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Disaster Coverage by China's Radio and Television Stations

--- Xu Jun

A. A Brief Introduction of Chinese Radio and Television

1. Domestic Broadcasting

   In the early 1920s, radio was introduced into China.
   The first radio stations in China were set up by foreigners.
   The first Chinese-run radio station, the Harbin Radio Station, was established in 1926.
   In August 1928 the Central Radio Station under the Chinese Kuomintang Government started its service in Nanjing.
   On December 30, 1940, the Chinese Communist Party set up the "Yan'an Xinhua Radio Station" in Yan'an, which was then the Revolutionary Base administrated by the Communist Party. The station moved to Beijing on March 25, 1949. It was renamed the Central People's Broadcasting Station (its English name was changed to China National Radio later on) after the founding of the People's Republic of China. China National Radio (CNR) is under the direct supervision of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. Currently, it is the only national radio broadcasting nationwide in China.

   At present, China National Radio broadcasts 128 hours of programs on seven channels everyday: two channels cover the whole country with comprehensive programs in Putonghua (Standard Chinese); two channels are targeted to Hong Kong and Taiwan, one channel provides services in the Mongolian, Tibetan, Uygur, Kazak and Korean languages to the ethnic minority areas; one stereo FM channel for music and local operas; and another stereo FM channel broadcasting to the Pearl River Delta Area. CNR has 37 correspondent offices across the country. CNR has business contacts with radio stations in more than 40 countries and regions.

   Apart from CNR, all provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government, as well as districts and major cities and counties also have set up their radio stations. By the end of 1994, there were 1238 radio stations, 734 medium- and short-wave transmitting and relaying stations across China. Radio programs cover 83.7 percent of the country's population.

2. Overseas Broadcasting

   China Radio International is China's only state-run radio station transmitting programs worldwide. It is under the direct supervision of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television.

   CRI broadcasts worldwide in 38 foreign languages as well as in Putonghua and four dialects. These add up to an accumulated total of 189 hours of programming a day. CRI is the world's third largest international broadcaster in terms of the number of languages used, broadcasting hours and letters from listeners. It has 27 overseas correspondent offices in 27 countries and one in Hong Kong. CRI has business contacts with broadcasting organizations in 30-odd countries and regions. CRI has agreements with seven countries to relay its short-wave programming. They include Canada, French Guyana, Russia, France, Switzerland and Spain. It also rents transmitters in Brazil and Mali to relay its programs.
3. Television

China's first television station, the China Central Television (originally called the Beijing Television Station), went on the air on a trial basis on May 1, 1958. It started regular transmission on September 2 the same year. The station began broadcasting color TV programs through PAL system in 1973. It adopted its current name in 1978. CCTV currently has eight channels, broadcasting 138 hours of programs daily. Channel One broadcasts mainly news and general topics. Channel Two features economic news and educational programs. Channel Three offers music and performing arts. Channel Four serves overseas audiences with news and entertainment. Its programs are transmitted in both NTSC and PAL Systems through "Asia Sat-1", "ST-14" and Pan Am Sat No. 2, 3, and 4 which cover 98% of the globe. Channel Five is a sports channel. Channel Six is a movie channel. Channel Seven provides a wide range of services from shows for children to programs on agricultural, military and science subjects. Channel Eight offers local operas as well as MTV shows.

CCTV has business contacts with some 212 television stations in 133 countries and regions. It also has overseas correspondents in the United States, Belgium and Hong Kong, etc.

In addition to CCTV, all provinces, autonomous regions, municipalities under the jurisdiction of the Central Government, districts and major cities and countries have their own TV stations. At the end of 1996 there were 1245 TV transmission and relay stations with a capacity of one kilowatts plus. TV programs cover 86.1 percent of the country's population.

Besides, the State Education Commission and its affiliates have established more than 1,000 educational TV stations across the country.

In recent years, cable TV has undergone a rapid development. At the end of 1996, 1,200 cable TV stations went into operation with government approval, offering services to about 50 million subscribers.

4. Administrative Bodies

At present, radio and television stations in China are run by governments at different levels. The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television under the State Council is the administrative body in charge of the country's radio, film and television. At the same time, it directly supervises China National Radio, China Radio International, China Central Television, China Film Administrative Bureau and their affiliates.

The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television has signed agreements of cooperation in radio, television and news with dozens of countries. The State Administration under the name of Radio and Television of the People's Republic of China (RTPRC) has participated in activities sponsored by the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union, the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development and other international organizations.

