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Why an Individual Investigation of Smog Aroused Public Engagement

– A Rhetorical Analysis of *Under the Dome*

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Abstract

In 2015, Chai Jing's film, *Under the Dome: Investigating China's Smog*, was issued online and soon gathered two hundred millions of views only within 48 hours. The unprecedented diffusion of *Under the Dome* suggests a successful communication case for an environmental topic in terms of the extensive attention and heated discussion it brought about, as well as its potential influence in raising the public awareness and policy-making. *Under the Dome* arouses broad study interests from various disciplines regarding the reasons back of the phenomenon. This essay focuses on exploring the rhetorical approaches employed in the film and argues that *Under the Dome's* rhetoric presents an innovative mode of persuasion: the incorporation of investigative journalism and personal perspective and discourse. While developing the credibility of its information and arguments through practical means of investigative journalism, the individual stand and other personalized multimedia assets build up a close connection with the audience and encourage their engagement. Functioning together with other factors such as the new media as the distribution channel, the timing of its issue and the celebrity effect of the film-maker, the distinctive rhetorical design empowers its persuasiveness and contributes notably to the virality of the film.

Keywords: Smog, Rhetorical Analysis, Identification, Source Credibility, Investigative Journalism

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Abbreviations

CAS	Chinese Academy of Science
CCTV	China Central Television
MEP	Ministry of Environmental Protection
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NPC	National People's congress
PM2.5	Fine Particulate Matter with a diameter smaller than 2.5 microns
SARS	Suspected Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
TED	Technology, Entertainment, Design. TED is owned by a non-profit foundation with the goal of spreading ideas through short and powerful TED talks.

1 Introduction

Along with its rapid development in industry and remarkable achievement in economy since the end of 1970's, environmental pollution has increasingly become a severe issue in many areas of China. In certain developed part of China, the public has been aware of water and soil contamination related to industrial activities for a long time. In contrast to this, the air pollution in the north of the country was discussed in terms of "foggy weather" up to the last two decades. The concepts of "smog" or PM2.5 (a measurement of particle pollution indicating the fine particles 2.5 micrometers in diameter or smaller) didn't appear in public media until the beginning of 2010's when the Bureau of Meteorology started to monitor and forecast PM2.5, one of the key components of smog concerning human's health (Wang, 2015). People started to get to know that what they thought of as rural and poetical "fog" was actually the hazardous haze developed mostly from industrial activities. They built up their knowledge of smog from TV and social media and took some passive actions they were told to, for instance, staying indoors as much as possible in smog days; wearing masks if they have to go out, etc.

On Feb. 28, 2015, a documentary film about the smog problem in China, "*Under the Dome*" (hereafter called *Dome*), was issued online on two mainstream websites. The film was produced and self-funded by Chai Jing, a famous former China Central Television (CCTV) journalist and anchor. It illustrates an overall view of smog issue with answering three thematic questions: What is smog? Where does it come from? What can we do to deal with it (Chai, 2015)? Soon after its release, the film was distributed and reposted promptly in many local social media and viewed by two hundred millions of people only within 48 hours (Yang, 2016). It aroused a long-lasting extensive attention, drastic discussion and violent debate among netizens about the film, the smog issue and even the producer herself, which had never been achieved by any other environment-related communicative activity in China, neither by government nor private organization (Li, 2015).

Media commentators compare *Dome* with Al Gore's documentary, *The Inconvenient Truth*. Chen Jining, the new Chinese Environment Minister, also highly evaluated the film and referred to it as the Chinese *Silent Spring* (an influential environmental science book by Rachel Carson on 1962): "Chai Jing deserves our respect for drawing the public's attention to the environment from a unique public health perspective" (Garner, 2015, p.1).

2 Aim of Study and Research Questions

The vast diffusion of *Dome* represents a remarkable case about an environmental issue in terms of the broad attention and heated discussion it brought about, as well as its potential influence in raising the public awareness and policy-making. *Dome* phenomenon stimulated relevant studies in various disciplines and fields including journalism, film, new media, communication and so forth, regarding to the potential factors which contribute to its popularity. Based on the literature review I have conducted, most of the researches from the communication perspective deliberated aspects such as the distribution channel, the presenting style, the timing of the issue, Chai Jing's celebrity effect and the social context which favored the widespread of the film. As Wang Yan (2015) points out in his review, most information in *Dome* is not new, many previous investigations or reports have proposed similar arguments. However, none of them have reached the same scale of recognition as *Dome*, which verifies one of the essential philosophies of rhetoric — **how to talk** plays a more important role in persuading people than **what is talked about**. Despite of numerous transnational articles reviewing *Dome* and some of them attempt to dig the reasons of its virality, very few studies have concentrated on the rhetoric of the film and studied it systematically from the rhetoric point of view.

As a student of Environmental Communication program, I noticed the impressive functions of some rhetorical elements when I tried to analyze the film. I found it was one of the key factors in favor of *Dome*'s success. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to study the rhetorical design of *Dome* and analyze how the employed rhetorical components contribute to its popularity. The research questions that have been guiding the analysis are: What are the main rhetorical approaches employed in *Dome*? How does Chai present her investigation of smog and raise appeals? How have these rhetorical strategies helped in attracting the viewers, conveying information, building the understanding and recognition for them, and even moving and affecting them? I wish the study would provide some insights and inspire the way of thinking when we prepare and conduct similar environmental communication practices.

3 Theoretical Background

In this chapter I describe the main theoretical concepts, “**source credibility**” based on Aristotle and “**identification**” based on Burke, that guided my rhetorical analysis of the film.

3.1 Rhetoric

Because of its rich connotation and long history of application, **rhetoric** is seen to have inextricable links with communication. Some scholars studying communication categorize rhetoric as one of seven theoretical traditions (Rhetorical, Semiotic, Phenomenological, Cybernetic, Sociopsychological, Sociocultural and Critical) that illustrate **communication** from various theoretical perspectives. Rhetoric tradition is a humanistic, interpretive way of thinking about communication (Craig and Muller, 2007).

The concept of rhetoric has a very long and rich history which can be traced back to the ancient Greek when the Sophists practice certain “persuasive” speeches. Due to the central position rhetoric held in the fields of communication and education, corresponding studies and debates has never stopped. The theory has been developed by generations of scholars with various of definitions. Rhetoric is traditionally conceptualized as an art of discourse, wherein a rhetor strives to inform, persuade or motivate the listeners to the direction that they are expected.

