

# Irrational Expression and Channelling of Public Opinion on the Internet in the New Media Era

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## Abstract

**In the era of new media, the space for public opinion development is expanding in the rise of public discourse, the online world is full of various voices, and public opinion plays an important role in all aspects of society. At the same time, the accelerated development of media technology has expanded the ways of social participation, and the public is able to use multiple ways to know society. Therefore, it is necessary to study the irrationality of online public opinion in the new media era. This paper takes irrational expressions in online public opinion as the research object in the new media perspective, explores the ecological status of online public opinion expressions in the new media environment, further deciphers the negative social benefits behind it, and uses it as the basis to analyze the paths to channel irrational expressions in online public opinion from the perspectives of three subjects: mainstream media, opinion leaders, and netizens.**

## Keywords

**New media; Public opinion; Irrationality; Negative benefits; Public discourse.**

## 1. Introduction

New media technologies are constantly developing, forming digital communication methods, and Internet users are able to receive and interact with the information spread on the Internet in a timely and indiscriminate manner, and even produce information through self-media applications. At this stage, the public opinion field is becoming more and more complex, and various social trends influence people's cognition and values. Journalism critic Lippmann once put forward the idea of "public irrationality", which is precisely the negativity of public opinion on the Internet: many irrational expressions flood the Internet and become an unfavorable factor in the construction of the Internet opinion ecology.

## 2. The Irrational Expression of Public Opinion From Lippmann's "Mimetic Environment" Perspective

American scholar Lippmann introduced the concept of "public opinion" and proposed the concept of irrational public opinion. The "mimetic environment" refers to the public's understanding of the world through media reports, but the "mimetic environment" is a part of the real environment, a world selectively presented by the media. Public opinion is real because people use the media's "mimetic environment" to get information, which leads to a distance between the public and society, and the public cannot get the real information they need from it, thus irrational public opinion arises. First, the public's perception of information acquisition comes from the media. The "mimetic environment" is shaped by the media, from which the public cannot get comprehensive information for comprehensive thinking. At the same time, the public is easily guided by the media and influenced by various interests, and passively

accepts the information presented by the media. Second, the elite's unique position in public opinion. The elites use public opinion to defend their own interests and thus control the different voices in society. Third, there is a lack of public awareness, and the public is prone to form stereotypes about events, difficulty in focusing, etc.

Although Lippmann does not refer to the public as a "rabble" like Le Pen, he also believes that "the cognitive picture in the human mind does not naturally correspond to the external world, but is the result of one-sided external circumstances combined with subjective interpretations." It can be said that public opinion is indeed irrational in character. [1]

### **3. The New Media Platform Has Become An Important Collection and Distribution Center for Public Opinion.**

#### **3.1. Technical Dimension: Diversified Media Information Channels**

The 49th Statistical Report on the Development of the Internet in China shows that the number of Internet users in China has reached 1.032 billion. The Internet and its related applications are widely popular, and the media channels for the public to harvest information are becoming more and more abundant. In recent years, media resources in society are very rich, and new media applications represented by Internet media and cell phone media have gradually derived new media and grasped the threshold of user information acceptance. Currently, the openness, anonymity and virtual nature of the Internet, the construction of virtual interpersonal space makes trust between Internet users. At the same time, the emergence of self-media expands the free space for speaking, expands the way of information dissemination, and realizes the communication between both communicators and users.

With the continuous development of media technology, the media ecological landscape has transitioned from a mass media-dominated to a new media era with a multitude of voices. The empowering nature of the Internet medium has enabled the public, as participants in the network, to have an increased right to voice and respect for their right to expression. [2] Users use self-media applications to express their views on online events, and the openness of the online opinion space has increased public participation in social public affairs. Many online events are sent out through self-published media and quickly receive public attention, and then official media and government agencies join in the investigation and analysis of the events, forming a powerful public online opinion together online and offline.

