
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Agenda Setting in Media Coverage of Natural Disaster Exogenous Events: The 9.5 Sichuan Ganzi Luding Earthquake as an Example

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| ABSTRACT

Disaster reporting, as a special kind of news reporting, requires the media to assume more moral and social responsibilities. At present, the development of disaster reporting faces many dilemmas, such as the substitution of traditional media by new media, the difference between mainstream media and self-media communication, and the guidance of public opinion in public discussion under disaster situations. This paper analyses the disaster coverage related to the 9.5 Sichuan Luding earthquake from a communication perspective in the hope of reflecting the current dilemma of disaster coverage development. Based on big data analysis of public opinion related to the event, it explores the effect of media agenda setting on the guidance of audiences and related discussions. Through the study of the existing disaster coverage, the defects of the current disaster coverage in our country are summarized, and the corresponding improvement measures are put forward.

| KEYWORDS

Disaster reporting; agenda setting; communication studies; new media

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The earliest established theoretical research on agenda-setting theory began with American scholars McCombs and Shaw (1993). They successfully tested the assumptions related to agenda setting in the Chappell-Hill study and published a report on this study in 1972 in the quarterly English-language journal *Public Opinion*, General Volume 36, entitled *The Issue-Setting Function of the Mass Communication Media*. Agenda setting in disaster reporting has gradually changed with the advent of the new media age, in which the status of the audience has changed, and the audience is both the recipient and the initiator of information, and with it all aspects of disaster reporting, what are the similarities and differences in agenda setting in disaster reporting in mainstream and self-media, and what are the dilemmas facing public discussion in the public opinion environment of disaster situations. What advice can we give to the media?

2. Agenda Setting for Disaster Reporting in Traditional and New Media

2.1 Agenda Setting in Traditional Media and Self-Media

The 6.8 magnitude earthquake that struck Luding, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, on 5 September 2022, once again focused the nation's attention on Sichuan, where many strong earthquakes have occurred in the past. 2017's Jiuzhaigou 7 magnitude earthquake, 2013's Lushan 7 magnitude earthquake and 2008's Wenchuan 8 magnitude earthquake, and from preparatory measures to post-disaster relief to media coverage of national support, China's response has become faster and more scientific in its approach.

The 2008 Wenchuan earthquake was a milestone in China's coverage of sudden disasters, with quick information, openness and transparency, and a heightened sense of humanism among media professionals. There were also problems with media reporters gathering in the mountains to take up relief resources, interfering with relief efforts for "effect", and inappropriately entertaining

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the situation. In terms of agenda-setting, the mainstream media, such as CCTV, broadcasted the rescue scene, and newspapers dominated the front pages of Wenchuan news and radio stations reported on current events, but this was a progressive development compared to the coverage and agenda-setting of the Luding earthquake. According to the official determination of the China Seismological Network (CSN), a 6.8 magnitude earthquake occurred in Luding County, Ganzi Prefecture, Sichuan (29.59°N, 102.08°E) at 12.52 pm on 5 September, with a depth of 16km. Unlike in the past, in this new media era, the official media and countless self-published media quickly pushed the news to the top of Weibo, and a large audience began to pay attention to the news, from the number of casualties, the damage to roads and houses, to the smallest victim in need of rescue, we can all quickly learn about it, and it can be said that China is getting faster and faster in disaster reporting and more and more transparent and open information after 2008.

2.2 Similarities and Differences in Secondary Agenda Setting

In terms of secondary agenda setting, both the Wenchuan and Luding earthquakes were preceded by an analysis of the specific situation, tracking the lives of the affected people and reporting on the dedication of the soldiers of the Armed Police Liberation Army who came to support them, but later on, both chose different secondary agendas depending on the circumstances. To this day, the coverage of the Wenchuan earthquake ranges from joy at the return to the peace of the survivors of that year to more annual coverage of the anniversary rituals, which evoke group memory by repeatedly stating, summoning and expropriating the past. In media coverage, the Wenchuan earthquake represents the fearless courage shown by the Chinese people in resisting natural disasters. It represents the national cohesion of a nation in need and the strong will to “build a nation out of many hardships”. Through these reports, the memory of the Wenchuan earthquake is being written and reshaped, and the sense of the national identity of ordinary people is being strengthened. The Luding earthquake, on the other hand, was far less deadly than the Wenchuan earthquake due to China's increasingly scientific approach to earthquake prevention and its ability to respond to emergencies, while the media also introduced audiences to many heroes and heroic people who were willing to sacrifice themselves for saving others in the Luding earthquake. The Luding earthquake was not as far back in time as the Wenchuan earthquake, nor was it as influential, so whether the disaster coverage is seen as a fixed pattern of addressing panic and exporting family sentiment or whether the focus of the secondary agenda-setting coverage of the Luding earthquake is to highlight these heroes in times of crisis, it is clear that the coverage of the Luding disaster was both humanistic in terms of addressing the damage and celebrating. The shift in the media's coverage of the disaster shows that China's disaster coverage is constantly evolving.

