

Communication Characteristics, Practical Dilemmas, and Governance Paths of Online Public Opinion in Universities in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract: *In the post-truth era, the communication logic that prioritizes emotions over facts has profoundly reshaped the generation and evolution mechanisms of online public opinion in universities. Adopting the post-truth theory as an analytical framework, this paper systematically examines the new characteristics of online public opinion in universities across four dimensions: subject composition, content form, communication channel, and evolution path. It also reveals the practical dilemmas in current governance of such public opinion, including the cognitive dilemma where "facts give way to emotions," the structural dilemma of "circle barriers and echo chambers," the effectiveness dilemma of "delayed responses and rhetorical failures," and the value dilemma of "control-oriented mindset versus educational mission." The study proposes that universities should take measures from four aspects: technological empowerment, emotional governance, value guidance, and institutional reconstruction, so as to build a full-chain governance system encompassing "monitoring, empathy, guidance, and regulation," thereby achieving an organic integration of order maintenance in cyberspace and the fundamental task of fostering virtue and nurturing talents.*

Keywords: *Post-Truth; Online Public Opinion in Universities; Emotional Governance; Encapsulation; Risk Prevention and Control*

Introduction

In 2016, the term "Post-truth" was named the Word of the Year by the Oxford Dictionary due to a sharp increase in its frequency of use, and it is defined as "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." This concept accurately captures a fundamental shift in the contemporary public opinion ecology: the persuasive power of objective facts in shaping public opinion is being eroded by emotional appeals and individual beliefs. Post-truth does not mean the complete disappearance of facts; rather, it indicates that the priority of truth is significantly postponed in the ordering of public cognition. In this context, "emotion" and "imagination" replace "fact" and "truth" as the core focus of public opinion, and even when objective facts are present, they can hardly shake established emotional positions. This shift is not an isolated cultural phenomenon but is closely related to the rise of social media ecosystems, the algorithmization of information distribution, and the transformation of social trust structures. When the mode of information reception shifts from active searching to passive pushing, individuals' emotional experiences and identity recognition increasingly replace fact-checking as the decisive variables in information acceptance and dissemination.

Universities, as the frontline positions for ideological work and the digital gathering places for young people, face unprecedented challenges in public opinion governance within the post-truth context. College students, as typical "digital natives," are on one hand intellectually active and receptive, showing high enthusiasm for engaging with new things; on the other hand, their worldviews, life philosophies, and values are still in the process of formation, making them susceptible to being guided by emotions and thus weakening rational judgment when confronted with complex and diverse online information. In recent years, from the "Rat Head and Duck Neck Incident" to the "Wuhan University Library Incident," public opinion incidents on university campuses have occurred frequently, often undergoing sharp fluctuations from "ignition point-explosion point-turning point" within an extremely short period, with the truth remaining elusive and public sentiment continuing to escalate. The common characteristic of such incidents is that the facts and truth often emerge only gradually after the peak of public opinion, whereas the emotional positions and value judgments of the public

become solidified before the information is complete, thereby creating an opinion pattern of "truth arrives late, judgment comes first."

The traditional governance model of "fact restoration-authoritative release-calming the situation" gradually fails in the post-truth context^[1]. This model implies an assumption of "fact-centrism," that is, the belief that as long as the facts are clear and the authorities speak out, public opinion will return to rationality. However, in the post-truth context, the clarification of facts often fails to shake the already formed emotional identification, and authoritative releases may even be prejudged as "statements of stakeholders" due to the identity of the releasing subject. This situation prompts us to ask in depth: What communication characteristics does online public opinion in universities present in the post-truth era? What deep dilemmas does the current governance of university online public opinion face? How should adaptive governance paths be constructed? This paper conducts a systematic analysis of the above issues, aiming to provide theoretical support and practical reference for the governance of online public opinion in universities.

