

The Influence of Social Media Sentiment on Online Public Opinion in the Post-truth Era

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Abstract. With the continuous development of the Internet, social media appeared and gradually entered everyone's life. Social media platforms not only give individuals the opportunity to be heard but also make the truth drowned in the ocean of information. The vast and broken information flow makes it difficult for netizens to sort out the complete and objective truth the first time but is provoked by some of the more attractive information fragments, and the post-truth era will follow. When people invest more time in the virtual world, the boundaries between the virtual world and the real world are constantly merging. Therefore, when the virtual becomes part of reality, part of the virtual becomes a reality. As far as the field of news and communication is concerned, the public opinion position has shifted greatly from offline to online, and whether it can reasonably guide the influence of social media emotions on online public opinion largely determines whether the formation of post-truth can be avoided, and is also closely related to the credibility of the media and the government, and is related to the happy life of every citizen. Therefore, this paper systematically studies the influence of social media emotions on online public opinion in the post-truth era, and finds that negative social media emotions will promote the formation of post-truth and the extreme development of online public opinion. Therefore, it is very necessary to reasonably guide social media emotions to a benign development.

Keywords: Social media sentiment; online public opinion; post-truth era.

1. Introduction

The emergence of social media is dependent on the development of WEB 2.0, and it is based on the mass base and technical support it has been able to develop. If the Internet does not give users more initiative, social media will lose its mass base and technical support and lose its foundation. While netizens are gaining more and more initiative, the post-truth era has quietly arrived, and social media emotions have an increasingly important influence on the spread of public opinion. For example, in the "Luo Yixiao" incident in 2016 and the "Red Yellow Blue" kindergarten incident in Beijing in 2017, the development of public opinion has long been detached from the truth and eventually turned into a farce to vent emotions. Although, in the end, the media reported the facts and made the truth clear, as emotions gradually calmed down, the truth was not cared for or even ignored, and many innocent people were even hurt by the emotional violence on the Internet, making it difficult to heal their wounds.

In the traditional media era, media professionals assumed the role of gatekeepers for the news, but this role has gradually dissipated as mobile social media has come to dominate communication. With the increased immediacy of information dissemination, the attitudes, emotions, and behaviours of the public in the process of news dissemination have a significant impact on the formation and development of public opinion, and public opinion dynamics are facing more challenges than ever before. In the new social communication context, the media are paying more attention to the process and angle of presenting information in news communication, focusing on presenting the truth of events to the public from multiple perspectives. Social media communication allows individuals to quickly amplify and disseminate information, allowing them to become important nodes of social communication.

In this context, the mainstream media are required not to violate the objective rules of journalism and not to develop in the direction of extreme radicalism. The reasonable use of emotions to guide

public opinion towards the correct development of truth has also raised higher standards for the journalistic quality of front-line journalists [1]. At the same time, Internet users are both important nodes for receiving and disseminating information, and they are also the important beginning and end of social media emotions influencing online public opinion. Therefore, it is worthwhile to study the role of mainstream media, journalists, and online users in the process of social media sentiment influencing online public opinion. While most of the current research on post-truth, social media sentiment, and online public opinion is fragmented, this paper analyses it from a holistic perspective, focusing on its relevance and making suggestions.

The purpose of this article is to explore how social media sentiment will affect online public opinion and how to properly guide the development of online public opinion now that the post-truth era has arrived.

The following three aspects are the formation of post-truth, the different changes in public opinion arising from the influence of adverse social media sentiment and the management of online public opinion, addressing the influence of social media sentiment on online public opinion in the post-truth era, and how to effectively manage and properly guide online public opinion.

2. Post-truth Formation

2.1 The connotations of post-truth

The term "post-truth" refers to the fact that truth plays a minor role in shaping public opinion under the influence of beliefs and personal emotions. It was chosen as the word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary in 2016 when the United Kingdom left the European Union, and Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. In August 2016, the New York Times published an article by William Davis, a professor at the University of London, explaining that "the 'truth' we previously held in such high regard has fallen from grace and is losing its power to dominate social consensus. We have entered a post-truth era" [2].

2.2 The connotation of stereotypes their impact on post-truth formation

In Lippmann's view, everyone has "stereotypes", which are "fixed, simplistic ideas and impressions that people have about a particular thing, usually accompanied by feelings of value, good or bad, about that thing", "It can provide an easy reference point for people to understand things, but it also hinders the acceptance of new things" [3]. It is clear that stereotypes, once formed, can easily become one of the leading causes of post-truths. In other words, the prevention of post-truths can also begin with the prevention of stereotypes.

It is clear that once a system of stereotypes is fully fixed, personal attention is drawn to the facts that support it and ignores the facts that contradict it [4]. When definition before understanding replaces understanding before definition, and when stereotypes become a shortcut for the masses to understand the world and deal with things in a consciousness-first way, the objective truths sought to become "red through blue glass," a moon in the water that is always foggy and unseen, that is, the formation of post-truths.

