

Governance Pathways for Public Crisis Communication in the New Media Environment (Post-print)

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Date: 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

Against the backdrop of social transformation and economic transition, characterized by multicultural integration, diverse ideological trends, and the coexistence of multiple values, new media powered by mobile internet are profoundly reshaping the media landscape, public opinion ecology, and communication patterns. Adhering to communication laws, strengthening collaborative governance, and adopting scientific, precise, and effective measures for public crisis communication management in the new media environment constitute an essential component of innovatively constructing a social governance system characterized by joint construction, collaborative governance, and shared benefits, as well as an important guarantee for promoting stable, orderly, and harmonious development of the economy, politics, and society in the new era.

Full Text

Theoretical Research: Media Convergence—Pathways for Public Crisis Communication Governance in New Media Environments

Abstract: Against the backdrop of social transformation and economic transition, diverse cultures, ideologies, and values coexist and intermingle. Mobile internet-driven new media has profoundly reshaped the media landscape, public opinion ecology, and communication modalities. Adhering to communication laws, strengthening collaborative governance, and implementing scientific, precise, and effective measures for public crisis communication governance in new media environments constitute an essential component of innovating and building a co-constructed, co-governed, and shared social governance system. It also serves as a critical safeguard for promoting stable, orderly, and harmonious development of the economy, politics, and society in the new era.

Keywords: new media; public crisis; governance pathways; new media environment

CLC Number: G206

Document Code: A

Article ID: 1671-0134(2019)05-048-03

DOI: 10.19483/j.cnki.11-4653/n.2019.05.010

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1.3 Multi-layered Subjects and Objects

The evolution from traditional media to “two micros and one terminal” (Weibo, WeChat, and news clients) and further to “multiple micros and multiple terminals” has shattered the unidirectional model of traditional media information dissemination. Simultaneously, new media features relatively low entry barriers compared to conventional media. Public crisis communication in new media environments primarily refers to social members who receive information and express opinions via the internet, using the internet—particularly mobile internet—as both communication channels and interactive platforms. These actors obtain information online, participate in digital interactions, and express personal viewpoints, emotions, attitudes, and opinions. Key subjects include event participants, opinion leaders, stakeholders, and bystanding public members. The objects of public crisis communication in new media environments mainly refer to widespread online discussions triggered by social incidents, leading to crisis-driven public opinion formation and dissemination. These encompass social focal events, emergent social problems, social conflicts, and public figures’ statements and behaviors.

1.1 Diversified Media Carriers

Profound changes in information dissemination channels and audience demographics have driven continuous expansion of the online population and shifts in its age structure, making internet-based new media the primary channel for audiences to access information. Under the new pattern of media development and public opinion ecology, advancements in internet information technology—particularly mobile internet—have transformed concepts, content, methods, and carriers of public opinion dissemination. Media carriers for public crisis communication in new media environments have become increasingly diversified, with crisis communication sources further concentrating on mobile terminals. Websites, forums, Weibo, WeChat, micro-videos, App clients, and live-streaming platforms all serve as critical media carriers for contemporary public crisis communication.

1.2 Fission-based Path Models

Traditional public crisis communication followed two primary models: a “One-to-One” unidirectional linear transmission from communicator to audience via media carriers, and a “One-to-N” fan-shaped dissemination pattern from sender to receivers. In contrast, new media environments exhibit a coreless “One-to-N-to-N+N” fission propagation model, creating “group polarization” phenomena characterized by rapid fission, sudden outbreaks, diverse actors, varied situations, negative effects, and difficult remediation. This model easily generates derivative information and secondary public opinion, exerting varying degrees of impact and shock on social order, grassroots governance, moral ethics, information security, and the image of Party committees and governments. Traditional media typically maintains strict editorial gatekeeping processes, with “gatekeepers” determining the release of public opinion information. However, public crisis communication in new media environments, relatively lacking such gatekeeping roles, demonstrates notably rapid fission path effects.

1.4 Diversified Communication Forms

In the mobile internet era of “terminals following people, information revolving around people,” public crisis communication exhibits characteristics of immediacy, universal participation, massive volume, equality, interactivity, and diversity. Interactions among individuals, groups, society, and online-offline contexts have become increasingly tight-knit. Mobile internet technology development has, on one hand, removed all temporal and spatial constraints on public crisis communication in new media environments; on the other hand, it has broken down original boundaries between traditional media and public communication, enabling the public to achieve multi-directional, multi-dimensional exchanges through “information,” “comments,” “forwarding,” and “sharing” functions, thereby forming a network-based communication pattern.

