The Internet Public Opinion in Crisis Management: Analysis from the Perspective of Chinese Government

Li Hongquan

School of Politics and Law, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, P.R.China, 130117
(Email: lihongq22@126.com)

Abstract

This assay puts forward the concept of internet public opinion(IPO) in crisis management and its characteristics by the research methods of public management and data analysis. The paper argues that the IPO in crisis management in China increased the social instability, weaken the credibility of the government, influenced the governmental decision-making and reduced the social identity of the mainstream values. The paper draws a conclusion on the basis of the above analysis that we must attach to the monitoring, early warning and guidance of IPO, and establish a IPO response mechanism in the context of the growing China's Internet society.

Keywords: Internet, Internet Public Opinion (IPO), Crisis, Crisis Management, Chinese Government

1. Introduction

The study of the internet public opinion (IPO) in the west is mainly in the field of public relations, marketing and Internet information technology [1]. Some scholars study on the IPO to predict the election; some have presented the theory of Detection and Tracking (TDT), including TDT of the identification of the crisis and its follow-up reports [2]. Andrew Chadwick presented the monitoring and control of the internet, the concept of the political gap caused by the digital a divide the the IPO's influence on political, and the concept of the internet politics which is based on the analysis of states, citizens and new communication technology [3]. The domestic scholars studied on the IPO from the behavior or psychological characteristics of internet users [4], discussed in details about the IPO's impact on culture [5], and studied the relationship between the IPO and group events, and the countermeasure to dispose and prevent group events in an Internet environment [6],and put forward the internet public opinion crisis (IPOC) guidance and control mechanisms [7]. There is also scholars' view on this issue from the technical aspects, they focused on the calculation method of the IPO hotpots [8], built a screening model of IPO [9]. This paper will focus on the concept, characteristics and hazards of the IPO in Chinese government crisis management, and find a method to deal with it.

2. The Connotation and Characteristics of Internet Public Opinion in Crisis

2.1. The connotation of Internet public opinion in crisis

Internet public opinion is a new thing, it is born with the full utility of IT and Internet, it refers to the change and trend of the netizens'opinions and attitudes towards some hot social events, these views and attitudes are expressed through Internet and bring a great pressure to the Government's handling of these events. Usually, the Internet public opinion in crisis spreads rapidly and maybe endangers the social order and government management. The mechanism of IPO in crisis is as follows: the crisis will be discovered by some kind of media when it happened, and the public opinion will be spread rapidly online, then it will be focused and zoomed by the Internet, followed by the formation of interaction of multimedia, this will cause the government's concern and involvement.
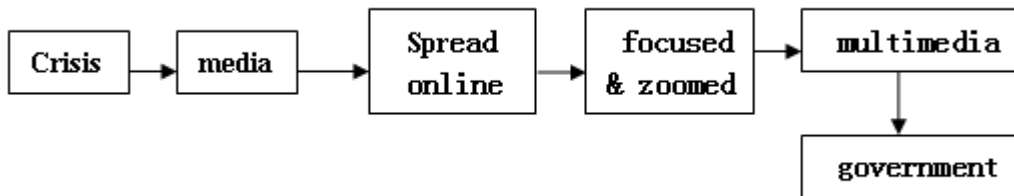

Figure 1: The Mechanism of IPO in Crisis

2.2. Characteristics of IPO in crisis

First of all, the diversity. On one hand, the scale of IPO including the netizens in all social sectors and all areas. By the end of December 2011, the total number of Chinese Internet users has been over 500 million to 513 million, and Internet penetration increases 4 percentage points to 38.3 %(Figure 2).On the other hand, the topic of IPO involves all aspects such as politics, economy, culture, military, diplomatic and social life. For example, the IPO relevant to crisis in 2009-2010 can be divided into 10 basic types: public health, finance, disasters, people's livelihood, law, anti-corruption, social security, current affairs, politics, culture and international affairs.
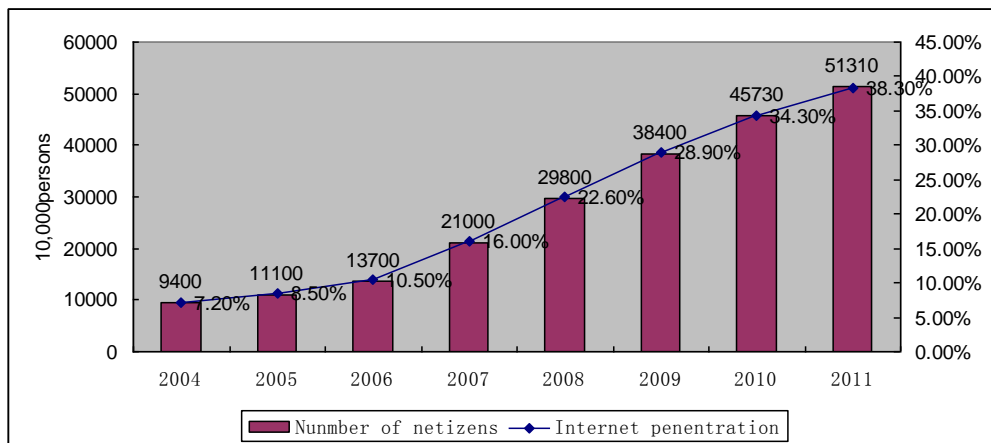

