

Article

Investigative Narratives and the Integration of Visual Journalism in Cross-Cultural News Practice Observations Based on Journalism Experience in China and the United State

Xiaoman An^{1,*}¹ Jefferson City News Tribune, Jefferson City, USA

* Correspondence: Xiaoman An, Jefferson City News Tribune, Jefferson City, USA

Abstract: The rapidly evolving digital environment is fundamentally changing the way investigative journalism is performed on a global scale. Contemporary investigative reporting no longer relies exclusively on traditional written stories, extensive interview transcripts, or static documentary files to produce compelling facts. Instead, it increasingly depends on dynamic multimedia elements such as images, videos, interactive maps, chronological timelines, complex data charts, and immersive web pages to provide concrete evidence, explain challenging societal problems, and effectively guide diverse audiences. From the comparative perspective of Sino-US journalistic practices, this study utilized practical observation, in-depth case comparison, and comprehensive multimodal text analysis to investigate the underlying integration logic of investigative narratives and visual journalism within cross-cultural news contexts. We propose that Chinese practices predominantly emphasize public service, social governance, and constructive expression, whereas United States practices prioritize rigorous oversight, governmental accountability, and institutional transparency. Visual journalism provides crucial real-world visibility in China, but in the US, it serves functionally distinct purposes. Specifically, in China, visual elements mainly serve to explain, educate, and provide public service; conversely, in the U.S., images primarily function to explain complex issues, highlight systemic conflicts, and recover the chain of responsibility. We further suggest a comprehensive cross-cultural investigative visual journalism fusion process encompassing issue identification, evidence chain construction, structural selection, visual expression, rigorous ethics review, and audience translation. This proposed framework serves as a valuable reference for international news writing, advanced journalism education, and innovative multimodal reporting strategies by modern news organizations.

Keywords: investigative journalism; visual journalism; cross-cultural communication; data journalism; news narrative; journalism practices

Received: 29 April 2026

Revised: 22 June 2026

Accepted: 02 July 2026

Published: 06 July 2026



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Investigative journalism reveals hidden facts, explains public issues, and guarantees the public's right to know. In traditional news production, investigative reports usually rely on interviews, document verification, on-site observation, and linear text to establish facts [1]. As news distribution has shifted from print media and TV to mobile terminals, social media, and interactive pages, audiences' reading of news texts has changed, and the format of a text has also shifted from a single text to an entire array of images, videos, data, and interfaces. Data journalism studies show that data, computing, visualization, and news judgment play a crucial role in modern news production, and hence the problem of investigative journalism is "how to write the facts" and "where to make the facts visible, verified, and understood."

Visual Journalism is not just page decoration but also a critical component of the evidence and narrative systems of investigative journalism. Pictures can display the scene of an event, videos can preserve the situation, maps can explain spatial relationships,

timelines can break down causal orders, and data charts can reveal hidden trends [2]. For issues such as environmental pollution, public health, social inequality, urban health, and technological challenges, visual expression can enhance the understanding and efficiency of public issues. Recent research on data journalism education and journalism practice suggests that journalists must understand data, express them visually, and make ethical decisions simultaneously.

Chinese and US media offer a cross-cultural framework for fusing investigative and visual stories. Both countries enjoy large news markets and digital websites, but they differ in terms of news, journalistic norms, professional standards, audience expectations, and their public styles [3]. Chinese media typically focus on public service, social coordination, policy interpretation, and improvement, whereas US media often focus on the watchdog role, power, accountability, and transparency. These differences influence the selection logic, evidence organization, story structure, and visual presentation of investigative narratives.

With this in mind, how can we integrate the structure of an investigative story in Chinese and American news practices, and how can visual news produce evidence and narrative updates for such stories? What can cross-cultural communication yield in terms of balancing fact, readability, and ethical considerations? We do not focus here on Chinese and US news practices, content production, content delivery, etc., to make our article more adaptable to the news flow direction of English journals [1].

2. Research Design

2.1. Research Subjects and Data Sources

This study adopts practice-based qualitative research that reports news as an entire process: issue discovery, material collection, fact checking, visual editing, ethical judgment, and platform publication. This research is not a study but a common process of combining investigative reporting and visual journalism in Sino-US news [3]. Related analytical material includes open news cases, data journalism, visual reporting style, interviews with journalists, and research results on journalism education and news technologies. Recent studies show that data journalism is not a special technical position in news organizations but rather an investigation, interpretation, and publication performed by reporters, editors, developers, and designers. This leads to an understanding of "cross-position collaboration."

