

Reporting the Fleet: News Writing of British Naval Reviews and the Construction of Imperial Identity Frameworks, 1773–1914

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Abstract

Framing Analysis theory posits that news writing functions as an ideological practice, jointly steered by power structures and media institutions within specific historical contexts, which systematically shapes collective cognition and directs identity formation. From 1773 to 1914, the news writing of British naval reviews constituted a pivotal site for the dynamic construction of imperial identity ideology. During this period, the dominant narrative framework underwent three significant structural transformations: evolving from an emphasis on “Monarchical Supremacy”, progressing to a discourse of “Composite Superiority”, and ultimately culminating in the paradigm of “Home Defence”. This diachronic evolution of identity narratives within naval review reportage demonstrates that the public press acted not as a passive recorder, but as an active Frame-Setter and Arbitrator of Meaning, deeply engaged in the production of the British Empire’s official ideology. Through the continuous processes of defining salient issues, attributing causality, and assigning moral and political value, this body of news writing substantially moulded the public’s overarching cognitive map and affective allegiance towards imperial rule. Consequently, it facilitated the establishment of a flexible mechanism for producing imperial identity—a mechanism characterised by its capacity for constant adaptation, strategic recalibration, and discursive regeneration in direct response to shifting geopolitical pressures and internal societal demands.

Keywords

naval review, British Empire, news writing, imperial identity

1. Introduction

The American sociologist Erving Goffman posited that news reporting does not merely “Reflect reality”; rather, through selecting, emphasizing, excluding, and reorganising specific elements, it actively “Constructs” particular “Frames” regarding events, issues, or groups, thereby influencing public understanding and cognition [1]. This insight profoundly exposes the essence of narrative frame construction within news writing—namely, relying upon strategies of selective representation, hierarchical salience, and meaningful association to structurally encode complex facts, thereby generating cognitive units endowed with specific interpretive orientations and value premises. Applying this theoretical perspective to a diachronic analysis of British naval review reportage between 1773 and 1914 effectively reveals the structural connection between the practices of public media reportage and the construction of a unified ideology for the British Empire.

Across these long decades, the British government convened thirty-two naval reviews at the Spithead, southwest of the Isle of Wight [2]. Through selective media representation of ceremonial elements, meaningful reorganisation of narrative logic, and strategic direction of the public agenda, this military ritual was progressively forged into a crucial framing arena for the construction and dissemination of imperial identity consciousness. The diachronic mutation of imperial identity narrative frameworks within naval review reportage not only reflected the distinct historical trajectory of the British Empire itself, but also, by reshaping the symbolic boundaries of collective social cognition, profoundly affected the performative foundations of imperial legitimacy and the precise orientation of its ideology.

2. Literature Review

As one of the core queries within the historiography of the British Empire, the construction of imperial identity through naval reviews has consistently attracted scholarly attention. Scholars represented by Jan Rüger and Charles V. Reed, adopting a metropolitan British perspective, have dissected the interplay between ritual and power at the level of macro-political culture. They argue that the success of naval reviews in reinforcing imperial identity marked the transformation of theatrical performance into a defining hallmark of the nineteenth-century “Popular Monarchy”, through which the monarch was converted into a symbol of the British Empire, consolidating internal cohesion through ceremonial display [3]. Conversely, scholars such as Daniel Owen Spence and Nicholas A. Lambert, writing from the perspective of ceremonial reception in the overseas dependencies, emphasize that the active participation of colonial representatives in naval reviews highlighted their special bond with British Empire. The enthusiastic reception of these rituals by colonial populations reflected an attempt to reconcile imperial identity with emerging local nationalisms [4]. Other historians, including Steve Dunn and Linda Colley, have focused on the specific roles played by the monarch within these ceremonies to interpret the mechanisms governing the construction and operation of British imperial identity. They point out that as the primary locus of imperial patriotic sentiment and the nominal commander-in-chief of the Empire armed forces, the monarch remained the core anchor through which the naval review forged imperial identity [5].

3. Methodology and Findings

Although existing scholarship has yielded substantial insights into British naval reviews and the construction of imperial identity, most works remain confined either to empirical reconstructions of specific historical episodes or to single-dimensional political or social analyses. There remains a lack of systematic, theoretical examination regarding the mechanisms of generation, competition, and transition among imperial identity narrative frameworks within news writing, as well as their underlying ideological functions. Addressing this lacuna, this article utilizes news reports of naval reviews published in British imperial public media between 1773 and 1914 as its primary source material. Employing “Frame Analysis” theory, it systematically examines the evolutionary trajectory and operational logic of British imperial identity narrative frameworks. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate the systemic role assumed by the mass media in the continuous shaping of imperial identity, reveal the evolutionary pattern of naval review reportage as a flexible identity mechanism, and thereby enrich our understanding of the ritualistic mechanisms that shape modern state-community discourses.

