Technological Changes in Chinese Media Governance: An Analysis Based on Conflicting Issues on the Internet

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Abstract: *Currently, although local governments in China have opened official media accounts, they are often silent when confronted with conflicting issues on the Internet. As a result, the issues cannot be officially recognized, and the local media are vulnerable to being questioned and criticized by public opinion. In this paper, we find that the roles played by Chinese local media in online conflict issues can be categorized as "urged", "vocal" and "silent". Nowadays, Chinese media are still used as one of the "tools of governmental governance", but the logic of Internet technology has a profound impact on the original administrative logic: the uncontrollable choice of issues, the visibility of netizens in the process of governance, and the failure of the territorial management model. However, the power structure behind the technology of media governance has not been fundamentally changed. The "central-local" management model is still the basic power structure of the current media governance technology. The response and attention of the central media is an important condition for many conflict issues to enter the public space.*

Keywords: mediatized governance; online conflict issues' local media

1. Introduction

Promoting the modernisation of the national governance system and governance capacity is a major strategic task of the current Chinese government. In the Internet era, how to continuously optimise the mediated governance capacity has not only become a need for the Party and the Government to enter a period of attack to solve the problem of "panic in knowledge", but also an important part of the modernisation of national governance capacity.In the age of the Internet, the popularity of web 2.0 interactive technology makes this direction a new imagination. The technical advantages of the Internet, such as "real-time synchronisation" and "transcending time and space", have provided citizens with convenient and inexpensive channels for political participation. In addition to this technological advantage, the breakthrough of the Internet is reflected in its externalisation outside the hierarchical system: unlike traditional media, Internet companies are less dependent on the local government, and the government's control over the media, such as personnel and financial power, is ineffective for Internet companies. How to effectively handle the risk of public opinion brought about by online issues has become a focus of attention for the Chinese government and the media.

2. Key concepts: media governance technologies

The concept of "governance" is borrowed from Foucault's term "technology of power", which examines how power turns the application and enforcement of its own rules into a daily routine that is uncontested by society.(*Michel Foucault, 1988*) [1] In the context of China's special media environment, the setup of the media system is directly related to the operation of the power system, and the media inevitably become integrated into the power network and become "actors" themselves, influencing the relationship between the state and the society, and between the central and the local levels. The term "media governance technology" refers to the fact that the media have certain governance functions, and that the media are an instrumental institution involved in the governance of the government. (Timothy *E, 1998*) [2] This definition will also be adopted for the "media governance technologies" discussed in this paper.

In the traditional media period, the process of media governance techniques is "the higher level of the media carries out relevant critical reports, followed by administrative measures by the

corresponding government, and finally the results of administrative or legal punishment of the personnel are published". (*Sun Wusan, 2002*) [3] The whole process is controlled by the central government, and the local government can be said to be disappeared and invisible. "The departments at the same level must first obey the will of the government at the same level". (*Lin Shangli, 2002*) [4] This mode of management has played an important role at the local level since the beginning of the Qin dynasty - the imperial power appoints officials at all levels to act on behalf of its jurisdiction in the territories, and these officials are subject to the control of the bureaucratic system, which is precisely what the "county system" is all about. (*Zhou Xueguang, 2017*) [5]

This is very different in the Internet era, where the establishment of official accounts for local media not only gives them a channel to speak out, but also makes it necessary and mandatory for them to do so as the primary responders to conflicting events within their territories.Although many local media have opened new media accounts, they are often silenced in the face of online conflict. As a result, the facts of the conflict cannot be confirmed authoritatively, the function of the media is not effectively played, and the local media are very vulnerable to public opinion questioning and crusading.

In summary, the research question of this paper is whether the technology of media governance has changed in the Internet era? The Internet has created a new social scene, and what is the impact of its dominant technological logic on administrative logic? With the advancement of e-government and local and municipal level integrated media construction, local media network voice channels are gradually increasing, how can local media better play the function of local governance in the Internet era? These issues need to be discussed in depth in this paper.

