

# *The Relationship between News Media and Natural Disasters*

Qingyao Li<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Wangfu high school, North Town of Seven, Changping, Beijing, China

a. postmaster@sdclny.cn

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** With the development of news media, disaster reports have become more and more popular, and the guidance of public opinion in such reports has gradually become a new issue. This paper takes the Wenchuan earthquake as the theme, mostly based on the reports on China Youth Daily in 2008 to see their content and dissemination effects. Through textual analysis, this paper looks into the languages, forms, pictures, and structures of these news reports. The results show that the news media play an important role in guiding public opinion on natural disasters. They can relax audiences, provide useful self-help information, and publish governmental guidelines. Online reporting and politics are inextricably linked, and the ways of communication are more diverse.

**Keywords:** media, disaster report, Wenchuan earthquake, *China Youth Daily*

## 1. Introduction

Natural disasters are often sudden and very destructive. In areas where natural disasters are frequent, they cause not only environmental pollution and economic losses but also casualties and public panic. In the 20th century, China has experienced nearly 800 earthquakes of magnitude 6 or greater. During these time periods, how to steer the population in a positive direction is a question for the media industry and the government to consider.

This paper discusses how the news media communicate when sudden disasters happen and how they cooperate with the government to pacify people's emotions, focusing on the reports about Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 in the *China Youth Daily* and *People's Daily*. It analyzes the keywords and picture content in reports and the difference between traditional media and self-publishing media.

Currently, research on news media has focused on the role of framing and opinion leaders, with an in-depth analysis of the structure of stories [1]. However, there is a lack of research in specific areas and they mostly use data models to analyze, without consideration of the dissemination of public opinions and other external factors [1].

This article analyzes two main issues. The first is the use of the implicit structure method. Those words that appeared more frequently in the reports of Wenchuan earthquake in the China Youth Daily are analyzed. Other components of the reports, especially photos and headlines, are also included to see how they form a big framework containing a positive orientation. The second point is to analyze false reports about the event government's responses, namely the interaction between the government and the news media. This paper argues that news media can help shape the image of the government in times of sudden disaster and there are still problems caused by journalists' attitudes towards disaster reporting and the form of interviews.

## 2. The Presentation Form and Role of News Media Coverage

### 2.1. Online Public Opinion in Sudden Disaster News

As a country with a vast territory and complex topography, China is undoubtedly one of the countries with the largest number of natural disasters in the world [2]. The topic of natural disasters is often discussed. A poorly worded news report or a faked video may cause public concern, set off unrest, and eventually lead to social panic. News media reports in various forms, such as websites, newspapers, short videos, and TV programs.

### 2.2. Form of Presentation

According to Alexa, *China Youth Daily's* website has a user view rate of 85.8% in China, making it a news media website with a large number of readers [3]. For example, the Wenchuan earthquake was covered by about 1,742 articles on the *China Youth Daily* website [4]. Initially, people tended to get information through newspapers and news broadcasts. The day after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, *China Youth Daily* published its 12,699th issue, which gave the location and magnitude of the earthquake clearly and mentioned the serious casualties [5]. According to the information office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, the earthquake severely damaged an area of about 500,000 square kilometers, with a total population of 46,256,000 people affected [5]. As the news spread rapidly, people knew the information and began to have a panic mentality. Then on May 14, 2008, the newspaper published its 12700th issue, which included several references to "earthquake relief", "President Hu Jintao", and "troops". These words form a variety of metaphorical structures [6]. Disaster is compared to struggle, and unity of struggle is necessary to win the battle. Thus, these texts had a positive impact, making people feel the strength of the country and the unity of the people in the midst of this disaster. In subsequent news reports, despite mentioning the death toll of more than 60,000 and the extensive damage, they were always accompanied by words such as "relief," "donations", and "determination, stabilizing people's fears.

