Emergencies and Emotional Guidance: A Study on the Emotional Guidance Effect of Mainstream Media Comments in Emergencies

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Abstract: This article analyzes the relationship between the characteristics of mainstream media comments and audience emotions by studying the multiple public opinion events and public emotions that have occurred in China this year, and explores the inevitable connection between the two. On this basis, conduct a comprehensive study on the emotional guidance effect of mainstream Chinese media comments in emergencies.
Keywords: unexpected events; Emotional transmission; Mainstream media; Public opinion guidance;

1. Introduction

1.1 Background Introduction

In 2022, a series of major emergencies such as a woman giving birth to with eight children in Fengxian County, assaulting someone at a Tangshan barbecue restaurant, and the disappearance of Hu Xinyu sparked huge public opinion, while also exposing the insufficient effectiveness of official media in guiding public opinion. We have observed that there is a type of guiding article that has achieved good results, that is, when the event is completely exposed and public opinion is boiling, mainstream media often publish a special comment, "requiring local governments or police to investigate the facts as soon as possible. This type of comment has played a good role in guiding netizens' emotions, easing the situation, and often calming public opinion temporarily, buying enough time to investigate the truth of the incident. Therefore, I am curious about this phenomenon. Can this non truth revealing comment really have an emotional guiding effect, and what mechanism is it through?

2. Literature review

2.1 Literature review on the phenomenon of cognitive disharmony among netizens

From the perspective of social psychology, Leon Festinger, a foreign scholar, put forward the theory of cognitive dissonance in the 1950s. He classified the relationships between cognition into three categories: irrelevant, coordinated, and dysfunctional. He believes that people often hope to

maintain a balance between their various cognitions. When there is a imbalance between their own behavior and attitude, or when they encounter two opposing viewpoints, people will experience psychological disharmony, which will cause psychological discomfort and promote people to take action to regain a state of cognitive coordination and balance.

However, domestic scholar Shen Jie, from the perspective of communication studies, further expanded the application field of cognitive dissonance theory by studying the relationship between news coverage of the A/H1N1 influenza event in China and the public's own cognition. He effectively supplemented the audience perspective content in the theory and emphasized the attention to audience psychology in news public opinion guidance. However, Leon Festinger's research is only limited to the perspective of social psychology, and has made a detailed exploration of people's cognitive psychology. Although scholar Shen Jie has explored the relationship between news reporting and audience psychology from the perspective of journalism and communication studies, he has not yet explored the mechanism behind the phenomenon of disharmony in public cognition. At the same time, due to factors such as the time of his research, his research has not explored the current flourishing development of new media, so it has certain limitations.

Overall, there is still relatively little research on the theory of cognitive dissonance, and its application in news dissemination and public opinion guidance in the new media era is even rarer.

2.2 Literature review on the phenomenon of emotional transmission in online public opinion

There has been extensive research in the academic community on the phenomenon and effects of emotional transmission. The concept of "emotional contagion" was first proposed by Mc Dougall, who believed that emotional transmission refers to the direct induction of emotions through the response of the primitive sympathetic nervous system. Hatfield and other scholars believe that emotional contagion is an unconscious, semi-automatic imitation process. On the contrary, Hoffman believes that emotional transmission is a behavior that people consciously participate in. Schoenewolf views emotional contagion as a contagious behavior between individuals or groups through conscious and unconscious emotional states and behaviors generated by emotions.

Today, with the deepening development of the internet and new media, the phenomenon of emotional contagion on the internet is more obvious. Coviello and other scholars have found through extensive research that emotions are spread through the internet, and the expression of individual opinions on social media can affect the emotions of other individuals and groups, and may also lead to large-scale dissemination. Domestic scholars Zhao Yunze and Liu Zhen combine the theory of emotional contagion with the new phenomenon of China's social media and internet era in the field of news communication. They believe that emotional contagion exists objectively and accompanies all stages of news communication. They also believe that emotional contagion and news facts constitute the basic components of public opinion and play a crucial role in the agenda and tone of news reporting (Zhao Yunze, Liu Zhen, 2020). Domestic scholars such as Qu Feifan have combined the public opinion of netizens in the context of the Internet with the

phenomenon of emotional communication, and believe that mainstream media in China still have the function of correcting the crisis of online emotional communication, with characteristics such as positive emotional guidance and improvement of social mentality.

