

Difficulties and Countermeasures of Crisis Management in Universities in Network Information Era

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Abstract

Social transformation will inevitably bring about various unpredictable social problems and relevant parties pay increasingly greater attention to crisis management. As an important organic component of the society, a university is a densely populated public place with numerous talents. Thus university crises might result in grave consequences. Network information era presents crisis management with new problems. Based on the features of university crisis management in network information era, this paper analyzes the positive effect and challenges of network media in university crisis management, identifies the problems relating to the application of network media to university crisis management, proposes before-crisis, during-crisis, and after-crisis management strategies of using network media to realize crisis warning, release crisis information and guide public opinions.

Key words: network media; university crises; crisis management

1. Introduction

The rapid social change thrusts universities into an increasingly complex external environment. Social change and promotion of China's higher education reform impose more and more impacts of various crises in a more complex manner. Human society has stepped into a brand-new age – network information era. Network media brings new challenges and opportunities to universities. Especially during the crisis intervention period, the effect of crisis handling mainly depends on the extent to which network media is taken advantage of in a correct and scientific way. How should

universities deal with various crisis events in network media environment and make use of the effect of network media for crisis handling? These subjects have become a critical part of building harmonious campus and an arduous task for administration of universities, and are of important practical significance.

The study on “emergencies” and “crises” in universities were originally a part of “Public Relations”. In 1952, Cutlip (et al), eminent American scholars, put forward solutions to some “problems” bothering universities from the perspective of public relations: rising costs, increasing demands from the public, fewer students, drop in government support, insufficient and superficial media reports, public criticism, and financial crisis. [1]The pioneer of formal study on higher education crises is American scholar Coombs, who devoted himself to the study of higher education crises in the 1980s at the macro level. [2]

Ever since the end of 1990s, fruitful achievements have been made by foreign scholars in terms of campus crises and corresponding solutions. One of the widely acknowledged works is School Crisis Response Combat Guide by Lerner (et al). [3]The book covers solutions and educational training for some “Acute Traumatic Stresses” occurring in US campuses, including suicide, violence, drug abuse, pregnancy, trial marriage, survivors of traffic accidents, sexual harassment, etc. This work is reputed as “a set of integrated response plans for campus crises”. Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools And Communities, nationally issued by US Department of Education in May 2003, specifies that campus crisis management shall be carried out in a four-successive-phase mode, i.e., “crisis relief and prevention”, “preparation aiming at crises”,

“response to crises”, and “recovery after crises”.

China has also been pushed into an era brimming with crises caused by social transformation. In January and July of 2006, State Overall Emergency Response Plan for Sudden Public Incidents and The State Council’s Opinions Concerning Strengthening Emergency Management Work in an All-round Way were issued in succession. This is a sign that crisis management undertaking in China has moved into a new development stage. In recent years, the stability and development of universities are seriously threatened by frequent crisis events in university campuses. “Campus crises”, a critical subject, has aroused extensive concern in the educational circle. During the Second Plenary Session of the Sixth Plenum of the 16th CPC Central Committee held in October 2006, Hu Jintao, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee, clearly pointed out that social harmony is the essential attribute of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The harmonious socialist society China strives for is a society with harmonious economic, political, cultural and social development and balanced man-man, man-society, and man-nature relations. Campus is an element of the society and the building of “harmonious campuses” is a specific embodiment of the effort to achieve “social harmony”.

“Harmonious campus” shall be built in accordance with the general requirements for democracy and the rule of law, equity and justice, honesty and fraternity, vigor and vitality, stability and order, and harmony between man and nature. [4]Putting people first is the core value of the outlook on universities’ development and plays its role in every aspect of higher education. A campus is a human community and “putting people first” and “promoting comprehensive and balanced development of students” are the essential requirements for building harmonious campuses. According to the requirements, campus life shall be student-oriented; the culture and idea of harmonious campuses shall be applied to the teaching and administering process in universities, so as to establish an humanized and humanistic educational environment; the human-oriented ideology with “equity, respect and affection” as the basic connotation shall be continuously carried out; the university spirit with “freedom,

science, democracy, and innovation” as the guideline shall be always adhered to.

