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Ethics and Humanitarian Care in the Reporting of the Wenchuan Earthquake: A Case Study of People's Daily

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Abstract:
This study explores the characteristics and evolution of disaster news reporting in China through the case analysis of the Wenchuan earthquake, a major natural disaster. Compared to traditional conservative reporting methods, modern media have made significant progress in terms of timeliness and comprehensiveness in disaster coverage. By analyzing content from People's Daily, this study summarizes the current state of disaster news reporting in China and offers suggestions for future improvements, with particular emphasis on journalistic ethics and humanitarian care. The research suggests that disaster reporting should strike a balance between rationality and emotion, objectivity and perception. Journalists covering disasters should respect the dignity of those affected, adhere to ethical principles, avoid excessive emotionality, strengthen media self-regulation, and ensure the objectivity and social responsibility of their reporting.

Keywords:
Disaster News Reporting,Wenchuan Earthquake, Journalism Ethics, Humanitarian Care, Evolution of News Reporting

1 Introduction

Disaster news is closely linked to people's lives. Earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, floods, and landslides cause thousands of deaths annually and result in significant property losses. Many countries that have experienced such disasters pay great attention to the role of media in disaster coverage. As a global power, China has made remarkable progress in disaster news reporting. This study focuses on the Wenchuan earthquake as a case study. Considering the authority and mainstream status of People's Daily, the study examines the media's coverage of the earthquake. The research primarily covers three aspects: textual descriptions of the disaster site, portrayals of affected populations, and image selections. Through textual analysis, the study summarizes the successes and progress in this disaster report and highlights the methods and key points in disaster news writing. The findings provide a theoretical basis and reference for news writing.

Disaster news is typically a response to sudden events. Due to its negative nature, it can cause harm to the public and have a psychological impact. Facing such disasters, public media should serve as society's first line of defense. However, journalists often face ethical dilemmas when reporting on disasters-how to empha-

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size emotional tones and humanitarian care while ensuring ethical standards? How to balance factual reporting and ethical considerations? This paper argues that while journalists provide the public with real-time and useful information about disasters, they must also navigate the emotions of disaster survivors, sometimes confronting situations where the survivors are overly calm in front of the media. Moreover, some media outlets exaggerate the effects of a disaster to attract attention, and occasionally, disaster reporting includes false descriptions, such as using blood-soaked scenes to evoke stronger emotional reactions. These practices provide misleading information to the audience and can cause further harm to the victims. This study attempts to find a balance between rationality and perception in disaster reporting, emphasizing that disaster journalists must maintain the dignity of those reported on, respect their privacy, offer objective descriptions, avoid over-sensationalism, and promote media self-discipline.

2 Background of disaster news reporting

Disaster news is closely connected to people's daily lives. Natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis cause thousands of deaths annually and lead to significant economic losses. As a major global power, China has made notable strides in disaster news reporting. This study uses the Wenchuan earthquake as a case study and analyzes the coverage of People’s Daily, with a focus on textual descriptions of the disaster site, the portrayal of affected populations, and the selection of images. The research emphasizes that disaster reporting must balance the delivery of information with emotional care, maintaining objectivity, respecting privacy, avoiding excessive emotional tone, and promoting media self-regulation. Disaster news is not only a tool for information dissemination but also acts as a catalyst for global action, and its urgency tests the professionalism of journalists. In the era of new media, audiences can access news through various platforms at any time, and different reporting methods can influence public psychological reactions. This research stresses that disaster reporting should prioritize human impact, showcasing the vast effects of disasters on people's lives, while embodying humanitarian care.

The history of Chinese journalism began during the war period with the emergence of radio broadcasting, followed by the rise of newspapers, which focused on political events and wartime coverage. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, significant changes occurred in the social, economic, political, and public opinion environments, resulting in breakthroughs in both the quantity and quality of mass media's information dissemination. The study of disaster news reporting in China has a long history and has evolved in three stages. The first stage, from the founding of the nation to the 1980s, was significantly influenced by external political factors, especially during the "Seventeen Years" period, when the new system established had a major impact on all aspects of society, including cultural communication. Traditional media, such as newspapers, were also affected. The second stage, from the 1980s to the early 21st century, saw the promotion of reform and opening-up policies and an improvement in information technology. The government began to place more importance on disaster reporting, and in 1987, the Central Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China issued guidelines for timely reporting of major natural disasters and catastrophic accidents. The third stage, from the early 21st century to the present, followed the outbreak of SARS, during which the government introduced regulations to improve emergency response reporting, such as the "Regulations on Emergency Response to Public Health Emergencies" and the "Government Information Disclosure

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Regulations," which promoted transparency in emergency information. The rise of the internet and new media further contributed to the reshaping of traditional media's credibility.