However, these studies did not study the phenomenon of emotional communication among netizens from the perspective of guiding behavior of mainstream media in China, and therefore did not answer the questions about this study.

2.3 Question raising

In summary, this article will start from the theory of cognitive disharmony and emotional communication, attempting to answer the following question: Can mainstream media comments on the progress of public opinion events have an emotional guidance effect if they have not released the truth? What is the mechanism by which mainstream media comments have a guiding effect?

3. Research methods

This article adopts the research methods of questionnaire survey and interview to attempt to answer the above questions.

3.1 Questionnaire survey method

3.1.1 Assumption Establishment:

H1: The higher the degree to which mainstream media comments on the progress of public opinion events align with public opinion, the more likely the emotional easing effect will be

H2: The more timely the mainstream media releases comments on the progress of public opinion events, the more likely the emotional relief effect will be

To prove the hypothesis, this study used a questionnaire survey method to sample the population and create a questionnaire.

3.1.2 Sampling method

The corresponding research object of this hypothesis is the netizen group, and we conducted a random sampling of this group. The data collection, organization, and analysis process of this survey was completed on April 10, 2023. The survey mainly focuses on open and closed questions, and the main content is: (1) Basic information confirmation: including age and gender. (2) The dimensionality reduction statement section on the relationship between the degree of public opinion conformity and the timeliness of news reporting in the independent variable (3) The dimensionality reduction statement section on the emotional moderation effect of the dependent variable. This questionnaire contains 13 questions, including 6 multiple-choice questions, 6 matrix

questions, and 1 fill in the blank question. Adopting a combination of online and offline methods, through WeChat Moments, QQ Space, Questionnaire Star Sample Library, and offline distribution.

3.1.3 Sample feature description

A total of 195 valid questionnaires were collected in this survey, and a total of 195 respondents expressed their understanding of the "Zhang Jike Incident". More than 50% of the respondents' gender samples are female, and 45.5% of the samples are male. 47% of respondents felt angry after seeing this event, 30% felt nervous, and 11% felt sad. It can be seen that most netizens experience certain emotional fluctuations after seeing the Zhang Jike incident. 71% of respondents have expressed their views on this public opinion event online, 88% of respondents understand that People's Daily has commented on this event, "Zhang Jike needs to clarify three things when swiping the screen." 90% of respondents hope that mainstream media can actively speak up and promote the resolution of the event. It can be seen that when facing sudden public opinion events, the public has strong expectations and attention to the voice of mainstream media.

3.2 Deep Interview Method

3.2.1 Preparation of Interview Outline

The interview questions are mainly divided into two parts. The first part is the basic problem design for the core issue of this study. The interview mainly involves the interviewee's feelings towards the constantly fermenting public opinion events on the internet before making targeted comments on mainstream media, including whether they have irrational emotions towards the public opinion events that occur, what kind of emotional state this emotion is, how the interviewee expresses this emotion, and also includes the interviewee's emotional changes and opinions and feelings towards the comments after the targeted comments are published. The interview attempts to explore the relationship between netizens' emotions and targeted comments from mainstream media, whether comments have a certain moderating effect on netizens' emotions, and thus play a role in guiding and calming public opinion, as well as the underlying mechanisms.

The second part, preparation, mainly involves potential deep excavation issues. In the process of interviews and research, researchers strive to avoid the four ethical issues and deviant behaviors emphasized by scholar Al an Bryman: (1) causing harm to research participants; (2) Do not use informed consent permission documents or materials; (3) Infringe the privacy of research participants; (4) Deception of research participants. And if the interviewee has any questions or dissatisfaction that they are unwilling to answer during the interview, they can remain silent or withdraw midway. The interview materials that the interviewee stated that they were unwilling to disclose were not included or cited in this study.