#### **3.2. Economic dimension: the "Matthew effect" is obvious**

In the public opinion field of the Internet, the Matthew effect means that hot events receive the general attention and active participation of netizens, and the discussion heats up continuously, while cold events gradually disappear from people's sight, with the strong getting stronger and the weak getting weaker, which is a relatively common phenomenon in the public opinion field. Self-media continues to develop, and the Matthew effect appears in the fan economy.

In the era of fan economy, platforms rely on net stars and celebrities for commercial cash, and have gathered a large number of highly sticky and concentrated fans in the market of continuous "star-making", and the rice circle is gradually formed. In the trend of traffic gathering and brand marketing, resources are increasingly tilted to the rice circle, and the head advantage is more and more strong, with the obvious horse-trust effect. The fan group is developing and growing with the tilt of traffic and the attention of capital. "Fans" is not only a huge consumer group, but also a loyal sticky user of the platform. In the new and growing economy, fans are making qualitative metaphors for themselves through irrational perceptions and assigning themselves to specific fan circles. They even transcend their own power and engage in irrational consumption and irrational expressions when pursuing stars in order to

attract traffic for the so-called idols to cater to the market. In the expression of online public opinion, there is a clear tendency for fans to follow the crowd and follow the trend. In events related to their so-called idols, fan groups take the lead in speaking out to defend the image of their idols and form a powerful public opinion to oppress supporters who express different opinions. Under this public opinion field effect, the emotional extremes become louder and louder with the support of users, and the events continue to ferment. At this point, some public events that really deserve social attention are ignored, and a situation where the strong get stronger and the weak get weaker emerges, such as the appropriation of public resources by the pink idols.

### **3.3. The Social Dimension: A New Landscape of Agenda Setting**

In the self-media environment, the order of issue attention is jointly shaped by media and users, and there are even rankings of the order on Weibo. Agenda setting presents a new situation in which the public's personal agenda setting is transformed into a lowered threshold for public issues. In the online platform, there are numerous cases of personal events being triggered by public opinion into public events, and the boundaries between private and public discourse spaces lack a clear division, and the boundaries between the two are broken. In the public arena of online communication, the network can make it possible for personal events to spread in a short period of time. In addition to this, there exists a cognitive and emotional padding for events that become explosive on the public microblogging hotlist. According to Fisk and Taylor, "The phenomenon of padding describes the impact of previous contexts on the interpretation of new information." The public has been exposed to everyday information, and when the public encounters new information stimuli, this old information struggles to make a connection with the new information, and the public rallies with similar emotions. Even secondary public opinion emerges. The video of "a woman giving birth to eight children in Feng County" spread on social media platforms, which brought the Feng County woman into the public eye and developed into a public opinion event, and later netizens questioned the government's credibility and the rights of the woman.

## **4. The Ecological Status of Public Opinion Expression on the Internet under New Media**

### **4.1. Trends in Group Pressure in the Expression of Public Opinion**

Internet technology is highly interactive and spreads quickly, users can quickly voice their opinions through self-media applications, and the freedom of public opinion expression is high. The issuers of opinions conceal their identities because of the anonymity of the Internet, which increases the freedom of expression of users' opinions, and they find suitable virtual communities in the Internet through their personal interests. By exchanging the information they have with each other, users gradually expand the degree of interaction and communication because of the lack of moral constraints and real-world limitations, and people with similar views develop into a psychologically convergent group. When people are in a group, they will be influenced by group cues and group infection, and then overreact. On the one hand, when their views are different from the group, they will give up their views for the sake of group belonging and then remain similar to the views of the group crowd; on the other hand, some people are extremely vulnerable to environmental oppression because of their own personalities, and their attitudes are infected by the group and are more easily swayed by group opinions, showing irrational expressions of public opinion. Especially in the case of online public opinion events, the role of group psychology in influencing individuals is obvious.

Internet users' attention is influenced by the group polarization effect, with extreme public opinion tendencies and group pressure formation.

