

The Construction of Public Emergency Discourse by Local Governments: A Study on Social Media Discourse Strategies

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Abstract: With the popularity of social media, local governments have increasingly relied on these platforms to disseminate information and interact with the public when responding to public emergencies. Social media not only provides a direct communication platform for governments but also brings new challenges and opportunities for the management of public emergencies. This paper aims to explore the discourse strategies employed by local governments on social media, analyze their characteristics, identify existing problems, and propose corresponding optimization strategies. Through the study of discourse strategies, it is found that local governments often face issues such as lack of precision, low transparency, and insufficient emotional guidance during information dissemination. Local governments should enhance the accuracy and consistency of their information, improve communication transparency and public engagement, and balance the expression of rational information with emotional guidance to enhance public recognition and trust in government discourse.

1. Introduction

The widespread use of social media has made it an indispensable part of modern public administration. In responding to emergencies, social media has become an essential communication channel between the government and the public. The role of local governments is particularly critical in crisis management, as they use social media to release information, provide emotional guidance, and convey policies, which directly influence public emotions and actions. Handling public emergencies not only requires scientifically effective responses but also demands local governments maintain accuracy and transparency in information delivery to gain public support and cooperation. In practice, local governments often face issues such as fragmented information, insufficient communication transparency, and inappropriate emotional expression, all of which severely affect the effectiveness of government discourse and public trust.

2. Characteristics of public emergency discourse strategies

2.1 Timeliness and breadth of information dissemination

Timeliness and breadth are key characteristics of information dissemination in public emergencies. Social media platforms, such as Weibo, WeChat, Facebook, and Twitter, have become essential

channels for transmitting information, allowing governments to quickly deliver messages. After an emergency occurs, these platforms enable real-time updates to respond to developments. The rapid spread of information on social media enables local governments to reach a large audience in a very short time, reducing delays and misunderstandings [1]. In situations like natural disasters or public health crises, governments can use social media to publish disaster updates, rescue progress, evacuation instructions, and other essential information, ensuring the public can quickly access relevant knowledge and guidance, thus preventing confusion and panic caused by delayed information [2].

The widespread nature of social media ensures that information can reach different groups. The interaction between the public and the government on these platforms has significantly increased. Social media offers governments an opportunity to directly communicate with diverse audiences through interactions such as comments, shares, and responses to questions. This broadens the audience for government messages. During the COVID-19 pandemic, local governments used official Weibo accounts to release epidemic control measures and data, encouraging the public to share, comment, and ask questions, which heightened the public's engagement and awareness of government policies [3]. This form of communication not only allows for broad coverage but also creates a broad feedback loop, helping to adjust government responses in real time. The immediacy and breadth of social media provide governments with powerful communication capabilities, though challenges are evident, such as the risk of information being misinterpreted, manipulated, or misunderstood once it is shared [4].

2.2 Authority and credibility of government discourse

The authority and credibility of government discourse are crucial when local governments release information on social media. The government's authority stems from its legitimacy and official status, and its information is often seen as the most authoritative source. In the social media environment, however, the rapid spread of information can make it difficult to distinguish between true and false content, challenging the public's ability to assess and trust government communications. To ensure the authority of their discourse, local governments must ensure that their information comes from clear, accurate sources and avoid ambiguous or biased content.

Credibility also depends on transparency and authenticity, as well as the interaction between the government and the public on social media. If the government publishes unverified or false information, it can directly harm public trust and lead to a media crisis. In some emergencies, local governments may release unverified data or speculative information prematurely, which may cause panic or doubt among the public. In such cases, the government's authority could be undermined, and public backlash could occur. To enhance the credibility of government discourse, local governments need to ensure the accuracy of their information and establish a fast, transparent, and trustworthy communication mechanism. For example, governments can enhance credibility by using authoritative reports from experts, providing regular updates, and ensuring a transparent information release process.

2.3 Emotional guidance and social mobilization

Emotional guidance and social mobilization are another key characteristic of government discourse strategies in public emergencies. Social media not only serves as a tool for information dissemination but also becomes a platform for emotional guidance and social mobilization. Through emotional expressions, governments can stir public emotions, boost collective confidence in handling the crisis, and motivate action. During major natural disasters, for instance, governments use social media to offer comforting words and encourage the public to remain confident, while also using vivid

language to communicate emergency measures already taken, which helps ease public panic.

A core task of emotional guidance is strengthening social mobilization to ensure that the public acts according to government instructions. In public crises, governments often need to use social media to mobilize the public's response and engage all sectors of society in managing the crisis. During a public health emergency, governments can use emotional appeals to encourage the public to follow health guidelines and cooperate with control measures. Social media also serves as a platform for mobilizing social resources, organizing volunteer rescue efforts, and facilitating material donations. Through emotional guidance and social mobilization, governments can activate public enthusiasm and collective action, effectively enhancing social emergency preparedness and overall societal cohesion.

