

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 era of post-truth, a communication logic that gives more weight to emotion than to reason has begun to affect the formation and spread of online public opinion in universities. In light of the post-truth theory, this paper will examine the new features of online public opinion in universities from the four aspects of subject composition, content form, communication channels and development patterns. It can also be seen from the above that there are actual problems with the current governance of such public opinion, such as the cognitive dilemma of "facts yield to emotions", the structural problem of "circle barriers and echo chambers", the effectiveness problem of "delayed responses and rhetorical failures", and the value problem of "control-oriented mindset versus educational mission". Therefore, this paper proposes that universities should take the following four kinds of measures in the four areas of technological empowerment, emotional governance, value guidance and institutional reconstruction to build a full-chain governance system of "monitoring, empathy, guidance and regulation", and thus achieve the organic integration of order maintenance in cyberspace with the basic tasks of cultivating virtue and nurturing talent.*

Keywords: *Post-truth society, Online public opinion at universities, Emotional governance, Encapsulation, Risk prevention and control.*

Introduction

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary was named the Word of the Year for "post-truth" because it had been used more and more frequently, and since then, it has been defined as "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs". It can be concluded that the basic situation of public opinion has changed; that is, the persuasive effect of objective facts on public opinion is weaker now compared with that of emotional appeals and individual beliefs. Post-truth is not the lack of facts; rather, it is a situation in which the demand for truth in public life has been reduced to some extent. Therefore, "emotion" and "imagination" have taken over as the main subjects of public opinion, replacing "fact" and "truth", and even in the face of objective facts, they cannot change the existing emotional state. It is not only a change in culture but also closely related to the development of social media ecosystems, algorithmic dissemination of information and changes in the structure of social trust. As the way of obtaining information has changed from active pursuit to passive reception, emotional experience and a sense of self have started to serve as a kind of verification for the accepted and spread information.

Universities are the first level of ideological and political education for young people, and now they are facing new difficulties in managing public opinion in the post-truth era. As typical "digital natives", college students are both intellectually active and receptive; they show strong interest in learning new things, but their worldviews, life philosophies and values are still in the process of formation, so they may be easily influenced by emotions and lack rational judgment in the face of numerous and diverse online information. In recent years, from the "Rat Head and Duck Neck Incident" to the "Wuhan University Library Incident", many public opinion incidents have occurred on university campuses, and they often go through an "ignition point - explosion point - turning point" in a very short time, with the truth remaining unknown and public sentiment continuing to rise. In general, such cases have the characteristic that the facts and the truth are only known after the peak of public attention; by then, people have already formed emotional responses and value judgments, so before the full disclosure of information, an opinion pattern of "truth arrives late, judgment comes first" has already taken shape.

The old way of governing has not done well in the post-truth era, as shown in^[1]. The model is based on the idea of "fact-centrism", that is to say, the belief that as long as the facts are clear and authorities speak out, the public will be rational. However, in the era of post-truth, correcting facts often fails to change the minds of people who have already formed emotional attachments, and official releases may be regarded as "stakeholder statements" due to the identity of the issuing body. Therefore, we need to consider what kinds of communication features online public opinion in universities has taken on in the post-truth era. What are the serious problems in the current governance of university online public opinion? How to Construct an Adaptive Governance Path? Based on the problems mentioned above, this paper will present some research results that can help improve the governance of online public opinion in universities.

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

With the rise of the post-truth era, online public opinion in universities has started to exhibit characteristics that differ significantly from traditional public opinion in terms of subject, content, channel and evolution. The above attributes do not occur in isolation but are interconnected and work together to form the basic reasons for the problem of university online public opinion governance.

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

According to the 57th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development, by the end of 2025, the total number of internet users in China will reach 1.125 billion, and the proportion of users aged 20-29 will be 12.8%^[2]; thus, the college student population is now a relatively large group of online users. At the same time, the participants of university online public opinion have also gone beyond the traditional categories of teachers and students to show considerable diversity and decentralisation. In addition to the current teachers and students, alumni, parents, the general public, and so on, may also be the subjects of public opinion events. Many subjects have pointed out that the boundaries of public opinion events have been crossed, and governance issues at the campus have entered public discourse in a very short time; external forces often complicate this situation.