Figure 2 Scale and Popularizing Rate of Chinese Internet Users

Secondly, the variability. It reduces the accuracy and objectivity of the Internet information because of the anonymity and autonomy, and leads to the different versions of reports about one crisis event, hence, the IPO will be a diverse form. With the development of the crisis, the IPO is always changing.

Thirdly, unexpectedness. The Internet's instant, efficient, interactive makes it possible that IPO can outbreak in crisis. According to some studies, a new crisis event can become IPO within a few hours. For example, there were 27 crisis events to be exposed within 2-3 hours in the 60 crises in 2011 which was accounting for 45%. The unexpectedness of IPO will have a huge interference in people's social psychology and sentiment and influence people's rational judgment, thus will exacerbate the destructive power of the crisis.

Finally, the diffusivity. As a result of the Internet's virtual nature, most of the netizens are participate anonymously in the discussion and expressing their demands. The netizens can put their views online immediately when crisis events occur, and all kinds of individual views will be quickly brought together and turned into public opinions. Meanwhile, the views from various channels are interacting quickly, then a powerful IPO is to be produced. accompanied by an uncertain emotional tendencies and the Chinese people has a serious herd mentality, it can easily accelerate the spread of the crisis, the expression of public sentiment seems to be rather extreme and even sightless and seditious, if the government could not dealt with it properly, it would lead to some group events in the real society, and thus will intensify the social contradictions and undermine the social order and threaten the social stability.

3. The Hazards of IPO in Crisis Management

3.1. It increases the social instability

Along with the transformation of Chinese society there are a increasing number of social conflicts and social problems, and the Internet has become an outlet of social pressure, a variety of interest demands are expressed by Internet which aroused the attention of the government. In the handling of the crisis, because the Internet public opinion is often

Time	Rumors
October 2008	the rumor of maggot orange in Sichuan Guangyuan
February 2010	the rumor of earthquake in Shanxi
February 2011	the rumor of explosion in Xiangshui County, Jiangsu Province
February 2011	the rumor of leather milk
March 2011	the rumor of grabbing salt which caused by the 3.11 earthquake in Japan
August 2011	the State Administration of Taxation's Notice No. 47 in 2011
October 2011	the rumor of poisonous needle acupuncture in Chongqing
November 2011	the rumor of the food with AIDS blood
February 2012	the rumor of SARS
March 2012	the rumor of the military vehicles has been to Beijing, there will be an accident

Table 1: Top Ten Internet Rumors in China in Recent Years

3.2. It weakens the credibility of the government

Face to the crisis, some Chinese government departments were unable to meet the demands of Internet, they were lack of information transparency and some of them even blocked the messages, so that the gossip, rumors or even false information widely disseminated online. When the government came forward to refute the rumors, the people often identified that the government was confirming something did occur. The good examples to illustrate it are the top ten Internet rumors in China in recent years, these have undermined the public trust in government.

3.3. It impacts the government's decision-making

IPO affects the government's policy agenda and prompts the government to change the mode of decision-making. It not only promoted deliberative democracy in public decision-making, but helped government to create an atmosphere of democratic decision-making on public issues and complemented details of the policy process. With the intervention of IPO, the government's policy to deal with the crisis has two modes. The first is the mode to initiate consultations, which is the government, puts the decision-making program online, and solicits the public comments initiatively. The second is a passive consultation, in this mode, the public will widely criticize in the Internet media because of their discontent with the policy made by the government to manage the crisis, the government will absorb the public views and a re-introduced policy will be made consistent with the people's will.

