The Internet, Public Crisis and Social Identity

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Abstract: The Internet reconstructs the order of information dissemination and power relations during a public crisis and facilitates the redistribution of discourse power. Therefore, from a micro perspective, it further complicates a specific crisis; while from a macro perspective, it intensifies the uncertainty of social risks. In the context of a public crisis, through the redistribution of discourse power, the Internet promotes competitions among a diversity of opinions and disintegrates the traditional mechanism of opinion expression, the mechanism of social trust and the legitimate mechanism of decision making and power exercising. In the meantime, the Internet also creates space for social actions. This space, integrating the virtual space with the real world, enables the public to "upgrade" from onlookers and expressers to active movers. Dialogue among plural subjects in the society should be deemed a basic notion and the approach to public crisis management in the era of the Internet should renew the discourse order, reconstruct the mechanisms of trust and legitimacy, and cultivate a sense of identity and community in a pluralist context.

Keywords: public crisis; dialogue; discourse power; trust; legitimacy

Public crisis refers to a threatening and pressing incident or state that affects the mentality, interests and values of the public. Compared with individual crisis and organizational crisis in a general sense, public crisis is highlighted by the public, a core feature bringing its influence on the public space. Since the beginning of the 21st Century, public crises have been a central topic under discussion worldwide. Countries like the USA, Europe, Japan and China have successively

introduced public crisis-targeted policies and laws, and established the basic categories and formulas for the management of public crises. The frequent outbreak of sustained public crises in a systematic and structural way verifies the prediction made by Beck and Giddens between the 1980s and the 1990s that human beings are stepping into a society of risks. According to Beck and Giddens (Beck & Giddens, 2001), modernity is full of contradictions, paradoxes and self-denials, for which modern society is faced with increasingly normalized and publicized risks in nature, society, economy, ideology, trust, as well as violence in various forms. Fermented and erupted in the public space of a specific country, these risks are gradually spreading across the world. "Living in an era of globalization means we are faced with an ever-increasing number of different risks."[1]

For public crisis management, communications management is a core issue and it directly concerns discourse construction, trust repair, legitimacy reconstruction, public participation, as well as social identity. If major clues must be clarified, one is the emergence management concerning power, systems, resources and technology, the other is communications management itself. The former is a "hard management" category, which aims at directly bringing crisis damage under control; the latter, though closely related, attaches more importance to the issues of expression, consensus and identity during a crisis. This paper explores communication concepts, mechanisms and approaches adopted in public risk management, and their relationships with social identity in the age of the Internet.

1.The Redistribution of Discourse Power

The rise of the Internet is arguably accompanied by the emergence of a risk society. Since the

beginning of the 21st Century, the Internet has been involved in a variety of risks, crises and public crises. In public crises, the Internet exposes, spreads, and enlarges various risk elements; it reconstructs interest relationships and subsequently intensifies the complexity and variability of a specific crisis. From a modern macro perspective, the Internet creates ever-increasing uncertainties concerning social ideas, knowledge, social relationships, politics, economy, culture, etc., exacerbating social risks. For both specific crisis and the entire scenario of a risk society, the Internet is not just a simple renderer, but also a profound risk constructor. Through ubiquitous presentation and construction, the Internet promotes the gradual normalization and penetration of risks and crises, and at the same time transfers such an objective trend into a subjective imagination that the public are becoming more and more sensitive to the risk society. The academic views concerning the Internet's influence and consequences mainly fall into the following three categories.

