
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Construction of the Meaning of Chinese Government Press Conferences under Public Health Emergencies Based on the Theory of Political Communication

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| ABSTRACT

In the process of responding to public health emergencies, the government should promote effective communication with the public and further unblock the channels of communication between the government and the public. Government press conferences are an important channel for the government to communicate with the outside world and an important tool for the government to respond to public health emergencies. The government should make reasonable use of press conferences to actively respond to social concerns, promote the positive function of public opinion, and improve the ability to respond to sudden public health forgetfulness so as to promote the formation of a synergy of social governance. Based on the theory of political communication, this paper focuses on the practical principles and operational risks of government press conferences under public health events and puts forward governance ideas to standardize the release process, strengthen interaction and cooperation, and improve emergency response capacity, so as to achieve emergency management capabilities of government press conferences under public health emergencies.

| KEYWORDS

Public health emergency; Government press conferences; Political communication

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1. Introduction

In public health emergencies, the government, as the manager of public affairs and the provider of public goods, needs to assume multiple responsibilities. On the one hand, the government needs to organize emergency rescue, medical and health forces and resources to participate. The government also needs to disclose information in a timely manner and guide public opinion. Therefore, the press conference has become an important channel for the government to communicate with the public, and it plays a constructive role in strengthening political communication, guiding public opinion, enhancing government credibility, and stabilizing social order. For government governance, without communication, there will be no politics (Wang Sao, 2003). Effective political communication plays an important role in shaping and enhancing government credibility. Through effective political communication, the government can use the feedback information to continuously adjust its behavior so as to better achieve its goals (Easton, 2016). Political communication theory generally attaches importance to public agenda participation in the political process, emphasizing the resolution of problems by responding to audience concerns in a timely manner. From the perspective of this theory, the government's press conference has become an important communication tool for the public to express their demands and for the government to obtain feedback. By building an open communication platform for the government, the public, and social media, all parties can communicate on this platform. Dialogue, discussion and negotiation of some social issues. Especially in public health emergencies, the government should reasonably use press conferences to communicate with the public, and it is necessary to pay attention to the operational risks of government press conferences in emergencies. The government should use the concept of modern political communication to optimize the governance path of government press conferences, improve risk communication capabilities, and strengthen risk perception and crisis response capabilities.

2. Practical principles of government press conferences during public health emergencies

2.1 To meet the public's information acquisition needs

China's press conference system was established in the early 1980s, and there are only press conferences at the central level. At that time, the purpose of holding a press conference was to meet the central government's need to publicize the new outlook of reform and opening up internationally. It was not until the outbreak of SARS in 2003 that the government gradually realized the significance of press conferences in strengthening communication and interaction between the government and the people. For example, the "Regulations on Public Health Emergency Response" clearly stipulates that an information release and disclosure system for emergencies should be established, and a rapid response mechanism for news releases of major emergencies should be improved so as to protect the public's rights to know. A smooth interactive communication mechanism is also of great significance for clarifying the truth (Du Gang, 2017). At the end of 2004, the central government completed the construction of a three-level press conference system consisting of the State Council Information Office, central ministries and commissions, and provincial people's governments. Driven by this public health emergency, press conferences in China have developed by leaps and bounds. The function of press conferences has gradually expanded from the main function of publicity to the function of satisfying the public's right to know.

In crises of all types, government organizations need to provide timely and actionable information and reach larger audiences. Press releases are an important platform for the government to respond to public concerns and solve problems during public health events. In January 2006, the State Council issued the "National General Emergency Plan for Public Emergencies". In November 2007, the National People's Congress issued the "Law on Response to Public Emergencies". The construction of press conferences provides institutional guarantees. In response to public health emergencies such as influenza A (H1N1), the new crown epidemic, and the monkeypox epidemic, the government respected the public's right to know, held timely and frequent press conferences, focused on hot issues, and dispelled doubts for the public through information release. Resolve doubts and respond to social concerns with positive strategies. The themes of these press conferences involved prevention and control notifications, medical research, social security, prevention and control of overseas epidemics, and other fields, and authoritative experts in the medical field were invited to conduct medical science popularization. Especially in this new crown epidemic, the Chinese government released epidemic information in a timely, open, and transparent manner and fully informed the public of the latest developments and the fight against the epidemic through live broadcast press conferences (Cheng, 2021).