1. Communication Characteristics of Online Public Opinion in Universities in the Post-Truth Era

The advent of the post-truth era makes online public opinion in universities present characteristics that are distinctly different from traditional public opinion across the dimensions of subject, content, channel, and evolution. These characteristics are not isolated from one another; instead, they are interwoven and mutually reinforcing, collectively constituting the root of the complexity in the governance of university online public opinion.

1.1 Subject Characteristics: Diversity and Decentralization with the Invisibility of Opinion Leaders

According to the 57th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development, as of December 2025, the number of internet users in China reached 1.125 billion, among which users aged 20 to 29 accounted for 12.8%^[2]; the college student population thus constitutes a significant force in online participation. Meanwhile, the participating subjects in university online public opinion have expanded beyond the traditional scope of teachers and students, exhibiting notable diversity and decentralization. In addition to current teachers and students, alumni, parents, social onlookers, and even marketing accounts may become participants in public opinion events. This diversification of subjects implies that the boundaries of public opinion events are broken, and governance issues within the campus are incorporated into public discourse within an extremely short period; the intervention of external forces often complicates the situation.

What is more critical is that the authority of traditional official accounts has been weakened, and ordinary student accounts with "high empathy ability" have become invisible opinion leaders. Unverified "personal accounts" released on channels such as campus "Confession Walls" and anonymous tips on Xiaohongshu often have stronger dissemination power and greater influence than official releases^[3]. These invisible opinion leaders play an important role in the dissemination of public opinion by setting agendas and integrating opinions, but their lack of professional training and fact-checking ability makes them prone to becoming amplifiers of false information. The authority of invisible opinion leaders derives from their identity closeness and emotional resonance with the audience, rather than factual accuracy and professionalism, which precisely reflects the typical characteristic of the post-truth era that "who is speaking" often affects the communication effect more than "what is said."

1.2 Content Characteristics: Emotional Polarization and Narrative Dramatization

In the post-truth era, the content of online public opinion in universities presents significant characteristics of emotional polarization and narrative dramatization. On the one hand, public opinion events are often quickly reduced to binary opposition labels such as "strong versus weak," "official versus civilian," or "university administration versus students"^[4]. In the "Rat Head and Duck Neck Incident," for example, the mixing of a foreign object into the food, the university administration's repeated denials, and the neglected rights and interests of the students all ignited the onlookers' indignation at the collapse of public credibility and their empathy for the difficult pursuit of rights protection. The binary opposition narrative structure possesses strong dissemination power because it greatly reduces cognitive costs, allowing individuals to quickly take sides and express their positions without needing to grasp complete information.

On the other hand, visual content has become the main carrier of emotional transmission. Short videos, screenshots of chat records, and surveillance clips have replaced rigorous written announcements; visual content easily triggers emotional resonance due to its intuitiveness, but it often strips away the complete context and causal sequence of events. The typical characteristic of visual communication lies in the immediate impact of "what you see is what you get"; however, such "what you see" often refers to highly selective fragments rather than the full picture of an event. When a video or screenshot is widely disseminated out of context, its ability to mobilize emotions far exceeds that of a complete and prudent factual statement, thereby creating a communication rhythm of "emotion first, facts later."

1.3 Channel Characteristics: Encapsulated Communication and Echo Chamber Effect

The communication channels of online public opinion in universities present obvious characteristics of encapsulation. The initial positions for public opinion have shifted from traditional platforms such as Weibo and Zhihu to WeChat Moments, WeChat groups, Xiaohongshu, and other platforms with stronger private and encapsulated features. The closed and homogeneous nature of these platforms leads to the continuous reinforcement of homogenized opinions within the encapsulated groups, forming an "echo chamber effect," while heterogeneous information finds it difficult to enter^[5]. The core problem of encapsulated communication lies in the fact that, within a highly homogeneous information environment, individuals' existing positions are constantly strengthened, while their exposure to and tolerance of heterogeneous information continuously decrease.

