

From Factual Selection to Value Articulation: Frame-Building Mechanisms in Award-Winning Feature Reports of the 35th China Journalism Award

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Abstract

This study examines how factual materials are transformed into value articulation in the production of feature reports. From a population of 34 first-, second-, and third-prize feature reports in the 35th China Journalism Award, 10 cases were selected through purposive and maximum-variation sampling. Seventeen work-elicitation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 creators, producing approximately 410,000 Chinese characters of transcripts. A theoretically informed codebook thematic analysis showed that facts entered the final report through the dual gate of verifiability and explanatory relevance; problem definitions and evidence gathering recursively revised one another; the functional configuration of lived experience, data, expert knowledge, and institutional materials constructed causality and responsibility; and characters, scenes, and temporal structures translated evidence into public meaning. Frames were mainly developed by reporters and were calibrated by editorial feedback and organisational norms as recalled by the creators. The study proposes an iterative mechanism of problem orientation, evidentiary constraint, narrative translation, and feedback calibration, together with the concept of evidence-constrained value articulation. It extends Entman's textual functions into observable production practices and argues that the journalistic legitimacy of value articulation depends on evidentiary traceability, causal proportionality, and the non-substitution of narrative for evidence.

Keywords: China Journalism Award, Feature Journalism, Frame Building, In-Depth Interviews, Value Articulation

Introduction

Research Background

News reporting is not an undifferentiated reproduction of the real world. It results from journalists identifying, selecting, organising, and interpreting real-world material under

constraints of space, time, and cognition. Events ordinarily contain numerous people, actions, data points, viewpoints, and causal clues. Journalists cannot include them all; they must decide which facts are newsworthy, which relationships require explanation, which details merit emphasis, and where the report should ultimately direct readers' attention. In this sense, news production is not only the collection of facts but also the organisation of meaning. Framing theory provides an important basis for explaining this process. Goffman (1974) understood frames as cognitive structures through which people organise experience, recognise situations, and interpret reality. Entman (1993) further argued that framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient in order to promote particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. A frame does not necessarily distort facts. In professional journalism, it first entails the limited and orderly configuration of factual material so that dispersed facts form meaningful relationships that publics can understand. Framing research therefore asks not only what a report includes, but also what it excludes, what it foregrounds, how it relates facts to one another, and what value orientation these operations produce.

Feature reports are especially suitable for examining this process. Compared with straight news, which prioritises immediacy and compression, feature reports provide greater narrative space for characterisation, scene construction, contextualisation, data analysis, causal explanation, and emotional expression. They answer not only what happened, but often why it happened, what it means, and how it should be understood. Their length and expressive range give reporters greater scope to select facts and organise narratives, while also making reporters' judgements, editorial intervention, and institutional value requirements more visible in the final text. Headline design, character selection, source configuration, plot development, causal linkage, and concluding elevation can therefore all function as concrete framing devices. Pan and Kosicki's (1993) syntactical, script, thematic, and rhetorical structures likewise show that news frames are embedded in textual organisation and expressive detail rather than residing only in abstract themes.

From a news-production perspective, the meaning structure of a news work is also shaped jointly by editorial routines, organisational arrangements, and professional norms. Tuchman (1978) argued that news is a form of reality constructed through the classificatory rules, work procedures, and everyday routines of news organisations. Reese (2007) further described frames as socially shared and relatively persistent organising principles that symbolically endow the social world with meaning. Value articulation in feature reports therefore cannot be attributed simply to a reporter's subjective intention; it must be examined within a production environment constituted by reporters, editors, news organisations, source relations, and professional norms.

The 35th China Journalism Award provides an analytically valuable population for studying frame building in feature reports. The award recognised 377 works: 4 Special Prizes, 74 First Prizes, 113 Second Prizes, and 186 Third Prizes (Xinhua News Agency, 2025a). Item-by-item counting of the official winners' catalogue (Xinhua News Agency, 2025b) identified 34 feature reports among the First-, Second-, and Third-Prize works: 5 First Prizes, 11 Second Prizes, and 18 Third Prizes. One additional feature report received a Special Prize. To maintain comparability across award levels, this study defines the 34 First-, Second-, and Third-Prize

feature reports as its research population and excludes the Special-Prize work from routine award-level comparison.

These works were produced by central, provincial, industry-specific, municipal, and various digital media organisations. They address economic development, grassroots governance, public welfare, cultural inheritance, ecological protection, anti-corruption, ethnic solidarity, and changing social attitudes. Some systematically explain major public issues, whereas others use ordinary people, everyday life, and concrete scenes to carry public values. The feature reports thus form a diverse professional sample through which to compare how different topics, media levels, and production actors transform factual discovery into organised meaning and, ultimately, value articulation.

Existing scholarship on feature reports has explained the textual characteristics of exemplary work through narrative perspective, characterisation, temporal structure, and language. Final-text analysis, however, cannot fully explain how these forms emerged. The same structure may result from a reporter's field judgement, editorial feedback, organisational arrangements, access to interviewees, or material constraints. Explaining the formation of frames therefore requires tracing the meaning structures visible in completed works back to their production processes.

From the 34 works, this study selected 10 feature reports that varied in topic, media level, team structure, and narrative form, and analysed the published texts, publicly available production accounts, and interviews with their creators in relation to one another. The cases display several possible pathways: a medical phenomenon may be elevated into a question of demographic change and public service; cooperation between local firms may be reframed as an issue of competitive order; an individual's occupational experience may embody regional-development outcomes; changes in an ordinary trader's life may reveal a transformation in urban governance; an emotional story may reactivate historical memory; and a specialised case may be translated into an institutional problem accessible to the public. In-depth interviews were used to reconstruct the concrete decisions made during topic selection, reporting, writing, revision, and publication.

This study therefore goes beyond identifying the frames ultimately used in award-winning feature reports and instead centres the production of those frames. It asks how reporters identify a core problem in a complex reality; how they select, exclude, and foreground facts; how they use characters, scenes, data, and sources to establish causal relationships; how editors and organisations participate in frame adjustment; and how factual accuracy, value commitments, and narrative appeal are coordinated during production. The analytical question thus advances from 'what frames are present in the work?' to 'how are those frames produced?'

Research Problem

The central problem of this study is as follows: under the foundational professional constraint of factual accuracy, how do news producers use selection, exclusion, foregrounding, connection, and narrative ordering to transform 'what happened' into an organised articulation of 'what the problem is, why it occurred, how it should be evaluated, and how it should be addressed'?

This problem encompasses three interrelated research gaps.

First, existing studies of the China Journalism Award have often treated the final texts of winning works as their primary object, classifying themes, language styles, narrative perspectives, structural patterns, and communication features. Such research usefully reveals what exemplary works present, but a final text alone cannot reliably reconstruct which materials journalists originally encountered, which facts they discarded, or how the text changed during reporting, writing, and editing. Because award-winning works are usually structurally complete and thematically clear, their polished form may conceal hesitation, conflict, alternative approaches, and negotiation during production. Textual analysis can therefore identify the outcome of framing but cannot, by itself, explain the mechanism through which the frame was produced.

Second, international framing research has long concentrated on identifying media frames and testing audience effects. Scheufele (1999) distinguished frame building, which examines how media frames are formed, from frame setting, which concerns how those frames affect audience cognition. De Vreese (2005) likewise situated framing research across the connected stages of production, content, and use. Systematic reviews nevertheless show that framing scholarship still gives greater attention to message design, specific frames, and their effects than to the conditions under which frames are produced (Borah, 2011). Many studies also remain highly descriptive, use imprecise operational definitions, or depend excessively on textual content analysis (Matthes, 2009). D'Angelo (2002) described framing research as a multiparadigmatic programme spanning cognitive, constructionist, and critical approaches. This breadth increases explanatory potential but also requires researchers to specify whether they are examining textual structure, audience effects, or news production.

Third, the mediating process between factual selection and value articulation remains insufficiently explained. Entman's (1993) four framing functions help researchers determine whether a text defines a problem, interprets causes, evaluates morally, and recommends treatment, but they do not automatically reveal who proposed these functions, when they took shape, or through what negotiations. Reporters may establish an angle through field observation; editors may require a thematic adjustment or additional sources; organisations may revise expressive boundaries in light of news values and public responsibility; and interviewees may influence the factual structure through the information they provide. A news frame is therefore unlikely to be set once by a single actor. It may instead be revised and stabilised through interactions among multiple participants.

Brüggemann (2014) argued that journalists may actively set frames or transmit frames supplied by external actors, with their actual role varying along a continuum from active construction to relative dependence. Boesman, Van Gorp, and d'Haenens (2016) further maintained that combining work analysis with reconstruction interviews enables researchers to examine both what the final text makes salient and what the production process leaves silent. This approach is particularly appropriate for award-winning feature reports because such texts have already undergone substantial editing and thematic concentration; examining only the published product makes it difficult to identify initial proposals, deleted material, and differences in judgement between reporters and editors.

News frames are also shaped at multiple levels, including the individual, work routines, organisations, and broader social institutions (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). A reporter's judgement may be conditioned simultaneously by interview time, length restrictions, source accessibility, editorial demands, media positioning, and risk awareness. Ignoring these conditions risks mistaking organisational choices for personal preferences or treating a final text's value articulation as a conclusion appended only at the end of writing.

In response to these gaps, this study treats framing as a dynamic process of construction rather than a static textual label. The analysis comprises three interconnected levels. The factual level addresses the inclusion and exclusion of people, events, scenes, data, and sources. The narrative level examines how selected facts are organised through sequence, perspective, causal relations, and language. The value level analyses how these structures generate problem definitions, attributions of responsibility, value evaluations, and orientations towards action. The three levels are neither linear nor independent; they are repeatedly recalibrated through reporters' production judgements and the editorial and institutional influences that reporters perceive.

Research Objectives

This study aims to explain how award-winning feature reports in the 35th China Journalism Award build frames from factual selection through to value articulation. Its specific objectives are:

1. To analyse the decision logics through which creators select, exclude, and foreground news facts during topic development, reporting, and writing, and to identify how news values, material conditions, and professional judgement shape the factual structure.
2. To reveal how characters, scenes, data, sources, temporal order, and story structure are used to construct problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and orientations towards action, thereby explaining the narrative mechanisms through which factual material becomes value articulation.
3. Within the limits of creators' accounts, to construct a reporter-centred mechanism of frame production influenced by sources, editorial feedback, and organisational norms, and to explain how the knowledge, authority, and responsibilities of different actors shape the proposal, negotiation, revision, and stabilisation of frames.

These objectives do not primarily seek to determine whether a work's value position is 'correct'. Rather, they examine how value articulation acquires factual support, how narrative structure carries it, and how it takes shape within professional norms and organisational settings.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following four research questions:

- RQ1: How do the creators of award-winning feature reports in the 35th China Journalism Award select, exclude, and foreground news facts during topic development, reporting, and writing?
- RQ2: How do creators use characters, scenes, data, sources, narrative perspective, and temporal structure to construct problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and orientations towards action?

RQ3: In creators' recollections, how do reporters perceive the influence of sources, editorial feedback, and news-organisational norms on the proposal, revision, and finalisation of feature-report frames?

RQ4: How do news producers coordinate factual accuracy, narrative appeal, public-value articulation, and the boundaries of professional responsibility in order to arrive at an acceptable framing arrangement?

The four questions form a progression from micro-level factual operations to narrative meaning-making, multi-actor production relations, and professional boundaries. RQ1 addresses the material foundations of frames; RQ2 examines the narrative mechanisms that transform facts into meaning; RQ3 explains the actors and organisational sources of framing; and RQ4 analyses the normative conditions of frame building. Together, they ask what material feature reports use, how that material is organised, who makes the decisions, and what boundaries constrain those decisions.

Significance of the Study

Theoretical Significance

First, the study shifts the analytical focus from 'what is the media frame?' to 'how does the media frame form?' Conventional frame analysis commonly identifies problem definitions, causal attributions, and value evaluations in final texts. This study instead examines the upstream topic judgements, factual filtering, narrative experimentation, and editorial negotiation through which those functions emerge. By connecting the factual, narrative, and value levels, it links Entman's (1993) textual-functional model with Scheufele's (1999) account of frame building.

Second, this study locates frame production within relations among reporters, sources, editors, and organisations. A frame is neither a direct projection of an individual reporter's cognition nor a one-way imposition of organisational requirements on a text. Actors participate with different knowledge, authority, and responsibilities. Because editors were not interviewed directly, empirical interpretations of editorial and institutional roles are strictly limited to creators' retrospective accounts and the available production materials. This approach responds to constructionist framing scholarship's emphasis on cultural context, social interaction, and organisational practice (Van Gorp, 2007).

Third, the study develops a mechanism of feature-report frame building comprising factual selection, narrative organisation, value articulation, and organisational negotiation. The mechanism emphasises that value articulation acquires journalistic legitimacy only through verifiable facts, reasonable causal relations, and appropriate narrative structures. Value is not an abstract judgement attached to a work's conclusion; it is a meaning outcome that forms progressively through interviewee selection, factual relationships, narrative sequence, and modes of explanation.

Empirical Significance

Using the 34 First-, Second-, and Third-Prize feature reports in the 35th China Journalism Award as its research population, this study contributes evidence from Chinese news-production practice to frame-building scholarship. The sample encompasses different media

levels, issue types, and narrative forms, enabling comparison of how major themes, social problems, character-centred stories, and specialised issues are framed in production.

Rather than analysing texts alone, the study uses work-elicitation in-depth interviews in which creators recall the origin of the topic, reporting materials, discarded facts, initial structures, revision comments, and the finalisation process with reference to a specific work. This work-guided reconstruction identifies decision points that published texts cannot directly reveal and provides context-sensitive cases for frame-building research in a non-Western news environment.

Award-winning works are professionally selected success cases and cannot represent all everyday feature-report production in Chinese news organisations. The study's empirical contribution is therefore to identify mechanisms that may operate in exemplary feature reports, not to infer that every Chinese feature report follows the same pattern.

