

# Social Media Intervention in Public Crisis: A Case Study of Neocoronal Pneumonia

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## Abstract

**This paper studies the positive and negative effects of social media in public crisis. Through the research, it is found that under the crisis situation, some traditional media are absent and unbalanced. Faced with such a situation, the involvement of social media can play a positive role in unblocking information channels, mobilizing public participation, forming social synergy and building public platforms, but at the same time, it may also magnify the crisis risk by interfering with public opinion guidance, causing rumors crisis, misleading political decisions and suspected privacy violations. Using social media science to deal with emergencies requires the joint efforts of media, government, platform and users to amplify positive effects and avoid negative effects.**

## Keywords

**Public Crisis; Social Media; Traditional Media; Epidemic Situation of Neocoronal Pneumonia.**

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the frequent major public safety incidents in the world have brought huge losses to human life and property. Public crisis not only test the governance ability of government departments, but also challenge the allocation of social resources and the integration of social forces. Public crisis event not only poses a threat to the safety of life and property of the public, but also may cause damage to the normal social order and value norms. Under the shadow of the epidemic, anxiety, tension and panic pervaded the society, and various uncertainties made social governance and crisis response more difficult. The intervention of social media has opened up new possibilities for the management of public crisis, but social media may show both positive effects of accelerating crisis resolution and negative effects of amplifying crisis risks. How to amplify the positive effect and avoid the negative effect has become an urgent issue to be solved.

## 2. The Absence of Traditional Media in Public Crisis

With the public interest as their primary mission, traditional media in China have traditionally played an important role in news reporting, information delivery, public opinion monitoring, and educating the public. In the 2020 outbreak of New Crown Pneumonia, traditional media played a constructive role and contributed to the resolution of the crisis. However, at the same time, the absence and imbalance of some traditional media also magnified the epidemic crisis to a certain extent. The absence of traditional media was mainly manifested in the following aspects.

### 2.1. Lagging Crisis Warning

The news media's role as an early-warning agent stems from its environmental surveillance function, which requires the media to identify potential and hidden risks in society and report

them to society in a timely manner. Traditional media play a good early warning role in the pre-crisis period to help the public avoid risks, resolve risks and reduce risk damage. The lack of information from official sources is an objective fact that cannot be avoided, but in terms of crisis warning, official sources are not the only channel to obtain information. In the early stage of the epidemic, due to the inertia of some local traditional media, they relied excessively on the information released by official departments and lacked in-depth investigation and interviews with multiple sources for cross-evidence, which led to the lag of early warning by local traditional media, which originally had the geographical advantage. In this sense, the traditional media did not act as a good "environmental radar" and "pressure valve" in terms of early warning.

## **2.2. Absence of the Role of "Gatekeeper"**

As information publishers, traditional media have the unique advantages of interviewing and dissemination, and can restore the truth, stop rumors and stabilize public opinion by releasing the original information to the society in time after screening and screening. On the contrary, if the media releases inaccurate information and puts out wrong signals, it may magnify the risks, create risks, trigger social panic, play a bad demonstration role and lead to the loss of media credibility. Truth is the life of news. During the epidemic, some traditional media, in their eagerness for "speed", relaxed their standards of fact-checking and news-checking, resulting in false news. For example, the news released by some traditional media during the epidemic caused the public to rush for ShuangHuangLianKouFuYe. Journalistic professionalism requires news media to report news in a fair, balanced and objective manner, without pandering or sensationalism. During the epidemic, some traditional media outlets have been unbalanced in their coverage, and their focus has been skewed, such as the media's promotion of donations for the elderly and disabled. These socially controversial stories reflect the lack of professionalism and humanistic care in traditional media, which not only fail to move the public, but also may cause a decline in media credibility and influence.

