

Crisis Communication in China

*Strategies taken by the Chinese
Government and Online Public Opinion*



Wei Cui

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIETY



CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN CHINA

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Strategies Taken by the Chinese
Government and Online Public
Opinion

BY

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Tongji University, China



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
China CDC	Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention
CNN	Cable News Network
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Centre
CPC	Communist Party of China
NEMS	National Emergency Management System of China
State Council	The State Council of the People's Republic of China
WHO	World Health Organization

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 AN OVERVIEW OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN CHINA

Options of strategies for organisations facing crisis are identified and seen important by a lot of crisis communication theories, and this book aims to compare these against the Chinese government's practice during the H7N9 crisis. The Chinese government is a huge organisation marked by horizontal fragments (e.g., regional governments) and vertical blocks (e.g., government departments with hierarchies) (Guo, 2013). Within this complex structure, policy coordination is a major problem (Lampton & Lieberthal, 1992, p. 126). According to Destler (1980, p. 8) and Cray et al. (2017), policy coordination involves the management of all policy decision processes and the oversight of official action and implementation. In the Chinese context, the president and other senior executives, particularly the premier and members of the State Council and Politburo standing committees, can be replaced at short notice (Lampton & Lieberthal, 1992, p. 127).

The impact on crisis management of the hierarchical nature of governance in China is demonstrated in Chen's study of the 2009 Sichuan earthquake. This included surveys in Beijing (China's capital) and Chengdu (the capital of Sichuan Province) and took a public relations perspective (Chen, 2009). Chen argues that during this crisis the Chinese government's system of information departments and spokespersons at central, provincial, city and county levels meant that the head of the crisis communication team had direct access to top leaders, which helped central government manage the crisis communication of Sichuan earthquake effectively (2009, p. 189).

However, although the Chinese government set up crisis communication teams at all levels, the hierarchical organisation of the government meant that leadership was not sufficiently decentralised to allow lower-level institutions to

respond to crises autonomously. Thus, crisis communication in this context can be characterised as a top-down process in which the leadership makes decisions for lower-level authorities (Chen, 2012, p. 463). Based on this feature of governance in China, this research focuses not only on Chinese central government but also on local governments such as those in Shanghai and Nanjing, where the impact of the H7N9 crisis was the most serious.

With the SARS outbreak in 2003, research on crisis communication in China developed considerably (Cheng, 2020; Qiu et al., 2018). Two main approaches were applied in studies of crisis communication during the SARS incident. One involved examination of media reporting of the outbreak. A number of comparative studies were undertaken of the reports issued by different media sources. Tian and Stewart (2005) compared how CNN and the BBC reported on the crisis. Another approach to SARS research was to critique the crisis communication strategies adopted by different governments, such as in Hong Kong, mainland China and Canada (Fleming & Zhang, 2005; Lee, 2009; Tyshenko, 2014). An example of this is Ding's (2009) rhetorical analysis of the official communication and interaction between the Chinese government and the World Health Organization.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, public relations departments have been established as 'information departments' in all regions of the country (central, provincial, municipal and county), and these are allocated independent budgets and are obliged to follow standardised practices and procedures. In this way, the government's public relations activities have been given full 'legitimacy'. Crisis communication is the most institutionalised of these activities (Chen, 2009). According to Boin et al. (2016), political crises are accompanied by uncertainty and discourse control; authorities try to decrease uncertainty by taking over the sources of crisis management, in particular, those they do not trust.

Media reports will affect the public's awareness and evaluation of a crisis. Therefore, effective communication is needed to deal with the crisis correctly. According to Roshan et al. (2016), while crisis communication is about informing the public to mitigate the effects of a crisis, communication through the media – which is the way that the Chinese government communicates with the public – can make it more complex to deal with a crisis. To some extent this is because of complicated context in Chinese society, and any crisis communication discussion involving the Chinese government and Chinese media cannot ignore the influence of unique cultural values in China.

1.2 FROM SARS TO COVID-19

While past public crises were addressed by focussing on protecting the public safety and maintaining public order (Farazmand, 2001), public crises today, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, require different responses and face more challenges.¹ The rapid global spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) during the winter of 2003 served as a wake-up call for the Chinese government in terms of how crisis communication should be addressed. Ten years later, a similar public crisis, involving avian influenza A(H7N9) (herein referred to as H7N9), emerged in China, and research on the crisis communication process in this case will contribute to understanding of how practice has developed over time. Based on a comparison of the crisis management process during the SARS and H7N9 events, Liu (2014) argues that China has learned from the SARS event and made great progress in the management of public health crises.

In 2003, SARS broke out in China, and this is considered the beginning of modern crisis management and communication in China (Mason, 2010). The government's emergency response capacity was severely tested, the media was challenged for failing to provide adequate information and little information was released in a climate of distrust and suspicion (Tong & Zhang, 2020, p. 165). After the SARS outbreak, a web-based infectious disease-reporting system was built, and this was put in place at the beginning of 2004. This played a vital role in the response to H7N9 (Seto, 2015). On the basis of this system, the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) can receive daily notifications of all newly diagnosed cases.