4. Early Naval Reviews and the Narrative Framework of Monarchical Supremacy (1773–1852)

A prerequisite for constructing a unified narrative framework is the process of “Frame Bridging”—linking discrete cognitive elements under a specific issue to form a logically coherent narrative whole, thereby guiding public understanding and alignment [6]. Following the 1770s, confronted with the crisis of imperial identity provoked by the American War of Independence, traditional symbols of monarchical authority urgently required integration with the public’s mounting anxieties over national defence. Because the naval review simultaneously embodied monarchical grandeur and the display of national martial might, it emerged as the primary vehicle for achieving this bridging. From 1773 onwards, through the selective representation of ceremonial spectacle, the iterative enhancement of the monarch’s majestic image, and the seamless weaving of tableau depicting uniform loyalty across metropole and colonies, the press successfully remoulded the King

into the central symbol and emotional linchpin of imperial identity. In doing so, it systematically constructed a narrative framework of imperial identity anchored upon “Monarchical Supremacy”.

Since the seventeenth century, British monarchs had endeavoured to achieve an organic bridge between the assertion of royal authority and the construction of national identity, for which the naval review served as the ideal medium. During the Stuart era, by controlling naval personnel and bestowing royal ciphers upon warships, the Crown constructed a symbiotic “Monarchy–Sea Power” system at the symbolic level, transforming the Navy into a mobile performative vehicle of royal authority. Consequently, the naval review was pre-anchored, in both institutional and symbolic dimensions, as a pivotal ceremonial space connecting the monarch with the national community [7]. The Newsreport coverage in the early-to-mid eighteenth century consistently sustained and reinforced this connective framework. On 27 May 1729, *The Daily Journal*, reporting on the King’s inspection of the fleet, placed heavy emphasis on the lavish reception he received while residing at the estate of the Earl of Scarborough, thereby highlighting monarch’s exalted position within the kingdom’s political order. On 9 April 1753, *The Daily Advertiser* further fortified the King’s image as the supreme commander of the armed forces by highlighting the dutiful posture of naval officers and seamen during the review [8]. The repeated emphasis and scenic re-creation of the monarch’s dominant position and authoritative stature in these inspection rituals imperceptibly built up a cognitive landscape of the King as the paramount national symbol, laying an essential intellectual foundation for the emergence of the early “Monarchical Supremacy” narrative framework [9].

Subsequently, with the sudden onset of the imperial identity crisis triggered by the American Independence Crisis in 1760s, this early narrative framework acquired a historical opportunity for rapid development and reinforcement [10]. Under the pressure of crisis, widespread security anxieties within British society birthed a collective expectation that the monarch should fulfill his function as the ultimate guarantor of imperial defence. Mirroring this collective psyche, British newspapers between May and June 1773 actively transformed the naval review into a public issue capable of synthesizing social defence concerns by printing “Letters to the Editor”, thereby achieving a re-bridging of monarchical authority and imperial identity. On 22 May, a letter published in *Public Advertiser* pointed out that, “If a Fleet was equipping for immediate service, a Royal visit would be highly proper to spur on the Artificers in forwarding their work, and to raise a fire in the breasts of the nation, and inspire the seamen with zeal for the war [11].” On 10 June, the same paper again called upon the King immediately commence the naval review to “Once more raise the name of England in the world, by unchaining the British lion, and give him leave to thunder on his enemies”, directly linking the monarch’s ceremonial initiative with the imperatives of national security [12]. This series of press maneuvers represented a strategic adaptation and reinforcement of the bridging mechanism between monarchical authority and imperial identity. By steering popular demands into the public agenda, the British press subtly tied the ceremonial display of royal authority to the urgent task of revitalising imperial defense. The King’s role as the guardian of imperial security was thus highlighted and clarified as never before, achieving a thematic focus and emotional intensification of the “Monarchical Supremacy” narrative framework in public cognition.

Responding to the social security demands amplified by the press, British authorities from May 1773 onwards actively exploited the power of the public media in agenda-setting. By guiding reportage along multiple dimensions, they systematically bridged general anxieties regarding national defence with public expectations of royal responsibility, thereby expanding the “Monarchical Supremacy” narrative framework in practice [13]. This process manifested through coordinated adjustments across three distinct levels of media coverage: reporting mechanisms, narrative objectives, and emotional construction.

First, the reporting mechanism underwent a crucial transition from retrospective record to prospective forecast. Prior to 1773, reportage was largely limited to brief post-event summaries. However, a full month before the 1773 naval review, *General Evening Post* informed its readers on 29 May that, “Saturday last three of the Royal yachts were ordered to be got in readiness immediately, in order to go round to Spithead, to wait his Majesty’s arrival at Portsmouth. It is supposed on his Majesty’s review of the grand fleet”. Given the British authorities’ heightened vigilance and control over public media in the wake of the “Wilkes Affair¹”, the publication of a report explicitly announcing the King’s intention to leverage naval rituals for “Naval

¹ In June 1762, John Wilkes founded *The North Briton*, repeatedly attacking government and even King George III himself. Offended, George III ordered Wilkes’ arrest on April 30, 1763, and imprisoned him in the Tower of London. Although Wilkes was later released, he was forced into exile and imprisoned again, remaining in custody until 1770.