The best known definition of rhetoric is made by Aristotle, who sees it “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” and proposes three means of effective persuasion: the rhetor’s personal character and credibility (ethos); to understand the listeners and stir their emotions (pathos); logic and persuasive arguments (logos) (Craig and Muller, 2007). In the middle of 20th century, following the traditional “persuasion”-centered theory, Burke broadens rhetoric with the concept of Identification. Through identification the rhetor establishes a common ground with others, with or without conscious, transcends the divisions between them in order to achieve the persuasive effect eventually (Burke, 1969). This broader definition allows for the inclusion of audience, communication format and context to be deliberated as important elements of critical study (Watson, 2014).

3.2 Source Credibility

In my analysis I found that credibility was of rhetoric importance in this film and therefore saw a need to elaborate on the first of the three means of Aristotle, namely ethos. Ethos's early definition is: "(There is persuasion) through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence" (Bruss & Graff, 2005). The idea of *source credibility* is originated from the concept of ethos, and is seen as one of its four critical components, along with attraction, homophily and temperament (Brière, 2011).

As one of the classic communication variables, **source credibility**, is typically defined as a message source's *ability* or *motivation* to provide accurate and truthful information respectively through its two dimensions—source expertise and source trustworthiness. That is, expertise may affect a message source's *ability* to provide accurate information, trustworthiness is likely to influence a message source's *motivation* to provide truthful information (Nan, 2013). According to traditional studies, source credibility has positive impact on persuasion, people will be more persuaded by messages associated with a high credible source comparing to a less credible source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Besides of communication, source credibility is studied for practical application in marketing, law and political science as well. In the field of journalism, source credibility is also a major professional value and a central ethical code which is pursued by the practitioners to shape their own status and image as providers of truthful, accurate, fair, unbiased news (Reich, 2011).

3.3 Identification

Kenneth Burke is considered as the father of modern rhetoric studies (Davis, 2008). Besides of following Aristotle's assertion that the "basic function" of rhetoric is persuasion, he broadens the rhetorical tradition and suggests rhetoric is more about identification. The important aim of rhetoric is to establish a connection rather than to win an argument. Only through making a connection with the audience by an identifying act, the rhetor could have the precondition to persuade them. "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his." (Burke, 1969, p.55). Compared to persuasion, identification emphasizes more the active engagement of the listeners.

Identification is the key concept of the rhetoric theory of Burke. He articulates the concept in some of his earlier works such as *Attitude Towards History* (1937) and *The Philosophy of Literary Work*. But only until *A*

Grammar of Motives (1969) and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1969), he clearly places identification as the core theory of his rhetorical system and crystallizes the definition of it (Jordan, 2005): "A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so" (Burke, 1969, p.20). To make it simple, "Identification is a way in which a rhetor states explicitly to an individual (possibly to convince himself or herself): 'I am like you.' or 'I have the same interest as you.'" (Cheney, 1983).

Burke illustrates the concept with the help of two items: **substance** and **consubstantial**. "To identify A with B is to make A 'consubstantial' with B" (Burke, 1969, p.21). Identification is a mode that an individual exists as an independent identify but can establish relation with others. The consubstantial or identification may only address certain respects they share in common, they still remain their distinctness at the same time, that is to say, the distinct *substance*. For example, a group of people are identified generally as artists although they may represent various styles (they have different substance). Thus, substance implies division between individuals either in material/biological or action/behavior aspect, but "Identification is compensatory to division." (Burke, 1969, p.22). Identification is demanded to deal with the implications of division in a communication process, because people are inclined to cooperate with those who share the same interest. The common ground achieved by identification is the necessary condition for common motives and acting together.

3.4 Identification Strategies

Burke categorizes three interpretations of identification as rhetorical strategies, and other scholar, such as George Cheney (1983), develops and completes them in his work. The first strategy is the common ground technique (or identification through sympathy), which means the rhetor equates or links himself or herself to others by building up the common ground and assuming they share the same or similar value, attitude, state etc. The second strategy is identification through antithesis. The rhetor makes use of the common enemy shared with the audience to establish the association and join their forces against the antithesis although they might different or disagree with each other on other respects. The third one is the assumed or transcendent "we" (or identification by inaccuracy). In certain situations the identification is developed unconsciously between parties even when they have very little in common because of the impact of words such as "we", "everyone", "all" etc. People are influenced by the implication of these items and bond themselves unconsciously together with those who are addressed by the words at the same time (Cheney, 1983).

Despite that there are other influential philosophers and theories of rhetorical communication, the mentioned theories of Aristotle and Burke will be focused in this study.

4 Methodology

In this paper, the case study approach is adopted aiming at studying the particular communication event—the broad-spread of the environmental documentary, *Under the Dome*, to see how the rhetorical design works to enhance its diffusion and influence in local society.

I studied the film from two perspectives. First, the film *Under the Dome* itself and an interview video issued online simultaneously with it —*The Special Interview with Chai Jing: “People Do Things Because They Care From the Bottom of Their Heart”* (*Ren Zuoshenme, Shi Yinwei Xindi You Aixi*), in which Chai clarifies her motivation and aims of carrying out the project. Upon analyzing directly the documentary and the relevant interview to the filmmaker, I built up my own reflections to the film as a viewer. Second, I searched and read other people’s articles or comments regarding the documentary, which inspired and enriched my own insights and the study. The material was collected from both local and international websites in order to cover a comprehensive viewpoints from different stands. Material includes the papers examining *Dome*; reviewing articles from influential media, such as BBC, the New York Times, ChinaFile, Tai Media, etc; and the comments and debates in some noted social media such as Zhihu, Xinlang Blog (equivalent to Twitter in China). While going through this information, I filtered out the ones concerning the rhetorics of the film that I saw could be interesting to delve in.