Practical Significance

At the level of news practice, the study translates 'value articulation' into inspectable production steps. Reporters can examine whether core claims have sufficient factual support, whether characters and cases are representative, whether causal relationships have been verified across sources, whether emotional expression obscures complexity, and whether conclusions exceed the limits of the evidence. Editors can correspondingly distinguish necessary thematic concentration from improper factual simplification, thereby reducing the risk of deciding a value conclusion first and selecting only supportive material afterwards.

The study also informs the planning and collaborative production of feature reports. By identifying the roles of reporters, editors, and organisations at different stages, it can clarify responsibility for topic justification, fact verification, structural revision, and value review, thereby reducing repeated revision or conflict caused by ambiguous roles.

Most importantly, the study demonstrates that fact and value are not mutually exclusive. Journalistic value articulation should not depend on argument detached from the material, but on sufficient facts, diverse sources, reasonable causality, and transparent narration. From this perspective, excellence in feature journalism involves not only telling a compelling story but also ensuring that the story's values can be demonstrated by facts, explained by logic, and subjected to public scrutiny.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section reviews five interconnected fields of knowledge: feature reporting, framing theory, frame building, news narrative, and journalistic professional values. It first examines how feature reports organise public meaning through characters, scenes, details, and causal relationships. It then returns to Goffman's conception of framing as the organisation of social reality and operationalises Entman's four framing functions. On this basis, the theoretical focus moves from media frames in completed texts to the process of frame building, examining how reporters, editors, sources, news routines, and organisational settings shape journalistic meaning. Finally, the section distinguishes frames from narratives, discusses the relations among factuality, professional values, and institutional values, and proposes a sensitising analytical framework to be tested and revised through the interview material.

Feature Journalism and the Organisation of News Meaning

In Chinese journalistic practice, *tongxun* is a formally recognised genre. It can be rendered in English as feature journalism, feature reporting, or in-depth news reporting, although it does not correspond exactly to feature journalism as understood in Western scholarship. In the latter tradition, feature journalism is usually a genre family encompassing profiles, in-depth reports, news features, travel writing, and lifestyle journalism, and it commonly emphasises human experience, emotional connection, scene-based expression, and public interest (Steensen, 2018). Feature reports in the China Journalism Award encompass not only human-interest stories but also event features, practice-oriented reports, investigative features, and explanatory in-depth reporting. This study therefore uses 'feature reports' as a working English designation while retaining the genre's specifically Chinese journalistic character in the theoretical and methodological discussion.

The analytical value of feature reports stems first from their expanded factual capacity. Straight news generally communicates core facts rapidly within limited space; feature reports can additionally incorporate personal experience, field observation, institutional context, historical change, and multiple sources, extending an event from a discrete information point into a public problem with process, relationships, and meaning. A feature report does not merely add more material. It assigns different positions to different materials: a person may become an entry point into social change; a scene may make a problem visible; a set of data may establish the scale of a phenomenon; and historical context may explain the conditions under which a present problem emerged.

Characters are important vehicles through which feature reports organise news meaning. Abstract policies, social structures, and institutional changes often become perceptible only through particular people's situations, actions, and choices. A character may be an eyewitness, a bearer of the problem, an implementer of institutional rules, a professional interpreter, or an actor who embodies a value. Character selection is therefore not a neutral technical step: who becomes the protagonist, who receives explanatory authority, and whose experience is treated as representative all shape readers' understanding of the nature of a problem and the distribution of responsibility.

Scenes and details likewise perform both factual and explanatory functions. A scene returns a character to a concrete time and place, preventing the report from becoming merely the reporter's summary of events. Details provide empirical support for journalistic judgement through observable actions, words, objects, and environments. High-quality detail is not literary ornamentation; it should have evidentiary or explanatory value. It may demonstrate that a change actually occurred or reveal how institutional rules enter ordinary life. If a detail does not serve the central problem and is used only to generate emotion or drama, it may distort factual proportions or substitute an isolated experience for a complex reality.

Feature reports also move beyond isolated facts through causal explanation. They must explain the relationships between personal circumstances and social structures, immediate events and long-term change, and local cases and public issues. Causality may be established through data comparison, historical reconstruction, expert interpretation, institutional analysis, or corroboration across cases. The central professional challenge then extends beyond whether individual facts are true to whether the relationships constructed among

those facts are warranted. A person's experience may be authentic, yet a report can still become explanatorily misleading if it derives an unrepresentative general conclusion from that experience.

Research on narrative journalism shows that character-centred storytelling, scene construction, temporal progression, shifts in perspective, and conflict can enhance readability, presence, and emotional connection. These devices, however, also increase the demands of factual verification and narrative ethics (Neveu, 2014; van Krieken & Sanders, 2021). Feature reports must balance storytelling and explanation. Explanation without story may become abstract argument, while story without explanation may personalise or sentimentalise a public problem and conceal its institutional and structural conditions.

Industry analysis of the 35th China Journalism Award summarised current practice through the principles of brevity, factual solidity, and novelty. 'Micro-granular narrative' uses ordinary people, small entry points, and micro-scenes to carry major themes; 'plain narrative' emphasises deep reporting, factual density, and unadorned expression; and 'intelligent narrative' highlights the extension of news expression through artificial intelligence, data visualisation, and multimodal technologies (Shen & Jiang, 2025). These observations illuminate the current Chinese journalistic emphasis on small entry points, factuality, and technological innovation, but they are industry-level summaries of style and narrative trends rather than substitutes for framing theory.

More specifically, 'micro-granularity' describes the narrative scale selected by a report, 'plainness' its language and mode of presenting material, and 'intelligence' the technological means involved in expression. Framing theory must ask further why a particular character or scene is selected, what problem that selection defines, where it locates responsibility, and what value judgement it produces. The principles of brevity, factual solidity, and novelty can thus provide contextual concepts for Chinese feature-report practice, but they cannot replace problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation as framing dimensions. Because the attached study examines all winning works in the award, its conclusions also cannot be imposed in advance on the present sample of 34 feature reports or treated directly as interview-coding results.

Framing as the Organisation of Social Reality

The sociological foundation of framing derives primarily from Goffman. Goffman (1974) was concerned not with how communicators persuade audiences through language but with how social actors answer the fundamental question, 'What is it that is going on here?' Because lived reality is complex and uncertain, people draw on interpretive schemata to recognise an event as a comprehensible situation. A frame is thus a principle for organising experience; it enables actors to distinguish event boundaries, participant roles, and the meaning of action within the continuous flow of reality.

Goffman distinguished natural from social frameworks. Natural frameworks explain events as processes not controlled by human intention, whereas social frameworks understand them as purposeful and rule-governed actions involving accountable actors. For news research, this distinction means that the same fact can sustain different interpretations. An industrial change may be understood as a natural adjustment to demographic shifts, or it may be

defined as a problem of public-service allocation, organisational management, or policy implementation. A frame does not determine whether the fact occurred; it determines the relational structure in which the fact is placed.

Frames also organise social reality through role definition. People in a news event may be presented as victims, agents, witnesses, experts, institutional representatives, or bearers of responsibility. Such roles do not follow automatically from social identity; they emerge through the report's selection of people's words, actions, circumstances, and relationships. Once a person enters a news report, the person not only supplies facts but may also occupy a symbolic position within a particular explanation of the problem. The reporter's configuration of roles therefore participates in constructing both the event's meaning and its relations of responsibility.

Goffman's theory further suggests that frames are culturally shared. Journalists do not invent interpretations in a vacuum; they draw on intelligible meaning structures already present in social values, professional knowledge, and public discourse. A local story can be elevated into an issue of its time because the reporter connects local facts to established ideas of governance, development, fairness, responsibility, or community. This also explains why the same news fact may acquire different meanings across institutions, periods, and cultural settings.

Goffman, however, primarily explained how social experience is organised; he did not specify which production actors construct news frames or provide a complete method for identifying their functions in news texts. His work supplies the ontological starting point for this study: news does not present an unorganised reality, but a reality already selected, named, ordered, and interpreted. Explaining how journalists accomplish this organisation requires Entman's framing functions and subsequent frame-building research.

Entman's Four Framing Functions

Entman (1993) defined framing as selecting aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text so as to promote particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. This definition translates the abstract idea of a frame into four functions observable in news texts and production processes.

Problem Definition

Problem definition answers the question of what the reported occurrence is taken to be. The same event may be defined as an individual experience, an industry difficulty, a public-service problem, a governance problem, a cultural conflict, or a change in social structure. The problem definition sets the analytical boundary of a report and shapes which characters, data, and background are considered relevant.

In feature-report production, problem definition usually begins during topic development but may change continually through reporting. An initial lead may consist only of a personal story or local phenomenon. After gathering data, interviewing multiple sources, and learning the institutional context, the reporter may redefine it as a broader public problem. Studying problem definition therefore requires more than analysing the headline and lead; it requires

asking how the reporter initially understood the topic, which new materials altered that understanding, and whether editorial feedback expanded or narrowed the problem boundary.

Causal Interpretation

Causal interpretation answers why a problem occurred and which conditions produced it. Causes may be attributed to individual choice, organisational management, institutional arrangements, resource distribution, cultural beliefs, market conditions, or historical change. Causal interpretation determines whether a report goes beyond describing a phenomenon and directly shapes the attribution of responsibility.

Causal relationships in feature reports cannot rest solely on temporal sequence. The fact that one event follows another does not mean the former caused the latter. Reporters need to build causal chains through multiple interviews, data comparison, professional knowledge, and institutional documents. Causal interpretations may also compete, as sources may offer different explanations of the same problem. Frame analysis should therefore examine which explanations are retained, which are weakened, and on what evidence reporters and editors determine the primary causal relationship.

Moral Evaluation

Moral evaluation answers how a problem should be understood and judged. Entman's term is not limited to morality in a narrow sense; it also includes evaluations of the legitimacy of an action, institutional arrangement, or social change. In Chinese feature-report practice, this function may appear in judgements concerning public responsibility, improved livelihoods, cooperation, cultural inheritance, social fairness, or governance performance.

Value evaluation may be explicit, but it may also be embedded in character selection, contrastive structure, emotional scenes, and the ending. A report need not state directly that something is right or worthy of praise to establish a clear value orientation. Assigning some characters the role of positive agents or making a particular change the narrative turning point can have the same effect. Analysing value articulation therefore requires more than searching for evaluative words; it requires examining which interpretation the overall factual structure makes reasonable, natural, or worthy of endorsement.

Treatment Recommendation

Treatment recommendation answers how a problem should be addressed or in what direction future action should move. It may take the form of an explicit policy recommendation, or it may be conveyed indirectly through a successful case, a course of action, an institutional response, or an expectation for the future. A feature report need not provide a complete solution; if it uses comparison to show that one practice is preferable to another, it has already advanced a directional judgement.

The four framing functions need not appear with equal strength in every work. Some feature reports foreground problem definition and emotional evaluation while treating causes and solutions more lightly. Investigative features may develop a fuller structure of phenomenon, cause, responsibility, and response. This study therefore does not mechanically treat all four

functions as mandatory textual elements, but uses them as theoretical coordinates for analysing a report's meaning structure.

Frames should also be distinguished from topics, attitudes, and tone. A topic answers what a report is about; a frame answers how that matter should be understood. Attitude denotes support, opposition, or neutrality, whereas framing involves problem boundaries, causal relations, and allocations of responsibility. Tone indicates a positive or negative expressive tendency but may not constitute a complete explanation. Only when factual selection and organisation jointly promote a problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation can a framing function be identified.

Entman's model supplies the principal dimensions for analysing journalistic meaning, but it chiefly describes what frames do in communication texts and cannot fully explain how the four functions arise during reporting and editing. The analysis must therefore move from media frames to frame building.

From Media Frames to Frame Building

Media-frame research generally analyses how completed reports organise problems; frame-building research asks how such meaning structures enter the report. Scheufele (1999) distinguished frame building, the production and formation of media frames, from frame setting, the effect of those frames on audience cognition and evaluation. De Vreese (2005) further positioned framing across a continuum of production, text, and audience use. Because this study examines creators' factual judgements and editorial decision making, it is theoretically situated in frame building rather than frame effects.

Journalists as Active Frame Builders

Reporters do not passively receive reality or source information. Through topic choice, source selection, questioning, field observation, and material inclusion or exclusion, they actively determine which aspects of reality can enter a report. Their professional experience, issue knowledge, value judgement, and imagined audience shape how they discover and interpret facts.

Journalistic agency is nevertheless limited. Brüggemann (2014) conceptualised journalists' contribution to framing as a continuum from frame sending to frame setting. In frame sending, journalists primarily transmit interpretations already formulated by sources; in frame setting, they actively organise facts and offer a journalistic explanation. Actual production commonly lies between these poles. Reporters may adopt a problem definition supplied by a government department, expert, or participant while modifying it through additional reporting, structural changes, and alternative sources.

This study therefore does not assume that reporters independently developed every frame in the award-winning works. It examines their degree of interpretive autonomy: whether the angle was proposed by the reporter, requested by an editor, or supplied by a source; whether reporters considered competing explanations; and which explanations were abandoned because of insufficient evidence, space constraints, or organisational judgement.

Editors and Editorial Negotiation

Editors are frequently neglected actors in textual frame analysis. By revising headlines, leads, paragraph order, causal wording, and concluding evaluations, editors may alter a report's frame. They also carry responsibility for fact checking, legal risk, political orientation, length, and platform fit. Reporters may prioritise field material and narrative completeness, whereas editors may evaluate a work in relation to institutional positioning, public impact, and overall communicative effect. The two may consequently differ over problem boundaries and value articulation.

Editorial involvement should not simply be understood as suppression of reporters' autonomy. Editors may supply macro-level context missed in local reporting, request counter-sources, require verification of key data, or reduce causal claims not adequately supported by evidence. Yet routine formulas, risk aversion, or organisational preferences may also lead editors to compress factual complexity. Analysis must attend to both the constructive and constraining effects of editorial negotiation.