## **2.3. The Imbalance of Reporting Perspective**

News is a living history book, and the current news recorded by the news media will become an effective witness to future history. News narratives that focus on small people in disasters are more emotionally resonant to the public than big and comprehensive news narratives. While the data in crisis reports are cold, the protagonists of the stories behind the data are three-dimensional and vivid. The release and handling of information in a crisis must follow a value scale that all people believe in. In this epidemic, the traditional media focused on the government, experts and medical personnel, and as social responsibility bearers, the media's grand narrative lacked attention to the ordinary individuals affected by the epidemic. Focusing the camera on ordinary people in the epidemic area is not only a way to leave a vivid, three-dimensional and thought-provoking memory for history, but also a manifestation of the media's humanistic concern in the midst of the disaster. The "Wuhan Diary" published on Weibo is sought after because these fragmented memories largely restore the real lives and reflect the true feelings of people in the epidemic area, fill the gaps in traditional media coverage, and become an effective supplement to the construction of collective memory. The voices of ordinary individuals are equally important to the news of special times.

The reasons for these deficiencies and imbalances can be broadly divided into two types. First, the traditional media broadcast system for public emergencies is not sound. In times of public crisis, the information-hungry and emotionally anxious public relies on authentic and authoritative information. In the face of sudden crisis events, traditional media, which used to have the advantage of editorializing, are often at a loss and are dominated by social media in terms of information dissemination. For news reporting in this period, timeliness, accuracy and authenticity are still of great significance. Because of the lack of a sound internal system for

broadcasting unexpected public events, traditional media lack scientific guidance in the face of sudden crisis events, and the strict daily news-gathering mechanism at this time limits the response speed and reporting ability of traditional media. At this time, following the trend has become a disadvantage, traditional media not only can't issue early warning signals in time, but also can't completely guarantee the truthfulness and accuracy of news information.

Secondly, the lack of professionalism and professional ability of practitioners. A professional editorial team is an advantageous resource for traditional media, which enables them to take a back seat in the competition for attention with social media. However, the epidemic reflects the lack of professionalism of some news practitioners, who do not cherish interview resources, do not conduct fact-checking, and do not respect the laws of news dissemination and public opinion guidance, leading to false news and sensationalist news. In addition, under the impact of new media, many journalists have switched to other professions in recent years, and there is a lack of talents within the traditional media to continue the situation, and there is a lack of professionals who can engage in in-depth investigation and have excellent narrative skills, which is reflected in the news reporting as simple statement of facts, lack of overall awareness, inability to communicate with crisis subjects, and inability to reconstruct collective memory.

### **3. Supplement of Social Media in Public Crisis**

While some traditional media were absent and unbalanced, social media also intervened as an important force in the public opinion field of the epidemic. In the environment of high pressure of the epidemic and public panic, the new force of social media has played a great role in resolving the crisis and relieving people's pressure, and has achieved a complementary communication function. Its positive effects are mainly described as follows.

#### **3.1. Ensure Smooth Information Channels**

During sudden crisis events, the uncertainties in society increase, and the public is plunged into anxiety, tension and anxiety, and the thirst for information becomes stronger. In order to judge whether the surrounding environment is safe, the public is not only eager to know information, but also eager to share information, while in the traditional media, the general public lacks a voice channel and can only be a "passive listener". Traditional media is limited by the strict information censorship and release mechanism, there is a certain lag and limitation in news release, and the feedback is delayed. Social media, as an effective supplement to information channels, makes up for the weaknesses of traditional media. As an information distribution center, social media has become an important tool for people to perceive risks, understand crises and receive science education. The accessibility of social media provides a channel for the general public to make their voices heard. With the help of social media, people in epidemic areas express their daily lives, thoughts and ideas during the epidemic. At the same time, the information on social media will be an important basis for the government to conduct crisis management. During the epidemic, government departments use social media to solicit clues about the epidemic and suggestions for prevention and control from the public, and official government microblogs and blogs become a bridge for effective communication between the government and the public during the crisis.

#### **3.2. Encourage the Public to Participate in Social Governance**

Social media are becoming a consistent feature of the crisis response milieu. The virtual network ecology makes the public feel less institutional pressure from reality, and the openness and convenience of social media give users the possibility to speak out. In the virtual space, the public tends to actively and boldly participate in public discussions and express their views and suggestions on crisis events.