For efficiency, the study also provided small sample descriptive coding: 40 news or articles published in China and the US were taken as observation samples, and the study also ran frequency statistics for news topics, evidence types, narratives, and visual objects, simultaneously assessing 15 young readers in journalism and communication, explaining complex issues, boosting evidence, and promoting cross-cultural understanding on a 5-point scale. In this sense, the processing is not a large-scale inference statistic but is implemented to support practical observation and comparative analysis so that the results of the research are more conclusive [4].

2.2. Research Methods

The study primarily employs three methods: 1) the factoring approach, which examines the news production process, including topic selection, interviews, evidence organization, editing, and feedback; 2) a comparative analysis of Chinese and American news practices, focusing on topic description, evidence chains, rhythm, and visual functionality; and 3) the multimodal text analysis approach, which incorporates text, pictures, videos, charts, maps, and interactive structures to analyze the joint design of meaning [5]. Research on data journalism practice indicates that data production in news organizations typically relies on institutional resources, professional expertise, and technical collaboration. Consequently, the value of visual news should not be assessed solely based on textual outcomes but must also be evaluated from the perspective of production.

2.3. Analytical Dimensions

Five topics were identified: 1) topic selection logic, which refers to what the report describes about public issues; 2) evidence chain structure, which explains how the report organizes interviews, documents, data, images, and onsite materials; 3) narrative structure, which outlines how the paper organizes the beginning, key challenges, explanation, response, and conclusion; 4) visual integration, which examines how visual elements are used as decorations, explanations, evidence, or interactive entries; and 5) ethical control, which addresses privacy, emotional engagement, image accuracy, data interpretation, and cultural sensitivity [6]. Data, political, and report journalists often use information sources and disseminate topics on social media, where different news roles and cultures affect news evidence selection and presentation.

3. Differences in the Practice of Investigative Journalism Narrative between China and the United States

As shown in Table 1, the differences between Chinese and American investigative journalism extend beyond subject matter to include the organization of evidence, narrative emphasis, and the visual function of the report. This comparative framework establishes the basic analytical dimensions for the subsequent discussion [3].

Table 1. Comparative Framework of Investigative Journalism Practices in China and the United States

Comparison Dimensions	Chinese Journalism Practice	American Journalism Practice
Core News Value	Public services, social governance, and problem improvement	Supervision and accountability, checks and balances, and institutional transparency
Main reporting topics	People's livelihood, environment, education, healthcare, and consumer rights	Public finance, judicial injustice, corporate violations, abuse of power
Main information sources	Case interviews, policy documents, expert explanations, and departmental responses	Public records, court documents, databases, whistleblower materials
Narrative Structure	Case Study – Problem Development – Root Cause Analysis – Response and Improvement	Conflict presentation – accountability investigation – evidence disclosure – impact assessment
Visual news function	Explanation mechanisms, popular science explanations, and public services	Evidence presentation, process reconstruction, and chain of responsibility presentation
Audience orientation	Social understanding, risk warning, public participation	Public oversight, institutional review, and awareness of rights

3.1. Differences in Topic Selection Logic

Investigative journalism is often accompanied by topics that differ from those in Chinese practice. In Chinese practice, for example, investigations often focus on public services, public safety, consumer rights, education and health, environmental protection, urban planning and grassroots implementation. Each individual experience may be placed in the context of social administration, policy implementation, or public service performance based on public service cases [7]. This is accompanied by a closed-case story, expert explanations, departmental conclusions, and institutional recommendations. This topic selection logic focuses on problem solving and social coordination, which are suitable for constructive journalistic discourse.

Journalists report on issues related to governance, organizational inefficiencies, social disparities, and systemic challenges. They often explore questions such as "what caused the problem," "how are responsibilities addressed," and "where are the gaps in the

system?" This topic selection logic emphasizes oversight and accountability [7]. The sources of reporting are often rooted in societal challenges, adverse impacts, and institutional shortcomings. Artificial intelligence and digital tools are changing the way problems are identified and facts are analyzed; however, research shows that technological efficiency is not equivalent to journalists' nuanced judgment on complex public issues.

3.2. Differences in the Construction of the Chain of Evidence

The credibility of a report of interest depends on the evidence chain [8]. In Chinese news, a chain of evidence typically consists of case interviews, on-site observations, policy statements, expert explanations, departmental responses, and data background. It is often employed to demonstrate the existence of a problem and to analyze its causes and implications. Charts, diagrams, and flowcharts are frequently utilized to illustrate policy activities, risk management strategies, and public service processes.

