

Analysis and Improvement Strategy of Government Response to Public Opinion Crisis in the Case of Buried Children in Yuanyang County, China

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Abstract: On April 18, 2020, four children were buried and killed in an accident at a construction site in Yuanyang County, Henan Province. When dealing with the incident, the local county government clashed with the media and journalists, which triggered large-scale public opinion. This paper will investigate the opinions of Chinese netizens on the measures taken by the Government of Yuanyang County to deal with the public opinion crisis through questionnaires. The study found that Chinese netizens expressed outrage at the bullying behaviors of local officials and their disregard for the legal rights of journalists. This paper argues that the reason why local officials behave like this is that they do not straighten out the relationship between the government and the media, so they refuse the media to exercise the power of supervision over the government. This paper also argues that local government officials should improve their media literacy on the one hand, and on the other hand, they should establish the awareness of speaking out for self-justification. These measures may also have a positive impact on other county-level governments.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China has been striving to improve its ability to respond to public opinion crises and to show the good image of the Chinese government to the outside world [1] In particular, the national and provincial governments have rich experience and skill in dealing with various public opinion incidents. For the past few years, there have been very few “catastrophic” incidents that seriously damage their own image. However, some county-level governments in China often generate huge controversy online when dealing with public opinion crises. On April 18, 2020, four children in Yuanyang County, Henan Province played on the earthwork of the community site. The earthwork collapsed causing all four children to be buried and killed. Yuanyang County notified the incident in the early hours of April 19th. On April 20th, the construction company and government officials with regulatory responsibilities were punished. On the same day, a number of media journalists went to the interview and were brutally obstructed by the government staff, and their mobile phones were also robbed. This incident immediately caused widespread discussion among Chinese netizens. Subsequently, the follow-up actions of the local government also repeatedly caused controversy. Government officials publicly denied what they had said in the interview. The government officials apologized to the journalists afterwards and were accused of perfunctory forms. The government staff erased all the data on the phone without the journalists’ consent. As a result, the internal information of the journalists’ mobile phone was lost [2].

This article will investigate the views of Chinese netizens on Yuanyang County Government's response to the crisis of public opinion through the form of a questionnaire. After searching the literature, it was found that there is no research on the incident. This research will help to provide an effective reference for the Chinese county government, and guide it to respond effectively and correctly to the public opinion crisis.

2. Methodology

This paper investigated Chinese netizens' views on the crisis public relations measures of Yuanyang County Government by means of Internet questionnaire. A total of 12 questions were set

in the questionnaire and posted on Sina Weibo. Sina Weibo has over 500 million monthly active users and it is one of the largest online communities in China[3]. Moreover, Weibo is the birthplace of most public opinion events[4] The questionnaire was posted under the 50 hot topics of the day, and these hot topics can attract a large number of netizens. The questionnaire was released on April 29, and ended two weeks later and went offline. The respondents to this questionnaire were completely random, and the questions do not involve personal privacy.

3. Results

A total of 12,493 questionnaires were collected in this survey. Those questionnaires with one same option and showing obvious regularity are counted as invalid questionnaire. A total of 10944 questionnaire are valid and the questionnaire efficiency was 87.6%.

88.8% of the respondents said they were aware of the conflict between government officials and media reporters in Yuanyang County, which shows that the public opinion on this issue has a wide range.

Three officials responsible for the incident were dealt with three days later. This measure won the approval of 87.2 percent of the respondents, indicating that most netizens believe that the previous measures taken by Yuanyang County Government are appropriate. This may suggest that in the early stage of the incident, the mainstream of public opinion was a lament for the loss of life, rather than a criticism of the Yuan Yang county government.

Local government staff jostled journalists and snatched their mobile phones without giving any reasons for stopping, when the journalists tried to cover the burial. The percentage of respondents who disapprove of the way government staff treated journalists was 39.6 percent, while those who strongly disapprove were 58.2 percent. Only 0.5 percent of respondents said they understood this behavior. One-sided opposition may explain why public opinion, which had been relatively calm, has risen so quickly.

About 26 percent of respondents understood the behavior positively, saying that the staff was trying to prevent the bereaved family from being disturbed. And 66 percent understood negatively, saying that it was because the local government had secrets which were not known by the outside world so they were afraid that journalists would contact the bereaved family. 8% of respondents chose "other" option, and most of the messages are negative expressions against the government, such as "the government must have some dark sides and was afraid of the journalists". The positive image of the government, which had been built up by the quick punishing the officials involved, began to wane.

The local government propaganda official said in an interview that the assailants were not government officials but relatives of the dead who had lost control of their emotions. This claim was immediately denied by journalists and relatives of the dead. Facing doubts and suspects, the official denied that he had ever made such a statement. 88% of respondents said the official's actions were unacceptable and damaged the government's credibility. 45.7 percent of respondents believed the official's denial of what he had said was motivated by an attempt to pass the buck. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents said the it reflected the official's bureaucratic habits, and that he did not take what he said seriously. Twenty-six percent of respondents chose the "other" option to express more personal opinions, which are mostly negative comments about the official. The above data may indicate that the official's behavior has aggravated the public's dissatisfaction with the handling of the incident in Yuanyang County.

After the public outcry, the local government propaganda chief apologized to the journalists, but did not say what the government staff did was wrong. A total of 59.3% of respondents chose to disapprove or strongly disapprove of such apologies, saying that chief was not meant to be genuine but merely intended to appease public discontent. Other interviewees showed tolerance, arguing that apologizing without giving reasons might simply be an unintended mistake and people do not need to require over-interpretation. The above data shows that public opinion on the apology is relatively calm, and temporarily dose not significantly stimulate the public criticism.