The Wenchuan earthquake, which occurred on May 12, 2008, at 14:28:04.1, is one of the most destructive earthquakes in China's history. The earthquake had a magnitude of 8.0 and caused severe loss of life and property. By September 18, 2008, the earthquake had killed nearly 70,000 people, injured nearly 400,000, and left 20,000 people missing. The direct economic loss was estimated at 845.1 billion yuan. Unlike the media's collective silence during the Tangshan earthquake, the media's coverage of the Wenchuan earthquake marked a milestone in the history of earthquake news reporting due to its breadth, depth, and detail. The media's successful coverage set the standard for future earthquake reporting. Newspapers, as a typical form of traditional media, play a crucial role in China's mass communication, and People's Daily, as the official newspaper of the Communist Party, was selected as the case study for this research. People's Daily is China's largest and most authoritative newspaper, and its reporting on the earthquake is considered exemplary.

In the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China's media were heavily politicized, and disaster reporting was deeply intertwined with political messages. For example, during the Tangshan earthquake, coverage was often distorted to align with political ideologies. Research by Gan Xianfeng (2008) found that the coverage lacked objectivity, with political slogans like "Oppose the Rightist Anti-Party Wind," "Class Struggle First," and "Proletarian Cultural Revolution" being forcibly inserted into disaster news. The real stories of individual victims were overshadowed by collective images of "communes" and "heroic people," and disaster descriptions were sparse, mostly replaced by political propaganda.

Today, academic research on disaster news in China primarily focuses on two areas. One examines the historical development of disaster reporting from the founding of New China, guided by journalism theories. The other compares disaster news from different periods or different disasters, often utilizing narrative theory in cross-temporal studies. This paper adopts the second approach, analyzing the evolution and current state of disaster news reporting in China.

To deeply analyze the evolution and current state of disaster news reporting in China, this study employs content analysis, using People's Daily as the primary research subject. By statistically and analytically examining sample reports during the Wenchuan earthquake, the study explores the forms of disaster news, its content, and ethical issues in journalism. The research subjects are divided into three main categories: news reports, feature stories, and commentary. Through the analysis of different types of reports, the study focuses on examining the timeliness of news reporting, detailed descriptions, image selection, and its role in guiding public emotions.

3 Literature review

Disaster news reporting, as a unique genre of journalism, has long been one of the focal points of research in the field of communication studies. Scholars have explored its multi-dimensional characteristics, impacts, and social responsibilities. Research on disaster news primarily focuses on topics such as journalistic ethics, reporting frameworks, emotional expression, and its influence on the public. With the evolution of the media environment, both the content and perspectives of disaster news studies have continuously progressed.

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In China, disaster news reporting has shifted from a political orientation to a greater emphasis on public emotion and ethics. Early disaster reports were often government-driven, focusing on political and propaganda elements. The coverage typically lacked emotional depth and humanitarian concern, emphasizing national strength and social unity. For example, disaster reporting during the Cultural Revolution often treated disaster events as an extension of political struggles, neglecting individual emotions and humanitarian values. After the reform and opening up, especially in the 21st century, with the diversification of the media and the rapid development of information technology, disaster news reporting gradually became more objective and comprehensive.

As social modernization progressed, ethical issues in news reporting began to take center stage in academic discussions. Blau, in his study of disaster reporting in the United States, pointed out that the core ethical issue in disaster reporting is how to accurately transmit information while avoiding secondary harm to the victims. In the case of Chinese media, ethical concerns in disaster reporting are particularly pronounced. During the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, the balance between timely reporting and the protection of victims' privacy became a focal point for scholars. Huang Yinnoted that in disaster reporting, journalists must not only convey factual information but also consider the emotions of the audience and the societal mood, avoiding excessive dramatization of tragedy while preventing the ethical dilemma of "disaster exploitation."

Furthermore, with the rise of social media, the dissemination paths and modes of disaster reporting have undergone significant changes. As one of the main channels for information dissemination, social media has made disaster news more immediate and widespread. Cai suggested that from the Wenchuan earthquake to the 2013 Ya'an earthquake, social media's role in disaster reporting has steadily increased. This not only changed the speed of news transmission but also turned public participation and interaction into new trends in disaster reporting. User-Generated Content (UGC) and the participation of online communities have made disaster reporting less reliant on traditional media and more dependent on public emotional expression and the collective action of social networks. This shift not only improved the efficiency of information dissemination but also increased the diversity and complexity of reporting content.