The method employed to analyze the film is the content analysis from the rhetorical perspective, which I conducted based on several means and phases. First, I searched and read some rhetorical analysis to other environmental films to prepare myself for the potential analytical approaches that could be used on my own study. Second, I watched *Dome* a number of times in order to identify those aspects which could be rhetorical importance and interesting to analyze. The discourse (or textual content), the visual and audio content, and the presentation style of *Dome* is reviewed carefully, and I found elements such as Chai’s personal story, her individual stand, the TED mode presentation, and visual material of interviews, onsite probes etc. played important roles in convincing the audience and worth to be discussed. Third, while watching the film, I read through a series of rhetorical theories and looked for appropriate theories upon which I could explain and discuss the rhetorical aspects I found in the film. Choosing theories went back and forth, because in the middle of these processes I found a newly published article (Chai Jing's *Under the Dome* : A Multimedia Doc-

umentary in the Digital Age, by Cui Shuqin, published online on 27 Dec. 2016) which was similar like what I had planned in terms of both the aspects and theories. This finding had confused me for some time because I intended my thesis not to look like someone else's. I gradually decided to use the theoretical concepts of *identification* and *source credibility* as the main analytical themes, which are different from the other paper. At last, the identified rhetorical aspects are grouped under the two analytical themes and discussed accordingly.

5 Background Information for Analysis

5.1 About Under the Dome

Under the Dome is a 104-minutes-long-documentary investigating the smog issue in China. In this film, using a TED talking mode, Chai shares with the onsite audience her incentives, reports her findings and calls on actions dealing with the problem from both the policy-maker and the public.

With a simple graph on a big screen back of her displaying the PM2.5 situation of Beijing in January 2013, Chai starts her speech by directly pointing at the subject of the film – haze. Meanwhile, the period the graph depicting was also the time when Chai discovered she got pregnant, which leads to her personal story about the reason why she launched this self-funded, year-long investigation and made the film. After this simple, direct and very personalized opening, Chai continues to present her investigation following the three thematic questions (what is dome; where does it come from; what we can do to solve the problem) with various audio-visual means including videos and audios of interviews; videos, photos and footages of onsite probes; figures in charts, graphs and textual reports cited from authoritative institutions; animations etc. Through these multimedia assets she explains haze, its development during the past several decades and its hazardous impact to human's health and environment. She reveals the problems caused by coal and oil burning, which is said has contributed to 60% of the air pollution in China. She proposes corresponding corrective actions to the government, for example to adjust the energy structure, change the monopoly situation in petrochemical industry, strengthen law enforcement etc.; and she calls upon collective behavior change of the public to be more environment-friendly.

5.2 Chinese Documentary-making Context

Films made for awakening public awareness and stimulating collective actions may have very different features in terms of strategies, forms, and approaches applied. Comparing to previous films, *Dome* is unique from many aspects, that some scholars find it hard to categorizing it into certain classic genre, such as Wei claims in his article online: "It looks like an individual speech, or an investigative journalism, or a documentary... I don't exactly know what it is." (Wei, 2015).

In spite of the disputes regarding the genre of *Dome*, it is commonly acknowledged as a documentary by most of the scholars and observers, but in an unconventional format (Cui, 2016). To study *Under the Dome*, it is inevitable to compare it with other Chinese documentaries in similar topics thus it is necessary to learn more about the documentary-making context where *Dome* emerges.

The history of Chinese documentary has been dominated by what Bill Nichols calls the “expository mode” since 1950’s, with a development of personalized, activist work only lately since the beginning of 1990’s. The expository approach relies on the spoken word by employing a voice-of-God or a voice-of-authority commentary to convey information and propose a perspective with supporting images (Nichols, 2001). The expository documentaries usually narrated in an official tone and manner in order to establish the qualities of neutrality, omniscience, disinterestedness, or distance, concerning to shape the figure of authority and credibility in front of audience eventually (Edwards, 2015). This mode has been exclusively applied in China for the purpose of political propaganda since Maoist era and prevails the theories of documentary-making until today (Edwards, 2015), despite the fact that from the 1990’s, along with the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy in economy, remarkable changes have occurred in the society and cultural market as well, and documentary-making has diversified with multi-voice narration and personalized style (Chu, 2004).

5.3 Development of Investigative Journalism in China

Investigative journalism has been seen as one of the most prominent developments in contemporary Chinese media by academics (Zhou, 2000). Some scholars assert this form of journalism developed based on the notion of “in-depth reporting” initiated by the elite national media in the 1980s, emerged from the social context of a liberalized media culture generated by the relatively loose political environment and the increasing social problems coming along with the economic reform which demand journalistic attention (Wang & Lee, 2014). Its publication and influence declined after the Tiananmen pro-democracy movement in 1989 and then boomed again from the mid of 1990s, along with the accelerated economic reform and the launch of a series of investigative programs in both state and local media (Wang, 2010).

Confronting various social and economic problems such as extensive corruption, increasing income inequalities, the emergence of investigative journalism is both welcomed by the citizens and encouraged by the Chinese party-state. For the former, investigative journalism makes a different voice among the all-the-time-positive-reporting by exposing and criticizing

the wrongdoings and failures in public affairs, which represents the public interests to certain extent. For the state government, encouraging this critical voice shapes its gesture of concerning citizens' dissatisfaction and striving to improve its performance and gaining public trust, and "allows propaganda work to be carried out in a more hegemonic and persuasive fashion." (Wang & Lee, 2014). Thus although investigative journalism is constrained by political control and marked by "cautious control" over the criticisms, it still survives because of the increasing professional imperatives of the journalists, the institutionalization of the genre, and its marketing value (Wang & Lee, 2014). It obtains its popularity and recognition among Chinese audience.

6 Analysis

Dome's Rhetoric: An Incorporation of Personal Perspective and Investigative Journalism

A prominent difference of *Dome* from traditional Chinese documentaries is its personalized style (Edwards, 2015). Chai applies a more individualized and embodied style of address to talk to her audience as a fellow citizen on their stand. The TED-mode speech, the story of the film-maker's daughter which leads to the claim of personal incentive to this self-invested investigation and documentary, and the discourse of individual perspective in the movie, all these rhetorical designs suggest the innovative style of *Dome* of personalization, which changes the impression of the public about documentaries in serious topics as rigid doctrines, eliminates the psychological resistance from them, builds a much closer association with them and engages them successfully in this communication event.

The air pollution issue, after all, is such a complex and extensive problem in terms of its possible reasons and solutions affected by diverse of social, cultural, economic and natural factors. Thus besides of connecting and attracting audience at the first place, another key communication target is to convince them with logical arguments supported by concrete and reliable proofs. Chai brings in the format and elements of investigative journalism into the documentary, in consideration of forming *Dome* as a comprehensive, objective and trustworthy source of information about air pollution in China.