2.3 Common public psychology in post-truth formation

The public psychology that dominates the development of public opinion in the post-truth formation process is based on several psychologies or psychological behaviours, such as pluralistic ignorance and herding, group polarisation, and the spiral of silence.

2.3.1 Pluralistic ignorance and herd mentality

When Internet users are exposed to hot topics on the Internet, they are influenced by external social conditions such as the number of retweets and likes. However, the "opinion environment" is not necessarily a true reflection of the distribution of opinions in society. By mistaking the views of the minority for those of the majority, they take for granted that the information reported is the truth

accepted by the majority and thus choose to converge with the majority or remain relatively consistent with mainstream voices.

2.3.2 Group polarisation

Group polarisation, also known as risk shifting, refers to the tendency for group decisions to show a tendency to polarise when groups deliberate on an issue, regardless of whether or not individuals previously agreed, either by shifting to the conservative side or to the risk-taking side. While after the group discussion individuals who originally chose to be conservative will become more conservative and those who chose to be risk-taking will become more radical, with the two groups lacking a shared space of meaning. The American sociologist Sunstein has pointed out that "in networks and new communication domains, like-minded groups will communicate and discuss with each other and end up with the same ideas as before, but in a more extreme form" [5].

2.3.3 The Spiral of Silence

The "spiral of silence" in the online environment is the result of a combination of forces. The interaction of Internet users in the online social environment will bring environmental pressure on themselves: when onlookers express their positions and views, they will use the online "opinion environment" as a reference system and will only actively participate in it when they think the same as the majority; those who hold the opposite opinion to the majority will choose to be silent for fear of being isolated and attacked., thus giving one side an overwhelming advantage and reducing the other to a spiral of silence. The influence of opinion leaders on the Internet is not to be underestimated in the dissemination of information. When information touches the public's knowledge blind spot or the public lacks relevant background knowledge, the influence of the opinion leaders' comments in this field will be amplified, causing more people to follow blindly [6].

3. Different changes in public opinion arising from the influence of undesirable social media sentiments

3.1 The mechanism of generating the heat of reversal news based on social combustion theory

3.3.1 The connotations of reverse journalism and social burn theory

Reverse news is a phenomenon in which the direction of public opinion turns as events unfold in the process of news dissemination, eventually presenting the truth of the event. It is a new challenge for information production and dissemination in the age of social media.

The social combustion theory was developed by academician Niu Wenyuan who introduced the phenomenon of combustion in nature into sociological research in order to investigate social phenomena. The theory suggests that the phenomenon of combustion in nature is a coexistence of physical and chemical reactions and that the phenomenon of combustion requires the combined action of a combustion substance, a combustion aid, and an ignition temperature. The theory analogises the occurrence of a phenomenon in society to the burning of a natural substance, and the factors that cause social instability to the "burning substance"; the media's exaggerated reporting of news events, which in turn misleads the public and amplifies social psychology, to the "combustion agent" that causes social instability.

3.3.2 Key factors influencing the popularity of reverse news stories

Firstly, high media engagement and journalistic misconduct are the key conditions for the generation of high public opinion on reversal news. Secondly, the type of issue and the number of reversals alone cannot be the trigger for the generation of high public opinion on reversals, but the two must work together to be the trigger for the generation of high public opinion on reversals. And for non-sensitive issues, multiple reversals are required to generate high public opinion on reversals; the effect of reversal intensity on the generation of high public opinion on reversals is not obvious. Finally, in the grouping path of high opinion generation, media involvement mostly appears in the

form of "high media involvement", while in the grouping path of low opinion generation, media involvement mostly appears in the form of "low media involvement", indicating that media involvement has a significant influence on the generation of a high opinion on reversal. This indicates that media involvement has a certain cooling effect on the fervor of reversal news [7].

3.2 The negative culture of moral abduction of truth

Mr. Chiang Hsuan said, "When morality becomes a kind of performance, that is, fakery, it becomes a performance of all shapes and sizes, it makes the most immoral people into the most moral ones, and words and deeds begin to separate. If the people are unable to think, all the prosperity and strength of society will be false, and it will all be ruined."

At this stage, people are used to using social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat to obtain news information or other information. Most people are easily attracted by inflammatory language, and some people habitually stand on the moral high ground and judge others' rights and wrongs at will. Therefore, the causes of the phenomenon of moral abduction in news and public opinion are not only influenced by the factors of news publishers and receivers, but also indicate that the citizens of society need to further deepen their awareness of the law and moral obligations, and have not balanced their rights and obligations properly. In addition, mainstream news media have higher authority than other self-media platforms, but some mainstream media do not give full play to their function of guiding social opinion and education, which makes the dissemination of news information unequal. Moreover, when mainstream media apply moral standards to judge news, if the public does not understand it with a correct sense of public opinion, the phenomenon of moral abduction cannot be avoided [8].

