

The Art of Weaving Words: How Hosting Techniques Drive Narrative Production in Interviews

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ABSTRACT

Interview narrative is a meaning system dynamically constructed by the host through discourse strategies and non-verbal behaviour. This study proposes a three-level narrative production model, deconstructing the generative pathways from the technical layer, process layer to the narrative layer. Based on conversation analysis and discourse analysis methods, empirical research findings reveal that hard news generates accountability narratives through a chain of factual anchors, soft characters activate cultural identity through emotional symbiosis, while entertainment creates a joyful community through a rhythmic resonance network. The study reveals the core value of hosts as narrative engineers: when techniques are transformed into a spotlight illuminating reality (hard news), a spark for the spirit of the times (soft characters), and a key to interpersonal connections (entertainment), they truly fulfil the strategic mission of "telling China's story well."

KEYWORDS

Narrative production model; Host techniques; Discourse analysis; Positive energy narrative

1 Introduction

When Bai Yansong asked about food safety responsibilities on Focus Interview, his question, "Where are the test reports for this batch of food?" cut through the fog like a scalpel. On Lu Yu's Appointment, Chen Lu Yu softly asked, "What book was on your mother's bedside table the night she passed away?" instantly activated the guest's dormant emotional memories; in "Ace vs. Ace," when Shen Teng was pushed into the pool, a wave of laughter swept across the screen. These classic moments reveal the deeper mysteries of interview programmes—stories are not merely told but grow out of the host's narrative weaving. The current media landscape is undergoing profound changes. According to the "China Online Audio-Visual Development Research Report (2023)," talk shows produce over 120,000 hours of content annually, yet they face a crisis of homogenised narratives—hard news is mired in "data overload without sharp insights," soft features slide into "sentimental performances losing authenticity," and entertainment shows are trapped in "overstimulation leading to aesthetic fatigue." This dilemma points to a core issue: when technology grants everyone the right to speak, how can professional hosts use discourse strategies to imbue stories with irreplaceable value? Existing research reveals methodological gaps. Goffman (1981) revealed the ritualistic framework of dialogue through his interaction ritual theory, but failed to deconstruct the narrative generation process; Jing Jun (2017) focuses on the discourse construction of television interviews but lacks a systematic explanation of how techniques are transformed into stories; Lapov (1972)'s narrative grammar model, though explanatory, struggles to adapt to the dynamic dialogue fields of the integrated media era. This theoretical lag leads to practical dilemmas: hosts often find themselves trapped in the binary dilemma of either "mechanically piling up techniques" or "relying on improvisational empiricism."

This paper proposes the core concept of discourse weaving to penetrate the black box of narrative production. Based on the three-tier narrative production model—genetic coding at the technique layer, catalytic intervention at the process layer, and institutional crystallisation at the narrative layer—the study will reveal how non-verbal symbols become conduits of emotion and how the combination of hosts' techniques generates a narrative gravitational field. The study selects three typical domains for empirical deconstruction, using a cross-lens approach of conversational analysis and discourse analysis to capture the complete chain reaction from technical micro-manipulation to story formation. Its value lies not only in constructing a new theoretical paradigm for narrative production but also in providing a discourse weaving toolkit for the international dissemination of Chinese stories.

2 Three-level narrative production model

2.1 Technical layer

Interviews are not merely the simple transmission of linear information but a complex production system driven by micro-level techniques that coalesce into macro-level narratives within a dynamic process. The technical layer forms the foundation of this system, serving as a repository of specific behaviours that the host can draw upon. It includes precise questioning techniques such as open-ended exploration of context, closed-ended clarification of facts, follow-up

questions to delve deeper, hypothetical prompts to stimulate imagination, and empathetic emotional connection; active listening techniques such as positive silence, interpretive feedback, emotional mirroring, non-interruptive reception, and rich non-verbal communication; the intensity and direction of eye contact, the resonance and control of facial expressions, the openness or distance of body posture, the adjustment of spatial distance, and the use of paralinguistic features. These micro-techniques are like the basic movements of a dancer, and each application is not isolated.

2.2 Process layer

When techniques are combined and applied in a specific interview context, they directly influence the process layer. This layer manifests as the dynamic trajectory and interactive rhythm of the interview. The host guides the focus or shift of the topic through the design of question chains; controls the allocation and transition rhythm of turn-taking through the depth of listening and response methods; and creates a cooperative, confrontational, relaxed, or serious interactive atmosphere through immediate feedback of non-verbal signals. The process layer is the direct result of technique application and the dynamic crucible where narrative takes shape. For example, a series of tight, fact-based closed-ended follow-up questions from the host can significantly accelerate the interview pace, create a tense process, and set the tone for subsequent revelation of contradictions or truths.