2.3 Changes in Agenda Setting

There are differences in agenda setting between traditional media and new media because of the speed of dissemination, the quantity and quality of information disseminated and people's choice of channels. Therefore, traditional media will be shackled in the selection of information because they cannot do instantaneous dissemination of news and can only select news that is more significant and urgent to cover. At the same time, it can be very costly in terms of manpower and resources to complete the sad narrative. The fact that traditional media coverage of events can attract widespread social attention shows that the media can influence what people think. However, it is not yet proven to influence people's thoughts, as the media cannot easily access people's opinions due to the lack of a platform for feedback and cannot verify whether it has influenced their views. But with new media platforms, the public can express their views on issues and push them to the top in a relatively short time, shortening the time it takes for them to become public issues and increasing the impact of public opinion so that everyone is paying attention to the issue. Overall, the effect of agenda setting continues to be enhanced in the new media environment. New media offers more options in the provision of information, and the subjects of agenda setting have become diverse. People have gone from receiving information to being part of those who can take the initiative to send out information and drive the spread of information, but this has also made it more difficult to control the expansion of media influence. In summary, as new media gradually replace traditional media, the agenda setting for disaster reporting is changing.

3. The Impact of Agenda Setting in Mainstream and Self-Media Disaster Reporting

3.1 The Relationship Between Source Credibility and Speed of Information Dissemination

In the age of full media, everyone is a publisher of information, and for this event, both mainstream media and self-publishing media played a very important role. After the earthquake, central-level media such as the People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency and China Central Radio and Television, and provincial media in Sichuan Province quickly dispatched reporters for in-depth coverage. Information related to the earthquake casualties, search and inspection, treatment of the injured, prevention of hidden dangers and resettlement of the masses was released in a timely manner in video, pictures and text. The audience's right to know was satisfied, and the initiative of public opinion was seized. As journalists in the mainstream media are trained to have a rigorous sense of journalism, they will abide by the principle of journalistic authenticity when carrying out news reporting, and the content of their reports will be more truthful and credible. In 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping raised four hopes for journalists: to adhere to the correct political direction, to adhere to the correct orientation of public opinion, to adhere to the correct journalistic aspirations, and to adhere to the correct work orientation. According to the British communication scholar Couldry (2002), the mainstream media is where the symbolic power of constructing reality is concentrated, and this concentration of symbolic power

is reflected in the basic attitude and trust of ordinary people towards the mainstream media. The average person may have different levels of trust in different channels of communication, but on the whole, their basic attitude towards the mainstream media is positive, with people recognising these institutions as sources of social knowledge and definers of social reality.

According to Weibo topic data, as of February 2023, the topic “SichuanLuding Earthquake” initiated by CCTV News had a total of 1.5 billion reads, 2.825 million discussions and 246 participating media outlets; the Weibo topic “SichuanLuding 6.8 Earthquake” initiated by Chengdu Business Daily had a total of 1.46 billion reads, 241,000 discussions and 42,000 originals. In addition to the official media, a large number of individual users posted updates on the earthquake and generated a lot of interest. The high impact and effectiveness of the mainstream media are well illustrated by the rapid attention and active participation of the audience in the dissemination of information. The volume of information actively interacted with by the public met the needs of the general public to participate in social affairs. The emergence of self-published media has changed the traditional information transmission relationship, with users being both the audience and the source of information. Each user can express his or her own opinion; for example, a micro-blogger's article about people's lives after the earthquake received hundreds of thousands of likes. However, the users of self-media do not have the rigorous journalistic awareness of journalists, so there are irregularities and falsifications in the statements published. According to statistics from the Central Internet Information Office, as of 13 September 2022, more than 4,300 pieces of rumour-based information about the earthquake in Luding, Sichuan, had been published on the website platforms of Tiktok, Weibo, Tencent, AAuto Quicke, Little Red Book and Bilibili, and 564 accounts had been disposed of. The nature of their comments was bad and caused a serious negative impact. Some self-media users wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to increase exposure, spreading videos of the former earthquake as well as false statements, causing anxiety, panic, doubt and other emotions, seriously disturbing people's minds and interfering with normal post-disaster reconstruction work.