1.5 Extreme Impact Effects

Against the backdrop of diverse cultural integration, ideological currents, and coexisting values, mobile internet-centered emerging media has profoundly transformed the media landscape, public opinion ecology, and communication forms. In this context, crisis public opinion ferments rapidly, erupts through fission, and spreads extensively, often causing significant negative social impacts and severely damaging ideological concepts, social emotions, public order, social governance, and economic development. The extremity of impact effects has become increasingly prominent.

2. Generative Drivers of Public Crisis Communication in New Media Environments

Contemporary society, undergoing economic transition and social transformation, presents a pattern of diverse ideologies, changing concepts, and varied values. Social-economic differentiation, social structural changes, and social norm alienation have led to public crisis communication emerging through different causes and forms.

2.1 Opaque Information Disclosure

Some grassroots units and departments lack correct and profound understanding of new situations, problems, opportunities, and challenges regarding information disclosure in new media environments, viewing transparency as a “flood beast” and becoming fearful of openness. This results in untimely information disclosure, non-standardized information release, and improper public opinion guidance, causing absence of authoritative information, weakened publicity and education, lack of public opinion supervision, insufficient interactive communication, and loss of control in guidance. Crisis public opinion, characterized by suddenness, complexity, and destructiveness and closely related to public production and life, easily arouses strong public distrust in government. Single, rigid methods and measures for guiding public crisis communication, employing crude and simplistic “block,” “press,” and “plug” approaches, exacerbate crisis communication spread. Delayed authoritative and objective information disclosure places public crisis communication event handling in a passive position and escalates incidents.

2.2 Inadequate Communication and Resolution Channels

Crisis public opinion often causes severe damage to social order, social functions, and resource environments, strongly impacting people’s production, life, and normal economic-social operation. Since most public crisis communication events involve sectors closely related to public production and life—such as reform and development, economy and society, grassroots governance, livelihood security, science, education, culture, health, and ecological environmental protection—the lack of effective and smooth channels for public interest expression and communication objectively generates associated factors for public crisis communication, increasing its social viscosity.

2.3 Deficient Crisis Communication Literacy

The new media era, born alongside rapid mobile internet development, has given everyone a microphone, making everyone a spokesperson with the right to speak. However, this has simultaneously created problems of communication literacy deficiency: some communicators spread misinformation without knowing the truth; some seek sensationalism contrary to facts; some embellish or quote out of context. The phenomenon of “the more excitement, the better” and the

enthusiasm for riding hot topics have led to frequent opinion reversals and public opinion chaos, making public opinion more sudden and more negative, causing serious harm to politics, economy, society, culture, and ideology. Meanwhile, official responses that are untimely, immoderate, and ineffective during crisis communication incidents can easily generate new crisis public opinion on top of existing issues.

3. Evolutionary Process of Public Crisis Communication in New Media Environments

Generally, the evolutionary process of public crisis communication in media environments involves six stages: latent, outbreak, spread, recurrent, mitigation, and long-tail.

The **latent stage** involves objective formation of a potential period for public crisis communication through interwoven factors such as socio-economic differentiation, social structural changes, and social norm alienation. The **outbreak stage** witnesses the rapid rise of mobile internet in new media environments, which changes original linear communication laws and objectively provides technical foundations, channel carriers, and spatiotemporal conditions for crisis public opinion eruption and dissemination. The **spread stage** features the intertwining of information dissemination and complex, intense online opinions in the new media era, easily producing diffusion effects. The **recurrent stage** arises from diversified information carriers, authenticity issues in content, and spatiotemporal interactivity, causing derivative topics to continuously emerge through “exposures” and other forms, leading to repeated public crisis communication. The **mitigation stage** occurs as public crisis incidents are effectively improved and resolved over time, while new public opinion hotspots shift public attention, interest, curiosity, and dissatisfaction, gradually alleviating public crisis communication. The **long-tail stage**, or long-tail period, means that even after the mitigation stage, some online publics continue paying attention to the same public crisis communication due to diverse ideological understandings and varied interest appeals, forming a relatively prolonged dissipation period.

4. Governance Pathways for Public Crisis Communication in New Media Environments

Governance pathways for public crisis communication in new media environments should focus on three major aspects: operational institutions and mechanisms, media convergence construction, and network communication laws.

4.1 Strengthen Top-level Design and Optimize Operational Institutions and Mechanisms

4.1.1 Improve Public Opinion Information Disclosure Mechanisms

Transparency constitutes a fundamental characteristic of law-based government. Scientifically and steadily advancing information disclosure holds significant meaning not only for developing socialist democratic politics and safeguarding people's rights to know, participate, express, and supervise, but also for enhancing national governance modernization, strengthening government credibility and executive power, and building a new pattern of co-constructed, co-governed, and shared social governance systems. The “information hunger effect” objectively requires that after crisis public opinion incidents occur, Party committees and governments should seize information initiative, respond promptly to concerns, expand public participation, ease social emotions, and satisfy the public's rights to know, participate, express, and supervise. Efforts should focus on information that concerns the masses and on government service matters to solidly implement public opinion information disclosure.