#### **4.2. Virtual Role Building for Public Opinion Expression**

In online communication, the public constructs an ideal image of "oneself", which is often full of contrasts. The virtual society is free from the restrictions of the real world, and the boundaries between people are gradually eliminated, and people continue to construct their ideal "self" through their subconscious in the sense of satisfaction and identity. More people choose to make use of personalized settings that represent their personality traits and psychology, so that they can achieve a sense of existence in the virtual society and realize their self-worth. The sense of security that is lacking in real life is constantly harvested in the virtual society, which further stimulates the public's willingness to express, and the social role in the virtual society is actually a supplement and targeted compensation for the personality of the real social role. [3] In addition, the popularity of cell phones, a mobile communication terminal device, has broken the limitations of devices and venues to realize virtual and reality and conversion. In this situation without boundaries and constraints, cyber citizens give vent to all their repressed emotions in daily life and realize online virtual socialization in their own constructed virtual roles, thus stimulating the desire of cyber citizens to express themselves.

#### **4.3. The Tendency of "Depersonalization" of Public Opinion Expression**

Internet users are in a state of anonymity in online communication, and because of the herd mentality, when there is a "social media frenzy", people are in a state of de-individualization because of the continuous emotional exuberance in the group. In this process, individuals are subordinated to the tendencies and expressions of the group and lose their individuality and consciousness for a short period of time. In the group, people lack self-awareness and believe that responsibility is dispersed to the masses and that the law is not to blame. As a result, many Internet mobs emerge, and this environment is full of unbridled emotional venting, followed by the blind following of the Internet audience, and even a state of group unconsciousness. Individuals in the group, the view must be subordinated to the voice of the crowd, at this time is already a state of de-individualization, individual action, attitude and group highly consistent.

### **5. The Negative Social Benefits of Irrational Expression of Internet Opinion**

#### **5.1. False Information Hostage to Public Opinion**

The online media has rich resources that help users get the information they need. At the same time, information is disseminated by multiple subjects and produced in various ways; the process of communication is decentralized, and the content of communication is not restricted by a specific group of people, so people can express their own opinions and participate in the discussion of events through the media. In the context of "post-truth", self-publishing media no longer takes the responsibility of promoting values, but has become a "free market of opinions". [4] However, because of the rapid release and dissemination of information in the network, the authenticity of information is subject to verification, and it is more likely that false information and rumors will be spread. Some audiences lack basic literacy and reap attention by taking facts out of context and fabricating them, and false news appears frequently. Irrational expressions of public opinion appear in the discussion of hot events, and the spread of false information is difficult to control, which negatively affects the parties involved in the events and also influences the direction of public opinion, disrupts the social order, and even reduces the credibility of traditional media.

## 5.2. Public Opinion Siege Invades the Network

With the popularity of the Internet and the continuous development of information technology, online public opinion is mainly dominated by the emotional expressions of Internet people, so violence in the new media era also derives a new form of development - cyber violence. Due to the lack of morality in real life of some Internet users, it leads to random expressions on the virtual network or personal attacks by attempting to vent their dissatisfaction in life in the network. In the network, publicly released information is rational, which is in line with the needs of socializing with acquaintances and the network "persona" of Internet users, while in the process of commenting, Internet public opinion conceals the real identity of individuals and begins to appear irrational expressions. Initially, Internet violence is caused by a small number of netizens making inflammatory remarks about the incident and venting their emotions indiscriminately to form a "one-person orgy", which then leads to a group polarization effect. This collective irrational state ignores some rational, questioning voices, and because of the attraction of group belonging, the few rational voices eventually deteriorate.

