

Analysis of Public Opinion Crisis Control by Mainstream Media During COVID-19

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Abstract: The sudden outbreak of new pneumonia has had a profound impact on the global world and all walks of life. At the same time, it also creates a torrent of public opinion under the mud of information and accelerates the fermentation and loss of control of the Internet public opinion field. Tuchman, a famous scholar, claimed in *Doing the News* that “news is the constructed reality”, and the mainstream media controls the trend of public opinion when disseminating news. In this paper, public opinion at each stage of the epidemic was analyzed based on the crisis phase analysis theory proposed by Steven Fink. In the face of the epidemic crisis, the mapping of the media plays an important role. Mainstream media should control the public opinion crisis through different discourse strategies and social effects caused by communication methods.

Keywords: public opinion guidance; COVID-19, mainstream media, crisis communication

1. Introduction

Today, with the popularization of the Internet, everyone has a voice. Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus pneumonia, online public opinion has been varied and complex, and there are many hot spots. Tuchman, a famous scholar, claimed in *Doing the News* that “news is the constructed reality”, and the mainstream media controls the trend of public opinion when disseminating news [1]. News and public opinion workers should grasp the characteristics of public opinion communication, do a good job in the guidance of public opinion communication, to ensure that public opinion along the right direction of communication. Such a move will help defuse risks in public opinion, unite people and enhance people’s confidence in defeating the epidemic, which is of great significance to the fight against the novel coronavirus. In 2003, during the SARS period, public opinion was mostly spread by word of mouth, which had obvious regional limitations. However, in the mode of public opinion communication of the novel coronavirus pneumonia, media fusion makes public opinion communication go beyond the restrictions of region, time and border [2].

In accordance with the crisis communication stage analysis theory proposed by Steven Fink in 1986, this paper divides the public opinion communication of 2020 COVID-19 into four stages: the potential period of crisis (before January 23), the sudden period of crisis (January 23-January 27), the spreading period of crisis (January 28-March 23), and the resolution period (March 24-April 8). The following contents will describe and analyze the methods of mainstream media to control public opinion crises in these four stages, respectively. This paper reveals the influence of mainstream media in the face of public health emergencies and the control of public opinion, which

improves the ability of society to deal with emergency public crises. Conducive to social stability and development. This paper reveals the influence of mainstream media in the face of public health emergencies and the control of public opinion, which improves the ability to promote the society to deal with emergency public crises. Conducive to social stability and development. The sudden outbreak of the novel coronavirus has profoundly changed the world. The great changes unseen in a century and the global pandemic of the novel coronavirus have a superimposed effect, accelerating the reconstruction of the international order [3]. In a speech at the symposium on press and public opinion work, Xi Jinping emphasized that “all aspects and links of news and public opinion work should adhere to the correct orientation of public opinion”, including different types of media, different forms of reports, and different news, programs and columns, without exception, should be oriented [4].

2. Potential Period of Crisis

On December 1, 2019, the first suspected case was admitted to the Jinyintan Hospital in Wuhan. At this point, a public crisis was brewing, and people did not know whether the disease was contagious. The indifference of some social groups has coincided with a frenzy of public opinion about the pneumonia case. Mainstream media at the time focused on finding the source of the first suspected case, catering to the public’s curiosity. With the experts’ research on the novel coronavirus epidemic, academician Zhong Nanshan issued a research judgment through the media on January 20, 2020, that the novel coronavirus has appeared as a phenomenon of “human-to-human transmission”. After identifying this phenomenon, media at all levels in Hubei have significantly increased the number of reports on COVID-19, and the forms and contents of the reports have been significantly improved. By the time of the Wuhan lockdown on January 23, local mainstream media in Hubei had become an important window for the outside world to get front-line information about the epidemic, playing an indispensable role in maintaining social stability, calming public anxiety and guiding the fight against the epidemic.