2.2 Maintain the security and stability of social order

The press conference system can clarify the facts, conduct emergency science popularization, reduce and eliminate public anxiety caused by information asymmetry, and maintain government credibility. At present, China is in a critical period of social transformation, striding forward on the road of Chinese-style modernization, but at the same time, under the blessing of the new crown epidemic, various social contradictions have gradually become prominent, such as the widening gap between the rich and the poor, a crisis of government trust, and chaos in grassroots governance. Every problem creates a gap between the government and the public. The sudden public health crisis involves the safety of people's lives and property. The people may feel anxious and panic and the people's voice for the protection of the right to know will also increase, and they hope to get an official solution. Under such circumstances, the press conference should act as the "definer of news events" for the first time. The government should use its own influence and credibility to positively guide public opinion so as to resolve social conflicts and show the solution to the problem to society in a timely manner.

Multiple emergencies such as vaccination, difficulty in seeking medical treatment, and shortage of supplies have increased the difficulty of government governance. In the new media environment, although everyone can become a self-media and a source of information release, any chaos will be magnified. The press conference should bear the heavy responsibility of clarifying the truth. For example, from January 22 to December 28, 2020, a total of 1,545 press conferences were held by the Information Office of the State Council of China, the Joint Defense and Joint Control of the State Council, various national ministries and commissions, and various provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions. Even held multiple press conferences a day with a clear theme, fully responded to social concerns, and kept abreast of the development of the epidemic. Although there were doubts, rumors, and emotions in the process, there was a more positive public opinion Atmosphere (Liu Xiaoying, 2021). In public health incidents, press conferences are of great significance for relieving negative social emotions, enabling society to pay attention to the progress of the incident in a stable and rational manner, and resolving problems and contradictions.

2.3 Build safe and solid political trust

The press conference is an important means for the transparency and openness of the work of government departments. It can make it easier for stakeholders to obtain information, and it is an important means to promote the transparency of government affairs. Making good use of press conferences is a requirement for the government to govern the people, and it is also an important platform to display the country's image. Internally, it can enhance the public's national self-esteem, and externally, it can show the world the rapid development of China and enhance its international image.

In major public health emergencies, the government is the main body to deal with the incident. In China, however, the continuous press conference system can maintain government credibility and build political trust in political parties. In this political trust building mechanism, whether the timing of information disclosure is timely, whether the press conference is held at an appropriate time, and whether the release of key information is solid are all related to the effect of the press conference, which is crucial to the building of political trust and the maintenance of government credibility. In the new crown epidemic, economic development, resumption of work and production, and basic living supplies are all related to the interests of most people. It is extremely important to respond to this key information in the press conference.

3. Operational risks of government press conferences under public health emergencies

3.1 Incomplete input—scientific response and timely response

In the face of public health emergencies, the government needs to do a good job in policy interpretation and public opinion guidance in a timely manner. While setting the agenda, the government should respond to social concerns in a reasonable and effective manner. When encountering sudden mass infectious diseases, unexplained diseases, acute poisoning and other events that seriously affect public health, the government needs to consult and verify experts in related fields before taking the next step. Because the distribution of professional knowledge is asymmetrical, public health emergencies put forward higher knowledge requirements and ability requirements for policy makers and implementers. However, not all policy participants have knowledge in the field of public health, which also causes some policy ambiguity. At this level, the accuracy of information input will have an impact on the effect of the press conference.

Public health emergencies are often complex and unpredictable. When many situations are still unclear, there is very little time to prepare for news releases. When the policy subject cannot scientifically study and judge public opinion due to a lack of information literacy, or there are no talents in the organization who are good at handling emergencies and public health incidents, the information that the government itself can obtain is also limited. Moreover, it will take some time to collect and verify information on public health emergencies and epidemics. During this period of time, government officials need to be "cautious." During public health events, governments face the challenge of identifying and addressing misinformation, rumors, and conflicting information that the public receives from multiple informal sources on social media sites to combat the information epidemic and information overload (Tang, 2018). For these reasons, the information resources that some government press conferences can carry are limited. When the demand for scientific response and the need for timely response create tension, although this situation is inevitable, it will affect the effectiveness of political communication between the government and the public. In the face of public health emergencies, the government needs to scientifically master the effective methods and strategies of public opinion governance, and government press conferences should be used to effectively guide public opinion and gather social forces.