Promotion” indicates that news writing had been integrated into the official apparatus of identity production [14]. Thereafter, predictive mechanisms continuously fortified the public nature and precision of naval review reporting. On 17 June 1773, *London Evening Post* explicitly noted that the review will “set out early on Tuesday [15]”. For the first time prior to the official commencement of the ceremony, the exact date was communicated to the public, transforming the naval review from a closed court function into a “Grand Public Spectacle” in which the public could prospectively participate. This forward-looking mechanism effectively expanded the temporal dimension of the ritual from a closed “Present Completion” into an open “Future Expectation”, cultivating the necessary public attention and emotional readiness for constructing a monarch-centric narrative framework.

Second, the reporting objective deepened from information transmission to participatory mobilization. On 4 June 1773, *Morning Chronicle* first disclosed that the flags of renowned admirals, such as Lord George Edgcumbe, would be raised at the review site. By highlighting military figures with high public resonance, the narrative pre-planted symbols of “Heroic Presence”, evoking public associations of honour and emotional investment [16]. Subsequently, *London Evening Post* emphasized on 5 June that the brother of Fletcher Norton, the Speaker of the House of Commons who was widely esteemed by London citizens, was expected to steer the royal yacht. By weaving familial ties into the narrative, the press bridged the psychological distance between the public and courtly activities [17]. By 21 June, *Daily Advertiser* published a complete list of principal officers, the order of events, and the King’s precise itinerary, enabling the public to rehearse the entire proceedings in their imagination. This meticulous pre-event disclosure allowed the public to access inside information through the media, transforming them into potential participants rather than distant onlookers, thereby constructing a sense of ceremonial complicity [18].

Building upon this successfully cultivated public anticipation, the authorities used the media to propel this sense of participation from the cognitive realm into physical action, converting the media guidance of imperial identity into tangible mobilization. Although *Morning Chronicle* claimed on 7 June 1773 that the King intended to maintain the “Private and Unceremonious” of the review, this actually generated narrative tension for the subsequent “Public Invitation” [19]. Three days later, *Public Ledger* ran advertisements explicitly “Inform the Public who may be delirious of seeing the review of the fleet at Spithead” to book passenger vessel services to view the spectacle, effectively issuing a call for physical participation under the guise of commercial information [20]. On 25 June 1773, *Daily Advertiser* noted that the King expressed “Great Satisfaction” with the public attention, almost explicitly signaling his encouragement of popular attendance [21]. This series of seemingly disparate yet aligned reports jointly constructed a narrative framework that encouraged public presence. Guided by this framework, vast numbers of metropolitan and colonial subjects arrived at Portsmouth in advance [22]. Consequently, naval review news writing successfully leapt from creating a public opinion atmosphere to facilitating physical presence, allowing the King’s symbolic status as the core of imperial identity to receive bodily witness from his subjects.

Third, the emotional construction achieved a leap from the assertion of authority to emotional resonance. During the 1773 Naval review, press strove to fashion a “Monarch–Subject” emotional community, constructing a political tableau of reciprocal reinforcement between royal benevolence and popular loyalty. Within the metropole, newspapers emphasized the dramatic interaction between royal grace and subject devotion. On 28 June 1773, *Hampshire Chronicle* adopted a bridging narrative strategy: it first recounted George I’s benevolent acts during the 1722 naval review—distributing alms to the poor and pardoning prisoners—and the joyous and loyal enthusiasm with which the populace welcomed him; then, via an editorial note, it established a historical link between George III and his grandfather, forging a continuous genealogy of “Benevolent Rule–Popular Affection” [23]. This aimed to demonstrate that loyalty to the sovereign was an enduring emotional constant in history. On 10 July, *London Evening Post* focused on the immediate emotional scene, highlighting the “Joyful Cheers and Astonishingly Satisfactory” enthusiasm that erupted among the crowd as George III inspected the ships. The report further asserted that the profound respect shown by the inhabitants of Portsmouth would prompt the King “plainly perceived in all his subjects and seeing their King engaged in so noble asphere” [24]. Such reports refashioned the monarch into a tangible repository of sentiment capable of perceiving and responding to popular will, portraying the populace’s passion as the natural outcome of this wholesome interaction.

In the North American colonies, this narrative framework was systematically transplanted and expanded to construct a transatlantic map of loyalty. Loyalist newspapers, epitomised by *New-Hampshire Gazette* and

Historical Chronicle, highlighted the journey of colonial elites across the ocean to attend the ceremony, casting it as the ultimate expression of allegiance. In its 6 August issue, the paper detailed the extraordinary joy among the upper echelons of North America and noted several colonial officials who crossed the Atlantic with their families, thereby demonstrating colonial devotion to the Empire [25]. An even more strategic narrative emerged from publishing first-person accounts of ordinary colonists. John Wickes, a colonial resident, detailed his experience attending the spectacle with his daughter in *Thomas' Boston Journal*, praising the 1773 naval review as a "Splendid Aquatic Performance" prepared by the King for all his subjects and the most magnificent sight he had ever witnessed [26]. From a populist perspective and with rich emotion, this provided a compelling testimonial of identity, binding imperial allegiance to personal wonder and pride. Through continuous emotional echoes between metropolitan and colonial reports, scattered individual ceremonial experiences were integrated into a unified, emotionally charged narrative domain. Media construction of these visualizable emotional symbols successfully transformed "Monarchical Supremacy" from a political discourse into a practice of emotional mobilization across the Empire.

