

**The Reconstruction of Communication Order in Risk Society:  
A Case Study on China**

**Cui Bo**

**(Science, Technology and Society Center, Tsinghua University, Beijing, 100084)**

**Abstract:** In the risk society, how to elude, decrease and share in risks is critical for the individual, organization, state and society to maintain a sustainable development. In the information age, risk information transfer can help manage risks, but it can also exacerbate or create new risks.

From both macro and micro perspectives, the paper investigates the relationships among the public, government and media in the new media environment. Using data from several cases of crisis in China in recent years, the paper concentrates on the challenges and opportunities that new media bring about, and on the check and balance among the public, government and media as well.

Finally, the paper provides concrete suggestions for existing problems in the risk communication in China in order for the public, government and media to reestablish the three-way relationships. The paper also points out that in the process of the relationship reconstruction, the public and media are not passive and negative, whereas they can improve the reform of government and the transition of social systems.

**Key words:** risk society, new media, management, public, government

In the risk society, none of organizations can escape from the crisis, so how to avoid, reduce, and share in risks is the priority for individuals, organizations, states and society to consider how to maintain a sustainable development. Both the objectively existing risks and the manufactured risks are expected to co-determine what tools, methodologies or institutional arrangements to choose. In the information age, risk information transfer can help manage risks, but it can also exacerbate or create new risks. With the public, government, and media involved in risk communication, it is very important and necessary to construct a sound communication order between them.

### **1. The Bargaining Agendas in the Risk Communication**

In the risk management, we can ignore neither the existence of risks, nor the information impacting on the risk assessment or cognition. It is critical whether risk can be communicated in an open, transparent and scientific way.

Compared to the other information, the risk information has two features. First, the uncertainty of risk information makes man confused and ambiguous when they recognize and assess the risk information. Uncertainty is the core concept of the risk society. For example, the uncontrollable accidents make man unable to carry out the accurate predictions; genetic engineering and cloning technology make man unable to recognize his own behavior; human activities will cause a long-term environmental consequences, not only beyond man's ability to pre-test and deal with, but beyond the means of the insurance coverage available; man has no knowledge of what the genetically modified foods will result in. In a word, it is the manufactured uncertainty that is the outcome of the reflexive modernization.<sup>1</sup>

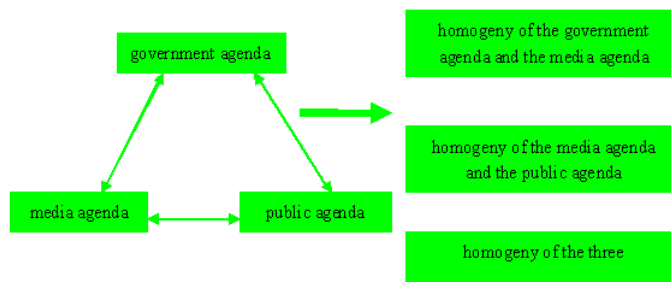
Second, the lack and distortion of the risk information make man unable to make a correct assessment, resulting in the collective actions, the main form of which are rumors. Rumors are the unknown and unconfirmed the news or statements, for man can not be sure about the sources. American psychologists Gordon· W· Allport put forward such a formula:  $R$  (diffusion of the rumors) =  $i$  (the importance of the events)  $\times$   $a$  (the ambiguity of the events). Rumors have two features. First, rumors focus on the events closely related to man's interest. Second, the lack of evidences promotes man to seek information from rumors.

In China now, the open, transparent and scientific dissemination of the risk information is subject to the opinion orders, as the consequence of the competitiveness between the public, government and media. In other words, with information linking, there exist the interaction and

checks and balances between the public, government and media, forming a dynamic communication system.

In traditional media age, the interaction and checks and balances between the public, government and media in the process of information dissemination remain in imagination. At that time, communication was underdeveloped and communication technology backward. As a result, sources and channels from which the public obtain information were relatively simple, so to some extent the government policy could control the media, preventing the risk information from social panic and social unrest.

In the new media era, especially with the booming of internet and mobile phones, not only the communicators, recipients, technologies and contents, but also the quantity and speed of information and communication notions have dramatically changed. It is possible for civil society to have dialogues with the government and media. In the atmosphere created by new media, civil society can play a part in the opinion order. At the same time, the communication transmission is changing from one-dimension to the two- dimension or multi- dimension interaction. The government's exclusive monopolization on information is being challenged. On the one hand, new media enhance the efficiency of information transmission. They supports peer-to-peer and interactive communication, so as to improve communication and resource sharing between the government and public. On the other hand, the new media shake the government authorities on the information management: Once the government has lost the initiative in public opinion, it will be at a disadvantage and in danger. As a result, its authority and credibility will be challenged. In short, the communication in China now is in bargaining situations, especially in risk agendas. The bargaining situations can be approximately divided into the following, namely Government Agendas V.S Media Agendas & Public Agendas, Media Agendas V.S Government Agendas & Public Agendas and Public Agendas V.S Government Agendas & Media Agendas (see Figure 1).