With the advancement of technology and the rapid rise of self-media platforms, people have a high demand for the speed of information dissemination. As a result, some media began to do anything for clout in order to attract the attention of the audience, resulting in false news and rumours beginning to spread in large numbers on the media platforms. Such behaviour has led to a gradual decline in people's trust in self-published media. Compared to self-published media, mainstream media uphold an objective, open and serious attitude to improve the credibility and authority of the media. The audience is more willing to view and comment on the news, thus increasing the volume and, to a certain extent, the speed of information dissemination.

3.2 Secondary Agenda Setting in Mainstream and Self-published Media

The first level of agenda setting, proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1993), takes the salience of an issue as an entry point to examine the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda. The second level of agenda setting is attributional agenda setting, which further examines the impact of the media agenda on the attributes of the issue and the attributions of the audience. What is the difference between the second level of agenda setting for catastrophic events in the mainstream media and the self-published media?

In disaster news, the secondary agenda setting of mainstream media tends to choose the direction of positive energy, such as Sichuan News reported “Luding 6.8 magnitude earthquake Sichuan Ganzi special police ‘flying over Luding Bridge’ like 12 hours of life and death rescue”, Sichuan Daily special report “new era ‘strong crossing the Dadu River’ and ‘Flying over the Luding Bridge’ type rescue”, etc. It showed the bravery of the armed police and firefighters who rushed to the front line in the face of danger and the touching stories of the people's heroes, Gan Yu and Luo Yong, who sacrificed themselves for others. Through media coverage, the responsibility of the people's heroes, their courage and kindness, as well as the strength and perseverance of life, were proclaimed. In addition to objective reporting, the mainstream media set the agenda by promoting the spirit of heroism and China's great power in times of crisis. The extensive series of reports resonated with audiences, some of whom began to express their own opinions and views on the heroes. This was the result of secondary agenda setting; as Bernard Cohen (2015) once said: “The media may not be successful in telling the public what to think, but they are extraordinarily successful in telling the public what to think.

Compared to mainstream media, self-published media is more free, subjective and interactive. The secondary agenda contains a wider range of content, such as celebrity donations, volunteer participation in disaster relief, scientific knowledge of disaster prevention and other topics. Due to the wide audience of the self media platform, these topics were closely followed by netizens; for example, the topic of nearly 10,000 volunteers, Luding first-line disaster relief, was on the hot list of the ShakeYin platform, with over 60 million readers. Because each self media user specialises in a different field, different agenda setting was carried out, but all brought close attention to the different angles and dimensions of the story of the Luding earthquake. In the age of self-media, more people were driven to appeal for understanding and recognition and to shoulder the responsibility of spreading positive energy.

4. Public Discussion Arising from Catastrophic Reports

4.1 Emotional Social Sharing and the Transmission of Crises

The occurrence of a sudden crisis event often draws a great deal of attention, and people express their views on online platforms. When views from different positions collide, a public discussion is formed. Emotional social sharing theory plays an important role in the dissemination of information. Events with the emotional appeal can trigger people to share the event and the emotion in their interpersonal networks. (Rimé et al.)