Although the "Monarchical Supremacy" framework constructed by the 1773 naval review news writing ultimately failed to avert American independence, the symbolic bridge it established between royal authority and imperial identity was continuously consolidated and institutionalised thereafter. Firstly, within the domestic context, mass media sustained the monarch's status as the core symbol of imperial identity through multi-dimensional narrative strategies. In November 1773, a pocket educational pamphlet for women published in Hampshire placed an engraving of George III reviewing the fleet in the primary position, transforming the royal image into a visual cue for female imperial identity [27]. During the 1778 naval review, the press depicted local aristocrats, gentry, and colonial elites tightly surrounding the King, describing the spectacle as an event which be "Most glorious and animating to a Briton", thereby emphasizing internal unity [28]. Reports surrounding the 1781 naval review explicitly stated that the King's inspection of the Navy was "not more new than glorious, and cannot fail to stimulating our officers and crews to the most heroic achievements", binding royal prerogative to imperial glory [29]. Between 1790 and 1791, press reports asserted that the fundamental purpose of the review was to allow "The Royal Eye" to behold an unprecedentedly grand fleet, elevating the monarch from a mere presider to the ultimate endower of ceremonial meaning [30]. During the 1797 naval review, media explicitly attributed naval victories to the King's sagacious leadership, achieving a symbolic fusion of monarch, navy, and empire [31]. Secondly, this framework expanded geographically and audience-wise through colonial newspaper networks. On 19 October 1789, Canada's *Quebec Herald* reported in detail on George III's reception by citizens and soldiers at the Plymouth review [32]. Meanwhile, *Royal Gazette*, and *Miscellany of the Island of Saint John* highlighted on 21 October 1791 that the King personally visited the port to inspect the fleet to boost naval morale, aiming to reinforce the monarch as the common focus of loyalty in a colonial context [33]. The repeated appearance and cross-regional dissemination of such reports anchored the logical consistency of this narrative framework, elevating it into a universal discourse of identity across the British Empire [34]. By the early nineteenth century, the "Monarchical Supremacy" framework had evolved from an emergency strategy into a stable, self-reproducing ideological mechanism, providing soft-power support for the maintenance of the imperial community.

5. Victorian Naval Reviews and the Narrative Framework of Composite Superiority (1853–1902)

The stability of a narrative framework is not permanent. As historical contexts and social practices shift, the explanatory power of an existing framework gradually diminishes, necessitating a "Frame Transformation" through "Keying Way" [35]. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the British Empire confronted new challenges: the erosion of its absolute naval dominance and rising centrifugal tendencies within its colonies. The established narrative framework proved increasingly inadequate for explaining complex realities and unifying a diverse empire. To reconstruct imperial identity, British officials and the public press jointly drove a narrative transformation, refashioning the naval review into a performative platform for the Empire's comprehensive supremacy. They systematically constructed a new narrative framework of "Composite Superiority"—anchored upon the pillars of "Strong Navy and Powerful Nation", "Technological Leadership", and "Sharing of Imperial Glory"—to provide a political discourse suitable for global Victorian rule.

The root of this frame transformation lay in the fact that the internal and external challenges faced by the Victorian Empire breached the explanatory boundaries of the old framework. With the diffusion of the First

Industrial Revolution, continental powers, led by France, began rapidly catching up in naval development. In September 1850, the warship *Le Napoléon* entered service in the French Navy as the world's first purpose-built steam line-of-battle ship, significantly undermining Britain's traditional naval edge. To support such deployments, the French government had been expanding its naval base at Cherbourg since the mid-1840s, directly threatening British command of the English Channel [36]. In October 1850, France held a massive naval review less than 25 nautical miles from the English coast, widely interpreted by international opinion as a direct threat and show of force [37].

Faced with this crisis, the "Monarchical Supremacy" framework suffered a decline in efficacy. On 20 August 1853, *Punch* published an article lambasting the increasingly frequent and lavish reviews presided over by the Crown as unrestrained squandering of taxpayers' wealth, deriding them as a "Joy and the Uproar" [38]. Members of the public interviewed by American journalists openly criticized the government and royal family for indulging in grand spectacles while ignoring genuine national defence needs [39]. This shift in public sentiment marked a rapid loss of appeal for the old framework, exposing a rift between its explanatory logic and the public's expectation of tangible security.

To rebuild legitimacy, British authorities collaborated with the media from the 1850s onwards to drive a strategic narrative transformation, injecting new values through "Keying" rebuild. In this process, the discourse of "Technological Leadership" was forged as the primary indicator and cornerstone of the new framework. During preparations for the 1856 naval review, *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle* reported that the Admiralty required all steamships to burn high-quality Welsh coal to prevent inferior smoke from ruining the spectacle. This not only signalled the dominance of steamships in the ritual, but also tightly bound the quality of British industrial raw materials to the Navy's image of technological leadership, constructing a coupled theory of imperial superiority in the public mind [40]. Subsequently, *Punch* quoted Lord Hardwick's talk on 19 April emphasizing that, "At the grand naval review, British fleet will do something more with the new vessels". By 8 May, *Evening Star* also published a comprehensive list of participating steamships, complete with tonnage, horsepower, and armament specifications [41]. These reports, combining official directives, political declarations, and technical data, aimed to empirically demonstrate Britain's industrial and technological supremacy. As *John Bull* noted, the naval review was no longer merely an occasion to display naval power, but a "most valuable display of the progress the British Government has made in securing the efficiency of the fleet" [42]. Science and technology were converted into symbolic capital, rendering "Technological Leadership" a vital source of national pride and laying the foundation for the broader "Composite Superiority" framework [43].