3. Research methodology

As shown in Table 1 , this paper selects eleven cases of conflicting online issues, adopts a process perspective, delves into the development process of a specific case, specifically analyzes the interactive process of each subject, and carries out a preliminary screening and categorization of conflicting online heated events in 2018-2023 in an attempt to be able to examine three types of interactive relationships - local media and superior media, local media and other local media, and local media and online self-media. In the end, eleven typical incidents were selected. It should be noted that due to the complexity of the events themselves, it is inevitable that there are composite relationship types, but this also helps to observe the coordination and game of multiple subjects. (*Zhou, C., Qian, Z. & Han, Z., 2023*) [6]

Table 1 A Compendium of Internet Public Opinion Cases

Conflicting issues	Interactivity
Carbon Nine Leak in Quanzhou (November 4, 2018, 1:14 a.m.)	Local Media and Online Self-Media
Xi'an Mercedes Benz female owner defends her rights (April 9, 2019)	Local Media and Online Self-Media
Drowning of Li Xincao in Yunnan (September 9, 2019)	Local media and higher media
Dalian woman brutally beaten late at night (June 22, 2019, around 1 a.m.)	Local Media and Online Self-Media
Yantai Bao's Sexual Assault Case (April 9, 2020)	Local media and other local media
Changsha Cargo Laundry Female Passenger Dies in Crash (February 6, 2021)	Local Media and Online Self-Media
The case of the "woman who gave birth to eight children in Feng County, Jiangsu Province" (June 10, 2022)	Local media vs. online self-publishing; local media vs. higher media
Tangshan Barbecue Restaurant Beating (June 10, 2022)	Local media vs. online self-publishing; local media vs. higher media
Disappearance of Hu Moyu from a middle school in Jiangxi (November 15, 2022)	Local media and other local media
The "Arctic catfish" incident	Local media vs. online self-publishing; local media vs. higher media
The "Rat's Head and Duck's Neck" Incident at Jiangxi University (June 1, 2023)	Local Media and Online Self-Media

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of local media in China, the author interned with an official media organisation for six months. In-depth interviews were used to interview 12news staff who have been working in local media for a long time, and all of them are more familiar with the news workflow of local media. Multiple interviews were completed during the author's internship in a municipal radio and television department. By virtue of the internship status, the author was able to

draw closer to the interviewers, and during the interviews, the interviewees were encouraged to express their views freely under the established themes and frameworks.

4. Local Media in Conflicting Issues in Microblogs

In the dissemination process of eleven microblogging conflict issues, affected by the power relationship and public opinion game pattern of each issue itself, different issues have their own process paths, but there are certain commonalities in the performance behavior of local media. After summarizing, the local media responded to the performance of the following three main roles.

4.1 "Supervisees" under pressure

The role of the local media as "supervised" is most directly reflected in the relationship between the central media and the local media, which is very similar to the traditional media period, where the central media's coverage of local events was used to realize the central government's governance of the localities. For example, in the Yunnan Li Xincao drowning incident, the retweets and comments of @People's Daily became a key part of the development of the incident. In the follow-up to the development of the incident, #People's Wei-Review #column forwarded three notification letters of different reasons for filing the case, alluding to the laxity of law enforcement by the local police, and commented that "each individual case of justice will profoundly mark the progress of the rule of law scale". Therefore, in public opinion events, the central media puts pressure on the local media.

In the face of conflicting issues on the Internet, some local media adopt a positive and active feedback strategy, reporting the frontline situation in the first time and responding to the public opinion in a timely manner; while some other local governments also adopt a negative and passive feedback strategy, giving partial or even no feedback in the form of lapping up the news. The most important element in measuring the local feedback is the pressure of public opinion on the relevant events. Among the factors affecting the response strategies of local media in China, the pressure within the power mechanism is often more important than the pressure of public opinion. Often, there is a possibility that the pressures within the power mechanism of public opinion pressure can be transformed into each other. In this situation, localities become more vulnerable, because no matter what kind of media can bypass territorial restrictions through the advantages of Internet technology, as long as the conflict issue itself generates a certain degree of dissemination, it can be transformed into public opinion pressure on localities, urging them to respond positively, which also makes the "supervised" become the most common role of local media.