Network information era places university crises in new social context. Network has been changing all aspects of social life, especially due to its feature of “rights equalization”, citizens including university students positively and actively compete for discourse power. [5]Universities are a kind of informationization community with high rate of internet popularization and utilization, the influence of network information is infiltrating every sector of universities at an amazing speed and imposes impact of different degrees on traditional university administration system. Consequently, functional departments attach more attention to both public crisis incidents in daily life and crisis management of universities that are an important part of modern society.

2. Basic Features of University Crises in Network Information Era

Universities in China have long been under rigorous planning and jurisdiction, with restricted decision-making power, single social responsibility, and limited public participators. This made it look like universities were functioning smoothly. Most of the problems that arose at time were within the control of administrators. Thus most university administrators and relevant departments prefer the word “problem” to “crisis”. [6]However, the potential “university problems” that are incubated in the daily administration may grow into crisis incidents. Rapid social change brings universities increasingly complex external environment and more impact of crises. University crises refer to the incidents that occur on university campuses and result in grave threats and damages to the life and development of universities, due to factors relating to internal management and external environment, without early warning and with limited time for solutions. [7]

Crisis management has become a critical element of daily management in universities. In the new era, as network media has become more and more influential, the form of crises and the mode of crisis management have changed a lot, and the public tend to respond to emergencies in a more prompt and active manner. Therefore, university crisis management faces more severe challenges. It is necessary to get familiar with the features of

university crisis management during network information era, so as to correctly understand the impact of network media on university crisis management and rationally promote the solution to crisis incidents with the help of the powerful network media.

Firstly, there is the issue of promptness. The promptness of network media results in a higher speed and a wider spreading of crisis as well as more uncertainty in crisis handling. The promptness of network media also brings higher requirements for the timeliness of information released by the press. Network media can timely report every crisis incident, since digitized dissemination greatly enhances information exchange and spread. Once a university crisis occurs, the faculty, students and the public can get relevant information via multiple media outlets first hand. In this way, the crisis will spread across a larger area and it will be more difficult for the administrators to take measures. In addition, the quick spread among the public makes it harder for the administrators to grasp the people's mental change and results in higher uncertainty in crisis handling.

Secondly, there is the issue of complexity of source. The openness of network media enables the audiences to get crisis information via more channels. Therefore, university administrators have less time to tackle crises and the handling becomes more difficult. As the rise of various media outlets and the openness of information spread diversify the method and source for the public to know about crises, it is impossible for the administrators to completely control and block the passage of information. Various media tools, such as internet, cell phones, blog, podcast, mobile TV, and mobile newspaper, are accompanying us every single minute and we are surrounded by information. Facing multiple information spread channels, upon the occurrence of crisis incidents, university administrators are suggested to promptly communicate with the media to release authentic information via various media outlets, so as to avoid missing the optimum handling opportunity.

Thirdly, there is the issue of sociality. Due to the weak regulation of network media, crisis information becomes less reliable during the spread and may cause "media crisis" that will exacerbate the crises. Since network media is participatory, anyone can act as a transmission

link and the traditional role of regulators becomes weaker and weaker in network media. Absence of regulators is the primary challenge and problem for network civilization and also makes network be the channel for false and negative information. If the administrators fail to release authentic information via official channels timely upon the occurrence of university crises, crisis information may become false after being reprinted or spread via network media and this might even lead to deterioration of the crisis.