Despite the benefits that social media's involvement in disaster reporting offers, it also brings about some negative effects. For instance, users might post unverified information driven by emotional impulses, leading to misinformation and emotional overload in disaster reports. Therefore, journalists must maintain professionalism and adhere to ethical standards, especially when managing public emotions and societal opinion, ensuring high levels of responsibility and self-discipline.

Overall, research on disaster news reporting in China has gradually formed a multi-dimensional theoretical system, accumulating extensive research on journalistic ethics, emotional expression, social media dissemination, and other related fields. However, with the rapid development of new media, the relationship between the ethical dilemmas of disaster reporting, the authenticity of information, and public emotions remains a crucial issue that needs further exploration both academically and in practice.

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4 Analysis of wenchuan earthquake news reporting

4.1 Research methodology

To delve deeper into the evolution and current status of disaster news reporting in China, this study employs content analysis, using People's Daily as the primary object of research. By statistically and analytically examining the coverage of the Wenchuan earthquake, this study explores the forms of disaster news, its content, and ethical issues. The study focuses on three types of reports: news, feature stories, and commentary. Through the analysis of different types of reports, the research examines the timeliness of news reporting, detail descriptions, image selection, and its role in guiding public emotions.

4.2 Research samples and content

The author collected literature from multiple channels. Initially, through Google Scholar, the author searched for "disaster news reporting" to understand global research trends, learning different analytical perspectives and methods. Next, the author used China National Knowledge Infrastructure to search for domestic research on disaster news and the Wenchuan earthquake. The research also focused on geological knowledge of the Wenchuan earthquake and global trends in disaster reporting. Simultaneously, the author gathered theoretical knowledge on the themes of journalistic literacy and humanitarian care in disaster news.

In terms of sample selection, the author reviewed reports from two Chinese newspapers during the Wenchuan earthquake. Chinese newspaper reports are typically divided into news, features, and commentary. News reports focus on timeliness and event summaries, feature stories delve deeper into the news, making them highly readable, and commentary articles synthesize facts and guide public opinion. The author selected traditional newspapers for the research sample due to their in-depth coverage, substantial information, and the ability of image layouts to supplement visual communication, making them easier to obtain for research. As the party newspaper, People's Dailyis highly authoritative, comprehensive, and representative. It played a significant role in the Wenchuan earthquake coverage, establishing a dominant image.

This study applied content analysis, first analyzing the reporting content to identify elements such as type, theme, and source, and then categorizing and summarizing the findings. Subsequently, the study compared the reporting frameworks, analyzing their similarities, differences, and influencing factors, offering constructive suggestions for future reporting. Additionally, interpretive content analysis was used to study the writing of news stories. This method, which is systematic, objective, and quantitative, aids in deeply exploring professional ethics and humanitarian concern in reports. Although qualitative research has limitations, it is combined with quantitative analysis, using a statistical classification of lexical words to create a mathematical model. Through surveys conducted on the electronic versions of media reports, content analysis was used to evaluate the presentation modes of reports, including text, images, and video formats.

Starting from the theory of news framing, and drawing on international news theory research, the study uses framing theory (Goffman defines it as a cognitive structure) to analyze overseas disaster news. The research also refers to the use of vague language, as mentioned in Li Yun's paper, which reflects the uncertainty of objective facts and is an important complement to news writing. Using a comparative method, the study compares results from different disaster news reports, focusing on on-site descriptions and the expression of

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humanitarian concerns. Finally, reports from the official website of People's Daily regarding the Wenchuan earthquake were analyzed through news discourse analysis theory (Van Dijk's framework), exploring humanitarian care and ethical reflections from perspectives such as theme structure, news graphic categories, and rhetorical angles, while also considering the challenges faced by reporters and the ethical issues in disaster reporting.

5 Reporting statistics and data analysis

5.1 Data statistics and analysis of reports

The author divides the period following the disaster into three phases: the post-disaster period, the rescue period, and the post-disaster reconstruction period. The author accessed the People's Daily data search platform and utilized its search function, setting the date range to the first five days after the disaster, from May 13 to 17, to search for earthquake-related reports and display the statistical results. Among all types of news reports, a total of 483 reports were identified, of which 220 were specifically about the Wenchuan earthquake. The number of reports on the Wenchuan earthquake during this period is shown in Figure 1 below.