In the first category, the Internet is regarded as the target of public risk management, an inherent maker of troubles, risks and uncertainties, as well as a key to crisis warning, handling and recovery management. From a perspective of information dissemination, S. Berrisford holds that the Internet exacerbates the dilemma of a crisis, resulting in information chaos, inaccessibility of truth and public disorder.[2] From a perspective of social relations development, Yu Guoming argues that the Internet brings about a revolution of interpersonal relationships and social relations while advancing the transformation of the media landscape and public-opinion ecology. It also commences a full-scale challenge to the government's role and action logic.[3]

In the second category, Internet is perceived as a means of public crisis management, and it is believed that the openness and interactivity of public crisis management brings about new possibilities to

further improvement of communication efficiencies, optimization of the exercise of power, enhancement of social mobilization mechanisms, etc. This can be exemplified by Garnett and Kouzmin's assessment of the US government's media communication mechanism and its efficiency in dealing with the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe. According to Garnett and Kouzmin, factors like communication barriers, failure to effectively utilize information technology and inflexibility of administrative power have transformed this natural calamity into a disaster of communications and public management.[4]

In the third category, "Internet" is understood as a term reflecting its special time and social context. To put it another way, the public crises today are rooted in a "society of new media" during the "era of the Internet". Zhang Chengfu and Xie Yifan argue that the risk to society previously predicted by scholars such as Beck and Giddens is now coming into being worldwide. And this is precisely accompanied with the popularization of the Internet, which amplifies people's perception of risks and a risk society and upgrades risk-society governance into a global social strategy.[5] Hu Baijing proposes that the Internet is intertwined with issues concerning modernity, risk society and globlization, forming a macro context of modern public crises. Given that, it is now unimaginable to discuss public crisis management without touching upon the Internet.[6]

In fact, understood as a target, a tool or a context, the Internet exerts its impact on public crisis via the following approach: it changes the order of information dissemination and discourse rules and thus transforms the power relations between crisis-related stakeholders and the power operation mechanism during crises. The Internet creates unprecedented resources and opportunities for the public to express themselves and it shapes people's understanding, imagination, discussion and construction of public crises. As a diversified space for the game of power, the Internet impairs the rules of power and basis of legitimacy previously dominated by elites from the circles of politics, business and culture. In this mechanism, the reconstruction of power relations, triggered by the reconstruction of discourse, demonstrates a transition of discourse power. One major reason the Internet has become a matter concerning public crisis management, or why public crisis management has encountered new problems in this era of the Internet lies in the Internet's redistribution of discourse power in a crisis.

The notion of discourse power was first proposed by French philosopher Foucault, who believed discourse is power. From Foucault's perspective, in daily verbal communication and "in a love-system or economy-based relationship, one party invariably tries all means to manipulate the other party's behavior, which indicates that power is everywhere,"[7] In a way, the entire human history and civilization are the outcomes of discourse construction, and are the existents "retained" or "eliminated" by power by discourse means. For example, whether a public crisis is a "natural disaster" or a "man-made disaster" is ultimately determined by the one who has the final say. If a crisis is identified as a "natural disaster", administrative malpractices like system crumbling, undisciplined management and officials' misconduct will all be "eliminated". Also, public management field's ever-lasting debate over "who is the subject of public crisis management", government dominance or diversified coordination is, in nature, a matter of discourse power distribution.

Entering the 21st Century, the Internet has endowed the public with unprecedented discourse power. Under such circumstances, how to consolidate, regulate and properly utilize such power has become an important task. Traditionally, during

a public crisis, there are confrontations among three types of discourse power. The first is the top-down elites' discourse system comprising political power, material wealth and knowledge resources. The second is the bottom-up civil discourse system exercised in the forms of memorial submission, petition, gathering, parade, demonstration, protest, etc. The third is the so-called "third party" discourse system advocated by traditional media like the press, broadcasters and TV stations. In fact, traditional media have inevitably become supporters and transmission pipelines of one party (particularly the elites' side) during a crisis. The elites tend to reproduce or legitimize their own interests and ideology by shaping the framework of the mass media. And traditional media such as newspapers and TV are the important channels for them to exercise their discourse power.[8] There is barely any chance for the public, especially the vulnerable groups, to acquire from the media the discourse power equal to that enjoyed by the governing elites. Besides, they also lack adequate training in public expression. Even in countries with a so-called long democratic tradition, elites' discourse power, in most cases, enjoys a dominant position.

