

# Resonator · connector · actor: reconstructing the public roles of mainstream media in the era of intelligent media

*Liufang Cao<sup>\*</sup>, Yi Wei*

School of Journalism and Communication, Communication University of China, Nanjing, China

\*Corresponding Author. Email: 2496848402@qq.com

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**Abstract.** Traditionally, mainstream media have assumed public roles such as "information disseminators" and "guiders of public opinion," thereby becoming key participants in social governance and public service provision. However, within the increasingly complex communication ecology shaped by intelligent media, the construction of these public roles faces new challenges. Taking the full-course coverage of the "Zhou He Yao Incident" by mainstream media as a case study, this paper focuses on reporting practices to examine how mainstream media adhere to a people-centered philosophy. By adopting empathetic narratives as an entry point and leveraging the empowerment of intelligent media technologies, they facilitate cross-regional collaboration among media organizations and various sectors of society. In doing so, mainstream media accomplish a reconstruction of their public roles as "resonators, connectors, and actors." This practice offers both theoretical reference and practical insight for enhancing the communication capacity, guiding power, influence, and credibility of news and public opinion in the new era, as well as for promoting the participation of mainstream media in social governance.

**Keywords:** mainstream media, reconstruction of public roles, empathetic communication, proactive mobilization, Zhou He Yao Incident

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## 1. Introduction: the predicament of public roles of mainstream media

Discussions of media roles are closely intertwined with studies on the functions of mass communication. Drawing on classical functional theories of mass communication, Ding extends the framework to articulate the social roles assumed by mass media, encompassing five dimensions: producers and disseminators of news and other information; operators who influence ideology through public opinion; transmitters, promoters, and popularizers of culture and knowledge; providers of social services and public entertainment; and participants in and drivers of economic life [1]. These correspond to traditional role perspectives such as "information producers," "public opinion guides," "cultural inheritors," and "facilitators of social services and development." Based on the functions performed by media in specific contexts of public crisis communication, Zhou categorizes media roles across different stages into early warning agents before a crisis; communicators, mobilizers, and supervisors during a crisis; and image shapers and reflective actors after a crisis [2]. This typology supplements the dimensions of "critical warning" and "constructive reflection" in role analysis. As the media environment continues to evolve, the functional scope of media roles has been enriched

with new connotations shaped by the times. On October 9, 2016, General Secretary Xi Jinping, while presiding over the 36th group study session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, emphasized the need to "accelerate the use of internet and information technologies to advance social governance." The introduction of national and social governance frameworks has opened new avenues for innovation in mainstream media roles. Consequently, scholars have increasingly explored pathways through which mainstream media participate as key actors in social governance and public service provision. For instance, from the perspective of networked governance, Tian and colleagues argue that county-level integrated media—representative of mainstream media—should assume multiple roles in grassroots governance, including mobilizers, service providers, and supervisors [3]. At this juncture, a more systematic conception of "media roles" has entered public discourse, marking a shift from "information centers" to "cores of governance," and enriching the multifaceted functional positioning of media in the new era.

In recent years, the technological ecosystem centered on AIGC and algorithmic recommendation has reshaped the information ecology of mainstream media, ushering communication into a new era of intelligent media. Decentralization of communication, fragmentation of information access, and platform-dominated, multi-actor networked dissemination have become defining features. In this context, on the one hand, mainstream media, empowered by emerging technologies, have innovated and upgraded their functional systems, thereby contributing more effectively to the modernization of national governance capacity and governance systems—for example, through the active adoption of AIGC in news production and dissemination, which significantly improves production efficiency. On the other hand, this evolving ecology poses new challenges to the exercise of media's public functions and roles. A diversified communication landscape composed of "professional media + platform operators + self-media + ordinary users," the rise of interactive, bidirectional communication between senders and receivers, increasingly diversified public information demands, and algorithm-driven personalized distribution mechanisms have, to some extent, led to a weakening of mainstream media's discursive authority. Amid these transformations, higher demands are placed on mainstream media in terms of information dissemination, public opinion guidance, public service provision, and participation in social governance. Under specific circumstances, adapting role positioning and practical approaches in response to changing needs and environments—thereby achieving the upgrading and reconstruction of public roles—has become an urgent issue for mainstream media.