Frame building is consequently not a linear process in which one reporter decides one frame. A reporter may propose an initial approach, an editor may question its evidence, the reporter may conduct additional interviews, the team may reorganise the structure, and the organisation may make a final judgement. The published text reveals only the negotiated outcome, not the proposals that were revised or deleted. This is why interviews with creators are necessary.

Sources and Access to Reality

Sources provide not only information but also names for problems, causal explanations, and proposed solutions. Government departments, companies, experts, people directly affected, and members of the public possess different forms of knowledge and expressive resources. Institutional sources that can continually supply data, documents, and interview access are generally more likely to enter news than ordinary people with fewer resources. Source availability therefore affects what reporters can see and which explanations acquire evidentiary support.

Source selection is both a condition and an outcome of frame building. A reporter may seek certain sources because of an existing problem definition, or revise an initial frame after encountering a new source. Research should not merely count the people quoted, but ask what sources did during production: who first defined the problem, who supplied decisive evidence, whose explanation the reporter questioned, and who was interviewed but omitted from the published report.

News Routines and Production Constraints

News routines enable complex production to function under constraints, while also regulating frame choice. Deadlines, length standards, reporting cycles, departmental divisions, source channels, balance conventions, and headline norms can all shape how reporters organise facts. Tuchman (1978) showed how news organisations use routines to convert an unpredictable reality into manageable news categories, while Gans (1979) demonstrated how availability, efficiency, news values, and accumulated professional judgement jointly condition news selection.

In the production of award-winning feature reports, routines may also include major-topic planning, embedded fieldwork, cross-departmental cooperation, multi-level review, and award conventions. Longer reporting periods can yield complex material but do not automatically produce complex explanation. Strict length limits may sharpen a problem or exclude necessary context. Analysis must therefore determine whether a frame reflects an active professional choice or the most feasible outcome under resource and time constraints.

Organisational and Institutional Environments

News organisations influence frames through resource allocation, media positioning, editorial systems, and performance standards. Breed's (1955) early study of social control in the newsroom showed that organisational policy does not always enter reporting as a formal directive; it may operate through professional socialisation, editorial feedback, and everyday understandings of what is publishable.

Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) hierarchy-of-influences model differentiates individual, routine, organisational, social-institutional, and social-system levels. A reporter's choices are shaped by personal experience but must pass through editorial processes; editorial decisions are shaped by institutional positioning; and the institution itself exists within wider political, economic, cultural, and technological environments. Frame building cannot therefore be reduced to any single level.

In research on Chinese award-winning feature reports, the organisational environment may be expressed through media level, reporting department, major-topic systems, cross-media cooperation, reporting resources, platform requirements, and risk management. The task is not to assume in advance that organisational factors necessarily override a reporter's judgement, but to analyse how influences at different levels enter concrete decisions. An organisation may set the direction of a topic while the reporter retains authority over facts and characters in the field; an editor may adjust value articulation but depend on evidence supplied by the reporter; and a cross-media team may possess more knowledge resources while facing greater negotiation costs.

Frame Building as a Negotiated and Recursive Process

Taken together, the literature suggests that frame building is negotiated and recursive. Reporters, editors, and sources do not control news equally, but each can alter problem definitions, causal interpretations, and value articulation at different stages. A frame is not necessarily fixed during topic selection; it may expand during reporting, become concrete in writing, be challenged during editing, and achieve only provisional stability before publication.

Boesman et al. (2016) argued that frame-building research should combine textual analysis, production documents, newsroom observation, and reconstruction interviews. The text shows what became salient, whereas interviews and production records help explain what was excluded, why it was excluded, and which alternative frames once existed. This approach directly informs the present study: an in-depth interview should not merely ask for the work's theme, but reconstruct concrete decision points around the work, including the initial topic, changes in material, structural drafts, editorial comments, and reasons for the final version.

Narrative Devices in Frame Construction

Frames and narratives are closely related but should not be conflated. A frame answers how reality should be understood; a narrative answers how that interpretation is organised and told through characters, events, time, and language. A frame is a principle of meaning selection and interpretation; a narrative is the structural means through which that interpretation is realised.

The same frame can be realised through different narrative forms. A social phenomenon defined as a public-service problem may be presented through personal experience, a data investigation, institutional history, or cross-case comparison. Conversely, the same character-centred story structure may carry different frames: a protagonist's difficulty may be explained as a consequence of personal choice or as a problem of institutional resource allocation. Narrative form alone therefore cannot establish the nature of a frame.

Character Selection and Focalisation

Character selection determines whose experience provides the reader's entry into an event. Centring an ordinary person may enhance perceptibility but may also reduce a structural problem to individual endeavour. Centring an expert may strengthen explanation while weakening the voice of affected groups. The focal character's identity, capacity for action, and narrative position influence whether the problem is understood as a personal story, a group condition, or an institutional issue.

Scene Construction and Evidentiary Detail

Scenes locate abstract judgements in time and space, while details provide observable evidence of personal conditions and social change. Scenes and details acquire journalistic evidentiary value only when they are verifiable and relevant to the core problem. Analysis should ask whether a detail proves, explains, symbolises, or merely intensifies emotion, and whether an isolated detail is assigned a general significance beyond its evidentiary capacity.

Temporal Order and Narrative Causality

Feature reports may use chronological order, flashback, interpolation, historical comparison, or parallel narrative lines. Temporal order shapes not only reading pace but causal understanding. When a change is positioned as the story's turning point, readers may treat it as the cause of the problem or the beginning of its resolution. Research must therefore distinguish experiential causal relationships from a sense of causality generated by narrative structure.

Conflict, Contrast and Turning Points

Conflict and contrast can increase a problem's salience. Differences between past and present, individuals and institutions, or policy goals and actual outcomes may all serve as framing devices. Turning points organise facts into a problem-action-change logic. If a report retains only facts that fit the turning-point structure, however, it may obscure incomplete change or counterexamples in reality.

Quotations, Data and Explanatory Voices

Quotations bring authenticity and immediacy, but their selection, extraction, and ordering also participate in framing. Data can extend the explanatory reach of a case, but their source,

period, and statistical definition must be clear. Expert sources can offer causal explanations, yet professional authority cannot replace examination of competing accounts. Narrative credibility arises from mutual support among different forms of evidence, not from the authority of any single source.

Titles, Openings and Endings

Headlines and openings usually establish the initial problem definition and indicate the angle from which readers should enter the report; endings often distil values and point towards the future. Strong alignment among headline, opening, and ending can clarify a frame, but may also force the body of the report to serve a predetermined conclusion. Analysis should attend to the beginning and end while also determining whether the substantive facts genuinely support the final value judgement.

Pan and Kosicki's (1993) syntactical, script, thematic, and rhetorical structures show that frames are realised through concrete discourse structures rather than floating above the text. Narrative devices are resources for realising frames, not frames in themselves. Whether characters, scenes, time, language, and technological forms contribute to problem definition and value articulation must still be assessed in relation to the specific work and its production process.

Factuality, Professional Values and Institutional Values

Framing necessarily involves selection, but selection does not permit arbitrary treatment of facts. News cannot represent reality in its entirety, yet the facts it includes must be verifiable, and the relationships it constructs among them must have an evidentiary basis. The inevitability of framing therefore cannot be used to deny journalistic truthfulness; instead, it makes the transparency, reasonableness, and accountability of factual selection more important.

Factuality as an Evidentiary Constraint

At a basic level, factuality requires names, times, places, numbers, actions, and quotations to correspond to verifiable material. At a higher level, it requires cross-verification of key claims. Godler and Reich (2017) argued that journalistic evidence does not simply derive from a single source but is constituted through corroboration among different sources. Because feature reports are longer and make more causal claims, they require verification not only of isolated facts but also of relations among facts.

Factuality also requires a distinction among observation, source statement, and reporter inference. A scene witnessed by a reporter, a participant's account of personal experience, an expert's professional judgement, and a reporter's interpretation of the material have different evidentiary statuses. Treating inference as fact or a single source's view as a certain conclusion obscures the origin of journalistic knowledge.

Professional Values

Journalistic professional values include accuracy, truthfulness, independent judgement, public service, timeliness, and ethical responsibility (Deuze, 2005). These values do not imply that reporters lack positions; they require those positions to be constrained by evidence, procedure, and public responsibility. Schudson's (2001) discussion of objectivity suggests that

it is better understood as a set of executable professional procedures than as the total absence of value judgement by journalists.

In feature-report production, professional values are expressed in questions such as whether major conclusions have sufficient evidence, whether relevant parties receive appropriate opportunity to speak, whether people are instrumentalised, whether emotion rests on authentic experience, whether counterexamples and uncertainty are handled reasonably, and whether the reporter distinguishes fact, analysis, and evaluation. Professional values are thus constraints on frame building, not merely an ethical check after writing.

Public Values

Public value concerns why a report deserves entry into public communication. It may involve public interest, social fairness, improved livelihoods, institutional responsibility, cultural inheritance, or communal identity. A feature report may reach public meaning through individual experience, but a personal story produces public value only when it is connected, with sufficient evidence, to wider social relations.

Public-value articulation should not be reduced to adding a grand judgement at the end. It should develop progressively from the preceding facts and explanations. When a report demonstrates how individual circumstances relate to policy, resources, and social beliefs, its public significance emerges through relational disclosure. If the body is only a personal story and the conclusion suddenly ascends to a grand theme, value articulation may become detached from the evidentiary structure.

Institutional Values

Institutional values are the relatively stable requirements that news organisations develop concerning media positioning, editorial policy, political responsibility, social function, risk control, and brand reputation. Institutional and professional values may align, for example in their shared emphasis on truthfulness, public responsibility, and social impact. They may also conflict: demands for communicative impact may encourage emotional headlines; risk control may weaken complex issues; and award orientation may encourage works to pursue a complete and conspicuous thematic structure.

Institutional values should not be treated simply as external interference. News organisations also provide access, professional review, legal support, and cross-departmental knowledge, enabling reporters to complete investigations and explanations beyond individual capacity. The key analytical question is how institutional value enters a work: as an upstream directive, an editorial-stage structural revision, or a pre-publication boundary control; and whether it increases evidentiary sufficiency or compresses factual complexity.

Accordingly, this study does not position fact, professional value, and institutional value as mutually exclusive forces. It examines how they are combined in specific production settings. A professionally legitimate frame must meet at least the following conditions:

- The core problem is grounded in verifiable facts.
- Causal interpretation is proportionate to the strength of the evidence.
- Value judgement does not exceed what the material can support.
- Principal stakeholders receive appropriate rather than merely token representation.

- Editorial and institutional intervention can be traced to explicit professional or organisational reasons.
- The report preserves necessary openness towards uncertainty, counterexamples, and interpretive boundaries.

These conditions are not a predetermined scoring rubric. They are comparative dimensions for the subsequent analysis of how reporters, editors, and organisations understand a 'good feature report' and 'appropriate value articulation'.

Research Gap and Sensitising Framework

The foregoing literature identifies three interconnected gaps.

First, studies of feature reports and the China Journalism Award commonly focus on the narrative structures, language styles, and value themes already present in completed works, offering limited processual explanation of how factual material was selected, excluded, and revised. A text displays final meaning but not the whole process by which that meaning formed.

Second, although framing research provides mature dimensions such as problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation, existing work still concentrates mainly on frame identification and audience effects. Negotiation among reporters, editors, sources, and organisational settings has received comparatively less attention. The existence of frames is well described; their production requires more evidence from the news-production process.

Third, research on feature-report narrative and research on frame building remain insufficiently connected. Narrative scholarship can identify characters, scenes, time, details, and perspective without necessarily explaining the problem definition these forms advance. Framing research can identify the meaning a report constructs while neglecting how story structure makes that meaning readable and emotionally compelling. The present study must therefore answer both how reality is interpreted and how that interpretation is narrated.

In response to these gaps, the study proposes the initial sensitising pathway shown in Table 1.

The analytical pathway comprises five interconnected stages.

Table 1
Sensitising Framework for the Analysis

Initial stage	Core analytical question	Potential empirical material	Primary theoretical source
Factual selection	Which characters, scenes, data, and sources were included, excluded, or foregrounded?	Interview records, original material, deleted content, and creators' recollections	News-production research; frame building
Problem definition	What public problem did the work ultimately define, and when did that definition change?	Topic proposals, interview guides, and changes to headlines and leads	Goffman; Entman
Narrative organisation	How were facts organised through characters, time, causality, contrast, and detail into an intelligible structure?	Draft structures, scene selection, narrative order, and quotation placement	Narrative-journalism research; Pan and Kosicki
Editorial negotiation	How did reporters, editors, and organisations negotiate evidence, structure, and value?	Revision comments, follow-up reporting, headline adjustments, and review processes	Frame building; hierarchy-of-influences model
Value articulation	What evaluation and direction did the work establish, and what was the evidentiary basis?	Endings, evaluative structures, treatment directions, and handling of counterexamples	Entman; research on journalistic professional values

The pathway is not a linear assertion about actual production. Frame building may involve substantial feedback: newly reported facts may alter the problem definition; the problem definition may direct the search for further evidence; editorial comments may prompt additional reporting; and organisational assessment of evidentiary risk may narrow value articulation. A more complete relationship can therefore be represented as follows:

This study defines the structure as a sensitising framework rather than a fixed coding scheme. Blumer (1954) argued that sensitising concepts orient researchers towards the empirical world without predetermining the characteristics that experience must exhibit. Charmaz (2014) likewise maintained that qualitative researchers may enter the material with existing theory, provided that the data are allowed to revise, extend, or even disconfirm the initial concepts.

Formal coding used factual selection, problem definition, narrative organisation, editorial negotiation, and value articulation as first-round points of observation, while allowing the material to generate new process categories. Inductive codes included lead incubation, reporting opportunities, cross-media collaboration, evidentiary risk, emotional boundaries,

and headline reframing. Only concepts repeatedly supported across cases entered thematic integration.