The Internet has, to some extent, realized the redistribution of discourse power, which mainly manifests as opinion competition among multi-stakeholders. Traditionally, the games among all parties concerned were generally overshadowed by time lag and geographic separation, for which outsiders and marginal stakeholders barely had any idea awareness. The truth, "unity of talking", interpretation and solutions were mainly determined by elites from the government, enterprises and professional circles. There was an asymmetry in the resources of information, knowledge, power and expression between the elites and the public. It had long been recognized that enriching "the market of views" with different opinions and promoting equal competitions among them were to the benefit of discovering truths.[9] Even so, due to a lack of technology, platforms and mechanisms, the concept of opinion competition was not truly implemented into the practice of public crisis management. By contrast, the Internet now manages to break through the barriers of time and space, unveiling the curtain of power and bringing a diversity of opinions, competitions and confrontations to the "front stage". Under such circumstances, heated debates are staged in the public opinion field between the elites and the public, between different elite groups representing conflicting interests, and among different communities and individuals in society. "The Internet helps marginal groups, who used to be excluded from the mainstream discourse of the public sphere, develop their own consultation platform and communications network and compete with the dominant meaning and practice."[10]

Discourse power redistribution and opinion competition are not restricted in the public discussion of virtual space. Technically, the Internet has established a democratic principle of openness, equality and sharing, and gradually formed a democratic atmosphere and concept featuring dialogue, coordination, "decentralization" and "anti-authority". Nowadays, social media are increasingly blurring the boundary between virtual space and reality. The virtual space is no longer a simple reflection and extension of the real world. Instead, it is now "formatting" society in accordance with its own philosophy, values and approaches. The Internet has the amazing potential to transform the "equal right of accessing knowledge" into an astonishing power of acquiring all equal social rights.[11] This is an empowerment process combining the virtual space with reality, during which the public gradually develops the capacity and acquires the opportunity to resist the discourse power of the elites.

In the face of this new situation, crisis managers

generally have two options. One is to retreat to the old pattern of a "single authority", trying to stop the redistribution of discourse power, suppress the competition among different opinions and block criticisms. The other is to accept the change in, or even the disintegration of the traditional information transmission order and discourse power landscape so as to timely, actively and publicly engage in the opinion competition. The first option is in nature a "suppressive strategy", the advantage of which is to promptly create "harmony" and a "unified public opinion", the disadvantage of which is to further complicate the technical operation and risk a loss of trust. The second option falls into the category of "persuasive" strategy, the advantage of which lies in its compliance with the development trend in this age of diversity and its capacity of promoting democracy and good governance, the disadvantage of which is it is prone to get caught in an exhaustive fight against chaotic public opinions and even to move away from democracy. In developing countries like China, neither the government authority nor the public have fully adapted to the reforms of discourse power redistribution, opinion competition and social relations reconstruction. On the one hand, the government authority is often swinging between "suppression" and "persuasion". On the other hand, the public is far from being good at harnessing technical democracy and discourse power, and can easily fall into either an outrageous or ecstatic state created by irrational expressions.

2.Crises of Trust and Legitimacy

"Suppression" inevitably comes with more dissatisfaction and distrust. "Persuasion" is challenged due to a lack of trust. In a society governed by traditional order, the public have at least a relatively stable and subjective trust in the elites. The Internet-facilitated redistribution of discourse power has shaped such a tendency: The asymmetry of information and knowledge between the elites and the public are in a process of continuous disintegration; the expression resources, opportunities and status tend to balance and the curtain of traditional power gets increasingly fragile and transparent. Such disintegration, balance and transparency make what the elites have said and done seem suspicious. Because of that, the public, acquiring discourse power and the right to participate in opinion competition, become even more skeptical about the elites. According to the empirical research conducted by He Zhou and Chen Xianhong, in times of public crisis, the Internet provides the public with even broader space for public debates and public "access to the media". On the other hand, in the face of an official discourse, the public, however, tend to exercise their "access to the media" in a complicated mentality or attitude mixed with doubt, disapproval, contradiction, indifference, etc.[12] Because of this, many researchers argue that relevant authority should take the initiative to promptly publicize information and statements to acquire or reclaim the discourse power.[13] In fact, government authorities are getting more and more skilled at taking persuasive measures and strategies, including swiftly and spontaneously communicating the truth to the public. Even so, they frequently encounter such embarrassments as "misspeaking from the very beginning" and "talking much, erring much," and their disclosed information subsequently becomes a source to trigger a new round of criticisms. Even third-party experts, scholars and opinion leaders are often ridiculed by the netizens as "bricksperts" (same pronunciation with "experts" in Mandarin) and "50-cent Party" (a colloquial term for Internet commentators believed to be hired to manipulate public opinion to the benefit of the Chinese government) and are therefore deprived of the qualification and capacity of leading public opinion.

