Authoritarian Fragmentations and Media Improvisations in Mediated Disasters
媒介災難事件中的威權主義碎片化和媒體即興報導

Submitted to
Department of Media and Communication
媒體與傳播系
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
哲學博士學位

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December 2019
二零一九年十二月
Abstract

In authoritarian China, the Party-State exerts leverage over the marketized media. This study demonstrates that the Party-State’s propaganda system is disturbed by political fragmentation during high-profile disasters, resulting in defective media control. The marketized media secure political space from the vertical, horizontal, and vertical-horizontal fragmentation to improvise new reporting practices, addressing to the market and society more than usual. The marketized media break from the routine mouthpiece and limited information provider roles to varying extents. They strive to be the more independent and comprehensive information provider and the critical watchdog in the coverage of catastrophes. The dynamic state-media interactions and the power relations behind lead to diverging mediations of disasters. On the media stage, the rescue moments are dramatized with three distinctive scripts: an eventful rescue drama where crisis appears, a salvage conquest achieved by the government and the public jointly, and a show that celebrates the official rescue victory. The media spotlight is also cast upon responsibility attribution. Three different dramas of blame are identified: one unravels institutional faults, one blames individual villains, and another dodges human responsibilities.

The study establishes a theoretical framework with fragmented authoritarianism theory, literature on Chinese media system and marketized media, the idea of improvisation, media events theory, social drama conception, and frame theory. Fragmented authoritarianism deconstructs the authoritarian political power. It illustrates the Party-State’s propaganda agencies are organized into a crisscross structure where potential bureaucratic tensions reside. Previous research on Chinese media system shows the media market is regulated by the propaganda agencies in routine. The marketized media are manipulated to serve the Party-State’s propaganda demands and the audience/public needs of information simultaneously. However, it
is not always the case. As the concept of improvisation indicates, the marketized media tend to modify or reconstruct the routinized news practices in unique circumstances. The very unexpected disasters and the potential political fragmentation in crisis are the typical conditions that breed media improvisations. Media events theory bridges the changing state-media interactions to the presentation of disasters. It defines news production of important events as social performance that is subjected to the different social actors’ powers. Social performance develops through breach, crisis, redress and reintegration/ separation phases, according to the social drama framework. The scripts of “breach” and “crisis” phases adopt the diagnosis frame, while those of “redress” and “reintegration” apply the prognosis frame, as indicated by frame theory. In the mediation of significant disasters, the fragmented propaganda agencies and the improvising marketized media contend to frame and enact diverse social dramas on the media stage.

The author draws on the multi-case methodology to analyze authoritarian fragmentations and media improvisations in the contexts of disasters. Three groups of comparative case studies are designed in the exploration. The author uses several disaster keywords to search the Wisenews database and collected the candidate disaster cases. Then, in-depth interviews of journalists and editors are conducted to find out more about the cases, the transcripts of which are examined by the author intensively. Meanwhile, the author applies critical discourse analysis to investigate the disaster news texts. The interview transcripts and the disaster news texts are triangulated with each other for verification. Through the qualitative data analysis, the author reaches conclusions about state-media interactions in disasters and discusses the implication for authoritarian resilience in the Party-State’s cultural governance. In the end, the author demonstrates limitations of this dissertation and directions for future research.