From the perspective of social reception, this narrative successfully bound technological progress to imperial strength and public confidence. A spectator at the 1853 naval review wrote that if Horatio Nelson were to witness the scene, he would be astonished that "naval tasks that once required two days can now be accomplished in thirty minutes" [44]. *London Globe* asserted: "The might of England on her own element was never so conspicuously proved". Such coverage transformed deep-seated anxieties over lost dominance into collective pride in industrial capacity [45]. Officially, this framework became institutionalised; during preparations for the 1887 Golden Jubilee review, numerous MPs demanded that the Admiralty permit journalists to report from aboard warships throughout the event to bolster public imperial consciousness [46].

However, by the 1870s, as centrifugal tendencies intensified in major colonies and self-governing dominions, a standalone "Technological Leadership" narrative exposed its limitations. The intellectual roots of this crisis traced back to mid-nineteenth-century colonial separatism. Between the 1840s and 1870s, figures such as Sir George Cornewall Lewis, Liberal leader William Gladstone, and Under-Secretary for the Colonies Frederic Rogers argued that colonies yielded little profit while exposing British Empire to "Great Contingent Dangers" [47]. To extricate the metropole from such "Dangers", they argued that the Empire must deliberately recognize the legitimacy of independence for those dependencies suited for it, and through political arrangements, prepare those not yet ready for self-governance [48]. Influenced by these ideas, movements for greater autonomy or independence gathered momentum in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and India between the 1870s and 1890s [49]. The existing narrative failed to convey how imperial rule directly benefited individual and local destinies, resulting in a severe fracture between official discourse and lived experience [50]. To restore narrative appeal, British authorities and the media strategically expanded the framework from the 1890s by incorporating two new dimensions: "Strong Navy and Powerful Nation" and "Sharing of Imperial Glory", forming a comprehensive "Composite Superiority" framework.

This fully articulated framework received its ultimate showcase during the 1897 Diamond Jubilee Naval Review. In the dimension of “Strong Navy and Powerful Nation”, media reports framed the sheer scale of the fleet as indisputable visual proof of imperial power. On 18 May 1897, *The Friend of India* emphasized that although all major world powers sent fleets, the British fleet held absolute dominance with “21 battleships and 166 warships of various classes”, translating abstract sea power into direct visual contrast [51]. *The Times*, in a special report on 26 May regarding the ballet *Victoria and Merrie England*, depicted sailors enacting naval review movements on stage while shouting “God Save the Queen”, binding military force to monarchical devotion [52].

In the dimension of “Technological Leadership”, technology was integrated with military dominance. On 3 July, *Sporting Gazette* highlighted the firepower of six first-class battleships, including HMS Prince George, while describing the illuminated fleet at night, noting that its brilliance “the waters of the Solent appearing to be ablaze” [53]. On 30 June 1897, *New Zealand's Ohinemuri Gazette* remarked that Britain's ability to assemble 165 modern warships and 50,000 personnel while maintaining global commitments proved “the unchallengeable nature of British maritime hegemony” [54].

In the critical dimension of “Sharing of Imperial Glory”, the media fostered a cross-regional sense of shared pride derived from royal favor. On 26 June 1897, *Auckland Star* reported that Queen Victoria had personally ordered free spectator vessels and allowances for colonial troops, with the Prince of Wales presenting special commemorative medals. Although this policy originated from the Admiralty, framing it as a direct royal command deliberately forged an emotional connection between the monarch and the colonies [55]. On 29 June, *The Friend of India* noted that while the Queen “is unable to acknowledge individually the great numbers of telegrams from all parts of the Empire, Her Majesty expresses, through the Press, her sincere thanks for these touching proofs of loyalty and attention”, conveying that all imperial subjects shared an equal status under the Crown [56].

