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Fighting the pandemic: Analysis on the role of mainstream media in major public health emergency

Yixin Jing , Jialu Dun

School of Culture and Communication, Hebei University of Economics and Business, Shijiazhaung, China

Since the early Chinese Spring Festival of 2020, the novel coronavirus pandemic started to spread across the country. People from all walks of life all over the country were firmly organized to fight against the pandemic and great determination has been made to win this war. Journalists from central and local mainstream media, together with medical personnel and front-line workers, also participated in the pandemic containment. The war against the pandemic by news media serves as a significant role of “the second battlefield”. In this war of pandemic prevention and control, the mainstream media shoulder the mission of issuing authoritative information, connecting and coordinating the international and domestic communities, performing positive publicity and supervising public opinion, which fully reflects the outstanding role of the media in major public health emergency.

1. The role of mainstream media in disseminating information in major public health emergency

1.1. Possessing access priority and more first-hand sources of information

In major public health emergency, the mainstream media plays a different role from the Internet, social media and self-media. It has particular interview rights and access to the front-line of the pandemic control to interview the cases and anti-pandemic information. For example, CCTV reporter Bai Yansong conducted an online interview with Zhong Nanshan a well-known respiratory expert for his latest views on the pandemic situation. Also Bai Yansong interviewed a patient at the front-line as soon as he recovered from treatment. These first-hand information and reports from the front-line of anti-pandemic war have been delivered at a large scale by traditional media and its alternatives such as Weibo, WeChat and its official news apps, which serve as the best way for the public to get authoritative information.

1.2. Combining of traditional and new media in delivering information efficiently and effectively

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the mainstream media has actively responded to the call of the Party by not only using traditional media such as television, radio and newspapers, but also fully mobilizing the power of new media such as Weibo, WeChat, official news apps and media convergence centers at all levels. In addition, in order to maximize the range of publicity, some mobile news platforms such as TikTok, Kuaishou, Toutiao are also mobilized to form a matrix publicity network so that the authoritative information of government can reach all the public with all our strength. On February 3, President Xi Jinping stressed the role of mainstream media on pandemic containment by saying: “let the masses know more about what the Party and government are doing and what to do, which is crucial to strengthening the confidence of the vast people and winning the anti-pandemic war.” Among all mainstream media forms at all levels, county-level media convergence centers play the role of “defending the people against the pandemic at the last mile” by offering feedback information about the pandemic in a timely manner, collecting data and replenishing it. County-level media convergence centers offer comprehensive and specific information on the number of suspected cases, confirmed cases, discharged cases and observed cases even including the earliest confirmed cases. For example, on January 21 before the first novel coronavirus suspected case was confirmed in

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Anhui, in response to the emergency response mechanism of the provincial publicity department, county-level media convergence centers acted as the core role of commanding force against the pandemic. By 24:00 that night, 61 county-level media convergence centers all delivered the first prevention and control information, officially announcing the all-round battle against the pandemic. They delivered the information about government policy and pandemic containment to the masses by radio, television, TikTok, Weibo, WeChat, official news apps etc. Up to now, over 11 thousands pieces of pandemic control information including government orders have been delivered, which functioned as an irreplaceable role in pandemic containment.

1.3. Publicizing timely and accurate knowledge on pandemic containment

The mainstream media plays a significant role in publicizing timely and accurate knowledge on pandemic prevention by using traditional media and new media. From the perspective of traditional media, television stations at all levels are mobilized to make pandemic-related live broadcasts and special programs on pandemic containment, to update pandemic control information in time, to interview authoritative experts to conduct scientific and authoritative analysis of the pandemic, to interpret complex medical knowledge by using professional but easy-to-understand words. From the perspective of new media, the mainstream media actively uses the agenda setting by setting “novel coronavirus” and “fighting the pandemic” as highlighted columns. From the outbreak of the pandemic, “fighting the pandemic” column has gradually become a fixed section of Weibo. In addition, CCTV Video set a fixed portal named “novel coronavirus tracking” and “fighting the pandemic” on some short video platforms such as TikTok and Kuaishou. All the agenda settings greatly contribute to updating case data and providing relevant pandemic containment knowledge and authoritative information.

