Analysis of Multiple Paradoxes of Social Media in Crisis Communication

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Abstract: With the world entering the risk society, the complexity and uncertainty of public crisis become more and more prominent, which brings great challenges to the traditional emergency management system. Government departments have gradually realized that in crisis communication, the role of social media in crisis communication has gradually emerged. While the government attaches importance to the positive function of social media, it cannot ignore its shortcomings in complexity and anonymity. This paper describes the role and influence of social media in public crisis communication, analyzes the problems of social media in crisis communication, and puts forward the thinking of social media on public crisis.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the world is in a period of great development, great change and great adjustment, and the unstable and uncertain factors faced by various countries have gradually become prominent. Non-traditional public security threats such as terrorism, network security and major infectious diseases continue to spread, and mankind is facing more challenges. China is in a period of frequent public crises. Natural disasters, sudden safety accidents, social safety incidents and various safety and health incidents emerge one after another, which have a negative impact on the image of the country, society and government.In April 28, 2020, Xi Jinping chaired the thirteenth meeting of the Central Committee for deepening reform in an all-round way, emphasizing deepening reform, improving the system and improving the governance system, and being good at using the advantages of the system to deal with the challenges of risks and challenges. Since the outbreak of SARS in 2003, the government has gradually realized the importance of public crisis management, and crisis management has gradually become a research hotspot in China's public management academia. Every sudden major public crisis event, such as Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, Malaysia Airlines MH370 lost contact in 2014, Tianjin explosion in 2015, and COVID-19 pneumonia epidemic in 2020, has brought severe challenges to government agencies in various countries on how to properly handle public crises and restore public confidence in government social governance.

Modern society is a media society with high-speed information circulation. Compared with the early e-mail, online messages and various kinds of social media APP, the participation, communication, applicability and openness of social media are better than traditional communication. Every sudden major public crisis event pushes the government department as the main body of social governance to the crest of public opinion. Social media emphasizes the creation and extensive interaction of user content. Social media is characterized by outstanding performance in information sharing, exchange and transmission. It is a kind of aggregation media containing different communication modes and different contents. It allows direct dialogue and various forms of communication between different organizations and individuals. Common social media include foreign Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, etc., as well as China's WeChat, Weibo, Aauto Quicker live broadcast, vibrato short videos, etc. The emergence of social media also reflects the characteristics of "decentralization" and "equality" in the media era, which improves the communication efficiency between the government and the public, and also improves the openness of information. Accordingly, it weakens the role of "gatekeeper" of traditional media. At present, social media has become an important part of modern work and life, greatly changing the way of information dissemination and communication. In times of crisis, social media will spread to a wider audience faster and in a more focused way.

The narrow definition of public crisis management is the information sharing among local government, media and the public for the purpose of solving the crisis after the occurrence of public crisis events. After the crisis events, the public order is maintained, the public panic caused by public crisis is eliminated, and the bad influence on the government image is repaired through active crisis information sending, receiving, understanding, decision-making and feedback. Crisis communication is an important part of public crisis management and the foundation of emergency management. Effective crisis communication can improve emergency response and improve the efficiency of handling public crisis events. Generally speaking, the public lack of psychological preparation for public crisis events, and generally pay high attention to it. When a public crisis occurs, we must pay attention to objectivity and professionalism in the release of relevant information. Information bias or need to be corrected will reduce people's evaluation of its credibility. In the dissemination of relevant information, we should unite with the major platforms and media to form a joint force of public opinion in the information environment, so as to make rumors have no foothold, so as to stabilize people's hearts.

2. Literature Review

China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) released the 46th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (hereinafter referred to as the Report). According to the Report, as of June 2020, the number of Chinese netizens reached 940 million, an increase of 36.25 million compared with March 2020, and the Internet penetration rate reached 67.0%, an increase of 2.5 percentage points compared with March 2020. By June 2020, there were 126 million registered users of the national government service platform, with a total of 1.002 billion visitors and 5.891 billion page views. The range of Internet users is more and more extensive, and the application of social media is more and more popular in life and work. Similarly, in public crisis, social media also takes on the responsibility of crisis communication. However, the theme of media and public sphere has been occupying a crucial position in the field of communication research for decades. Scholars have been debating the contradictory role of media in public life. It can be roughly divided into two aspects. Some scholars believe that social media is an inevitable trend, an inevitable trend of science and technology development and information sharing, and has a positive role in promoting public crisis. There are also some scholars who believe that social media is suspected of disrupting public crisis communication, information asymmetry, unrestricted speech and difficult to distinguish the authenticity of the access to information.