Between 26 June and 1 July, colonial newspapers such as *New Zealand Mail*, *Ashburton Guardian*, and *Taranaki Herald* extensively covered Queen Victoria receiving colonial representatives and inviting them to official banquets. This treatment was framed as an equal privilege transcending race and class, integrating colonial representatives into an imperial community [57]. Spectators from overseas dependencies experienced a profound sense of pride, realizing that the metropole possessed sufficient strength to protect the Empire [58]. A colonial representative even admitted that, “We have thought the old country effete and feeling the effects of age and decay. We believed that she must rely for the energy and enterprise to preserve her vast empire upon the youth and vigor of the colonies. But this naval review has entirely changed our opinions. These people at home are up to date and can take care of themselves and protect us without our help, though we are very willing to help [59].” As the editor of *Mr. Chamberlain's Speeches* noted, the warm welcome accorded to colonial leaders bore rich fruit, binding the dependencies tightly to the mother country during a critical period [60]. Through the interlocking dynamics of these multiple identity narratives, the sense of alignment and belonging toward the Empire among metropolitan and colonial populations witnessed a significant ascent following the 1897 naval Review. Shortly after the conclusion of the ceremony, popular poets passionately lauded that: “Here’s to Queen Victoria. Dressed in all her regalia. With one foot in Canada. And the other in Australia [61].” Mandell Creighton, the Bishop of London, similarly observed that, “The occasion expanded into a significant manifestation of imperial greatness, and of a fundamental unity of purpose, which came as a revelation to England and the Colonies alike, and awakened the respectful wonder of all Europe [62].” A more concrete, positive signal manifested within the reactions of the international financial markets. According to data compiled by the New York Stock Exchange, the United States had consistently led share prices prior to the review; however, on the eve of the pageant, its aggregate stock prices suffered a rapid decline, with the closing prices on the day hovering at a mere three-quarters of their theoretical optimum. In stark contrast, the London money market remained resilient, characterized by a booming trajectory of rapidly expanding loan volumes [63]. Fluctuations within financial markets routinely mirror shifts in market confidence, thereby serving as an index of public sentiment. The vivid contrast between the financial trajectories of Britain and the United States illuminated the profound, positive efficacy of framework of “Composite Superiority” in reconstructing imperial identity and fortifying national confidence.

Through integrating military power, technological leadership, and shared imperial glory, late nineteenth-century naval review reportage successfully constructed the ‘Composite Superiority’ framework. The vivid contrast between the financial trajectories of Britain and the United States during the 1897 Diamond Jubilee

illuminated the profound efficacy of this discourse in reconstructing imperial identity and fortifying national confidence. Yet, this grand narrative of expansive, self-assured hegemony contained underlying structural vulnerabilities, which were swiftly exposed as international relations deteriorated and naval rivalries escalated at the dawn of the twentieth century.

6. Pre-War Naval Reviews and the Narrative Framework of Home Defence (1903–1914)

As the global geopolitical equilibrium fractured, the expansive imperial optimism embodied in the “Composite Superiority” framework was forced to confront an acute crisis of existential security. When public lived experience conflicts with an existing narrative framework, “Frame Resonance” collapses, necessitating “Frame Alignment” to reconstruct consensus [64]. In the early twentieth century, escalating European geopolitical tensions and the Anglo-German naval arms race created a profound rift between British public anxiety over home survival and the “Composite Superiority” narrative. To restore ideological mobilization, British authorities and the media shifted the framework toward “Home Defence”.

In the early twentieth century, Imperial Germany’s naval expansion and challenge to Britain exerted fundamental deconstructive pressure upon the narrative framework of “Composite Superiority”. In 1898, German Reichstag passed the Naval Law (*Gesetz, betreffend die deutsche Flotte*), which explicitly stipulated the construction of a modern fleet comprising 19 battleships, 8 coastal defence ships, and 42 cruisers by 1903 [65]. To achieve this objective, the German government began providing its domestic shipbuilding industry with annual subsidies of no less than £80,000 from that year onwards—far exceeding the British government’s subsidies during the same period—thereby demonstrating its resolute determination to challenge British imperial maritime hegemony [66]. In March 1908, German Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz further proposed accelerating the construction rate of dreadnoughts to four per year and planned to build 21 capital ships prior to 1914, driving the naval arms race to a fever pitch [67]. Alongside this naval expansion, the German government also sought to reinforce its deterrence against Britain through open displays of naval power. Immediately following the conclusion of the 1898 British naval review, Germany dispatched a task force consisting of 16 battleships, 3 armoured cruisers, and numerous auxiliary vessels to undertake a strategic cruise along the line extending from the Azores to the Canary Islands [68]. Between 1911 and 1912, Kaiser Wilhelm II held successive large-scale naval reviews just 320 miles from Sheerness, a primary British naval base, and publicly demonstrated a posture of confrontation by participating in anti-British rallies and receiving popular cheers. At a symbolic level, this directly eroded the imperial prestige and authority constructed through British naval review news writing, representing a symbolic counter-offensive against the narrative framework of “Composite Superiority” [69].

Under the formidable challenge posed by Germany, British society fell into a “Naval Scare”, which cast profound doubt on the credibility of the established “Composite Superiority” narrative framework, causing its three primary narrative pillars to falter in succession [70]. During the 1902 British naval review, press outlets already noted that the public considered the current strength of the Imperial Navy to be far inferior to the Victorian era, thereby shaking the foundation of the “Strong Navy and Powerful Nation” narrative [71]. In 1906, critical voices further accused the government of attempting to use the naval review to generate “Utopian Hopes” among the populace while ignoring genuine diplomatic crises, reflecting a rapid decline in the efficacy of ceremonial identity discipline [72]. By the aftermath of the 1909 naval review, some letters to editors went so far as to openly protest that while the government expended over £40 million annually to maintain “The Greatest Life and Property Destroying Machine”, ordinary citizens “living in conditions in which civilisation is impossible, and which degrade them to the level of the beasts” [73]. This sharp contrast almost entirely dismantled the moral legitimacy and logical self-consistency of the “Technological Leadership” narrative, severely weakening the capacity of the “Composite Superiority” framework to evoke resonance.

