

***From E-Government to Social Media: An Analysis of Political Communication in  
the Xuzhou Eight-Child Mother Incident***

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**Abstract**

New media platforms have the characteristics of fast speed, a wide range of communication, and multiple subjects (Li, 2022). The government uses social media to communicate with people and releases government-related information through e-government (Graham, 2014). New media platforms change the original top-down agenda setting, making the dissemination of events and information on the web sometimes uncontrollable. This article explores how the government uses new media tools for political communication through the analysis of the Xuzhou Eight-Child Mother Incident (XEMI) public opinion diffusion and platform distribution and internet users' sentiment data. In mainly, it discusses how the government uses e-government and social media platforms for information dissemination, government image building, and crisis PR event management. The results show that although the government used e-government and social media platforms in XEMI to better solve some of the public opinion problems, there are still problems in handling public opinion in the beginning period. At the same time, the government's control over new media platforms also makes the collective silence of mainstream media criticized by domestic and foreign netizens, which is also considered a point worthy of future consideration and research in XEMI.

Keywords: Political Communication, New Media Platform, Risk Management

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## **Introduction**

Political communication on new media platforms has been on our horizon since the day they were born. New media platforms have the characteristics of fast speed, a wide range of communication, and a plurality of subjects (Li, 2022). Based on the characteristics of new media, which are not available in traditional media, the government uses social media to communicate with the people by publishing government-related information through e-government (Graham, 2014). Some studies have shown that such electronic public services significantly affect economic growth and quality of life (Magro, 2012). At the same time, new media platforms are also characterized by a wide range of information sources, difficult to discern, and rampant fake news (Wu&Liu, 2015). This means that the government does not have smooth sailing when using new media platforms to deal with public affairs and often faces many challenges. This paper examines the recent Xuzhou Eight-Child Mother Incident, which was at the center of public opinion on the Internet, to analyze how the Chinese government used new media platforms to promote its policies and handle online public opinion crises this case. The paper begins by reviewing the literature on e-government and political communication on social media. The paper then analyzes the four stages of public opinion development of the Xuzhou Eight-Child Mother Incident and concludes with a discussion and conclusion. Finally, the directions for future research and the existing shortcomings of this paper are given based on the analysis.

## **Functions of e-government**

E-government has been in the minds of academic researchers for a long time. Silcock (2001) defines it as an online tool that uses Internet technology to build a partnership between government and citizens and enhance government delivery and access. "Delivery" is mainly in information disclosure and agenda-setting (Zhang, 2002). e-government tends to disclose relevant information and recent government developments so that citizens can be informed of government policies. "Access" is mainly manifested in the suggestion boxes set up by e-government to obtain citizens' opinions and suggestions. It also manifests itself in obtaining commercial investment (e.g., bidding) after the government has made the information public in the first place (Huang, 2020). Some scholars argue that e-government has many advantages, such as making digital procurement data transparent and reducing the chance of backroom deals. E-government has facilitated the progress of specific public projects by allowing citizens to give their opinions and has built a nation in the minds of citizens (Li et al.,2020). However, citizens' opinions are within the government's tolerance range. In other words, citizens do not have complete freedom of speech on the e-government platform. The government can select the positive messages they want through e-government and choose not to display messages that have negative sentiments (Ali et al., 2020).

Moreover, some studies show that citizens are very concerned about their privacy in e-government. They fear that the government will steal their personal information through the database, sometimes even threatening their safety (Lee&Vandyke, 2015). Medaglia and Zheng (2017) have pinpointed that the primary purpose of e-government is to provide information to the government. Government is mainly for self-marketing and political marketing, not transparency, participation, and better service. The government's information disclosure only allows citizens to see what the government wants them to see, thus building its image. E-government is top-down agenda-setting, and this setting is one-way (Lee&Vandyke, 2015). The e-government platform only carries out the transmission of information and does not have a form of dialogue. Citizens can only passively accept the

information and does not have a form of dialogue. Citizens can only passively accept the information that the government delivers to them.