The Yuanyang Government's real attempt to galvanise public opinion was to rob journalists'

phones and reinstall system, resulting in the loss of all their contacts and other information. 92.7% of respondents said that this behavior was completely unacceptable. The overwhelming opposition explains why the criticism escalated again, when people heard the news that journalists' mobile phone system was reinstalled and information was gone.

When asked how to evaluate the measures taken by the Yuanyang County Government in the face of public opinion, 67.9% of respondents said that they were very poor, 29.1% said that they were relatively poor. 97% of respondents in total gave a negative assessment of the measures taken by Yuanyang County to deal with public opinion. In this incident, Yuanyang county handed over an unqualified answer.

When asked who should be held responsible for the conflict, 79% of respondents said the county government should take full responsibility. But the video from the scene of the clash showed that when government officials blocked the journalists' access to the burial site, the journalists verbally and physically challenged the government officials, which in part inflamed the conflict between the two sides [5]. However, the survey showed that 92 percent of netizens did not notice the journalists' misbehavior. Of those who said the county government should take full responsibility for the incident, 60 percent said journalists should take some responsibility if they had known about the journalists' actions. It can be seen that when the media reported the incident, they focused on the mistakes of the government staff and ignored the problems of the journalists themselves. Many Chinese netizens were also affected by the report and believed that the incident was the unilateral fault of the government staff.

4. Discussion

This study investigated the Chinese netizens' view on the response of Yuanyang County Government to the public opinion crisis in the case of children buried and killed, and analyzed the causes of these measures and the ways about how to improve the relations between the county government and the public.

In this case, the government staff pushed and shoved journalists and grabbed their mobile phones, which made the government get a low rating in this public relations event. Especially the behavior of reinstalling the system of journalists' mobile phones without permission was strongly criticized by the majority of the public. The aggressive behavior against journalists not only exposes the lack of common sense of crisis public relations among local government officials, but also reflects their indifference of legal awareness and their disrespect for media rights. Bullying is not allowed in Chinese culture and is often criticized in public opinion events. In the eyes of the public, the media is weak compared with the government, while the government is strong. This overreaction will be interpreted as a blatant assault that the government officials tried to protect themselves by bullying the weak and ignoring the legitimate rights of the media, which may be the main cause of public's outrage.

Local government staff dare to do this to the media, mainly because some county-level governments are too bureaucratic to comprehend the relationship between the government and the media. China has a deep-rooted bureaucratic mindset, in which officials see themselves as managers of the people rather than servants of them. In recent years, the Chinese government has been trying to correct this mentality among government staff by changing their work style. However, some county-level governments are too grass-roots and still have a strong bureaucratic mentality. They still look at the world from the position of managers and have the mentality of being superior. Officials with such ideas may take the themselves as regulator and take media as the one which should be regulated. They do not believe that they have an obligation to be supervised by the media, nor do they believe that the media has the right to supervise them. On the basis of this perception, officials may think that the media which interview negative events are not doing their supervisory duties, but setting traps for the government and challenging managers. As a manager, it might be natural to harm the interests of the managed one to achieve the purpose of maintaining their own security. Driven by this perception, pushing and shoving journalists, lying in front of reporters, and taking journalists' mobile phones to reinstall their machines seem reasonable to many officials.

There are still some phenomena that deserve our attention. Although the Yuanyang County Government was at fault in the way it treated the media, there were also some mistakes on the part of journalists according to media reports. For example, the journalists provoked government staff when they were not permitted to come to the burial site. And the journalists did not show their press cards which are required for interviews. However, most netizens ignored this point, believing that the government should take full responsibility for the incident. This may explain two things. First, the government of Yuanyang County took a series of wrong and aggressive measures against journalists, which made the public feel that the powerful group oppressed the weak group. This angered the public opinion, thus it covered up the mistakes of journalists. Second, media and the journalists have a stronger voice and they deliberately covered up their mistakes when they reported this event. In this way, people are guided to believe that the Government of Yuanyang County should take all the responsibilities for the event. At the same time, the county government has a weak right of speech and does not have the awareness to speak out, so it is unable to let more netizens know that the other party is also responsible, and it is completely defeated by the other media in guiding the public. The strong image of Yuanyang County Government and its weak discourse power are also important reasons for the passive public opinion this time.

Aiming at the above problems, this study puts forward some improvement ideas. First of all, the county-level government should establish a correct attitude towards the media, and recognize that the media has the function of supervising the government. This function should not be regarded as finding faults. It is reasonless for government staff to have conflicts with the media when the media exercise the function of supervising. Second, county-level governments should learn to make use of new media such as Weibo to speak out for themselves, so as to avoid the media make one-sided reports.

5. Conclusion

Through questionnaires, this paper investigates the attitudes of Chinese netizens towards the event of four children buried and killed in Yuanyang County. It is believed that local government staff do not have a correct understanding of the relationship between the government and the media, so they take themselves as regulators and refuse the supervision of the media. Also, the Yuanyang County government lack the awareness of speaking up for themselves. This paper puts forward the corresponding measures, and also provides useful reference for the crisis public relations work of county-level government in China. In future studies, we will strengthen the pertinence of the survey, such as how people of different educational backgrounds, different ages and different regions view public opinion events of county-level governments.

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