Even more critically, accompanied by the continuous erosion of the resonance and appeal of the “Composite Superiority” narrative framework, a new wave of Imperial identity crisis spread rapidly toward the principal dominions and colonies. During the 1911 Wellington naval review in New Zealand, a reporter for *New Zealand Herald* observed an anomalous public reaction: “Although the review itself was a huge success.....the crowd exhibited a sad lack of enthusiasm. Not once during the whole two hours that we were present did they show any outward sign of appreciation-not even by a clapping of hands [74].” This phenomenon not only reflected the alienation of colonial populations from the ceremony itself, but also symbolized the substantive failure of

the “Sharing of Imperial Glory” in terms of emotional mobilization. When imperial strength could no longer be converted into cross-regional emotional resonance, and shared glory met with widespread detachment, the “Composite Superiority” narrative framework—anchored upon the triad of “Strong Navy and Powerful Nation—Technological Leadership—Sharing of Imperial Glory”—lost its reason for being, thereby paving the way for a thorough transition toward an identity narrative framework directed at the instinct for survival.

To address the new crisis precipitated by the explanatory failure of the “Composite Superiority” narrative framework, British officials and the media collaborated from 1911 onwards to conduct a systematic re-alignment of the naval review narrative framework. The core objective was to reconstruct the public’s cognitive focus, urgently contracting and re-anchoring the focus of imperial identity from the discourse of superiority concerning a comprehensive, global colonial empire onto the imminent issue of home survival. This process unfolded along two mutually reinforcing narrative dimensions:

Firstly, the ceremonial focus of the naval review underwent a fundamental restructuring from “Sharing of Imperial Glory” to “Verification of Combat Readiness”. Media strategies methodically stripped away the complex global symbols and cultural connotations present in older news writing, systematically reshaping the review into a public examination to test and proclaim the Navy’s immediate operational efficiency. On the eve of George V’s Coronation naval review in 1911, *Dundee Courier*, by detailing fleet scale, service age, and modern armaments, explicitly proclaimed Britain’s determination to maintain its maritime dominance, pointing out that it was precisely this fleet that safeguarded home security, open trade, and imperial stability. In doing so, it re-anchored the core ceremonial connotation of the review toward morale boosting and strategic deterrence, completing a utilitarian conversion toward “Home Defence” [75].

As the crisis deepened, the transition of the naval review narrative framework grew increasingly urgent and streamlined. On the eve of the 1912 naval review, *Gisborne Times* ran the headline “On The Eve of A Great Naval Crisis!”, emphasizing that British survival depended upon maintaining a fleet superior to all other nations, while elevating the naval race to a spiritual and moral plane as the ultimate test of the Empire’s “True Inner Character” [76]. Reports surrounding the July 1914 naval review set the final tone for this iteration of narrative transformation. In reports published between 20 and 21 July 1914, *The Times* directly used headlines such as “Naval Spectacle at Spithead” and “The Naval Might of Britain”, shifting the focus of reporting from “Review” to “Mobilization”. It particularly highlighted two operational elements: first, it emphasized that the Second and Third Reserve Fleets were reviewed alongside the active First Fleet, demonstrating Britain’s efficient mobilization capacity to transition over 200 vessels from low readiness to full combat status within days; second, it reported that the Naval Air Service immediately engaged in tactical exercises following the review, underscoring the live-combat training nature of the assembly. The report ultimately asserted that the fleet constituted the sole reliable force defending the British homeland against any threat [77]. By this point, the naval review had fully transformed in public discourse into an occasion for assessing home combat readiness and signaling external deterrence.

Secondly, the spatial framework of identity underwent a strategic contraction, generating an absolute priority narrative of “the Homeland is the Empire”, whereby the highly simplified logic that defending the homeland is defending the Empire became the core of the new narrative framework. On the eve of the 1905 Anglo-French naval review, *Gloucester Citizen* and *Aberdeen Journal* published a speech by then-Conservative Prime Minister Arthur James Balfour, which emphasized that, “The Home Defence is certainly the most important. If Home Defence be ill secured, The British Empire, though it may be a magnificent structure, rests on feet of clay, and we are perfectly useless for purposes of defence in far-off seas [78].” This content initiated the inward shift of public imperial identity. Subsequently, the official press release for the 1909 naval review further specified that “the fighting ships reviewed exclusively comprised vessels which are always fully manned and always in home water”, marking that the “Home Water” had attained overwhelming priority within the hierarchy of the new imperial identity narrative [79]. Under this framework, the role of the colonies and dominions was quietly and instrumentally reconstructed, downgraded from equal members sharing glory within an imperial community to strategic resources serving domestic defence.