On the one hand, some scholars believe that government departments use social media to deal with public crisis. Huang Kun and Zhang Qingcun (2020) believe that social media has improved the mechanism of crisis communication. In addition to traditional mechanisms such as press conferences, governments at all levels have chosen government microblog as the main information release channel of official social media during the epidemic. Sun Si and Tong Xing (2018) believe that risk, disaster and crisis are an organic whole and a constantly changing process. Uncertainty aggravates human vulnerability and makes the traditional disaster emergency management system unadaptable. The emergence of social media provides a new tool for disaster emergency management. The government should pay full attention to social media and advanced technology. Yu Peng and Qiu Yanni (2020) think that social media improves the public's right to speak and know about crisis events, and also leads to a large number of public opinion information flooding the network, threatening the authenticity and authority of information. The time limit for the breadth and depth of public opinion in the all-media era is also shortening. Only by grasping the "golden four hours" of public opinion dissemination can the public's anxiety and panic be effectively alleviated. Xie Qihui and Peng Zongchao (2017) think that the crisis scenarios, such as whether the government is responsible for the crisis and whether the public is related to the crisis interests, have more influence on the public's use of social media, such as the government WeChat WeChat official account. Therefore, the use of social media to publish reports and in-depth analysis of relevant emergency actions can relieve public emotions and control rumors in crisis communication.

On the other hand, scholars believe that the huge number of users on social media platforms will

lead to complex crisis information, and the secondary crisis will be more destructive. Tanaka Y(2013) believes that everyone can become a news publisher on all social media, but the lack of review in the traditional media news release process creates conditions for the rapid generation of crisis rumors. Linhe Zhu and Chen Hong (2016) said that compared with the past communication mode of word of mouth and three people becoming tigers, social media rumors spread faster and changed more, and the content was more confusing, which caused the occurrence of sub-public crisis events and even brought more serious destructive consequences. Xue Ke and Yu Laihui (2017) concluded that social media users participate in the generation of public crisis information, because the resonance opportunity produces the same negative emotional infection as the victims, causing a large area of resonance, and even deteriorating into a special social hatred and political dissatisfaction.

To sum up, scholars have carried out extensive research on the information dissemination of public crisis by the government and public users under the social media environment, and have also formed fruitful research results. Previous studies focused on the government's handling of public opinion and crisis governance, and the degree of public users' participation in public crisis. In view of this, this paper will analyze the role of social media in crisis communication, and make a reflection on it.

3. The Role and Influence of Social Media in Crisis Communication

Combined with the definition of crisis communication, social media crisis communication refers to how the government and the public communicate through social media before and after crisis events. There are two main meanings, one is to provide effective communication channels for public crisis events. Social media breaks the traditional way of crisis communication, which enables the government to directly release information to the public without mass media, thus ensuring the timeliness and authority of information. Second, the intermediary of social media meets the needs of information interaction between the government and the public. After the occurrence of public crisis, a single information release channel has been unable to meet the needs of crisis information communication under the changing social environment. The openness and timeliness of social media improve the efficiency of information transmission, and play an important role in guiding and promoting the development of events. Social media has gradually changed the dominance of government media and mainstream media, and has become a platform for risk communication and information gathering.

3.1 Positive Efficacy of Social Media in Crisis Communication

3.1.1 Social Media Provides Help Information

With the wide range of social media applications, people can choose different social media platforms to seek help and inform others in the emergency of public crisis. For example, in 2018, the high-rise of a family building in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province emitted strong black smoke from the window, and the surrounding residents didn't know if anyone was indoors, so they quickly called the fire-fighting number 119 and forwarded it in WeChat friends circle to find the residents of the floor. Social media provides distress information, and fire trucks quickly go to the police to protect the safety of people's property. This is a real-life example of using social media for quick rescue. Social media speeds up the transmission of rescue information and saves people's property in time.

3.1.2 Social Media Speeds Up Communication

Many emergencies need to be notified as soon as possible, and the government or relevant emergency departments can release information through social media platforms. Because social media can communicate in real time, using social media in crisis communication can speed up the transmission of emergency messages. Most users can receive emergency notification immediately and spread it in their network, which is much faster than traditional media. In the public crisis, the

government or emergency management agencies immediately provide life-saving information to a large number of people through social media, and share these messages with their followers. The news spread quickly in social media, which won the golden time for rescuing people.