Crisis management encounters great challenges due to the basic features of university crises in network information era. The key problems are mainly reflected in the following aspects: (1) Diversity of main subjects. The main subjects of university crisis management become diversified and more active. In the past, most of campus crises were dealt with by universities themselves, even by certain administrative departments. The current network environment contributes to the linkage among main subjects and most crises are tackled by the coordination and cooperation of different parties from the public. (2) Complexity of crisis content. In network environment, both information transmission and information content bring impact and challenges to university crisis management. Crisis control becomes more difficult in such way that, due to the complex information source, validating the authenticity and reliability of information is of the same importance as that of timeliness. (3) Sociality of crises. With the intervention of network media, university crises are no longer inner contradictions and problems of universities, but become social concerns, and may even affect the image and reputation of universities. This urges the main subjects to respond quickly; otherwise the consequences will be severe.

3. Dilemma of Applying Network Media to University Crisis Management

Lippmann states that communication is powerful to bundle the scattered individuals, either good or bad, and to create or break down political order. [8]The great master of media pointed out the character of media years ago. For crisis management, media is also a kind of double-edged sword: on the one hand, media can help the administrators to defuse crises; on

the other hand, they may fuel the public panic and lead to graver harms.

Network media becomes increasingly important to university crisis handling. Proper application of media can carry out the work with effort halved, while improper application may lead to crises of larger scale and result in more damages. On the one hand, network media becomes increasingly influential in many sectors of human society including economics, politics, culture, etc, taking special communication media, such as Internet, streaming media, electric forums and mobile networks, as the carrier. Network media spreads information at an amazing speed within an extremely wide range. Thus in the new era, the form of crises and the mode of crisis management have changed a lot, and the public tend to respond to emergencies in a more prompt and active manner. On the other hand, the features of network media, such as openness, timeliness, interaction and sharing, make crisis information spread at an ever higher speed via multiple channels. Information control and monopolization are more difficult and crises are easily worsened. The concept and method of university crisis management have to undergo some changes, so as to adapt to the new environment.

3.1. Weak awareness of crisis management and unsound crisis warning system for network information conditions in universities

Crisis management awareness is the starting point of crisis prevention. Strong crisis awareness is effective in reducing the occurrence probability of crises and maintaining normal teaching order in universities. Since Chinese universities are just in the period of rapid development and transition, most university leaders pay attention only to development and tend to ignore the cultivation of crisis awareness in network era and lack of acute judgment ability for crises. Education departments at different levels have not included crisis education into routine education system as in developed countries such as Japan. Thus crisis awareness is widely weak in Chinese universities. After the SARS period, though many universities have issued rules and regulations related to crisis management, most of them are limited to routine anti-theft, fire protection, food safety, traffic safety, etc and the awareness of crises

caused by network media communication is still insufficient. The students are still not good at identifying crisis information, and they are not conscious about active response.

Firstly, the universities lack a sound monitoring system for campus crisis information. If the students are not provided with smooth channels to express their opinions, suggestions, hope and requirements and the administrator fails to timely solve problems with proper means and measures due to unsound information monitoring and feedback system, some students may transform their hope and requirements into disappointment and grievance and vent their anger via various electronic media.

Secondly, the universities lack training and practice related to crisis response. Once crises occur on an university campus, both the faculty and the students will become too startled to tackle it, without knowing their responsibilities in crisis management and even having no idea of how to carry out self-rescue or seek help.

Thirdly, public opinions on networks need correct guidance. At present, when building websites, universities are still in the exploratory stage in terms of hardware facilities, software development and position construction. Corresponding prevention technologies of public opinions on networks and supervision system are still weak due to factors such as inadequate investment and attention.

3.2. Lack of systematic crisis information response mechanism and effective guidance for public opinions in universities

At the beginning of university crisis incidents, the public easily gets the wrong information and panics. Due to the convenient and smooth communication channels, relevant information may be widely spread within a short time period and cause crises of a larger scale. In such occasions, the administrator shall make full use of technologies to block the spread of unreliable information and clearly reveal the actual circumstances as soon as possible, so as to reduce the cost for the faculty and students to get information and stabilize their morale. Now the world has stepped into the era of globalization and informationization and the control of information source and channels by universities is increasingly weak. Adherence to the “externally loose and internally tight”

popularization policy may throw universities into a disadvantageous position.