3.2.2 Interviewee Selection

This study conducted 20 minutes of semi structured in-depth interviews with 15 interviewees.

The interview began in April 2023 and ended in May 2023. According to the maximum sampling principle of qualitative research methods, when the 15th interviewee is collected, all interview content is sufficient to answer the research questions, and the sample collection deadline is reached. The interviewees have differences in age, occupation, education level, and location, with a low degree of homogenization.

The interviews were conducted through telephone interviews, WeChat text interviews, and one-on-one face-to-face interviews. The interview results were compiled into a verbatim manuscript, with a total of 75677 words. The processing of interview content is completed by myself. The basic information of the interviewee is shown in the table, where the name is a pseudonym.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	occupation	Education level
Wang Gang	male	twenty	student	Undergraduate studying
Zhan Hong	female	thirty-two	driver	Graduation from junior high school
Bian Xu	male	twenty-six	cook	Graduation from technical secondary school
Tian Bo	male	forty-three	teacher	Doctoral graduation
Chen Xing	female	thirty	worker	Graduation from technical secondary school
Li De	male	eighteen	student	Undergraduate studying
Zhou Wei	male	nineteen	student	Undergraduate studying
Zhang Hong	female	forty-six	worker	Graduation from junior high school
Li Li	female	twenty-three	student	graduate student
Wang Kun	male	twenty-two	student	graduate student
Lin Cui	female	nineteen	student	undergraduate college
Zhang Mei	female	fifty	teacher	Doctoral graduation
Wang Fang	female	nineteen	student	Undergraduate studying
Wuhang	male	twenty-one	student	Undergraduate studying
Zhao Ge	male	twenty-three	student	graduate student

4. Research findings and discussion points

4.1 Media comments are in line with public opinion and conducive to easing public sentiment

This study analyzed the degree of consistency, timeliness, and emotional relief effect of mainstream media comments on public opinion. It was found that the degree of consistency between mainstream media comments and public opinion showed a significant positive correlation with emotional relief effect, $r=0.323$, $P<0.01$. This indicates that mainstream media comments on hot events are more in line with public opinion and have a stronger effect on easing public sentiment. The research hypothesis H1 is supported.

In addition, when we conducted further in-depth interviews and attempted to obtain answers to questions such as whether comments on sudden public opinion events by mainstream media in the past three years have had an emotional easing effect, we were pleasantly surprised to find that over half of the interviewees had cognitive dissonance towards sudden public opinion events, and the interviewees' answers supported my idea:

“The anger I felt from the bottom of my heart was still Chinese.”

“At that time, I did indeed make a statement on the platform that seemed immature now, which was a bit radical and biased.”

“I was constantly browsing various videos about this matter, and I just wanted to know more and understand what was going on.”

“I have seen various so-called behind the scenes revelations and analyses of the truth about this incident (Tangshan Assassination), and although I did not know the truth at the time, I still feel that the content of the analysis is reasonable.”

When individuals receive complex events with significant controversies on new media networks, they often experience cognitive dissonance due to their inability to obtain and analyze detailed information about the entire event in a short period of time. It is precisely the generation of disharmonious cognitive states at the individual psychological level that makes individuals eager to obtain complete information about events, but unable to achieve it. It is precisely at this time that the internet is quickly filled with various interpretations of such events, as well as various false information and rumors, providing a seemingly reasonable, comprehensive and detailed information and logic to the audience in a state of cognitive disharmony. Some audiences will choose to believe in returning to a state of cognitive coordination and balance, but this choice will also make the audience's emotions more unstable, and even gradually go to extremes, And then engage in irrational behavior, etc.

4.2 Timely media comments to help people return to rationality

Through analyzing the data collected from the questionnaire, I found a significant positive correlation between the timeliness of mainstream media comments and the effectiveness of emotional relief, $r=0.464$, $P<0.01$. This indicates that the more timely mainstream media comments on hot events are, the stronger the effect of alleviating public emotions. The research hypothesis H2 is supported.

