Original Paper

A Study on the Efficiency of Disaster Information Communication Based on the Gate Keeper Theory

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Abstract

In recent years, major disasters have occurred frequently, with sudden floods, rampant epidemics, and typhoons... Faced with sudden disasters, the affected population is often caught unprepared. Under the background of "Internet +", the speed of information circulation has improved, but the news that the material needs of the disaster victims are not effectively met still often appears in the public's view. In order to improve the efficiency of disaster information dissemination and enable the efficient distribution of related materials, this paper discusses this issue based on the gatekeeper theory of communication science. With a view to tracing the source and clarifying the reasons for the low efficiency and poor effect of disaster mutual aid information dissemination under the background of "Internet +", this paper proposes solutions to the problems in combination with the gatekeeper theory of communication, to promote the rational distribution and utilization of resources, meet the material needs of disaster victims, and ensure the basic life of the people.

Keywords

gatekeeper theory, information dissemination, disaster mutual assistance

1. Overview of the Gatekeeper Theory

The "gatekeeper" theory is one of the earliest terms that entered the field of journalism in China, and it is also one of the earliest theories that Chinese scholars combined with the phenomena of news communication. In 1947, Kurt Lewin, an American scholar and one of the founders of communication studies, first proposed the concept of "gatekeeper". Only information content that conforms to group norms or "gatekeeper" value standards can enter the communication channel. He believed that

"gatekeeper" referred to individuals or groups with the decision-making power to allow something in or out. In 1950, communication scholar White introduced the concept of "gatekeeper" to the field of news communication research. He clearly expressed the gatekeeping model in his theory, believing that in the process of selecting material for news reporting, the communication medium forms a gate, and only a minority of news or information can pass through this gate and be delivered to the audience. The most obvious shortcoming of White's theory is that he regarded the "gatekeeper" as an isolated factor and ignored the social factors associated with the "gatekeeper" and their constraints on gatekeeping activities. Later, scholars such as Walter Geber transformed the "gatekeeper" theory into a social control model, elevating the personal "gatekeeping" of news editors to "gatekeeping" by news organizations and institutions with respect to the information. They promoted the research of "gatekeeper" and expanded and changed the "gatekeeper" model to organizations and social systems.

Since 1947, the gatekeeper theory has been continuously improving. The author believes that using the gatekeeper theory to analyze the channels of information dissemination in disaster situations can trace and clarify the reasons for the low efficiency and ineffective dissemination of disaster information, and propose corresponding solutions.

2. The Current Situation and Problems of Mutual Assistance Information Dissemination during Disasters

2.1 The Evolution of Disaster Information Exchange Platforms in the Internet Age

In today's rapidly developing Internet era, the application of disaster information exchange platforms is becoming increasingly open, with a variety of channels and platforms for information exchange, such as e-government, spokespersons, and new media platforms. During disasters, e-government platforms of governments at various levels have released information to achieve government transparency and guarantee citizens' right to know. At the same time, spokesperson is an important way for the government to communicate with the public. In the current Internet age, everyone can become a news publisher, making new media platforms the most frequently used communication platforms for the public.

2.2 Characteristics of Disaster Information Exchange Platforms in the Internet Age

2.2.1 The Influence of Media is Increasing

As a medium that represents public speaking and political supervision, the media should play an increasingly important role in the dissemination of crisis information. The media plays a role as an intermediary, timely uploading the current situation and reactions of the public, and issuing the latest developments, government measures, and other information. This not only satisfies the urgent information needs of the public, stabilizes their mentality, and maintains normal living order, but also meets the information needs of the government to understand public opinion and observe social conditions.

This is a two-way communication process. Finally, in the process of disaster disposal, the media plays a

role in guiding public opinion, and more is to assist the government in the transmission and interaction of disaster information.

When facing disasters, the public often feels at a loss, and at this time, media explanations or news reports are needed to alleviate their confusion, and the media naturally plays a good guiding role. This requires the media to follow the principle of information disclosure, to respect the facts, to respect the public's right to know, and also to choose from the perspective of social stability to scientifically guide the public to correctly understand the disaster and fully exert the positive power of news opinion guidance.