### **Political communication on social media**

Unlike e-government, where political content is disseminated on fixed government websites, political communication in the new media era is usually carried out through third-party websites (i.e., social media platforms) (Medaglia&Zheng, 2017). Political communication includes writing and oral statements and the creation of political identity and political images (Ali et al., 2020). The Internet has expanded the sources of political information, and social media has simplified the process of dissemination and access to information. Agenda setting is no longer monopolized only by politicians and journalists, and people have more freedom to comment (Gurevitch et al., 2019). Governments and politicians have become adept at using social media to package their images, and the widespread use of social media for presidential debates and campaigns has become routine (Magro, 2012). The most classic example of this is the election of President Barack Obama, who, according to Riaz (2007) analysis of data, received at least 30 percent of the vote through new media. This is a very significant figure. In addition to its excellence in political elections, the government has also used new media for information dissemination in major disasters. For example, in the Queensland disaster and the Haiti earthquake, the government quickly used social media to release information and reach out to the public quickly and effectively (Magro, 2012). More concomitant hazards associated with significant disasters were avoided. In addition to natural disasters, governments have used new media for information disclosure and notification of significant health issues. Governments are updating the public on COVID-19 in a Twitter column called "COVID-19" to inform the public of the latest developments in COVID-19, creating a positive image of the government while promoting policies to combat COVID-19 (Wright et al., 2022).

Unlike developed countries like the United States, the most essential purpose of government control of new media in developing countries in Asia is policy advocacy and opinion control (Riaz, 2007). China has been cautious in controlling political communication on social media as a developing country with stringent political censorship on the Internet. Laws and regulations have been enacted to control information on social media, such as the "Network Security Law" and the "Three Network Integration Promotion Program" (Duan, 2018), creating a pattern of mainstream media as "gatekeepers." The mainstream media act as opinion leaders in news reporting, guiding the direction of other media's judgments (Cheng et al., 2020). With the increasing number of Internet users since 2008, the number of official media accounts as mainstream media has increased dramatically. As of December 2021, there were 94,14566 government media websites in China (China Internet Network Information Center, 2022). Regarding reporting and propagating information related to the CPC, China's official media have been timely, elaborate, and authoritative (Zhao, 2019). For example, in the reports related to the celebration of the centenary of the founding of the Party, CCTV News was the first to continuously release on-site videos, information, and other news content on social media platforms such as Beeper and Weibo to promote the event. The related videos all had more than 200,000 views (China Internet Network Information Center, 2022). In addition to the function of publicity, the Chinese government also used new media platforms to control online public opinion. The control of public opinion did not start smoothly (Graham, 2014). During the SARS crisis in 2003, the Chinese government blocked information from the public. It even controlled the news media to prevent them from reporting the news, resulting in a severe information blackout. The lack of timely handling of

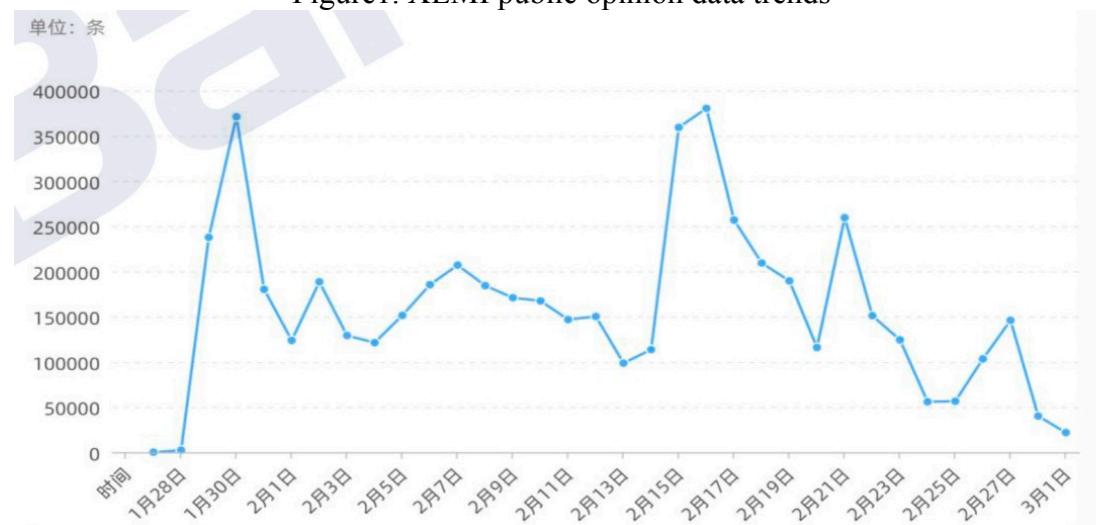
the crisis-affected social stability and even seriously damaged the image of the Chinese government (Yang, 2013). After that, the Chinese government learned its lesson and used the power of social media platforms such as microblogs in the "microblogging to fight abduction" campaign and the "9.27 Shanghai Line 10 subway rear-end accident". Live microblogging, microblogging, and apology to the public have controlled public opinion and prevented rumors from damaging the government's image. In addition to safeguarding the public's right to know, we also interacted with the public positively (Chen et al., 2020).