More importantly, the authority of the traditional official accounts has decreased, and ordinary student accounts with "high empathy ability" have become the new invisible opinion leaders. Unverified "personal accounts" published on the campus "Confession Wall" and anonymous tips posted on Xiaohongshu are often spread more widely and have a greater impact than official announcements^[3]. Although these unacknowledged leaders can guide the spread of public opinion by setting the agenda and coordinating views, they lack professional training and do not have the habit of fact-checking, so they are often used to spread false information. The power of the force of invisible opinion leaders comes from their closeness to the people and emotional appeal, not from facts or expertise; therefore, they are typical figures of the post-truth era, in which "who speaks" has a greater impact on the results of communication than "what is said".

1.2 Contents Characteristics: Emotional Polarity and Narrative Dramatisation

In the post-truth era, the content of online public opinion in universities has shown some characteristics of emotional polarisation and narrative dramatisation. On the one hand, the public opinion event is often reduced to a simple binary opposition in a short time, such as "strong versus weak", "official versus civilian", or "university administration versus students"^[4]. For example, in the "Rat Head and Duck Neck Incident", there was a foreign object in the food, multiple denials from the university administration, and the neglected rights and interests of the students; all of these made the onlookers angry about the loss of public trust and moved them to care about the difficult cause of rights protection. The binary opposition narrative structure has been widely spread and is easy for people to understand; thus, they can quickly choose a side and express their views without learning all the details.

At the same time, pictures and other visual materials are also employed to express emotions. Short videos, screenshots of chat records and surveillance clips have taken the place of formal written announcements; although the visual content is easy to understand and moving, it often lacks the full context and chain of causality of the event. Generally speaking, the characteristic of visual communication is that it has an immediate effect of "what you see is what you get"; however, what one sees is often only a very selected part and not the whole situation. When a video or a screenshot is

spread widely out of context, its power to move people's emotions is far greater than that of complete and reasonable factual statements, so the communication speed is "emotion first, facts later".

1.3 Channel Characteristics: Encapsulated Communication and Echo Chamber Effect

The Communication Channels of online public opinion in universities have certain characteristics of enclosure. The starting points for public opinion have moved from the old places of Weibo and Zhihu to more private and closed platforms such as WeChat Moments, WeChat groups, Xiaohongshu, etc. As these platforms are closed and homogeneous, the views of the in-group are constantly affirmed, an "echo chamber effect" is formed, and it is difficult for different information to enter^[5]. The main reason for the problem of encapsulated communication is that in a highly homogeneous information environment, people's existing views are constantly confirmed, and their exposure to and acceptance of all kinds of information gradually decrease.

There is a relatively large information gap between the student circle and the administrative circle; administrators post announcements on the official public account, but students discuss "insider information" in WeChat groups, and the two sides seem to live in different worlds. Segmentation of this circle will lead to a delayed response by the university to changes in public opinion because the university administration does not know the actual circumstances of the students; thus, the decisions made may not meet the expectations of the students and will increase hostile emotions. More seriously, circle segmentation is often related to a difference in discourse systems; administrators are more likely to use institutional and normative language, students are more likely to use everyday and emotional expressions, and communication between the two sides often decreases to the extent that they are "talking past each other" due to this mismatch in discourse systems.

1.4 Evolution Characteristics: Overlapping Reversals and Frequent Secondary Public Opinion

In the post-truth era, the development of online public opinion in universities has shown the characteristics of a low ignition point, high intensity and frequent fluctuations. A serious management problem has recently drawn the attention of the public. At the same time, another problem has been getting worse and worse: secondary public opinion. Before the public is satisfied, "past scandals" of the parties involved or words and actions of relevant officials will be dug up, leading to an overlap in public opinion. Therefore, the public opinion event is no longer about judging whether a particular case is right or wrong; instead, it has become a full-scale "public trial" of the people concerned.

Be wary of the post-truth "reversal" mechanism as well; fragmented and emotional "pre-truths" can quickly fill the information void in people's minds. By the time the official investigation results are released, people's emotions will have become fixed, and rational truth will find it difficult to change this emotional climate. Public opinion events are in a Rashomon situation; reason is constantly suppressed by emotion, and labelling the parties involved has become the norm in the post-truth era. The main issue with this type of labelling is that rich and varied events are reduced to simple character categories (e.g., "victim", "perpetrator", "non-performer"), and many details of the incident, the background of the system, and different perspectives are overlooked in the pursuit of quick emotional expression and moral judgment.

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

Many problems have occurred in the traditional model of university online public opinion due to the communication characteristics of the post-truth era.