3.4. It reduces the social identity of the mainstream values

Internet public opinion is usually manifested in the form of a non-mainstream and cross the constraints of time and space. The Internet media has so many forms, such as virtual communities, BBS, blogs, micro loggings, instant communications, mobile Internet and etc., the social mainstream values will be suspected, questioned or even denied, in case the government could not control the IPO in crisis management , thus will lead to an identity crisis to the society.

4. Methods to Deal with IPO in Crisis Management

4.1. To establish an early warning mechanism to grasp IPO's dynamic

The key to crisis management is the prevention. This requires a comprehensive and effective monitoring and filtering the potential crisis information from all Internet information. If the early warning mechanism of IPO was established the government could monitor and predict accurately the development of IPO so as to avoid the crisis to evolve in the negative direction. The Independent Functional the Modules of IPO needs to be established on the basis of vast amounts of information analysis. It includes four components shown in Figure 3. First, the IPO collection module, it can collect IPO information by the automatic web collection system, the manual acquisition system and governmental monitoring system, and thus create an IPO massive database. Second, the IPO analysis module, the massive database will be divided into a variety of topics by the special IPO analysts, and made into analysis reports and some charts, thereby

establishing a classification filtering database. Third, the IPO decision-making services module, these analysis reports through will be delivered to the government especially to departments of decision-making by a multi-level information distribution system, after that all information and data will be made into a trend figure, by doing this, the IPO decision-making database will be established. Fourth, the IPO admin, which is management background, a technology platform based on computer network.

Figure 3: The Independent Functional Modules of IPO Monitoring

4.2. To establish an interactive mechanism to provide the people with a Internet political platform

China's Internet has become an important channel for the public to exercise their rights of participation, expression, and supervision. It has become a normal behavior that the public concerned about the social issues and participate in public affairs through Internet. It is a crucial foundation for the government to build a mutual trust with the public and to respond to the IPO that the government should ensure the public's right to know in crisis management. Therefore, in the process of crisis management the government should set up a IPO interactive mechanism and provide the people with Internet political platform. China's Government Online Project has been started in 1999. The Central Government website (www.gov.cn) has been officially opened on January 1, 2006. The Internet Politics are being paid more and more attention by the government. By the end of 2010, the government websites in China with domain gov.cn has been more than 30,000, all of the component departments of the State Council and provincial governments, more than 95% municipal local government at district level and more than 85% of local government have built a government website. The interaction between the public and the government is strengthening the IPO tracking and feedback and removing the communication barriers caused by inappropriate crisis management.

4.3. To establish a guidance mechanism to strengthen the specification on IPO

During crisis management the government must strengthen guidance and regulation of IPO in order to ensure the sound development of crisis management. To begin with, the government should increase the level of management and constraints on the Internet media, to make sure it could meet the needs of the government crisis management, be in accordance with the people's interests and play a positive role in crisis management. Thereby the government should control the adverse medias. Furthermore, the government should disclose the information around the hot issues in time and respond to the reasonable demands，in the same way, to promote the formation of the correct opinion. Last but not least, the government should play an active guiding role of the opinion leaders online. The professional explanation is necessary for the public when the crisis happened. Therefore, the IPO leaders in crisis management are particularly significant. The government should make use of the characteristics of Internet media to eliminate the crisis effectively.

4.4. To establish a coordination mechanism to improve the efficiency of government crisis management

In the case of crisis, the government's efficiency to handl it is the key factor. According to a report from Tsinghua University that nearly 67.6% people are not satisfied with the government's crisis management situation and they argued that the efficiency need to be improved. For this reason, it is indispensable to establish coordination mechanism to deal with the IPO so that the government's efficiency of response to the crisis could be improved. For the Chinese government, it needs to coordinate the actions of various government departments and strengthen the communication and information sharing to ensure the IPO could be mastered accurately and the government could react in a timely manner.

5. Conclusions

Internet is becoming the main media in China through which more and more people express their will and realize the political participation. At the same time,the growing number of netizens not only brought vitality but also many challenges to Chinese government. Particularly when there is a crisis, the Internet often played double-edged sword in the direction of public opinion.The tendency of IPO directly affect the effectiveness of the government's crisis management, and how to control it has become an important means for our government to understand and divert the public will in the crisis management. Consequently, the government must establish a long-term mechanism which is able to monitor, regulate and guide the IPO to lay a basis for crisis management. With the development and progress of Chinese society, the Internet will play a greater role, and how to dispose of the IPO effectively is an important subject of academic research, as well as the difficulties of the government crisis management.

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