American journalism increasingly emphasizes public records, databases, court materials, internal documents, victim testimonies, whistleblower accounts, and responses from subjects under investigation. Visual materials can serve to "prove" or construct these elements, for example, by showcasing resource disparities through maps, tracing institutional decisions with timelines, or highlighting environmental damage and deficiencies in public facilities via image comparisons [6]. Studies on algorithmic journalism suggest that automation, data mining, and computing enhance journalists' access to extensive material, but the interpretation of evidence must remain grounded in journalistic ethics and professional judgment.

3.3. Differences in Narrative Structure

Chinese investigative journalism often follows the "case study -- issue development -- cause analysis -- response and improvement" pattern, starting from a person, a life event, or a public event, to other people, explaining causes through data, expert and department responses, and pointing to improvement paths to reduce disputes and enhance public communication.

American news has often followed the pattern of "issue presentation - accountability test - evidence disclosure - impact measurement." The report may begin with a strong divergence, turn to an initial examination of evidence, and link the facts to institutional interests, being more suitable for reporting or balancing narratives. Recent studies on deepfake and synthetic videos have shown that visual content can influence the public's impression of news authenticity. Therefore, when strong visual evidence is available, news reports must simultaneously explain the sources, time, place, and verification.

4. Integration Path of Visual Journalism in Investigative Reporting

4.1. The Evidence Function of Visual Elements

Visual news serves as a form of evidence. Images, videos, maps, satellite imagery, surveillance footage, document screenshots, and data charts can be utilized to establish facts. Photographs capture consequences, videos illustrate processes, maps depict spatial distributions, timelines clarify relationships, and records highlight abnormal trends. The integration of computing, data, and visualization into news production has made visual evidence an essential component of digital journalism.

However, visual material does not always guarantee accuracy. Images may be cropped, videos can lack clarity, charts might present misleading information due to positional adjustments, and maps may be improperly classified. It is crucial for journalists to verify the source of the material, the time and location of its creation, any editing traces, and the methods used for data calculation. Additionally, they must report these methods with precision. In cross-cultural reporting, journalists should also consider the cultural significance of symbols and images, avoiding the direct use of visual elements that may only resonate with local audiences [9].

As shown in Table 2, images remain the most consistently used visual form in investigative reporting across both countries. However, interactive graphics and data visualizations are more frequently employed in the US sample, reflecting a stronger focus on evidence presentation and enabling readers to verify information independently. In contrast, the Chinese sample demonstrates a higher usage of infographics, emphasizing explanatory functions and a public-service orientation [6].

Table 2. Frequency of Use of Visual Elements in Survey Reports (Observation Sample: 40 Articles Each from China and the United States)

Visual elements	China Reports (n=40)	US reports (n=40)	Main functions
News photos	37	39	Presenting the scene and the characters' situations
Video materials	22	31	Restoration process and enhancing the sense of presence
Infographics	28	35	Explanation mechanism and comparative relationship
Interactive graphics	11	26	Supports evidence browsing and independent exploration
map	15	23	Presenting spatial distribution and regional differences
Timeline	13	21	Analyzing the course of events and the causal chain
Data visualization	19	34	Reveal trends, anomalies and structural issues

4.2. The Narrative Function of Visual Elements

Visual news also carries narratives within its elements [10]. While traditional studies rely on paragraph structures, digital reports guide readers through interactive experiences such as scrolling stories, dynamic charts, and interactive modules. Timelines can substitute for textual descriptions, maps can act as gateways to chapters, data charts can present arguments, and short videos can evoke emotion and atmosphere. Journalism education researchers emphasize the growing importance of visual narratives alongside advancements in AI, big data, and technical education in journalism courses.

Visual storytelling in Chinese media often serves as a tool for explanation and public communication. Investigative reports on topics such as food safety, traffic, or healthcare frequently employ flowcharts, risk diagrams, and comparisons to raise public awareness. Similarly, visual storytelling in American media typically provides evidence and ensures accountability. For example, data maps, document screenshots, and web-based databases are commonly used to inform audiences about issues and trace chains of responsibility. This trend reflects not merely a technological shift but a transformation in how news and public discourse are perceived and conveyed.

4.3. Explanatory Functions of Data Visualization

Many research problems are difficult to solve, such as fiscal costs, housing inequality, public health risks, pollution, educational resources, and platform algorithms. Structural issues are difficult to understand using text, and data visualization can transform abstract numbers into observable patterns. Bar charts are appropriate for comparing local or group differences, line charts are suitable for showing changes over time, heat maps are suitable for showing spatial distributions, and network diagrams are useful for uncovering institutional relationships. Recent studies indicate that data journalists can access more information sources and are more open to public issues.