3. Problems with local governments' discourse strategies on social media

3.1 Fragmented and incoherent information release

Local governments often face issues of fragmented and incoherent information dissemination on social media. When dealing with complex public emergencies, information may lack systematic organization due to omissions or repeated revisions. Governments often release information in various formats, such as short text, images, and videos, but these communications may lack a unified structure, leading to gaps or misunderstandings. For example, during a fire, a local government may first issue an evacuation notice, and later release information about the cause, damage assessment, and affected areas. However, the intervals between updates may be too long, and the necessary connections and updates may be lacking, which can lead to an incomplete understanding of the event, and even misconceptions. Fragmented information makes it difficult for the public to gain a clear understanding, leading to confusion and anxiety during crises. Local governments should establish a unified process for information release, utilizing social media platforms to ensure multi-level, comprehensive communication and to maintain consistency.

3.2 Over-control and insufficient communication transparency

Local governments may sometimes over-control information release on social media during emergencies, often due to political considerations or concerns about public safety. This approach can undermine the transparency of communication, leading to a loss of public trust and even unnecessary panic. If, for instance, a local government initially conceals or delays the release of information about an outbreak, the public may become skeptical of the government's response and develop resistance to subsequent measures. In emergencies, governments should adopt a transparent communication strategy, promptly and accurately disclosing the true nature of events, and adjusting communication strategies based on real-time feedback from social media.

3.3 Conflict between rational information and emotional expression

Local governments often face the dilemma of balancing rational information with emotional expression on social media. While it is important to provide scientific, rational analysis and guidance in public emergencies, excessively rational or detached communication may make the government appear cold or unresponsive, diminishing emotional resonance with the public. On the other hand, overly emotional or inflammatory language can lead to irrational public reactions and escalate emotions unnecessarily. In times of crisis, excessive dramatization of tragic situations can cause unwarranted panic, disrupting social order. Local governments need to strike a balance between rational information and emotional expression, offering accurate, scientific data to help the public

understand the nature of the crisis.

4. Strategies for optimizing local governments' discourse strategies

4.1 Improve the accuracy and consistency of information release

The accuracy and consistency of information are crucial for local governments on social media. Timely and accurate information can effectively alleviate public anxiety, prevent unnecessary panic, and help people make appropriate responses. To ensure accuracy, local governments should use various technologies, such as big data analysis and artificial intelligence, to monitor the progress of events in real-time and rigorously screen information before release to prevent misinformation. Establishing an information review system ensures that each piece of information is thoroughly checked and verified, guaranteeing both accuracy and authority. Such a review mechanism helps minimize the risk of misinformation and misleading content.

Ensuring consistency in information release requires local governments to clearly define the responsibilities and standards for different departments when disseminating information. This helps maintain uniformity in messages and avoid conflicting or redundant information. Local governments should develop specific information release manuals or guidelines, outlining each department's responsibilities and how to handle common issues. This institutionalized arrangement helps reduce confusion in information transfer and ensures the public receives authoritative, consistent guidance.

4.2 Enhance communication transparency and public engagement

Improving communication transparency and public participation is essential for enhancing trust and action during public emergencies. Transparent communication helps the public better understand the situation and avoid unnecessary panic due to incomplete or asymmetrical information. Local governments should not only provide detailed updates on the events but also disclose the reasons behind decisions and actions, helping the public understand and support the government's response measures. Transparency can be improved by using visual and interactive media to explain the situation's development, ensuring that various groups can receive timely and accurate information. Governments should also encourage public interaction through online Q&A, surveys, and other platforms to collect feedback and address concerns. This participatory approach not only strengthens public trust but also helps governments adjust their strategies to better respond to social needs.

4.3 Balance rational information with emotional guidance

Local governments must balance rational information with emotional guidance to engage the public effectively. In emergencies, clear and reliable information is essential for the public to understand the situation and take appropriate actions. However, emotional guidance also plays a key role in maintaining public order and solidarity. Local governments can use social media to provide reassurance, empathy, and collective empowerment, encouraging the public to stay calm, cooperate with authorities, and adhere to control measures. To avoid emotional manipulation, emotional expressions should remain reasonable and appropriately timed, ensuring they complement the factual information rather than overshadow it.

5. Conclusion

The strategies for disseminating government discourse during public emergencies on social media play a critical role in shaping public responses. Governments must work towards achieving a balance

between accuracy, transparency, emotional expression, and rational guidance to effectively communicate during crises. By improving the consistency of information, fostering public participation, and managing emotional responses, local governments can better guide public behavior, mitigate risks, and enhance their legitimacy and trust.

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