Just like what Chai Jing pointed out in her own interview that she felt obliged to do a research about air pollution due to both a mother's instinct and a journalist's responsibility (Chai, 2015), I argue *Dome*'s rhetoric is exactly an incorporation of discourse of these two identities. The setting of personal perspective arouses interest and emotional resonance of the audience and engages them deeply in this communication event, and the discourse and means practiced as a professional journalism build up the credibility of the investigation and reinforce the persuasiveness of the film.

The following discussion on the rhetoric of the film is based on these two thematic aspects.

6.1 Rhetorics Engaging Audience

Burke(1969) argues that persuasion's very condition of possibility is identification; the primary aim of rhetoric is not to win an argument but to make a connection (Davis, 2008). Dome is successful in this regard. As mentioned earlier, a remarkable feature of Dome is its personalized style which causes the unprecedented interests and engagement of the public in the smog issue, which I have found was accomplished by the following concrete rhetorical approaches: establishing identification through Chai's personal story and individual perspective and discourse; reinforcing the public engagement through TED mode presentation, and conveying information through digestible visual methods like animations and charts, etc.

6.1.1 Personal Story and Perspective—Identification through Sympathy

In my analysis I have found that identification is an essential rhetorical approach adopted in Dome. As Burke asserts that the shared interest and common ground achieved by identification would smooth the communication and cooperation between different parties (Burke, 1969), the identification strategies employed in Dome function successfully in establishing a bond with its audience and obtaining their recognition. This is actually the first step for Dome to be accepted and distributed among the millions of netizens. Chai's construction of herself as an embodied, questing mother encourages identification with average people and enhances the emotional power of Dome.

Personal Story

Dome starts in a quite simple, direct and attractive way. By showing on screen the PM2.5 index of Beijing in January, 2013, which leads to her personal story and individual stand, Chai attracts the viewers into the documentary immediately. The story is about her daughter who was discovered with a benign tumor before born and had to take the surgery right after her birth. Later Chai had to keep the little girl indoors like a prisoner once the air wasn't good outside. She expresses her concerns about the poor environment where her child lives and the potential influence to her health, her future. "The moment I heard her heartbeat, I had no other hope for her than to be healthy." (Dome, 2015, 1:00) "I had never felt afraid of pollution before, I never worn a mask anywhere. But now I was holding a life in my very arms. What she breathes, eats, drinks, are all your responsibility, and then you feel the fear." (Dome, 2015, 2:32) The feeling of anxiety and responsibility as a parent can be expected to be shared strongly by the vast audience who have children and the same concerns. Through telling this story,

Chai identifies herself as an average mother who worries about the air pollution and wants to keep her child healthy and safe from it. She sounds just like a neighbor or sister who is so attached to the viewers. Like one of the observer's comment: "Chai...tying the story of China's polluted air to the story of her own daughter's health.... It is a video that tugs at parental heartstrings." (Gardner, 2015, p.2).

Chai Jing was a famous investigative journalist and an anchor who had hosted several different programs of CCTV for more than ten years before she quit her job in 2014. Ordinary people see her as a middle-classed elite, with strong marks of CCTV on her identity, might has certain privilege and doesn't share the same lives and problems with them. As Burke says: "Identification is compensatory to division" (Burke, 1969), through telling her personal story Chai identifies herself as an ordinary parent who confronts the same problems as millions of other parents do. The story builds a common ground for Chai and the public. People can easily connect her story with their own life and thus share the same feelings as she shows. According to Cheney's categories of identification strategy, this rhetoric can be referred to what is called *identification through sympathy*, through which the rhetor links herself by building up the common ground and assuming they share similar state (Cheney, 1983). This identification associates Dome closely to the audience.

Later in the online debate, some netizens criticize Chai Jing for sensationalism and arousing public sympathy with her daughter's illness (Ma,L. 2015). However, I agree with the opposite opinion. The first time when I watched the film, I was impressed and attracted by the story Chai told. Because of this story, not only she spells out her personal motivation of making the film, but also she weakens her well-know identity as a CCTV journalist who doesn't associate with the common citizens so much. I assume this is a strong character distinguishes Dome immediately from other Chinese investigative documentaries I have watched. The new identity as a normal parent built up by the story is accepted broadly by the audience from a country where familial bonds remain particularly strong, which is actually the essential basis for Chai to further move, persuade and even impact them with her arguments. I assume *identification through sympathy* is a very effective rhetorical strategy in *Dome*. Just like what reads in *Time* where Chai was awarded the Green Fighter in 2015: "*Under the Dome*, is one of the most important pieces of environmental awareness building ever in China." "Her very personal and powerful story is one that millions of people in China can relate to, which points to the reason it was viewed 200 million times just days after it was first broadcast." (Ma, J., 2015)

Individual Perspective

Led by her daughter's story, Chai declares that the film is invested by herself and the key motivation of conducting such an investigation was "to address her personal grudge to the smog". It is because of her daughter she started to concern about the haze and conducted the research to get ready to answer the questions probably raised by the little kid soon in the future (Chai 2015). The emphasis of the personal perspective and motivation of *Dome* is a fundamental difference from traditional documentaries. As in my discussion in the section of Chinese documentary-making context above, most of the documentaries regarding environmental issues are made by institutional authorities and in an expository mode with a voice-of authority (Nichols, 2001) who normally is seen in a superior positions and "inform" people about the problems and "educate" them what to do stiffly. Despite of the credibility and authority shaped by this mode, it generates the distance from its audience. Psychologically, people hold their reservation and even resistance to the information from the official channel which are usually seen with certain propaganda purpose (Edwards, 2015).

By claiming this independent and individual perspective, Chai places herself as a fellow of her viewers instead of a superior. This pre-announced independent stand of *Dome* may eliminate the resistance from the audience and they would be less defensive and willing to listen to a voice from their stand. This identification, on the one hand, makes a connection with the average citizens who become curious about how other fellow perceives this common problem and willing to watch it at the first place; On the other hand, the personal voice presented in the film sounds more approachable and acceptable to the public, the information and arguments from an individual whose purpose is just to fulfill a mother's responsibility would seem more trustworthy.