Since the SARS event, the Chinese government has given more attention to crisis communication management, and it has introduced a series of laws, regulations and contingency plans for public crisis response (Qiu et al., 2018). On 7 May 2003, the State Council released the *Regulation on Preparedness for and Response to Emergent Public Health Hazards*, which requires the health administration department of the state council to formulate national plans for the urgent handling of crises according to the rapid response principle, and to submit this to the state council for ratification.² In the same year,

1 COVID-19 was first found in December 2019 in China and has spread globally, resulting in a pandemic.

2 State Council: The State Council of the People's Republic of China, is the highest executive organ of State power and administration. The State Council follows the system of premier responsibility in work while various ministries and commissions under the State Council follow the system of ministerial responsibility.

the Chinese government enacted *Measures for the Administration of Information Reporting in Monitoring Public Health Emergencies and Epidemic Infectious Disease Situations*. This supports the construction of command systems and clarifies the responsibilities and the leadership role of chief executives of central and local governments, previously held by the CDC. In 2004, the government added SARS and avian flu as notifiable diseases and revised the Law on the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases. On 3 April 2013, four days after the first confirmed H7N9 case, the government issued a guide: *Prevention and Control of Human Infection with H7N9 (2013)*. According to these laws and regulations, a series of social innovations enacted after the SARS event has improved China's ability to combat any emerging crisis.

Not only government regulations but academic research proliferated in this area after SARS. In 2008, the Wenchuan earthquake provided a further boost to the volume of research on domestic public crisis management and communication (Lo, 2014). After 2008, academic research on this topic entered a new stage. Through online communication people are increasingly living in a global village made up of both real and virtual societies. In this context, crisis events in any field can easily become public crises, posing serious challenge to government crisis management. The Internet and various mobile devices, with digital media at the core, began playing an important role in the communication and management of public crises. The development of digital media has had a major impact on the life cycle of public crises in China and on the evolutionary cycle of public opinion (Wolf, 2015).

In 2003, China was in the 2G era with a network speed of only 150 kilobits per second. According to the 11th *Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet Network*, published in July 2003 by the China Internet Information Centre (CNNIC), China's Internet users at the time were relying mainly on desktop computers. The total number of Internet users was 68 million, and the number using other devices (mobile terminals, information appliances) to access the Internet was only 1.8 million (CNNIC, 2003). Since then, communication technologies have continued to evolve. According to the 45th *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*, as of April 2020, the number of mobile instant messaging users in China reached 0.89 billion, and mobile news users reached 0.731 billion, accounting for 80.9% of mobile Internet users (CNNIC, 2020).³ Mobile terminals and social media have become the main channels for information acquisition. Due to the widespread

3 The report can be found at http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxyzbg/hlwjtjbg/202004/t20200428_70974.htm.

use of digital media, it is crucial to consider the role of digital media when studying crisis communication in China.

In late March 2013, the Chinese government reported the existence of a new strain of avian influenza A(H7N9) that could infect humans and birds (poultry). Subsequently, the virus was blamed for 39 deaths and 185 cases of severe illness in China by 31 May 2013. The spread of H7N9 lasted for about two months, and on 31 May, the Ministry of Agriculture of China officially announced that the H7N9 bird flu ‘basically ended’.⁴ Most preliminary studies suggested that the primary source of infection was poultry contaminated by the H7N9 virus, but the possibility of limited human-to-human transmission could not be excluded. As of 31 January 2014, no study had proven that person-to-person contact was a route for the spread of H7N9, and a vaccine for preventing it remained unavailable. This ambiguity surrounding the route of infection and the lack of successful development of a vaccine led to more public panic (Gu et al., 2014). In order to reduce public panic and maintain normal social order when facing a public crisis like the H7N9 event, communication must be at the core of crisis management strategies. As Regester and Larkin (2008) argue, only effective communication management can lead to effective crisis management.

According to Barton (1993, p. 26), the selection of crisis communication strategies is key to whether an organisation can survive a crisis. In order to avoid a potential H7N9 pandemic, the Chinese government pursued a variety of strategies, such as shutting down live poultry markets and educating the public about preventive behaviours. However, the extent to which communication between the Chinese government and the public was efficient requires further investigation.

This book analyses the crisis communication strategies selected by the Chinese government in response to the H7N9 public health crisis, and it explores how contextual factors influenced this selection. Contextual factors are a range of variables that can affect crisis communication in a certain country. These include, but are not limited to, social, cultural, economic, political and technological factors. This thesis focuses on cultural, socio-political and technological factors. In other words, this thesis analyses the Chinese government’s top-down approach by examining how it conducted crisis communication when facing H7N9 bird flu, but also analyses bottom-up responses by examining how cultural issues influenced this process and focussing on the public reaction to the Chinese government’s strategies.

4 The sentence ‘H7N9 had basically ended’ is a direct translation from Report No. 1950 of the Ministry of Agriculture of China.