From the above literature review, we can find that governments have both successes and failures in using new media. This may be because the information flow on the Internet is from many sources and is complex. The government needs to spend more effort screening information and dealing with public opinion (Kavanaugh et al., 2012). Recently, the Xuzhou Eight-Child Mother Incident (XEMI) has had an enormous public opinion impact on the Chinese Internet. The local government issued four inconsistent announcements through new media platforms. Instead of calming public anger, they have contributed to the widespread growth of negative rumors against government. This paper examines how the government used new media to control the spread of public opinion in XEMI, resolve the public opinion crisis, and build the government's image.

### New Government Media in Xuzhou Eight-Child Mother Incident

XEMI took place in Huankou Town, Feng County, Xuzhou City, Jiangsu Province, China. A video of a mentally abnormal and imprisoned woman who allegedly gave birth to eight children went viral. Eventually, the incident sparked a huge public controversy as multiple investigators uncovered the truth. In mid-February 2022, the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee and the provincial government formed an investigation team to investigate the incident and issued a final investigation report. According to the detection of the public opinion monitoring system, the public opinion data in the XEMI incident showed several apparent peaks. Figure1 shows the trend of XEMI public opinion spreading on new media-related platforms. The highest peak of public opinion spreading occurred after the Jiangsu provincial government set up an investigation team on February 17.

Figure1. XEMI public opinion data trends



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## **Fermentation period of public opinion**

The fermentation period of public opinion mainly occurred before January 28, 2022. Internet users posted a video through a new media platform (Weibo) and attracted the attention of netizens. This is the same as the findings of Liang and Zhang (2021). Many public and marketing numbers republished the content, and the online public opinion spread quickly. At this stage, the government did not respond to the new media platforms and the government's e-government, resulting in many netizens rushing to the government's new media accounts to get the government to intervene in the matter.

## **Development period of public opinion**

During the development period of public opinion, the government noticed the incident on the new media and responded on Feng County People's Government and China Jiangsu Online. These two platforms are authoritative as the government's e-government platforms. The Feng County government issued two government investigation announcements to control public opinion through government websites with authority (Ma, 2021). At the same time, the government is also making efforts in new media platforms. The content on e-government was redistributed on channels such as public SMS platforms and official microblogs. The content of the two investigation bulletins issued by the government stated that the woman who gave birth to eight children was adopted as a vagrant and suffered from mental illness.

Moreover, the announcement clearly states that the woman who gave birth to the eight children was not found to have been abducted by the government civil affairs bureau staff at the time of her marriage. From Figure1, it can be seen that the public opinion trend over this period is up and down. This illustrates that the announcement issued by the Feng County government could not satisfy the citizens' concern about XEMI.

