International Communication Capability of Chengdu, China: Present Situation and Enhancement

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ABSTRACT. *Chengdu in West China is building an international gateway hub city and a world cultural city, but its international communication capability is not sufficient to improve its international influence and cultural soft power, demonstrated by insufficient communication carriers and products, deficient contents for communication, and less effective writing style in communication. In order to enhance the city's international communication capability, this paper proposes that contents for communication should be purposeful in audience-oriented language style through both official and civil media channels of traditional and new media, and an effective international communication mechanism should be constructed.*

KEYWORDS: *Chengdu; Communication capability; Media; The internet*

1. Introduction

Chengdu is the capital city of Sichuan Province, People's Republic of China. It is located in the southwest of China, and is one of the largest cities in China from an economic and strategic perspective. It is the country's western center of logistics, commerce, finance, science and technology, and the gateway to Tibet autonomous Region, with rich scenic, historic, and culture resources.

The preliminary scheme of Urban Master Plan of Chengdu (2016-2035) compiled by Chengdu Municipal People's Government in 2018, defines the four major strategic positioning of Chengdu such as the provincial capital of Sichuan Province, the national central city, the international gateway hub city, and the world cultural city (Chengdu Municipal People's Government, 2018). Until now, Chengdu has been on the track of international urban construction in all respects. Along with the improvement of urban hard power through enhancing infrastructure construction and economic function, the Plan attaches great importance to upgrading Chengdu's urban soft power like social influence, cultural influence, driving mode, and urban positioning, so as to go with the new trend of international urban construction. It is imperative to improve Chengdu's international communication capability, so as to boost the international image of Chengdu, to spread the culture of Chengdu to the outside world, and to convey the voice of Chengdu in a timely and accurately manner. According to the survey, Chengdu's current international communication capability cannot meet the needs of building an international metropolis, which is manifested as: the inadequate foreign language media, the unsatisfactory quality of foreign language services, and the lack of an effective communicative mechanism to disseminate the information from communicators to recipients in many areas such as economy and culture. In the context of foreign contacts proliferation, Chengdu's current international communication capability would impede its progress in constructing an inland open gateway city, an Asian inland comprehensive economic center city, or an international exchange center, thus Chengdu's international communication capability needs to be planned and improved strategically. Advancing the international communication capacity construction of the city is contributive to telling the stories of Chengdu and conveying the voice of Chengdu, and is crucial to establishing and spreading its good international image, as well as speeding information dissemination precisely, so as to promote trade, tourism and international cooperation in Chengdu, and enhance its international influence and the cultural soft power, all of which are of great significance to the economic and social development of Chengdu.

2. Present Situation of Chengdu's International Communication

According to the survey, there is a huge gap between the existing international communication capability of Chengdu and that required by an international city, as shown below.

2.1 Insufficient Communication Carriers and Products

This dimension is invested by searching the Internet and social media, for at present, new media has become the main front of international communication.

In terms of access to information, accessing tourism information through online search has become a global trend. On July 10, 2013, Google released the "China Inbound Tourism White Paper", which showed that online media channels became the most important source of information collection for respondents, more than the general media. 88% of visitors acquire travel information via the Internet, with the highest proportion of respondents using search engines for information collection, reaching 49%, 92% of which use Google search (Google, 2013). An survey initiated by Facebook in 2015 reveals the similar results: 36% of people search for travel destination through Facebook and 33% through search engine (Facebook, 2015). The Internet has taken the place of traditional information provider including travel agencies, magazines and newspaper, television advertisements, to become the main source of travel information. Therefore, the quantity of webpages could to some extent indicate the richness of information about a search target.

When checking the number of webpages on Google about a city, we can have a general view of the city's information amount. The Google search results for Chengdu are 37,800,000 (Nov. 30, 2018), which is far less than the well-established Chinese international cities, that for Beijing is 294,000,000, which is seven times more than that of Chengdu, and that for Shanghai is 433,000,000, eleven times more. Not to mention the world known metropolis Hong Kong, which has 1,560,000,000 hits on Google search, 41 times more than that of Chengdu. Chengdu still lags far behind its competitors or peers: Xi'an, an ancient city in West China, having 152,000,000 hits, Hangzhou, a much similar city in East China, having 62,000,000 hits, and its neighboring city Chongqing, having 40,100,000 hits. These figures suggest that Chengdu need to release more information through Internet to spread the city stories.