At the beginning of 2026, Zhou Heyao, a 21-year-old female student from the School of Music at Yangzhou University, urgently required a bone marrow transplant after being diagnosed with acute mixed leukemia. On January 22, with the assistance of the Publicity Department of the CPC Committee of Yangzhou University, she publicly issued an appeal to seek relatives and potential donors. Subsequently, numerous mainstream media outlets, including *Modern Express*, *Jiangsu News*, and *CCTV News*, conducted continuous, full-process coverage, rapidly drawing widespread attention and discussion across the internet. The reporting on the "Zhou Heyao Incident" did not remain at the level of mere information exposure; instead, it took "empathetic narrative" as its entry point and leveraged intelligent media technologies to facilitate cross-regional collaboration among media organizations and various sectors of society. From the perspective of communication pathways, the process can be broadly divided into four stages: empathetic awakening, communicative connection, mobilization and advancement, and follow-up engagement. Advancing progressively, these stages enabled an effective transformation from emotional resonance to concrete action, vividly demonstrating a new configuration of public roles for mainstream media in the era of intelligent media. Accordingly, this paper takes the full-course coverage of the "Zhou Heyao Incident" as a case study to examine the role transformation of mainstream media from "empathetic communication" to "proactive

mobilization," as well as the complete pathway through which this transformation unfolds. It seeks to address the following questions:

How have the public roles of mainstream media evolved? How are these roles manifested in practice? And can this shift in model provide practical insights for future reflections on and applications of media roles?

## 2. Reconstructing the role of "emotional resonator" through empathetic narratives

"Empathy" refers to "an individual's emotional response based on an understanding of another person's emotional state or situation" [4]. Originally a philosophical concept, it has in recent years been widely introduced into the field of journalism and communication studies, giving rise to the notion of "empathetic communication." This concept denotes a mode of communication that takes emotion as its core symbolic code and mediating bridge, constructing a communicative space of emotional co-presence and shared meaning through organic interaction, as well as the flow, connection, and exchange of emotions [5]. At present, a growing body of scholarship suggests that empathetic communication—grounded in emotional connection—has become a key approach for mainstream media to explore paradigm innovation, overcome the constraints of traditional discourse, bridge generational and cultural divides in communication, and consolidate as well as construct mainstream ideology. Through various strategies such as detailed storytelling, thematic resonance, and participatory co-creation with audiences, mainstream media have normalized the use of empathetic narratives to enhance the communicative power, guiding capacity, influence, and credibility of news dissemination [6]. This trend is particularly evident in the rise of short-video micro-narratives, which has made empathetic communication increasingly prevalent. For instance, the integrated media production *A Century of Glory: Youth in Dialogue*, produced by Hubei Radio and Television, employs convergent communication techniques and emotionally driven storytelling to foster audience identification with historical figures, thereby rendering grand themes such as Party history education and rural revitalization more tangible and relatable.

In the "Zhou Heyao Incident," mainstream media adopted "empathetic narrative" as the foundational logic at the initial stage of reporting (January 22–23, 2026). The core objective at this stage was to disseminate essential information about the event, excavate its key emotional elements, and evoke public empathy, thereby laying a solid "emotional foundation" for subsequent proactive mobilization.

In terms of content presentation, media coverage extended beyond basic information such as Zhou Heyao's medical condition and her appeal for a bone marrow donor. Greater emphasis was placed on uncovering rich, human-centered narrative details: her personal growth story; her resilience and vulnerability after falling ill; the image of her adoptive parents exhausting their resources and efforts in seeking treatment; the caring support provided by her university; the encouragement and solidarity expressed by online users; and the dedication of medical staff in providing treatment. Through the vivid reporting of such detailed stories, mainstream media achieved a concrete and emotionally engaging presentation at the initial stage of information dissemination. This enabled the public to experience the complex interplay of hardship, uncertainty, optimism, and perseverance in an individual's life, thereby generating a rich emotional response. Such reporting not only attracted sustained public attention but also actively encouraged audience participation in news sharing, commenting, and topic interaction, marking the initial emergence of empathetic communication effects. For example, *Yangzhou Evening News*, as a local mainstream outlet, focused on Zhou Heyao's academic and daily life at Yangzhou University, highlighting both her youthful vitality and her unfortunate circumstances. This approach effectively elicited attention and sympathy from local audiences, with readership exceeding 80,000 on the same day. Similarly, Jiangsu News released the first in-depth report

that achieved wide dissemination across online platforms, integrating key informational and emotional elements of the event, with daily readership surpassing 100,000. It is evident that, in this case, mainstream media demonstrated a clear shift from the role of "information disseminators" to that of "emotional resonators," significantly narrowing the emotional distance between media institutions and the public.