There is a serious information gap between the student circle and the administrative circle: the administrators issue announcements on official public accounts, while the students discuss "inside information" in WeChat groups, as if the two sides live in parallel worlds. This circle segmentation leads to a delayed response from the university when public opinion ferments, because the university administration does not understand the students' real context, and it may even make decisions that contradict the students' expectations, thereby further intensifying the antagonistic emotions. What is more troublesome is that the circle segmentation is often accompanied by a difference in discourse systems: the administrators tend to use institutional and normative language, whereas the student group is accustomed to a more everyday and emotional expression; the communication between the two sides often degenerates into "talking past each other" due to the mismatch of discourse systems.

1.4 Evolution Characteristics: Overlapping Reversals and Frequent Secondary Public Opinion

In the post-truth era, the evolution of online public opinion in universities presents the characteristics of a low ignition point, high intensity, and frequent reversals. A single minor management error may quickly ignite due to long-accumulated negative emotions. At the same time, the frequent occurrence of secondary public opinion has become a notable feature: before the main public opinion subsides, the "past scandals" of the involved subjects or the words and actions of related personnel are dug out, resulting in an overlapping of public opinion. This overlapping effect means that a public opinion event is no longer about clarifying the rights and wrongs of a single incident but evolves into a comprehensive "public trial" of the involved subjects.

In addition, one must be vigilant about the post-truth-style "reversal" mechanism: fragmented and emotional "pre-truths" rapidly occupy users' minds in an information vacuum. By the time the official investigation results are released, public emotions have already solidified, and rational truth often struggles to shake the established emotional positions. Public opinion events fall into a Rashomon-like situation, where reason is constantly suppressed by emotion, and labeling the parties involved becomes the norm in the post-truth era. The core problem with such labeling is that it compresses complex, multi-dimensional events into simple character types (such as "victim," "perpetrator," or "non-performer"), thereby serving rapid emotional projection and moral judgment, while the details of the incident, the background of the system, and the complexity of multiple perspectives are systematically ignored in this process.

2. Realistic Dilemmas in the Governance of Online Public Opinion in Universities in the Post-Truth Era

The communication characteristics in the post-truth context subject the traditional governance models of university online public opinion to multiple dilemmas.

2.1 Cognitive Dilemma: The Conflict Between "Absence of Truth" and "Emotions First"

The primary dilemma in the governance of university online public opinion lies in the cognitive misalignment. The university administration is accustomed to the approach of "investigating first and then speaking out," pursuing absolute accuracy of facts, but the investigation cycle is relatively long. In the information vacuum, fragmented and emotional "pre-truths" rapidly occupy users' minds. Once public opinion erupts, if the university administration fails to respond promptly within a short period, it will fall into a passive position. Even if the official side eventually releases a detailed investigation report, the public's emotions have already solidified, and rational truth can hardly shake the established emotional stance, leading to the helpless feeling that "refuting rumors exhausts one's efforts."

2.2 Structural Dilemma: The Divide Between "Circle Barriers" and "Communication Failure"

The structural dilemma in the governance of university online public opinion stems from the circle segmentation between the administrative management and the student group. On the one hand, the "digital tribalization" of teachers and students is becoming increasingly serious. The administrators and the students are located in different information circles, use different discourse systems, and focus on different issues. On the other hand, there is a huge gap between the logic of management and youth culture. An insurmountable barrier exists between the "serious and procedural" discourse of university administrative management and the "playful and deconstructive" discourse of students' online expression. Official announcements often trigger secondary antagonistic interpretations from students because they are "too rigid" or "bureaucratic." This communication failure not only hinders the effective transmission of information but also deepens the distrust between the two sides.

2.3 Efficiency Dilemma: The Embarrassment of "Delayed Response" and "Rhetorical Failure"

Faced with sudden public opinion, most universities lack forward-looking risk assessment capabilities and often respond passively only after the public opinion becomes a trending topic, falling into the "Tacitus Trap"-whether they tell the truth or lies, the public does not trust them^[6]. This delayed response not only loses the initiative in public opinion guidance but also provides space for the spread of rumors. What is more concerning is the phenomenon of "rhetorical failure": some universities' public opinion responses focus on "shifting responsibility" and "emphasizing management difficulties," lacking emotional concern and humanistic care for the situation of the parties involved^[7]. In the post-truth era, the public's demand for emotion is much higher than their demand for facts; a response lacking empathy cannot quell public opinion but rather becomes the trigger for a new round of public opinion^[8].