3. Emergency Period

January 23 to January 27 was the crisis period. In the early morning of January 23, Wuhan Epidemic prevention and Control headquarters issued a notice: from now on, all exit routes from Wuhan will be temporarily closed. As soon as the news was sent out by the media, it quickly hit the headlines on Weibo, attracting a large number of people’s attention within a short time, and public opinion was in an uproar. As a result of the increased attention, opinion leaders and mainstream media at all levels began to speak intensively. Yao Chen and Yang Mi, who have a large number of fans, posted a message wishing Wuhan an early success. At the same time, reports from mainstream media such as People’s Daily and Hubei Daily and official authoritative statements began to play a guiding role. The official microblog of the People’s Daily called on the whole society to cheer for Wuhan and let the people of Wuhan know that they are not alone. On the same day, the post was forwarded more than 12 million times and received 1.77 million clicks. The mainstream opinion in the public opinion field gradually formed, that people hope Wuhan can defeat the epidemic as soon as possible. On January 26, Hu Bufe, a popular blogger with 2.5 million followers, reposted an article titled “What I learned in Wuhan is disturbing!” The article, quickly triggered heated discussion and debate. The article ruthlessly pointed out that after the lockdown of Wuhan, governments at all levels had chaotic management, a lack of overall planning and dispatch, and inadequate distribution of materials. On the same evening, Wuhan Mayor Zhou Xianwang also announced at a press conference that nearly 5 million people had left Wuhan before the lockdown. This information has triggered a heated discussion on social media platforms, with negative public

opinions increasing. The National Health Commission, the Information Office of the State Council, and the China Center for Disease Control and Prevention jointly launched a press conference on the joint epidemic prevention and control system, during which they answered questions about transportation support and supplies of prevention and control materials that have been of great concern to the public. In addition, more than 10 press conferences were held in Hubei, Beijing, and other places, with mainstream media scrambling to report the latest situation of the epidemic. The mainstream media intervenes and influences public crisis events through timely and effective information dissemination, thus stabilizing the crisis of public opinion.

4. Period of Contagion

From January 28 to March 23 was the contagion period. From January 28 to March 23, 72 articles about the lockdown were pushed to Chutian Metropolis Daily's WeChat official account, most of which ranked in the top three. In the early days of lockdown, the programs focused on epidemic prevention and control, with subjects and characters mostly medical workers and Party officials from the frontlines of the epidemic response. These reports invited special guests to tell their stories of fighting the epidemic, so that Wuhan residents who were quarantined at home could have a more direct understanding of the development of the epidemic. For example, in the program broadcast on January 30, the reporter interviewed Du Ronghui, a medical worker from the front line of the epidemic response. She shared with the audience the story of an 87-year-old COVID-19 patient who survived the crisis. Such reports helped the public understand the truth, calmed many panicked Wuhan citizens, and effectively controlled the crisis of public opinion. Looking back at the three public health emergencies in China over the past 20 years, we can see that the real reason for the rapid and effective control of the epidemic is often not the high infectivity of the virus itself, but the lack of timely and transparent disclosure of epidemic prevention information. Premier Li Keqiang also stressed that epidemic prevention and control should "push down the strength of prevention and control, adhere to openness and transparency". Local mainstream media in Hubei also reported a decline in the number of "lockdowns", but still maintained a high level, which is to ease social panic by doing a large volume. By the middle and late March, the epidemic was gradually brought under control, and the focus of the program gradually changed to work resumption and psychological counseling, which were widely concerned by the public, to help Wuhan citizens smoothly transition to a normal life. The mainstream media responded positively to the central government, adhered to the principle of seeking truth from facts, disclosed the real data of the epidemic transparently, and carried out in-depth reports on the crisis events, giving full play to the functions of public supervision and guidance, soothing the panic of the public, and effectively maintaining social order.

