Conflict and Negotiation: A Study of Public Opinion Conflict on Online Opinion Platforms

Jingwen Yang
Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing 102600, China
Corresponding author E-mail: 644985532@qq.com

Abstract: As one of the hot issues in public opinion research, online public opinion has been attracting much attention from scholars. This paper explores the reasons why people tend to express their opinions in the form of confrontation and conflict in social networking platforms and the impact of this tendency from the perspectives of communication science, sociology and psychology. First of all, This paper uses the video "The Story of the Second Uncle" on Bilibili as an example, and uses the interview method to investigate the tendency of respondents to speak in the network in depth. The study found that users would choose consensus discussions to avoid conflicts for their own interests on online social networking platforms where interpersonal networks exist. But users tend to express their true views and opinions in online platforms with fewer interpersonal relationships, such as Weibo and Bilibili, which may lead to conflicting discussions. Secondly, this paper analyzes the causes and effects of the above situation by applying the spiral of silence hypothesis, catharsis theory and Shirley Turkle's concept of the "playground of humanity". Finally, the paper reflects on the shortcomings of the study and points out that the study of Internet users' psychology is also an important factor that needs to be taken into account in the governance of online public opinion.

Keywords: public sphere, online public opinion, consensus discussion, conflict discussion

1 Introduction

1.1Background

With the development of technology, online information transmission and public opinion expression have always followed each other. In recent years, with the popularity of various new network businesses and the strengthening of citizens' awareness of participation, netizens' remarks and network emotional excitement have reached an unprecedented level, and the Internet public opinion has become a barometer and amplifier of varieties of social phenomena and problems. [1]In the era of new media, the loss of the right to speak and the growing awareness of multiple subjects to participate in social governance have led to the surging of online public opinion, which is characterized by suddenness, complexity, group polarization, fast spreading, high potential harm and easy reversal. We observed that on social media platforms such as Weibo, people are more tended to export their opinions in the form of confrontational conflicts. We are curious about this: Why do people tend to express their opinions in the form of confrontation and

conflict in social media platforms? What is the impact of this?

2 Literature review

2.1 Literature review on the phenomenon of online public opinion

The phenomenon of online public opinion has attracted research from multiple perspectives in academia. Foreign scholars He, W., Xia, D., Liu, J., & Ghosh, U. analyze and point out that by building a model of dynamic monitoring system of online public opinion in the big data environment can effectively shorten the time of public opinion monitoring and improve the accuracy of public opinion detection[2]. Scholar Savigny, Heather analyzes the challenging position of the Internet on the makers of online public opinion from the perspective of the public domain[3]. He points out that public opinion is constructed through the online communication system, which conflicts with the interests of politicians. Scholar Greece, M., on the other hand, analyzes how people use the Internet and other social media to create public opinion and express their feelings in terms of different communication channels[4].

The domestic scholars Wei Shuyan and Tang Rongcheng conducted a more detailed study of China's public opinion guidance strategy in terms of the generation and evolution of online public opinion, which showed that the generation and evolution of online public opinion is the result of the interaction and game among public opinion events, cyberspace, netizens and the government[5]. Lin Min, on the other hand, reveals the multi-layered factors in the process of online public opinion generation and its inherent evolution mechanism and law from the perspective of communication science, based on the real social environment and the actual situation of online public opinion in China. His research shows that giving full play to the positive effects of online public opinion or transforming negative effects into positive ones should be the guiding ideology of public opinion management[6]. Scholars Xu Xin, Zhang Chengzhi and Li Wenjing categorize the contents of online public opinion research, and their research shows that online public opinion is a double-edged sword, which on the one hand affects the decision making of relevant departments, and on the other hand, due to the absence of "gatekeepers", online public opinion is more limited than traditional media environment[7].

Although these studies have explored in depth the influencing factors and governance of online public opinion, research on the reasons why people are more inclined to export their opinions in the form of antagonistic conflicts in social media platforms and the impacts they have is incomplete. Therefore, this paper aims to answer these questions by taking social media platforms such as microblogs as the research area.