2.2.2 New Media Becomes the Main Force in Communication

Since entering the era of "Internet +", new media, with its fast dissemination speed, high efficiency, and wide range of dissemination characteristics, has gradually occupied a place in mass communication. Central departments and institutions can publish authoritative information through their official websites, use official channels such as public mailboxes and hotlines to solicit opinions, respond to public concerns, and communicate with the public. Most local governments and institutions have also established official microblogs, official accounts, TikTok, and other new media accounts, relying on the new media information platform and service platform to release all kinds of information in the form of text, image and text, video, etc., to spread and social hot spots. In addition, major authoritative news media and local news media have gradually begun to use new media accounts to spread the news to the public.

Therefore, after a disaster occurs, effectively utilizing new media is an important means of providing information, exchanging mutual assistance messages, and stabilizing public sentiments.

3. Limitations of Disaster Information Exchange Platforms in the Era of the Internet

3.1 Delayed Disclosure of Media Information

The media often waits for the government to release the message that "the disaster is initially under control" before publicizing information about the disaster to society. They do not adhere to the principle of safeguarding citizens' right to information and timely disclosure of information related to the public interest that they have obtained, preferring to adhere to the principle of stability. In modern society, with the development of new media, information cannot be completely blocked, and people transmit information quickly through the Internet, mobile phones, and other means. This may lead to a crisis of trust in the government even if the information is accurate. If it is inaccurate, it may lead to the spread of rumors and panic.

Most media are dependent on the government, even serving as vassals, and are constrained in the process of disseminating information, lacking independence. There are also issues with the professional ethics of the media. In addition, the media's quality and professionalism need to be improved, making disaster information more objective, professional, and in-depth.

Disaster information has a direct relationship with the public interest, but the media has failed to fully

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play its role in serving the public interest. Despite the significant attention and expectations from the public in the intermediary role played by the media, disaster victims are more dependent on and follow the media than usual, but the media often fails to fulfill its responsibilities in meeting public information needs and making full use of its information dissemination function to provide a platform for monitoring and restraining government actions.

In reality, the media's dissemination and interaction of disaster information is inadequate, and its role in guiding public opinion has not been fully realized. The concept of disaster information dissemination has entered the minds of various media outlets, making them pay special attention to and actively report on disaster-related news. However, problems have occurred in specific operations, resulting in the phenomenon of "media-manufactured crises." At the same time, driven by interests, media outlets generate fear to attract readers, and due to an insufficient sense of responsibility and judgment, misunderstanding or one-sided information is disseminated to the public, causing unnecessary panic and disorder and making it unable to guide public opinions.

3.2 The Level of Public Scrutiny Varies

In the era of traditional media, mainstream media occupy an absolute "quality control" position, and a large amount of information is presented in an orderly and systematic manner after the orderly and systematic screening. However, in the process of disaster mutual assistance message transmission using new media as the main information transmission platform, "everyone is a disseminator, everyone is a recipient." Anyone can become a "gatekeeper." In this case, the composition of the "gatekeeper" group is complex, with varying levels of education. They may have different perspectives on the same event, and it is difficult to ensure the quality of "gatekeep". Especially after a disaster occurs, the untrained group of "gatekeepers" lack a sufficient level of "gatekeepers" and unified leadership, which can easily lead to problems such as information blockage and non-circulation, resulting in the situation where mutual assistance information and materials cannot be effectively distributed.

4. The Particularity of the "Gatekeeper" Theory in the Dissemination of Disaster Information

In contemporary society, the main actors in exchanging disaster information are the government, the public, and the intermediary, namely the media. The government and media provide public services, ensuring citizens' right to access information. With the development of the internet, the roles of these actors are continuously changing.