### **3. Reconstructing the role of "public opinion connector" through convergent communication**

A close examination of the case reveals that mainstream media did not remain at the level of merely eliciting emotional responses. Instead, in the second stage (January 23–25, 2026), they relied on "convergent communication" to reposition themselves as "public opinion connectors," thereby moving beyond a unidimensional narrative logic. The core objective of this stage was to comprehensively disseminate information about the event, further excavate its deeper emotional core, and aggregate widespread social attention, thus consolidating a robust "emotional foundation" for the orderly advancement of subsequent mobilization efforts.

At the level of communicative content, multidimensional perspectives were brought into dialogic alignment. Through carefully designed editorial planning and reporting, mainstream media presented the event from multiple sensory and narrative angles. Voices from the individual at the center of the event, her parents, university administrators, classmates, and medical professionals were all incorporated, offering a comprehensive and layered portrayal rather than a single, superficial "emotional trigger." This interplay among "individual narrative perspectives + institutional perspectives + professional and authoritative perspectives" enabled audiences to form a more coherent and cognitively grounded empathetic understanding.

At the level of communicative form, expression was adapted to the intelligent media ecology through multimodal and immersive presentation. In the era of intelligent media, diversified forms of convergent communication provide rich expressive resources for empathetic storytelling. In covering the Zhou Heyao Incident, mainstream media leveraged intelligent media technologies to employ a variety of formats—including text-image reports, videos, live streaming, short-form videos, and interactive topic engagement—thereby aligning with diverse audience information consumption habits. This not only broadened the channels for empathetic communication but also enhanced its immersive effect. For instance, a video released by CCTV News documenting Zhou Heyao's medical transfer process, characterized by its authenticity and emotional intensity, garnered over one million views and more than 150,000 likes, triggering widespread emotional resonance. Similarly, an online concert livestream organized by the School of Music at Yangzhou University to encourage Zhou Heyao attracted several thousand viewers and received over 80,000 likes.

At the level of communicative subjects, a pattern of interconnected dissemination across institutions and media platforms emerged. Campus media at Yangzhou University, municipal and provincial media in Jiangsu, and national-level media organizations—nearly one hundred entities across multiple platforms—formed a coordinated communication network. This resulted in a dissemination pattern characterized by "local initial release + amplification through provincial integrated media + ignition by central media + cross-regional coordination." Such a structure generated substantial communicative momentum and enabled information to reach a significantly broader audience. In sum, through comprehensive and continuous coverage of the event, mainstream media effectively leveraged the positive affordances of technological innovation and platform-based ecosystems. By assuming the role of "public opinion connectors," they amplified the efficacy of empathetic narratives and facilitated the large-scale aggregation of social attention.

## 4. Reconstructing the role of "collaborative actor" with the aim of proactive mobilization

When journalistic practice successfully enables a transition from online emotional engagement to offline action, and from individual expression to collective coordination, the media cease to be merely channels of information dissemination. Instead, they evolve into social infrastructures that connect resources, organize public action, and construct networks of collaboration [7]. In recent years, key academic concerns have included how to build a composite communication ecology that integrates "emotion and action," and how to promote the transformation of mainstream media from single-function information providers into co-creative facilitators and collaborative actors across multiple social domains [8]. Within the traditional media paradigm—characterized by "one-way communication and passive response"—action-oriented mobilization by mainstream media has typically exhibited two features. First, from the standpoint of advocacy or supervision, media have sought to facilitate action through sustained reporting; however, this remains essentially a third-party perspective rather than that of an active participant in the action itself. Second, mobilization has often relied on slogan-based, exhortative forms of expression, lacking well-developed coordination mechanisms and thus proving insufficient in effectively integrating multiple actors, resulting in limited mobilization efficacy. Against this backdrop, exploring the operational logic and practical pathways of media-driven action has become a critical issue.

In the Zhou Heyao Incident, during the third stage of reporting (January 24–29, 2026), mainstream media explicitly oriented their efforts toward "proactive mobilization." Building on the empathetic foundation and extensive audience reach established in earlier stages, this phase centered on mobilization-oriented communication to advance the search for Zhou Heyao's biological relatives and to facilitate concrete forms of social assistance. In doing so, mainstream media achieved a functional shift from reporting to enabling social support, thereby reconstructing their role as "collaborative actors."

