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## Exploring Innovations in Television News Reporting During the Pandemic: A Case Study of Guangdong Satellite TV' s “Evening News” Postprint

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### Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has posed severe challenges to conventional news communication paradigms, while simultaneously presenting opportunities for innovation and transformation in traditional television news reporting. When confronted with major emergencies, what adjustments should traditional mainstream media implement to effectively respond to public opinion? Upon entering the normalized stage of epidemic prevention and control, how can television news reporting maintain its authoritative advantage? This study examines Guangdong Satellite TV' s “Evening News” as a case study, investigating innovative initiatives across four dimensions: “structural transformation,” “topic selection adjustment,” “media convergence,” and “talent transition,” and conducts a summary and reflection.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

**Title:** Innovative Approaches to Television News Reporting During the Pandemic: A Case Study of Guangdong Satellite TV' s *Evening News*

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has posed severe challenges to conventional news communication methods while simultaneously providing opportunities for innovation and transformation in traditional television news reporting. When facing major emergencies, what adjustments should traditional mainstream media make to respond to public opinion? How can the authoritative advantages of television news be maintained after the pandemic prevention and

control enters a normalized stage? This paper examines Guangdong Satellite TV's *Evening News* as a case study, exploring innovative measures across four dimensions—“structural changes,” “topic selection adjustments,” “media convergence,” and “talent transformation”—and offers a summary and reflection.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; news reporting; communication methods; media convergence

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## Introduction

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, triggering a nationwide battle against the virus. During public health crises, hospitals serve as the “frontline” of the war, while media outlets assume responsibility for the “second battlefield” of pandemic response. Guangdong Satellite TV's *Evening News* program broke from its conventional format, rebranding as *Special Pandemic Prevention Report* during the outbreak and simulcasting across six channels within Guangdong Radio and Television Station to disseminate authoritative information and address public concerns. This proved particularly crucial in May 2021, when Guangzhou faced a second wave of infections and successfully cleared local cases within a month—an achievement to which effective news communication contributed significantly. When confronting major emergencies, what adjustments must traditional mainstream media make to manage public opinion? Can the “watchtower” function of authoritative news be sustained after entering the normalized pandemic prevention stage? Can diverse media presentations create new possibilities for television news communication? This study investigates these questions through the lens of *Evening News*, analyzing innovations in structural changes, topic selection, media convergence, and talent transformation.

### 1. Structural Changes to the Pandemic Special Program

The regular *Evening News* program was originally divided into two main segments: “Evening Focus” and “Guangdong Today.” After transforming into the *Special Pandemic Prevention Report*, the structure was reorganized into pandemic-specific topics for clearer information reception. The newly established segments were: “Pandemic Prevention in Progress,” “Frontline of Pandemic Prevention,” and “Pandemic Prevention Positivity.”

The “Frontline of Pandemic Prevention” segment focused on the frontlines of the

battle against the virus. On Chinese New Year's Eve 2020, Guangdong TV reporters Huang Jiali and Zang Mu accompanied the Guangdong medical team to Wuhan, filing over 50 vivid, compelling reports from the epicenter. Additionally, multiple reporting teams accessed the Guangdong Provincial (Municipal) Health Commission, designated hospitals, press conference venues, transportation hubs, and food markets to authentically reflect pandemic prevention conditions across Guangdong. The coverage addressed citizens' most pressing concerns, delivering practical service information.

The "Pandemic Prevention Positivity" segment showcased moving stories during the pandemic through news vignettes, allowing the public to feel the warmth of "ruthless virus, compassionate humanity." For example, the March 27, 2020 segment featured a story titled "Hearts and Hands Connected: Saluting the Heroes Who Rushed to Hubei's Aid," which reminded viewers of the hardships faced by medical workers.

*Guangdong Satellite TV Evening News—Special Pandemic Prevention Report* aired starting February 1, 2020, ranking among the top eight provincial satellite channels nationwide during its time slot, with a national audience reach of 4.9%, providing authoritative pandemic information to over 60 million viewers. Within Guangdong Province, this simulcast special report across six channels set a historical record for viewership of a single news program, with estimated provincial viewership exceeding ten million. [Figure 1: see original paper] and [Figure 2: see original paper] show the ratings statistics from CSM Media Research, illustrating the program's performance on its launch day (February 1, 2020). These data reveal two key points: first, *Evening News* special report's ratings on Guangdong Satellite TV increased by 2.9% compared to the previous day; second, in cross-program comparison that day, the *Special Pandemic Prevention Report* achieved the highest ratings and market share among all Guangdong Satellite TV's self-produced programs, excluding TV dramas and films. The launch day ratings demonstrate strong audience demand for traditional media's breaking news coverage during emergencies. Traditional mainstream media is often called society's "watchtower," bearing social responsibilities in modernizing national governance by guiding mainstream public opinion, promoting mainstream values, setting public agendas, and building social consensus. The pandemic special program's structural changes responded to these communication needs through combined reporting that delivered a synergistic effect greater than the sum of its parts.