2.3 Narrative layer

Ultimately, through the sustained application of techniques and the dynamic evolution of the process, the narrative layer crystallises. This is the final story form presented to the audience. It encompasses the determination of the core theme, the selection and arrangement of key information, the presentation of conflicts, the shaping of character images (such as authoritative experts, relatable idols, tragic heroes, or entertainment stars), the setting of emotional tones (such as serious, warm, humorous, or sentimental), and the overall meaning framework (such as accountability, enlightenment, entertainment, or leisure). The narrative layer is the endpoint of the interplay between techniques and the process, and it represents the core value of the interview as a "product." A hard news interview aimed at revealing the truth (such as Focus Interview's investigation into a pollution incident) necessarily emphasises the rigor of the evidence chain and the attribution of responsibility. This directly stems from the host's use of techniques centred on fact-checking and logical questioning, as well as the high-pressure, rigorous process thus constructed.

3 Process intervention and narrative output of technique strategies

The moderator's toolbox of techniques is not universal, and his or her strategy choices are profoundly constrained by the interview genre's predetermined target narratives and inversely reinforce the genre's characteristics.

3.1 Hard news interviews

In hard news interviews, such as News 1+1's Bai Yansong's conversation with the head of the ministry, the core objective is the precise delivery of information, the clarification of responsibilities and the in-depth analysis of public issues. Skill strategy is reflected in the high degree of focus, questions to sharp, direct, close to the core facts of the closed and follow-up questions such as "can you clearly answer, this data is verified?" "What level of decision-making caused the delay?" "Listening emphasizes catching logical gaps, factual contradictions and ambiguous statements, and instantly challenges them with precise questions; non-verbal communication maintains a formal, serious and neutral stance, with sharp eyes, conveying pressure and a sense of authority that cannot be avoided. Process intervention is characterized by high-intensity advancement, strong dominance of the moderator, strict control of the topic direction and time, interrupting non-relevant answers, quickly pulling the conversation back to the core issue, and a compact and targeted process. The resulting narrative output is naturally characterized by high information density, strong logic and a clear accountability framework. The story unfolds around the problem-evidence-responsibility-solution, shaping a calm, objective, truth-seeking narrative authority, such as Bai Yansong's peeling of policy loopholes, and ultimately builds a narrative of accountability with the power of public supervision.

3.2 Soft character interviews

The core of soft character interviews, such as "Lu Yu Youyouyou" dialogues with cultural celebrities, lies in the revelation of characters' inner worlds, life stories and unique values. The skill strategy is shown in the shift to gentle guidance, open-ended questions become the main force such as "What was the toughest moment in your life?" "What beliefs supported you through those years?" complemented by deep empathic listening with long, focused stares, timely

nods, emotional responses such as "That must have been very difficult", interpretations and emotional reflections such as "Do you mean to say that that loneliness is what made you creative?"; non-verbal signals are warm and accepting; and non-verbal signals are warm and accepting. Non-verbal signals of warmth and acceptance, leaning forward, soft expressions, moderate physical contact such as patting the back of the hand. The process of intervention shows a high degree of flexibility, the host is more like a companion, following the flow of the guest's emotions and memories, allowing the topic to naturally extend or even deviate from the preset, giving full space for expression, and the process is soothingly paced and full of emotional tension. The narrative output is deeply humanized and emotionally resonant. The story focuses on the unique experiences, struggles and insights of the individual life course, shaping a full-bodied three-dimensional portrait of the character, conveying warmth, enlightenment or philosophical thinking, such as Chen Luyu through the depth of empathy to guide the guests to open up, and ultimately weave a life story that touches the hearts of the people ^[1].

3.3 Entertainment interviews

Entertainment interviews, such as "Here Comes Kangxi" star interviews, the core demand is to create a relaxed and happy, show the star charm and provide a pastime. Skill strategy is reflected in the very performative questions full of fun, flirting and even moderately offensive "I heard that you are filming this time and so-and-so rumors?", short jumps; listening is often full of fun. The questioning is short and jumpy; listening is often characterized by exaggerated surprise, laughter, or a "comic" response of "Wow!""Really?" Non-verbal communication is extremely active, with rich and exaggerated expressions, large range of movement, and often active in creating or responding to physical laughter. The process of intervention seeks to maximize the effect, and the host is highly in control, frequently creating explosive points of conversation, interrupting bland narratives, actively "digging holes" to guide the guests to create dramatic or humorous effects, with a fast jumping tempo and full of unpredictable "laughs". Its narrative output is fragmented, entertaining and spectacled. The story consists of a series of anecdotes, humorous interactions, image display collage, the characters are portrayed as entertainment symbols, and the overall service is a sensory experience of relaxation and decompression, for example, through the exaggerated performance of Xiao S and spicy questions, the star interview will be transformed into an entertainment show full of dramatic tension and laughter.