2.2 Literature review of public domain theory

Since the theory of public sphere was proposed by German sociologist Habermas in the mid-20th century, scholars at home and abroad have paid much attention to it and have made a lot of research results. By studying the relevance of public sphere theory in the contemporary social

context, foreign scholars Verstraen, Hans proposed that the function of the media in providing entertainment plays an important role in bringing about the transformation of the public sphere[8]. Scholars Lee H, et al. by studying the problem of privacy leakage in the public sphere, proposed that the privacy paradox is currently the main wrestling ground for the conflict and integration of the personal and public spheres in the WeChat space, and the key point of balancing the two sides is whether the loss caused by the leakage of personal privacy is commensurate with the gain[9]. Scholar Warren, M.E., through his study of the representation of citizens' will in the micropublic sphere, proposes that: in the absence of broader public information and consultation, the micropublic sphere can guide citizens' political judgment; in addition the micropublic sphere can take on the role of the expected public in political decision-making, such that the political sphere may generate problems, but has not yet attracted public attention[10].

The domestic scholar Wan Chenyang combines the actual phenomenon of excessive entertainment on Sina Weibo with Habermas' theory of the public sphere, pointing out that hot events on Weibo form a "butterfly effect" through the thinking and discussion of netizens. It is because of such a mechanism that the public sphere of microblogs can be better realized[11]. Scholar Huang Hongye argues that "full media" and the public sphere have a wide range of similarities: citizens' right to speak is fully respected by officials, different views can collide and generate sparks of ideas in a specific space, and cyberspace becomes a marketplace for free expression of views[12]. Yin Huanxia, on the other hand, combines the construction of a harmonious society with the theory of public sphere, and proposes that the media public sphere, with its free public interaction, dialogue and consultation under the care of communication rationality and supervision of state power, will play a special role in the construction and development of a harmonious society in China[13].

However, these studies do not examine the phenomenon of conflicting public opinion on online opinion platforms from the perspective of public sphere theory, and therefore do not answer questions about why people are more inclined to export their views in the form of antagonistic conflict in social media platforms and what impact this has.

2.3 Problem formulation

Therefore, this paper will try to answer the following questions from the public sphere theory: Why do people tend to export their views in the form of antagonistic conflicts in social media platforms? In what way will these views be presented? What is the impact of this? What is the scope of influence?

3 Research Methodology

This paper uses the interview method in an attempt to answer the above questions.The interview questions were divided into three main parts, the first part mainly concerned with the basic information of the interviewees, including their gender, age, and occupation. The second part downscales the research questions into interview questions. It includes their views on the public opinion conflicts of hot events on online platforms, their specific coping strategies and the

ways of presenting public opinion conflicts on online platforms. The third part of the preparation mainly deals with the possible deeper digging questions.This study conducted 30-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews with each of the 11 frequent Weibo users. The interviews began in June 2022 and ended in October 2022. The interviewees firstly included teachers, bank employees and other occupations, and secondly, a larger research sample was recruited through online platforms. According to the maximum sampling principle of the qualitative research method, by the time the eighth interviewee was recruited, the entire interview was sufficient to answer the research questions and the sample collection was closed.The interviews were conducted in the form of telephone interviews, text interviews by WeChat, and one-on-one interviews in person. The results of the interviews were compiled into verbatim transcripts, and the basic profiles of the interviewees are shown in the table.

Table 1 Basic information of respondents

Serial number	Gender	Age	Career
1	Male	18	Students
2	Female	26	Teacher
3	Male	21	Students
4	Male	33	Bank employees
5	Female	22	Students
6	Female	24	Students
7	Female	25	Editor
8	Male	22	Students
9	Female	23	Students
10	Female	22	Students
11	Male	24	Students

4 Research findings and discussion points

When we conducted further in-depth interviews and tried to get answers to questions about why people are more inclined to export their views in the form of antagonistic conflict in social media platforms and what impact this has, we were surprised to find that the more interpersonal and group participation, the more inclined it is to consensus discussions. The more platform-based media was involved, the more it tended to be conflict-based discussions. The interviewees' responses corroborated my thoughts about the interviewees' tendency to favor consensus discussions on more interpersonal online platforms such as WeChat and Friendship Circle and their tendency to express their true opinions related to less interpersonal online platforms such as Bilibili and Weibo.