B. A General Introduction to China's Natural Disasters

China is a country that has long been plagued by natural disasters. All-too-often have its people suffered from flood and drought, storm and earthquake. The only form of natural disaster by which China is little affected is volcanic eruption.

In a typical year, about 200 million of China's people are affected by the wrath of Mother Nature. Last year, for example, natural disasters killed several thousand people and forced the relocation of three million. More than 40 million hectares of cropland were damaged and three million houses destroyed. With the continuous and rapid development of the national economy, the expansion of production capacity, and the accumulation of social wealth, the losses caused by natural disasters have gradually increased. The damage is exacerbated by the relatively slow pace of reconstruction. Based on 1990 prices, the average annual direct economic losses from natural disasters are as follows: In the 50s, 48 billion yuan,
or 5.85 billion US dollars; in the 60s, 57 billion yuan; in the 70s, 59 billion yuan; in the 80s, 69 billion yuan. And in the 90s, the average annual direct economic losses have exceeded 100 billion yuan, or 12.2 billion US dollars.

1998 was a particularly bad year. Devastating floods on major Chinese rivers caused severe damage to life and property, making the year one of the worst-hit since the People's Republic was founded in 1949. More than 350 million people were affected by natural disasters in 1998: 5,511 people died, and 20.8 million were urgently relocated. About 24 million rooms houses were severely damaged or destroyed. More than 50 million hectares of cropland were affected. Of this, 25 million hectares were severely hit and 7.6 million hectares produced nothing. Direct economic losses caused by natural disasters in 1998 reached 301 billion yuan, of which floods alone accounted for 255 billion yuan.

Clearly, natural disasters have become one of the major factors hindering sustainable economic, social, and environmental development. Disaster relief has therefore become one of the guarantees for the expansion of the national economy and social development.

C. A General Introduction to China's Disaster-Relief Work

Natural disasters are the enemy of all humankind, and disaster relief is a common task faced by all nations. In 1987, the United Nations designated the final 10 years of the 20th century as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. In response to the United Nations' call, and to promote disaster relief work, China set up the Chinese Committee for the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction.

The achievements made by the Chinese Government in the work of disaster reduction include: more projects to reduce damage from disasters have been constructed; management of disaster prevention, reduction, and mitigation has been strengthened; through promotion, education, and training, the Chinese people have increased their knowledge of natural disasters; science and technology is increasingly applied to the work of disaster reduction; and government disaster relief departments have strengthened their cooperation. In addition, progress has been made in law-making, research, and international cooperation in this field.

But the Chinese government still faces many problems in the fight against natural disasters. The construction of disaster reduction projects is not keeping pace with the rapid development of the national economy; losses from natural disasters continue to grow; disaster relief plans made by governments at all levels have not been systematized and standardized. Laws and regulations related to disaster relief should be further perfected; evaluation technology and methods of disaster relief lag behind the need; more scientific and technological results should be developed and applied to disaster reduction work; disaster relief equipment is far from sufficient; the storage system for disaster relief materials should be perfected; disaster reaction capabilities should be improved; and more work needs to be done in the promotion and education of disaster relief.

D. Chinese Radio and TV Stations' Role in Disaster Reduction and Their Future Development

1. Roles Played by Chinese Media When There Is a Natural Disaster

Timely and Accurately Declare the Disaster Situation.

When a natural disaster occurs, government organizations like the Ministry of Water Resources and the State Forestry Bureau will issue news releases with the latest disaster information through the mass media.

In the summer of 1998, severe floods hit the Nengjiang and Songhuajiang rivers, and the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River. National media, like China Central Television, China National Radio and China Radio International, everyday broadcast the latest
information on the floods, releasing data on the latest flood peaks and water levels. The media’s timely and accurate provision of information did much to prevent the rumors and panic that could have so easily arisen in the flood-stricken areas.

Cover the Various Disaster Relief Activities Taking Place in Disaster-Stricken Areas.