2.4 Value Dilemma: The Tension Between "Control-Oriented Mindset" and "Educational Mission"

The deepest dilemma in the governance of university online public opinion lies in the tension between governance objectives and educational mission. Some universities adhere to the logic of "avoiding trouble," adopting crude control measures such as "covering up the problem," deleting posts, and tracing IP addresses. Although such actions suppress public opinion in the short term, they seriously damage students' sense of freedom of speech and their sense of belonging to the university. This "rigid control" mindset conflicts with the fundamental mission of universities as educational institutions. Universities are not only administrative units responsible for maintaining stability but also educational fields for cultivating students' rational thinking abilities, media literacy, and civic awareness. The distortion of public opinion governance into a mere task of "maintaining stability" neglects the important responsibility of guiding students to enhance their discernment skills and learn to express themselves rationally in a complex public opinion environment. This value deviation makes it difficult for public opinion governance to gain students' recognition and cooperation, and the effectiveness of governance is naturally greatly diminished.

3. Path Reconstruction for the Governance of Online Public Opinion in Universities in the Post-Truth Era

Facing the multiple dilemmas brought about by the post-truth context, universities need to systematically reconstruct their concepts and practices in order to build a governance system for online public opinion that meets the requirements of the new era.

3.1 Technological Empowerment: An Early Warning Mechanism That Shifts from "Post-Event Firefighting" to "Holographic Perception"

In the post-truth era, the primary prerequisite for public opinion governance is the establishment of a precise early warning mechanism. Universities should fully utilize big data and artificial intelligence technologies to build an encapsulated public opinion monitoring system. They must monitor not only public platforms such as Weibo and Zhihu but also private and encapsulated platforms such as WeChat groups, WeChat Moments, Xiaohongshu, and campus forums, in order to identify high-frequency emotional words and potential risk points. On this basis, universities need to develop an emotional tendency analysis model, shifting from the past practice of focusing solely on "mention volume" to prioritizing the analysis of "emotional saturation" and "intensity of negative emotions" in public opinion. They should provide dynamic early warnings for long-term accumulated student dissatisfaction (such as logistics support, academic pressure, management styles, etc.), aiming to "treat the disease before it occurs." When the monitoring system detects a sustained increase in the emotional intensity of a certain issue, the management department should intervene proactively to resolve potential conflicts in a timely manner, thereby avoiding the "instant flare-up" caused by long-term suppression.

3.2 Emotional Governance: A Discourse Transformation from "Fact Release" to "Empathetic Communication"

The core logic of the post-truth era is "emotion first," so public opinion governance strategies must be adjusted accordingly. Universities should establish a strategy that prioritizes "emotional guidance" over "factual conclusion." In the early stage of a public opinion outbreak, if the facts are not yet clear, they should first issue an "empathetic" statement, expressing humanistic care for the parties involved and high regard for the incident, using emotional resonance to curb the spread of negative emotions. At the same time, universities need to reconstruct their rhetorical system and change the stereotyped writing style. They should cultivate spokespersons with a "sense of online culture" who understand both administrative norms and youth discourse, and use short videos, memes, live streaming, and other forms that students enjoy for flexible communication. The establishment of a dialogue-and-response mechanism means that universities move from "passive reaction" to "active communication." Through regular interaction and emotional connection, they can resolve potential conflicts in a timely manner and reduce the likelihood of public opinion outbreaks; on the other hand, they can enhance understanding based on mutual trust, ease antagonistic emotions, and build consensus. The effective operation of this mechanism will ultimately translate into a substantial improvement in the credibility of university administrators. In addition, building an "emotional buffer zone" is equally crucial. Universities should fully utilize the "intermediary" role of counselors, professional psychological consultants, and student leaders, integrating them into the core force system of public opinion guidance. These individuals, who are within the circles, can sense subtle changes in group emotions at the first moment, provide daily emotional comfort and rational guidance, and intervene effectively at the critical point of emotional fermentation, preventing students' emotions from becoming extreme within the closed and homogenized circles.