5 Summary and Reflection

This study theorizes the phenomenon of conflicting public opinion on online opinion

platforms through an interview method, and tries to answer the question of why people are more inclined to export their opinions in the form of antagonistic conflict in social media platforms and what effects this will have. The study finds that the more interpersonal and group participation, the more inclined it is to consensus discussions; the more platform-based media participation, the more inclined it is to conflict discussions.

5.1 The psychology of avoiding harm: interpersonal group participation tends to be consensus-based discussion

"In the Bilibili watched the content of the video related to the second uncle, I think the second uncle although life is not easy, but should not become a source of capital profit, should not be exposed to disturb his life. Many people in my circle of friends have also expressed their views on the video, but the most I can do is just give them a like. Do not speak easily in the circle of friends, but I stick to my own opinion and will not change my attitude because of the common tendency of most people's attitude. If I really want to express my opinion, I still choose to go to Weibo, because no friends know my Weibo account, and this way I won't clash with my friends or colleagues." (S9)

"In the Bilibili and Weibo have seen the second uncle related video content, think the second uncle is a very powerful person, although the encounter is saddening, but he never gave up life, but also helped a lot of people. I will go to the network and netizens on line, but also absolutely not in WeChat and friends circle inside the discussion of this matter, unless it is and its close friends private chat. Because to avoid conflict in the circle of friends or group chat, or worry about the bad impact on future life." (S11)

"I think the netizens have a lot of sense, and I think the second uncle is worthy of sympathy and admiration, but this kind of publicity is really easy to make people suspect of selling misery and gaining attention, but in private conversations with friends or discussions in the group, I prefer to hide my true thoughts. When discussing with friends or in the group, I prefer to hide my true thoughts, after all, in the group also work together to produce conflict is not good, so what the real idea is better to say directly in the microblogging, Bilibili above, because we do not know and do not meet and there is no interest entanglement." (S6)

It is not difficult to see that when Internet users participate in discussions on hot topics in interpersonal and group settings, they are more likely to "tend to avoid harm" due to group pressure and consideration of their own interests, and to conform to the attitudes and opinions of interpersonal or group members. Thus, the "minority" group members who do not share the same views remain silent, triggering the spiral of silence effect. However, group opinion, as a strong opinion, is not an opinion shared by all, and group members who have different opinions may superficially agree with them, but in fact, they still insist on their own opinions.

5.2 Self-satisfaction and decompression valve: platform-based media engagement tends to be conflict-oriented discussions

"I watched the video related to the second uncle on the b site, and also looked at the hot search about the second uncle on Weibo. The friends in the WeChat group think that the second uncle deserves sympathy, but it is not right to make the second uncle incident into a stunt, which is disrespectful to the second uncle. But I actually think it's okay to make it into a terrier, now everything on the network can become a terrier, the purpose is to serve as a pressure reducing valve in real life, the content of the terrier is not important, the important thing is to play the terrier to make people happy. But on WeChat you can not say what you think with your friends, for fear of being scolded for having a wrong outlook, because this kind of thing affects the feelings is really not appropriate. So I agree with them in WeChat and play stalker entertainment with my friends on other online platforms where no one knows them." (S8)