Not only words but also pictures are often an important medium for spreading information. After a disaster, official media tend to release photos more quickly, giving people a direct view of the progress and the real situation. For example, in the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, according to *China Youth Daily*, pictures of crumbling buildings, injured faces, and soldiers carrying backpacks to support the victims all let people know the severity of the disaster. One of the photos that attracted strong attention at the time was a man in his 40s carrying a child wrapped in a red cloth. The large concrete field and collapsed mountain road behind him indicate that the area had experienced a major disaster [7]. The first impression of this photo is authenticity. It featured a father and his son, with the father carrying his son who died in the earthquake. The layers of mountains in the distance and the potholes in the concrete close by showed the father's hardships along the way. There is also a picture of a soldier from the rescue team moving heavy rocks with his bare hands and his look was serious [8]. All kinds of similar photos are often seen in the press, and the media tend to pay more attention to humanistic concerns and people first when dealing with disaster news. This makes more people willing to come together to help the people who suffer disasters and know that life is precious and respect others. In the case of Wenchuan earthquake, the concept of "disaster reporting with respect for human life and dignity" was completed [9]. The three stages of fact-value-guidance were also completed.

Also, the headline is often the main element of the overall news framework, accurately reflecting the media's characterization of the disaster and their focuses [10]. On the seventh day after the Wenchuan earthquake, *China Youth Daily* headlined its 12705th issue with "Keep fighting, go ahead". The saying that "All the people are united in the fight against the earthquake" was also frequently

used in several newspapers [4]. This reflects the fact that the media at that time mainly focused on rescue and countermeasures. The saying that "Disaster is not news, earthquake relief is news" also gave the highest respect to the dead and the greatest comfort to the living.

### 3. The Roles of Traditional Official Media for Government and Society

#### 3.1. Characteristics of Traditional Media

Xinhua was the first online medium to report the Wenchuan earthquake, 32 minutes after the sudden disaster occurred, and CCTV was the first to broadcast live at 3 p.m. and launched a 24-hour special program called "Earthquake Relief, All Will Be One". Subsequently, major media platforms opened special sections and fundraising channels about the Wenchuan earthquake. According to information from the Civil Affairs Bureau, within six months after the earthquake, 76.214 billion yuan was raised for the Wenchuan earthquake victims on May 12, of which 65.2 billion yuan was donated [11]. According to a survey published by Lingnan Culture Research Center of Guangzhou Academy of Social Sciences, 68.2 percent of people trust the information released by official media, while only 3.1 percent trust online forums [11]. Most of the traditional media are corporatized and controlled by the state, and they are public interest institutions [12]. Therefore, the choice of content will be restricted, not to mention the dissemination of false information.

Today's self-publishing media publish information quickly but lack content integration and a neutral stance. More exaggerated information attracts readers' attention. On the contrary, the traditional official media have their own well-organized system and prestige accumulated over the years, which greatly improves their credibility.

#### 3.2. Methods and Guidelines

All of the reports above come from news networks established by the state and therefore they are linked to politics. Governmental departments are the gatekeepers. Any poorly written reports that are widely disseminated, are likely to cause social unrest, which will be bad for the national government. For example, on May 12, 2008, a message appeared on the *People's Daily* Online, stating that "there will be an earthquake of magnitude 2-6 in Beijing between 22:00 and 24:00 on the night of May 12" [13]. This news was quickly and widely reprinted, and even though it was later clarified, many Beijingers did not dare to go home to sleep that day but spent the night in their cars. This caused unnecessary panic. There were also many rumors that caused people to start questioning the post-disaster relief efforts and spreading various rumors about the disaster area, such as water contamination and aftershocks. Thus, disaster events are also a test for the government and if a news article with negative energy is allowed to be spread, then it may cause a crisis of people's trust in the national government.

Likewise, new opportunities can emerge from crises. The media can help the government improve its self-image. For example, after the Wenchuan earthquake, the news media were the first to publicize the knowledge of self-help after earthquake and the State Council Information Office broadcasted the latest progress of disaster relief in real time every day [9]. These moves showed the spirit of the government and the efficient work progress in sudden disasters, which established a firm and reliable image in the public's mind.