(Figure 1)

### 1.1 Government Agendas V.S Media Agendas & Public Agendas

In November 2002, SARS broke out in Guangdong Province, China. In a few months it spread into the first epidemic disaster this century and caused social crisis and trust crisis. Before April 5, due to the government's information force-out, media kept silent over it. On the site of [www.people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn), the earliest reports of SARS *Atypical Pneumonia in Canton has been effectively controlled* can be searched as early as February 11, 2003. Even in March 3, the reports related to SARS were considered improper. The government's failure to timely proclaim the epidemic resulted in large-scale proliferation of the rumor of "*pneumonia epidemic spread*". According to the statistics given by Guangdong Mobile Communication Corporation, the users have sent 1.26 billion short messages from January 16 to January 18. The extreme flood of rumors has brought new social catastrophes.

Under the pressure of international public opinion, on April 2, the former Health Minister Zhang Wenkang accepted an exclusive interview with China Central Television, for the first time disclosing the national epidemic. On April 3, the press conference opened up a way for Chinese and foreign journalists to launch the SARS coverage campaign.

According to the statistics by Xia Qianfang and YE Xiaohua, the government freed the information regulation on April 5. Since then, the media have launched a large scale of reports, covering the epidemic, prevention measures, medical treatment, prevention knowledge, research progress, diplomacy and economic activities and etc. As a result, the SARS reports increased but *effective control* continued to be frequently used. However, more and more words were used to describe *epidemic*, such as *disasters*, *SARS outbreak*, *non-smoke battlefield*, presenting the seriousness of the situation. After April 20, such words as *a sudden major disaster*, *distress*,

*national calamity*, never used since the People's Republic of China was founded, showed the extreme pressing situation and the government's determination to defeat SARS. <sup>2</sup>

The release of 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake information was a sharp contrast to epidemic proclamation of SARS. The earthquake occurred at 14:28 on May 12, 2008 and at 14:46 the Chinese government released the information on the network, television, radio and etc. so that the people could timely know the disaster. Both the rescues, disaster situations and donations were timely released. This time, the information released by government went before rumors and won public opinion. The Media Research Lab, Tsinghua University, has done a research on the key reasons for the breakthrough of the earthquake reports. 98.4% the testees attributed it to the CCP and government leaders' attaching great importance; 97.67% to the fast spreading information due to Internet and other new media; 97.21% to the severity of the earthquake, 87.92% to the changing of coverage concept of disasters; 86.54% to the journalists' devotion,;10.14% to the pressure by the international community. <sup>3</sup>

## **1.2 Media Agendas V.S Government Agendas & Public Agendas**

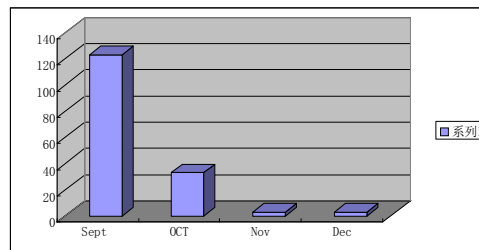
In 2008 the media played a key role in disclosing the world-shocked *Sanlu milk powder incident*. On September 11, 2008, *Oriental Morning* released a report "14 babies in Gansu suspected of drink induced nephropathy," which raised the query into safety of dairy industry. It was the first time to disclose the *Sanlu problem milk powder* in public. In fact, *Oriental Morning* is not the first to have reported the problem milk powder. Many media in the provinces of Hubei and Gansu have reported the problem before. However, when coming to the manufacturer's name, *some enterprise* was used instead of the exact name, due to varieties of worries. On September 10, a report from a website said the infant nephropathy may attribute to the consumption of milk powder without give any evidences to support the suspicion. The report did not call the name of the manufacturer either. The journalist Jian Guangzhou of *Oriental Morning* described how he covered *Sanlu milk powder incident*. <sup>4</sup>

I felt that the incident may not be easy, because several years ago, a lot of babies in Fuyang, Anhui fell ill and even died due to the consumption of unqualified milk powder. I wondered whether it would be a serious food problem. No soon did I telephone the Urology Department, Gansu Provincial PLA Hospital than Dr. Li Wenhui confirmed that the 14 babies have been in hospital due to kidney stones. Dr. Li also said that he had never encountered under one-year-old babies suffering from kidney stones and he also explained that the babies fed on milk powder, and milk powder may be the cause.