4.2 "Voices" to protect their image

Although local media often play the role of the "supervised", it does not mean that local media completely lose the opportunity to speak out. In fact, the central government has long had a clear regulation on local media - for governmental public opinions involving particularly important or major emergencies, a press conference should be held within 24 hours at the latest, and other governmental public opinions should be responded to within 48 hours .(*General Office of the State Council, 2016*)[7] In practice, however, local voices do not simply "refer to the regulations", but more often show a "trade-off". Weighing factors include whether the development of the situation is controllable, whether there is enough evidence for investigation, and the consideration of local image and interests.

As a result, local media voices are very often responses based on institutional pressures. Not all conflictual events receive feedback from local media, and not all local media feedback meets the expectations that netizens are waiting for. Whether or not the government can respond and provide feedback on online conflictual issues carries its own uncertainty, (*Sun Wusan, 2002*)[8] which needs to be weighed against the public opinion and the attitudes of multiple departments. It is certain that under the general policy of maintaining stability, if the local party and government do not take any positive attitude and action on these related topics, and the local media will not respond to them, it is likely that their topics will be dragged out, or even be in bad shape.

4.3 Ignoring the "silencers"

In addition to the above two roles, local media also play the role of the "silencer", trying to minimize the negative impact of public opinion. This is particularly evident in the relationship between

local media and self-published media. In the traditional media era, individual voices in conflict situations, such as complaints and petitions, were easily suppressed by the bureaucracy. (*Wang Jinhong, Huang Zhenhui, 2012*) [9] With the rise of the Internet, actors have begun to actively utilize new communication technologies such as the Internet, which not only reduces costs, but also quickly generates public opinion.

Local media often adopt a strategy of silence when it comes to self-published media such as netizens' personal microblog accounts. In addition, this type of self-published media can be the first channel to verify whether the official media's claims are true or not, creating a discourse struggle for the right to explain the incident. on February 15, former investigative reporter @Deng Fei, who exposed Dong Zhimin's and Yang Qingman's marriage certificates and the date of birth of their oldest son on Weibo, challenged the local conclusions of Xuzhou, pushing the public opinion to further escalate and becoming a key turning point.

In addition, it should be noted that the progress of responding to conflicting events on the Internet itself is not rule-based, and the response strategy of the local media is not simply to inform, and it is also difficult to make a final decision, which is usually manifested in a number of interactions between the party and the government, and the other subjects of the local media. Of course, if the local media's feedback is insincere or perfunctory, and far from the general demands of public opinion, it is very likely to trigger a new round of public opinion storms and receive even harsher condemnation.

5. Changes in media governance techniques in the Internet era

On the basis of empirical analysis, this section uses a historical comparative perspective to view the use of media governance functions as a dynamic process of change, comparing media governance technologies in different periods and summarizing their changes. It can be found that no matter what role is played, the administrative logic of governance still exists, and the media is still a "non-bureaucratic governance tool". However, the Internet as a new way of political participation has shown an attractive picture in breaking through the technological bottleneck, and the technological logic of governance has caused some interference with the administrative logic.

5.1 Uncontrollable choice of topics

According to Sun Wusan, governance in the traditional media period followed "a critical report by the higher media, followed by administrative measures by the corresponding government, and finally the announcement of the results of administrative or legal punishment of the personnel". (*Sun Wusan, 2002*) [10] Therefore, the choice of governance content was often "considered and agreed upon by the central government" (*Hu Jiwei, 1988*) [11], with a clear policy direction. On this point, Wang Zhian also mentioned about the subject matter of the Focus Interview: "The most important mission of the reporter in the process of interviewing is to collect the facts that the local government violates the policy by all means" .(*Wang Zhian, 2010*) [12]

The key to the uncontrollability of issue selection lies in the lowering of the threshold for publishing information on the Internet, and the traditional local practice of "keeping a lid on things" no longer works. The privilege of choosing governance issues under the administrative logic has been weakened, and as long as a conflicting issue receives the attention of online public opinion, it will become an issue that the government must respond to. This is also reflected in the "Xi'an Mercedes Benz female owners rights incident", "Yantai Bao Moumou sexual assault case", "Arctic catfish incident" in the three events: initially only some personal behavior, with the topic gradually involved in the public's attention. However, as the topic gradually enters the public eye, through the focus and amplification of public opinion, the parties involved, the media, government departments and other stakeholders continue to intervene, the topic is likely to show a rapid expansion of the explosive trend.