4 Techniques for locking in narratives: core mechanisms and signal recognition

How does a facilitator precisely "target" and reinforce a particular type of narrative through specific techniques? The core mechanism lies in the key interventions of the technique combinations on the process nodes. The combination of core skills is the cornerstone and stabilizer of a narrative genre. Continuous factual questioning and serious non-verbal signaling in hard news constantly pulls the process back to information verification and logical argumentation, ensuring that the narrative does not slip into sensationalism or entertainment. The depth of open-ended questions and empathetic listening in soft character interviews continues to nourish the process of emotional exploration and life storytelling, keeping the narrative focused on internal experiences rather than external events. In entertainment interviews, jumping questions and exaggerated performative responses continue to create laughs and points of interest, forcing the process to serve the entertainment effect and inhibiting in-depth discussion. These techniques act as "anchors" to stabilize the dynamic process within a predefined narrative framework ^[2].

4.1 Process transitions

When there is a risk that the interview process may deviate from the predefined genre, the moderator's process transitions are a key corrective. In hard news interviews, if the guest tries to avoid the issue by talking about his or her personal contribution, the moderator will immediately bring the process back to the accountability track with forceful interruptions and precise factual questions such as "Sorry to interrupt, but we are more concerned with operational failures". In soft character interviews, if the guest gets bogged down in minutiae, the moderator uses a deeply emotional open-ended question, "How did this experience fundamentally influence your subsequent life choices?" to reactivate the process of emotional and meaningful exploration. In entertainment interviews, once the topic becomes serious or cold, the host will quickly throw out a bold gossip question or do an exaggerated parody, creating instant laughs and forcing the process back to the entertainment channel. This immediate and powerful intervention ensures that the narrative genre is not carried away by unexpected factors.

4.2 Narrative curing signals

The host's skillful use of iconic narrative curing signals is a visible sign of genre stability. The hard news presenter's usual "let's get back to the core facts/issues" and "you haven't answered my question positively" are clear labels for the information and accountability narrative. The soft-personality presenter's gentle "What happened?", "How did you feel at the time?", are signals of an ongoing invitation to deeper emotional narratives. Entertainment hosts' signature exaggerated exclamations ("OH MY GOD!"), specific bantering phrases such as "Aren't you afraid of going home and kneeling on the keyboard when you talk like that?" or signature gestures such as S rolling her eyes or pretending to faint, are the switches that instantly activate and reinforce the entertainment narrative. These highly repetitive, genre-specific verbal or non-verbal patterns continuously send clear narrative genre signals to guests and viewers, reinforcing expectations.

4.3 Characterization of the finished story

Ultimately, the differences in the characteristics of the finished stories produced under the dominance of different skill strategies become the ultimate proof that the narrative is locked. The structure of hard news stories is rigorous, such as investigative reports, with precise and objective language, highly restrained emotions, and conclusions pointing to public value judgments, attributions of responsibility, and policy recommendations. Soft character stories are structured like essays or memoirs, with language rich in emotion and metaphor, vivid details, and conclusions that are often open to life lessons or philosophies. Entertainment stories are structured as a collection of variety show clips, with lively and slang language or even nonsense, exaggerated and outward-looking emotions, and the pursuit of instant laughs and celebrity image consumption, often with no profound conclusions. These distinctive differences are the narrative "genes" that are ultimately solidified by the underlying skill strategies through the driving process ^[3].

5 Method application guidelines

Conversation Analysis (CA) and Discourse Analysis (DA) function like binoculars, providing researchers and practitioners with precise tools to penetrate the surface of interviews and gain insights into how techniques drive narrative production. This guide aims to translate methodological principles into actionable pathways through four practical dimensions: audio/video transcription, typological strategy deconstruction, process intervention training, and ethical calibration. These practices empower hosts, directors, or media students to precisely control the narrative production chain. For example, investigative journalists from "60 Minutes" analysed their own interview videos frame by frame to identify micro-expressions such as the timing of raised eyebrows during follow-up questions. They discovered that overly coercive non-verbal signals triggered defensive reactions in interviewees, prompting them to adjust their technique combinations: adding a 3-second silent gaze before critical inquiries, paired with a more steady tone of voice, increased the success rate of obtaining key information through follow-up questions by 40%. This case demonstrates the direct effectiveness of the method's application, where technique optimisation begins with microscopic observation of interactive details.