The previous reports inclined to use *some brand milk powder* to replace *Sanlu*. And I learnt three babies suffering from kidney disease came from the provinces of Hubei, Henan, Jiangxi. The same symptom happened in different provinces made me suspect the milk powder instead of the water.

It was impossible that the something was wrong with the water in four places at the same time. Especially when I knew the suffering babies might be dying on the operating desk, I was determined to call the name of *Sanlu*. If I did not disclose it, I would feel uneasy. Previously the report without the manufacturer's name was copied online. The netizens strongly urged the publication of the manufacturer's name, in order to respect the consumer's right to know. This also contributed to my calling the name of *Sanlu*. "If you have children, will you be so vague and irresponsible"? A mother's message made me determined to disclose the problem.

The story by Jian Guangzhou was copied in large numbers of major Chinese websites, quickly launching a climax reporting *Sanlu milk powder incident*. I have searched CNKI ( short for China Knowledge Internet). In 2008, the number of the reports of *Sanlu milk powder incident* was 162, with national newspapers 40 reports and local newspapers 122 reports. From September to December, the distribution of newspaper can be seen in Figure 2:



(Figure 2)

The reports contributed to measures to solve the risk as follows:

On September 11, soon after the first exposure, the State Administration of Quality Supervision took actions. In a few days, an inspection on the dairy industry swept through the whole nation.

On September 16, Vice Mayor Zhang Fawang and Mayor Ji Chuntang were removed from office. Board Chairman and General Manager of *Sanlu* Group Tian Wenhua was dismissed and arrested.

On September 17, it was reported that the National Standards Commission was revising the relevant standards in order to improve the quality of the dairy industry.

On September 22, Li Changjiang resigned from the Administration of State Quality. Wu Xianguo, Secretary of the Shijiazhuang Municipal Committee was removed from office.

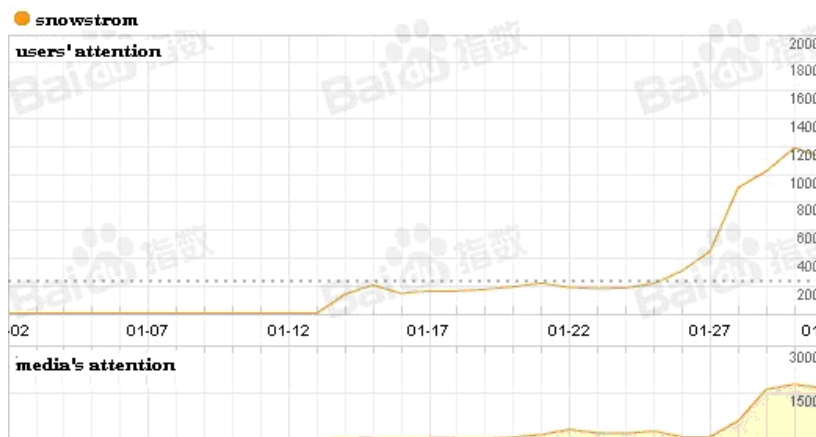
On January 22, 2009, *Sanlu* case was adjudicated in Shijiazhuang City Intermediate People's Court and Wu County People's Court respectively. Tian Wenhua, Board Chairman of *Sanlu* Group

was sentenced to life imprisonment.

### 1.3 Public Agendas V.S Government Agendas & Media Agendas

The awareness of civil rights and varieties of access to information make it possible to set up the public agendas.

From the middle of January to early February 2008, South China has suffered four consecutive snowstorms. The disaster caused substantial losses to industry and agriculture. The public first attached attention to the snowstorms and set up the agenda. The overlapping of the snowstorm and the spring transportation peak triggered a storm of public attentions. From January to February, the information of the damage caused by the snowstorms could be seen on the BBS of community sites and blogs. Zhu Jianhua, after searching Baidu, presented the statistics (see Figure 3) and the questions: “Who leads and who follows? Make your own judgment.”<sup>5</sup>



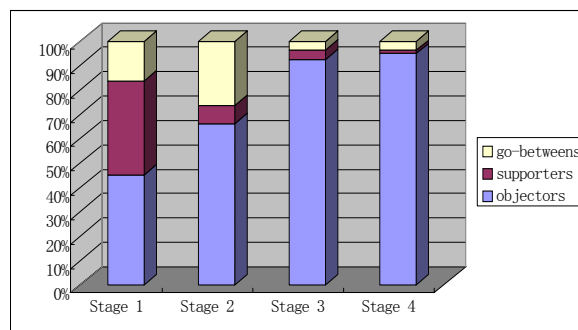
(Figure 3)

The answers to the question can be found in Figure 3. The public agenda led to the media agenda, and the media agenda enhanced the spirit of Chinese people to fight against the snowstorm.