From the ruling elites' perspective, the redistribution of discourse power brings about a competition of diversified opinions and de-constructs the traditional trust mechanism, thus triggering a crisis of trust. For the public, the redistribution of discourse power, to some extent, means a process of decentralization, anti-establishment, diversification and even fragmentation, for which it is necessary and also possible to remain skeptical about everything.

In a normal society, trust is a seemingly abstract prerequisite for interpersonal communication; while in times of crisis, trust is "materialized" into a substantial amount of social capital. As a type of social capital, once it is over drafted, the government authority's "persuasive" strategy in a public crisis will fall into futile performance. In a time of Internet-based activities, with ubiquitous "onlookers", any performance done by a "loosely" organized institution or individual may be considered ridiculous, ironic and self-defeating and a persistent offense to public opinion and kindness. Therefore, the government should strive to maintain and increase the trust capital in public crisis management, not the other way around. Yet, it is a pity that when the "persuasive" strategy doesn't work well, some government authorities may rely even more on the old means of dodging, lying and suppressing or other tough tools, which may further impair people's trust. This is no doubt a vicious circle, which may work for a while but will eventually strain the public's trust. In a repressive society with diminishing trust, the Internet is transformed from a hub of public values into a sphere of emotional release and collective peep.[14]

Continued distrust, i.e. the deepening and consolidation of a crisis of trust, will result in a crisis of legitimacy. A crisis of legitimacy refers to a fundamental challenge, threat or subversion of relevant authority's core values and the existing basis and legitimacy of power. In a modern context, the legitimacy of governance and decision-making is mainly from three sources. Firstly, is procedural legitimacy based on fair and just rules and systems; secondly, performance legitimacy based on contribution, efficiency and achievements; thirdly, value legitimacy based on morality and justice, spirit and belief. The three sources of legitimacy are interconnected and any hamper or damage to one source may trigger a crisis of legitimacy. "There is no such country that can base its legitimacy solely on a single ideal model of the three sources; procedural legitimacy, performance legitimacy and value legitimacy. In reality, a country's legitimacy source is normally a combination of the three ideal legitimacy sources."[15]

The redistribution of discourse power not only transforms traditional opinion expressing mechanisms, but also gives rise to an in-depth reform advocacy – building the mechanisms of trust and legitimacy in the era of the Internet. The Internet shapes new concepts and makes it possible for multiple subjects to have equal dialogues and participate in opinion competitions. On the other hand, the public are equipped with more and more discourse power. Under such circumstances, the mechanism concerning the generation and maintenance of trust and legitimacy is undergoing a quiet reform. According to the principle of procedure, any subject or decision not publicly discussed can be suspicious. In a larger sense, any legitimacy based on a "centralized" discourse power is possible to be challenged. Meanwhile, performance legitimacy must survive the observation, discussion and examination in a transparent environment. Value legitimacy is also the outcome of multi-consultations, the diversity-based "identity" and the "greatest common divisor" of entities in a differentiated society.