## 2. Confronting Hot Topics Directly to Maintain Authoritative Advantage

Unlike other news genres, current affairs news topics are determined by their special nature, which derives from their importance. Selecting safe and authoritative subjects has traditionally ensured absolute reliability. However, technological development has fundamentally transformed the media landscape, making it impossible to ignore changes in media philosophy and audience needs.

According to Quest Mobile data ([Figure 3: see original paper]), China's mobile internet user base reached a historical peak of 1.164 billion in June 2021, a net increase of 9.62 million year-over-year. Moreover, over 50% of monthly active users across the entire network accessed news information online ([Figure 4: see original paper]), indicating a “near-universal demand with moderate usage.”

These shifts in information dissemination and reception impose new requirements on mainstream media's public opinion guidance. During the pandemic, increased social uncertainties, rumor propagation, and information overload on social platforms compelled mainstream media to rapidly innovate from form to content. If mainstream media remains silent, rumors will run rampant. Therefore, even when facing potentially risky topics, news organizations must actively fulfill their social responsibility, using comprehensive, timely, and professional reporting to debunk misinformation.

For example, on February 7, 2020, when Guangdong reported its first COVID-19 death—a case that deteriorated from initial symptoms to death in just five days, causing public panic—the *Special Pandemic Prevention Report* invited Li Mengfeng, President of Southern Medical University, for a studio interview. President Li analyzed the reasons for the rapid deterioration, alleviating public concerns while reemphasizing the importance of “maintaining safe distance” and “early detection and treatment,” guiding citizens toward calm and orderly behavior.

### 3. Practical Shifts in “Media Convergence” for Pandemic Special Programs

In recent years, news organizations from central to provincial levels have actively optimized news dissemination through “media convergence,” employing various high-tech tools in news broadcasting. These technologies have accelerated news production and dissemination speed and efficiency while producing more refined visuals and ensuring higher-quality source materials. However, the direction of media convergence shifted during pandemic special reports—equipment became less advanced and more modest.

In late May 2021, Guangzhou experienced sporadic local outbreaks due to imported cases, turning multiple areas in Guangdong into medium- and high-risk zones and plunging the province back into special pandemic prevention status. On June 3, Guangzhou's Fangcun area implemented closed management, isolating many residents at home, including media professionals. Guangdong Satellite TV news editor Dai Xi'an lived within the closed management area and, during his nearly month-long isolation, completed a series of interviews and Vlogs using only a mobile phone. These videos were broadcast simultaneously on the *Special Pandemic Prevention Report* and distributed through self-media platform accounts. Although the mobile phone footage had low resolution and unstable images due to handheld shooting, it provided Guangzhou citizens with first-hand information about food supply and testing conditions within the closed

area, preventing panic from spreading when no other reporters could enter.

As Friedrich Kittler noted in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, “Media determine our situation.” Media possess materiality and mediality; when serving as bridges connecting information sources and audiences, media complete the transmission but are often overlooked themselves. Yet media merit study, as their shifts reflect broader societal transformations. The transition from professional high-definition cameras to mobile phones demonstrates that people were experiencing extraordinary times, with the medium itself becoming part of the news content presentation.

Although broadcasting mobile phone footage directly on television screens was a special measure for extraordinary times, it clearly achieved effective communication. This innovation was passive in origin, but the *Evening News* team could transform passivity into proactivity, no longer deliberately pursuing “high-end” equipment. Different news topics could be presented through different media forms boldly.

“Media convergence” actually represents a “dissolution of media boundaries,” placing traditional and new media, large and small screens on equal footing. As long as content meets communication needs, no hierarchy exists between media platforms. This practice provides ideas for diversifying routine news reporting and creates conditions for material conversion between large and small screens.

#### **4. Talent Transformation: A New Development Trend from “Specialized” to “Comprehensive”**

In traditional media’s talent structure, program production has exhibited clear “fixed centralization” characteristics—centered on the producer, with chief editors, deputy editors, anchors, reporters, editors, and post-production staff each performing their own duties. News programs are also media products, and in the product refinement process, each production link has traditionally focused only on what they do best. This creative model has long been the default in traditional media because: (1) a fixed producer core better manages program style and news orientation; (2) everyone concentrates on their specialty without distraction; (3) clear responsibilities facilitate reward and punishment systems, ensuring program safety.

However, these former advantages have become the greatest obstacles to traditional media transformation. News communication methods have changed dramatically, and information consumption habits have been transformed by new technology. As Alvin Toffler stated in *The Third Wave*, “This is an era of fragmentation—fragmented information, fragmented audiences, fragmented media.” Facing this new wave, talent transformation is the most critical aspect of program transformation, requiring everyone to develop more comprehensive professional competencies. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this talent transformation process.