"Watched the video related to the second uncle on the b site, also participated in the discussion with netizens on the b site. I have reservations about the second uncle video. It feels more comfortable to talk on online platforms like b site than on WeChat. In WeChat to express the feelings of such events or whatever, if there is a conflict with others in the circle of friends or group, it would not be very awkward? They are all people who have to meet every day. In WeChat or circle of friends to speak word by word to be deliberate, feel tired, also rarely in WeChat or circle of friends to send about a matter of opinion. Of course, in the b site, microblogging platform like this can express their feelings, want to say what to say what, there is always a window for people to vent it. The views are not the same as the conflict, just as a cathartic mouth of emotion." (S7)

Since the online environment is anonymous, virtual and open, it is easier and braver for Internet users to express their true feelings and opinions in social media platforms with few interpersonal and group relationships, such as Weibo and Bilibili, and try to avoid the negative impact on interpersonal relationships and their own interests due to expressing their opinions.

Secondly, from the study of this paper, the reasons for the tendency to conflict in different platform-based media engagement discussions are inextricably linked to the catharsis theory in communication science. With the rapid development of society, the fast-paced life and the ensuing social pressure lead to the public's urgent need for a place to vent their emotions, and the online social media platform is an excellent choice. The catharsis theory can be traced back to Aristotle in ancient Greece, who believed that the catharsis of energy after repressed emotions is a function of watching tragedies. It is currently believed that the only way to ensure a normal mental state is to relieve and release human stress through certain channels. Because of the anonymity, openness and virtual nature of online social media platforms, they have become a "stress relief valve" for society. Social citizens often hide their real identities in the network and use online social media platforms as a place to escape from the real world, using their virtual identities to vent their stress and negative emotions in real life by expressing opinions, participating in discussions, and playing tricks.

MIT professor Shirley Turkel introduced the concept of "human playground" in the 1990s, explaining that the more people participate in platform-based media, the more they tend to engage in conflicting discussions. In online social media platforms such as Weibo and Bilibili, people show their "carefully designed ideal selves", and their real and complex sides are reduced, while

their perfect and refined sides are enlarged. In the process of sharing and discussing, people satisfy their need to be valued, recognized, and admired, and they even gradually develop an illusion of an aura of self-importance and become obsessed with this "egocentric socialization". This "egocentric socialization" leads online users to believe that their own views are authoritative, and to express and confirm the authority of their own views by refuting the views of others in platform-based media, which leads to conflicting discussions.

5.3 The influence of psychological factors of internet users on public opinion conflicts

As some scholars argue, "Habermas' public sphere overemphasizes rational discourse and ignores the emotional and rhetorical components of communication. In fact, "most human behavior does not originate in people's logical reasoning, but in their emotions. The analysis of interview transcripts of respondents reveals that the willingness to speak in the Internet and the choice of consensus or conflict discussions are governed by users' emotions, rather than being entirely the result of interpersonal relationships and the influence of different platforms. At the same time, the content of discussions on hot topics in the public sphere is sometimes not based on the online hot topics themselves, but rather to satisfy their own emotional catharsis or entertainment needs. Therefore, discussions in the public sphere are mixed with a large number of irrational factors, rather than people's logical judgment. If online platforms are to truly function as public spheres and promote social integration and group identity, it is necessary not only to address the focus of conflicts, but also to conduct an in-depth study of the emotions of online users.

The deeper reasons for the different attitudes of Internet users in different public spheres are also factors that need to be explored in depth later in this paper. In public spheres with strong networks such as WeChat groups and friend circles, users choose to reach consensus with most group members based on interpersonal relationships and their own interests, while in online social platforms with few networks such as Weibo and Bilibili, users tend to have conflicting discussions with other online users. The underlying psychological factors such as users' emotions and sentiments in need to be studied and discussed in depth.

In addition, how to solve the above problems and how to apply the findings of this paper to the research field of online public opinion behavior are also issues that need to be explored in depth in the future of this study. This is because it will be beneficial to our control and governance of public opinion conflicts in online platforms.

