patients with pneumonia caused by the novel coronavirus, couriers, and epidemic prevention volunteers, and explores the true feelings and beauty of human nature from the minor characters, achieving the coexistence of objectivity and truth, mainly in the following points:

### 2.1 Plain narrative

The purpose of a narrative is twofold. One is to narrate the story, and the other is to present the theme, which contains the story value, the inspiration to the audience, the expression of thematic emotions, etc. From the viewpoint of *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan*, its theme is very different from other epidemic documentaries, which mainly take the path of positive direct propaganda. Instead of simply showing the glorious aspects of the epidemic, while the individual lives under the epidemic were shown, restoring the real Wuhan under the epidemic. In this natural state, the life force embodied by each individual photographed is different, but all are full of resilience and tenacity. In this documentary, the first restrain then accelerate writing technique was used, and the theme was set to be plain and objective. In this way, it can visually answer the questions concerned and doubted by the international community and convey the actual situation of the epidemic to the domestic audience, thus attracting many audiences to participate in experiencing the epidemic in its natural state, arousing deep resonance.

The documentaries should be real and from real life, which is the substantive characteristic of documentaries. *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* dares to present the truth in front of everyone, with bleak narrative undertones under the epidemic, and is unanimously recognized by audiences at home and abroad as a down-to-earth narrative symbol that can easily make the documentary popular. Many sensitive issues were brought to the forefront through the one-month lockdown of Wuhan, such as many healthcare workers being infected and the sudden death of whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang. The documentary transforms the speed and spirit of the Chinese people's fight against the epidemic into a story of emotion through a down-to-earth history by showing a series of various people on the front line of the epidemic. Thus, the documentary breaks through the psychological barrier of international audiences and dramatically enhances the spread effect.

### 3. Narrative perspective-organic combination of multiple perspectives

In his "Narrative Discourse", Gérard Genette defined narrative perspectives as internal focalization and external focalization. In the documentary *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan*, massive internal and external focalization narrative perspectives were used to create a natural feeling for the audiences and take ordinary people in Wuhan as the main characters of the story, while the narration becomes a viewing perspective, making the narrative authenticity greatly enhanced.

#### 3.1 Internal focalization narrative perspective

Thanks to the continuous catalyst of media, the differentiated expression of micro-individuals are gradually becoming a breakthrough point for documentaries' internationalization. From this point, the international spread concerned by the media is a spread of cultural ideas among people. The ability to visually express the 23 groups of subjects in the limited time available in *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* relies heavily on the use of an internal focalization narrative perspective, so two effects can be achieved, one is to make the content accurate and viable, and the other is to create a temporal and spatial link between the subjects and the audiences. For example, in front of the camera, nurses talked about their sufferings, giving injections to patients every day, but with a constant stream of patients; doctors showed that they have eczema from wearing protective suits for too long, and patients with mild symptoms reveled in the fact that the delicious food at isolation sites. All these pictures narrate the daily life and sense of each person who experienced the epidemic, thus making the people under the epidemic more vivid and lively. This way of filming focusing on individual characters has impacted the barriers between national cultures and perceptions, allowing many foreigners to find commonalities with themselves in the epidemic life of these ordinary people in Wuhan, thus becoming vicariously involved.

#### 3.2 External focalization narrative perspective

We could find that the narration was short when we looked meticulously at the documentary *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan*. It used the omniscient perspective to connect the content of the various characters, answering the environment they were in and the current situation of the epidemic, etc. For instance, the narration of huoshenshan hospital is that "A brand new hospital begins construction ..... will provide 1,000 beds" from this narration. The external focalisation narrative perspective retains the absolute objectivity of the documentary. Such an objective and neutral narrative perspective not only makes the documentary achieve the most significant degree of truthfulness but also allows international audiences not to find it unbelievable or to feel antipathy when it enters global markets.

### 4. Narrative logic-transfer of expressive power

"In traditional foreign propaganda documentaries, the historical characters are only as auxiliaries and do not become the main narrators." But the documentary *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* shifts the narrative protagonists from the historical parties to the ordinary people in reality, thus ingeniously handing over the narrative power and making the logic of the narrative smoother and broader. In terms of visual logic language, the film frames the story through dramatic thinking, setting up a suspension in a few minutes, perfectly pinpointing the audience's attention and interest. For instance, in the beginning, it spent about two minutes filming a migrant worker who didn't know what to do in a post-closing train station and then pans into the perspective of a doctor so that the worker can see what happened during a viral outbreak. The camera turns again and inserts the scene where the nurse sees an ocean of patients coming to see the doctor in the outpatient clinic. The presentation of these three scenes, along with the quick editing technique, highlights the narrative logic of the entire documentary, fast and accurate, without any useless scenes. In fact, for the international diffusion of documentaries, "the broad and smooth narrative logic, making facts the subject of the documentary," it is of paramount importance for documentaries not to use any narration with ideological and political elements. In particular, the narration that guides the logic of the narrative should be very proactive in reflecting the truth. For example, at the end of the documentary, a real-life event was recounted: "In Wuhan, suspected COVID-19 patients no longer had to wait days for nucleic acid tests, and the number of new cases continued to decrease every day", which in turn led the personal truth of nurses: "We are truly grateful for the help and improvement in our lives from all over the world." These narrations sound normal, simply stating facts, but this inner monologue shows the attitude of most healthcare workers and the attitude of supporting Wuhan from all over the country, further triggering the empathy of every audience. Therefore, the narrative has become the logical direction for extensive interaction with the audiences, who can "interact" with the characters in the documentary in various ways, feel their status quo, what they are thinking about at this moment, and what they are struggling for, and get a constant source of motivation to live and work from them.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, the documentary *The Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* uses a multi-line narrative strategy to roundly show the environment, figures and events in Wuhan after it is in lockdown, depicting for the audience a picture of all the people struggling to make progress in the epidemic, which skillfully constructs a cross-section of the outbreak in Wuhan and expresses the theme of “hope.” Through the plain narrative theme, the internal and external in the narrative perspective are skillfully combined with shifting the power of the narrative from historical figures to ordinary people. Ultimately, the audience is left to make emotional inputs and expressions and to make personal comparisons that broaden the narrative logic to maximize empathy with the audience. It has made unique innovations in narrative, setting a model for the documentary narrative that other documentary filmmakers can learn from.

## References

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