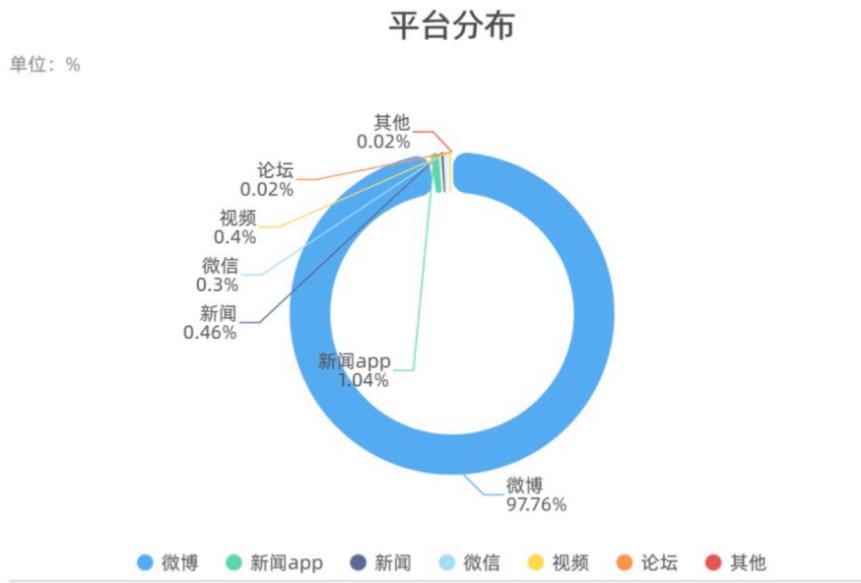
From February 7 to February 10, 2022, the Xuzhou Municipal Government, to which Feng County belongs, released an updated survey via Sina Weibo, "@XuzhouPublish." The investigation clearly stated that the woman who gave birth to eight children was brought to Xuzhou from Yunnan by her hometown, and the woman's identity was clearly defined. At the same time, the investigation also took coercive measures against the suspects suspected of illegal detention and trafficking in women. As seen in Figure1, the development of public opinion rose to a small peak on February 7. After the Xuzhou Municipal Government issued a notice through new media on February 7, the discussion of public opinion showed a decreasing trend. It shows that the Xuzhou government's investigation notice has played a role in pacifying the public. This success is not only related to the depth of the Xuzhou government's investigation but also inextricably related to the new media strategy they used. In the government's use of new media platforms, there is often a degree of neglect of the Internet's function in public political participation, democratic consultation, political decision-making, and agenda-setting (Han, 2019). This problem was well addressed by the release of two circulars in Xuzhou. The government did not close comments and selected comments. All netizens could leave comments on the microblogs, and agenda-setting achieved two-way and interactive nature.

## **The climax of public opinion**

On February 17, 2022, the Jiangsu provincial government set up the "XEMI Investigation Team" to investigate the incident. The data trend of Figure1 shows that the public opinion of

the whole incident reached its peak on 2.17. From Figure2, we can see that Weibo is the main platform for public opinion fermentation, accounting for 95.76%. CCTV News, People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency and other mainstream media followed up the progress of the incident. In the morning of Feb. 23, the investigation team of Jiangsu Provincial Government announced the investigation and handling of the case through the new media channel "Jiaoyuan News". The report mentioned that the woman who gave birth to eight children was indeed abducted and sold to Feng County, and the relevant government personnel involved in the investigation were punished. This largely answered the netizens' questions about XEMI. After the Jiangsu provincial government submitted its report, the official media on the new media platform Xinhua, CCTV and Jiangsu Provincial Radio and Television simultaneously released a series of follow-up interviews and comments.