6.1.2 Calling Upon Collective Actions—Identification by Inaccuracy

Besides of constructing the individual perspective of *Dome* through personal story, Chai applies the rhetoric of identification while calling upon collective actions against air pollution. Chai argues: "It (controlling pollution) needs to rely on the ordinary people like you and me. It's our choice, our determination" (*Dome*, 2015, 1:31:00). She shares her own experience of taking individual actions, such as taking part in the public participation meeting, using an APP to detect and report a pollution site nearby or expose it on Weibo (equivalent to Facebook), complaining to an uncovered construction site, ringing the hotline 12369 to report a restaurant without smoke filtering device or a gas station without gasoline vapor recovery equipment. In this section, Chai employs items such as "the ordinary peo-

ple like you and me”, “our”, “we”, to attempt to bond the audience with her as the same group, which is the strategy of what Cheney calls “the assumed or transcendent ‘we’”, also called *identification by inaccuracy*. (Cheney, 1983) Besides of these motivational sentences in her speech, Chai exemplifies several successful cases when she complained directly or called the hotline to complain about the pollutions in her community as a normal resident. The videos of the examples convey a clear message to the audience: it doesn’t seem so difficult for her when she “tried” to do those things as an ordinary person, maybe I can “try” to do this in my community as well. Thus, the rhetoric applied here does not only make the audience identify themselves as fellows of the same group with Chai who can stand up and fight against the pollution, but also implies that they can do it successfully, just like what Chai did in the video footages.

6.1.3 TED Talk Mode Presentation

Beginning since 1984 from an architecture conference, TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) nowadays is seen as an effective tool of sharing information and learning within larger societal and cultural shifts, which achieved by its own genre of persuasion through encouraging identification and associating its audience (Waston, 2014). In addition to the strategy of identifying herself as a fellow citizen, the way Chai presents her smog investigation—the TED talk mode, also functions to build a close connection between the speaker and the listeners. On the one hand, this TED talk mode helps to establish a circumstance of close, authentic and direct communication with more engagement of the onsite audience; on the other hand, the engagement of the onsite audience encourages the identification of the online audience.

Impressive to most of the Chinese audience, with both the topic and content look like an investigative journalism, the presentation of *Under the Dome* suggests an inspiration of a TED talk mode rather than a conventional one. This style goes beyond the expectation of the information receivers and offers a fresh viewing experience to them, because the TED mode is still new for many local citizens although it is quite acknowledged among intellectuals and young generations (the important target group of the film). Differently, traditional investigative reportages are usually presented by enumerating pictures and videos along with some narrations of a reporter talking to the camera, sometimes there is even not a reporter but only a voice-over. People are tired of the “voice of God” mode which keeps a distance from them (Li, 2015). Watching this kind of information-delivery films, the audience don’t feel being addressed directly and hardly engaged themselves in the issue communicated.

One of the key components of TED is exerting influence through face-to-face persuasion (Waston, 2014). Delivered in a TED discourse, Chai's smog investigation changes the usual way of communicating such a scientific and harsh issue which demands collective actions from the public. *Dome* is screened in a large studio full of audience with a stage and a huge screen. Throughout the film, Chai strolls across the stage and talks to the audience face to face in a chatty, relaxed manner with moments of humor. She addresses and interacts with the onsite audience directly by sharing her stories and feelings, reporting her findings and raising some simple questions, such as "How much will be the profit to produce one ton steel now in Hebei?" and "Which city do you think has the most smog days in China?". She invites them to think about the problems and possible solutions together with her, and associates them tightly with the issue she targeted. Just as what TED's philosophy indicates: communication through simplified storytelling in an atmosphere where encourages an authentic experience with an engaged audience (Waston, 2014). This face-to-face interaction between Chai and her audience constructs a close and genuine circumstance which allows and fosters a deeper involvement of the audience.

To the offsite viewers, the messages they receive from *Dome* are not only the smog investigation, but also the interflow between Chai and the onsite audience recorded by the frequent camera cross-cuts between them. For example, when Chai talks about the story of her infant child's surgery, the camera zooms in on several young couples with worried looks on their faces; laughter bursts out from onsite audience when the fraud in vehicle industry is appealed by an interview audio ironically. As part of the onsite community, the present audience and their reactions to the speech are used as the rhetorical tools to construct the truthful circumstance of interaction and identification with offsite viewers (Cui, 2016). And the offsite viewers, implied by the emotional reactions of the audience onsite, normally identify themselves unconsciously to the onsite ones and feel the similar engagement. This can refer to Burke's theory of *identification by inaccuracy* (Cheney, 1983). Just like the classical example: smokers would identify themselves unconsciously with the charming guy on the advertisement of Marlboro cigarette and do whatever he does. Thus through this TED mode speech and interaction between the speaker and the onsite audience, *Dome* associates and engages numerous online viewers rhetorically.

6.1.4. Animation

Animation is usually not seen as serious and precise enough and even contradictory to the conventions of documentary or journalism (Boykoff, 2010), thus film-makers are cautious of using it. From the other aspect, "animation

can make a news story more vivid, and thereby increase viewer's consumption of the news content" (Lo & Cheng, 2015). It is even expected as a possible mean to increase the public engagement with journalism works (Lo & Cheng, 2015).

There are two animations sequences in *Dome*. The first one is displayed to help with the explanation of the first question raised in the beginning of the film: what is smog. The flash illustrates what PM2.5 particles is, and the mechanism of how it affects and damage human's health. Facts referring to environmental and medical science in other documentaries are normally presented in a serious way with plenty of complex specialized words and figures along with a rigid voice-over narration, which looks and sounds boring to amateurs and also difficult to follow. But in *Dome*, PM2.5 and human immune system are personified and illustrated with cartoon figures. The invading process of the hazardous elements into human's respiratory system is narrated from the perspective of "PM2.5" by an "evil" voice. Presented in this vivid way, abstruse scientific concepts may become not only comprehensive and approachable but also interesting and impressive to ordinary viewers. Conveying message through this way, a better effect is achieved in terms of the scientific education and environmental awareness of the public, which is the precondition of the common understanding and actions in next step.