The theoretical framework therefore does not merely place Goffman, Entman, narrative theory, and news-production research alongside one another. The components perform distinct roles: Goffman explains why news necessarily organises reality; Entman specifies the meaning functions of that organisation; frame-building research explains how different actors and production conditions jointly create those functions; narrative research shows how frames enter concrete works through characters, scenes, time, and language; and research on factuality and professional values specifies how this production of meaning retains journalistic legitimacy.

This integrated framework serves one central explanatory objective: to show how dispersed facts in the real world are transformed, through journalists' professional judgement, narrative organisation, and institutional negotiation, into value articulation that has public significance and remains open to evidentiary scrutiny.

Methodology

This study explains how award-winning feature reports in the 35th China Journalism Award construct news frames with particular problem orientations, causal logics, and value directions from complex factual material. Rather than re-identifying frame types already visible in completed texts, it enters the production process to examine how reporters discover leads, define problems, select and exclude facts, organise narrative material, and transform factual judgements into value articulation within professional norms and institutional settings. Because these questions concern news producers' interpretations of concrete practical experience, the study adopts an interpretivist qualitative multiple-case design. Semi-structured in-depth interviews constitute the principal data source, supplemented by work-elicitation using the award-winning reports and related production materials. The material is analysed through a theoretically informed codebook thematic analysis.

Research Design

The study adopts an interpretivist epistemological position. Interpretivism holds that the meanings of social reality do not exist wholly independently of actors, but are continually understood and constructed within particular social relations, institutional environments, and practices (Crotty, 1998). From this perspective, a news frame is neither an intrinsic property of a news fact nor simply the result of a reporter attaching a predetermined ideology to facts. It is a structure of meaning produced through selection, interpretation, organisation, and negotiation as reporters encounter leads, interview material, sources, time pressure, textual conventions, and institutional requirements.

A qualitative multiple-case design was used, treating the award-winning feature reports as distinct but comparable production cases. Although these works share professional commitments to factuality, news value, and public expression, they differ substantially in topic, reporting duration, media level, team size, and narrative form. Cross-case comparison makes it possible to identify recurring mechanisms of frame building and to examine how those mechanisms vary with topic, organisational resources, and production conditions.

Data collection centred on semi-structured in-depth interviews. The semi-structured format ensured that all participants discussed common issues of factual selection, problem definition, narrative organisation, editorial negotiation, and value articulation, while allowing the interviewer to pursue the specific production history of each work. The interviews addressed the following questions:

- How was a news lead recognised and transformed into a reportable problem?
- Which facts were selected, excluded, or particularly foregrounded, and on what grounds?
- How were characters, scenes, data, sources, and temporal structures organised?
- How were the headline, lead, key passages, and ending developed?
- How did reporters understand the causal interpretations and value judgements in the work?
- How did editorial comments and institutional requirements affect the work, with such material analysed only on the basis of reporters' recollections?

Were any reporting materials, narrative angles, or modes of value articulation abandoned? Interview data were treated as participants' retrospective interpretations of production practice rather than as an unbiased, objective reproduction of the past. Participants' accounts could be affected by reconstructive memory, post-award rationalisation, and professional self-presentation. The researchers therefore compared their statements with the published works, public records, and any available interview outlines, headline proposals, and revision material. The findings distinguish among participants' self-interpretations, textual evidence observable in the works, and the researchers' resulting theoretical interpretations.

Research Population and Case Selection

The research population comprised the 34 First-, Second-, and Third-Prize feature reports in the 35th China Journalism Award: 5 First Prizes, 11 Second Prizes, and 18 Third Prizes. The Special-Prize feature report was excluded so that the distinctive assessment status of the Special Prize would not affect comparisons among ordinary award levels.

Cases were selected through a combination of purposive and maximum-variation sampling. Purposive sampling prioritises a case's knowledge relevance to the research question rather than statistical representativeness. Maximum-variation sampling expands differences in award level, media type, topic, production team, and narrative form, thereby improving the study's capacity to identify mechanisms that recur across contexts (Patton, 2015).

A case was eligible when it met five criteria: (1) the work was officially listed as a First-, Second-, or Third-Prize feature report in the 35th China Journalism Award; (2) the researcher could contact a creator who had directly participated in topic development, reporting, writing, or substantial revision; (3) the participant could provide experiential material about particular factual choices and the formation of the text; (4) the case increased variation in topic, media level, or narrative approach; and (5) the participant agreed to a recorded interview and signed informed consent.

Ten works were ultimately selected, representing 29.4% of the 34-work population: three First-Prize, four Second-Prize, and three Third-Prize cases. The topics covered healthcare and population, business competition, rural governance, interregional employment cooperation, free-trade-port development, urban governance, revolutionary history, ecological restoration, youth culture, and anti-corruption governance. The cases were not mechanically

sampled in proportion to the three award categories; selection was designed to maximise theoretical variation and mechanism comparison. Table 2 presents the cases and participant coverage.

Table 2

Case Selection and Participant Coverage

Case	Award-winning work	Award level	Invited creators	Actual participants
C01	Obstetrics at a Crossroads	First prize	2	2
C02	Peers Are Not Enemies; Peers Point the Way	First prize	3	3
C03	When Yours Rises, So Does Mine—How Can Bride Prices Stay Low? When Yours Falls, So Does Mine—How Can Life Not Improve?	First prize	4	3
C04	Notes on Leaving Dingxi	Second prize	1	1
C05	I Repair Aircraft at the Free-Trade Port	Second prize	1	1
C06	A ‘Brief History’ of Huang Yanghai Selling Watermelons	Second prize	1	1
C07	A ‘Wedding Photograph’ Delayed for More Than 90 Years	Second prize	5	4
C08	‘Grass Planters’ Along the Mother River	Third prize	3	3
C09	Searching for the Youthful Code of Cultural China	Third prize	2	2
C10	In-Depth Focus Punishing Corruption through Bribe-Giver Proxy Holdings	Third prize	1	1
Total	—	—	23	21

Note. C = case. Participant counts include only individuals who consented and completed an interview.

Of 23 invited creators, 21 participated and signed informed-consent forms, a participation rate of 91.3%. Two invitees were unable to participate during the data-collection period because of year-end work commitments and an out-of-town reporting assignment. As neither person participated or contributed interview data, their personal information was not coded or analysed. At least one core creator from every work was interviewed, so all 10 cases were retained in the final sample.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected purposively on the basis of role relevance. They had to have directly participated in discovering the lead, planning the topic, reporting, writing, or making

substantial revisions, and to be capable of explaining particular production decisions. A person named in an award record was not automatically eligible if unable to account for the work's production process.

The final sample comprised 21 reporters or principal creators from central media, national specialist media, provincial Party newspapers, and cross-media reporting teams. It included both individual authors and members of collaborative teams, enabling comparison between individually led and team-based processes of frame formation.

No editor or planner was interviewed separately. The object of analysis is therefore more precisely described as reporters' and creators' practical interpretations of feature-report frame building, not as a complete observation of the newsroom decision system. Whenever participants discussed editors revising a headline, shortening the text, adjusting the structure, reinforcing a theme, or otherwise changing the work, the analysis identifies the claim as a reporter's or creator's recollection. Such material indicates how reporters understand editorial involvement but cannot be treated as editors' own direct accounts of the decision process.

To protect participants, P01-P21 were used as participant codes and C01-C10 as work codes. Works produced by larger teams were not assigned greater analytical weight simply because more participants spoke. Cross-case comparison used the work as the primary unit of analysis and participant statements as evidence units within each case.

Work-Elicitation Interview

The study used work-elicitation interviews. This method draws on material-elicitation and reconstruction approaches to news production: a participant's own published work and related production materials serve as prompts for recalling decisions at specific textual positions and production stages, rather than for discussing general journalistic ideals in the abstract. Reconstruction interviewing can connect what the final text foregrounds with alternatives considered, revised, or abandoned during production, making it particularly appropriate for examining frame formation (Boesman et al., 2016).

Before each interview, the researcher prepared a case prompt sheet identifying the work's headline, lead, principal characters, key scenes, data, sources, structural turns, and ending. The sheet also provisionally marked Entman's (1993) four framing functions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation.

The published work served as a shared reference during the interview. The researcher presented the headline, lead, and key passages and asked:

- Why was this fact, person, or scene selected?
- Which reporting materials did not enter the published version?
- How was a particular fact judged to be representative?
- Were alternative versions of the headline or lead considered?
- Which passages were substantially revised, and who proposed the revision?
- How did the work extend from an individual story to a public problem?
- How were tensions between factual requirements and value articulation handled?

- Would deleting a particular data point, person, or detail have changed the explanatory direction of the work?

Where participants retained interview outlines, early drafts, alternative headlines, or revision records, these were used as additional prompts. Where no revision history survived, the interview relied on the published work and production moments that the participant could specifically identify. Work elicitation was not intended to prove that participants' memories were perfectly accurate. Its purpose was to reduce generic answers by anchoring professional judgements in verifiable facts, text, and decision contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected between 15 November 2025 and 20 January 2026. Ethical approval was obtained after the results of the 35th China Journalism Award had been announced and before formal interviewing began, ensuring that every case and participant related to a confirmed award-winning work.

Interviews combined online and face-to-face modes. Approximately 70% were conducted in person, mainly in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, and Jinan. Approximately 30% were conducted through Tencent Meeting, principally to accommodate participants in Yinchuan, Lanzhou, and Haikou and to resolve distance and scheduling constraints. Online interviews were screen- and audio-recorded; face-to-face interviews were captured on digital audio recorders.

Seventeen interview sessions were completed: 11 initial individual interviews, 3 initial joint interviews, and 3 follow-up interviews. The joint interviews involved three collaborative cases and concentrated on how team members collectively recalled topic formation, division of reporting labour, narrative organisation, and the coordination of differing views. The follow-ups clarified the process of establishing the topic, the upstream extension of the reporting chain, and criteria for factual selection; each lasted 15-25 minutes.

Initial interviews lasted 51-174 minutes. Combining the initial interviews and follow-ups, the 17 sessions averaged approximately 87 minutes and yielded about 24.7 hours of recordings. Participant and session counts represent different units: 21 participants were distinct individuals, while the 17 sessions included joint interviews with multiple participants and repeat follow-ups with existing participants.

All interviews were audio- or video-recorded with consent, and iFlytek Hearing was used to assist real-time transcription. Automated transcripts were not used directly for analysis. The research team checked them line by line against the original recordings, correcting names, numbers, proper nouns, semantic pauses, and referential relations. The final corpus contained approximately 410,000 Chinese characters, including interview transcripts and annotated field notes.

Data collection and preliminary analysis proceeded concurrently. The researchers continually recorded new codes, conditions, and relationships among themes. The team judged that thematic saturation appropriate to the study's objectives had been reached when later cases produced no new first-order codes and supplementary interviews added contextual variation

to existing themes without changing the core thematic structure. The judgement also drew on the principle of information power, according to which sample sufficiency depends on participants' relevance to the research question, data quality, sample variation, and analytical purpose rather than a predetermined numerical threshold (Malterud et al., 2016).

Data Analysis

The study used a theoretically informed codebook thematic analysis. This approach uses explicit theoretical concepts as initial analytical directions while allowing researchers to induct production processes that existing theory does not adequately explain. Compared with purely deductive coding, a hybrid deductive-inductive design reduces the risk of searching only for material that confirms theoretical expectations. Compared with entirely open coding, it preserves alignment among the research questions, framing theory, and empirical material (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Unit of Coding and Unit of Analysis

The basic coding unit was the meaning unit: a complete sentence, a continuous turn of speech, or several exchanges concerning the same production decision. Material was coded whenever it explained factual selection, frame formation, narrative organisation, editorial intervention, or value judgement. A single meaning unit could receive multiple codes.

The work case was the primary unit of analysis, and participant statements were evidence units. The researchers first reconstructed the production process within each work and then compared mechanisms and differences across works; they did not simply count how many participants mentioned a theme.

Initial Codebook

The initial codebook contained two classes of codes. The first comprised deductive codes from Entman's framing theory: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. The second comprised inductive codes generated from the production process: lead discovery, factual inclusion and exclusion, evidentiary ordering, character selection, scene organisation, headline revision, editorial feedback, institutional requirements, value conflict, and alternative approaches. Table 3 presents the principal coding domains and operational definitions.

Table 3

Theoretically Informed Initial Codebook

Coding domain	Operational definition	Main indicators
Problem definition	Construction of a condition as a problem requiring public attention	Core problem; problem boundaries; affected groups; public relevance
Causal interpretation	Explanation of the causes, process, or relations of responsibility	Causal chain; structural conditions; responsible actors; critical turns
Moral/value evaluation	Value criteria used to assess facts and actions	Public interest; fairness; responsibility; dignity; social order
Treatment recommendation	Explicit or implicit responses and future directions in the work	Policy response; institutional adjustment; action proposal; exemplary solution
Story initiation	How a news lead became a reportable problem	Assignment; accidental discovery; policy event; long-term observation
Factual inclusion	Why a fact was included in the work	Verifiability; typicality; explanatory power; representativeness
Factual exclusion	Why material was deleted or abandoned	Insufficient evidence; repetition; risk; length; departure from the topic
Narrative organisation	How facts were organised into an intelligible story	Characters; scenes; time; contrast; lead; ending
Editorial intervention	How editors influenced the work, according to reporters	Headline revision; length reduction; structural adjustment; thematic reinforcement
Professional values	How professional norms constrained the frame	Verification; accuracy; balance; source reliability
Institutional values	How organisational positioning and public responsibility affected expression	Mainstream values; public orientation; risk management; organisational positioning
Alternative/negative case	Material inconsistent with the primary mechanism or challenging the initial interpretation	Rejected options; internal tensions; weak causality; unresolved disagreement

Coding Procedure

Analysis began with familiarisation. The researchers repeatedly read the transcripts and award-winning works, created a case file for each work containing the published text, interview material, interview notes, and related production records, and wrote a case memo. First-cycle coding followed. Entman's four framing functions were used to identify how participants understood the work's explanatory structure; open inductive coding recorded actual production activities preceding and accompanying frame formation. When later material generated a new inductive code, the researchers returned to previously coded material for retrospective checking so that the same code was applied consistently across cases.