Reference

[1] Lin M. (2013). Internet public opinion: a study of influencing factors and its mechanism of action. Doctoral Dissertation. China: Zhejiang University. https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CDFD1214&filename=1013203482.nh

[2] He, W., Xia, D., Liu, J., & Ghosh, U. (2022). Research on the Dynamic Monitoring System Model of University Network Public Opinion under the Big Data Environment. mobile Networks

& Applications, 1-12. Applications, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11036-021-01881-8

[3] Savigny, H. (2002). Public Opinion, Political Communication and the Internet. Politics, 22(1), 1. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.00152

[4] Greece, M. (2008). Tempering Public Opinion in the Internet Age: When Everyone Is an Expert. Public Relations Strategist, 14(1), 18-21.

[5] Wei Suyan & Tang Rongcheng. (2014). Analysis of the propagation process, boosting factors and guidance strategies of online public opinion. Theory Monthly (10), 116-121. doi:10.14180/j.cnki.1004-0544.2014.10.073.

[6] Lin M. (2013). Internet public opinion: a study of influencing factors and its mechanism of action. Doctoral Dissertation. China: Zhejiang University. https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CDFD1214&filename=1013203482.nh

[7] Xu X, Zhang C. C. & Li W. J.. (2009). Review and prospect of domestic online public opinion research. Intelligence Theory and Practice (03), 115-120. doi:10.16353/j.cnki.1000-7490.2009.03.010.

[8] Verstraeten, H. (1996). The Media and the Transformation of the Public Sphere: A Contribution for a Critical Political Economy of the Public Sphere. European Journal of Communication, 11(3), 347-370. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323196011003004

[9] Lee H, Park H, Kim J. Why do people share their context information on Social Network Services? A qualitative study and an experimental study on users 'behavior of balancing perceived benefit and risk. International Journal of Humancomputer Studies, 2013, 71(9): 862-877.

[10] Warren, M.E. (2009). Two Trust-Based Uses of Mini-Publics in Democracy.

[11] Wan, Chen-Yang. (2020). An analysis of Sina Weibo's "entertainment to death" problem: Based on Habermas' theory of public sphere. Humanities World (10), 41-43. doi:10.16737/j.cnki.rwtx81281190.2020.10.012.

[12] Huang, H.Y.. (2021). On "Total Media" in the Perspective of Public Domain Theory. Southeast Communication (01), 24-26. doi:10.13556/j.cnki.dncb.cn35-1274/j.2021.01.008.

[13] Huanxia Yin. (2014). Media public sphere and harmonious society construction. Hunan Social Science (06), 270-272.

[14] Li, J.. (2021). Paradox and its self-adaptation: features of conflict and convergence between public and private spheres in WeChat space. New Media Studies (07), 67-70. doi:10.16604/j.cnki.issn2096-0360.2021.07.019.

[15] Chu, Qingqing. (2016). The value of micro-public sphere theory for practical exploration of consultative democracy. Journal of Tianjin University (Social Science Edition) (02), 155-159.

[16] Kensaku Fukui. (2016). The ウェブ 世論 and the new relevance of copyright. Journal of Information Processing & Management / Joho Kanri, 59(2), 75-88. https://doi.org/10.1241/johokanri.59.75

[17] Thompson, G., & Conley, S. (2006). INTERNET RESOURCES: Guide to public opinion polls Web sites. College & Research Libraries News, 67(9), 566-569. https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.67.9.7688

[17] Tatum, H. (2019). The Star of the Telegram: the Cartoons of Harold Maples. legacies, 31(2), 59-60.

[18] Kim, K., Baek, Y. M., & Kim, N. (2015). Online news diffusion dynamics and

public opinion formation: a case study of the controversy over judges' personal opinion expression on SNS in Korea. Social Science Journal, 52(2), 205-216. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2015.02.001

[19]Xinyan Zhao.(2016). Effects of Perceived Media Diversity and Media Reliance on Public Opinion Expression. International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 28(3), 355 -375. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edv015

[20] Tetsuro, K. (2006). The Internet as a Tool for Policy Understanding: Investigating the Influence of Internet Use on Japanese Public Opinion. Conference Papers - American Political Science Association, 1.