3.2 Process asymmetry—asymmetry of government process information

There is an essential difference between government press conferences as government affairs and press conferences managed by social organizations. The main purpose of publishing news on social platforms is to attract traffic and make profits, while government press conferences need to take into account both media functions and government service functions. The structural characteristics of the bureaucracy make it necessary for the government to "uniformly" issue government decisions at the specified time and place. For the sake of risk control, the government press conference pays more attention to "official caliber" and "political attitude", which will limit the content, form, and time of the information to be announced. It is necessary to unify the key content, such as the cause of the time, the number of infected people, and disposal measures, but the caliber. But it is not enough to pay attention to the news information itself; ignoring the analysis of the audience's psychology will also reduce the expected effect of the press conference.

At the same time, some local governments restrict the political participation of the media and the public because of fear of public criticism (Holtz-Bacha, 2022). Local health authorities receive health policy guidance from the National Health Commission, but they are also directly led by local governments, which control their budgets and personnel. Professional advice from local health authorities may be at odds with the local government's political considerations (Mei, 2020). In the early stage of the public health crisis, the top-down performance appraisal and promotion mechanism drove local governments to manipulate or conceal the central government's epidemic-related information, which weakened the government's information communication capabilities (Mao, 2021). Some officials may choose to conceal it because they are worried that the leak of epidemic information will cause panic and have a negative impact on their career development. Major public health events are related to the safety of public life and property. If scientific and effective information cannot be released, it will lead to mishandling and cause panic on a wider scale in society.

Before the press conference is held, the government often conducts extensive research on multiple public health issues and reviews the feasibility of public health policies. In this process, the event information held by the government is relatively complete, while

the event information held by the public is relatively incomplete. In the case of information asymmetry, due to the lack of public policy information, they do not fully understand some public health policies, making it difficult for the follow-up implementation of relevant public health policies to achieve the desired effect. Information asymmetry also makes it easy for some people to make one-sided judgments and behaviors, which ultimately has a negative impact on the implementation, supervision, and adjustment of public health policies.

3.3 Limitation of output—limitation of public rational participation

The timely, authoritative, and clear release of news information directly determines the quality of press conferences and affects the direction of public opinion. With the progress of society and the development of modern communication technology, people's enthusiasm for participating in and discussing state affairs has also been increasing. They pay more attention to the protection of their own right to know and right to speak and hope to have an equal and two-way interaction with the government. Public health emergencies have focused the extensive attention of the public. There are both positive emotions represented by expectations and negative emotions represented by worries in society. During this period, the public urgently needed a political communication channel that could obtain official information and express their demands. In the eyes of the public, "official" means "science". In the face of public health emergencies, the public's expectations for government press conferences are also getting higher and higher. However, group psychology has limited rationality, and people sometimes have "reverse psychology". In public health emergencies, there is also the phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility, that is, the transfer of responsibility to lower-level government units, citizens, or experts. Governments that shift responsibility to citizens during a crisis may stoke public frustration and dissatisfaction with democracy, but they may also (re)engage them more strongly in politics (Hinterleitner et al., 2022). When the political communication function of some local press conferences is not obvious and cannot respond to the concerns of the people well, the people will only selectively believe the government's press conferences. Once faced with a public health emergency, when the public's political communication demands are ignored, they will turn to social media platforms to vent their dissatisfaction, which will easily trigger the "long tail effect" of public opinion. When a major public health event occurs, the progress and changes of the event should be released in a timely manner, actively communicate with the public, and promote the effective resolution of the problem because the intensification of deep-seated social conflicts and dissatisfaction may trigger the "flashing point" of sudden incidents.

The spokesperson plays the role of displaying the image of the government in the press conference, which has high requirements on the communication skills and cultural quality of the spokesperson. At this stage, the local government does not have a permanent spokesperson and only temporarily finds someone to "take power" after a major event occurs. Usually, the director of the office or the propagandist is appointed as the spokesperson, but they usually have more administrative affairs, lack news theoretical literacy or have less practical experience. Therefore, it is necessary to further improve the quality of press spokespersons and emergency communication capabilities.

In addition, during public health emergencies, there are also many false statements on social news platforms, which increase the cost of political communication and public opinion governance. Some self-media with ulterior motives spread false information and intentionally create social panic to gain popularity and profit. There are also some institutional media that have produced unqualified content products without verifying the authenticity and integrity of the information. This false information is grafted with urgent information that the public is eager to know and spread rapidly through Internet social platforms, which has aroused great concern from society. Because the transmission environment in public health emergencies is complex and changeable, and public cognition and individual emotions are more fragile than usual, people are more likely to choose to believe some false information "in order to protect themselves", such as "mosquitoes can spread the new crown virus", "Drinking salt water, warm water or vinegar can kill the new crown virus", "eating more garlic can kill the new crown virus", "more infected people will naturally produce herd immunity, and there is no need to vaccinate", etc. The more complicated the communication environment is, the more authoritative information is needed from mainstream platforms, and the government needs to refute rumors and actively speak out in a timely manner when holding press conferences, positively guide public opinion, and communicate with the public in a timely manner.