In terms of news dissemination, social media has become an important channel for users to get news. A recent report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism of Oxford University shows that the explosive growth in the use of smartphones and social media has fundamentally changed the way users access news. Based on a YouGov survey of 74,000 people in 37 countries of five continents, television remains a critical source of news for many, but its annual audience declines. On average, 62% of the sample use the smartphone to get news weekly, only just behind the laptop/computer at 64%. 65% of the respondents prefer to get news through third-party platforms like Facebook and YouTube, rather than going directly to a publisher website or app. 53% prefer to access news through search engines, social media, or news aggregators, interfaces that use ranking algorithms to select stories, rather than interfaces driven by humans (homepage, email and mobile notifications). In the US, weekly social media use for news was 45% in 2018. At the same time, consumers increasingly use messaging apps such as WhatsApp for news as they look for more private spaces to communicate (Newman, 2018). Those findings reveal a trend that users' news consumption patterns are increasingly being socialized.

As of November 2018, on the most popular social media Facebook, there are more than 20 accounts naming after Chengdu, but the followers are rarely. The government official account "Chengdu, Sichuan" on Facebook has about 29,000 followers, and the top-ranked "Go Chengdu" , also sponsored by Chengdu government, has about 53,000 followers. In contrast, some Chinese big cities have more accounts on international social media and more followers, e.g. 2.6 million or so followers of "Beijing Tourism", more than 721,000 followers of "Hangzhou, China". Therefore, in terms of spreading news, Chengdu has a long way to go on the path of establishing communication carriers and products.

2.2 Deficient Content for Communication

In Chengdu's products for international communication, the following features can be found: the content for dissemination focuses more on traditional culture than contemporary development; the topics are concentrated on the long-standing tokens, with little touch of the diverse social life of Chengdu.

For example, among the search results for "Chengdu" on Google, the first 30 articles are mostly about Chengdu tourism information, the main publishers of which are tripadvisor.com and travelchinaguide.com. The former is a commercial website, mainly publishes information about hotels. The tourist attractions and cultural folklore of Chengdu on its first page center largely on pandas. The article ranking first on the Bing search about Chengdu's profile is an article named "China's Chengdu: 10 Reasons to Visit Sichuan's Capital City", written by an American travel writer Sharon Hogeon, published on the now-closed "HuffPost Contributor platform" in 2015 and posted again on Life blog in 2017. In the article, the 10 Chengdu assets listed are panda, tradition, food, temples and historic sites, ancient history, riverside, Mount Emei, Giant Buddha, transit, value (accommodation)

(Hoge, 2017). The summary of traditional tourism resources in Chengdu is in place, but it only uncovers the surface of the city, rather than digging into the connotation of Chengdu's folk customs --- plentiful resources and relaxed lifestyle owing to the long history and diverse geographical endowment. Readers of the article could only learn that Chengdu is a tourist destination with historical sites and convenient transportation, but could not distinguish Chengdu from other cities in China. No wonder most foreigners would associate Chengdu with pandas whenever mentioning this city, for Chengdu has only spread successfully the "Panda" business card. Moreover, because Chengdu is emphasized by its abundant natural landscapes such as Mount Emei and Jiuzhaigou, the image of Chengdu became a safari park or wilderness to some foreigners. Of course, for a foreign writer, it is not easy to learn so much about the western Chinese city, which is far from the capital or the prosperous coastal areas of the country. And it's even more insightful to list Chengdu as an exclusive "starter city" in addition to Beijing and Shanghai. But one could not help wondering, why the articles at the forefront of the Bing search results are from the hands of foreigners? Why did the Chengdu media, which has a better understanding of the city culture, lose its voice?