The codebook was then revised. Each code included a name, conceptual definition, inclusion criteria, exclusion criteria, a typical example, and distinctions from adjacent codes. The team used concrete examples to clarify boundaries between potentially overlapping codes such as problem definition and topic formation, value evaluation and institutional value, and narrative revision and editorial intervention.

Within-case analysis was conducted next. For each work, the researchers reconstructed a process chain of lead emergence, factual filtering, problem definition, narrative organisation, revision negotiation, and value articulation, while recording interruption, return, and adjustment. The chain was not treated as a predetermined linear model. Where verification changed the problem definition, or editorial revision prompted additional reporting, the process was represented recursively.

Cross-case comparison followed. A case-comparison matrix was used to examine common mechanisms and conditional differences across award levels, media types, topics, and team structures. Cross-case analysis focused on the conditions under which a mechanism appeared, how it operated, and what effect it produced; the number of participants who mentioned a theme was not treated as the sole indicator of theoretical importance.

The researchers then integrated themes and constructed the mechanism. Lower-level production codes were combined into higher-order themes including factual selection, problem construction, narrative translation, professional negotiation, and value articulation, after which relations among the themes were analysed.

Finally, negative-case analysis actively sought material inconsistent with the initial explanation: cases in which a value direction was not predetermined, editorial intervention weakened rather than strengthened expression, narrative appeal conflicted with factual completeness, or no explicit treatment recommendation appeared. Negative cases were used to revise the theoretical model rather than discarded as anomalies.

Intercoder Agreement

To assess the codebook's clarity and stability of application, two researchers who had not participated in the relevant interviews independently coded four randomly selected transcripts. They used the same version of the codebook without seeing the primary coder's decisions. Mean Cohen's kappa across the four transcripts was .81, indicating a high level of shared understanding of the codes' scope.

Kappa was treated as supporting evidence of the codebook's operational clarity, not as proof that the qualitative interpretation was objectively correct. Disagreements were resolved by returning to the original context, comparing code definitions, and discussing alternative interpretations. Where necessary, code boundaries were revised and the amended criteria were applied retrospectively to earlier material.

Researcher Reflexivity

Interpretivist research acknowledges that the researcher participates in producing data and interpreting meaning. Prior understandings of the China Journalism Award, journalistic professional norms, mainstream value articulation, and framing theory could shape interview questions, material selection, and theme development. The team therefore maintained reflexive memos recording theoretical expectations, field impressions, anomalous material, and analytical judgements, and continually examined how researcher position affected the analysis (Berger, 2015).

First, the researchers avoided assuming that a frame must have been successful because the work won an award. The China Journalism Award represents professional recognition, but it does not prove acceptance by all audiences or the absence of contradiction in production. Interviews asked not only why the work succeeded, but also which facts were not used, which material was deleted, where creators disagreed, and which aspects remained unsatisfactory. Second, the researchers avoided allowing agreement with a work's public or mainstream values to obscure tensions in the process by which those values formed. The analysis separated whether the researcher endorsed a value from how the value took shape in facts and narrative, focusing on its evidentiary basis, narrative vehicle, and professional boundaries.

Third, retrospective explanations were not treated directly as objective production facts. General statements such as 'it was fixed from the start', 'the team agreed completely', or 'the value emerged naturally' prompted further questions about timing, specific participants, revision comments, and alternatives. Statements unsupported by text or production material were explicitly identified as participants' retrospective interpretations.

Fourth, the researchers avoided selecting only material that supported the initial theoretical pathway. Evidence inconsistent with the preliminary sequence of factual selection, problem definition, narrative organisation, and value articulation was included in negative-case analysis to test for reverse, cyclical, or interrupted processes.

Trustworthiness

Research quality was evaluated in terms of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility was supported through work elicitation, transcript checking against recordings, follow-up interviews, and member checking. Three follow-ups clarified topic formation, the upstream extension of the reporting chain, and criteria for factual selection. Transcripts from two team cases were returned to participants so that names, times, data, and key production facts could be checked. Member checking was used to verify factual statements and

quotation accuracy, not to require participants to endorse every theoretical interpretation (Birt et al., 2016).

Dependability was supported by an audit trail. The team retained interview guides, recordings, automated transcripts, manually corrected transcripts, follow-up records, versions of the codebook, case memos, thematic matrices, and records of coding-disagreement resolution, allowing the progression from original statements to codes, themes, and mechanism-level claims to be traced.

Confirmability was strengthened through researcher reflexivity, peer review, and negative-case analysis. Two researchers independently coded four transcripts, while the team actively examined material inconsistent with the primary conclusions to reduce the likelihood that findings merely reflected the main coder's theoretical expectations.

Transferability was pursued through maximum-variation sampling and contextual description. The report specifies topic, award level, media type, team structure, and production conditions so that readers can judge whether the mechanisms may apply to other award-winning feature reports, ordinary news projects, or different media environments. The study seeks analytical generalisation rather than statistical inference from 10 cases to all Chinese news production.

Ethics

The study was approved by the Academic Ethics Review Committee of Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology (approval no. CUCN-IRB-2025-112; 8 November 2025). Approval was obtained after the announcement of the 35th China Journalism Award and before the first formal interview.

Before interview, all participants received an information sheet explaining the research purpose, mode of participation, audio-visual recording, data uses, potential risks, confidentiality, use of direct quotations, and the right to withdraw. All 21 participants signed informed-consent forms. The two invitees who did not participate generated no research data; their identities and reasons for non-participation were excluded from the analysis.

Because award-winning work titles, media organisations, and creator names are public, readers may be able to infer a participant's identity from a combination of work and quotation even when names are removed. The consent process therefore expressly addressed the risk of indirect identification. P01-P21 are used for participants and C01-C10 for work cases. Unless a participant separately consented to attributed quotation, a single evidentiary passage does not simultaneously disclose the participant's name, precise position, and a highly identifying direct quotation.

No editor or planner was interviewed. References to editorial comments and editor-reporter negotiation are explicitly identified as reporters' retrospective accounts; they are not presented as direct testimony from editors, and no individual-level inference is made about the intentions of editors who did not participate.

Audio and video files, consent forms, identity keys, and de-identified transcripts were stored separately. Research data are held on an encrypted, intranet-only server at the Media Convergence Research Centre, School of Journalism and Communication, Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology, and are accessible only to authorised members of the research team. The data will be retained until 31 January 2031 and then audio-visual recordings, identity keys, and other identifiable materials will be deleted in accordance with the approved protocol.

Results

This section reports the results of the theoretically informed codebook thematic analysis of 10 award-winning feature reports in the 35th China Journalism Award, interviews with 21 participants, and approximately 410,000 Chinese characters of transcripts. Work cases were the primary units of analysis and participant statements the evidence units. Within-case process reconstruction and cross-case comparison were used to examine relationships among factual selection, problem definition, causal interpretation, narrative organisation, editorial revision, and value articulation.

Seven connected empirical themes were developed and then integrated into a comprehensive frame-building mechanism. The section headings are thematic claims generated through cross-case coding rather than restatements of the interview guide. A small number of oral repetitions were removed from quotations without changing their meaning. Participants are identified as P01-P21 and works as C01-C10.

Problem-Relevant Evidence as the Gate: Selecting Facts by Explanatory Relevance

The analysis shows that the first criterion governing whether a fact enters an award-winning feature report is not whether it is vivid, moving, or novel in itself, but whether it serves the central problem already formed or still forming in the work. Factual selection is therefore not merely the compression of material after reporting; it is a process of meaning-based filtering that runs throughout topic development, reporting, writing, and revision.

In C01, the reporting team encountered materials from hospital administrators, obstetricians, pregnant women, policy researchers, and statistics. It did not treat the closure of maternity departments as the endpoint of the report. P02 summarised the principle of factual selection as follows:

'The report did not remain at the superficial level of "how many hospitals had closed".... Every fact selected had to serve the central question, "Where is obstetrics heading?"' (P02, C01, initial interview)

This indicates that a fact's news value is linked to its framing function. Maternity-department closures supplied the event-level entry point, but materials explaining relations among demographic structure, fertility policy, operating pressure, and the allocation of medical resources received greater priority. Data were favoured not simply because they appeared more 'objective' than individual experience, but because they could elevate dispersed hospital cases into a structural problem.

C03 used a different evidentiary strategy. High bride prices are a sensitive issue involving policy governance, family relations, and local culture. Rather than relying primarily on policy documents, the creators prioritised the experiences and language of farming households: *'Our strategy was "a small entry point with deep investigation"—not to discuss policy in the abstract, but to enter farming households and record their real stories and inner changes.... Letting people speak for themselves is more powerful than any preaching.'* (P07, C03, joint interview)

C01 foregrounded the structural explanatory power of data, whereas C03 emphasised the contextual persuasiveness of lived experience. These strategies are not contradictory. Cross-case comparison showed that no single type of evidence was invariably best. Whether a fact entered a report depended mainly on its fit with the core problem. Data carried greater weight when the report needed to establish scale and structural change; personal experience and grassroots speech carried greater explanatory force when it needed to show how policy entered everyday life.

C10 further demonstrates the functional character of factual selection. Confronting the specialised problem of corrupt payments held on another person's behalf, the creator used cases as conceptual-explanatory tools:

'Every case had to explain clearly what holding assets on another's behalf means, why it is so harmful, and how it is detected.' (P21, C10, initial interview)

Here, cases did not ornament the report or merely increase readability. They respectively explained the concept, its harm, and the governance response. Factual selection was constrained simultaneously by truthfulness and explanatory value: material had to be reliable and occupy a clear position in the overall argument.

A negative case appeared at the early stage, before a lead had been sufficiently problematised. C04 began as a routine assignment to cover the launch of a special train for migrant workers. Had the reporter selected facts according only to the event schedule, attendees, and launch procedure, the work might have remained a procedural news item. The case shows that facts do not automatically arrange themselves by importance; without a core problem, the reporting agenda can easily be dominated by the sequence of an organised event.

Overall, factual selection can be described as filtering by problem relevance. Verifiability determines whether material can function as news evidence; explanatory relevance further determines whether it enters the final frame. Exclusion does not necessarily mean that a fact is untrue. A fact may leave the work because it repeats existing information, lacks explanatory function, departs from the central problem, or fragments the narrative.

From a Small Entry to a Public Problem: Problem Definition through Narrative Entry

The second theme is the construction of problems through a small entry point into a larger issue. Most cases did not begin directly with macro policy or abstract values. They first identified an observable person, event, scene, or contradiction and transformed it into a problem of public significance. The narrative entry point determines both where the story begins and what kind of problem the story is understood to be.

The creators of C01 explicitly distinguished a report on a phenomenon from a report on a problem:

'The starting point of the topic was not "reporting a phenomenon" but "dissecting a problem".' (P01, C01, initial interview)

The 'wave of maternity-ward closures' was only the surface phenomenon. The substantive problem was how demographic change, hospital operation, specialist personnel, and responsibility for public healthcare should be reconfigured. The core frame was therefore not simply that maternity departments were declining, but whether society still needed a stable safety-net system for obstetric care amid demographic change.

C02 entered through the relationship between two bird-feeder companies that moved from competition to cooperation. The local business story was selected because it could address the wider problem of involutionary competition:

'This is a vivid case of resisting involution.' (P03, C02, joint interview)

'The value of the report is not that it says the two firms did well, but that it provides an example of how it can be done.' (P05, C02, joint interview)

The problem definition was elevated from a fact about inter-firm cooperation to a question about competitive order. The individual case was not treated as a universal conclusion, but as a way of examining a possibility: must relations among firms in the same industry be exclusionary, or can cooperation provide an alternative market practice?

C06 similarly shows how an entry point shapes problem definition. The creator discovered the lead in a short news item about temporary fruit-sale sites:

'In July 2024, I saw a "gold mine" in a Xi'an Evening News brief about Xi'an establishing 174 temporary summer and autumn fruit-selling sites. Progress in urban management must ultimately be reflected in every ordinary person's sense of benefit.' (P11, C06, initial interview)

Had the report entered through the establishment of 174 sites, the work might have defined the issue as a municipal-management measure. When it turned instead to a mobile vendor's decades-long livelihood, the problem was redefined as the way urban governance could move from managing a target population to protecting the lives of concrete people. The new entry point gave policy information temporal depth and a human scale.

Cross-case comparison identified three principal pathways of problem definition. The first moves from phenomenon to structure, as C01 moved from maternity-department closures to demography and public healthcare. The second moves from a case to an illustrative possibility, as C02 and C05 used firms or occupational figures to explain larger development issues. The third moves from lived experience to institutional change, as C04 and C06 used the changing lives of migrant workers or mobile vendors to represent public policy.

C04 is an important processual negative case. Its core problem was not fully established when the assignment was received; it gradually formed after the reporter rejected a quick and routine treatment:

'It looked like a routine assignment—record the launch ceremony for the train and file a short, quick report. But my news instinct told me there was a much bigger story here.' (P09, C04, initial interview)

Problem definition therefore does not always precede reporting. It may begin as an indistinct professional intuition and become more specific through contact with people and the accumulation of material. The relationship between problem definition and fact gathering is not one-way: the problem guides reporting, while new facts revise the problem.

Triangulating Experience and Institutional Evidence: Constructing Causality and Responsibility

The third theme concerns how sources are combined to construct causal interpretation and judgements of responsibility. Award-winning feature reports usually did not rely on a single authoritative source to state a cause. They combined lived experience, field observation, statistics, professional interpretation, and institutional information, giving causal claims both experiential accessibility and institutional explanatory power.