4. The optimization path of government press conferences under public health emergencies

4.1. Actively respond to representative public opinion and meet public information needs and emotional needs

The essence of the news release is still the transmission and communication of information. Under the shadow of the crisis, the one-dimensional, top-down propaganda model is difficult to effectively convey the voice of the party and the government. The government's news release work should be examined with the concepts of crisis communication and crisis communication management, and the public and media reporters should be regarded as communication objects rather than opponents of information disclosure (Deng Hang, 2020). For the attention of the media and the public, it is generally appropriate to "drain" rather than "block". The "dredging" project should be launched, and targeted and convincing statements should be prepared in advance to provide key information, answer hot issues, and clarify false rumors.

4.2 Establish a modern political communication concept and standardize the information release process

As the focus organization in the crisis management network, the government should pay attention to public support for its policies, reputation and legitimacy and establish a modern concept of political communication. In public health events, the government will also fall into the dilemma of information dissemination and communication, such as disseminating and increasing the release of accurate information, restricting the dissemination of false information, misinformation, etc. (Pomeranz & Schwid, 2021). The government should try to avoid these miscommunications, strengthen monitoring of health and other information related to people's safety during public health emergencies, and severely punish social media for maliciously creating or disseminating misinformation (Chen et al., 2021). In addition, the government can use various new media tools to communicate with the public in a timely and in-depth manner on the content and topics of the press conference.

The government also needs to formulate a reasonable press conference process, especially in the event of public health emergencies; there should be reasonable early warning arrangements and timely release of true and correct news. Every time government agencies at all levels hold a press conference; they must do a lot of preparation and planning, mainly including careful arrangements before the event, scientific arrangements during the event, and comprehensive analysis after the event. The general process of a press conference is usually like this: Check in and receive the guests—The host of the conference explains the status of the attendees and announces the schedule of the press conference—The spokesperson releases news—Respond to interviews—Press conference The work goes on — and the final press conference is done. At the same time, for the texts published by the news media, especially the information releases, it is necessary to ensure that the texts are correct, concise, solemn, and simple based on ensuring that the texts are as reasonable and appropriate as possible. The expression must be accurate and reasonable, and the information, words, and vocabulary used must be accurate. This is also the most fundamental requirement for oral and written expressions. The expression should be simple and clear, use more vocabulary, short sentences, straightforward statements, etc., and reduce the accumulation of dialogue. In the release of major news, especially the reporting of negative information, the most important thing is to express your position and belief in your work. It is necessary to explain the problem clearly, explain the actual situation clearly, and try to be straightforward. In the event of a public emergency, it must be highly pertinent and time-sensitive (Fu Shan & Lu Xiaoyan, 2022).

4.3 Build a multiple and linked release mechanism to improve media interaction and cooperation

In addition to the live broadcast of press conferences held by government departments in various regions, they are usually broadcast live online simultaneously with major media. After the conference, the major media will also disclose relevant information about the press conference. This strengthens the communication and cooperation relationship between government departments and the media and is a necessary part of government departments at all levels to achieve positive results in press conferences. People's governments at all levels should actively communicate with the media during press conferences rather than favour a certain media. At the same time, governments at all levels should handle news events in a responsible manner and maintain regular exchanges with the media. We must continuously supplement the real information we have to avoid the spread of rumors and false reports; we must seriously handle various interview issues from the media; pay attention to the deadlines for media reports so as to reduce the tension and anxiety of the public.

In addition to maintaining timely communication with the media, it is also necessary to maintain timely communication with the public with practical actions because only actions can effectively deal with things (Guo Yukun, 2022). Local governments can open official platforms for news development reports through various media platforms, use Weibo, WeChat public accounts, video accounts, etc., to interact with the public, deliver information in a timely manner, expand the field of communication with news media, and create an excellent government image. People's governments at all levels must do a good job in the construction of e-government, smooth the channels of communication with the public, strive to reduce the one-sided phenomenon of public opinions, and spread true and positive information and images based on government departments.