In the aftermath of a disaster, the news media also report many heroic deeds and the core ideas of the Party Central Committee, and vigorously disseminate knowledge about disaster response. It helps the government in the aftermath and crisis prevention. For example, compared to the earthquake in Lushan 5 years later, both the ethics of the journalistic profession and the effectiveness of reporting were significantly improved [14]. It made people feel that under the leadership of the government,

people overcame natural disasters again and again, enhancing their sense of identity and expanding the influence of the government.

The government sets boundaries for catastrophic news and masters mass media, changing different language skills in different places, such as the formulation of the "Network Security Law", "Internet Information Service Management Measures" and other relevant laws and regulations [15]. The main target is the media that lack a sense of social responsibility and authenticity. Article 10 of the Regulations on the Administration of the Publication Market released on May 31, 2016, clearly mentions that the content of the report should be in line with the organizers identified by the publication administrative department of the State Council as well as the correct guiding ideology [16]. Thus people can find a precise niche within their business and serve the people and society.

After a disaster, the news media first need to convey the real live situation to the people in a timely manner so that everyone is aware of the situation in real time. Moreover, keywords and appropriate phrases need to be well thought out. It is necessary to make a connection between the government and the people, report the government's actions to the people, and give feedback on the people's attitude towards the government, so as to promote the harmonious co-existence of the whole society.

#### 4. Problems with the News Media in Disasters

Under the government's control, there are many people engaged in the news media. They seize this opportunity and use news reports to court the leaders, rather than focusing on the people and events. For example, on July 9, 2013, China Youth Daily had an article memorializing the Zhejiang girls who were killed in the Asiana Airlines crash, with a line that said, "If they were alive and knew that Cai Qi, the head of the Organization Department of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee, was paying attention to them both, Wang Linjia might have opened her eyes wide in surprise and smiled, while Ye Mengyuan might have jumped up in disbelief " [4]. The release of this story prompted many people to question whether the journalist was fawning over the powers that were with this story. These actions blurred the focus of the story but showed favor to the leaders.

Attention were also paid to the restoration scenes and people's feelings in the disaster area. All these are to make the news reports more authentic. However, when journalists interview victims, they will mention the scene of the disaster, which will inevitably cause secondary psychological trauma to those who survived. For example, Jiang Min, known as the "strongest Chinese policeman", lost her mother in the earthquake. When the reporter met Jiang Min, who was taking care of the children in the disaster area, he asked her, "When you are helping the victims, do you think that there is nothing you can do to save your own parents and daughters when you see the children" Jiang Min, who had been heartbroken for days but struggled to support herself, was unable to speak and fainted as soon as she left the tent. In the news reports, there are often many crying and heartbreaking photos. Therefore, overly trying to arouse people's empathy is also a problem.

#### 5. Conclusion

The news media are a double-edged sword that is inextricably linked to politics. The state is dominated by the attitudes of the people. Therefore, every story has to consider social factors, especially traditional news stories supported by the state, such as the *China Youth Daily*.

*China Youth Daily* met the government's basic requirements for news media in the Wenchuan earthquake, such as real-time, truthful, comprehensive, and open reports. The tragic personal experiences were elevated to the national spirit and people's fighting spirit, and they emphasized the cooperation between people and the government to overcome the difficulties. The main idea that *China Youth Daily* wanted to highlight was the unity of the people and their determination to fight against the earthquake. Thus, it also achieved the role that the government wants media coverage to

play in natural disasters, namely to inspire people and increase cohesion. This is in great contrast to self-publishing media which do not need to take politics into account and are mainly about personal ideas. In the absence of restrictions, the information is published quickly, but it is not likely to spread widely. First of all, there is no certain time sink and lack of readers. The second is that most discussion platforms do not allow false and extreme statements to spread widely and thus raise political issues. Nowadays, in an increasingly informative and digital era, freedom of expression has a lot of prerequisites and legal controls. Everything is mainly based on the establishment of a stable social environment.

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