C01 interviewed doctors, hospital administrators, pregnant women, and policy researchers. Each source performed a different function: doctors described professional pressure; administrators explained operating constraints; pregnant women revealed the consequences for public service; and data and researchers' views helped determine whether the problem extended beyond individual hospitals. This source configuration prevented the report from reducing maternity-department closures to the business decisions of a single hospital.

P02 explained:

'Compared with an individual hospital case or the feelings of some doctors, data have stronger empirical force and persuasiveness.' (P02, C01, initial interview)

This did not make individual experience unimportant. It meant that individual experience could support a structural causal claim only when cross-checked against data and institutional information.

C03 juxtaposed government governance objectives with changes in villagers' lives through a month of embedded reporting:

'We began with particular people and particular events, investigated the effects of the targeted campaign, and used vivid examples to show ... how farmers responded to the call of the Party and government and embraced new civilised social customs.' (P06, C03, joint interview)

Its causal interpretation did not attribute changes in bride prices entirely to administrative orders. It showed how social norms formed through comparison and mutual influence among families. The rise-and-fall construction in the headline compressed a causal model:

'The first half reveals how the problem arises—mutual comparison causes prices to rise together; the second gives the solution—mutual influence creates a new civilised custom.' (P08, C03, joint interview)

C08's causal structure expanded over a long reporting period. The frame developed from why a Shandong team travelled west, to how ecological restoration was conducted, and then to what changes it produced:

'The factual frame kept expanding: from "why they went" to "how they did it" and then to "what changed".' (P17, C08, joint interview)

Whereas C03 compressed causality through contrast in the headline, C08 established the relationship between action and outcome through longitudinal observation. Causal interpretation can therefore be built rapidly through contrast or develop progressively through evidence accumulated over time.

C10 used the most explicit explanatory chain:

'The frame was built according to the sequence "what it is—why it happens—what should be done".' (P21, C10, initial interview)

In this case, problem definition, explanation of harm, and institutional response were strongly organised. Responsibility was also clearer: the report identified the concealment involved in a new form of corruption and foregrounded the response of disciplinary and supervisory authorities.

A contrast appeared in emotional and symbolic narratives. C07 emphasised perseverance, historical memory, and intergenerational inheritance, but did not assign responsibility as explicitly as C01 or C10. Its concern was not who caused a problem, but why a personal experience mattered to public memory. Not every feature report, therefore, requires strong causality or explicit attribution of responsibility. The prominence of responsibility depends on whether the issue itself calls for attribution and a governance response.

Source diversity is thus not a matter of interviewing many people for its own sake. The key is whether sources perform complementary evidentiary functions. The more structural the causal claim, the greater the need for cross-source verification. Reports centred on emotional memory and exemplary people may instead construct meaning through time, detail, and symbolic relationships without assigning responsibility explicitly.

Making the Macro Visible: Narrative Organisation through People, Scenes and Time

The fourth theme is the concretisation of macro-level problems. Characters, scenes, and details are not writing techniques attached to an external frame; they are primary mechanisms through which abstract problems are translated into intelligible experience. A macro issue becomes perceptible only when organised through the actions, circumstances, and temporal changes of concrete people.

C02 used three 'firsts' as structural nodes in the transition of two firms from mutual suspicion to cooperation:

'The work uses three "firsts" to narrate the process in stages and at different levels, showing how the two firms moved from guarding against each other to sincere cooperation. The report has story, scene, detail, and psychological description.' (P04, C02, joint interview)

The three stages are more than a chronology. They transform 'mutual benefit through cooperation' into an observable change in relationships. Cooperation does not remain a value judgement asserted by the creators; it is demonstrated through a sequence of suspicion, experimental cooperation, and shared benefit.

C04 organised its narrative around the moving space of a train. The reporter first entered migrant workers' homes, then the train's carriages, and finally the destination where they would work, establishing spatial links among family life, interregional cooperation, and employment policy:

'The train travelled 1,700 kilometres over more than ten hours.... I went into the workers' homes, extending the reporting chain upstream. After the train departed, I moved through the carriages with my notebook and camera.' (P09, C04, initial interview)

The carriage was not only a scene; it was a narrative space in which facts at different levels converged. Workers' clothing, photographs of their children's certificates on their phones, and expectations for the future translated employment policy into changes in family life.

C05 juxtaposed three characters to represent the talent structure of the free-trade port:

'We finally selected three maintenance engineers with very different backgrounds—one chose Hainan, one returned to Hainan, and one grew rapidly in Hainan.... Together, the three form a three-dimensional picture of talent in the free-trade port.' (P10, C05, initial interview)

The three characters represent arrival, return, and growth. Character selection therefore performs a classificatory function: each person provides a story, while their differences together support an overall judgement about policy attraction and developmental opportunity.

C06 compressed temporal structure into a mobile vendor's 'brief history' of selling watermelons:

'The history of one person's watermelon selling reflects the history of a city's progress in management.' (P11, C06, initial interview)

The narrative embeds institutional change in an individual life course. The macro issue and the character are not externally joined as a 'big theme plus a small story'; they correspond through sustained changes in the person's circumstances.

C07 organised a revolutionary-history topic through emotional depth, historical duration, and intergenerational inheritance:

'In selecting facts, we stayed close to three dimensions: the emotional depth of the characters, the temporal depth of history, and the intergenerational transmission of spirit.' (P13, C07, initial interview)

Across cases, narrative organisation performed three main functions. Characters supplied agents of action; scenes made abstract relationships visible; and temporal structures explained how change occurred. Works differed in how they combined these elements. C04 used spatial movement to drive the narrative; C06 compressed institutional change into an individual life history; C07 joined historical time and emotional relay to construct public memory; and C08 used the cultivation of a lead over 18 months to show the cumulative effects of ecological action.

C10 is a formal contrast. It did not develop a full personal life history, but used representative cases to explain a technical concept. Cases and details remained important, but primarily served cognitive explanation rather than emotional immersion. 'Humanisation' is therefore

not a single expressive mode required of every feature report. Characters, scenes, and details constitute effective narrative organisation only when they perform explanatory work.

Reporter-Perceived Revision as Frame Calibration

The fifth theme is the calibration of frames through revision. Creators' accounts show that the frames of award-winning works were not completed once reporting ended. They became progressively stable through writing, feedback, deletion, revision, and reorganisation. In participants' perceptions, editorial and institutional influence mainly calibrated problem focus, evidentiary sufficiency, narrative rhythm, and value boundaries.

It is important to reiterate that no editor was interviewed directly. The following findings derive from reporters' and creators' retrospective accounts of editing and from available production materials; they should not be read as direct statements by editors.

C04 began as a clearly assignment-driven production. The reporter was asked to cover the launch of a special train but independently reworked the assignment into an in-depth feature report. In a follow-up interview, P09 recalled repeatedly refining the work with an editor. This account suggests that the editor was not the sole source of the initial problem awareness, but participated in converting reported material into a coherent frame.

According to P09, revisions in this case operated at three levels. First, the genre shifted from event news to feature report. Second, the reporting chain was extended upstream from the departure site to workers' homes. Third, the structure reorganised stories from the train into a public narrative of east-west cooperation and employment support. Editorial feedback tested not a particular word, but whether the volume and quality of material could support the enlarged problem frame.

C08 displayed more sustained team revision. Participants recalled that the prose had been refined more than 60 times. This intensity shows that frame stability does not mean identifying the correct theme and then writing it out directly. The team continually tested whether people, technical processes, regional relations, and ecological outcomes formed a clear connection.

The C08 lead was cultivated for 18 months, producing substantial material over time. The more material accumulated, the greater the risk of narrative dispersal. Repeated revision did not primarily add facts; it reduced competition among them so that why the team went, what it did, and what changed became a controlling logic for the whole report.

Multi-person cases revealed different forms of negotiation. C02 developed a staged structure of changing business relations through collective reporting. C03 involved journalists from different media and required a shared problem frame linking local experience, policy context, and national communicative significance. C08 unified cross-regional material through long-term reporting and repeated revision. Teamwork was therefore more than task allocation; members needed a minimum common understanding of the central problem, factual standards, and value direction.

In more individually led cases such as C04, C05, C06, and C10, initial narrative judgements came more strongly from the reporter. Creators nevertheless recalled that the final version was shaped by genre norms, length limits, and institutional positioning. Feedback commonly concentrated on several thresholds: whether the topic merited expansion, whether the evidence supported the claim, whether the narrative departed from the core problem, and whether value articulation rested on fact.

Negative evidence in this section is equally important. The interviews rarely described unresolved conflict between reporters and editors, and no editor supplied an account of revision. Post-award recollection may incline participants to portray production as collective improvement while minimising disagreement, rejection, and power asymmetry. The study can confirm that editorial influence exists as reporters perceive it, but cannot infer that editors and reporters held equal framing authority in every case.

Within the available evidence, editors are therefore best understood cautiously as creator-perceived 'frame calibrators', not as frame setters directly confirmed by editors themselves. Reporters developed problem awareness and the evidentiary foundation through reporting; editorial and organisational feedback in their recollections tested whether the frame was focused, supportable, readable, and consistent with organisational boundaries. This supports an interpretation that requires further testing through paired reporter-editor interviews: frame formation is recursively characterised by reporter leadership, feedback intervention, and continuing organisational constraint.

Value Made Evident: From Verifiable Evidence to Public Meaning

The sixth theme is the evidentiary articulation of value. All 10 cases contained explicit or implicit judgements of public value, but value was not an additional conclusion detached from fact. It was built progressively through character selection, causal explanation, temporal change, and comparison of outcomes.

C01 did not amplify anxiety about the difficulties confronting obstetric care. It acknowledged demographic and healthcare-system pressure while advancing a claim of public-service responsibility:

'This is not an article that talks obstetrics down. It combines medical depth with humanistic and sociological reflection, seeking to offer reason amid anxiety and point towards a way forward amid difficulty.' (P01, C01, initial interview)

The statement combines public and professional values. Public value lies in concern for basic healthcare and a system supporting childbirth; professional value lies in refusing to reduce a complex problem to an emotional narrative.

C02 grounded its value articulation in observable outcomes of cooperation:

'The value of the report is not that it says the two firms did well, but that it provides an example of how it can be done.' (P05, C02, joint interview)

Rather than simply declare cooperation superior to competition, the report demonstrated its feasibility through changing inter-firm relations and shared growth. An abstract norm became an empirical possibility.

C06 articulated value more implicitly:

'The report tells stories without preaching.... The warmth of urban management is not found in documents, but in tangible improvements in the lives of ordinary people such as Huang Yanghai.' (P11, C06, initial interview)

'Telling stories without preaching' does not mean the absence of value. It means value is not stated directly through authorial comment. Changes in a character's circumstances perform the evaluative function, allowing readers to derive the judgement from factual relationships. C07 adopted a similar position towards sloganised expression:

'The report contains no slogan saying "we must inherit the revolutionary legacy".... When readers are moved, the value has already been communicated.' (P14, C07, initial interview)

C08 described the relation between fact and value directly:

'Value is not a label pasted on afterwards; it grows naturally from the facts—a blade of grass, a group of people, and a river together form a complete chain of value articulation.' (P18, C08, joint interview)

Cross-case comparison identified three levels of value. Public values concerned healthcare, employment, humane governance, ecological protection, and social fairness. Professional values concerned truthfulness, evidentiary sufficiency, complexity, and avoidance of didacticism. Institutional values concerned public policy, social order, cultural identity, and directions of institutional governance.

The three levels did not always coincide. Institutional value without factual support can become a slogan; professional value that stresses accuracy without public problem awareness can leave a work as a catalogue of facts; and public value that relies excessively on emotion can weaken causal analysis. What the award-winning feature reports shared was not maximal intensity of value expression, but an effort to make value judgement mutually supportive with verifiable evidence, lived experience, and narrative structure.

C10 represents a more explicit type of value articulation. The report not only explained corruption but also sought to warn and educate:

'The value of anti-corruption reporting lies not only in exposure, but also in warning and education.' (P21, C10, initial interview)

Unlike the implicit value articulation of C06 and C07, C10 directly stated institutional responsibility and the direction of governance. Whether value is explicit therefore depends on the issue; explicitness is not a universal measure of quality.

Rejected Alternatives and Evidentiary Boundaries

The seventh theme concerns alternative framing paths and evidentiary boundaries. Because every case was an award-winning work, the interviews were strongly oriented towards successful experience and yielded relatively little direct discussion of failure, serious disagreement, or unresolved conflict. The analysis therefore treats rejected reporting paths, modes of expression deliberately avoided by creators, and inconsistencies among cases as contrary evidence rather than as failed works.

The first tension lay between richness of material and focus of the problem. C01 rejected merely counting how many hospitals had closed; C05 avoided attempting a comprehensive

account of free-trade-port development; and C08 accumulated material over 18 months yet still required repeated revision to achieve a clear structure. Extensive reporting does not mean that more material should always enter the work. As material expands, selection and exclusion become more important.

The second tension lay between value direction and sloganisation. C03 avoided reproducing policy documents; C06 emphasised telling stories without preaching; C07 avoided direct value slogans; and C09 likewise stated:

'Cultural confidence is not an empty slogan.' (P19, C09, initial interview)

These statements challenge the assumption that more direct value expression is necessarily more effective. If value appears too early as a conclusion, it may reduce the explanatory space of facts and turn characters and scenes into illustrations of a predetermined answer.

The third tension lay between causal clarity and real-world complexity. C10 used a what-why-how sequence to make a specialised concept intelligible. C01, by contrast, confronted multiple factors involving population, healthcare, operations, and specialist personnel, and could not reduce the problem to a single cause. A narrative needs an intelligible causal chain but should not manufacture a monocausal account for the sake of clarity.

The fourth tension lay between professional judgement and institutional value. Participants generally endorsed the importance of public values while insisting that facts must support them. The material does not show reporters merely obeying predetermined conclusions; it shows them repeatedly seeking facts that could give those values an empirical basis. Because no editors were interviewed and no newsroom observation was conducted, however, the study cannot fully show how institutional requirements were formulated or under what conditions reporters rejected or revised editorial comments.