Technically, the Internet offers a practical channel for the public to discuss and vote for all

public issues. Such expression and engagement has witnessed a rigid growth and reflected the citizens' will that "never goes down". This is particularly true in the context of a public crisis. Once people's discourse power and sense of participation are excluded or suppressed, the crisis itself is no longer a matter of temporary loss or retreat; instead, it will directly disqualify the legitimacy of power and decision-making. This basically explains the reality that in some crises, even if relevant authorities remained impartial and objective and had sufficient "persuasive" resources and strategies, the public somehow still refused to let it go and, depending on the situation, initiated outrageous or ecstatic waves, "opposing for the sake of opposing". Once a public crisis evolves into a crisis of legitimacy, relevant authority's defense of the fact itself becomes insignificant. Judging from some successful cases over the past few years, the key to effective management of public crises is to reconstruct the legitimacy of power and decision-making, and improve the credibility, persuasiveness and social recognition of the government's procedure, performance and values.

3. From Expressers to Movers

Discourse power redistribution facilitates the reconstruction of the mechanisms of opinion expression, trust and legitimacy. Will such reconstruction further generate or change the social action mechanism in a public crisis? When the public acquires certain discourse power and transforms from silent "addresses" to onlookers and expressers, they begin to question relevant authority's credibility and legitimacy. Will they further develop into active movers during a public crisis? Has the Internet enhanced the possibility of such transformation? In the beginning of the 21st Century, there were comprehensive debates concerning the Internet's

hidden value of boosting democracy and liberation in academic circles. Those debates concluded that the realization of the Internet's above mentioned values was under a variety of restrictions. In 2001, Jason Abbott studied the cases of China and Malaysia to explore the role of the Internet in political changes and reforms. He considered the Internet to be an important medium and tool to promote freedom of speech and social resistance, holding that aspects like localization, regionalization, education inequality, gender differences and revenue gaps made it difficult for the public to form a community of action.[16] What concerned Abbott was whether the public, with different views, could communicate with each other and manage themselves. He further questioned the public's cognition and attitude towards cyberspace. For example, he wondered whether the general public's distrust in relevant authority and their challenge to its legitimacy could truly be transformed into social actions in the real world.

The Internet revolution in the next decade, to some extent, has answered Jason Abbott's question. Web 1.0 equips the public with unprecedented discourse power; while Web 2.0 provides strong idea support and great technical convenience for the public to take action. Around 2010, social media, dubbed the masterpieces of Web 2.0, witnessed an explosive growth worldwide. That marked a new era in global IT revolution, during which the core value of the Internet shifts from the production of mass information and the communication among social members to the reconstruction of social relations and the extension of social members. Social media like Facebook, Twitter, Weibo and WeChat facilitate mass production, instant transmission and extensive sharing of information online to form a community of information. Meanwhile, they can also establish and reconstruct interpersonal interactions to form a community of relations in a direct way and with

convenience. Furthermore, they can stimulate public participation and social actions under specific conditions to form a community of actions. Social media has increased the chances for the public to "upgrade" from onlookers and expresser to movers.

Given that, the public crises in the Internet context become even more complicated and unpredictable. Public crises today, bearing the inherent uncertainties and risks of all crises, are also crises of discourse power, trust and legitimacy, and are likely to trigger a mass protest or movement at any time. In this sense, current public crises expand the potential for social movements and collective protests. To some extent, the public no longer belong to the abstract category of "otherness" or the vague group of "the masses". Instead, they are gradually growing into active participants in public discussions and social actions. The Internet (including social media) manages to create the resources, opportunities and technical possibilities for people with very different backgrounds to transform from noisy expressers to participants of joint actions.