5.2 Internet users become "visible" in the governance process

During the traditional media period, media-based governance was "merely a decision-making and implementation process within the party and government. The public plays a role of available pressure, but is not really present". (*Sun Wusan, 2002*)[13] But in the issue of online conflict, this situation has been broken. The voices of the parties or informants on the microblogging platform in the "Yunnan Li Xincao Drowning Incident" and the "Yantai Bao Moumou Sexual Assault Case" have directly challenged the monopoly of the official discourse, restored the events, and even served as an effective

way to test the official narrative. Public expression on self-published media is an effective way to test the official narrative. The emergence of netizens as a new participant makes the main game relationship in the governance process change from "central-local" to "local-netizens".

In conflictual events, the microblogging voices of those involved in the event are of great significance, gaining a unique voice due to their innate proximity to the event. This has been demonstrated in the "Changsha Cargo Lala Female Passenger's Death in a Car Crash", the "Arctic Catfish Incident", and the "Yunnan Li Xincao Drowning Incident". The reason why the incident has received public attention is closely related to the voice of the person concerned and his family on the Internet. By virtue of the identity of the person concerned to grasp the key information of the incident, the speech will also get the focus of public opinion. Moreover, these parties' accounts are authenticated as "relatives of the victim", and this "weak" image often makes them the party that public opinion will protect.

The intervention of the Internet has indeed reconfigured the traditional media governance process, and the participation of netizens has broken the original closed governance space and made it tend to be open. The fuzzy and ubiquitous subject of "netizens" has been drawn into the space of conflict evolution, especially in the stage of uncertainty, breaking through the temporal and spatial limitations of issue dissemination, and reaching information communication and real-time sharing through virtual space. As a result, a new mode of operation has emerged from this media-based governance - "netizens/parties to an incident expose it - public opinion promotes attention - government administrative measures - administrative or legal treatment by relevant personnel".

5.3 Territorial management model is facing a crisis of "failure"

The biggest challenge to the previous administrative logic brought about by the technological advantages of the Internet is the process of "de-territorialization", in which the previous territorial management model can be said to be "ineffective" on the Internet. With the help of online conflict issues, snowballing public opinion storms can not only cross the boundaries of territorial control, but also bypass the layers of bureaucratic barriers, and directly pressurize the central authority in the form of emergencies or focus on conflict issues, so that the challenges of local public opinion in the Internet era have obviously increased.

In the face of these new challenges, local media, which are accustomed to following "propaganda prompts," have not formed a complete experience in dealing with such crises, and once the scope of an incident crosses the boundaries of their own territories, local media become at a loss as to what to do, and even wait for the intervention of higher-level departments or more senior departments to take over. The normalization of online public opinion has caused local media to face this kind of problem on a regular basis, and in the process of media governance techniques, local media often become a "dead end" - not only are they urged by their superiors not to act rashly and wait for instructions, but they also receive accusations from public opinion because of their silence, and as a result, the local media become helpless. The result is that local media have become the object of emotional catharsis of online public opinion.

6. Summary and discussion

In the Internet era, new modes of public governance are taking shape due to the unique nature of the Internet's technological logic. Governance activities carried out through the media are now one of the key elements of public governance. With the frequent occurrence of conflictual issues on the Internet, the technological power of the Internet has become increasingly influential on all aspects of society. Thus, the positive significance of the model of governance through media for modern governance lies in the fact that, by solving the problems reflected in conflicting issues, the government's effectiveness can be further enhanced by constantly realizing the stability of the regime and society through dynamic adjustments. From this point of view, the Internet also provides the conditions for the modern development of national governance in the new era. According to this paper, exploring the technological perspective of media governance may provide a new way of thinking about how to closely integrate state governance with Internet technology in the local context of China.

Acknowledgement

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