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

The main problem in the governance of university online public opinion is a cognitive mismatch. The administration of the university is based on the principle of "investigate first and then speak out", so it gives priority to the absolute correctness of facts over speed. In the information vacuum, scattered and emotional "pre-truths" quickly attract people's attention. If the public is in a bad mood and the university does not respond in time, it will be out of hand. Even if the official side finally releases the detailed investigation report, the public's emotions will have become even more hardened, and rational truth will find it very difficult to change this established emotional state; thus, there will be a sense of

helplessness and the task of "refuting rumors is endless".

2.2 Structural Dilemma: Separation of "Circle Barriers" and "Communication Failure"

The structural problem in the governance of university online public opinion is that the circle of administrative management has been separated from the student body. On the one hand, the "digital tribalisation" of teachers and students is becoming increasingly serious. Administrators and students are in different circles of information, use different systems of language, and have different problems. At the same time, there is also a considerable difference in the logic of management and youth culture. There is a gap between the "serious and procedural" language of university administrative management and the "playful and deconstructive" language used by students in online expression. Official notices are often regarded as too rigid and bureaucratic by the students, so they are sometimes received poorly by the students. Therefore, the original goal of communication has not been achieved, and distrust has spread among all parties.

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

Due to the rapid changes in public opinion, most universities have been unable to foresee this risk in advance and have only responded after it went viral; thus, they have fallen into the "Tacitus Trap" - whether they tell the truth or not, the public loses faith^[6]. Late replies will not be in line with the public's current sentiment and may lead to the spread of rumours. More seriously, there is also the problem of "rhetorical failure"; some universities' public opinion responses only focus on "shifting responsibility" and "highlighting management difficulties" instead of showing true emotional concern and humanitarian care for the situation of all parties involved^[7]. In the era of post-truth, the public's demand for emotion is much higher than their demand for facts; thus, a response devoid of empathy will not win the public's approval but will be the cause of another wave of public anger^[8].

2.4 Value Dilemma: Conflict Between a "Control-Oriented Mindset" and the "Educational Mission"

The main problem in the governance of university online public opinion is that the goals of governance are in conflict with the educational mission. Some universities have taken the initiative not to disturb, and in serious cases, they have deleted the posts and recorded the corresponding IP addresses. Although such actions may reduce public attention in the short run, they will damage the students' sense of freedom of expression and their sense of belonging to the university. The "strict-control" mindset is not in line with the general direction of the university. Universities are institutions that maintain social stability and also places for educating people in terms of rational thinking, media literacy and civic consciousness. Narrowing the goal of public opinion governance to the sole purpose of "maintaining stability" fails to consider that we also need to guide students to strengthen their own judgment and learn how to express opinions reasonably in today's complex environment. Because of this, the public opinion management will not be able to win the trust and participation of the students, and thus will have little effect.

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

Given all the problems in the post-truth era, universities need to make systemic reforms in their concepts and practices and build a governance system for online public opinion that meets the demands of the new era.

3.1 Technological Empowerment: The old "firefighting after the fact" early warning system is now holography

The first demand in the era of post-truth is to build an accurate early warning system for regulating public opinion. Universities will continue to build an excellent public opinion monitoring system based on Big Data and artificial intelligence in the future. Be mindful of the public platforms of Weibo and Zhihu, as well as private and closed platforms such as WeChat groups, WeChat Moments, Xiaohongshu and campus forums, and learn to spot frequent emotional words and potential sources of problems. Therefore, universities need to construct an emotional tendency analysis model and move away from

the old way of only considering "mention volume" to pay more attention to analysing "emotional saturation" and the "intensity of negative emotions" in public opinion. Promptly inform the parents and students of the increase in student dissatisfaction (e.g., problems with logistics support, academic pressure, management mode, etc.) so that these problems do not get worse and lead to other issues later; otherwise, if there is a continuous rise in the emotional intensity of a particular problem, the management department should deal with it proactively and avoid an "instant flare-up" caused by prolonged suppression.