4.1 The Role of the "Gatekeeper" in the Dissemination of Disaster Information

Taking the last two decades of public health emergencies in China as an example, including the SARS outbreak in 2002, the H7N9 outbreak in 2013, and the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019, the development features demonstrated in the three stages align with the theories of the value chain, value matrix, and value network.
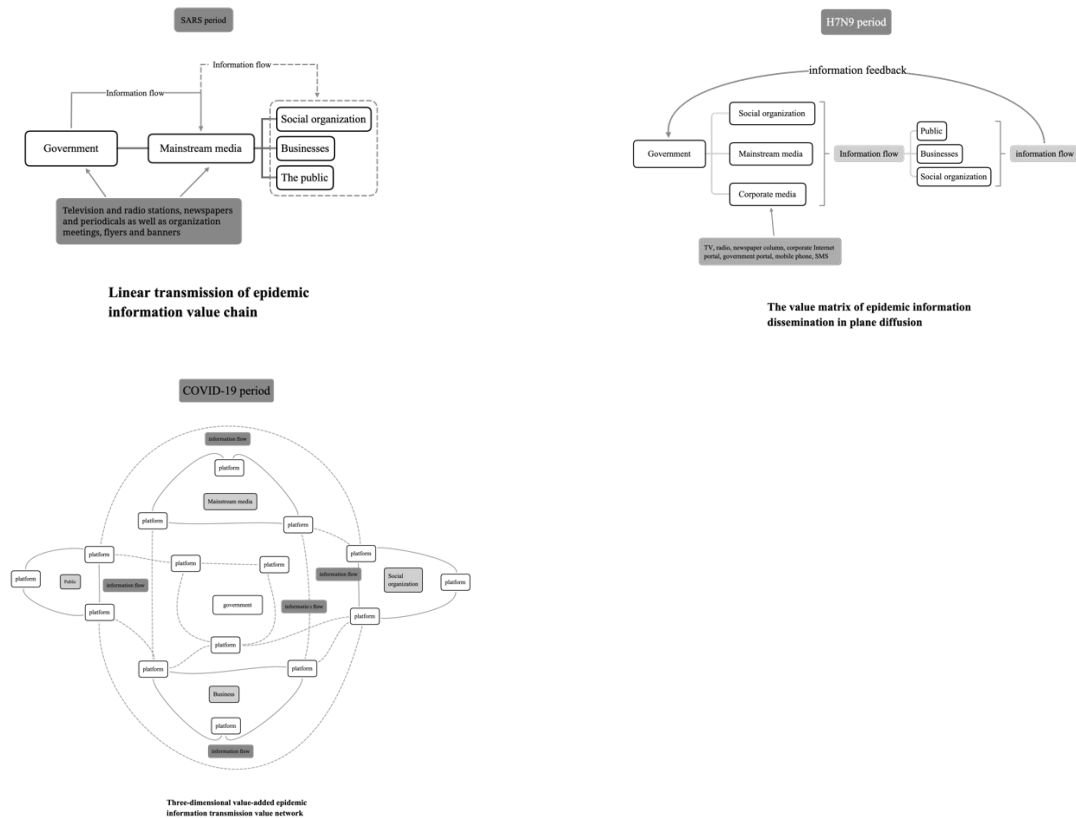
Figure 1. The Diachronic Evolution of Disaster Information Dissemination

In the early 21st century, disaster information was disseminated mainly from traditional media, providing one-way information on government emergency integration to the public. At that time, new media mainly used mobile phone text messages, and the linear information flow made the value of disaster information controlled by the government. In the early 2010s, with the role of the internet, the public could participate in the topic through new media such as Weibo and WeChat, based on government-provided information, thus achieving interactivity. In the late 2010s, large internet platforms have permeated daily life, and news is now produced and spread together by every ordinary person in the world and the media. All types of social entities can publish and disseminate disaster information on the internet, turning disaster information dissemination into a multi-dimensional value network.

In case of sudden disasters, finding the fastest way to build an information-sharing platform and effectively intervening in disaster information dissemination has become a global consensus. In the era of mass communication today, an effective information governance model for sudden disasters is crucial. It is essential to promote the open sharing of information, enhancing society's and the public's right to access disaster information.

4.2 The Basis for "Gatekeep" in the Dissemination of Disaster Information

Premier Li Keqiang pointed out in the government work report in 2023 that "it is necessary to improve the mechanism for preventing and controlling significant infectious diseases, emergency material protection system, and strive to ensure the people's health... Improve the social assistance system and provide timely assistance to those in need." The government ensures the public's right to access information through official information disclosure on government platforms and official websites, fulfilling the role of "gatekeeper". Mainstream and local media disseminate disaster information through public account articles, short video platforms, and other channels, they also perform the "gatekeeping" process. The public also plays a role in "gatekeeping" by disseminating help information and commenting on disasters through diverse ways such as word of mouth and posting related articles. It can be seen that the process of "gatekeeping" exists in various stages of disaster information dissemination. After a major disaster event, it is particularly important to carefully "gatekeep" the news dissemination of disaster information. Communication needs to be screened by highly skilled "gatekeepers" in order to obtain effective, fast, and high-quality distribution.

5. The Guidance of the "Gatekeeper" Theory on the Construction of Disaster Information Communication Platform

5.1 Media Level

The suddenness, uncertainty, scale, and complexity of disasters require new media to have a multi-functional, three-dimensional, and collaborative characteristic. New media has greatly influenced and changed the way the public obtains disaster information and even the entire pattern of disaster information dissemination.

