The Restructuring of Pseudo-environment in the Wenchuan Earthquake Coverage

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1. Information Age Calls for Restructuring of Pseudo-environment

Walter Lippmann’s term pseudo-environment refers to a meditated truth structured by the media or by individuals themselves through stories and pictures.\(^1\) As the term “pseudo” suggests, no one can avoid fiction as he cannot always experience reality. Most times, he tends to seek information in an environment built
by media reports to form judgment. Through the years, the Chinese media have been constantly preserving the role as being the government mouthpiece and have set up as a result a mostly one-way information flow. Yet with the globalization and informatization, the Chinese media is striding into a new era to build a new pseudo-environment, in which the public can perceive the society and development in a more transparent and real-world way. The restructuring of the pseudo-environment is realized via media role change.

Marshall McLuhan pinpointed that the media is the message and the personal and social consequences of any medium result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs. The "new scale" in evaluating today's media arena in China has taken shape. In the traditional perception established at the preliminary stage of China's opening up and reform in the 1970s, the media played the role of being the "mouthpiece" of the government and served as a tool for government propaganda. This is quite justifiable as over that time the country's economic and political development was in their early days. As the development of the technology and telecommunications was backward, it is necessary for the government to utilize the mainstream media, especially the newspaper, TV and radio broadcasting, as a way to popularize and publicize its macro-economic policies. It is the media's function as the government mouthpiece that ensured political and economic measures to reach most households both in cities and in the countryside. And via centralized media propaganda, most the sources in the society could be mobilized and dispatched to places in need. The media's role as the government mouthpiece met the demand of social development of the past and guaranteed the smooth social transition from political friction to economic advancement.

However, after the opening up and reform policies were put in full swing, the country's economic and technological development picked up speed and unprecedented changes were brought upon to every aspect of social life. The media broadened people's view and tightened the interconnection between peoples and countries. Under the influence of globalization and the emergence of the Internet technology, people began to ask for more transparent and immediate information beyond government propaganda. The society was transformed into an information age. By then, a new standard with which the media report news is to be defined and established. It requires the media to play not only the role of being a government mouthpiece organ, but the watchdog of social development and the provider of information to the public.
As Yu Guoming put it, "There is a huge gap in the country’s media development and the information disclosure. The media tend to report only positive news and downplay negative ones and the authority regards the media as the mere tool for propaganda. As a result, the news in China fail to report issues closely related to people’s life and social development in an all-round, reliable and immediate way."[3]

The present calling of the people for political, economic and democratic changes leads to the transformation of the media. In contrast to the common practice of the media in the past, the Wenchuan earthquake coverage leaves a legacy to the society in a way that the media undertake new roles to quench public thirst for the openness of information.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, media channels of newspaper, TV, radio and the Internet cooperated with each other to deliver timely and transparent earthquake rescue and relief news, and in turn, the society witnessed unprecedented media influence as people poured in to offer donations and voluntary help. On one hand, the media sector enjoyed much freedom in reporting news, which was heralded originally from the government’s vow to open information and endow press freedom after winning the bid for the Beijing Olympic Games. On the other hand, the Internet technology and the maturing of the professional media practitioners also contribute to the successful earthquake reports. In addition, in the information age, it is basically impossible to cover up a magnitude 8 earthquake and its huge casualties and devastating damage.

2. Reconstruction of Pseudo-environment through New Media Roles

Lippman in Public Opinion upheld the idea that the function of news is to signal an event and this signaling eventually is a consequence of selection and judgment. Thus journalism is able to create and thus sow the seeds of opinion. When properly utilized, the manufacture of consent, Lippmann argues, is useful and necessary for modern society because “the common interests” — the general concerns of all people — are not obvious in many cases and only become clear upon careful data collection and analysis, which most of the people are either uninterested in or incapable of doing. Most people, therefore, must have the world summarized for them by those who are well-informed.[4]

In the earthquake report, the performance of the Chinese media provides the preconditions for the reconstruction of a media environment that bridges the gap between truth and people’s thirst for information. The media reported on the
“common interests” issues by becoming a timely information provider and through manufacturing consent the media accomplished the roles of being a relief coordinator. Since the pseudo-environment is well created, the earthquake stories reflected by the mass media were well received both by home audience and the international ones. Though the media in practice would not cover all details and aspects of the real truth, by properly utilizing information and employing new concept of open information, the media demonstrated its function in sowing seeds of opinion among the people, namely, achieved the role of being the public opinion collector. The changes in the guiding principles of the media coverage led to positive results as the media undertook the role of being the rumor breaker. This is in sharp contrast of the previous SARS reports.