During the epidemic, the "Pneumonia Patients Seeking Help" super-talk on microblogs enabled a large number of patients to be effectively rescued through public releases and retweets, thus promoting the effective allocation of public health resources, which is an important manifestation of public participation in social governance. In addition, the public can learn about the epidemic through government microblogs such as the "Wuhan Mayor's Hotline" and actively engage in dialogue with the government through private messages, comments and retweets. The "Pneumonia Patients Seeking Help" super-talk on Weibo has been read by 3.48 billion people, covering information such as patients seeking help and epidemic prevention science. With the help of social media, the public can easily participate in the epidemic crisis, and to a certain extent, reduce the pressure on the government and improve the efficiency of treatment.

### **3.3. Connect the Public's Feelings**

Traditional media tends to focus on objective facts, and tries to report the news in a calm and neutral manner. Due to the "framework" of news reporting, traditional media seldom mentions the lives of ordinary people in the midst of the epidemic, and focuses on reporting facts objectively and rationally. Social media, on the other hand, encourages users to actively express and share their opinions, and social media texts are mixed with users' personal emotions, presenting an emotional narrative and emotional communication. In social media, the information that users share on their own for various reasons such as sadness, anger, and bitterness is the story behind what happened in the data.

Online interaction, like any other social activity, evokes emotions as well as cultivating emotional styles and social environments. With its powerful destructive power and influence, public crisis bring multiple social subjects into the crisis and face a complex multidimensional situation. Through emotional expressions, soft discourses and similar standpoints, social media can enhance the strength of social emotional ties in a short period of time, trigger public resonance and quickly gather public opinion, thus leading to social collaboration, forming social synergy and speeding up the resolution of crises. For example, the stories behind the Wuhan girl's independently updated logs on Douban have a strong personal touch, which are very different from the subjective media's "reasoning". The powerful emotional impact of these stories brought the psychological distance between the general public and the people involved, and stimulated the people's empathy, thus contributing to the enhancement of social cohesion and the formation of the will of the whole society to fight the epidemic.

### **3.4. Build a Public Platform to Serve Multiple Subjects**

Social media acted as a public service platform during the crisis, mainly in the areas of public opinion monitoring, rumor clarification, social relief, knowledge popularization and emotional reassurance. In the case of the new pneumonia epidemic, for example, social media discussions forced the Wuhan Red Cross to disclose information. In terms of rumor clarification, social media, supported by advanced technology and professionals, clarified and verified the truth in real time and dispelled rumors, such as Tencent's "truth checking platform". In terms of social assistance, Zhihu, together with Ali Health, launched a volunteer medical platform, and Weibo launched the "Guardian Backing" micro public welfare project. As the epidemic broke out suddenly, medical resources were strained due to the large capacity gap, and Weibo launched the "Fight Pneumonia Help Verification Post" to build a bridge between hospitals and medical supplies producers, and improve the matching efficiency between supply and demand. With the help of celebrities and other opinion leaders, the fundraising project quickly raised a large amount of money for the fight against pneumonia in a short period of time.

In terms of knowledge popularization, Paperclip released an explanatory video "All about New Coronary Pneumonia", which not only has depth but also has temperature. During the epidemic, "Dr. Ding Xiang", a public WeChat number for health science, sent daily epidemic reports to

promote knowledge of epidemic prevention, collect rumors and dispel them. In addition, "Dr. Ding Xiang" provided online consultation service, and carried out free medical consultation for users in Hubei. "Dr. Dingxiang's team created an epidemic map and interpreted key epidemic data to keep people informed of the epidemic's development. In terms of emotional appeasement, many entertaining and interactive products on social media provided an outlet for people to vent their emotions and relieve stress under the high pressure of the epidemic.

#### **4. Negative Impact of Social Media Intervention in Public Crises**

There is no doubt that the intervention of social media in sudden crises does, to a certain extent, accelerate the resolution of crises, mobilize public participation, stabilize public sentiment and improve the efficiency of resource matching. However, the negative effects of social media interventions cannot be ignored.

