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The role of building the ecology of good public opinion in the prevention and control of major pandemic

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President Xi Jinping, at a CPC conference on press and public opinion, pointed out that in the new era the responsibilities and missions of CPC's press and public opinion are to hold high the banner towards the right direction, focus on the core task and serve the overall situation, unite and inspire the people, cultivate a new social trend among the people, clarify the truth and distinguish right from wrong, bridge China and the rest of the world. He stressed that all the work of the CPC's media and public opinion should adhere to the unity of the Party spirit and the people's nature, turn the Party's theories, lines, principles and policies into the people's conscious actions, timely reflect the people's practical experience and the actual situation faced by the people, enrich the people's spiritual world and enhance the people's spiritual strength. This important address will play a crucial role in guiding various media to report the development of the novel coronavirus pandemic, reflecting the voice of the people, guiding the correct public opinion and supervising the work of pandemic prevention and control. The media are responsible for timely, accurate and all-round reporting of the pandemic situation, fully exercising their right of speech, guiding the correct direction of public opinion, and maintaining social stability.

1. Several steps in building the ecology of good public opinion in major pandemic

1.1. The role of early warning in the incubation period

The outbreak of any pandemic situation does not occur instantly. It will basically go through the stages of brewing, outbreak, developing, climax, regression and the end. The outbreak of this pandemic has some warning signs in the brewing stage with the number of infectious cases being on the increase every day. In order to curb the pandemic initially, the early warning and pre-control of the pandemic has become a compelling obligation of relevant departments within the government. Certainly, besides relevant departments of the government, media also bear some

responsibilities in the early warning of pandemic. As the Pulitzer's saying goes, "If a nation can be compared to a large vessel at sea, then the journalists are its watch-keepers who timely report the treacherous shoals and hidden dangers to ensure the safe journey of the vessel." As the "watch-keepers", media and journalists should not only spread the early warning information of the public crisis of the pandemic issued by the government, but also actively release the early warning information collected through the field investigation of journalists or artificial intelligence and big data, which plays an early warning role and thus to alert the country to take some precautions. Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, as a leading disease control authority, has established a network of national disease prevention and control and a network of public health information, and is responsible for information collection, analysis and prediction of disease prevention and control at home and abroad, and provides scientific resolutions for the decision-making of disease prevention and control. Due to the limited number of the personnel concerned, the early-warning observation may not meet the expectations of the public while the media at all levels, with rich social resources and a large number of professional information collectors, should find out the abnormal situation of the society and respond timely and quickly to issue early warning, thus to make contributions to timely blocking the spread of pandemic, saving lives and property of the masses, and maintaining social stability. Media has become a good supplement to the network of the government's early warning work so as to take the first step to build the ecology of good public opinion during a major pandemic.

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1.2. The role of dredging during the outbreak period

The COVID-19 pandemic is characterized by its suddenness, urgency, harmfulness and uncertainty, bringing with it great psychological panic to the public in a short time, which requires the government administrators to make preliminary control measures accurately and effectively immediately upon some negative public opinions. The diversified structure of governing pattern in modern society endows media with the status and identity to participate in the governance of risk controlling, timely transfer critical information including official containing measures, and assume the responsibility of dredging the communicative tunnels between the government and the public. On one hand, it provides the government with accurate and comprehensive information on pandemic development and solid foundation for the government's decision-making on pandemic containment; on the other hand, it offers authoritative information issued by the government to the public for relieving public tension and functioning as a convenient channel for the public to express their opinions. In containing the pandemic, the public is more dependent on the media as a main body for information transmission, mobilization and management. Concurrently, the demand for the latest information on pandemic situation will increase dramatically. It is the duty of media to meet this demand with real information. By the means of information transmission, mobilization and communication, groups of different social interest can be united together to combat this disease jointly. Meanwhile, media can form a harmonious circle of public opinion ecology and reinforce the pandemic containment. In addition, it is the responsibility of media to refute the various rumors of pandemic in time as these rumors will not only disturb social order and cause social panic, but also mislead public opinion, disorganize pandemic containment, and even damage the authority of the government. Therefore, in the process of pandemic development, in order to ensure that people receive true and valid pandemic information, media is supposed to clarify the rumors in time. For example, the "truth-seeking" column on the website of People.cn released more than 20 pieces of rumor-refuting news from January 22 to February 4, 2020, which served as effective tools to fight against the spread of faulty information and assisted the anti-pandemic war in an effective and orderly manner.