The fifth tension lay between the post-award success narrative and the complexity of production. In retrospect, participants may reorganise a difficult process into a coherent story and minimise internal conflict. Work elicitation, follow-up interviews, and negative-case analysis reduce this effect but cannot eliminate the limitations of retrospective data.

The contrary material in this study therefore consists less of failed works than of unrealised framing possibilities: event news instead of an in-depth feature, policy exposition instead of lived narrative, accumulated material instead of problem focus, slogans instead of factual demonstration, and single-cause attribution instead of multi-source explanation. These rejected pathways define the empirical boundaries of frame building in the award-winning feature reports.

An Evidence-Constrained and Iterative Frame-Building Mechanism

Integrating the preceding themes, this study describes frame building in the award-winning feature reports as a recursive mechanism combining problem orientation, evidentiary constraint, narrative translation, and feedback calibration (Figure 1).

The mechanism is neither a one-way process that begins with institutional value and then searches for facts to prove a predetermined conclusion, nor one that first completes objective

fact gathering and only afterwards adds a value judgement. Facts, problems, narratives, and values recalibrate one another throughout production.

Recursive Frame-Building Mechanism in Award-Winning Feature Reports

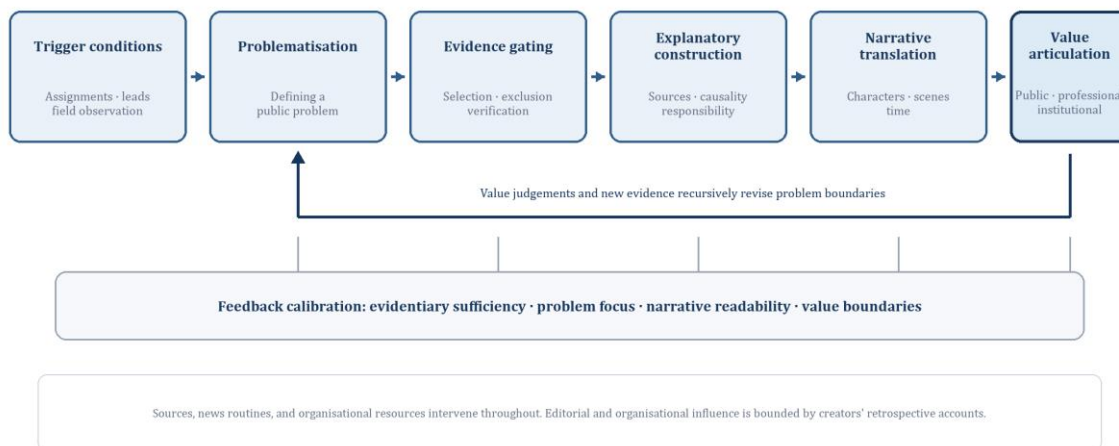


Figure 1. Integrated Frame-Building Mechanism of Award-Winning Feature Reports

Note. The return arrow represents recursive correction. Editorial and organisational calibration is interpreted only from creators' retrospective accounts and available production materials.

The mechanism contains four core relationships.

First, problem definition directs factual selection, but new facts also revise the problem. C04's movement from routine event coverage to a report on employment and regional cooperation shows that problem awareness can develop during reporting. C08's expansion from why the team went to how it acted and what changed shows that accumulated facts can alter the structure of the problem.

Second, evidence constrains frame building. A fact earns a place in the final text only after verification and when it can define the problem, explain causality, characterise an actor, or support a value. Insufficient evidence compels reporters to conduct further interviews, reduce the strength of a claim, or abandon a narrative direction.

Third, narrative translates evidence into meaning. Characters, scenes, and temporal structures are not rhetorical packaging around evidence; they are ways of organising evidentiary relations. They convert macro problems into perceptible action and change while positioning readers in relation to the issue.

Fourth, in reporters' retrospective accounts, editors and organisations contribute through feedback calibration rather than simply replacing reporters' judgements. Their influence principally tests whether the problem is focused, facts sufficient, narrative clear, risks manageable, and values grounded in evidence. Because the evidence derives mainly from reporters' accounts, the study limits this relationship to the editorial and institutional influence perceived by creators.

Value articulation, finally, does not suddenly appear at the end of the mechanism. Value sensitivity shapes the leads a reporter initially notices, what is defined as a problem, and which facts appear publicly meaningful. At the same time, value judgements remain subject to continual testing through evidence and professional norms.

The 10 cases therefore reveal not a simple linear transition from fact to value, but a cycle: Problem awareness guides factual selection; factual evidence revises problem definition; narrative organisation connects micro-level experience with macro-level meaning; editorial and institutional feedback calibrates framing boundaries; and evidence-constrained value articulation results.

This integrated mechanism answers the study's central empirical question. Value articulation in award-winning feature reports is not an external addition to factual reporting, but progressively acquires an empirical basis and expressive form through factual selection, explanatory construction, narrative organisation, and production negotiation.

Discussion

This study moves frame analysis from completed texts into the news-production process. The findings show that a feature-report frame is not an expressive structure added to facts after writing. It develops through topic problematisation, evidence gathering, factual filtering, source configuration, narrative organisation, and editorial revision. Frames are advanced by reporters' professional judgements and constrained by source knowledge, editorial feedback, and institutional norms, but the actors do not possess equal knowledge, decision rights, or responsibility.

Rather than restating the cases, this section discusses how the findings revise text-function-centred understandings of framing and develops a recursive mechanism of problem orientation, evidentiary constraint, narrative translation, and organisational calibration.

From Entman's Textual Functions to Production Practices

Entman (1993) conceptualised framing through four functions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. The model provides a clear way to identify how news texts organise reality, but chiefly describes what a frame does in a text rather than how its functions are produced. The present findings show that each function corresponds to a set of observable production practices.

Problem Definition as Topic Problematisation

Problem definition first develops through the problematisation of a topic. Reporters do not merely find a problem already fully formed in reality; they judge whether a phenomenon has public significance beyond an isolated event. Maternity-ward closure can be defined as a hospital-operating problem or as a problem of public healthcare amid demographic change. Cooperation between two firms can be defined as local business news or as an empirical response to involutionary competition.

Problem definition is therefore not a single statement in a headline or lead but a production operation that sets the boundaries of inquiry. It affects whom reporters interview, which data they seek, which scenes they observe, and which material they exclude. It is also revised

during reporting. When new facts cannot be explained by the original problem, or when a routine assignment reveals wider social relations, the problem boundary shifts.

This finding extends Entman's problem definition from a textual function into an upstream production practice. A frame enters news production first through the judgement of what deserves to be treated as a problem, and only subsequently takes textual form in the headline, lead, and structure.

Causal Interpretation as Source and Evidence Configuration

Causal interpretation develops through the configuration of sources and evidence. Causality resides not only in the causal sentences that reporters write, but also in decisions about whom to question, which sources to place in relation to one another, and how to assess evidentiary strength.

Where a report advances a structural claim, one person's experience is usually insufficient. Reporters must compare the experience of affected people, professional explanations, statistical data, and institutional records. Sources perform different epistemic functions: personal experience shows how a problem is lived; professional sources explain operational mechanisms; data establish scope and trend; and institutional sources identify policy responsibilities and governance responses.

Causal interpretation is thus not a neutral ordering of material but a knowledge structure produced through source configuration. Sources do not merely supply facts; they may also carry their own problem definitions, attributions of responsibility, and solutions. Reporters must assess a source's direct experience, expertise, interests, and verifiable basis rather than equate status with explanatory authority.

Moral Evaluation as Evidentiary Value Judgement

Moral evaluation develops through continuing judgement of facts' public significance. News values, public values, professional values, and institutional values enter production from the topic stage. Reporters attend to migrant workers, mobile traders, villagers, or healthcare provision not because they discover value only after fact gathering, but because these actors are already judged capable of revealing a matter of public significance.

This value sensitivity does not allow a value conclusion to escape evidentiary requirements. Participants repeatedly emphasised avoiding slogans, refusing to substitute policy documents for lived experience, and allowing value to be demonstrated through changing circumstances, factual relations, and comparative outcomes. Moral evaluation is therefore both antecedent and constrained: it guides problem discovery but remains answerable to factual verification and reasonable causal inference.

Treatment Recommendation as Narrative Resolution

Treatment does not always appear as a policy recommendation or authorial argument. It may be implied through an institutional response, an exemplary case, character choice, or before-and-after contrast. The cooperative-firm case presents mutual benefit as a possible response to dysfunctional competition. The report on bride-price governance uses a rise-and-fall

contrast to represent the process by which social norms change. The anti-corruption report more directly presents directions for supervision and institutional governance.

Treatment can therefore be explicit or narrative. Rather than telling readers what should be done, a report may demonstrate how a practice produces positive results and thereby render a course of action intelligible and possible.

Entman's four functions are not completed sequentially in production. A newly discovered cause may redefine the problem; a treatment direction without adequate support may prompt further reporting; and value evaluation may lead reporters to reconsider source configuration. The functions can be identified separately in a text but operate recursively during production. This is the study's first extension of Entman's model: static textual functions are translated into dynamic production operations.

Recursive and Distributed Frame Building

Framing scholarship often distinguishes between journalists' active construction and external influence upon journalists. The findings show that this distinction is insufficient for feature-report production. Frame building is both distributed and recursive, but distribution does not mean that all actors possess equal power.

Reporters, sources, editors, and organisations control different resources. Reporters control field access, interview choices, material organisation, and initial drafting. Sources supply experience, knowledge, and explanations but may also promote frames favourable to themselves. Editors influence final expression through headlines, structure, length, and evidentiary requirements. Organisations delimit possible expression through resource allocation, media positioning, professional standards, and risk boundaries. This is consistent with frame-building accounts of interaction among journalists, sources, and organisations (Boesman et al., 2016; Brüggemann, 2014).

Frame Building as a Recursive Process

The frames examined here did not move unidirectionally from topic to publication. They involved repeated returns:

- New facts could alter an existing problem definition.
- New sources could challenge a causal interpretation.
- Narrative structure could expose an evidentiary gap.
- Editorial feedback could require further reporting or the deletion of an overextended claim.
- Value articulation could be weakened when evidence was insufficient.
- Deleted material could prompt a new narrative entry point.

Topic selection, reporting, writing, and editing are consequently not wholly separate stages. Reporters may return to the field after writing reveals a lack of evidence. An editor who judges causal language too strong may request an additional source. A changed narrative entry point may make a formerly peripheral fact newly important.

Scheufele (1999) distinguished frame building from frame setting, the former referring to how media frames are formed. The present study adds that frame building itself is not completed once. It is a cyclical process of correction mediated by evidence and text.

Distributed Knowledge but Unequal Decision Rights

Distributed frame building should not be interpreted as equal co-creation among participants. Knowledge and decision rights are asymmetrically distributed.

Sources possess local experience or specialised knowledge but cannot directly determine a report's overall interpretation. Reporters possess the authority to select and organise material, but their judgements are constrained by evidence, editorial requirements, and organisational norms. Editors can alter the final text but may not possess all the contextual knowledge reporters acquired in the field. Organisations provide resources and boundaries of legitimacy, but institutional value cannot substitute for specific facts.

Frame building is therefore more accurately described as a production relation of distributed knowledge and unequal decision rights. Reporters occupy the central position of knowledge translation. Their task is not to average the views of sources but to judge which sources can support the problem definition, causal interpretation, and moral evaluation. Editors occupy positions of textual calibration and organisational accountability and bear stronger institutional responsibility for whether a work meets publication standards.

This finding responds to criticism that framing research neglects power relations (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Distributed production does not eliminate power; it distributes power across access to interviewees, material selection, editorial revision, and organisational boundaries.

Scope of the Claim

No editor was interviewed directly, and no newsroom observation was conducted. 'Editorial calibration' is therefore an interpretation based on reporters' accounts and production materials, not direct evidence of editors' own motives. The data confirm that reporters perceived editorial influence on headlines, length, evidence, and structure, but cannot establish how editors understood their authority or reveal conflict omitted from reporters' accounts.

The study accordingly supports a conclusion of recursive and distributed frame building while preserving an asymmetry in evidentiary scope. Reporters' practical judgements are supported by direct interview evidence; editorial and institutional effects are supported mainly by indirect evidence.

Factuality and Value Articulation

The findings do not support a simple opposition between factual reporting and value articulation. Reporters cannot collect every fact mechanically without a problem orientation or value judgement, because all reporting requires selection and organisation. This does not, however, reduce facts to rhetorical resources that can be used arbitrarily.

Framing entails selection, but facts may not simply be made to serve a predetermined conclusion. News values may direct attention towards neglected social problems, yet the legitimacy of the resulting value articulation depends on constraint by factual evidence, causal relations, and professional norms.

Evidentiary Traceability

The first condition is evidentiary traceability. Major claims must be traceable to interviewees, data, documents, field observation, or other verifiable material. Human stories can enhance readability but cannot replace evidence about the scope of a phenomenon. Authoritative sources can explain institutional context but cannot substitute for the actual experience of affected people.

News facts are not simply discrete propositions; they are knowledge claims established through source verification and cross-checking. Cross-verification allows reporters to assess agreement, complementarity, and conflict among sources and thereby improve the warrant of journalistic claims (Godler & Reich, 2017).

Causal Proportionality

The second condition is causal proportionality: the strength of a conclusion must not exceed what the evidence can support. An individual can demonstrate the existence of an experience but cannot automatically establish its prevalence. Cooperation between two firms may indicate a possible pathway but cannot prove applicability to every industry. A positive policy outcome does not exclude the contribution of other conditions.

The transition from fact to value therefore depends not only on the presence of facts, but on warranted inference between facts and conclusions. The legitimacy of a frame's value direction requires reporters to show how facts support the problem definition and causal claim while preserving complexity, uncertainty, and limits of application.