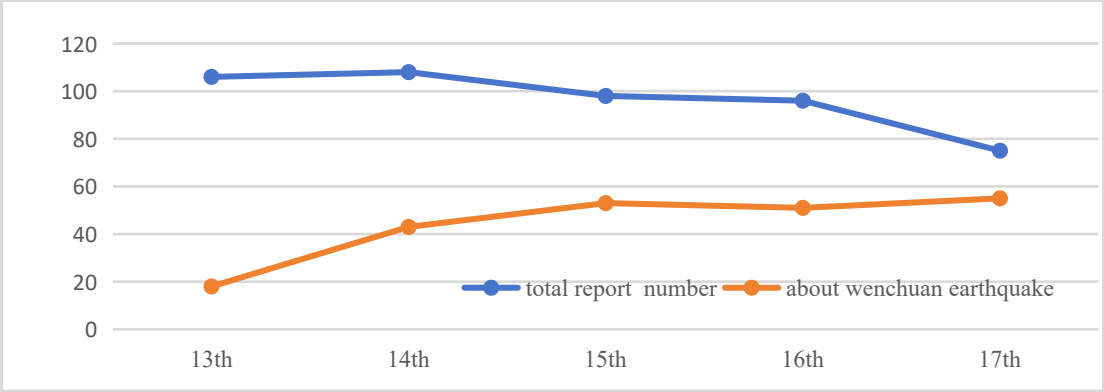


Figure 1 Statistics on the number of disaster news reports and total daily news reports

Figure 1 shows the news release situation of People's Daily from May 13 to May 17, the five days following the earthquake. The blue line represents the total number of news articles published each day, while the orange line represents the number of articles specifically related to the Wenchuan earthquake. For example, on May 13, People's Daily published a total of 106 news articles, of which 18 were related to the Wenchuan earthquake.

Table 1 Number of daily news reports

Date/number	13/5	14/5	15/5	16/5	17/5
Total number were reported	106	108	98	96	75
News about event	18	43	53	51	55
percentage of total	17%	39.8%	54.1%	53.1%	73.3%

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From Figure 1, it can be observed that over the five days starting from May 13, the number of news reports related to the Wenchuan earthquake increased steadily. As shown in Table 2, the proportion of earthquake-related news articles also rose significantly, from 17% to 73.3%. As time progressed, the coverage of the Wenchuan earthquake expanded, indicating widespread public attention toward this catastrophic event. While the early reports were limited in number, there was a clear upward trend. This can be attributed to the initial isolation of the disaster area from the outside world, resulting in limited information. However, an examination of the content from May 13 reveals that the newspaper's front-page news in the third and fifth sections covered detailed reports on the earthquake, effectively meeting the audience's information needs in a timely manner.

Due to the extended time span of the statistical report, the author chose to use a sampling method, selecting later-stage news reports as the focus of the study. For the mid-stage of the event, the author chose May 19 to 22. This period was marked by an increase in the number of news reports, with over 60 articles published each day, indicating that social attention toward the Wenchuan earthquake peaked during this time. Additionally, on May 18, the State Council declared May 19 to 21 as national days of mourning. "This was the first national mourning activity in the history of the People's Republic of China due to a severe natural disaster causing significant loss of life. The establishment of a 'day of mourning' and the lowering of flags not only provided a way for the living to express sorrow for the dead but also reflected respect and love for life. This was a manifestation of human compassion and a demonstration of the dignity of citizens."

Before the 1980s, disaster reporting in China was long considered a sensitive area. Information regarding the extent and losses of natural disasters was often regarded as "state secrets," which placed China in a passive position in international public opinion. However, during the Wenchuan earthquake, the speed at which disaster information was released and the volume of news published demonstrated that the Chinese government achieved a high level of openness and transparency. Within half an hour of the earthquake, Xinhua News Agency had issued its first announcement. As China's highest-level and most authoritative party newspaper, People’s Daily-acting as the central government's spokesperson-played a significant role in the breadth and depth of its coverage of the Wenchuan earthquake. This coverage was a milestone in the history of earthquake reporting in China and deeply reflected the Chinese government's respect for citizens' right to know, as well as its commitment to the legal regulations governing major disasters.

5.2Analysis of news types and content

People's Daily categorized its coverage of the Wenchuan earthquake into three main types of reporting: news reports, feature articles, and commentaries. After conducting a three-stage sampling (initial phase from May 14-15, mid-phase from May 21-22, and later phase from May 29-30), a total of 332 reports were analyzed. Of these, 187 were news reports (57%), 88 were feature articles (26%), and 57 were commentaries (17%). This data shows that news reports were the dominant type of coverage. The media used news reports to quickly fulfill the public's right to know, guide public opinion, and maintain the connection between the government and the people.