1.4. Dispelling rumors in time and sticking to the leading position of public opinion

After the outbreak of public health emergencies, the public’s concerns have boomed in a spurt, and the spread of social panic has caused the rapid spread and proliferation of non-normal communication activities such as rumors and gossip in public opinion. Therefore, at the beginning of public emergency, it is very important to seize the opportunity to deliver authoritative information, to monitor and predict public opinion quickly and accurately, and to win the dominance of public opinion. At this time, the voice of mainstream media cannot be absent. The public not only hopes that they can express their hearts, but also wants to hear the

authoritative voice. The mainstream media’s role as a benchmark in the multi-participated public opinion field will be highlighted and become a reference coordinate in online communication. In the publicity of novel coronavirus prevention and control, some columns on the websites of mainstream media such as “latest news”, “prevention manual” and “don’t believe in these rumors” by the WeChat account of People’s Daily dispelled more than 20 rumors, and some columns such as “Looking for close contacts” worked effectively and contributed a lot to maintaining social stability. It is common for the masses to check the mainstream media “morning report” and “rumor dispelling”.

2. The role of mainstream media in monitoring major public health emergency

2.1. Delivering transparent and open information and responding to social concerns

In the process of this major public health emergency, the mainstream media at all levels quickly responded to social concerns, provided professional and transparent information and reported in a timely manner. CCTV reporter Bai Yansong said: “On the condition of having no effective drugs, information disclosure is the best vaccine.” For example, the People’s Daily keeps people updated by delivering “latest update on cases” on a daily bases, which is a typical example of media transparency. In order to give more netizens access to witness the construction sites of Huoshenshan Hospital and Leishenshan Hospital, CCTV client online built a live streaming platform with the help of 5G technology, providing panoramic and close-range live pictures. It showed every construction detail of Huoshenshan Hospital and Leishenshan Hospital, which truly provided netizens with real-time supervision and right to know.

2.2. Questioning and urging the solution on public emergency

As the mouthpiece of the Party and the people, the public opinion supervision function of mainstream media, together with legal supervision, mass supervision, and intra-party supervision, constitute China’s supervision system. For example, at the critical moment when anti-pandemic suppliers were scarce, major media reported the incident of Dali Health Bureau of Yunnan province expropriating the face masks of Chongqing city. As a result of this report, a notice of criticism has been issued to Dali municipal government and Dali Health Bureau by some relevant departments of Yunnan Province and some staff involved were dismissed and investigated. This fully demonstrates that mainstream media should firmly grasp the dominance of public opinion in a diverse field of public opinion and play an active role in positive guidance.

3. Reflections on the relationship between major public health emergency and the media

The era of mobile communication has brought about a more fragmented communication environment, which can easily lead to fake news and misreading by the public. In major public health emergency rather than ordinary events, the content of information disseminated is subject to be more rigorous and comprehensive. The incomplete information elements and the obscurity of professional vocabulary used will not only cause inaccuracies in the communication chain, but also cause misreading by the masses who have no professional background knowledge or even inducing mass incidents such as panic buying and escaping. Therefore, as an environmental monitor, it is very crucial for the news media to play an early warning role and deliver comprehensive and popular information knowledge to the public so as to appease social psychology. For example, on the evening of January 31, Xinhua Vision released a message on the Internet themed as “Chinese patent medicine Shuanghuanglian can inhibit novel coronavirus” and then forwarded by the People’s Daily, which aroused great public concerns. Shuanghuanglian was snapped up online overnight and even some people went out to buy medicines overnight, which fully reflected the serious influence of the absence and misplacement of mainstream media in major public health emergency.

In the face of the various problems exposed by the media in this novel coronavirus pandemic, the mainstream media should also strengthen the response mechanism to public health emergencies, improve the timeliness, accuracy and authority of news reports, and ensure and continuously improve their credibility .

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