Figure2. Platform distribution of XEMI public opinion



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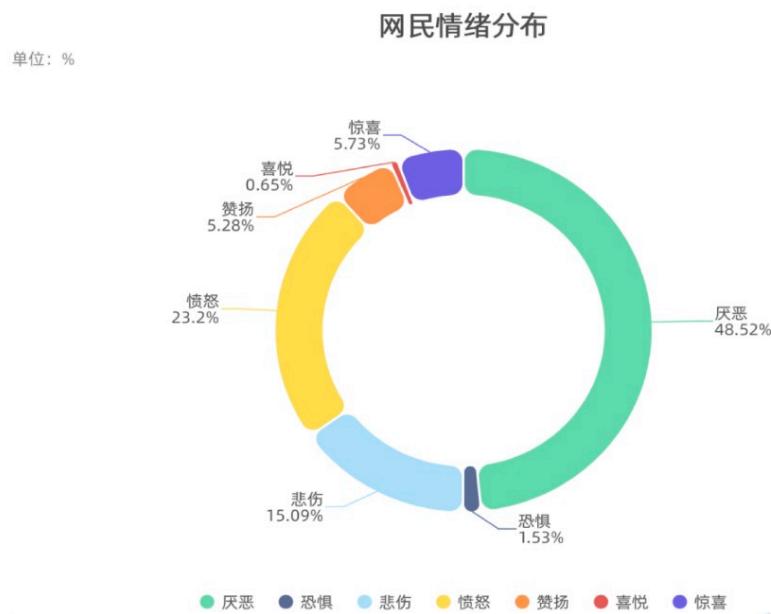
### The period of quiet public opinion

By searching the e-government platform of "Feng County People's Government," we found that the platform had deleted the initial reports on the XEMI incident. The existing reports are the follow-up activities to learn the lessons of XEMI. These include leadership visits to the grassroots, reorganization of municipal staff functions, and meetings to combat trafficking in women and children. It can be seen that the government has focused on re-establishing its image after the public crisis event by posting the corrective measures for XEMI on the new media platform (Jia et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, it is worth being mentioned. In XEMI, the government-controlled public opinion by restricting mainstream media coverage and controlling new media to release the progress of the investigation. For at least 20 days since the incident came to light on January 27, no Chinese official media expressed a position on the incident or published investigative reports. Only a few official announcements from the local government were reproduced. It was only on February 17 February 17 that CCTV news quoted the Jiangsu provincial government's decision to set up an investigation team, and only on the same day did the All-China

Women's Federation's organ, China Women's Daily, and the People's Daily issued an article on their official microblogs calling for the truth to be found as soon as possible and saying they were looking forward to a "definitive" investigation. This collective "silence" was quickly followed by a one-sided public opinion on the Internet (Liang&Zhang, 2021). According to Figure3, netizens' sentiment towards XEMI is mainly negative, accounting for 88.34%. This "silence" brought negative sentiment from Chinese netizens about the government investigation and discussion from foreign governments about the collective silence of the Chinese official media, with the BBC, New York Times, Washington Post, and other foreign media following up on XEMI. While questioning China's protection of women's rights, they also called on the Chinese mainstream and official media not to deliberately avoid the XEMI story, as this would damage the media's image.

Figure3. XEMI netizen sentiment distribution



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## Discussion and conclusion

The e-government platform and social media platforms are widely used by the government as new media tools for XEMI. The government publishes authoritative information announcements on e-government. The social media platforms are spreading the information and guiding the opinion on the social media platforms. e-Government is not naturally authoritative. People are persuaded by the information released on e-government because e-government has the authority of information source, policy interpretation, and platform release(Xu,2017). These are all government policies for responding to unexpected public events. The "collective silence" of the media in XEMI is perhaps the most noteworthy element. On the one hand, Feng County media's own inadequate investigation and perfunctory response to provoke public anger, on the other hand, the mainstream media collective silence. The government should be used to control public opinion of the two tools, coincidentally disappeared. The only voices that have been heard have been dry paraphrases of one side's lies in response to the other. The lack of mainstream media coverage has helped to feed the rumor mill. This illustrates the government's inadequate response to and control of

new media opinion in the XEMI case. Although the fact that the civil opinion field forced the official response reflects the two-way nature of agenda setting on the new media platform, the government should still improve its control over the new media. It should not only focus on official introspection and re-establishment of the government's image after the incident.

### **Limitation and future direction**

This paper is based on official information because no academic literature directly related to the case study could be found at the case study time. The absence of references to relevant case studies is perhaps the first drawback of this paper. Second, this paper only analyzes the government's initiatives on e-government and social media platforms in China. There is no analysis of the government's overseas versions of media accounts, which is perhaps the second shortcoming of this paper. Finally, the voices of politicians with political identities on new media platforms are also not included in the analysis of this paper, which is perhaps the third shortcoming. This is also considered a possible research direction to be done in this case in the future.

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