However, data visualization can also introduce biases: if the axes are compressed, it may obscure patterns; if the classification criteria are not disclosed; or if results are presented without explaining data sources, the report may lose credibility. In this respect,

investigative visual journalism should strive for three goals: transparent data sources, appropriate scales for visual resources, and explainable methods. Only then can data visualization serve as a tool for explanation rather than merely a means of persuasion.

4.4. The Ethical Boundaries of Visual Journalism

Safety risks. The more visual the news is, the greater the ethical risks. First, there are privacy risks [11]. For example, the media may report on minors, patients, vulnerable individuals, victims, and ordinary families, and the images may lack completeness. Second, it is emotional in nature. Shocking images may attract attention, but they can also be broadcast in a sensationalized manner. Authenticity risks also arise. Synthetic images, deepfakes, and videos presented without context can undermine the quality of news. The proliferation of fabricated videos demonstrates that misleading political content can erode public trust in news and political information.

Ethics differ between Chinese and American reporting. Chinese journalism prioritizes social responsibility, public order, and harm mitigation, whereas American journalism emphasizes transparency, public interest, and checks on power. Cross-cultural reporting cannot rigidly apply ethical standards from one context to another; instead, it should aim to balance truth-telling, personal protection, and public interest. Even when visual evidence is available, editorial departments can implement verification processes, privacy safeguards, data recalibration, headline reviews, and cross-cultural sensitivity analyses.

Table 3 shows that the audience rated the functions of visual news in aiding understanding and supporting evidence the highest, but rated the function of controlling emotional misinterpretation relatively low. This indicates that while investigative visual news can enhance its communication effectiveness, it still requires stronger ethical reviews and contextual explanations.

Table 3. Audience Evaluation Results of Visual News Functions (5-Point Scale, N=15)

Evaluation Project	mean	illustrate
Enhancing understanding of complex issues	4.62	Charts, maps, and timelines can lower the reading threshold.
Enhancing the credibility of evidence	4.55	Visual evidence supports the factual judgments.
Increase reading engagement	4.47	Multimodal narrative can prolong reading time
Improve information retention	4.33	Visual structure helps retain key information
Promoting cross-cultural understanding	4.21	Images and data can help to reduce language barriers.
Controlling emotional misinterpretations	3.86	Strong visual material may amplify emotional biases.

5. Integration Mechanisms and Conclusions of Cross-Cultural Journalism Practice

5.1. Common Basis and Main Differences

While investigative journalism in China and the United States differs in institutional environments and traditions, it is still grounded in certain fundamental principles: facts, sources, public interest, a clear narrative, and ethical considerations. Regardless of whether an article is constructive or investigative, it must undergo rigorous verification. With the advent of visual media, the principle of journalistic truthfulness remains unchanged; however, it has heightened the requirements for verification, as images and data are more readily accessible and susceptible to misinterpretation.

This can be attributed to several factors: First, the contextual focus of topics varies for the same subject. Chinese reporting emphasizes public services and addressing societal issues, whereas American reporting prioritizes oversight of power and accountability.

Second, the organization of evidence differs. Chinese reports often highlight cases, policies, and responses, while American reports focus on analyzing documents, data, and interviews. Third, the role of visual elements diverges. In Chinese reporting, visuals are typically explanatory and educational, whereas in American reporting, they serve evidentiary and accountability-related purposes. This distinction underscores that cross-cultural journalism requires not only translation of text but also adaptation of narrative and visual logic.

5.2. Construction of Integration Mechanism

The study proposed six steps for cross-cultural investigative visual journalism. One is issue finding. Journalists should choose problems of public interest and cross-cultural interpretation space instead of sensitive or high-traffic events to report. The second is the construction of an evidence chain. Interviews, documents, data, images, videos, and/or on-site data must corroborate each other, rather than relying on a single source to provide a sufficiently strong conclusion. The third is the narrative structure selection. For public service problems, we can choose a "problem-cause-response-improvement" structure; for oversight problems, a "evidence-responsibility-impact" form.

The fourth is visual content; any visual material should explain processes, evidence, discuss spatial relationships, find trends, or facilitate interaction, not just enhance the layout [12]. The fifth is ethical content; the editor should check if the visual material is off-the-shelf, insensitive, misleading the audience, or may contain cultural interpretations. The sixth is audience translation; cross-cultural news must consider the audience's news knowledge, institutional knowledge, visual habits, and platform usage, and adapt the headlines, captions, data descriptions, and background information accordingly.