Social media can bridge the gap between the virtual space and the real world, forming a mobilization and organizational mechanism to "share information, establish relations and initiate actions". This process consists of three stages. In the first stage, the public initiates or shifts their focus to certain crisis-related topics, sharing information and exchanging views with each other. During this stage, individuals with a shared view and attitude can spot each other and form an information community. In the second stage, attracted by a particular topic, people gather together and utilize social media to establish or reconstruct one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many interactions, transferring cyberspace-based interpersonal contacts to the real world. In this way, the barrier and adversarial relationships between cyberspace and reality is lifted; the virtual community has developed into a real one; the community of information has evolved into a community of relations. In the third stage, if a crisis-related topic or event concerns the vital interests and the well-being of the public, members of social media-based communities will immediately gather and transform themselves from expressers

share information, establish relations and initiate actions

to movers. During this stage, the public also forms a variety of communities, which challenge the legitimacy of official decisions and power operations in multiple forms and approaches. In most cases, there is barely any consensus or mutual promotion among different communities. Nonetheless, those communities somehow manage to enhance the "negative energy" of decentralization, anti-establishment and fragmentation.

Second, social media can also bridge the gap between verbal expression and action, establishing a dual-transmission mechanism capable of "informing people at all levels" and "sharing information among peers". Onlookers' spontaneous action needs to be based on a "common cognition", or rather, the direction and approach of that common cognition. And such a common cognition needs to be realized through that dual-transmission mechanism. In most cases, traditional media can only "inform people at all levels". That is because no press, broadcaster or TV has the mechanism or capacity of breaking down the horizontal information barrier and establishing a parallel network of relations. Social media, on the other hand, integrates the vertical and horizontal transmission processes into a whole, creating significant technical convenience for reaching a consensus and initiating a joint action among the most extensive group of netizens in the shortest possible time. This expands the space of discourse and action in a civil society. The fact that the same piece of information is shared by all people can help to alleviate individuals' feeling of humbleness, anxiety and powerlessness. Under such circumstances, the collective confidence, courage and ideal can develop and expand, waiting to trigger a joint action. "Overall, the Internet serves as a positive channel for the public to constantly test and explore the bottom-line and weakness of social control."[17]

Last, social media can create a large number of opinion leaders who actively lead public opinions and social actions. There was no shortage of opinion leaders in a traditional society, where, due to limited transmission resources, even a renowned expert or scholar could not make his or her voice heard anytime, anywhere. In the era of the Internet, however, apart from "public opinion leaders" from the elite group and "professional opinion leaders" from specific social areas, there are also "grass-roots opinion leaders" emerging from the masses. Their participation in the dialogues between officials and civilians, and between civilians and businessmen, has changed the traditional official-civil and civil-commercial social structures. In major public opinion-focused events like natural disasters, man-made disasters and mass disturbances, opinion leaders take a nodal position in the network of public opinions and social relations, and play the crucial roles of information transfer stations, opinion amplifiers, emotion renderers and social action organizers. They "often act as sources of information or organizers of public events, overwhelmingly guiding public opinions and initiating activities."[18]

During the netizens' transformation from onlookers and expressers to movers, social media allows information sharing and public-opinion mobilization while completing relationship establishment. The integration of virtual space with the real world is the very outcome of virtual communication; "sharing information among peers" also means a process for netizens to establish horizontal social relations; and opinion leaders play a key role in connecting online communities with those in the real world. Once a public crisis breaks out, information sharing and relationship construction are always the preferred choices for the public. The former shapes public opinions in a crisis context, while the latter tends to facilitate the building of a corresponding community to deal with crisis-related issues. Therefore, the government

authority needs to pay attention to public opinions and at the same time echo and integrate into the community and the relationship network behind those opinions. Although some government authorities try their best to guide public opinions in times of crisis, they never truly integrate themselves into the public's community on social media like Weibo and WeChat in an equal, open and interactive manner.