In May 2021, when Guangdong faced its second pandemic risk, the situation was more challenging than the previous year. To ensure the safety of all *Special Pandemic Prevention Report* staff and maintain normal broadcasting, the program team implemented an AB group work system during the special period, dividing all personnel into two groups that did not cross over, preventing entire team isolation if someone became infected. However, this arrangement created staffing shortages. To overcome this, chief editors took on additional responsibilities as lead writers and reviewers; anchors assumed news editing duties beyond voice-over and broadcasting; and post-production staff isolated in Fangcun stepped forward as frontline reporters. Everyone extended their capabilities beyond their primary specialties.

For news anchors specifically: previously, they had limited authority to modify scripts and relied on cues to understand broadcast procedures and precautions, making their work somewhat passive. However, the pandemic special program activated their initiative. With natural professional advantages in expression, anchors serving as chief editors could connect news leads more flexibly and arrange news layouts more narratively. To accommodate fragmented information consumption habits, as the program's anchor, when assuming chief editor responsibilities, I would break down in-depth thematic reports, replacing "long-form articles" with "short, fast content," using layered combinations of "news events + detailed narratives + expert commentary + news vignettes." This approach adapted to current audience viewing patterns while showcasing traditional media's advantage in producing in-depth content. When anchors returned to studio broadcasting, their understanding of other positions enabled more 默契 coordination and clearer expression of the program's stance and position.

Since implementing comprehensive talent development strategies, *Evening News* has shown significant ratings increases. For example, during the week of July 23-29, 2021, the program's average rating entered the national top six, marking its highest viewership since its 2019 launch. [Figure 5: see original paper] shows the ratings statistics for this period. The ratings improvement reflects that the shift from "specialized" to "comprehensive" development for news producers represents an unstoppable trend. News workers must plan and produce content from multiple perspectives—content creation, expression methods, and information delivery—to stand out in the all-media era.

## 5. Summary and Reflection

In recent years, traditional television media has faced persistent decline and difficult circumstances. The sudden pandemic in 2020 provided traditional media with an opportunity for transformation and upgrading. Mainstream news organizations across China upheld authoritative releases and positive propaganda. This paper traces the multiple reform measures implemented by Guangdong Satellite TV's *Evening News* during the pandemic, demonstrating traditional media professionals' value commitment, innovative courage, and breakthrough from predicaments.

### 5.1 Recognizing the Situation: Advantages Remain

Traditional media's accumulated credibility and authority were fully tested and affirmed during the pandemic coverage. Their value commitment ensured a clear cyberspace and stable public sentiment. From the initial chaos of online information to citizens waiting anxiously for official press conferences and searching for debunking columns in mainstream authoritative media, it is clear that during major public events, mainstream media remains the primary channel for the public to obtain authentic information. The advantages of mainstream media—"authoritative," "rigorous," and "in-depth"—are irreplaceable.

Additionally, traditional television media has accumulated extensive interview resources over the years. In *Evening News*'s special pandemic reports, daily interview guests included spokespersons from the Health Commission, hospital specialists, and frontline pandemic prevention workers. These guest resources represent a long-standing advantage that played a significant role in pandemic coverage. Traditional television news must not neglect one aspect for another during convergence transformation; it must recognize its own advantages and innovate based on them.

### 5.2 Possibilities for Television News Innovation in the Post-Pandemic Era

The preceding analysis of *Evening News* special programs examined innovations across four dimensions: structural changes, topic selection, media convergence, and talent transformation, detailing the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. However, all these attempts occurred against the backdrop of a major public health emergency. As pandemic prevention enters a normalized stage, public attention to this focal event will gradually diminish, and news coverage of people's daily production and life will resume. Can these special-period innovations transition to the post-pandemic normalized prevention stage?

Answering this question requires not just one or two weeks of ratings data but continuous trial and innovation over an extended period. The methods accumulated during the special pandemic programs must be applied to daily broadcasting: (1) flexibly adjusting daily news layouts based on different news events, boldly replacing original segment designs with the goal of maximizing information reach; (2) confronting hot topics directly in news selection, openly and transparently fulfilling television news media responsibilities; (3) abandoning sectarianism between media platforms, dissolving media boundaries, and treating each other as equal content producers and distributors; and (4) giving news workers broader space to demonstrate their abilities, activating everyone's subjective initiative to enrich news program presentation forms.

The pandemic posed severe challenges to conventional communication methods while providing opportunities for innovation in traditional television news reporting. In today's media convergence trend, traditional television media must both grasp core discourse power as mainstream media and creatively adopt new

media communication methods to optimize communication effects. It is hoped that the innovative ideas and measures outlined in this paper can provide some reference for the future development of traditional television news reporting.

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*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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