Hard news anchor Bai Yansong, when questioning a government official, consistently used institutional verbs such as "violating Article 5 of the Environmental Protection Law" and "evading regulatory procedures" instead of neutral terms like "practices" or "behaviour." By pre-setting the narrative framework of "illegal-accountability" through his language, he reinforced the legitimacy of investigative reporting. Analysing the proportion of such verbs in the anchor's language—reaching 27% in a particular interview—reveals how they strengthen the legitimacy of investigative narratives.

When Lu Yu interviewed a Paralympic champion, she described the guest's career as "carving out a path of light in the darkness," replacing conventional expressions like "overcoming difficulties."

In entertainment interviews, Cai Kangyong inserts sudden serious "life questions" into gossip topics, such as "What do you fear most in your heart when faced with the clamour of rumours?" which essentially embeds elements of psychological counselling within the entertainment genre. The frequency of such hybrid segments, such as an average of once every 15 minutes in "Kangxi" and during peak viewing times (typically increasing by 20%), validates their role in mitigating the trivialisation of narrative.

Cultivating "empathy-based reflection" for soft interviews: Build an open-ended question bank and establish emotional trigger word templates—such as "the most painful or proud moment," or "if you could go back to the beginning, what would you do?" Similar open-ended question banks can be created based on how others perceive success and glory, and what they actually mean to you.

Entertainment's "explosive point creation formula" has three key elements: controversy ("Who is the hardest to work with on set?"), timeliness ("The trending topic says you're getting divorced; you must address it today!"), and urgency ("The trending topic says you're getting divorced; you must address it today!").

When techniques become narrative weapons, ethical risks follow closely. The "truth trap" in hard news: A investigative programme edited together clips of guests "admitting to violations" to reinforce accountability narratives, leading to distorted storytelling. Solution: Establish a dual-track recording system—comparing the original audio track with the edited version—to ensure follow-up questions do not distort the original intent ^[4].

Soft character "empathy exploitation" The host repeatedly questioned an orphaned guest about the details of her mother's death, triggering a psychological breakdown. An emotional red line mechanism should be established, where guests mark off-limits topics during pre-interviews, and hosts are trained to identify emotional overload (e.g., trembling fingers, sudden changes in tone) and shift the topic accordingly.

Entertainment's "offensive threshold": Xiaoshu's jokes about a guest's physique sparked public controversy, highlighting the need to establish a system to pre-judge and absolutely avoid offensive topics; for permissible topics like relationships or embarrassing incidents, prioritise self-deprecating humour.

Ultimate testing standard: When reviewing the interview footage, ask yourself: If the guest were to watch the entire process, would they still acknowledge the fairness of the narrative? Do the techniques amplify reality rather than replace it? For example, a host analysed their own approach and found they overused pre-set questions like, "Do you feel ashamed of your failure?" they adjusted it to a neutral statement like, "What did that experience bring you?" This prompted the guest to voluntarily mention "shame" and made the narrative more persuasive.

6 Conclusion

The host's techniques span from micro-level micro-manipulation—such as precise follow-up questions, deep listening and observation, and subtle expression control—to dynamic regulation at the process level, including focusing and shifting topics, pacing, and atmosphere creation. These ultimately crystallise into macro-level narrative products: hard news accountability reports, soft-personality spiritual epics, and entertainment-driven joyful feasts. This forms an interconnected, mutually shaping narrative production chain. The "three-tier narrative production model" constructed in this study reveals this underlying mechanism. By analysing three typical domains—hard news, soft-focused character, and entertainment interviews—it empirically demonstrates how the host's technical strategies serve as the core driving force, intervening in the process to lock in and reinforce specific narrative types. Identifying "narrative solidification signals" and understanding the critical role of "process turning points" provides practitioners with a clear roadmap ^[5].

An excellent interview host is inevitably a master of techniques, a wise guide of processes, and a conscious shaper of narrative types. Their value lies not only in obtaining answers but also in using the alchemy of dialogue to forge information, emotions, and ideas into narrative crystals with specific forms and power, illuminating reality, touching the heart, or igniting joy. Understanding and mastering the interactive codes between techniques, processes, and narratives grants one the deeper rules for creating meaning within the dialogue domain. Dialogue never ceases, nor does narrative, and insight into this production mechanism will empower communicators with greater ability to shape stories and connect hearts.

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