5. Crisis Resolution Period

March 24 to April 8 is the crisis resolution period. Since mid-to-late March, the situation of COVID-19 in Wuhan has continued to improve, and when to "lift the lockdown" has become a hot topic among many people in Wuhan. On March 24, the Hubei epidemic prevention and Control headquarters issued a notice, clarifying that Wuhan was "unsealed" on April 8. The topic of Wuhan "unblocked" quickly became a hot search on Weibo. While netizens are celebrating the initial victory in the fight against the virus, some are also worried about whether it is really time for Wuhan to be "unsealed". In this regard, the local media in Hubei planned a series of reports on the "unsealing" of Wuhan, and reported the preparation work and site situation of the "unsealing" of Wuhan from multiple angles. For example, since March 24, Hubei Satellite TV has given full play to its role as an external publicity window, reporting various preparations for the "unsealing" of

Wuhan in a large time slot in its daily live news programs. These reports invited authoritative experts to appear on nightly interview programs to explain in detail the conditions and precautions of the “unlock down” and broadcast videos of the centralized disinfection of various public places in Wuhan to ease the “Hubei phobia” of some people in other regions. Hubei Daily, Chutian Metropolis Daily, and other paper media started on April 5 to welcome the “unsealing” of Wuhan in the form of a countdown, with the help of live broadcasts, creative posters, and other ways to show the “unsealing” scene. At the same time, these mainstream media also forwarded articles such as “Born to the Sun through the Epidemic” and “Wuhan Woman orders 76 breakfasts to Commemorate 76 Days of Home Quarantine on the Day of Unsealing the Lockdown”, recalling various kinds of sour, sweet, bitter and hot during the lockdown, showing the optimism and strength of Wuhan people and expressing gratitude to other provinces for their assistance on behalf of Wuhan citizens [5].

“Facing the increasingly complex public opinion environment in the post-epidemic era, the integration ecology of news and public opinion dominated by mainstream media urgently needs to be reconstructed, and the deep integration and development of the overall operation mechanism of mainstream media itself will be the only way” [6].

The series of reports on the “lockdown” in Wuhan not only removed the distrust of the public in other regions, but also led the public to review the hard work of medical workers and party officials during the lockdown and the results of the fight against the epidemic. This condenses consensus among the people, forms emotional resonance, and then achieves the purpose of guiding the discussion.

6. Conclusion

Based on the crisis communication stage analysis theory proposed by Steven Fink, this paper aims to divide the public opinion stage of the 2020 novel coronavirus epidemic and explore the social effects caused by the mainstream media through different discourse strategies and communication methods, as well as the role of controlling the public opinion crisis in the face of the epidemic crisis. During the incubation period of the crisis, the mainstream media should capture and identify the risks and symptoms of the crisis, conduct forward-looking research and judgment, and practice discovery and recognition. In an emergency period of crisis, the mainstream media should have the ability to resolve social conflicts and extreme emotions with the guidance of public opinion, and hold high the banner of guiding public opinion. In the period of crisis spreading, the mainstream media should guide public opinion and psychology according to the public psychology, adopt the way that the public is willing to accept, and finally guide the period of crisis resolution in the way that can achieve the best effect. In this paper, there is still a lack of in-depth thinking on the mainstream media’s systematic response to public opinion crisis, but in the future, with the improvement of citizens’ awareness of crisis, there will be a crisis response network and an emergency management system.

The news media and news and public opinion workers who are closely related to social governance and the dissemination of news and public opinion need to calmly observe and think deeply, carefully observe the ups and downs of public opinion, explore the leading factors and constraints behind it, and explore the law. We will further standardize and improve the information release mechanism, and present the sound post-epidemic situation in various regions through mainstream media. We will tell the story of China’s fight against COVID-19 well, control public opinion as a whole, and strive to create a China-friendly public opinion environment in the international media arena.

In the future, it is worth studying how the mainstream media, as the “gatekeeper” in the face of public health crisis and sudden disaster, and the new media can jointly use more diversified and open ways to control the development of public opinion in the crisis quickly and effectively.

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