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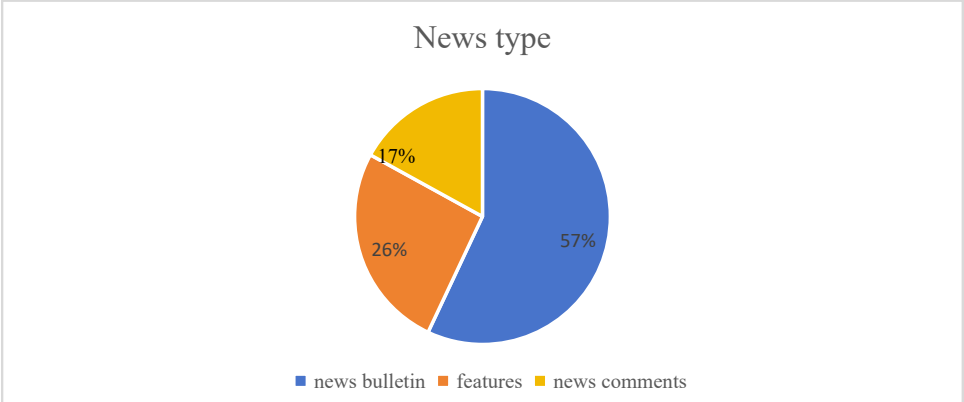


Figure 2 News type

Based on content analysis, the themes of the news reports can be categorized according to the progression of the earthquake event into the following stages:

1.Initial Stage (May 13 - May 22): The focus was on the disaster, rescue efforts, and government actions. On the day of the earthquake and in the following days, front-page headlines often covered Premier Wen Jiabao leading meetings and visiting the disaster-stricken areas to command rescue operations. These reports communicated government decisions and worked to stabilize public opinion, while also focusing on the scale of the disaster and the affected populations.

2.Mid-Stage (May 23 - May 31): The focus shifted to post-disaster resettlement and reconstruction efforts, with fewer reports on rescue operations. From May 24-27, many headlines dealt with resettlement and reconstruction work, emphasizing the relocation and care of the affected population. These reports aimed to actively guide public emotions and promote a sense of stability.

3.Late Stage (From June 1): As the reconstruction progressed, the quantity of reports significantly decreased. Coverage began to focus on reconstruction updates and post-disaster publicity. Due to the upcoming 2008 Beijing Olympics, some of the thematic content shifted toward Olympic preparations, including related work arrangements and financial management studies.

5.3 Content analysis of the news story case

This section of the paper adopts a case study approach to analyze news content. News feature articles (or special reports) are an important form of reporting, covering a wide range of subjects, including the affected population, rescue workers, and government entities, and addressing various aspects of the disaster. Based on a sample of 332 reports, disaster relief coverage accounted for over half (64.1%) of the total, emphasizing the government's people-centered approach. Such reports frequently use positive language to highlight the value of life, increasing the emotional impact of the coverage and vividly portraying both human life and national dignity.

The author selected a feature article on earthquake rescue efforts, titled "Rescue Workers Race Against Time, Battling Death Amid the Rubble of the Earthquake," which directly conveys the urgency of the rescue operations. The accompanying image shows rescue workers carrying a young girl out of the rubble, with the

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girl wearing a helmet. The image communicates both the difficulty of the rescue and the warmth of humanity, while also protecting the child's privacy, reflecting journalistic ethics.



Figure 3 News Images in Case News Reports

The report is organized in chronological order. The first paragraph describes the road repair efforts in Dujiangyan following the earthquake, using the words of the commander to establish authority. The main body of the article is divided into three sections, each addressing a different aspect of the disaster response:

Harsh Weather Conditions: The first section discusses how the severe weather made rescue operations more challenging, with workers continuing their efforts despite rain and aftershocks.

School Rescue Efforts: The second section highlights how rescue teams maintained hope, using detailed data to describe the scale and scope of the operations.

Severe Damage to a Car Factory: The third section describes the severe damage at an automotive factory, contrasting the selflessness of medical staff who worked through the holiday, with a focus on human sacrifice and dedication.

By describing the personal experiences of waiting parents, rescued children, and the efforts of rescue workers, the article showcases the shining light of humanity and the heroic actions of those involved. The reporting highlights China’s focus on the spirit of disaster relief and promotes a message of optimism and resilience.