4. Dialogue and Reconstruction of Social Identity

Overall, the Internet, by its unique and powerful mechanism of information production and relationship development, facilitates the redistribution of discourse power and challenges the established mechanisms of opinion expression, trust and legitimacy previously dominated by the elites. The new round of Internet revolution, i.e. the popularization of social media, further blurs the boundary between virtual space and the real world. Consequently, information sharing and relationship construction are simultaneously conducted both online and offline. The online communities are thus "upgraded" from onlookers and expressers to active movers. From a macro perspective, such a reform intensifies the fragility of a risk society; from a micro perspective, it further complicates a specific public crisis. These dilemmas contain the real solutions. The redistribution of discourse power itself means an irreversible major reform. During the process of orderly information dissemination and social relationship construction, a new era is coming into being, which will witness the decline of elites' discourse dominance and the rise of multi-party negotiations and equal dialogue. With the Internet's deep involvement, there are inevitable competitions among a diversity of opinions, interests and values in a public crisis. Meanwhile, relevant parties will

fight for discourse power and legitimacy. On the one hand, such competitions may trigger fierce social conflicts. On the other hand, they may also boast potentials for negotiation, dialogue and social identity reconstruction.

Starting a dialogue means respecting the diversity of different opinions, getting used to the competition for acceptance of the mainstream view versus the counterview and the marginalized view, becoming adept at developing one's own discourse power, credibility and legitimacy in public discussions, and advocating rational and constructive social actions. In short, dialogue serves to reconstruct a community in the age of pluralism. In the face of reform-triggered uncertainties, conflicts and divisions, the ruling elites aim to echo and guide the reform and strive to reconstruct a social identity and restore solidarity via dialogue. Proposed by Beck and Giddens, the solution to modernity crisis and the risk society promotes dialogism and conventional communicative rationality to reconstruct a community through dialogue. To cope with a risk society, Beck's basic assumption is to implement "participatory democracy". According to Beck, the modern society should encourage and pave the way for all stakeholders, including ordinary citizens to participate in public decision making, and establish a risk management network featuring two-way communications and coordinated action to jointly tackle risks and resolve crises.[19] Giddens proposes a more detailed solution to dialogic democracy. Given the risks and crises pervading in almost all domains of modern society, from individual space and society to nature, he believes that only collective forces can possibly bring about real change; that dialogue is a basic tool for identity and community construction; and that dialogue is a strategy of interests to fight against crises, generate profits and boost mutual benefits and also a strategy of significance to seek common grounds and share experience. According

to Giddens, dialogue is the only substitute for violence in a risk society.[20]

The advocacy of dialogue acknowledges the rationality of opinion competition. Although it is true that such a competition may give rise to social disorder, from a strategic point of view it is conducive to the solicitation of intelligent views, the cultivation of social identity and the maintaining of long-term stability. Therefore, the right attitude towards a diversity of opinions is to encourage their full and sensible competition in dialogues, instead of restraining their diversity. It is wrong and unrealistic to give up dialogue and try to return to the age of "suppression". In the context of the Internet, one-way instilling without dialogue, however, much effort is made, can produce nothing but a monologue amid all those noises. It cannot even expect to attract the public's attention, let alone gain discourse power. A crisis manager should invest significant energy, resources and intelligence into the construction of a dialogue mechanism in this age of pluralism, turn all those noises into rational dialogues, and abandon the oversimplified and crude attitudes and practices towards public opinions. A full and rational opinion competition is the right approach to redistribute discourse power and cultivate social identity and good governance. Accordingly, the key to public crisis management lies in the possibility of seeking a dialogue based on a diversity of opinions. Such a dialogue is supposed to reduce damage, create compensation benefits, restore order and reconstruct identity.

The crisis of trust is a common symptom in modern society. Giddens believes only dialogue can resolve this symptom. He advocates the cultivation of a multi-layered and multi-dimensional mechanism (i.e. a mechanism between individuals and the living environment, organizations, communities and the societies to which they belong, and between nations and states) of dialogic democracy to reconstruct an active trust in human society.[21] Giddens categorizes the "indispensable trusts" between two parties as passive trust, and those persuasive trusts spontaneously established by two parties as active trust. Evidently, good relations between government authority and civilians, between civilians and businessmen, and between communities should be based on an active trust. According to Giddens, only by revitalizing social communications (dialogue in particular) and popularizing dialogic democracy can a society expect to establish an active trust and thus alleviate modernity crises in the areas of politics, economy and culture. Both in terms of concept and technology, the Internet offers a real possibility for Giddens' theory to become reality. Today, in a public crisis, there is no obvious technical barrier in one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one and many-to-many dialogues. What really matters is whether the manager values openness and equality and has the courage and wisdom to build an active trust and reconstruct a community.