The inherent defects of the media itself will inevitably affect the communication and interaction between the government and the public and even become an obstacle. Therefore, the government must control the media and impose necessary constraints. For things like the media that have unlimited possibilities, only through proper management and regulation can they develop toward a healthy and benign direction, promoting communication and interaction between the government and the people.

Firstly, the government should implement tiered management and establish an accountability system for information release for this new personalized information terminal media. Secondly, new media outlets and the mobile news industry should be guided to self-regulate, establish a network journalist qualification evaluation system, and improve the quality of network journalists. Thirdly, the self-discipline spirit of the media should be vigorously promoted. Fourthly, the disadvantages of new media should be transformed into advantages, promoting communication between the government and the public.

The news media has a particular sense of authority over public opinion, creating an "opinion environment" through its reporting activities, which has an impact and constraint on public opinion. In disaster management, the correct public opinion guidance of news media can minimize the losses

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caused by disasters, stabilize public emotions, maintain social stability, and prevent similar disasters from recurring. How the news media can guide public opinion correctly has become a major issue.

5.2 Linkage between Government and Media

In the process of dealing with disaster information, the government faces problems such as a narrow scope of information acquisition and untimeliness. With the largest information processing volume, this requires the news media to change roles, participate in information management, help the government deal with disasters, reduce harm and influence, ensure social order and stability, and better promote the construction of a harmonious society.

Disaster management is primarily the responsibility of the government, with the media assisting in its handling and coordinating disaster relief work. Firstly, the news spokesperson system should be jointly improved. Secondly, based on information disclosure, public opinion should be jointly guided. Under the premise of government information disclosure, the disaster information obtained and disseminated by the media will be true, which is beneficial for the government to respond to disasters. The government should strengthen research on the dissemination laws of news media and society itself, and guide the public correctly through the news media to achieve the goal of the full participation of the people in disaster relief. To achieve multi-agency cooperation in disaster management, it is first necessary to change the role, responsibilities, and management methods of the government in the past, and clarify the functions and positioning of other entities. The government should be in the most important position, playing a role in supervision, guidance, and coordination, formulating behavior norms for every major decision and participant. At the same time, improve disaster response capabilities through various means such as controlling the economy, law, and policies. At the same time, as the leader, the government also faces problems such as a narrow scope of information acquisition and untimeliness, but the media has a wide range of mass bases and can communicate with the public more conveniently and swiftly, and can mobilize the widest range of social forces. This requires the government to supervise the news media and urge it to play the role of a bridge between the government and the people.

New media plays an important role in disaster management with its advantages. On the one hand, it makes the transmission of disaster information timelier and more transparent, and communication interaction more convenient and efficient, which is beneficial to establish government credibility. But on the other hand, new media may reduce the government's credibility, and even trigger secondary public opinion disasters. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate these emerging media in an orderly manner, and actively guide and scientifically manage them, making them a powerful tool for the government to manage disaster information. The government has utilized new media to build various forms of disaster information transmission and interaction platforms, mainly composed of government Weibo and online news spokespersons. These platforms need to not only leverage new media, but also fully integrate the characteristics of emerging media, cultivate the government's communication characteristics, and enable them to play a different role in disaster resolution than in the past. The new

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platform can make use of the timeliness of new media to ensure the timely release of information and improve the transparency of disaster information through its openness. The highly interactive nature of new media can also be utilized to open up new communication channels for the government and the people. Through the above ways to play the role of new media public opinion guidance, establish a good government image.

A platform built based on new media inevitably brings inherent drawbacks, such as the randomness and distortion of information release caused by timeliness. The function of public opinion aggregation can easily lead to group polarization and make public opinion information become a "non-authoritative" gathering place. Therefore, the government should take measures for scientific management, fully leverage the advantages of self-media, and make the new platform perfect. Linkage and co-governance should play a role in the communication and interaction of disaster information between the government and the people. A specialized organizational structure and a reasonable management system should be established for the new media platform to be scientifically managed. And a relatively independent governmental new media management organization should be established to regulate relevant management systems and legal responsibilities, and effectively integrate administrative resources, ultimately forming a unified, authoritative, coordinated, and efficient management system. What cannot be ignored is that we should vigorously promote the real-name system and resolutely crack down on malicious rumor-mongers and lawbreakers.

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