Some universities lack systematic release mechanisms corresponding to crisis information response. The administrators prefer trying to maintain peace by “blocking information” to timely releasing actual information via network media and effectively guiding public opinions. They are forced to take actions to deal with relevant information when crisis information spreads widely by network media. As a result, the optimum handling opportunity and advantages are missed and the crisis might even get worse.

3.3. Inadequate attention to application of network media to crisis evaluation and image re-establishment in universities

Crisis recovery is a significant part of university crisis management and its main function is to eliminate the damages caused by crises and restore normal teaching order in the universities. The end of crises does not mean the termination of crisis management, but marks the beginning of a new phase – for coping with the aftermath of crises. University administrators shall carry out relevant study and innovation, so as to transform the crises into opportunities and keep improving the crisis management capability.

During this phase, network media shall continue to give follow-up reports and demonstrate the whole process and multi-level analysis of the crisis incidents to the faculty, the students and the public, by providing incident review that is easily searchable, so that the public can calmly think about the crises rationally, search for the reasons that caused the crises, and explore the measures for preventing such crises and improving policies. After crises, the negative mood of most victims will rebound, taking the form of “post-traumatic stress disorder”. During this period, network media should give humanistic reports to calm the faculty and students and eliminate the uneasiness on campus to the maximum extent. Crises will cause damages at different levels to the image and reputation of the involved universities. If the universities can show their resolution to conduct self-examination and improve systems and effectively communicate with the public through positive publicity via network media, the image will be reestablished, even to a higher level.

In fact, the society will continue to pay close attention to the universities when the crises have ended and want to know more about detailed crisis investigation and analysis as well as preventive measures that will be taken in the future. It is the time for the universities to actively publicize crisis evaluation and recovery measures via various media, so as to win the understanding and trust of the public.

4. Governance Strategies of University Crisis Management in Network Information Era

Network environment brings both new opportunities and challenges to the warning and handling of university crises: on the one hand, network media play positive role in coping with crises; on the other hand, network media has dual character and may result in larger crises and damages in case of improper application. Governance strategies for university crisis management shall be determined based on the whole process of university crisis management and aiming at every specific phase.

4.1. Before crises: setting up warning mechanism of network media

The purpose of crisis warning is to reduce the occurrence probability of crises as much as possible. It does not only mean timely spotting the crises when they occur, starting emergency plans and releasing crisis level signals, but also serves for making adequate preparation before the crises. Crisis warning mechanism is the premise for successful crisis management, the soundness level of which determines the effect of crisis management.

4.1.1. Integrating network information disclosure platform

University crisis administrators should strive to get more information from inside and outside universities, conduct scientific analysis, timely spot potential crises, and establish and improve the system of information gathering, report and release, with the help of various network media, such as campus LAN, mobile phone LAN, government information disclosure platforms, BBS, forums, and even the blogs of teachers and students. Information can be collected from the Internet, the faculty, the students, and departments of the universities, and then special departments should carry out analysis, statistics, evaluation and release, etc, so that

corresponding data analysis reports can be submitted as soon as possible to higher leaders who will make decisions for coping with crises based on the reports.

4.1.2. Establishing network information management system. Smooth and quick network information management system can also contribute to effective university crisis warning

During actual practice, the degree of public attention to the incidents can be changed by using a combination of various multi-media and proper editorial means on the webpage, such as stressing some contents using special formats. For example, in case of special weather disaster, the administrators can publicize crisis warning and necessary prevention measures among the faculty and students via electronic media, short messages, etc, so as to reduce the probability of emergencies. Information collection and risks troubleshooting are also the premises for making crisis response plans.

4.2. During crises: disclosing information to network media

At the beginning of university crisis incidents, the public easily gets wrongly informed and panics. Due to the convenient and smooth communication channels, relevant information may be widely spread within a short time period and cause crises of a larger scale. The administrators should promptly disclose actual information to the faculty and students to calm them down.

