

Signaling Air Disasters: Media performance in major Accidents

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Abstract:

This article collects reports from different media after the two air crashes through the words of these news media; this article analyzes the tendency of the media in the two countries to report by comparing the reports of the Chinese and American media on the plane crash. It is found that the media reports of the two countries are quite different. This paper analyzes these differences and puts forward the possible reasons.

Keywords: media reports, media performance, report disaster

Due to the significant impact of major accidents, air disasters will often become the focus of public attention quickly, and the public urgently needs precise information about them. However, due to the different roles and functions of the media in China and the United States, the focus of the media in the two countries is different, even when reporting the same type of content. This article collects reports from other media after the two air crashes, search news portals, and well-known newspapers, including People's Daily and the New York Times. The content analysis method is used to analyze these newspapers. In reporting the plane crash, the American media is more inclined to present the accident situation and cause investigation. In addition to paying attention to the incident, Chinese media will pay more attention to the people and events behind the incident to guide the audience's attention in a specific direction.

“China Eastern Airlines Crash” vs “American Airlines Flight 191” Event

On March 21, 2022, a China Eastern Airlines plane crashed near Wuzhou City of Guangxi, and the Civil Aviation Administration announced at a press conference that all those on board had died. After the incident of the “China Eastern Airlines crash,” it quickly triggered a heated discussion among the public and was fully reported by the media.

American Airlines Flight 191 was a regularly scheduled domestic passenger flight in the United States operated by American Airlines. On the afternoon of May 25, 1979, DC-10-10 was taking off from runway 32R when its left engine detached, causing a loss of control, and it crashed less than one mile (1.6 km) from the end of the runway. All 258 passengers and 13 crew on board were killed, along with two people on the ground. With 273 fatalities, it is the deadliest aviation accident to have occurred in the United States.

In response to two similar aviation crashes, different media in China and the United States reported additional content due to various media positions. Media reports on the China Eastern Airlines Crash can be divided roughly into four categories: accident situation, search and rescue dynamics, positive energy events of people involved in the accident, and investigation progress of the cause. Media reports on the “American Airlines Flight 191” are divided into the following categories: severity of the accident, Rescue work, and Investigation into the cause of the accident. For example, the New York Times focused on the seriousness of this significant accident, citing descriptions of people at the scene. (George Owens, a witness to the worst domestic air crash in history. One of the first physicians to arrive at the location was Dr. Robert Loguerrasio. “There were bodies all over,” he said)

Analysis of media reports that played a positive role in the accident

Timely reporting can achieve the “Pareto” optimal effect. The “Pareto” principle refers to the fact that, in some cases, more significant results, outputs, or rewards can result from less investment and effort. One of the endeavors of news reporting is to maximize the impact on the audience with the least energy. In the sudden report of the China Eastern Airlines crash, a detailed event report can make the audience get relevant information about the event in time, reduce the audience's panic, and avoid the birth of rumors. The timely notice of the media also leads the direction of public opinion to a certain extent. Suppose the media fails to seize the golden time for reporting and timely reporting. In that case, rumors are more likely to breed, and the media may need to spend more time and energy correcting the audience's first impression. As the golden reflection time is seized, the media report has a positive influence, with the most power to guide the direction of public opinion to achieve Pareto efficiency.

The media played a positive role in the timely reporting

of events. After the “Eastern Airlines crash” incident, the press quickly collected information and reported the incident in a comprehensive and detailed manner as soon as possible. For example, the Beijing News reported that “China Eastern Airlines Crash: What We Know” was published at 01:04 on March 22. The plane crashed at 20:00 on March 21. The crash information collected within 5 hours is fast enough; the knowledge and progress of all aspects are integrated after the crash in the shortest time, and the event information and the latest progress are presented in an all-around way in the form of 3D animation, graphic data, etc. The specific number of the crash site, the aircraft model, the model of the accident record, etc., dramatically satisfies the audience’s information needs. Similarly, the New York Times responded quickly after the accident, reporting the information about the “American Airlines Flight 191” event and interviewing the people involved in the incident as soon as possible to enhance the report’s credibility.

At
timely voice from mainstream media. Online media has the characteristics of immediacy and guidance. These characteristics of the Internet make the dissemination environment of network public opinion more complicated. Therefore, in the complex network environment, the mainstream media must not only meet the public’s information needs in a timely manner but also be alert to the behavior of “self-media” interfering with the trend of public opinion. Although some “self-media” will not directly harm society, they will profoundly affect the public’s values. Because this “invisible damage” is impossible to control and eliminate in a short time. Therefore, after a major accident occurs, the mainstream media should not only report the information related to the event and meet the audience’s information needs but also guide public opinion in the right direction in a timely manner. They need to respect facts and regulate the orderly dissemination of information.

Analysis of the Dilemma of media performance in major Accidents

Different negative reviews are presented from multiple angles. After the significant accident happened, in addition to the relevant information about the accident report, the media also paid attention to the specific characters in the incident. However, focusing too much of a particular person can arouse destructive emotions in their clients. For example, the New York Times interviewed people immediately after the incident to enhance the report’s credibility. Similarly, the day after the China Eastern

Airlines accident, People magazine’s essay “The People on Flight MU5735” sparked much criticism on social media. Critics raised objections from the perspective of “journalism ethics,” accusing people of violating victims’ privacy and ethics, causing “secondary harm” to victims’ families.

Insufficient information may trigger a second crisis. Due to the diversification of the values and interests of the main body of public opinion, the development of public opinion in a super-diversified direction has been promoted. In addition, the popularity of the Internet makes the main body of public opinion more susceptible to the influence of various trends of thought, making it difficult to control the movement of public opinion. Due to the unique nature of significant accidents, they are more likely to trigger unfounded associations and speculations by the public. These associations and beliefs will be infinitely diffused and magnified by the “magnifying glass” of the Internet, forming mainstream public opinion. After major accidents occur, if comprehensive and sufficient information is not provided to the public promptly, it is likely to cause public emotional catharsis, trigger a second crisis, and exacerbate social unrest. After the “Eastern Airlines crash” incident, the official investigation process was long, and the specific cause of the incident was not announced in time, leading to speculation on the cause of the incident on the Internet, such as “the cause of the China Eastern Airlines crash locked the co-pilot” and so on. Such rumors spread quickly and negatively on social media. If, at the beginning of the incident, the relevant agencies can release the information on the cause of the accident in time after the investigation is completed, and the audience can obtain accurate, comprehensive, and sufficient data from official channels, it will significantly reduce the occurrence of such rumors.

In general, due to the significant impact of major accidents, the public first needs accurate information after an accident. Therefore, although the orientation of the media and the direction of reporting is not the same after a major emergency occurs, the most important thing for the press to do is to actively report the content related to the news and consider in advance what kind of results the reporting of different content will produce. Meet the audience’s information needs while helping the audience understand news events.

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