Narrative Non-Substitution

The third condition is that narrative must not substitute for evidence. Characters, scenes, plot, and emotion can make a problem intelligible, but a highly moving story does not establish causality by itself. Conversely, a data-led report without people or context may fail to show how a structural problem enters lived reality.

The legitimate function of narrative is to organise evidence, not obscure it. Characters provide experiential positions; scenes provide contexts of action; temporal structures explain processes of change; and data establish scope and trend. Narrative appeal remains factually grounded only when these materials support one another.

Value Articulation rather than Value Addition

On this basis, the study proposes the concept of evidence-constrained value articulation. Value is neither an evaluation added after factual reporting is complete nor a conclusion fixed in advance to which facts must conform. It is a process through which value, guided by problem awareness, acquires an arguable form through factual verification, causal interpretation, and narrative organisation.

The concept differs both from a value-neutrality assumption and from instrumental communication led by predetermined values. It recognises that value selection is unavoidable in journalism while treating evidentiary traceability, causal proportionality, and narrative non-substitution as professional conditions of value legitimacy.

Professional Autonomy and Organisational Influence

The findings indicate that professional autonomy and organisational influence are not a zero-sum relationship. An organisation may constrain a reporter but may also provide the resources, time, and professional calibration required for in-depth reporting. Reportorial autonomy is likewise not individual freedom detached from editors and institutions; it is a relational capacity that varies in strength across production stages.

Stage-Specific Professional Autonomy

Reporters' autonomy was most visible in discovering field-level facts, selecting characters, judging details, and initially problematising a topic. Several cases began as routine assignments, briefs, or accidental leads, but reporters used professional sensitivity to develop them into in-depth feature reports. By extending the reporting chain, cultivating leads over time, and approaching different sources, reporters enlarged the original assignment's boundaries.

Autonomy does not exempt a reporter from professional norms. The more publicly consequential the claim, the greater the responsibility to verify facts, configure sources, and control causal inference. Autonomy and responsibility therefore increase together.

Editorial Intervention as Quality Control and Framing Power

Editorial intervention performs a dual role. On one hand, editors provide professional quality control by removing repetition, requesting additional evidence, revising structure, and constraining unsupported claims. On the other, because editors determine headlines, length, prominence, and final wording, they also exercise framing power.

Treating editors only as agents of organisational control neglects their productive role in correcting evidence and improving narrative. Treating them only as collaborators neglects their asymmetric authority over publication and institutional responsibility. Newsroom research has long shown that editorial systems and organisational socialisation shape news judgement (Breed, 1955; Tuchman, 1978). The present study further suggests that organisational influence concerns not only which events can be reported, but also whether a problem can be supported by current evidence and whether value articulation remains within professional bounds.

Organisational Positioning as Constraint and Resource

Organisational positioning is similarly dual. A media organisation's public responsibility and value orientation sensitise reporters to facts concerning livelihoods, governance, and development. Its professional reputation and resources can facilitate access to sources, cross-regional collaboration, and longer production periods.

Organisational positioning can also create an expected frame and incline reporters to seek facts aligned with that direction. Professional norms then do not exclude institutional value but require it to withstand evidentiary testing. Factual verification, source diversity, and checks of alternative explanations become important safeguards of professional autonomy. This study therefore conceptualises reporters' autonomy as bounded generative autonomy: the capacity to discover and reconstruct problems actively while remaining constrained by factual responsibility, editorial review, institutional positioning, and communication

conditions. Constraint does not necessarily suppress innovation. When it tests evidence and improves narrative, it can become a generative condition of a high-quality frame.

Theoretical Contribution

The study's theoretical contribution is not the generic claim that it 'enriches framing theory', but four empirically grounded propositions with specified explanatory objects and boundaries.

Production Translation Proposition

Entman's four framing functions are produced through corresponding operations: problem definition through topic problematisation, causal interpretation through source and evidence configuration, moral evaluation through judgements of facts' public significance, and treatment recommendation through narrative resolution and institutional response.

This proposition transforms framing functions from categories for textual identification into researchable production practices, providing a middle-range analytical pathway between media-frame analysis and frame-building research.

Recursive Correction Proposition

News frames are not fixed once at the topic stage; they are revised recursively among facts, problems, narratives, and editorial feedback. Problem definitions guide factual selection, but new facts reshape problem boundaries. Narrative organisation exposes evidentiary gaps, and editorial revision may prompt further reporting.

This proposition corrects an overly linear view in which reporters first determine a frame and then select material. A frame may have an initial direction, but its final form depends on recursive calibration throughout production.

Asymmetrically Distributed Frame-Building Proposition

Reporters, sources, editors, and organisations jointly influence frames, but differ in knowledge, decision rights, and responsibility. Reporters gather field evidence and translate it narratively; sources provide local knowledge and interpretive resources; editors calibrate the text and bear publication responsibility; and organisations delimit resources and boundaries of legitimacy.

This proposition avoids treating reporters either as wholly autonomous manufacturers of frames or as participants in an equal, centreless collaboration. Distributed production must be analysed together with asymmetric power.

Evidence-Constrained Value Articulation Proposition

The professional legitimacy of value articulation depends on three conditions: evidence must be traceable, causal inference must be proportionate to evidentiary strength, and narrative must not substitute for factual demonstration. Value may guide the discovery of news problems, but it does not remove the obligation of verification and argument.

The proposition reframes factuality and value from a binary opposition into a constraining relationship. Facts do not eliminate value; they provide the conditions under which value acquires journalistic legitimacy.

Theoretical Scope

The propositions derive from award-winning Chinese feature reports and apply to news production characterised by strong public-problem orientation, relatively long reporting periods, and pronounced narrative organisation. They cannot directly represent daily briefs, breaking news, unsuccessful projects, or content generated entirely by algorithms. In particular, the proposition of editorial calibration relies mainly on reporters' retrospective accounts and requires further verification through interviews with editors and newsroom observation.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest that feature-report quality cannot be improved solely through abstract exhortations to tell a compelling story or strengthen the theme. Frame reflection should be embedded in concrete reporting and editing procedures.

Establishing an Evidence–Claim Matrix

Before writing, reporters can prepare an evidence-claim matrix that records each major claim, the supporting source, verification status, counterevidence, and narrative function (Table 4).

Table 4

Evidence–Claim Review Matrix

Review item	Key question
Core claim	What claim did the work actually make?
Supporting evidence	Which data, people, documents, and field observations supported the claim?
Verification	Was the evidence independently verified or cross-checked?
Counterevidence	Was there evidence inconsistent with the current claim?
Inferential limit	What was the strongest conclusion the available evidence could support?
Narrative function	Was the material used to prove, explain, depict, or evoke emotion?

The matrix can reduce both stories without evidence and conclusions without causal support.

Moving from Source Quantity to Source Configuration

Source diversity should not be measured only by the number of people interviewed. Editorial review should examine the knowledge function each source performs:

- Do affected people provide lived experience?
- Do professionals explain the operating mechanism?
- Do data establish scope and trend?
- Do institutional sources explain responsibility and response?
- Is there a source capable of challenging the dominant explanation?

- Does any source have a substantial interest in the issue?

Reviewing source configuration can prevent an authoritative source from monopolising problem definition and prevent a structural conclusion from resting only on a human-interest story.

Conducting an Alternative-Frame Check

Before publication, reporters and editors can test an alternative frame by asking:

- If the current headline were not used, what other problem could the work define?
- Which facts and actors does the current frame exclude?
- Is another causal explanation also reasonable?
- What new evidence would make the current judgement untenable?
- Was the present value direction decided before the evidence?
- Are characters being used merely to prove a predetermined conclusion?

The purpose is not to make one work present every possible explanation, but to ensure that the team recognises the current frame as a choice requiring justification.

Introducing Editorial Frame Reflection

In addition to checking facts, language, and length, editorial review can include frame-reflexive questions:

- Is the core problem clear and not overstated by the headline?
- Is the causal claim supported by evidence from multiple sources?
- Do characters and scenes perform explanatory functions?
- Does deleting material alter an important factual boundary?
- Is value articulation proportionate to evidentiary strength?
- Does the text clearly distinguish reporter judgement, source judgement, and institutional position?

For in-depth feature reports revised repeatedly, principal versions and reasons for revision should be retained. A version history enables a team to assess whether editing improved evidence and narrative or inadvertently removed complexity and differing voices.

Building a Frame Audit Trail

News organisations can maintain a simplified frame audit trail for important feature reports, recording the topic problem, core evidence, principal deleted material, significant headline versions, editorial comments, follow-up reporting, and the handling of disputes. The aim is not to add formal burden but to preserve traceable professional reasons for high-risk judgements and major public issues.

Conclusion

Using 10 award-winning feature reports from the 35th China Journalism Award as cases, this study conducted 17 semi-structured in-depth interview sessions with 21 creators to examine how facts are selected, interpreted, organised, and transformed into value articulation during production. Beginning with the framing functions visible in completed texts, it entered topic development, reporting, writing, and editorial revision to answer four research questions.

In answer to RQ1, whether a fact entered or exited a report depended primarily on its explanatory relevance to the reporting problem. Verifiability determined whether material could become journalistic evidence; problem relevance determined whether it entered the final frame. Exclusion did not necessarily mean that a fact was unimportant or untrue. It could

result from repetition, departure from the core problem, lack of explanatory function, or narrative fragmentation.

In answer to RQ2, problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation were produced through topic problematisation, source configuration, narrative organisation, and value judgement. Characters, scenes, data, and temporal structures were not writing techniques outside the frame, but mechanisms that transformed micro-level facts into public problems. The narrative entry point determined where the reader entered the problem and also shaped how the problem itself was defined.

In answer to RQ3, frame building was recursive and distributed. Reporters controlled field evidence gathering and narrative translation; sources supplied experiential and interpretive resources. Creators recalled editors calibrating headlines, structure, evidence, and expressive strength, while organisations supplied resources and delimited professional and value boundaries. Decision rights were unequal. Because editors were not interviewed directly, findings on editorial and institutional influence apply only to production relations as perceived and recalled by creators.

In answer to RQ4, factuality and value articulation were not simple opposites. Value sensitivity directed reporters towards publicly significant problems, but value judgements acquired professional legitimacy only when grounded in verifiable evidence, warranted causal relations, and appropriate narrative organisation. Value was not added externally after facts were complete; it developed through factual selection and interpretation and remained subject to evidentiary correction.

Integrating these answers, the study proposes a recursive mechanism of problem orientation, evidentiary constraint, narrative translation, and organisational calibration. Problem awareness guides factual selection, while evidence revises the problem definition. Source configuration constructs causality and responsibility, and narrative structure translates evidence into intelligible experience. Editorial and institutional feedback further tests focus, sufficiency, readability, and value boundaries. The outcome is not a linear leap from fact to value but a production process in which evidence, narrative, and value repeatedly recalibrate one another.

Theoretically, the study translates Entman's four textual functions into corresponding production operations and advances three central insights: recursive correction of frames; distributed knowledge combined with unequal decision rights; and evidence-constrained value articulation. News frames are neither direct projections of reporters' individual consciousness nor the one-way control of facts by institutional values, but relational outcomes formed among professional judgement, source knowledge, editorial calibration, and organisational boundaries.

Practically, the study recommends incorporating evidence-claim matrices, functional source configuration, alternative-frame checks, editorial frame reflection, and version audit trails into the production of important feature reports. The purpose is not to eliminate framing, but to make framing choices more explainable, verifiable, and revisable.

The study has several limitations. First, all cases are award-winning works, producing a success-case bias. Such works are more likely to have clear narratives and successful experiences that creators can readily articulate; they cannot represent ordinary, unsuccessful, or discontinued projects. Second, the data derive mainly from retrospective interviews and may be affected by memory bias and post-award rationalisation that reorganise complex production into coherent accounts. Third, because editors were not interviewed and newsroom negotiation was not observed, the analysis of editorial and institutional roles is mainly indirect. Fourth, no actual audience data were collected, so producers' design intentions cannot be used to infer audience interpretation or communication effects.

Future research can compare reporters' first drafts, successive revisions, and published texts to observe directly how problem definitions, causal claims, and value articulation change through editing. Newsroom ethnography, meeting observation, and paired reporter-editor interviews could test how framing power is distributed in routine interaction. Including non-winning, unsuccessful, and discontinued projects would make it possible to compare conditions under which a stable frame fails to form. Audience interviews, experiments, and reading-process research could examine whether different audiences understand producers' frames as intended. As artificial intelligence enters topic selection, material processing, and writing, future studies should also investigate how algorithmic recommendations participate in framing and how reporters and editors assume professional responsibility for algorithmically shaped choices.

Overall, the professional quality of a news frame depends not on the absence of value, but on whether value can withstand factual scrutiny; it depends not on narrative's emotional force alone, but on whether narrative organises evidence accurately. The defining quality of an exemplary feature report is that its public meaning emerges from verifiable facts, warranted explanation, and responsible news production.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The study was approved by the Academic Ethics Review Committee of Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology. All 21 participants received study information and provided written informed consent before interview. They consented to participate, to audio or video recording, and to the research team's use of de-identified material for academic research and publication.

Informed Consent

Participants were informed of the research purpose, intended uses of the data, right to withdraw, confidentiality measures, and the risk of indirect identification arising from publicly accessible award-winning works. Direct quotations are attributed to participant codes. Unless separate permission for named attribution was obtained, the study does not publicly link participant names to interview quotations.

Data Availability Statement

Because the audio recordings, video recordings, and full transcripts contain identifiable professional histories, work-production processes, and third-party information, the raw data are not publicly available. The de-identified codebook, thematic structure, and selected analytical matrices may be requested from the corresponding author where this is consistent

with ethical approval, informed consent, and data-protection requirements. Provision remains subject to assessment of indirect-identification risk and applicable ethical conditions. Research data are stored on an encrypted, intranet-only server at the Media Convergence Research Centre, School of Journalism and Communication, Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology, and will be retained until 31 January 2031.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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