The second animation is positioned in the last part of the film to assist the third question Chai raised: what can we do to deal with the smog? Through this short flash, Chai calls upon the participative activities of the public to stand out and act against the harsh situation. What Chai suggested seems not complicated to conduct, for instance, avoiding driving a car within five kilometers, writing bad online reviews for restaurants that don't have proper air filtration systems, boycotting the goods of polluting companies, reporting a pollution source to the hotline 12369, and so on. Illustrated in these vivid hand-drawing images in the brief animation, these actions are probably easier for the viewers to remember and follow. Additionally, the viewers are more likely to be stimulated by the appeals in such an infectious instead of rigid and didactic way. The animation provides tools that make it easier for people to become active citizens.

Thus, while piling up a number of concrete data, documents and serious investigative videos and footages, the production team of *Dome* utilize flash animations to explain complex scientific information and calls upon collective actions. The application of the animations makes this 104-minute long environmental documentary more animated and attractive to average viewers, and creates the balance between the speaker's intention of public edu-

cation and the audience's perception; as well as the speaker's appeals and the public's engagement.

6.2 Rhetorics Building the Credibility of the Arguments

The air pollution issue is a complex and extensive problem in terms of its possible reasons and solutions and is affected by diverse social, cultural, economic and natural factors. *Dome's* success (in terms of its unprecedented diffusion) as a smog communication event demonstrates its effective rhetorical design in achieving two targets. First, to rouse the interests of the stakeholders to the questions it raised (which is usually more difficult to a less entertaining topic); Second, to make the film convincing with powerful proofs so that the viewers would accept it, believe in it and even be persuaded by it. The factors relevant to the former target was discussed in the first part of the analysis section, in the following I focus on the rhetoric design that works to build up the credibility of the film.

While emphasizing the personal motivation and perspective of *Dome*, Chai's other identity, the professional investigative journalist, contributes to the rhetorical process from another aspect.

The subheading of *Under the Dome* is "Investigating China's Smog", and indeed, a big part of the film suggests the style of **investigative journalism**, which makes the project look professional and authoritative, just like Chai's previous probe works done when she was a CCTV investigative journalist. As I introduced earlier in the beginning of the Analysis section, **expository** documentary mode has a long history and represents an objective, professional style and is recognized by Chinese audience as an authoritative voice. Thus, the messages conveyed by *Dome*, which features both investigative journalism and expository documentary, are perceived as truthful and trustworthy conventionally. This is fundamental for a film exploring controversial smog issue. In addition, as one of the most well-known investigative journalists in China since 1990's, Chai has a long-term reputation of doing in-depth and critical investigations, which obtains the trust of the public to Chai and her team working in *Dome*. Chai seems to take a good advantage of her professional experience and reputation and embodies them into her film. This rhetorical design involved with the investigative journalism mode and approaches helps to build the credibility of this air-pollution-investigation project and thus empowered the persuasiveness of the arguments and the appeals raised in *Dome*.

I assume that as an experienced former CCTV journalist, Chai is quite aware of the essential role that credibility plays in her reports, meanwhile, she is also an expert with the know-how of constructing a trustworthy work,

just like what Hovland and Weiss (1951) assert, the expertise strengthens her ability to provide accurate information. Studying Dome from this perspective, I have found two directions to look into details: First, by choosing and citing data from other high credible sources Chai increases the validity of her own work; Second, through exercising typical investigative approaches such as onsite probes and interviews etc. and presenting them rhetorically in the film, Chai shapes Dome itself as a professional and trustworthy source of information on the smog issue.

6.2.1 Strengthening the Credibility of Cited Data

Chai's ability of accessing data is impressive both to the public and the observers, who assume she obtained the support from the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) (Seligsohn in Hsu. et, 2015). Along the presentation, 51 figures quoted from 332 data sources (Zu, 2015) function as solid evidences in illustrating the situation and developing data-based explanations and arguments to the miscellaneous problem. Every time Chai cites a data or brings in professional justification, she mentions the source, which includes Chinese Academy of Science (CAS), MEP, The Laboratory and Institutions of Tsinghua or Beijing University, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the former Chinese Health Minister, etc. These organizations and individuals are obviously seen by the public as authoritative institutions with reputation of high credibility in providing trustworthy and expertise messages. The citizens would be more willing to believe and accept the propositions supported by the messages given by these reliable sources, especially the data used to be "classified", which sounds even more truthful. For example, "A Survey of the Relationship Between Air Pollution and Cause of Death for 26 Chinese Cities 1976-1981"(Dome, 2015, 19:24), is showed on the big screen to reveal the report of air pollution caused by coal-burning and its relationship with local people's death. Hence, through underlining rhetorically the credible and trustworthy sources of the data she used in her findings, Chai enhances the credibility of her investigative project and creates convincing appeals.

Contrary to the authority and expertise of the sources that the data quotes, the way Chai presenting them is quite intelligible even to unaware people on the street. Relying on visual tools such as graphs, charts, tables, images and some simple concepts, the abstract, complicated and less-meaningful professional figures and reports are presented in an apparent, intuitionistic and meaningful way to the average citizens. As they can be expected to be sensitive to the simple visual images and they would perceive the information easily. For example, the graphs representing the brown coal production in recent years (Dome, 2015, 34:35) and the numbers of vehicles in past ten years (Dome, 2015, 39:11). And simple concepts such as: it's "not

even enough to buy a pickled egg” (Dome, 2015, 1:06:08) with the profit of production of one ton steel, illustrates explicitly the miserable situation of steel industry. According to Aristotle’s theory, in order to achieve persuasive effects, the rhetor must use “notions possessed by everybody” instead of esoteric terms, which are technically correct, even though, because the rhetor can not presume the audience are willing to follow with the unfamiliar and persuade by it (Daniel, 2002). Through this way of presentation, Dome not only shows the audience the professional figures which support its assertions, but also makes sure these data are digestible and meaningful to them, which reaches a balance of information conveying and perceiving between the sender and receivers and achieves a better communication result.

6.2.2 Onsite Investigation and Interviews— Expertise of Source Credibility

Besides of referring to authoritative data sources to build the data-based and convincing appeals, other journalism or documentary featured components such as onsite investigations and multi-facet interviews contribute to shape the investigative work about smog as a professional, objective one, which generally increases the credibility and persuasiveness of Dome as an environmental communication film.