The earthquake reports reversed the concept that media transparency in delivering bad news would undermine the national image, instead, the Chinese government earned much applause and reputation worldwide due to its immediate and transparent news reporting in the Wenchuan earthquake. The new roles media played can be distinguished as follows.

1) The information provider

The Wen Hui Daily from Hong Kong carried report on May 22, 2008, saying Chinese media have done a good job in reporting the earthquake and their western counterparts are having difficulty in pointing fingers at the Chinese media. Shortly after the quake, there were blanket reports about the casualties, the damage, the relief work and Premier Wen’s visits to Wenchuan. Nearly 300 news agencies and TV channels from over 100 countries adopted reports from Chinese media and the public chose to watch homemade news about the earthquake.

It is a big tide turned for the Chinese in seeking big news. According to a survey, before the earthquake, most Chinese tend to seek information online via foreign media when there is breaking news. In contrast, in the earthquake reports, the public chose to get homemade news in the first place because the mainstream Chinese media began to set news agenda based on human interest and the coverage on the earthquake provided first-hand information on the death toll and casualties, which was the top concern of the people in the time of a national emergency.

The progress made in the earthquake reports comes from the breakthrough in the media routine of “avoiding ‘bad’ news.” In the past, the media practice seemed to tell that “bad” or “negative” news should be avoided in order not to shake the morale of Chinese people in building the country’s modernization. However, the
Wenchuan earthquake reports prove that the transparency in carrying the news is very conducive to the relief work and to the buildup of national unity. By catching up with the latest news reports, the people knew how and when to send in their help.

(2) The rumor breaker

A consequence in reporting a national emergency at full length is that scary stories may strike up the nerve of the public. But if handled properly and timely, the panic will be appeased and reversed. Take the SARS epidemic as an example, when news about the disease was covered up, rumors set in which threatened the social stability. Yet when people got to learn more about the origin, development and treatment of the disease, their worries turned out to become confidence in the government’s ability in curbing the epidemic. The long-term turnout was positive after the government freed up media reports.

It is the similar case in the earthquake coverage. During the days after May 12, 2008, rumors on possible occurrence of large-scale devastation loomed in, which led to public panic and concerns on issues of possible epidemics, food safety and water shortage. A case in point is the water crisis on May 15 in Chengdu. Rumors about an explosion at a chemical plant nearby the city spread quickly and people began to grab at any drinking water available at the stores. Yet at the critical moment, the government in alliance with the media set a good example on guiding the public in the right direction. It convened news releases guaranteeing the citizens on water and food supply via mainstream and new media of TV, the Internet, radio and newspaper. Then the chaos didn’t last long and the normal life was restored. It demonstrated the media played a key role in providing information and breaking the rumor. Generally speaking, in the earthquake reports, the media adapted to the needs of the people and didn’t stick to the traditional way of “not reporting negative news.” Compared to the 1976’s Tangshan earthquake, it is a great leap forward.

(3) The relief work coordinator

From the earthquake reports, lots of lessons were learned. One of them is that the media can play a role more than just a news provider. In fact, the media could be a leading part in the relief work as well. Following the earthquake, connection with the remote rural areas was cut out and the information flow between the central government and local levels in the disaster-hit zone was not smooth. In this circumstance, the media, especial new media channel of the Internet and citizens...
from the grassroots level, contributed a lot to the rescue work and distribution of relief goods. The army and the rescue teams also made the use of the media to get feedback of the relief efforts and clues on how to reach out to the most needed people.

For example, lots of forums were set up by netizens to collect information on victims in remote mountainous regions and later on, Internet bulletins served a platform for those who lost the whereabouts of their families in the quake zone. TV stations alongside with radio broadcasting helped out in sourcing information on people who need help and places that lack relief work and donations.