On January 12, 2007, *Xinhua* net reported that Zhou Zhenglong, a farmer of Zhenping county, Shaanxi Province had taken photographs of the believed-to-be-extinct wild South China Tiger. The news was copied by major media. Soon the authenticity of photos was suspected by netizens and experts. On June 29, 2008, Shaanxi Government claimed the tiger photos faked. On September 27, 2008, Zhou Zhenglong was sentenced two years and six months in prison. On November 17, Zhou Zheng long admitted forgery. The case of the faked tiger photos is a typical case of the public-oriented agenda.

I have searched google with *South China Tiger Incident* as key words. By the end of January 30, 2009, the Chinese web pages were as many as 1.43 million. Among the pages, I have chosen 4 active sites during the period from November 12 to December 31. The websites are <http://www.netsoz.com/related/5cf830101b302c990512197c7dc79f8a.html>, <http://market.xitek.com/>, <http://www.xitek.com/photo/> and <http://club.163.com/>. The paper describes the role that the netizens played in disclosing the faked photos with the help of the posters.

According to the content, the posters were divided into objectors (think tiger photos are fake), supporters (think tiger photos are real) and go-betweens (not sure whether the photos were true or false). The following four posters can be seen as a critical events: the poster that first suspected the photos from psychological perspective, the poster that first suspected the photos from technological perspective, the poster that first gave evidences and the group of experts first released their identification, so the process of the event can be divided into four stages: doubt stage (October 12 -14), technically reasoning stage (October 15 –November 15), proof stage (November 16 – December 1) and identification stage (after December 2). With so many followers, I had to keep track of the key followers by applying the equidistant sampling (more followers, the lager the equidistance). The result is shown in Figure 4.



(Figure 4)

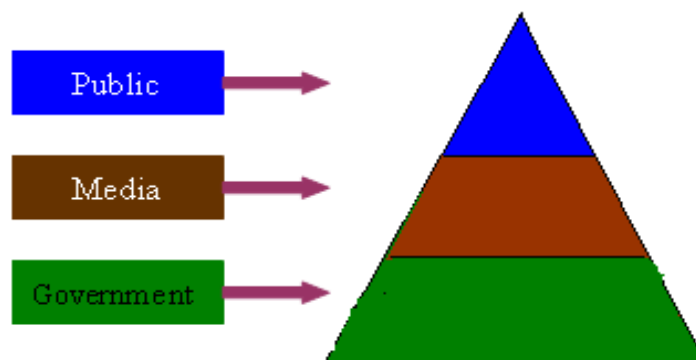
With the truth revealed, the public attitudes altered dramatically and the number of objectors continued growing, in a sharp contrast to supporters. From the poster content, what the public concerned transferred from *whether the photos were true or false* to *the fakers to be blamed* and to *who was the real counterfeiter*.

*The faked South China Tiger Incident* is one of typical examples in which the public agenda bargained with the media and government agenda. Because Forestry Department of Shaanxi Province ignored new media-based public agenda, the function of government agenda was left behind and the government lost its initiative in public opinion.