In Dome, along her calm speech, through an amount of audio-visual material of onsite investigations and interviews done by herself and some historical footages and images, Chai invites the audience to join her into an in-depth investigation about the air pollution issue with the three research questions: what is smog; where does it come from; what can we do to deal with it. As an experienced journalist, Chai has the expertise of exercising necessary approaches to make a convincing investigation. For instance, one of Chai’s onsite probes in a steel mill exposes the harsh situation in Tangshan, Hebei Province, one of the most air-polluted area in China. The following interview with the official administrator of the MEP reveals the conflicting situation of economic development, people’s livelihoods and environmental protection. Other probes and interviews illustrate the problems of coal and fuel consumptions, fraud issue in vehicle industry, the monopoly situation in energy industry and its consequence, the powerless of MEP, etc. The film presents what seems to be the “fact” with these visual and audio records of onsite, live and face to face confrontations with relevant stakeholders. These “onsite” recordings are also the key feature which makes investigative journalism perceived as a truthful, objective genre of information by the public. People would presume the messages conveyed by journalism or documentaries are more objective and close to truth, alt-

though the contents are filtered and chosen by the journalist or film-maker already.

Besides of onsite probe, interview is another important tool contributed to the investigation. According to the statistics, plenty of interviews were conducted and showed in the film with interviewees from varied backgrounds including experts of air-pollution-prevention (12 times), doctors (2 times), representatives from MEP (26 times), municipality and government officials (4 times), chiefs of fuel and car industries, ordinary citizen (4 times), historical video (7times) (He, 2016). Sequencing the abundant interview material, Chai develops comprehensive explanations to the research questions through the mouths of her interviewees who represent various social groups and stands. For example, in a double interview, Chai questions both CAS and the head of the National Oil Fuel Standard Committee regarding the failure of regulating the fuel standard, and the answers unveil the powerless role of MEP compared to the dominant position of the monopolistic state-owned fuel enterprises. With the voices of subjects on opposite sides of the issue, the interview creates a self-reflexive and objective rhetoric which exposes the fact of contradictory regulation system in the fuel industry.

6.2.3 Two Referable Cases

Incorporated with the investigative methods, some documentary elements such as historical pictures and videos are also collected and embedded in *Dome* in favor of framing principle solutions to the smog puzzle. For instance, talking about the coal-burning problem, Chai gives the case of the “Great Smog” disaster in London in 1952. Through the historical news clips, Chai invites the viewers to reflect on the history of the industry revolution in Britain since 1860’s which based on an increasing coal consumption and eventually led to the serious air pollution there. This example sounds an alarm of the possible consequence of the current pollution issue if we don’t do anything about it. The following interview to the UK Secretary of State for Energy, as well as the onsite probe in Los Angeles area both suggest the solutions to the pollution caused by burning coal and vehicle emission: cleaning coal, reducing its consumption, raising the emission standard and enforcing the law, which have been verified as quite effective in the two ever severely polluted cities. Thus, by exemplifying these two similar cases in London and Los Angeles with the help of historical images and onsite research, Chai not only proposes the answers to the question about what we can do to fix the problem, but also frames rhetorically the problem as a solvable one if necessary actions would be taken by the policy-makers.

In sum, in order to create the credibility of *Dome*, Chai narrates her findings in the framework of investigative reporting and takes advantage of the conventional trust of the public in this genre as a reliable source of information (Wang & Lee, 2014). Besides, applying this documentary discourse, Chai does show the audience again her outstanding ability of conducting an in-depth and intensive probe by exercising the investigative approaches. This helps to establish the objective, comprehensive, credible, authoritative discourse and achieve a convincing effect.

7 Other Key Factors that Contributed to the Popularity of Dome

Besides of the rhetorical design of the film, there are several factors which also played very important roles in the mass virality of this communication case and worth to be noticed.

7.1 Distribution Channel

As mentioned earlier, the film-maker chose new media instead of traditional media (TV) to publish her product, which was later proved to be a wise choice and one of the essential factors contributing the large-scale circulating of the film. Dome was first uploaded on the website of the state-run People's Daily newspaper, and was soon forwarded to other influential websites like Youku, Tudou, and Tencent and social media like Weichat and Weibo, and generated viral reposts, comments and debates. Millions of Chinese netizens showed an unprecedented attention and enthusiasm to deliberate this long-last environmental issue.

I assume the advantages of the online distribution can be seen from two aspects. In this communication event, comparing to TV, Internet is not only the medium through which the documentary is disseminated to a massive online viewers in a more accessible and flexible way, but also provides an approachable platform for the subsequent public discussion. Comparing to the older forms of broadcast media, the users of the new media play more engaged role. They are no longer passive information receivers like the audience of TV programs (Livingstone, 1999). Instead, with this common social media platform, they can leave their own viewpoints, exchange them with other viewers and also the film-maker. By reposting and commenting on the film they feel much more involved and become the co-agencies of the communication and distribution process.

7.2 Celebrity Effect of Chai Jing

Chai Jing was a famous investigative journalist and an anchor who had hosted several different journalism programs of CCTV for more than ten years before she quit her job in 2014. She has conducted and reported investigations on many crucial issues. She is well known and respected because of her direct and get-to-point interview techniques and in-depth and critical reporting style. Some of her investigation projects such as SARS (Suspected Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, out-broke in

2003), Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008 and Coal Mineral investigations shape and consolidate her figure as a responsible journalist. She is also an author of a well-sold autobiography in 2012, *Insight*. In short, Chai is a celebrated figure in China.

According to Bourdieu (1994,) the **symbolic capital** means the resources available to an individual on the basis of honor, prestige or recognition, which values him/her under certain circumstance. Chai apparently generated her symbolic capital through the accumulated reputation and popularity from her previous career as a well-known CCTV journalist and anchor. The symbolic capital that Chai pertained contributed to the vast diffusion of the film in several aspects. Her identify of once being a famous CCTV journalist and hostess actually benefited the production of *Dome* in almost all the processes, from the material-collecting, film-making and the distribution eventually, although Chai emphasized her personal incentive of doing the investigation and that the film was self-funded.

First, as a noted former CCTV journalist, her ability to access data was extraordinary, comparing to average journalist, which led to many speculations that she might have got supports from MEP. Apart from the plenty of figures and reports from the authoritative institutions, certain data sources or people to whom she conducted interviews seem harder or even inaccessible to an ordinary independent journalist. Yet Chai succeeded in collecting these first-hand materials, which contributed to develop the credibility of such a complex investigation regarding a topic with both scientific and social aspects.