4. Management of Online Public Opinion

Online public opinion is a new form of public opinion formed in the Internet environment, and the difficulty of managing online public opinion has been highlighted in the era of full media [9]. At present, the Internet has become a significant venue for people to express their opinions and views. Meanwhile, online public opinion has also become an important form of expression reflecting the feelings, attitudes, and demands of the general public. All online public opinion is closely related to certain social issues, and a quick response to public opinion is not only the priority of governance but also a reflection of the government's effectiveness and attitude toward people's livelihood. Only when the governance capacity and system are continuously improved and perfected can the governance of public opinion on the Internet be formed into a good result and become an important force for the continuous progress and development of social civilization.

Therefore, in order to strengthen the management and guidance of online public opinion as well as reduce the fermentation of undesirable public opinion, people should focus on the following three aspects.

4.1 Mainstream Media

First of all, mainstream media should uphold an accurate and objective attitude in news reporting, promote mainstream values, and seize the initiative in news propaganda and public opinion guidance to safeguard national security and promote scientific social governance. Therefore, as the backbone of the new media, mainstream media should establish a strict "gatekeeper" system, strengthen content review and detailed verification of articles, strictly control misinformation, and eliminate extreme statements. Secondly, the media accountability mechanism should be strengthened, and industry standards should be set to improve the authority and effectiveness of reporting; internet regulation should be strengthened, and individuals or organisations spreading rumours should be investigated and punished in accordance with the law. At the same time, official means should be applied to inform the public and deal with incidents of distorted rumours in short order to avoid the spread of public opinion caused by the lack of official information to the largest extent [10].

4.2 Journalists

Secondly, in order to avoid the occurrence of multiple reversals of events, journalists should firmly provide the society with reliable and true news reports of professional ethics and social responsibility. Journalists should ensure the authenticity of news, in particular by verifying the reliability of news sources and identifying the source of events before forwarding news reports, so as to eliminate the spread of false and inaccurate information. It is the responsibility of journalists to remove falsehood, maintain truth and ensure the reliability of news [11].

4.3 Internet users

Finally, internet users should improve their media literacy and form a correct concept of freedom of expression. In today's era of extremely rapid news dissemination online media, the public should abide by the bottom line of law and morality when expressing their opinions on social media and should advocate and guide the public to correctly exercise their right to speak on cyberspace and be rational. Besides, the public should be more aware of the sources of information and the questionable nature of its authenticity, look at issues from multiple perspectives and in a comprehensive manner, and at the same time, strengthen their resistance to negative information.

4.4 Government departments

The relevant government departments should firstly establish a comprehensive monitoring and early warning mechanism for public opinion on the Internet and, secondly, build an all-media information dissemination matrix with official background. On the one hand, the rapid development of public opinion on the Internet is not conducive to controlling the direction of public opinion quickly. However, at the same time, the large amount of video, picture, and text information is also conducive to all-around analysis and research of public opinion so as to avoid misjudging public opinion and taking inappropriate response measures due to information barriers. At the same time, people are more likely to believe in information that they have access to first, and that is hot, so building an all-media information dissemination matrix will make it easier for audiences to see and accept authoritative official information and thus avoid being led astray by online rumours and inflammatory sentiments. Government departments must be timely and effective in intervening in online public opinion, as missing the moment when the public most wants to know the truth or making an inappropriate response can be a major blow to the government's credibility.

5. Conclusion

In the era of all media, the Internet has gradually become a new front for news and public opinion, among which social media has also become an important platform for the generation and fermentation of public opinion. In the new media era, people's lives are becoming more affluent, more colourful, and more convenient, but the feature that everyone can become a disseminator of information also provides conditions for the development of extremes in online public opinion. Internet public opinion has a great influence on people's lives, and if it is not guided correctly, it may have an impact on people's thoughts and ideas and lead to various conflicts. Therefore, how to deal with online public opinion in the new media era has become a key issue to be considered at present. The use of social media emotions to benignly guide the development of online public opinion, follow the objective laws of news reporting and relentlessly pursue the truth are the tests facing journalists in the post-truth era. Journalists should and must lead by example, not only by producing quality journalism that meets the requirements of the norms but also by setting an example to prevent social media sentiment from dominating online opinion development. At present, there is an overkill of "one-size-fits-all" and a lack of focus in the management of online public opinion, and relevant laws, regulations, and standards are not perfect, so there is still a long way to go in managing online public opinion. This paper analyses the formation of post-truth, the influence of bad social media sentiment, and how to manage online public opinion. Discusses the rational guidance of social media sentiment and

management of online public opinion from three aspects: generation, development, and solutions, and makes suggestions to promote the good development of online public opinion management. At present, most of the relevant research focuses on the causes of the post-truth, the impact of social media emotions. In the future, our research should conduct in-depth exploration on how to solve the problem and put forward more specific and feasible suggestions. At the same time, we should strengthen cooperation with big data, artificial intelligence and other fields to keep pace with the times.

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