3.1.3 Social Media Expands Coverage of Early Warning Information

Government departments can quickly and effectively disseminate information to large-scale people through social media websites, and expand the coverage of emergency or disaster alerts and notifications through social media. Residents use social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat to register and receive emergency alerts. This enables emergency management agencies to inform residents who cannot receive messages because there is no fixed telephone. For example, novel coronavirus pneumonia swept across the country in 2020, when government departments released information on epidemic situation through official account of Weibo and WeChat at the beginning of the year. We resolutely forward, so that the scope of early warning rapidly expanded, so that the masses know the seriousness of the epidemic situation, and make corresponding protection measures. Novel coronavirus pneumonia is also being transmitted to the hospital in time by the health department and railway department, which are released by WeChat official account and Weibo. This is the way to spread early warning and emergency notice in the era of big data.

3.1.4 Social Media Collects Relevant Information

In addition to releasing emergency information, social media can also interact. This two-way communication mode is an effective way for government departments to collect emergency information, communicate with the masses, and inquire about the situation of the crisis area. It can effectively mobilize people to provide disaster information. Community residents are encouraged to participate in this way, which provides more information for emergency management organizations and guides emergency response work. However, when collecting information on emergencies from the public through social media, useful information needs to be screened. In an emergency situation, due to time constraints and limited resources, it may be difficult to do this effectively.

3.2 Negative Efficacy of Social Media in Crisis Communication

3.2.1 Social Media Delivers Fuzzy Information

Information can improve the efficiency of public response to public crisis, but the information uncertainty and low access caused by the dispersion, heterogeneity and anonymity of social media participants will lead to the dissemination of vague and even false information. Wrong emergency skills, untrue information for help, repeated search for information, etc. are all inaccurate information in the process of public crisis response. The dissemination of this information can not only improve the efficiency of handling crisis events and the ability to cope with crisis, but also easily lead to information confusion during crisis handling, leading to the wrong use of treatment measures and resources, and increasing the cost of material resources, manpower and financial resources. If users create rumors in the mixed information, it will cause more panic in areas with fragile social order, and further increase the difficulty of handling public crisis.

3.2.2 Social Media Has Technical Limitations

Social media still has the risk of using technology restrictions in coping with community crisis, which is mainly manifested in two aspects: hardware accessibility restrictions and users restrictions. In terms of hardware technology, when a major disaster occurs, the possible paralysis and destruction of power facilities, Internet and mobile phone wireless signals will lead to the unavailability of social media user terminals in the affected areas. In terms of users, even the use of mobile phones has not been popularized for residents in remote and backward communities, the elderly, children and other information vulnerable groups. They don't have the habit and awareness of using this tool, so they can't get the relevant information of crisis through social media. This new emergency tool is ineffective or inefficient for this kind of people.

3.2.3 Social Media Overload

During the crisis, the amount of information exchanged through social media may be too large, and it is very difficult to find useful information from a large number of information flows, so that it is impossible to clearly understand the specific situation of disasters. Therefore, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) believes that it is necessary to develop a new tool for situational awareness through social media. In addition, social media users can also post false messages. During the emergency, their views on the crisis situation may be paranoid and produce negative emotions, which may make it difficult for emergency managers to correctly understand the current situation.

3.2.4 Regulation of Social Media is Not Standardized

With the increasing internationalization of social media, the scope of information dissemination is wider, and it constantly breaks through national boundaries. Social media is closely related to national security and national interests. At present, the use of social media in public crisis management in China is still in its infancy. The government and the public still have concerns about how to use social media, and there are few appropriate laws or policies to guide the strategies of dealing with information and social media in crisis situations. The government lacks explicit provisions and relevant legal constraints on how to deal with social media to disseminate information in the case of public crisis. The application of social media in public crisis management and information dissemination have caused social problems in privacy, responsibility and security, but the corresponding regulatory policies have developed relatively slowly.

4. Conclusions

At present, social media is the main way for the public to exchange information and share emotions. WeChat group, friends circle and Weibo have become the main force of crisis communication. The key to dealing with public crisis lies in the openness and transparency of information, the perfection of crisis management system, and the collaborative governance mechanism involving government, media and the public. Because in a sudden situation full of uncertainty, information opacity will aggravate the public's awareness of risks, while ensuring information disclosure to the maximum extent in public crisis can dispel the public's unknown concerns, guide the public to form rational social awareness and increase the credibility of the government. Therefore, the internet thinking of public crisis management can be established, and the government departments can make full use of social media to announce the handling attitude and solutions of public crisis events in time, look at public crisis from the perspective of the public, and eliminate public panic psychology in time. Social media platform has become a channel for communication between the government and the public, which can enhance mutual trust and understanding, strengthen people's sense of social responsibility, and give better play to the supervision role of the masses.

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