## 2. The Limitation of the Existing Communicative Order

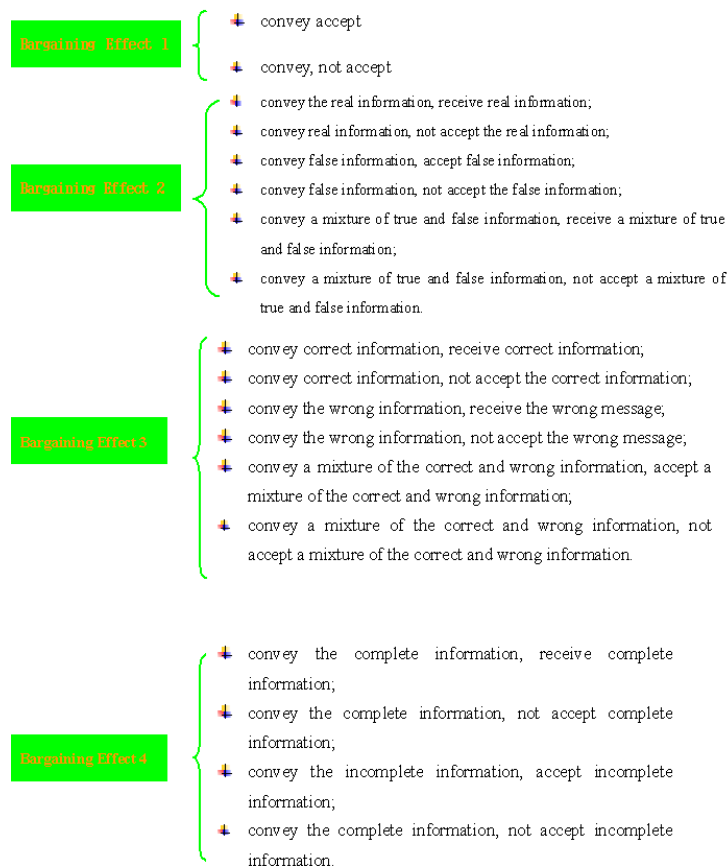
In China, does the existing bargaining order contribute to the risk control and solution? As we know, the diffusion of risk information is subordinated to the order composed by the public, government and media. However, their access to risk information is not necessarily equal and the information bargaining is not balanced.

From the macro perspective, government has more advantages over the public and media in the possession of risk information, called asymmetric information structure (see Figure 5). Spencer has proposed a model in which the government and media decide how to convey risk information, while the public who possess less have to wait for the information conveyed. Even if the personal communication is developed nowadays, the quality and quantity of the information possessed by personal communication cannot compare with those by the government and media.



(Figure 5)

As far as the bargaining concerned, there exist several combinations (Figure 6)<sup>6</sup>:



(Figure 6)

From the four combinations, we can see that all the effects don't necessarily lead to social justice and efficiency.

From the micro perspective, there exist flaws in the risk agendas oriented either by the public, government or media. In the public-oriented risk agenda, the public's media literacy, technological literacy and neighborhood complex have become the main factors restricting the communication. The so-called *neighborhood complex* means not happening in my backyard, a selfish, ideological or political inclination, which is hard to be persuaded. Ogburn has pointed out in his *Theory of Cultural Retardation* that society needs time to adapt to the major technological changes. When sudden risk information comes, the public have difficulties to adapt to it immediately. Even if they are not directly harmed, they can not control their emotions. In addition, new media are applied in the public-oriented agendas. On the one hand, the use of new media breaks the monopoly and control of risk information and monitors the solution effectively. On the other hand, with the traditional gatekeepers missing in new media, the freely releasing news may result in the mixture of true and false information.

On October 5, 2008, a short message aroused the national anxiety over food safety, saying, “Tell your family, friends and colleagues not to eat oranges. Maggot-like worms are found on the internal orange skins produced by Guangyuan County, Sicuan Province. A large number of oranges are buried, with lime sprinkled over them”. In a few days the message quickly spread throughout the nation, resulting in such chain effects: the newspapers throughout the nation have reported that local residents have bought the maggot- suspected oranges; the orange market almost paralyzed; the producers and traders suffered a lot.

In the media-oriented risk agendas, there also exist the similar problems. Many literatures point out that the mass media, as the go-betweens and actors in the risk communication; they often lead to different results from different factors.<sup>7</sup> In China, what obstacles the media encounter in risk communication are the lack of the rational dialogue mechanisms between technology and society and the shortage of democratic procedures. Finally, the media are subject to market. Driven by capital, the pursuit of money often leads to amplifying risk, which conceals the other social facts.

On March 13, 2007, a report *Banana cancer found in Canton* appeared in *Guangdong Information Times*. It said that a large area of bananas was infected by a so-called banana cancer Panama Virus. The rumor that bananas were toxic raised great fear and panic. As a result, the banana prices fell sharply, with enormous losses.

There is nothing wrong with this news, as the communication media, it removed the original uncertainty, but created a new uncertainty at higher speed. The next day after the news released, some newspaper readers asked whether they could eat the cancer bananas. Due to irresponsibility for copying the news and amplifying the facts, other media could not attain the correct information when reproducing and led to the rumors of *toxic banana* and panic suffusing among consumers.

There are flaws with the risk government-oriented agendas. In China, the release of risk information relies mainly on the government. The government is only able to deal with simplex risk departments, but when the large-scale and more complex risks come, the government has difficulty in coping with it, for China still doesn't have the unified and specialized emergency response agencies to coordinate and integrate the various functional departments against risks.

