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How the Media Can Facilitate Public Deliberation in Crisis Events
Take the Example of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The anxiety brought by the crisis event makes the looming identity crisis more obvious, but the resolution of the crisis requires a rational public deliberation process. The media has a role in calming public sentiment and contributing to public deliberation by disclosing the progress and guiding public opinion in a timely manner. Covid-19, as a worldwide crisis event, greatly restricted people's daily lives, and social media has become the preferred platform for the public to express their attitudes about various events and public health policies. The promoting effect on public deliberation of media during Covid-19 has become more prominent. Therefore, this paper takes Covid-19 as an example to analyze the problems exposed by the media and put forward measures to better facilitate public deliberation during crisis events.

Keywords: Media Management，Public Deliberation，Crisis Event, Covid-19

1. INTRODUCTION

In modern society, technological advances have brought not only great prosperity, but also increasingly intense opinion competition in the public sphere. On the one hand, this will help the formation of the society characterized by openness, dialogue and participation, but on the other hand, because of the lack of public rationality, it is easier to form a serious identity crisis, the echo chamber effect and other consequences. [1]In a crisis event, the lack of calmness among the public makes the discussion of opinions more intense and the identity crisis more evident. However, the cooperation of the multiple subjects plays a significant role in crisis resolution. Therefore, seeking a path of negotiation among pluralistic main body and improving the cooperation and cohesion can create good conditions for crisis resolution. As a carrier of information, the news media is the main body in reporting crisis events. Driven by the innovation of media technology, public awareness and decision-making increasingly rely on the media. Thus, the media greatly influences the reaching of public deliberation in crisis.

During the crisis event of the Covid-19, people's daily lives were greatly restricted and social media usage increased dramatically.[2] Media influence was further enhanced. The Covid-19 spread around the world, which required unprecedented global integration, consultation and cooperation to fight the pneumonia. Taking the Covid-19 for instance, this paper analyzes the public role of news media in crisis management, and proposes corresponding optimization design for strengthening news media management and enhancing the crisis management capacity.[3]

2. THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN PUBLIC DELIBERATION

Basically, over the years, there has been a unified view on the definition of public deliberation, which refers to the ability of parties with conflicting interests or value preferences to understand the others' interests, perspectives and needs through a specific dialogue and communication process.[4]By summarizing the previous research results,we can see that the process of public deliberation involves several elements. The subject is multiple. The ethical norm and practical principle are mutual subjectivity and publicity. Besides, the public deliberation is emotionally adhering to the communicative rationality. It also needs to be restrained by the public reason generated by rules，procedures and norms. In the end，the process tries to arrive at a pluralistic consensus.[5]

At the same time, in public deliberation, we should always pay attention to the following issues. Firstly, active trust is the motivation for multiple parties to participate in public deliberation. Active trust comes from the continuous supply of facts. The value of news content production is precisely the provision of facts. Secondly, according to John Rawls and others, social consensus-building requires the intervention of authority. Thirdly, in addition to revealing problems, public deliberation needs try to provide solutions. In this respect, Habermas et al. argue that the mass media and the public opinion they present play a key role.[6]

All of these confirm the importance of mass media in public deliberation. First, mass media acts as public sphere for public deliberation to take place. Also, the facts provided by the news media guarantee the capital of public deliberation- active trust. Then, problem-solving-oriented constructive journalism provides solutions that help solve the problems discussed in public deliberation. So the rational use of the media can be very helpful in facilitating public deliberation.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA SKEPTICISM AND FATIGUE

In the Covid-19, it revealed some media problems in news coverage, public opinion guidance and media regulation，which brought about media skepticism and use fatigue. Both will seriously affect the effectiveness in promoting public deliberation of crisis. The reasons can be expressed as follows.

3.1. Disinformation

The World Health Organization (WHO) has·emphasized that during Covid-19, there is a massive 2019-nCoV 'infodemic'，which makes it difficult to find reliable information and guidance.[7] Even though some information is assessed as accurate, inaccurate information is considered harmful. While social media are valuable in making data open and controlling outbreaks, it can also be the source of panic because they allow misinformation to go viral.

A large amount of false information greatly reduces people's trust in media contents. People are cautious about the information disseminated by the media, even if it may be true. Active trust and the media's role in public opinion guidance is greatly reduced. Public deliberation may go out of order and people's enthusiasm to participate in public deliberation is reduced.

3.2. Media Blackout and Regulations

During the Covid-19, reporting on the traceability and dynamics of the disease was biased towards national interests. In the media, this was manifested in media blackout and echo chamber effect. Along with the volatile international situation, virus conspiracy theories have been a hot topic. On the U.S. side, there is an assertion that the virus is a biochemical weapon. Former President Donald Trump alleged that the virus may have originated in a Chinese laboratory. Certain mainstream media have also taken this opportunity to maliciously vilify and smear China. Conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 are also widespread in China. Some claim that the virus is a tactic in the U.S.-China trade war. Others argue that members of the U.S. military first brought the virus into China, etc. Certain studies have also demonstrated that Chinese users were skeptical of media reports during the Covid-19 due to the strict censorship imposed on social media. This attitude was even more pronounced for those who used VPN to bypass the firewall and those with higher information analysis and processing skills.[8]

The media blackout and regulations led to the prevalence of rumors, slander and conspiracy theories. The echo chamber effect is more obvious. The media's role in public deliberation has been weakened by people's skepticism of the media.

3.3. Information Overload

During the Covid-19, social media became a platform for the public to express their attitudes about the personal or public events, and health policies.