##### **4.1. Crowd Noise Interferes with the Guidance of Public Opinion**

Emotional information texts can indeed play a role in forming social cohesion, but conversely, they may also lead to group polarization and interfere with public opinion guidance. The circling and interactive communication mechanisms of social media platforms as well as the generalization and tolerance of gate-keeping facilitate the public's emotional venting and opinion expression in unexpected crisis events. The algorithmic recommendation mechanism of some social media platforms easily leads to filtering bubbles, and a large amount of homogeneous content is repeatedly piled up, and users' established positions are constantly solidified, resulting in information cocoons. Subject to the dual influence of fear psychology and information cocoon, users are easily caught in the frenzy of group polarization, which may even trigger offline aggregation behavior. A large number of emotional and irrational views and evaluations flood the public opinion field, and the clamor of all voices creates resistance to the public opinion guidance of traditional media and relevant departments, which makes public opinion guidance lose its "bull's eye" and makes social integration more difficult.

##### **4.2. Circle Group Dissemination Triggers Rumor crisis**

Social media has grown into a massive platform for consuming news and sharing political information. In a public crisis, some users use social media to spread rumors and gain public attention, so as to achieve such purposes as venting anger and making profits. The sudden occurrence of crisis events provides a breeding ground for rumors. Social media users are connected into a circle based on the relationship of interest, blood, business, and geography, etc. The rumors in the circle have a trust base as soon as they start to spread, and the rumors are then nested in the circle through key information nodes to form the social flow waterfall effect. Under the effect of group pressure and group polarization, circle group members are biased to listen to rumors, resulting in the spread of rumors and gossips on a large scale.

##### **4.3. Public Opinion Manipulation Misleads Political Decisions**

Technology has nothing to do with good or evil, but technology has the possibility of human manipulation. The reason why public opinion manipulation also exists in online political communication is that online political communication can only reduce information asymmetry and information uncertainty, but cannot completely eliminate them. In a public crisis, information asymmetry and uncertainty provide opportunities for some stakeholders to divert public attention or defuse the hot topics by deleting posts, closing comments, hiring water forces, blocking keywords, lowering the weight of information exposure, and adjusting the order of hot search terms. The manipulated public opinion is not a reflection of the real public opinion, but its formation will have a strong influence on the direction of crisis events as a force

of public opinion that cannot be ignored, which may help crisis control, but may also mislead the government's decision and push the smooth resolution of the crisis to the opposite side.

#### 4.4. Technology Misuse Suspected Privacy Violation

The information tsunami has brought a large amount of information texts to social media users, but information involving personal privacy also comes one after another. Social media interpersonal interactions intertwine acquaintances and strangers, social networks expand the objects of interpersonal interactions and reduce the cost for the dissemination of private information, and the barriers between private and public spaces are constantly deconstructed. The huge database of social media platforms can assist in crisis control, but the collusion of technology and capital may also lead to privacy violation. In times of crisis, there is nothing wrong with giving way to personal privacy, but this does not mean that personal privacy is infinite, and the boundary between personal privacy and public interest needs to be clarified. According to Southern Metropolis Daily, during the epidemic, over 7,000 Wuhan returnees' information was leaked, and a large amount of private information was circulated in WeChat groups, causing psycho-physiological damage to the people involved.

In sudden crisis situations, using social media to convey information, stabilize people's mind, gather consensus and correct public opinion can help speed up the resolution of the crisis. However, at the same time, since social media is a new field, the relevant governance experience is not mature, and the relevant regulations are not perfect, so it is also necessary to take multiple measures to better play the positive effect of social media in crisis events.

### 5. Conclusion

In the social media context, users are no longer the "hidden audience" of the past, but rather are important "actors" on the stage. Social media has attracted the attention of more and more users and has become a significant force in the direction of public crisis: either to speed up the resolution of crisis or to amplify the risk of crisis. Only when the media, government, platforms and users work together to amplify the positive effects of social media in crisis management and avoid the negative effects of social media can we respond to sudden crisis events scientifically and efficiently.

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