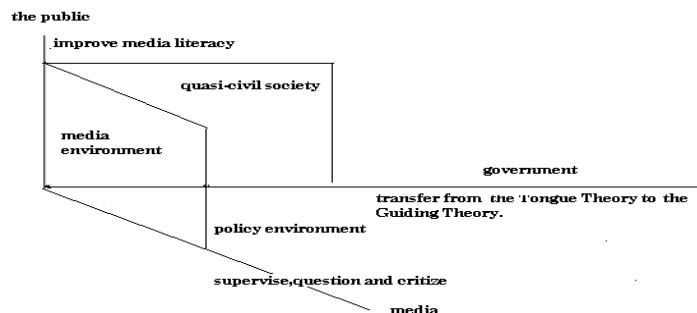
In Baker's analysis, a concept should be attached particular importance to, namely, *organized irresponsibility*, reflecting the current governance model in the plight of the risk society. It is

reflected in two aspects: First, even though the modern social systems are highly developed, with all areas of human activities covered, they are not able to work effectively on the advent of risk society and hardly assume the responsibility of both quasi-prevention and conduct ex post facto settlements. Second, when it is difficult to decide on who should assume the responsibility, each of the actors will apply laws and science as their excuse and defense and conduct the organized irresponsibility. Therefore, in order to make up the insufficiency of the state's governance, it is critical not only to enhance the state's governance capacity and improve governance approaches, but also to nurture and develop market and civil society. So in the risk communication, it is necessary for the public, government and media to collaborate and reconstruct the communication order.

### 3. The Reconstruction of the Risk Communication Order

Both abundant risk information and highlighted uncertainty are the distinctive features in modern society. Though the co-existence of risk information and uncertainty seem contradictory, we can explain reasons why they can co-exist. Sometimes new information may both eliminate the original uncertainty and create new uncertainty at higher speed. In order to resolve the uncertainty and problems caused by the release of information, we should start from where society combines with science and technology and enhance the understanding the risk communication and its effect, so as to set up compound governance model of risk society.

Man lives with orders and orders can help man to deal with risks. The advent of risk society not only challenges the existing order, but also provides opportunities for reconstructing a newer and safer communication order, though reconstruction will undergo a lot of hardship. In the reconstruction of risk communication order, the public, government and media in China will play roles like this (see Figure 7).



(Figure 7)

### **3.1 The Relationship between the Government and Media**

David • Gergen, a professor from Kennedy School, Harvard University has ever said, “The media are neither friends nor enemies. They are just powers, whether you like them or not.” Indeed, the media play roles in conveying information and guiding the public opinion, as well as act as an interface where the public express their views and conduct their supervision on the government. How the media work directly influences the relationships between the government and the public.

With the systems and technologies co-working, the four profound changes have taken place in media. Firstly, the operation system is changing from communicator-centered to audience-centered, from being funded by the state to being funded partly by the state and partly by themselves. Both of the social and economic demands are very strong. Secondly, the news coverage is changing from the regional to the national and worldwide, breaking through the boundary between the internal coverage and external coverage. Thirdly, the forms of the media present from being monotone to being plural, with newspaper, broadcasting, TV and Internet co-operating. Fourthly, the amount of information is changing from scarce to superfluous and thus the strategy is being adjusted from communicator-oriented to audience-oriented.

The major changes happening in media call for the necessity to adjust the relationship between the government and the media. It is urgent for the media’s role to transfer from being the tongue of the government to being the guides of public opinion. To be exact, the government should cooperate with media, exerting their social functions, such as conveying information, supervising government and guiding the public opinions, and therefore establish the positive image, finding solution to risks.

The co-operation system requires the government not to treat the media either as its subordinate or as its counterpart, but as a social power to influence the mass. The government should follow the communicative disciplinarians, and try to make a sound interaction with the media, which helps establish the trust and responsibility between them. In the risk management, the government and media have the same responsibilities to serve the public as their social responsibility, and that is the premise that they co-operate. At the same time, the media’s pursuing the economic benefits should be under the regulation of the government, so that the public interest and the legitimate interests of individuals can be insured. In a word, the co-operation requires the government not to indulge the media actions but to guides them as interfere and social powers to serve the public.

Of course, the co-operation doesn’t mean that the media lose their functions of supervising,

questioning and criticizing the government. If the media don't do so, they will lose their stand serving the public and their benefits rooted in the public will be gone. The risk management also calls for even tougher supervision, in order to pave a way for risk solution.