2.3 Less Effective Writing Style in Communication

Considering the differences in cultural background, customs, lifestyles, and religious beliefs of overseas audiences, international communication should seek the intersection of Chinese and foreign interests, common discourse, and emotional resonance (Cai Mingzhao, 2015), so as to use the language and style easy to be accepted by overseas receptors to transmit information. Regrettably, many official promotion copies have evident traces of Chinese thought and are therefore difficult to attract readers.

There is an interesting phenomenon that the viewers of the news or information about Chengdu on Facebook have always been few, say, usually less than 10,000 viewers, and the top news are mostly about pandas. But one news report attracted more viewers than pandas in 2018. The title is "Chengdu intersection chaos", with the headline "Driver gets beat up by pedestrains after wreaking havoc at Chengdu intersection". Obviously, this is not a good news about Chengdu, but it received more attention. Chengdu has so many achievements every year aside from panda breading, while the intersection beating up is but an accident. The fact that panda news and bad news attract more readers reminds us that Chengdu's image for some foreigners is still backward and barbarian, which would prevent tourists or businessmen from visiting Chengdu. The facts also warn us that the "good" news and other information about Chengdu need to be edited in an adaptive way to attract more foreign readers.

3. How to Enhance Chengdu's International Communication Capability

Based on the notion of international communication abilities, combining the city development with its rich geo-cultural and human resources, Chengdu's international communication capability can be enhanced in the four aspects such as the communication content, the language style, the media, and the communication mechanism.

3.1 Careful Choice of Communication Content According to the Positioning of Chengdu

Content for communication should be clarified in the first place in order to develop international communication capabilities. It requires the skills of grasping the characteristics and highlights of Chengdu, then deciding the focal topics and perspective of communication, even creating topics, to lead world opinion. This substantially requires the communication agencies to boost their discourse competence. Dissemination is not just about reporting after the event, but about making topics and leading opinion before the event. Therefore, the proper content needs to be carefully discovered to create a positive image of Chengdu conforming to its positioning.

3.2 Audience-Oriented Writing Style

The content is conveyed through the form. In the age of "shallow reading" or "snack reading", the language style and narrative perspectives should be easily understood and accepted by targeted audience. When disseminating Chengdu information, it is not enough to translate the Chinese version of news reports directly into the target language, and the correct way is to adopt the reader's perspective and adapt the dissemination information to the audience's reading habits and language conventions, so as to realize effective communication. In doing so, amplification and omission, rearranging, cultural interpretation, etc. are needed in "telling Chengdu stories and spreading Chengdu voice".

3.3 Combination of Diverse Media Platform

In terms of the media, official media and civil communication platform should be combined, with traditional media and new media complementing each other. It would be useful to utilize the flexibility of self-media to complement the conservative and rigorous official media for communicating in a creative way through personalized and friendly language and content. To this end, the construction of self-media platforms should be accelerated to develop more new media products that conform to the rules and logic of mobile Internet communication. The communicators should become good at using the new media such as Internet self-media to transmit contemporary Chengdu merits.

3.4 Construction of the Communication Mechanism

The design and construction of the communication mechanism is the core of communication abilities. It is urgent to construct a fast and smooth mechanism from information accessible to communicators through media to recipients. The process includes the following steps: the communicators search, explore and acquire the source of information; select and edit its content; decide the appropriate language style and narrative perspective; choose multiple media; and finally pass to the recipient. For each step, a mechanism shall be established, with efficient teams, clear procedures, and strict quality control. A close connection mechanism should also be established between the various steps to form a channel of rapid response. Here, the communicators are not the translation agencies in general sense, but a multifunctional team comprising foreign language reporters, trained language service provider and other communication personnel.

Two more points need to be stressed in building the mechanism. Firstly, the entry and exit of this mechanism are communicators and recipients, which should be open. It is important to offer channels for individuals or organizations that need transmitting information to easily access the communicator and communication platform, and at the same time to let the recipient's feedback reach back easily to the communicator. Secondly, supervision should not be neglected in the mechanism. It is necessary to construct a three-party supervision mechanism: scholars to study and analyze the communication efficiency, government agencies to monitor standardized operation, and communication requester to evaluate satisfaction.

Acknowledgement

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