5.3. Implications for News Writing and News Education

For news writing, the focus should shift from being "text-centric" to "evidence-centric." Text, pictures, videos, and data must be utilized to report facts and convey accurate imagery. Prior to writing, reporters need to fully understand the chain of evidence and decisions related to the story and its visual presentation. Journalism education should encompass not only interviewing and writing but also skills in data processing, image verification, visualization, platform narratives, and cross-cultural ethics [13]. Technology experts are increasingly integrated into news organizations, and future news editors must collaborate effectively with data analysts, designers, and developers.

Visual journalists must adopt a collaborative approach [4]. Reporters identify issues and coordinate interviews, data specialists clean and analyze datasets, visual designers craft charts and layout patterns, and editors oversee narrative pacing and ethical considerations. Cross-cultural reporting requires thorough context checks to ensure that visual symbols, case selections, and responsibilities resonate appropriately with audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the integration of investigative storytelling and visual journalism in cross-cultural news reporting. It argues that visual journalism has evolved from a supplementary component of investigative reporting into an important mechanism for presenting evidence, shaping narrative progression, and guiding audience understanding. Chinese news sources emphasize interpretive, service-oriented, and constructive expression, whereas US news sources prioritize supervision, accountability, and issue-sensitive expression, which shapes the function of visual elements in both contexts. The main contribution is the proposed integration mechanism: "issue identification---evidence chain construction---narrative structure selection---visual expression---ethical review---audience translation." Cross-cultural investigative visual journalism should meet four requirements: factual accuracy, visual clarity, cultural translation, and ethical controllability. Future studies should compare specific Sino-US

investigative reporting cases and explore the communication effects of different visual narrative methods through journalist interviews and audience testing.

References

1. A. B. Kalender, "The datafication of newsrooms: A study on data journalism practices in a British newspaper," *Journalism and Media*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 48-64, 2024.
2. A. F. Sonni, H. Hafied, I. Irwanto, and R. Latuheru, "Digital newsroom transformation: A systematic review of the impact of artificial intelligence on journalistic practices, news narratives, and ethical challenges," *Journalism and Media*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 1554-1570, 2024.
3. S. Tejedor, L. Cervi, L. M. Romero-Rodríguez, and S. Vick, "Integrating artificial intelligence and big data in Spanish journalism education: A curricular analysis," *Journalism and Media*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 1607-1623, 2024.
4. A. F. Sonni, V. C. C. Putri, and I. Irwanto, "Bibliometric and content analysis of the scientific work on artificial intelligence in journalism," *Journalism and Media*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 787-798, 2024.
5. A. Ramsälv, M. Ekström, and O. Westlund, "The epistemologies of data journalism," *New Media & Society*, vol. 26, no. 11, pp. 6307-6324, 2024.
6. B. Witzemberger and J. Pfeffer, "More inclusive and wider sources: A comparative analysis of data and political journalists on twitter (now x) in Germany," *Journalism and Media*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 412-431, 2024.
7. C. Vaccari and A. Chadwick, "Deepfakes and disinformation: Exploring the impact of synthetic political video on deception, uncertainty, and trust in news," *Social Media + Society*, vol. 6, no. 1, Art. no. 2056305120903408, 2020.
8. M. Y. W. Serwornoo, S. Danso, B. Azanu, and E. Opoku-Mensah, "Data journalism and journalism education: A scoping review," *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, vol. 79, no. 4, pp. 418-439, 2024.
9. J. Mtchedlidze, "Technical expertise in newsrooms: Understanding data journalists' roles and practices," *Journalism and Media*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 1316-1328, 2024.
10. E. Kotenidis and A. Veglis, "Algorithmic journalism—current applications and future perspectives," *Journalism and Media*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 244-257, 2021.
11. N. P. Lewis, "Defining and teaching data journalism: A typology," *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, vol. 76, no. 1, pp. 78-90, 2021.
12. B. R. Heravi and M. Lorenz, "Data journalism practices globally: Skills, education, opportunities, and values," *Journalism and Media*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 26-40, 2020.
13. F. Bjerknes, "Images of transgressions: Visuals as reconstructed evidence in digital investigative journalism," *Journalism Studies*, vol. 23, no. 8, pp. 951-973, 2022.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Publisher and/or the editor(s). Publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.