This case study also reflects the evolving style of Chinese media, which is both unified and organized, following party directives while also maintaining objectivity in portraying the nation's image. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of humanistic care in disaster reporting, arguing that media can strengthen national unity, help the public form correct values, and ensure a balanced portrayal of all perspectives. In disaster reporting, media outlets should prioritize both humanistic concerns and transparency of information.

Writing excellent disaster news is a fundamental skill for journalists, particularly in reporting on major events. Ewart points out that journalists choose methods that align with their predetermined practice in their reporting. In disaster coverage, journalists apply a comprehensive set of practices. This paper selects a feature story from the rescue phase of the Wenchuan earthquake for analysis, titled "Rescuers Race Against Time in the Battle for Life Amidst the Earthquake Ruins," which directly reflects the severity of the earthquake and

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the urgency of the rescue efforts. The accompanying image shows rescuers, wearing red and yellow helmets, rescuing a young girl, conveying a message of love and strength while adhering to journalistic ethics by respecting the privacy of the disaster victims.

The report introduces the weather conditions in the disaster area and the road repair situation using concise language, with statements from the commander adding authority to the report. The story is divided into three subheadings, covering different aspects of the rescue efforts, including the difficulties posed by adverse weather, the search and rescue operations at schools, and the challenges faced by factories and medical personnel. The detailed descriptions of parents waiting for rescue and the students who were saved highlight the humanistic care in disaster reporting. Chinese disaster reporting typically focuses more on "disaster relief" rather than the "disaster" itself, with limited descriptions of the disaster scene. By constructing heroic figures, the media guides public opinion, boosting morale and conveying the resilience, collective will, and optimism of the Chinese people in the face of disaster.

Furthermore, the report also addresses the economic losses from damaged factories and the tireless work of medical personnel in the rescue efforts. Overall, Chinese disaster reporting places a strong emphasis on humanistic care and ethical responsibility, offering truthful and emotionally impactful coverage that showcases the brilliance of humanity and provides valuable insights for future disaster reporting.

6 Reflection and Prospects

This paper analyzes the reporting of the Wenchuan earthquake to explore the objectivity, humanistic concern, and ethical issues in Chinese disaster news coverage. The study finds that disaster news should not only objectively reflect the facts of the disaster but also demonstrate care and empathy for the affected communities. While striving to capture the audience's attention and increase visibility, the media must remain sensitive to the feelings of the victims and their families, avoiding excessive sensationalism. High-quality disaster news coverage should balance detailed descriptions of the disaster scene with an emphasis on its tragic nature and the success of rescue efforts. Through techniques such as comparison, where the passive waiting of victims is juxtaposed with the relentless efforts of rescuers, the report enhances the emotional depth of the story. Furthermore, the report tends to convey the victims' determination to overcome the disaster and their positive evaluation of the government’s rescue efforts indirectly through their words. This reporting style helps to foster a peaceful public opinion atmosphere, resonate with the audience, and convey confidence and hope.

In disaster news reporting, the media and government must both build a positive image while ensuring transparency of information. They must avoid concealing the true causes and consequences of the disaster to prevent public panic. The report should not only alleviate social pressure but also respect the public's right to know, maintaining societal stability. Disaster news reporting should present a comprehensive view of the event, without bias, and reflect the complexity of the disaster. Additionally, media outlets should focus on the professional competence and ethical responsibility of journalists. Journalists in disaster reporting must prioritize the public's interests, adhere to the principles of objective reporting, and at the same time embrace a humanistic spirit, respecting the dignity of disaster victims. In the Wenchuan earthquake coverage, many journalists demonstrated admirable dedication, but ethical issues arose, such as when interviewing psycho-

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logically traumatized individuals or medical staff, potentially disturbing their emotions. In the pursuit of news timeliness and appeal, journalists sometimes overstep ethical boundaries, thereby harming public interests. Therefore, journalists must first be individuals with moral responsibility and only second, competent communicators.

In disaster reporting, the use of a macro perspective is crucial, closely linked to the deepening of political reforms, academic insights, and industry practices. Some issues exposed in the Wenchuan earthquake coverage, such as content homogenization, excessive publicity, the lack of media emergency response capabilities, and the lack of coordination and planning among news outlets, need to be addressed in future disaster reporting. These issues reflect the ongoing challenges faced by Chinese media reform but also offer valuable lessons and insights for improving disaster news coverage in the future.

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