Therefore, in the modern society, the government acts as a communicative bridge between the public and the media. The bridge should be kept in good conditions to ensure its ability to exert positive social functions and promote the harmonious development of society. The cooperation is essentially asking the government to help the media and realize their credibility

### **3.2 The Relationship between the Government and the Public**

In order to conduct effective risk communication, first of all, we should recognize that the dispute over resolutions is a political process. Only through adequate communication and public participation can the dispute over risks be reduced. As early as 1996, Waddell gave the definition of the risk communication like this: "risk communication is not a process whereby values, beliefs, and emotions are communicated only from the public and technical information is communicated only from technical experts. Instead, it is an interactive exchange of information during which all participants also communicate, appeal to, and engage values, beliefs, and emotions. Through this process, public policy decisions are socially constructed."<sup>8</sup> Katz and Miller thought that the definition emphasizes the interaction of the communication network helped to build up a "participatory democracy."<sup>9</sup>

However, public participating in the risk agendas depends largely on the information channels between the state and society. When the state and society co-exist without mutual communication channels, generally two situations embodied in the structure of society: either the state keeps close to or distance away from society; either the state holds the society or lose the control of society. The lack of the tension between the state and society often results in the fear of public authority and the rising of a sense of power distance and further leads to what Taylor called the *alienation between citizens and the country*. These do harm to the civic awareness and the public spirit and obstruct the improvement of democratization of public life. Based on Taylor's theory, in such circumstances, with a higher social closure while a low democratization, the state and society is well divided and the civil society hardly has room to develop. The social risks and potential conflict are suppressed by force. As a result, the accumulation of conflict will become more and more destructive, further increasing the vulnerability of social systems and risks.

Civil society is not only a unique political culture with democracy, negotiation and participation as its features and but also an effective power in social control. A century ago, Ross pointed out, social organizations, social norms and even the market itself are the important aspects of social control. Well-developed systems of social organization, such as universal and independent trade unions, churches NGOs and etc. can play an effective public and social intermediary between the government and the public in negotiating the groups at all levels and promote the social solidarity. The existence of civil society means the existence of a constitution with freedom, democracy and human rights concept infiltrated. Many vital civil groups and organizations provide sound public sphere with the function of check and error correction, as well as ordinary citizens with fairness, responsibility, tolerance, good at dialogue and compromise and active in participation. The existence of civil society leads to society transferring from closeness to openness; the activities of non-national, non-economic organizations can gradually expand the middle class, and open up a public sphere between the state and society. The existence of the sphere doesn't replace the function of the state but reorganize the society in the new economic pattern and create publicness. In line with the John Bordley Rawls, the publicness is the social rationality counters the state's rationality. They keep supervising the state and co-operating with the state to avoid the "incorporation" from the bureaucracy. It can be seen that the sophisticated intermediary organizations help maintain the tension. Structural changes in society lead to the increase of social risks and conflicts, while the all-powerful government office tangled by some trivialities and unable to provide adequate treatment, makes the potential risks evolve from the potential conflict to the substantive one.

Although the western sense of the intermediary structure "civil society" has not appeared in China, the market economy has the society itself develop and form its own relatively independent spheres of activities and sometimes the society began to express its demands or exert its influence. The relationships between state and society gradually transfer the previous state-led structure to the interaction structure between the state and society. In this context, the inevitable reform trend of the governance model in China may be predicted to be transferred from the monopolistic rule to the pluralistic governance under the supervision of the state.

The growing civil society in China may play the four basic functions. First, fill the spheres which are out of the reach of the state and market. Second, it not only serves as a transition zone,

linking the public power with the private sphere and preventing public power from directly intervening private life, but also conveys the consensus to public power through speeches and action. Thirdly, it reduces the market's over-penetrating of the society. It advocates the voluntary cooperation and mutual aid, and launches a variety of activities such as social justice and environmental protection. Finally, be self-discipline. Developmental level of civil society reflects the self-organization and trust of the society. With the social division of labor in depth, expert systems are increasingly becoming the basis on which we predict and reduce risks, so expert system must be self-disciplined, fair and comprehensive for the public consultation. Therefore, while we improve and strengthen the market economy, we must be active in cultivating civil society, enhancing their ability to be self-organized and self-regulated and giving full play to its governance functions, in particular, the functions to limit the excessive expansion of the market.