## 5.3. Pink Circle Thinking Permeates the Dialogue

Fan culture refers to a set of virtual impressions that are closer to one's own preferences for a favorite or even admired image within an individual or a group, and this leads to a cultural consumption around preferences and followers. [5] The participation and accompaniment of fan groups are increasing, "fan groups" are gradually developing and growing, and this kind of fan circle thinking is deepening and spreading, and has penetrated into various industries. During the Winter Olympics, Gu Ailing relied on her personal charm and unique character to gain millions of fans instantly; during the Summer Olympics, Yang Qian and Wang Shun increased their fans. The general audience treats athletes as role models, but also pounces on the negative behaviors of fan culture, such as netbursts, to bad-mouth athletes who are fighting for their country's glory on social media. Comments on social media can show the public's concern for industry affairs, but when infiltrated with a fan-culture mindset, such irrational behavior of the group is really inappropriate and even counterproductive, negatively impacting the people involved.

## 6. A Multi-subject Approach to Building a Balanced Posture of Online Public Opinion

### 6.1. Mainstream Media's Main Line: Actively Guide the Formation of Attention

In the online public opinion storm, the previous "top-down" communication method by traditional media is broken, forming a fermentation of public opinion first, until a large-scale public opinion effect is formed in the network, and then traditional media and self-media continue to pay attention together. In the online world, netizens release all their emotions in real life. The mainstream media should assume the responsibility of guiding the netizens. When the public opinion is initially fermented through the self-media, the mainstream media should grasp the initiative of online public opinion and public opinion guidance, react in time, investigate the incident in depth, and not give the rumor-mongers a chance to voice their opinions. It is worth noting that in the process of new media public issue construction, the only way to have a legalized living space is through government participation in consultation, while public issues are the result of rational consultation. Therefore, the construction of public issues is the result of mutual "games" among the media, the public, and the government. [6]

At the same time, mainstream media should pay attention to the hot spots of online public opinion. When the society is full of negative emotions, the mainstream media should spread positive issues to the general public, carry out effective media issue setting, highlight social

responsibility, promote socialist core values, and promote the formation of a good social climate.

## **6.2. The Main Line of Opinion Leaders: Highly Self-disciplined Performance Rationality**

In online events, opinion leaders possess rich knowledge and strong desire to express their own opinions on the events, driving the heat of public opinion to the peak, and opinion leaders influence most people's opinions on a certain event. As opinion leaders, they should fulfill their responsibilities, judge right and wrong, analyze issues from multiple perspectives based on factual content, and adopt opinions based on factual judgment when absorbing and digesting others' opinions. At the same time, opinion leaders should form a relationship with netizens to monitor each other and develop a sense that they should be strict in their speech. On the one hand, opinion leaders should strengthen civic education and legal education, and establish a sense of responsibility and a rational spirit; on the other hand, opinion leaders should consciously measure their own behavior and speech with morality, develop a self-disciplined character, and guide their audiences with their practical actions, so that more netizens can participate and express rationally and avoid group polarization.

## **6.3. The Main Line of Netizen Citizenship: Awareness Deepens to Express Emotions**

Numerous incidents of online violence occur due to stereotypes of internet users. Stereotypes are fixed and simplistic views and impressions that people hold about specific things, which are usually accompanied by value evaluation and good or bad feelings about things. [7] In online communication, only the rational expression of public opinion can form a good public opinion wind. Internet users themselves should deepen their understanding, change their concepts and refuse to follow the trend. When participating in hot events on the Internet, they should consider all aspects and should not stand on the moral high ground to "follow the trend" and blame the person concerned, which is not rational at all. As society progresses, the public's media literacy requirements are getting higher and higher.

## **7. Conclusion**

In the new media era, the public has abundant access to information and a high degree of liberalization, which makes people keen to pay attention to social public affairs. Under the impact of the development of self-media, the traditional media's right to lead public opinion is gradually reduced and the public forms public opinion spontaneously. The rational expression of public opinion is particularly important, and there seems to be difficulty in getting the public to act according to reason, which requires a long educational indoctrination to lead. What people need is not just complicated information, but more importantly, the wisdom to think more.

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