

Research on the Communication Mechanism of Online Rumors Under the Empowerment of New Media Technology—Take the “Nabobess Having an Affair With Courier” Rumor Incident as an Example

WANG Ruozhou

East China Normal University, Shanghai, China

As new media communication becomes popular and the technological threshold of personal expression has been lowered, the phenomenon of online rumors has also emerged with new communication characteristics as individuals are continuously empowered to communicate. This paper quantifies a rumor spreading event from 2020 to 2021 that generated a lot of discussion. Using a content analysis approach, we examined how different subjects in the online public opinion chaos have influenced the spreading process of the event, and used the study of online rumor spreading mechanism to gain insight into the public opinion governance in the new media era. The study found that media platforms, the parties involved, and the general public as important participants have fully utilized the voice channel of the online communication platform to play a role behind the rumor event.

Keywords: new media, technology empowerment, online rumors, rumor-spreading mechanism

Introduction

In July 2020, Ms. Wu in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, was secretly filmed while picking up a courier at a courier station in front of her neighborhood, and the short video and fabricated chat records were uploaded to the Internet. In the fabricated WeChat chat, Ms. Wu was portrayed as a “rich woman” who was home alone with her children and repeatedly seduced the courier and had an affair with him. The video and chat screenshots spread from a WeChat group, then spread rapidly on different social media platforms, and even appeared on the same city’s microblogging hot search, making Ms. Wu deeply involved in the whirlpool of rumors for a long time. Under the condition that new media social platforms are soaring and network communication technology is empowering, the carriers that allow rumors to spread have also expanded to popular media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo, and the power of online rumors to guide public opinion is becoming more and more significant. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the mechanism of rumor propagation supported by new media technology and examine the current public opinion environment.

This paper takes this incident as an entry point to focus on the dissemination mechanism of online rumors, study the influence behavior and dissemination path of the subject of this rumor in its dissemination and fermentation process, and try to explore new insights of Internet public opinion governance.

Review of Literature

From the articles related to the content and similar purpose of this study, the researcher focuses on three aspects of the analysis of online rumor transmission mechanisms, rumor transmission subjects, and specific rumor incidents. The research content and results of previous research are reviewed, and the academic space to be added or improved is sorted out to establish the research scope and analysis direction of this paper.

Research on the Mechanism of Rumors and Online Rumors

In 1951, American scholars Peterson and Gist defined rumor as an unsubstantiated elaboration or interpretation of something, event, or issue of public interest that is circulated privately among people (Kapferer, 1991). Gordon Allport proposed the formula of rumor = (event's) importance \times (event's) ambiguity in *The Psychology of Rumor* (Allport, 2003), creating the early concept of rumor research.

Domestic research on online rumors started late, and with the continuous occurrence of online rumor incidents in recent years, scholars had gradually started to focus on this research area, and mostly from the perspectives of communication, information management, and psychology, and mainly take public opinion guidance and network governance as research outlets. For example, Li (2010) has summarized several reasons for individuals or groups to fabricate online rumors and discussed the harm from the psychological mechanism of online rumor propagation; Chao and Huang (2004) emphasized three constituents of online rumors: transmitter, recipient, and intermediary, and concluded that anonymity, group thinking, and the power of repetition are different characteristics of the online rumor propagation environment from traditional rumors (Chao & Huang, 2004).

Research on Rumor Propagation Subjects

In the general research perspective, online rumors are regarded as a kind of public opinion disorder that needs to be urgently rectified and guided; thus some related studies focus on the dissemination subjects and gain inspiration for online rumor management strategies by analyzing the psychological and social motives of the dissemination subjects. Yuan and Xie's (2015) study of online rumor mongers of public events is one of the few studies that used quantitative methods to analyze the content of rumor mongers' rumor creation methods, motives, and approaches. However, in general, such studies are mostly limited to a superficial analysis of the characteristics of rumor propagation subjects, lacking detailed investigations using quantitative or qualitative research methods and corresponding analyses of rumor cases, and the presentation of research results is rather general and lacks practical guidance significance.

Analysis and Research on Specific Rumor Incidents

Regarding the spread of online rumors, existing empirical analyses mainly use a large number of rumor contents as samples for data analysis; however, there are fewer specific analyses targeting a particular rumor or a category of rumors through quantitative research methods. The studies by Dai (2011) and Tang (2018) all used a single rumor event as an entry point (e.g., the 3-16 salt grabbing incident, the Tai Fu Middle School incident, etc.), and analyzed the process and revelation of rumor generation, propagation, and disinformation after outlining the event. The advantage of such articles is that the analysis object is more focused and the interpretation of rumor propagation mechanism is more specific. However, there is a lack of emphasis on research methods among them. It is worth mentioning that the study on the online rumor storm of the Malaysia Airlines MH370 incident in 2014 by Qingxi Kong, Yanjun Lin, and Xiaoli Zhang is an example of using

content analysis method to explore the laws of disaster rumor cases, which is inspiring to this paper in terms of research methods.

For another part of the rumor incident research, academic theoretical perspectives such as social interaction and knowledge gap theory were introduced to focus on the analysis of rumor transmission, which increased the theoretical fit, credibility, and authority of the study. For example, Tian (2021) analyzed the evolution of the rumor “Shuanghuanglian can inhibit the new coronavirus” during the epidemic and the misconduct of media reporting; Zhang and Zhao (2015) also used the context of risk society as an analytical framework to examine the spread and governance of online rumors.