4.1.2 Improve Public Opinion Early Warning Mechanisms

The adage “preparation ensures success, unpreparedness spells failure” applies to establishing and improving public opinion information early warning mechanisms. This requires highlighting early warning priorities, focusing on building monitoring systems, implementing comprehensive measures, and advancing scientifically. Actively employing big data, cloud computing, mobile internet, and other information technologies strengthens early warning, discovery, analysis, and judgment mechanisms, enabling early and active intervention in public crisis communication factors from the source. Enhancing public opinion communication governance capabilities critically depends on leveraging the comprehensive intelligent early warning utility of mainstream traditional media and emerging media—including websites, internet TV, internet radio, electronic screens, mobile newspapers, Weibo, WeChat, and clients—from the perspectives of timing, degree, and effect.

4.1.3 Improve Public Opinion Guidance Mechanisms

British crisis management expert Regester's renowned “3T” principle for crisis handling offers valuable insights for establishing and improving public opinion guidance mechanisms. This involves screening public opinion information, implementing precise and categorized measures, clarifying response responsibilities, and enhancing response effectiveness. Establishing and improving mechanisms for crisis public opinion collection, consultation, analysis, response, and evaluation enables screening and precise categorized handling of different public opinion information. According to principles of territorial management, hierarchical responsibility, and “whoever is in charge is responsible,” public opinion response work should be conducted earnestly. Specifically, regarding *timing*, we must compete for the “first time” and “first point of contact,” responding promptly to resolve doubts. Regarding *degree*, we must carefully handle five

relationships: discipline versus law, hype versus non-hype, whole versus parts, positive versus negative, and subjective versus objective, to prevent derivative communication phenomena. Regarding *effect*, we must focus on three aspects—manifestation, type, and generation—to maximize positive effects in public crisis communication governance.

4.1.4 Improve Offline Social Governance Mechanisms “Offline determines online.” Online public crisis communication has objective laws; its essence is the concrete manifestation of real-world social problems in multi-dimensional cyberspace. Therefore, to some extent, responding to public crisis communication involves not only online guidance and governance but also offline social collaborative governance. The key lies in adopting more effective measures and pragmatic attitudes to fundamentally solve problems, resolve contradictions, promote development, and improve people’s livelihoods. By focusing on innovating and building a new pattern of co-constructed, co-governed, and shared social governance, we can better promote organic online-offline and virtual-real collaborative governance, transforming the internet—this greatest “variable” — into the greatest “positive energy.”

4.2 Advance Media Convergence Construction to Effectively Bridge “Two Public Opinion Fields”

From the “lead and fire” era of print media to the “light and electricity” era of broadcast media, and further to the “data and network” era of all-media, news media has consistently served as a bridge linking the Party and government with the masses, playing vital roles in releasing public opinion information, responding to social concerns, interpreting theoretical policies, guiding public opinion, and serving the people. Mobile internet-centered emerging media has profoundly changed the media landscape, public opinion ecology, and communication forms, objectively requiring public opinion guidance to bridge “two public opinion fields.”

In the public opinion communication field pattern, “two public opinion fields” objectively exist. One is the “official public opinion field,” primarily expressed through official media operated by the ruling Party and government. The other is the “folk public opinion field,” mainly formed through social network self-media platforms. The all-media era, born alongside rapid mobile internet development, features information that is ubiquitous, all-reaching, and universally used, presenting characteristics of boundlessness, digitization, interactivity, and multi-functionality. Public crisis communication increasingly breaks through spatiotemporal boundaries, physical limitations, subject restrictions, and functional boundaries. Therefore, effectively managing public crisis communication in new media environments requires profoundly following public opinion communication laws and media convergence development laws to advance media convergence construction and precisely and effectively bridge the “two public opinion fields.”

4.3 Profoundly Follow Network Communication Laws to Enhance Public Opinion Communication Governance Capabilities

Timing, degree, and effect serve as fundamental measures for examining public crisis communication guidance and governance and constitute important factors influencing public opinion guidance. Profoundly following network communication laws to enhance public opinion communication governance capabilities requires focusing on timing, degree, and effect. This demands using dialectical, historical, and developmental thinking to comprehend connotations, grasp laws, strengthen application, and exert precise effort. We must confront hot issues directly, skillfully manage timing-degree-effect balance, carefully set agendas, scientifically strengthen public opinion guidance, and construct mainstream narratives through mainstream voices. This enables mainstream guidance to play the “ballast stone” role of “mainstay” and “anchor” in the public opinion field.

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Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.