Regarding the relationship between targeted comments from mainstream media and the degree of compliance with public opinion, as well as the timeliness of content release and the easing of public sentiment, the interviewees' responses further validate my hypothesis:

“Of course, I hope the mainstream media can speak up. I think the faster the better, otherwise I always feel that they don't care at all, and my mood will be even more excited.”

“After seeing the article (content published by mainstream media), there was a feeling of 'dawn' at that time, feeling that this matter would have results, and feeling relaxed in my heart.”

“I think it still makes me feel that this matter has been taken seriously, will be properly and fairly resolved, and my mood will be much better.”

“The content of the article can be said to be in line with my heart's desire. If it is timely, I feel that it is relative. The faster the comment, the better, just like a 'reassuring pill'.”

Through interviews, this study found that when the public is already in a state of cognitive disharmony, it is urgent for them to have more information about the event and the truth behind it. However, mainstream media still have great credibility in the hearts of the Chinese people. The people are eager to obtain reliable and rich information from mainstream media, and to some extent, they equate the attention and coverage of mainstream media with the continuous promotion and final resolution of events. The more mainstream media's attention and comments on the event align with the people's voices and are released in a timely manner, the easier it is for the people's cognitive disharmony to be correctly resolved, and the emotions of the people will be better alleviated. The various levels of public opinion triggered by the event itself will gradually subside due to the emergence of the truth and the resolution of the event.

4.3Timely response to social concerns can alleviate public tension

The "Zhang Jike Incident" selected in the survey questionnaire for this study appeared on the internet and sparked discussion three days later. The People's Daily published a comment on it, "Zhang Jike needs to clarify three things by swiping the screen." This comment has strong timeliness and the content of the comment is largely in line with public opinion, which has a significant effect on easing people's emotions. Therefore, the incident did not continue to generate greater public opinion and provided time for relevant work and investigation into the truth of the incident.

The consistency between mainstream media comments and public opinion, as well as the timeliness of comments, are important influencing factors in alleviating the emotional effects of netizens. For sudden public opinion events, the degree to which mainstream media comments before confirming the truth of the event are in line with public opinion and the timeliness of their publication will significantly affect the emotional situation of the general public towards the event itself. According to the conclusion of this study, there is a significant positive correlation between the consistency between mainstream media comments and public opinion and the effectiveness of emotional relief. The timeliness of mainstream media comments is also significantly positively correlated with the effectiveness of emotional relief.

On the other hand, through questionnaire analysis, the study also found that in the face of sudden public opinion events, the public generally has strong attention and expectations towards the attitude and voice of mainstream media. Based on this psychology, it is not difficult to see that timely comments from mainstream media that are in line with public opinion play a significant role in guiding public sentiment and alleviating the intense emotions of the public about sudden

public opinion events.

5. Summary and Reflection

Through audience survey and in-depth interviews, this study conducted a theoretical study on the phenomenon of public sentiment easing in the comments made by mainstream media on the progress of public opinion events, and tried to answer the question of the effect of comments made by mainstream media on the progress of public opinion events on improving the people's cognitive dissonance psychology to ease their emotions. Through research, the author found that the higher the degree of consistency between the comments released by mainstream media on the progress of public opinion events and public opinion, the stronger the emotional easing effect; The more timely the release of comments by mainstream media on the progress of public opinion events, the stronger the emotional relief effect.

The issue of the causes of the moderating effect of mainstream media comments on the progress of public opinion events on the emotions generated by people's cognitive disharmony proposed in this study reflects the new development of emotional communication in the current era of the internet and new media. On the other hand, it also provides a reference for the improvement of the public opinion guidance mechanism of mainstream media in the context of modern China's new online media. However, due to the limited audience for interviews and questionnaire surveys, as well as the limitations of the author's research level and perspective, this study still has shortcomings. In future related research, researchers in the field of news communication may need to pay more attention to the relationship between mainstream media public opinion guidance and public emotional changes, as well as new phenomena related to them, and expand research and practice on the effectiveness of emotional communication.

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