3.2 Emotional Regulation: Shifting from talking about "facts" to talking about "empathy"

The general direction of the post-truth era is "emotion first", so the way to regulate public opinion should be changed accordingly. Universities should favour 'emotional leadership' over 'rational thought'. At the beginning of a public opinion crisis, before releasing all the facts, an "empathetic" statement can be issued to show humanitarian concern for all sides and give due consideration to their circumstances in light of the incident, thereby reducing the spread of negative emotions through emotional contagion. At the same time, the universities need to build a new rhetoric system and change the stereotypical style of writing. Train spokespersons who are well-versed in online culture, know the administrative regulations, are proficient in young people's language, and can communicate flexibly through short videos, memes, live-streaming, etc., in forms that students are familiar with. Set up a dialogue-and-response mode and have the university be in a state of "active communication" rather than "passive reaction". Through frequent communication and sharing of feelings, problems can be solved in an early stage before they become public knowledge; at the same time, together we can build trust, improve mutual understanding, reduce conflict, and reach an agreement. If the above mechanism is effective, the people's confidence in the leadership of the university will gradually increase. We need to build an "emotional buffer zone" too. Universities should make full use of the "intermediary" function of counselors, professional psychological consultants and student leaders, and integrate them into the main system of public opinion guidance. These people are in the circle and can feel any change in the group's emotions first; they provide daily emotional support and rational guidance, and promptly intervene if there is a risk of emotional problems among the students in the closed and uniform environment.

3.3 Value Guidance: From "Passive Response" to in-depth cultivation of "Media Literacy"

The goal of regulating online public opinion at universities in the post-truth era should be to promote "nurturing virtue and cultivating talent" in accordance with the original purpose. Public opinion governance should be added to the general plan of "ideological and political education", and public opinion incidents can be taken as specific teaching materials to help students learn about the structure of the "post-truth" phenomenon and improve their ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood and think rationally in an era of abundant information. Media Literacy Education should be compulsory for all college students. Help the students learn that the authority of different sources of information is not the same, and how to apply scientific norms in the analysis and evaluation of such information. When faced with attractive "clickbait" information, students should be able to form an objective judgment; they should not readily believe anonymous "insider knowledge" from whistleblowers but learn to think critically and exercise their "thumb-based right to speak" responsibly. At the same time, we will also foster "rational opinion leaders". Universities should identify and nurture students who are influential in their professional fields or student groups and have good rational thinking abilities, encourage them to put forward reasonable proposals in their circles, and learn to control their emotions. Organise regular activities for students to meet with the leaders of the university and hold online "roast parties" to help reduce negative emotions; thus, we can prevent the spread of public opinion problems caused by poor communication.

3.4 Institutional Reform: Changing from "Strict Control" to "Rule-of-Law Governance with Rigidity and Flexibility"

Universities should set the limits of free speech and the bottom line of the law at the institutional level. They should issue norms for online speech and behaviour in line with the Cybersecurity Law, the Personal Information Protection Law and other relevant educational regulations. Universities should protect the legitimate freedom of expression of students and deal with illegal acts such as cyber violence, rumors and invasion of privacy in accordance with the law; that is to say, an all-encompassing, full-cycle, closed-loop management system needs to be built for institutional construction. The

university should have been aware of the problems and developed a plan to deal with them in advance to prevent damage to public opinion. At the middle stage of the event, there should be a fast-response mechanism, a joint-assessment system and a graded-disposal plan to deal with any problems promptly. At this time, the university should address the problems that have arisen from the incident and restore the good name of the school through follow-up activities, establish a review mechanism to deal with problems raised by the public in light of negative public opinion, and thus achieve "reform based on public opinion".

4. Conclusion

Regulation of online public opinion in universities during the post-truth era is, in fact, an important test of the modernisation of university governance. Given the nature of communication and the problems in actual operation, this paper does not think that the old way of control is suitable. Research has shown that in the governance of online public opinion at universities during the post-truth era, one must face the dominant position of "emotional logic" and lose the hope that "the truth will eventually be revealed and public opinion will naturally subside".

Going forward, the general direction of the government's work will be to strengthen the three areas mentioned below. First, the idea of governance should be changed from "opposition control" to "empathetic accommodation", and emotions in governance will also need to be addressed at this time. Second, the subjects of governance should not act alone but need to be coordinated more effectively through cooperation among all parties, such as university management, students, platforms, families, etc. Thirdly, the purpose of governance should be to cultivate morality and nurture talent, rather than only to achieve results; therefore, public opinion governance will be integrated with talent education. Only by integrating hard-technology solutions with soft-emotional governance and embedding crisis response in the daily life of ideological and political education can an orderly and warm university online ecosystem be built in the face of complex and changing public opinion. It is to meet the needs of the people for good governance and to foster a new generation of young people with the strength to bear the heavy responsibilities of national rejuvenation.

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