First, mainstream media moved beyond the detached stance of third-party observers and established themselves as active subjects in the process of action. Conventional journalistic routines—such as identifying leads and conducting interviews—position the media as recorders of events. In this case, however, to more effectively promote practical outcomes, mainstream media transcended this role boundary and intervened directly in the development of the event. For example, they proactively coordinated with health commissions and civil affairs departments in both Guizhou and Jiangsu, promptly conveying Zhou Heyao's medical needs and the difficulties surrounding the search for her biological family, thereby facilitating more rapid governmental involvement and support. At the same time, under the leadership of mainstream media, a cross-regional communication network was established, linking media institutions across Jiangsu, Guizhou, and Sichuan to disseminate information related to the search effort in a comprehensive and coordinated manner. Notably, *Jiangsu News and Sichuan Observer* collaborated to deliver targeted information to users from Sichuan, covering all 21 prefecture-level regions, significantly improving the efficiency of clue collection. These practices reflect a shift from passive observation to active participation, with media assuming a subject position in driving the process forward.

Second, mainstream media moved beyond the limitations of traditional slogan-based mobilization by constructing a targeted, platform-based mechanism of coordinated action under a "media+" framework. While conventional approaches—such as calling on Zhou Heyao's biological parents to come forward, appealing to public goodwill, and encouraging institutional participation—remained present, they were supplemented by more precise, stage-specific mobilization strategies grounded in emotional resonance. For instance, during the search phase, efforts focused on mobilizing the public in Sichuan and Guizhou to disseminate information

widely; during the treatment phase, emphasis was placed on mobilizing medical experts and institutions to provide professional support, as well as encouraging donations from individuals and enterprises to alleviate financial pressures; and during the transfer phase, coordination was directed toward mobilizing medical and transportation authorities in both regions to ensure logistical support.

Finally, mainstream media transcended the episodic nature of action by enabling a dual empowerment process that extended from individual predicament to broader social reflection. In the later stages, media leveraged the event to promote public education on leukemia treatment and hematopoietic stem cell donation, thereby enhancing public awareness of relevant health knowledge and encouraging greater participation in stem cell donation initiatives. In this way, the transformation of action extended beyond the resolution of an individual case to the elevation of a public issue, demonstrating the capacity of mainstream media to link personal narratives with societal-level reflection and engagement.

## **5. Conclusion and reflection: the transformation toward the triple public roles of "resonator–connector–actor"**

Traditional role conceptions such as "information producer," "public opinion guide," "cultural transmitter," and "facilitator of social services and development" are largely grounded in a "media-centric" perspective. Confronted with structural changes in the media landscape, however, the media must actively pursue innovation and transformation. Taking the reporting of the Zhou Heyao Incident as a case in point, it is evident that contemporary mainstream media, guided by a people-centered philosophy, adopt "empathetic narrative" as an entry point and leverage intelligent media technologies to enable cross-regional collaboration among media institutions and diverse social actors. This process demonstrates a complete pathway for the reconstruction of public roles in the intelligent media era—from "emotional resonator" to "public opinion connector" and ultimately to "collaborative actor"—as well as its practical value. Such practices not only provide a replicable paradigm for reporting similar public welfare and assistance-oriented events, but also offer theoretical references and practical insights for enhancing the communication capacity, guiding power, influence, and credibility of news and public opinion in the new era, as well as for strengthening mainstream media's participation in social governance.

Nevertheless, the transformation toward the triple roles of "resonator–connector–actor" is not without problems in practice. For instance, empathetic communication in some mainstream media exhibits tendencies toward homogenization and excessive sentimentalization. Narrative strategies and emotional expression often rely on a fixed pattern of "misfortune + appeal for compassion," and in some cases, overly contrived emotional appeals may produce diminishing returns or even provoke public resistance. In addition, questions arise as to whether the media's active intervention in events may compromise the objectivity and authenticity of news reporting. Furthermore, while coverage tends to be intensive during the stages of empathetic awakening and mobilization, the frequency of follow-up reporting often declines significantly as public attention wanes. Some outlets remain at the level of opportunistic, event-driven reporting without establishing institutionalized mechanisms, thereby constraining the sustained extension of mainstream media's public roles. Accordingly, beyond the transformation toward the roles of "resonator–connector–actor," further reflection is required on issues such as the appropriate limits of emotional expression, the ethical boundaries of objectivity, and the establishment of normalized mechanisms for addressing deeper social problems. Looking ahead, as intelligent media technologies continue to evolve and the demands of social governance become increasingly complex, the reconstruction of mainstream media's public roles will remain an ongoing process requiring sustained exploration.

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