The public perspective here relates to its view of the government. Social media provides greater opportunities for Chinese citizens to pay attention to, interact with and participate in politics, and this has boosted citizens' confidence in the political realm. Unlike traditional media, social media offers citizens more opportunity to express their opinions, as it provides online platforms where the public can post and comment anonymously. Although the Chinese government continues to carry out supervision and censorship of social media, it has become a significant contributor to the expansion of people's rights and has increased engagement with authorities, thus helping to build an environment for free expression and exchange of ideas (Ye et al., 2017, p. 707). The public perspective is an important element to consider in research on crisis communication. In this book, government newspapers, press conferences held by the Chinese government and government Weibo posts are selected to represent government perspective, while metropolitan newspapers and public Weibo posts are used to represent the perspective of the public.

The main purpose of this book is to study crisis communication strategies in China during the H7N9 crisis, examining not only the government's management of the crisis but also the public's reaction to the official communication process. The analysis covers the Chinese government's crisis communication strategies in response to the H7N9 outbreak, using content analysis and critical discourse analysis to explore government and public perspectives. Content analysis of newspapers, press conference transcripts and government Weibo posts was carried out to identify what strategies the Chinese government adopted. Press conference transcripts were analysed using content analysis and critical discourse analysis to examine how the strategies were shaped by cultural factors. In addition, the research also involved a bottom-up approach, analysing metro newspaper reports and posts made by the public on Weibo, to explore how the public responded to the strategies adopted by the Chinese government with both content analysis and critical discourse analysis.

Moreover, rather than merely describing what strategies were taken by the Chinese government, these were compared with Coombs' SCCT to determine whether there were any differences in the strategies outlined in this framework, which originated from a Western context, and the government's approach. The influence of cultural factors and digital media were taken into account.

The Coombs' SCCT framework has been selected because it defines crisis situations and introduces specific crisis communication strategies and has been widely used in crisis communication research. However, as a theory proposed and developed in a Western context, its application in a non-Western culture should be examined because cultural factors play an important role in the selection of crisis communication strategies (Yu & Wen, 2003, p. 54). In this

research, power distance index, the level of collectivism, uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980; Minkov & Hofstede, 2012), humanism and saving face (Yu & Wen, 2003) are five cultural elements used to explain the crisis communication process.

Even though cultural influences and the role of digital technology have been discussed in some existing literature (Huang et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2017), few studies have attempted to integrate these elements into crisis communication theories. In order to fill these gaps, this research develops a comprehensive theory that incorporates cultural elements and digital technology, which shows new strategies emerged from cultural traditions and the development of digital media. The emergence of new strategies proves that crisis communication theory needs to take account of cultural differences.

The book was written during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this crisis, urban and rural communities have played a more significant role in epidemic prevention in China since the outbreak of COVID-19 (Rong, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). For example, to ensure the safety of community personnel, and to promote the community's overall epidemic preventive capabilities, Chinese communities have generally adopted the method of taking body temperature before residents entering the gate (Gupta & Kakkar, 2020; Huang et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020).

The community-based crisis communication process is more like a service than management. To create a more collaborate service provider system, public services must be inclusive and considered as safe, trustworthy and accountable. And trust in public services is often regarded as a condition for community development and prosperity. The trust in public services is to some extent based on the predictability and transparency of service processes, as well as the performance and execution of services. In other words, services with good participation need to be understandable and transparent to be trusted. As the same type of public health crisis as H7N9, it has brought greater and unexpected challenges for governments around the world, and it is of great significance to trace the crisis communication during H7N9, which will help us better understand the practice of crisis communication in China when facing this kind of crisis.

1.3 METHODOLOGY

In order to explain crisis communication in China, here the author will present the research methodology used in this book. It first introduces the overall

research design, discussing selected methods and media texts and how they help answer the research questions. This is followed by detailed description of each method, which are case study, content analysis and critical discourse analysis, and will end with a discussion of the ethical issues associated with this study.

1.3.1 Research Design

As mentioned before, there is potential for differences between Coombs' SCCT framework and the practice of crisis communication in China since the theory was proposed and developed in the Western context. In this study, to acknowledge the possible differences and explore cultural factors, the following research questions have been formulated.

Are there differences between Coombs' SCCT framework and crisis communication strategies taken by the Chinese government when responding a public crisis such as H7N9? If there are, how do cultural factors relate to this process, and how does the public respond to the Chinese government's strategies?

Thus, this book will analyse the government's strategies of crisis communication in response to the H7N9 outbreak in China and, through a bottom-up approach, explores how the public responded to the government's strategies at that time. Three sub-questions are addressed: What crisis communication strategies were adopted by the Chinese government when responding to H7N9? What cultural factors help to explain why the Chinese government selected these crisis communication strategies? How did the public react to the strategies taken by the Chinese government, especially the use of digital media technology? These three sub-questions identify three themes of this research, which crisis communication strategies taken by the Chinese government, cultural factors and public response. Each sub-question will be answered by the research method selected and the following empirical analysis will be presented following these three sub-questions.

In order to answer these research questions, this book uses a mixed methods design, which involves gathering and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. The mixed method involving quantitative and qualitative method is widely used when studying crisis communication. In order to explore institutionalising public relations of Chinese government crisis communication during 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Chen (2009) employs telephone interviews first, then adopts content analysis of media reports and