The richness of media contents on the one hand provides sufficient and novel information to keep people informed about the development trend of epidemic, but on the other hand, it must contain a lot of repetitive, verbose and incomprehensible contents, which means that more cognitive resources are needed to process it. Accordingly, the large amount of unfiltered information makes the media content overload. After processing a great deal of worthless information, the public becomes tired of using the media.[9]

The information overload makes the issues of public deliberation and the opinions of multiple parties unclear. Besides, Media is used less as a platform for the public to access information and express their opinions.

All in all, the lack of public rationality in crisis events makes them express a lot of opinions and forward much information across media, ignoring the reliability and value of the information sources. It is likely to generate a lot of false and duplicate information. Also，the control and restriction of the media in return increases the public anxiety. All makes the public suspicious of the media and weary of using it, which seriously affects the role of the media in public deliberation.

4. WHAT THE MEDIA SHOULD DO

Combining the role of the media in public deliberation and the problems exposed during the Covid-19, the author

tries to explore how to make the public trust media and enjoy using the media in crisis events, and how to make the media work the best in facilitating public deliberation and gathering strength to solve the crisis.

4.1. Immediate，Concise and Accurate Facts

In crisis events, to soothe the masses and then promote public deliberation, the content conveyed by the media must be real-time，accurate and easy to understand.

In the case of Covid-19, public health agencies should be the source of high-quality information. [10] Mainstream media delivers timely and accurate pneumonia news to the public, including the daily number of new cases, recoveries and deaths and epidemic prevention policies, etc. Furthermore, through data collection, integrated analysis and visual representation, integrated media reports can provide concise and understandable facts to the public. The global epidemic dashboard developed by the School of Public Health in Johns Hopkins University is a good example.[11]

Clear, concise and timely information provides active trust to multiple parties, which has a positive effect on public deliberation.

4.2. Balancing Communicative Rationality and Public Reason

According to Habermas, in public deliberation, there is a need to establish a dialogue relationship based on the communicative rationality, that is to say，inter-subjectivity. During Covid-19, instead of accusing and stigmatizing each other and shirking responsibilities, countries should share data and research results, and cooperate with others sincerely and equally. It is not wise to disconnect from other countries by means of a media blackout.

John Rawls added the concept of public reason, which emphasizes the formation of a free but orderly society through laws and authoritative institutions to regulate the process of public deliberation. With the power of government and other authoritative organizations, the media should reduce false information and deter scaremongers by means of tip-offs and account cancellation. Besides, we should accelerate the development of technology such as big data so that the self-purification and self-correction mechanisms of digital platforms can make a difference.

To sum up, public deliberation needs honestly and equally attitude of pluralistic parties and the restraint of rules and regulations. The media should adhere to both principles to promote public deliberation.

4.3. Constructive Journalism

The concept of public journalism, which became popular at the end of the 20th century, emphasizes the reshaping of news elements and news values. On this basis, constructive journalism was proposed, arguing that journalism should attempt to propose solutions to change audience preferences and seek public good, such as happiness, peace, and solidarity, while sticking to professional principles such as truthfulness, objectivity, and neutrality.[12]

In a crisis event such as Covid-19, the media should do the following. Firstly, avoid excessive concern over negative facts and increase the exploration of positive facts to increase the public's positive feelings and courage to face the crisis. For example, we can report on past experiences in containing the SARS epidemic, and the positive deeds of those working on the front lines. Secondly, try to propose solutions, such as self-isolation methods at home, ways to handle masks, sterilization methods. It is helpful for relieving public anxiety and increasing confidence in solving the crisis. Thirdly, play a leading role in public opinion. For instance, through the media, we propose the concept of universal mask wearing and changing mask frequently so that the public acts together to deal with the pneumonia.

However, it is noted that the prerequisite for constructive journalism is credible and true news contents. Only media with authoritative status can provide positive action for public deliberation.

In conclusion, in a crisis event, in the first place，the media is supposed to ensure the release of immediate, accurate and concise information to avoid disinformation and information overload. Next, each subject should start a dialogue with others in a respectful and equal manner, instead of monopolizing news，to avoid public media skepticism. Authoritative institutions should properly regulate the consultation process, and the media should develop their own purification mechanisms to promote public rationality. Finally, on the basis of adhering to the principle of professionalism, media should attempt to guide public opinion and propose solutions in order to increase positive public sentiment. Only by increasing the authoritative status of the media and making the public trust the media and enjoy using them to participate in public deliberation can the media be effective in improving cohesion and democratic consultation.

5. CONCLUSION

Public anxiety during crisis events generates more intense opinions discussion. However, crisis resolution requires a reasonable public deliberation and a high degree of cohesion. The media, as a subject, has a significant impact on the public deliberation by disclosing the crisis development process and providing a public

sphere for discussion. Taking Covid-19 as an example, the author found that the public's skepticism and media fatigue due to disinformation, media monopoly and information overload，which adversely affect the media in facilitating public deliberation.

Accordingly, the author tries to propose solutions. Above all, to ensure timely, accurate and concise information. Also, to ensure equal dialogue among multiple subjects and prevent information monopoly. At the same time，the media should be subject to the proper intervention of authoritative institutions and improve the self-monitoring mechanism to ensure the public reason in public deliberation. Finally, the media should tend to be constructive journalism. On the basis of reporting facts，criticizing and supervising，they should also provide solutions and raise positive public sentiment.

Although the media is only one of the plural subjects in public deliberation, it also has a special and significant place. It can help pacify public sentiment, gather strength, and facilitate useful public deliberation，which have an important influence on crisis resolution. Therefore, in the future，there is a continuous need for in-depth research on how the media contribute to public deliberation in crisis events.

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