4.4. Improve the overall quality of the press spokesperson, and enhance the professionalism and publicity of crisis communication

At the macro level, local government press conferences are closely related to the credibility of the local government departments themselves; from a micro perspective, the quality and on-the-spot performance of local media personnel also determine a media conference, to a large extent, success or failure. The credibility of government spokespersons and government trust is highly correlated with evaluations of crisis management (Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, for the spokesperson of the news media, it will be more practical to build a good press conference system for municipal government agencies. At present, the spokespersons of the press conferences of local government agencies at various levels in China mainly serve concurrently. Every move of the spokesperson shows the image of the government department. Therefore, the spokesperson should have a high degree of ideological and political quality, excellent professional ethics and good news publicity skills. He must have a lot of theoretical knowledge of news publishing and rich practical work experience in big data analysis capabilities. The press spokesman masters

the art of benign communication with the news media, which is conducive to standardizing the content of news releases, actively channeling public opinion, and thus maintaining the benign communication and harmonious, cooperative relationship between the government and the news media. In addition, media spokespersons cover not only administrative personnel but also experts, scholars, and medical staff. The inclusiveness and professionalism of the spokesperson also need to be greatly enhanced, and the concept and expectation of "contextual interpretation" and "diversity and tolerance" carried by it will connect the press conference with the media. Compared with government officials, during the COVID-19 epidemic, the public has expressed more and more trust and respect for the words of public health professionals such as Zhong Nanshan and Li Lanjuan. Therefore, the Guangdong provincial government also invited Professor Zhong Nanshan to participate in activities and give lectures at the press conference many times to communicate with the public on virus identification, disease research and judgment, technological breakthroughs, and health science popularization. The government's epidemic information conference is not just a government news release, but its significance can also be extended to an information platform for emergency science popularization.

4.5. Build an equal and rational dialogue mechanism that meets the requirements of the Internet age

To adapt to the dialogue shift of social governance, the government should liberate itself from the management orientation and discourse hegemony formed in the mass media environment. First, it must timely and fully disclose information, actively respond to social concerns, and focus on equal dialogue and consultation among multiple subjects. Constructive discourse aimed at solving problems and getting out of the crisis is conducive to mitigating the contagion of factual crisis and minimizing damage. In the era of mobile Internet with diverse information and loud voices, we are committed to becoming responsible and reliable actors by proactively disclosing information and communicating actively and sincerely. Secondly, to establish and practice an equal dialogue mechanism, the government's speech perspective should shift from the habitual "looking down" to "looking up". Different from the discourse power held by the official and mainstream media in the traditional context, the legitimacy generation and maintenance mechanism of the official discourse power has quietly changed—all conclusions and decisions that have not been discussed by the public may be questioned (Zhang Wenxiang & Yang Lin, 2020). Speakers must change their lofty perspective and cold way of conveying documents and eliminate the traditional mindset of strictly dividing subjects and objects between official and private people. They must be wary of using bureaucratic monologues and prevent one-way indoctrination and propaganda. , giving full attention to the facts and value appeals of the public to obtain the truth and express opinions, releasing information in a discourse content and form that is close to the public, promoting equal and rational dialogue among multiple subjects such as the government, the public, experts, authoritative institutions, and commercial organizations, and strive to achieve identity recognition, Emotional resonance, meaning generation and value co-creation.

5. Conclusion

In a major public health event, a government press conference involves the government, the media, and the public. In this process, the government press conference plays an important role in the political communication between the people and the government, and it is necessary to seek the unity of the government agenda, the media agenda, and the public agenda. Due to the particularity of public health emergencies, the time of the press conference, the speed of the press release, and the ability of the press spokesperson all determine the effectiveness of a press conference, and whether it can accurately respond to public concerns determines the effectiveness of a press conference. Make or break a press conference. Guiding public opinion during the epidemic situation, cultivating the quality of spokespersons, improving the interaction mechanism between the government and the media, standardizing the press conference process, and building an equal and rational dialogue mechanism that meets the requirements of the Internet era are all the foundations that require the government's press conference system to consolidate existing achievements. Aspects that need to be strengthened more. We should establish a modern concept of political communication, focus on the masses, strengthen the two-way communication between the government and the public, build a multi-faceted and linked release mechanism, improve the comprehensive ability of the press spokesperson, and make full use of the limited time and resources of the press conference to respond to issues of immediate concern.

This article aims to explore the rules of crisis communication and news release in major public health emergencies and provide constructive advice on its localization theory construction and practical operation.

On the whole, there are still deficiencies in this paper, and I hope it can be improved in future research. Due to the limited time and space for writing the article, it is limited to writing from the perspective of political communication theory. The research direction and research purpose are still in the exploratory stage, and the final research conclusions still need to be further improved and tested in practice.

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