To the eve of war in 1914, this new ceremonial narrative framework, centered absolutely on “Home Defence”, held a dominant position in naval review news reportage. On 16 July 1914, *Western Times* conveyed a clear signal to the public that the Navy was “fully prepared to defend the homeland” by emphasizing that nearly 500 major warships had completed a “test mobilization” in home waters [80]. However, while the media

went to great lengths to portray home defence as complete and solid, it maintained complete silence regarding the defence vacuums created in overseas imperial territories by the recall of warships. This narrative selective amnesia revealed that in the face of a survival crisis, home interests had completely superseded the holistic identity narrative of a global empire, with the public's imperial identity consciousness being highly simplified and urgently contracted into a single, exclusive survival mission: defending the homeland.

In summary, post-1911 naval review news writing successfully led the transformation of British public cognition and collective psychology on the eve of war by re-aligning the core of the imperial identity narrative framework from “Composite Superiority” to “Home Defence”. This narrative transition was not merely a direct reaction to German strategic pressure, but more importantly, a crucial ideological hub constructed by British authorities to achieve total social mobilization and sustain internal cohesion against the backdrop of the Empire's relative decline. It marked the irreversible shift of British imperial collective consciousness from the global confidence of the Victorian era to a wartime mindset focused entirely on self-preservation.

7. Conclusion

The evolution of the imperial identity narrative framework within British naval review news writing between 1773 and 1914 was, in essence, a century-and-a-half-long process of political negotiation and symbolic construction centered upon the concept of the 'imperial community' itself. During this period, the structural transformations of the dominant ceremonial identity narrative framework—shifting focus from “Monarchical Supremacy” to “Composite Superiority”, and ultimately to “Home Defence”—were by no means random stylistic shifts. Rather, they represented a strategic reorganization of social cognition conducted by the media and political elites in response to the core challenges confronting the British Empire at specific historical conjunctures. It was precisely the dual predicament of the American War of Independence crisis and external strategic encirclement that gave rise to the “Monarchical Supremacy” identity narrative framework with the monarch as its emotional linchpin; the emergence of Victorian global hegemony competition alongside internal centrifugal forces likewise drove the transition toward the “Composite Superiority” identity narrative framework; and the imminent existential threat of the early twentieth century ultimately resulted in the contraction, refocusing, and re-alignment of the “Home Defence” identity narrative framework. Throughout this process, the public media actively assumed the role of Frame-Setter, converting such news writing into a flexible and adaptable apparatus for the production of imperial ideology by selecting, emphasizing, and reorganizing symbolic elements of national identity within the naval reviews.

From a functional perspective, this mediated construction process demonstrated an internal adaptation mechanism within the British imperial identity narrative framework, driven by crisis elements. Whenever imperial identity encountered a shock, the guidance of public opinion carried out through naval review news reporting became a pivotal arena for executing crisis management and reshaping collective cognition. By introducing entirely new identity symbols and reconstructing their logical connection to the imperial community, the media effectively transformed public anxiety into a refocusing upon specific identity narrative frameworks, thereby sustaining the symbolic unity of the imperial structure. This also allowed media opinion guidance to gradually become institutionalized from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards as an indispensable soft mechanism within the governance system of the British Empire.

Examined from an instrumental perspective, the evolution of the imperial identity narrative framework within naval review news writing exhibited a clear gradient trajectory toward optimization of efficacy. From the single ceremonial identity narrative framework centered upon “Monarchical Supremacy” during the reign of George III, to the all-encompassing “Composite Superiority” identity narrative framework of the Victorian era, and finally to the highly focused “Home Defence” identity narrative framework on the eve of war, British imperial identity discourse underwent a narrative contraction from integrative construction to focused intensification. This simplification was not a regression, but rather a necessary strategy adopted to achieve rapid and widespread social mobilization as the threat of total war loomed. Operating with lower cognitive costs and heightened emotional resonance, it condensed imperial identity into a clear and urgent survival proposition, highlighting the strategic prioritization of communicative efficiency and mobilization efficacy within the production mechanism of British imperial ideology under crisis conditions.

As revealed by a long-term examination of the evolutionary trajectory of the imperial identity narrative framework within naval review news writing, it can be argued that the public media were not merely passive

chroniclers of the British Empire's rise and fall, but essential co-constructors of its official ideology. Through sustained framing practices, the media engaged deeply in forging imperial collective memory, rhetoric of governing legitimacy, and the delineation of public identity boundaries. That the naval review was elevated from a military ceremony into a core cultural vehicle of imperial identity was precisely the ultimate outcome of this continuous process of symbolic construction. Moreover, the contraction of the British imperial identity narrative framework in the early twentieth century constituted both an acknowledgment of the reality that its global dominance was faltering, and an augury of a profound ideological turning point in its historical destiny. Viewed from a broader perspective, this trajectory profoundly demonstrates that the maintenance of identity in a modern state relies not only on the effective functioning of its apparatus of violence and administrative organs, but equally on its capacity to construct a system of identity narrative frameworks capable of continually responding to changing circumstances and renewing itself.

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Funding

This research was funded by the Postgraduate Research & Practice Innovation Program of Jiangsu Province, “The Construction and Impact of Imperial Identity in the British Naval Review of 1897-1914” (KYCX25_0101).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project, and I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Professor Jinyuan, Liu, for his generous guidance and unwavering support throughout the development of this article. Without his careful comments, this article could not have taken its present form.

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