This is where each news medium invests the most human resources and materials. During the summer floods in 1998, China Central Television, or CCTV, sent 400 journalists in 48 groups to the front line. Every day they sent back more than 70 minutes of TV reports. CCTV’s key news programs, like Newscast, News 30 Minutes, and Focus attracted hundreds of millions of viewers. China National Radio reporters sent more than 2,300 reports from flood-stricken areas. Listeners could not only keep up with the situation; soundbites brought the struggle and danger, the roar of the surging waters, into their own living rooms. China Radio International sent 14 reporters to flood-stricken areas. Every day, their reports were broadcast in 38 foreign languages, plus standard Chinese and four regional dialects. The outstanding features of electronic media, like quick coverage and live appeal, were used to the maximum in the coverage of the 1998 floods.

Call Upon Society to Participate in Disaster Relief and Cover the Public’s Response to Natural Disaster.

When a big natural disaster hits a region, it almost immediately becomes a national event. Disaster-stricken regions need aid from other regions. Disaster victims need to be relocated to safe areas. The contribution of the media in these efforts is self-evident: covering large areas and with rapid transmission of information, they can tell the public how they can best get involved and help the victims.

Get Directly Involved in Disaster Relief.

During the worst days of the 1998 floods in China, besides reporting on the tragedy, the Chinese media also got directly involved in disaster relief. The organized activities were carried out, such as anti-flood forums and collecting donations for flood-stricken areas. The most influential activity was CCTV’s grand charity show. It was not the first time that CCTV had put on a charity party. During the 1993 Yangtze River floods, it ran a very successful charity show, which was attended by many celebrities. The show resulted in the collection of a large amount of money to help people in the disaster-stricken areas.

2. The Future Development of China’s Radio and TV Coverage of Disaster Reduction:

Strengthen Cooperation Among Disaster Management Departments, Disaster Research Institutes, and the News Media.

Cooperation between these three parties is necessary for the success of disaster reduction promotion. Disaster management departments are responsible for working out policies for disaster reduction and prevention, and their implementation; disaster research institutes are responsible for research and providing information for policy-makers; the news media are responsible for transferring information on natural disasters to the public. By strengthening communication among the three parties, accurate, timely information will be sent out.

One point to mention is that the Chinese Government and disaster reduction departments have changed their attitudes to the field. In 1978, when north China’s Tangshan City was devastated by a severe earthquake, it was three days before the Chinese Government released news of the tragedy. And the news did not mention some basic facts, like the strength of the quake, and the number of casualties and destroyed houses. Obviously, the Chinese Government then did not want the outside world to learn about such things. However, when the heavy floods hit in 1998, the State-level anti-flood headquarters and water conservancy departments at all levels did their best to release the latest flood information. They kept in close contact with the news media.

Strengthen Routine Promotion of Disaster Relief to Increase Public Awareness in the Field.

Transferring information to the public and increasing their awareness of the importance of disaster prevention and reduction has become an important task for news media in every country.

The public, especially in developing countries, lack information on natural disasters and environmental problems. But this cannot be attributed only to a lack of scientific knowledge. It
should be also attributed to weak communication, and therefore a knowledge gap, between scientists and the public, is created.

Researchers and specialists in disaster reduction continue to provide new findings. Their work enriches our knowledge of how to mitigate natural disasters. Providers of information hope the public can learn more about research results. They also hope that research results can be quickly conveyed to international organizations working in the field of natural disasters.

The news media are therefore actively involved in the promotion of disaster reduction, by enabling information to be widely broadcast and become commonly-shared knowledge.

For example, Mexico has a wireless radio program focusing on the transfer of research results, technology updates, and academic activities (including symposiums, training courses, and introducing new books) in the field of disaster prevention and reduction. This radio program also announces disaster prevention and reduction activities carried out by government departments, non-government organizations, and private companies. The programs were first launched in 1997 by the National Autonomous University of Mexico, or UNMA, and broadcast every Friday morning. It consists of three major parts: First, Interviews with Specialists. Interviewees include outstanding researchers, professors, authoritative figures in government departments, and leaders of NGOs; Second, a Feature Report; and Third, a Newscast. The program has become an effective tool for spreading the latest approaches and technologies for disaster prevention and reduction; it effectively encourages the public to participate in disaster reduction activities and in disaster risk management.

At present, China's radio and TV stations do not have such a specialized program. Information related to disaster prevention and reduction is always put into scientific and technological programs, or environmental protection programs.

High-tech Should be Applied in the Promotion of Disaster Reduction, such as the Internet and satellite transmissions.

In the information age, high-tech is ever more widely applied in the spread of information. China’s national radio and TV stations now use web broadcasting, while many local radio and TV stations have been or are about to go on the web.