An analysis using Weibo as an example; After the earthquake in Luding, Gan Yu gave up the first time to escape and chose to stick to the hydropower station to pull the flood gate, but he let himself in trouble. This news has sparked concern among netizens, who are actively discussing, retweeting and commenting on Weibo topics. As things progressed, the mood of netizens changed. When Gan Yu was lost, netizens were worried and anxious; when Gan Yu was found by villager Ni Dagao, netizens were appreciative and concerned; when Gan Yu shared his recent condition, netizens were joyful and emotional. And the richness of netizens' emotions facilitated the rapid transmission of relevant information. Studies have shown that social media with richer and more vivid emotions are more likely to have information retweeted and spread more frequently than neutrals. Meanwhile, news reports about Gan Yu have lasted for five months so far and have received a lot of attention from netizens. According to Weibo topic data, on January 18, 2023, the Weibo topic #Gan Yu Writes Letters of Gratitude to Strangers was read 116.34 million times, and on January 21, #Gan Yu's New Year Wishes was read 4.191 million times. On the Weibo platform, netizens' emotions are amplified, and the intensity of the emotions determines the extent of sharing. The Gan Yu incident triggered a high degree of emotional resonance, and in the process of sharing, it was also a transfer of emotions. Thus evoking more emotions and facilitating re-sharing, retransmission of emotions and re-dissemination of news. In addition, Weibo is a highly interactive platform, and the interaction of netizens' opinions will quickly increase the heat of public opinion. This will allow netizens to have a stronger sense of participation in sudden events and is more conducive to sharing their emotions. At the same time, they will be able to share their emotions and receive feedback, which will satisfy the psychological needs of the audience and allow the sudden disaster event to "fission" on the platform. This shows that emotions have a significant impact on the speed and efficiency of crisis communication, whether positive or negative; the stronger the emotions, the higher the speed of crisis communication.

4.2 The Role of Opinion Leaders in Public Discourse

In the run-up to the Luding earthquake rescue, netizens were very worried because of the uncertainty of casualties and the news that volunteers were missing. Netizens in the disaster area took to Weibo, Tiktok, Little Red Book and other self-media platforms to post their current situation, feeling grief and regret for their relatives and friends who were killed as well as their own inner fears and anxieties. Netizens outside the affected areas also posted their concerns as they were unsure of the rescue situation. As a result, various messages about the earthquake appeared on online platforms, with different attitudes, positions and emotions. In the face of this situation, opinion leaders play a huge role in the dissemination of information on social networks, as their statements, attitudes, and other actions and subsequent influence can spread through the links between users. This diffusion effect makes opinion leaders play a crucial role in predicting the state of information dissemination, monitoring and guiding public opinion, and influencing the trend of information diffusion on the Internet. In the micro era, opinion leaders on online platforms are usually Weibo vloggers, well-known bloggers on short-form video platforms, well-known experts on the internet, commentators on online media, and so on. They use videos, pictures, illustrations and other innovative forms to popularise earthquake rescue knowledge, heart-warming stories of volunteers in disaster areas, produce documentaries on the Luding earthquake and so on. Their views were easy to understand, their expressions were innovative and interesting, and their stance was firm, thus arousing the resonance and agreement of netizens. Most netizens are not as good at collecting opinions and expressing their views as opinion leaders, so they choose to trust and rely on them. In the Luding earthquake, opinion leaders played an active role in guiding public opinion, using their expertise to inform netizens of the truth and convey a positive energy, reducing unnecessary concerns and worries, thus reducing the emergence of inappropriate comments from some netizens.

5. Conclusion

The coverage of the Luding earthquake showed the speed of the rescue force in China, the bravery of the armed police officers and soldiers, and the dedication of some of the characters in the quake. At the same time, it can effectively overcome the past problems of "deliberate exaggeration", "deliberate imitation" of Western news paradigms, and "inappropriate entertainment". However, there are still some shortcomings in the coverage of the Luding earthquake. In the new media era, the media and the court of public opinion are an important part of the presentation of the country's image, but there are always voices in public opinion that differ from those of the mainstream media. The author believes that it is exactly the shortcomings in mainstream media coverage that give these voices an opportunity to take advantage of the situation. Both local and central media put more emphasis on writing about the rescue process and the results of the rescue, but often just a figure or a passing comment on the casualties and property damage. Although this is related to China's demand for positive media coverage and the promotion of correct values, what kind of framework is acceptable to the audience and whether the media can further explore the extent of the right to information and emotional interaction?

The world has now entered the new media era, and the right of the mainstream media to speak has been challenged by the new media. In addition to the speed of reporting, official television stations and traditional media newspapers should focus on the authenticity of the content. When reporting on catastrophic events, the focus should be on openness and transparency of information so that audiences can fully and accurately understand the truth about the disaster, which is conducive to relief work and the psychological and emotional reassurance of the public. For new media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Weibo and Tiktok, which have a wide range of users, it is important not to pursue traffic and speed in news reporting, but to consider the audience when using innovative reporting methods, learn from the rigour and objectivity of mainstream media in reporting, and improve the credibility of the media's agenda-setting.

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