4.2.1. Improving the authenticity of information source

The universities should invest more resources, integrate campus websites resources, enhance the service quality and prestige of the websites, make them interesting, and cultivate a large audience group. The administrators should get familiar with and accustomed to releasing public information on official websites, especially crisis information that may cause panic. The administrators should release information on official websites immediately after crises occur, so that the official website can act as the authentic releasing agent of crisis information and occupy the highland of network opinions.

4.2.2. Ensuring the authority of information disclosure. During information release on university websites, two negative trends shall be prevented: one is to report only what is

good while concealing what is unpleasant; the other is “aphasia” and information delay after the occurrence of crises. By reporting only what is good while concealing what is unpleasant, media will lose the function of “monitoring the environment”, fail to reveal the actual circumstances to the audience, and gradually lose its credibility. “Aphasia” and information delay after the occurrence of crises might deprive network media of the advantage to guide network opinions. This will do harm to the stability and harmony of universities.

4.3. After crises: recovery and evaluation based on network media

The end of crisis handling phase does not mean the termination of crisis management process, but marks the beginning of a new phase – for coping with the aftermath of crises. During this phase, the administrators should, based on the reality, properly cope with the aftermath and learn from the lessons and experience of crisis incidents.

4.3.1. Review of crisis incidents. Network media should give follow-up reports to achieve the completeness of crisis handling process

In addition, they should also demonstrate the whole process and multi-level analysis of the crisis incidents to the faculty, the students and the public, by providing incident review that is easy to search, so that the public calmly think about the crises rationally, search for the reasons that caused the crises, and explore the measures for preventing such crises and improving policies. After crises, the negative mood of most victims will rebound, taking the form of “post-traumatic stress disorder”. During this period, network media should give humanistic reports to calm the faculty and students and eliminate the uneasiness on campus to the maximum extent. Crises will cause damages at different levels to the image and reputation of the involved universities. If the universities can show their resolution to conduct self-examination and improve systems and effectively communicate with the public through positive publicity via network media, the image will be reestablished, even to a higher level.

4.3.2. Evaluation of crises

The administrators should mobilize the faculty and students and invite relevant experts to jointly carry out crisis evaluation, by means of network media outlets in different forms, such as BBS online communication, and network

essay contests. Crisis evaluation typically covers: before crises, whether the universities have made crisis warning management plans, whether the plans were effective in guiding crisis handling, whether crisis awareness education has been carried out, and whether the training of knowledge and skills relevant to crisis handling among the faculty and students has contributed to successful crisis handling; during crises, whether crisis management organizations have played their role, whether effective communication has been conducted, whether the life security and health of the faculty and students have been prioritized, whether the human-oriented principle has been adhered to, whether the crises have been promptly responded, etc; after crises, whether the recovery measures are effective, whether the study and innovation have been carried out, etc.

5. Conclusion

Both Lippmann and Bernays (“father of public relations”), two masters of communication industry, firmly suggest the government to conduct “publicity governance” with the help of media. Bernays states that, wise statesmen are able to mould and control public opinions through publicity and that the skillful application of publicity is the only way for the government to maintain harmonious relation with the public. He clearly expresses that, “during this era, what really matters to the statesmen is not to please the public, but to mould the public”. [9]

Professor Li Xiguang, a Chinese scholar of journalism and communication, states in the foreword of *Media Public Relations and Press Release of Government: Who is coping with the crises, the government, or the media? Can the government continue to hold the initiative in news and reports? After the crises, should the government pay attention to information release or to the management of media? Should the government take media as a friend, an enemy, or a puppet?* [10] These questions make it necessary to rethink the position and role of media in government’s public relations during a crisis.

Through analysis of university crisis incidents, it is easy to find that, most of the severe impacts are caused by “media crises” due to improper handling of information by university administrators. The media tend to hype and

track the crises before getting first-hand authentic information. This results in expansion of the issue and might even cause real social crises.

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