### **3.3 Relationship between the Media and Public**

The National Academy of Sciences defines risk communication as, “an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions. It involves multiple messages about the nature of risk and other messages, not strictly about risk, that express concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk management”<sup>10</sup>. It is obvious that risk communication at least covers relations between the media and public. On the one hand, risk agendas rely on media to get displayed and mass media enhances “social visibility” of the risk context. The uncertainty of risks increases people's desire and anxiety for the information. Therefore, media are endowed with significant responsibilities, such as “anti-risk”, “risk-disclosing” and “risk reification” and play an important part in “the process of reflexive modernization”, “sub-political centre forum” and etc. On the other hand, the public cognition and understanding of risks cannot live without communication. For example, the public depends on the information and communication platform that the media display and provide when they discuss risk agendas such as nuclear issues and genetically-modified food. If the way of risk communication is inappropriate, the public will have cognitive bias on the agendas. Hence, the studies on the risk communication are definitely beneficial for the public to realize the impact of risks and overcome the meaningless panic.

In risk society, media are bound to be responsible ones if they release the objective and correct information. Media should take the responsibility of guiding the public opinion and leading the

public citizens to participate in politics. Firstly, the media should show fully respect on the public suggestions and provide an equal forum for the public to communicate and discuss rather than suppress or even order them to be in agreement with media. As we know, the risk communication between media and public is a special communication process. Although scholars claim the process as an interactive one, in fact, the public and media are not in equal status, especially in the public risks, because the public are always the recipients receiving and enquiring risk information. Therefore, it is very decisive whether the media see public as their partners or not. If communicating through the mode of DAD (decide, announce, and defend), it will be difficult for media and public to trust each other.

Secondly, media should conduct risk pre-caution and risk communication aimed at serving the public interest. It means that media should monitor and announce the possibilities of the risk to the public in time, functioning as the vane of the society. In western countries, since the emergence and thriving of “predictive news”, the definition of news has shifted from “reports of the truth happening recently” to “reports and predictions of the truth which happen recently or will happen”. Some scholars even think that media in 21<sup>st</sup> century will be dominated by the predictive news. To be sure, this prediction must be established in line with science rather than risk imagination. The predictive paper “*Ten potential risks in China confronted with before the year 2010*” were published on *China Comment* in 2006. The ten potential risks were predicted by experts organized by National Development and Reform Commission, including employment problem, issues concerning agriculture, countryside and farmers, financial problems, gaps between the rich and the poor, ecology and resource problems, Taiwan issue, globalization, crisis of domestic treatment, lack of confidence and credibility, AIDS and public sanitation. The early-warning of risks by the media shows their high respect for the social conscience and right to know. In this sense, the early warning published by *China Comment* is not only a warning but also good advice in the risk society, which is positive and constructive.<sup>11</sup>

Media also assume the responsibility of proclaiming risks to the public. When risks occur, the media should report the truth transparently, accurately and in time, thus fighting against rumors, establishing the authority of media themselves and avoiding the possibility of large-scale macro risks. On the contrary, if the media lack responsiveness or even hides the truth, the risk treatment is likely to be plunged in an embarrassing state. In our daily life, it is common for media not to report risks for fear of social panic. However, from the view of risk treatment, telling the public the risk information makes more sense than hiding the truth, especially when information

technologies and channels are sophisticated and diversified. If the public could not obtain information from formal media, they will resort to Internet, short messages or those channels whose gate-keepers are slow to react. Since ignorance leads to fear, we would rather tell the truth and make the public realize their circumstances than leave the full-of-rumors society in panic.

Thirdly, media should treat social issues seriously fairly and objectively instead of leaving it over-recreational and affecting the public thinking capacity of social issues. In the face of uncertain information, media should stop at reporting the truth objectively. They should not make any explanations or assessments instead of experts, nor did they sensationalize news leading to social panic. Strengthening risk awareness and dealing with the uncertain information correctly and appropriately are not only the practice of objectivity, but also significant to avoid social risks effectively.

Finally, the citizens should improve the media literacy. In risk society, besides attaching importance to guiding the public to cope with risk optimistically, the media should impart the basic knowledge of risks. In the past, people were frightened of AIDS. However, in recent years, the public know clearly about the transmission and features of AIDS because media improve their coverage of AIDS knowledge, advocate healthy ways of life, appeal to the society to care for AIDS patients and their children and oppose discrimination of them, which embodies the social responsibility and humane care of the media, as well as the culture of friendship, mutual aid and equality.

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**Author Information:** Cui Bo (1968—), female, associate professor, postdoctoral fellow of Science, Technology and Society Center, Tsinghua University. Interested in the risk society and information management.

**Mobile:** 13488269488

**E-mail:** [cuibocherry@yahoo.com.cn](mailto:cuibocherry@yahoo.com.cn)