3.3 Value Guidance: Shifting from "Passive Response" to In-Depth Cultivation of "Media Literacy"

Fundamentally, the governance of online public opinion in universities in the post-truth era must ultimately return to the fundamental task of "fostering virtue and nurturing talents." Universities should integrate public opinion governance into the broader "ideological and political education" framework, using public opinion incidents as vivid teaching materials to guide students in analyzing the mechanisms of the "post-truth" phenomenon and cultivating their ability to discern truth from falsehood and think rationally in a complex information environment. Media literacy education should become a compulsory course for university students. Universities need to guide students to recognize the differences in the authority of information sources and to master scientific standards for analyzing and evaluating information. When faced with eye-catching "clickbait" information, students should make objective judgments; they should not easily trust anonymous "inside truths" from whistleblowers, but should consciously develop critical thinking skills and use their "thumb-based right to speak" prudently. Meanwhile, cultivating "rational opinion leaders" is also an important measure. Universities should identify and nurture students who are influential within their professional fields or student groups and who possess rational thinking abilities, encouraging them to voice constructive opinions within their circles to counterbalance emotional expressions. Establishing regular mechanisms such as

university leader reception days and online "roast sessions" can help digest students' negative emotions through routine communication, thereby preventing public opinion outbreaks caused by poor communication.

3.4 Institutional Reconstruction: Shifting from "Rigid Control" to "Law-Based Governance Combining Rigidity and Flexibility"

At the institutional level, universities need to clarify the boundary between freedom of speech and the bottom line of the law. They should specify norms for online speech and conduct in accordance with the Cybersecurity Law, the Personal Information Protection Law, and relevant educational regulations. Universities must both protect students' legitimate freedom of speech and legally address acts such as cyber violence, rumor spreading, and privacy violations, thereby achieving a "combination of rigidity and flexibility." Establishing a full-cycle closed-loop management mechanism is the core of institutional construction. In the pre-event stage, universities should conduct risk assessments and formulate contingency plans, intervening in advance in issues that may trigger public opinion. In the mid-event stage, they need to establish a rapid response mechanism, a joint assessment mechanism, and a graded disposal mechanism to ensure timely and effective responses. In the post-event stage, universities should improve the restoration mechanism to rebuild the school's reputation through follow-up work, while also establishing a review mechanism that transforms public opinion cases into a list of governance improvements, thus achieving "reform through public opinion."

4. Conclusion

The governance of online public opinion in universities in the post-truth era is, in essence, a major test of the modernization level of university governance. This paper, through the extraction of communication characteristics and the analysis of practical dilemmas, reveals the limitations of relying solely on traditional control measures. Research indicates that the governance of online public opinion in universities in the post-truth era must confront the dominant position of "emotional logic" and abandon the wishful thinking that "the truth will eventually come to light, and public opinion will naturally subside."

The future governance paths must achieve a threefold transformation: in terms of governance philosophy, a shift from "adversarial control" to "empathetic coexistence," with emotional governance incorporated into the core strategy; in terms of governance subjects, a shift from "acting alone" to "multi-party collaboration," integrating the strengths of the university administration, students, platforms, families, and other stakeholders; and in terms of governance objectives, an elevation from the bottom-line thinking of "maintaining stability" to the value pursuit of "fostering virtue and nurturing talents," organically combining public opinion governance with talent cultivation. Only by integrating hard technological measures with soft emotional governance, and by connecting crisis response with daily ideological and political education, can a university online ecosystem that is both orderly and warm be constructed in the complex and ever-changing public opinion arena. This is not only a necessity for public opinion governance but also an essential embodiment of cultivating a new generation of young people capable of shouldering the great task of national rejuvenation.

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