1.3. The role of guiding the public after the pandemic

With the joint efforts and cooperation of governments at all levels, medical workers and the mass, the pandemic will eventually be contained and defeated. However, the end of the anti-pandemic effort does not necessarily bring the end of those controversial events as they would probably not diminish in a short time. Even when the pandemic is combated, media still bear the responsibility

of summing up experience, finding new problems, guiding public opinion, and mitigating conflicts by follow-up reports. During the outbreak, all the anti-pandemic personnel, including those administrative staff working for the government, due to a lack of experience or poor coordination, will inevitably encounter some harsh troubles in the prevalence of the pandemic, which will ultimately cause panic or misunderstanding among the mass. Even if the pandemic is coming to an end, those issues may fail to be solved properly and timely. In order to relieve the negative emotions of the people caused by the pandemic, media is supposed to investigate more on specific individuals or events, respond to public concerns and clarify doubts, or urge a functional department to tackle them, actively guide the public opinion, maintain the normal social order and mend tears in social fabric. Meanwhile, the social media should also appeal to and mobilize the public to understand and support the pandemic containing work through a variety of ways and means of communication, and even actively participate in the crisis governance or post-crisis management, so as to realize the goal of joint containment and governance and eventually maintain the stable social transition.

2. Core values of building the ecology of good public opinion in critical pandemic situation

2.1. Respect the public's rights to be informed

The information on viral pandemic is directly related to the vital interests of the public, therefore people have the right to get relevant information in time. In order to guarantee the citizens' rights to be informed, China has established an information release system for emergencies and pandemic situation of infectious diseases by promulgating a series of laws including the "Emergency Response Law of the People's Republic of China", "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases", "Regulation on the Urgent Handling of Public Health Emergencies", which stipulates the responsibility of health administrative department of the State Council to timely release information about emergencies and pandemic situation of infectious diseases to the public. Approved by the State Council, the health administration of the provincial governments, autonomous regions and municipalities may be authorized to release information to the public on emergencies and pandemic situations of infectious diseases. These laws and regulations endow the relevant government departments with the right and obligation to officially release the pandemic situation. On the contrast, although there is no prohibitive standard, specified by the logic of these legal provisions, media are not authorized to release the overall and conclusive information of the pandemic situation. Certainly media have the responsibility to cooperate with the health administrative departments at all levels

to hold press conferences spreading the pandemic prevention and control information to the public. However, just because the relevant departments of the government have the power to release the pandemic information in an official way does not mean that media can't interview or report the infectious cases as the basic spirit of the law "all things are permissible unless prohibited" gives journalists as civil subjects the right to report. In the face of public health emergencies, the public urgently needs relevant pandemic information, while online information is hard to distinguish its facticity. In order to protect the public's right to be informed, as "watch-keepers", it is necessary for media to report objectively and fairly. During prevalence of COVID-19, some coward behaviors of media such as protecting themselves from involving with something sensitive but critical, being slack in spirit, lacking work enthusiasm as well as sense of devotion are not only harmful to the glorious image of journalism with socialistic characteristics, but also the interests of the masses. For example, except a report on COVID-19 issued by Caixin Network on January 7, other media collectively remained silent until Zhong Nanshan confirmed the human-to-human transmission for the first time on January 20. Especially the local media in Wuhan have been criticized by the public for their losing voice, lacking of responsibility, ignoring the public's right to be informed and betraying the social conscience.

2.2. Insist on reporting authentic news

The pandemic situation is closely related with people's lives and social stability. In particular, the COVID-19, as one of the most rapidly spreading, most widely contagious disease, is the most difficult one to prevent and control since the founding of the People's Republic of China. It has caused great concern and panic of the whole society, and the public had an extremely strong demand for real and authoritative information concerning the pandemic. Media bears the responsibility of releasing first-line interviews and collecting comprehensive information, so that the public can get rid of serious information asymmetry as soon as possible, by doing so, the media would timely relieve anxiety and panic, and orderly arrange the containment procedures. However, if the reporting style of journalists is not evidence-based, such as chasing after rumors, not thinking seriously, shadowing other's reports without proper investigation and verification, it is inevitable that the news reported by journalists will make mistakes or be faulty. As cognitive ability varies greatly among the public, once the false news is reported, it will mislead the public and cause serious negative social impacts, an example of which was found in the recent incident of "panic buying for Shuanghuanglian", and there were cases that experts misled the media, and the media misled the social opinion that finally misled the public. In addition, under the panic situation of the pandemic, all kinds of unconfirmed information or rumors were flooding