Second, as a notable figure in the field of media, Chai gathered a group of people with expertise working as the production team of the film. They either worked as her colleagues in CCTV projects or were willing to offer their ideas as personal friends. *Dome* was commonly appraised of its aesthetics and production although there were different opinions to some of its arguments and data cited, which is assumed as the contribution of the team members gathered by Chai's social network.

The celebrity effect influenced the film's distribution as well. At the beginning phase of the communicative event, Chai's reputation aroused the public's interests to watch the film when they heard that Chai Jing had done something new again, but independently this time. In addition, the endorsement of Chai's celebrity friends, who each have plenty of fans, accelerated the distribution of the film when they praised and reposted it in their own social networks (Gardner, 2015; Yang, 2016).

7.3 Social Context and Timing

The overwhelming air pollution has become severe and personal to average citizens in a growing area in China. More and more people have to face the problem of constant coughs, the visits to hospitals, no-school days, face masks, and the public has been expecting there would be something inspiring happens to change the situation. Just like what Gardner commented in The New York Times, “Under the Dome found a ready audience in China” (2015). The emergence of Dome provided them a channel to vent their feelings of concern, anxiety and dissatisfaction about the current situation by reposting and commenting on it.

The release timing of Dome is also seen as a key factor in its popularity. It was released online just six days before the opening of the annual conference of National People’s Congress (NPC) (China’s parliament), when it was a political sensitive moment and hot topics would attract spotlight from the public. Dome’s release in this time clearly attracted enough attention from both the general public and the state authorities and different stakeholders utilised it to make their own sounds. For instance, the new Chinese Environment Minister commented and praised Dome, which seems like a resonance to its appeal that MEP needs to be empowered in this battle against smog; netizens reposted and commented in social media to express their concerns and dissatisfaction to the current situation, which caused the viral distribution of the video.

8 Discussion

As I have analyzed above, *Under the Dome* is a documentary based on the conducting approaches of investigative journalism but narrated from an individual perspective. This personalized style is quite innovative and yet controversial. The supporters acknowledge the function of this style in renovating the perception of the public about documentary in serious topic, and promoting the diffusion of the video; On the other side, the involvement of personal emotions in such a documentary featured investigative journalism also drew strong criticism in later review articles and online debate. For example, another well-known journalist, Lvqiu Luwei, implied in her article that Chai intended to arouse public sympathy and sentiment on purpose by telling personal story (Lv, 2015). This approach, Luwei argued, stands in contrast to one of the key norms of journalism, namely objectivity, which aims at presenting the “fact” without involving the reporter’s opinions and values but leaving it to the audience for their own interpretation.

Journalism is commonly recognized as a trustworthy source of information by the public due to its doctrines of objectivity, professionalism and truth seeking (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). However, traditional journalism is often presented in a way as an insider’s game, which drives average people away just as spectators and leaves no room for them to be involved too much in the public discourse (Daniel, 2002). Thus how to foster engagement of the citizens in public affairs and create effective communication between journalism products and the public would be a challenge for journalists. Rhetorics, as one of the classical communicative theory, suggests an ethical system of public discourse, because it emphasizes more on the engagement of the information receivers through appeals to the information sender’s character, the receivers’ emotions and stands, and to the logic of the argument. Just as Daniel S.L.’s proposal in his study (2002): both journalism and rhetoric play essential roles in forming public discourse and opinion. If the practitioners could manage to combine the advantages of each theory and practice, they could empower the effectiveness of the communication.

As a documentary combined with the styles of personal speech and investigative journalism, *Dome* actually leaves some questions worthwhile for us to consider: Dealing with a complex and controversial environmental issue such as air pollution or climate change, how to present the issue and make the presentation trustworthy? The genre of documentary or investigative journalism seems to function well in shaping the credibility of the reporting

in terms of their fact-based characteristics and thus raise the veracity of the event reported, but in what ways can this kind of films be attractive and engage audience not only as passive viewers but as active participants? And in what ways can these communication events function as a medium or platform where public deliberation would happen, just like the unprecedented online debate enacted by Dome?

9 Conclusion

From the perspective of communication discipline, *Dome* makes a successful communication event as the consequence of collaboration of many relevant factors including information sender (the film-maker Chai Jing), distribution channel (new media), information receiver (the audience) and various communicative strategies. My study focuses on examining the rhetorical design of *Dome* and seeing what rhetorical approaches are employed in the film and eventually function positively to its viral diffusion. Following questions are taken into careful considerations: What are the main rhetorical approaches employed in *Dome*? How does Chai present her investigation of smog and raise appeals? How have these rhetorical strategies helped in attracting the viewers, conveying information, building the understanding and recognition for them, and even moving and affecting them?

Based on my study, a series of rhetorical strategies have been implemented in *Dome* to reach its communicative goal: broad spread and influence in the society. In general, *Dome* exhibits the smog issue in a mode of incorporation of personal perspective and investigative journalism, in an effort to attract and engage more people on the one hand, and persuade them with credible appeals on the other.

Given the complexity and seriousness of the topic – air pollution in China - Chai draws on the approaches of deep investigation by presenting videos and audios of onsite probes and interviews she conducted, and data, documents she collected from authoritative institutions. Through all these convincing visual material, Chai not only illustrates the smog situation and frames the problem as one need to be dealt with by taking prompt actions by both the policy-makers and the public, but also shapes *Dome* as a trustworthy information source and enhances the persuasiveness of its appeals. On the other hand, the applications of TED talk style and the discourse of individual perspective develop the identification of Chai and allow Chai align her own subjectivity with that of her audience, which solves the problem of traditional mode of communication where the audience normally are not engaged too much. Instead, *Dome*'s viewers are aroused emotionally and function actively and notably as one of the key parts of the wild diffusion process.

To sum up, I think Chai takes a very good advantage of her dual identities, the well-known one as a journalist and the emphasized one as an average citizen, in designing the rhetorical framework of *Dome*. *Dome*'s rhetoric

embodies the combination of the discourses of these two identities, and functions successfully in engaging and persuading the audience, which eventually contributes to its viral diffusion and long-last influence.

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