Dialogue is also an important approach to overcome the legitimacy crisis concerning the exercise of power and decision making. The rise of the Internet has resulted in the ever-diminishing "durability" and "validity" of government authority's trust capital and legitimacy in decision-making and the exercise of power. The establishment and consolidation of trust and legitimacy is no longer a one-for-all sure thing as it once was in the age of dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. Dialogue thus becomes a key to the reconstruction and maintaining of legitimacy and a basic means to deliver other solutions. Through dialogue, a diversity of opinions, interests and values are compared, discussed and integrated. The dialogue itself is a process of acquiring and consolidating legitimacy and expanding the scope of legitimacy. In a specific public crisis, dialogue outperforms the arbitrary, antagonistic and closed process of power exercising

and decision making. Through this process, different opinions are openly expressed, and expressers transform from a desperate opposition and nonchalant onlookers to power holders and decision enablers. At the same time, dialogue can boost orderly participation and coordinated governance and improve the mechanism of interest coordination in a public crisis. On the one hand, it helps to improve the performance of public crisis management; on the other hand, it also expands the consensus space for different stakeholders. From the perspective of mass communications, consensus space is built on the "common divisor" of the interlocutors' values. Therefore, dialogue can help improve the performance, value legitimacy and process of public crisis management.

Within the legal framework, the protests and social actions in a public crisis should be responded to through dialogue. Yet, dialogue doesn't promise a solution to any specific problem or seek a unanimous agreement among all parties concerned. Instead, the value of a dialogue lies in its ability to transform the stakeholders in a crisis into a fully interactive and mutually trusted community. Internally, this community can always maintain a basic consensus space and a shared value, even when tensions and conflicts among its stakeholders trigger a protest.

It is worth mentioning that dialogues in a public crisis should be based on some rational principles. According to Jürgen Habermas, in order to create a sphere where "everybody can speak" and "there is no obvious absurd logic added", a number of basic principles of communicative rationality have to be established. He also argues that to ensure communications validity, interlocutors should follow the following rational principles: The intelligibility of discourse expression, the truth of objective cognition, the rightness of subjects' relationships and social norms, as well as the truthfulness of subjective motives. These principles are unified in "inter-subjectivity", which means developing an open and equal "subject-subject" relationship, rather than a dominant one-way "subject-object" relationship. In Habermas' view, communicative rationality requires dialogues among plural subjects based on the principles of equality, mutual understanding, solidarity, respect, inclusiveness and common progress.[22]

The communicative rationality and inter-subjectivity proposed by Habermas are arguably in line with Giddens' "Utopian Realism". Both acknowledge the existence of modernity crises and advocate the reconstruction of modernity, or rather, further reaching the full potential of modernity. Giddens attaches equal importance to Utopian ideals and a down-to-earth spirit to utilize "Utopian Realism" based principles to overcome the crises and uncertainties in a risk society. From a "Utopian" perspective, communicative rationality should facilitate value innovation and transcendence, and promote community solidarity, progress and prosperity. From a "realistic" perspective, communicative rationality requires information publication, equal consultation, sincere communication and diversified integration while avoiding dislocation, unordered expressions and random discussions. In the era of the Internet, communicative rationality should serve as a fundamental civic literacy and rule of social operation. Cultivating a dialogue concept, methods and rationality is a long-term process. Without a daily dialogue mechanism, sustainable information sharing, benefit reciprocity and value identity, community reconstruction in a public crisis is much likely to deteriorate to empty talk. Therefore, to tackle a crisis, more effort needs to be made in areas beyond the crisis. Dialogue-facilitated reconstruction of social identity is based on the premise that a community capable of weathering crises is maintained through persistent dialogues.

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