the cyberspace. Some media, in order to hit the headlines, hastily joined the hashtags and spread those rumors twice, which not only expanded the scope of dissemination, but also produced a deceptive effect of empowerment of authority, further expanded the harm of rumors. So, how can media avoid false information or rumors, and report real news? First of all, at the macro level, journalists should have unswerving socialist ideals, be willing to sacrifice for the benefit of the country and the people, and be able to shoulder the social and media responsibility, and adhere to the party's governance philosophy of "building the party for the public and governing for the people" throughout every pandemic news report. Secondly, at the micro level, journalists should go for live broadcasting, make real interviews, dig deeply and collect extensively, verify every detail, and never omit each step, restore the truth of the incident, record the objective facts, and provide the public with all-round, detailed and real pandemic information. It should be noted that when reporting news, media should not deliberately hype and exaggerate for their own personal interests such as the increase of click rates, which will cause unnecessary damage to social order.

2.3. Perform supervision duties

For this pandemic, the mechanism of joint prevention and control has been adopted by the government so that an unprecedentedly large number of institutions and personnel participated in it with numerous issues arising. In the process of fighting the pandemic, there will be inevitably some wrong decision-makings, slackness, inaction, concealment and other things that harm the people's interests. To build a good public opinion ecology requires media to stand in the position of the Party and the people, to shoulder their responsibility by means of criticizing, disclosing and rectifying the current situation. President Xi Jinping, at a CPC conference on press and public opinion, addressed that "public opinion supervision and positive publicity are unified. Media should face up to the problems existing in their work and the undesirable social phenomena, castigate the bad and extol the good, discover problems, and publish critical reports with accurate facts and objective analysis." It can be seen that the Central Committee with President Xi Jinping as the core attaches importance to and encourages news and public opinion supervision. Accordingly, media should avoid a mere focus on good news, ignoring unfair phenomena and work principles. They should practice the work principles and policies of Party's public opinion with a high sense of social responsibility and selfless professionalism of journalism, bravely face the pandemic threat, air the Party's voice, promote the implementation of the central policy and social progress, uphold fairness and justice, and safeguard the interests of the people. We should also recognize that president Xi Jinping stressed the unity of supervision by public opinion and positive publicity, which manifests that the supervision by public opinion

does not oppose positive propaganda. Although they are different in language style, function and oriented results, they both share the same goal in maintaining fairness and justice, advocating honesty and trustworthiness and adhering to the principle of the Party spirit. Both the supervision by public opinion and positive publicity have the same effect in maintaining the authority of governments at all levels and the credibility of media, and both have the same function in building a good ecology of public opinion and one of a healthy society. Take the incident of Huang Mouying as an example. The media reported that Huang, a confirmed case of COVID-19, successfully travelled from Wuhan to Beijing under the “lockdown” policy. On February 26, 2020, after the media’s reports, with the approval of the Political and Legal Commission of the Central Committee, led by the Ministry of justice, a joint investigation team together with the Supreme People’s Procuratorate and the Ministry of Public Security was formed to probe into the case. On March 2, the joint investigation team released the investigation results, believing that “Huang’s incident” was a serious one caused by negligence, which had a very bad impact on the public. Moreover, with the proposal of Discipline Inspection Committee and Supervision Committee of Hubei Province and approval by Hubei provincial Party Committee, nine mainly-related officials, who work at Hubei Provincial Department of Justice, the Provincial Prison Administration, Wuhan Women’s Prison, Wuhan Dongxihu District Public Security Bureau and other units, have been discharged and filed for further investigation for their poor leadership. Although this case of public opinion supervision is not in the form of positive publicity, the Central Government still faces the existing problems alike with great determination, which requires timely investigation and severe punishment on relevant personnel so as to improve the image of the government and maintains the authority of the Party.

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