(4) The spokesperson of public opinions

The transformation of the media role not only mirrors the change in China’s media development, but also reflects the deeper social implication of the country. China has long been dominated by the elite voices and influence. Nowadays, people at the grassroots level are having the urge to participate more in the country’s social and cultural life. The new technology enables them to get to know the news from a wide range of ways, comment on it, and even report news from the citizen journalists’ perspective. But mainly, the people can get their ideas heard by the media and to some degree, make changes through media influence and supervision.

In the earthquake news reporting, the public were invigorated and mobilized by a transparent media to disclose some of the misconducts in the relief work. For instance, the Internet revealed a case that some tents for the displaced people in the quake zone were sent to a residential building in Chengdu for individual use. In another story, the public were suspicious of the procurement prices of tents and foods by the Red Cross. The prices made known on the Internet were quite high, even higher than the retail prices. Soon after the media publicized these news sourced from the public, the misbehaviors were rectified. Besides, there were also follow-up stories on the collapse of school buildings and its possible relevance to corruption by some government officials. The public began to acknowledge the media as an advocate for their voices and for social and cultural democracy.

3. Significance and Outlook of Media Role Change

The media's traditional role of a government mouthpiece is also regarded as a “propaganda model” which is a structural model that focuses on how market forces impact overall patterns of media behavior. In modern times, the model has been updated as the media are losing domination in information release. Individuals can
become news announcers and participate actively in researching the news. In this backdrop, the media need change to fit in the country's rapid development.

Indeed, the change of the media role reflected from the earthquake reports shows the advancement of China's political and democratic process, which is also widely acknowledged abroad. In this way, the earthquake coverage has changed to some extent the Chinese government's image internationally to the better, and with less bias by foreign media toward the government's efforts in the earthquake information release, foundation was laid for China to enter the world media dialogue system and change the political and ideological hostility held by the western countries.\(^5\) By the review of the earthquake coverage, it is of vital importance to get people informed of the truth and prepared in a crisis. Yet China's way of developing the media and democracy would be different from any other countries. At present, one of the priorities of the government is still to stabilize the society so as to provide a good environment for economic development. As China has the world's largest population, media's function of delivering government policies to the public cannot be relinquished. In this way, the total abandoning of media's traditional role is impractical. To find the means to develop a unique way for media development in China is the focal point of understanding the interdependence of the media and society.

In response to the transformation of the social and media arena, it is the need and a must for the mainstream media to shift the propaganda model to the construction of a new pseudo-environment which entails a more progressed and interactive media role. Media's performance in recent years' public emergency events has been a process for its progress and maturity. The Wenchuan earthquake coverage highlighted the media have prioritized the people's rights in acquiring information as its news agenda and developed its own influence in public supervision and monitoring. Throughout 2008, events and news release of public crises have frequented, such as the toxic milk powder scandal and the violent protest in Guizhou Province. The media have been furthering its responsibility as a watchdog power and an advocator for public opinions.

"As the society's values, norms and ways of doing things change because of the technology, it is then we realize the social implications of the medium."\(^6\) The media not only affect the way the news is perceived, but interact with the readers and exert influence upon the society. The change of the media is going on under the framework of China's social reform and democratic progress. The media
contributes to the country’s development and is more than the channels to release information. It is becoming an active participator in social changes.

Notes:

[1] 郑彤:《国家形象与大众传播》[J],《东南传播》, 2007 (1).
[2] 马歇尔・麦克卢汉:《理解媒介》[M]. 周宪, 许钧, 主编. 北京: 商务印书馆, 2000,第 33 页。
[3] 喻国明:《变革传媒——解析中国传媒转型问题》[M]. 北京: 华夏出版社, 2005, 第 5 页。
[4] Wikipedia. (2008). Public Opinion. Retrieved December 12, 2008, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_Opinion.
[5] 薛可, 余明阳:《国家形象塑造中的媒体角色》[J],《国际新闻界》, 2008 (11)。
[6] Wikipedia. (2008). The medium is the message. Retrieved December 3, 2008, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_medium_is_the_message.

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