Combing and summarizing the above rumor-related studies, we found that although the current domestic and international studies on the spread of online rumors have different focuses, the general analytical framework and landing point adopted can be summarized into four aspects: the characteristics and mechanisms of the rumor spread process, the causes of rumors, the impacts or risks generated, and the response and governance strategies. In other words, there is still room for improving the academic analysis of typical rumors: A more complete research system has not been formed for the dissemination mechanism of individual rumors, and the application of quantitative research methods is not perfect.

In summary, this paper uses a typical rumor event to make observations in a timely manner while the event is still developing, using the quantitative research method of content analysis, in an attempt to make a breakthrough in the methodological application of rumor event analysis, and to provide experience for scholars with this study. At the same time, this paper will comprehensively consider the various subjects that may have an impact on the spread of rumors, and explain the ways in which different subjects play a role in rumor incidents from the perspectives of the rumorized, rumor-mongers, netizens, and media, respectively, in an attempt to innovatively supplement the academic gaps in the study of online rumor spread mechanisms in China.

Research Design

Research Methodology and Sample Selection

This study adopts a quantitative content analysis method, and takes microblogs, where users are more active, as the main platform for the study. The two official media accounts that maintained attention to this rumor and the microblog accounts of the person who was rumored were selected. All the microblogs related to the incident posted by the three accounts in the five-month period from September 2020 to February 2021 were taken as the research object, and the content of the microblogs was sorted out to analyze the dissemination and development path of the rumor event.

Analysis Categories and Units

After sorting out the event chain and blog post statistics, the study selected one central media and one local media as the representatives of media account observation, namely CCTV News, which is more influential and authoritative, and The Paper, which has more and more complete disclosure of this event. From September 2020 to February 2021, when this rumor event came into public view, the microblog content would be analyzed from the following seven categories, starting from the subject of the person involved, netizens, and media, by referring to the framework of previous studies and the development characteristics of this event.

1. Microblog distribution pattern: Release time, release frequency.

2. Types of tweets: Pure text, text with video, text with pictures.
3. Microblogging hotness: Retweets, likes, comments.
4. Microblog content stage: Pre-disinformation stage, criminal self-prosecution stage, investigation stage, public prosecution stage.
5. Microblog content theme: Personal situation of the rumored person, related to the rumor-monger, the process of defending and pursuing responsibility, the person's voice against online evaluation, other related.
6. Microblog oriented information: Words, pictures.
7. Types of comments: Positive attitude, negative attitude, neutral attitude.

Analysis of the Influence of Different Subjects in Rumor Events

Taking September 2020 to February 2021 as the observation cycle, during this time period, the microblog account @The Paper News released a total of 11 related posts, the microblog account @CCTV News released a total of three related posts, and the rumor party account @NoAge-Jessie released a total of 16 related posts.

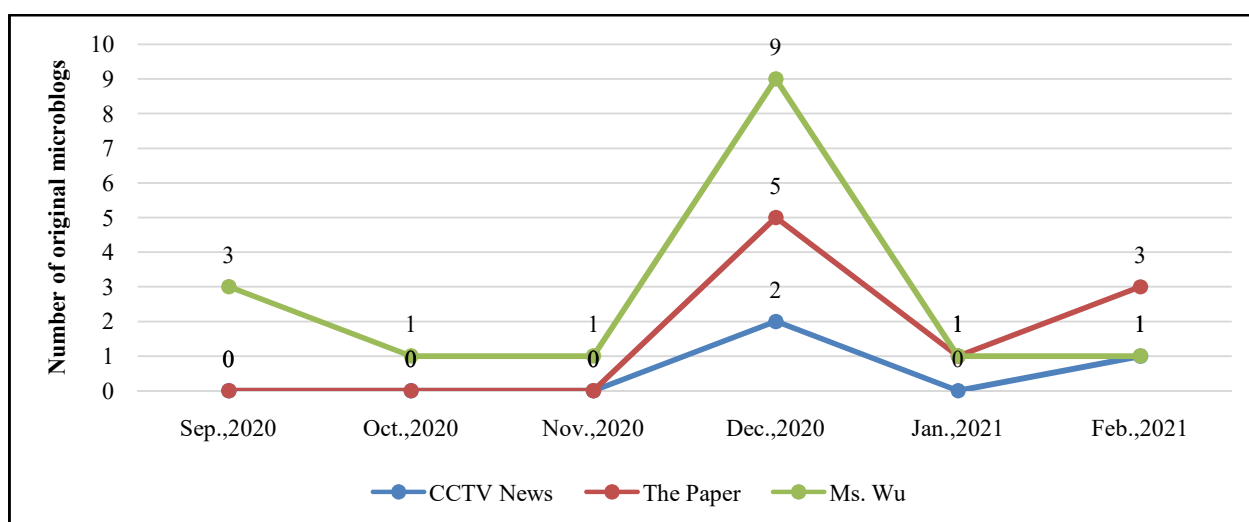


Figure 1. Distribution of posting time and number of blogs of the three accounts.

Based on the combing of the whole rumor event start and end, it was divided into four development stages, namely the pre-disinformation stage (July to October 25, 2020), the criminal self-prosecution stage (October 26, 2020 to December 24, 2020), the investigation stage (December 25, 2020 to February 25, 2021), and the public prosecution stage of the case (after February 26), and the content microblogs focused on was divided into five themes for recording.

Initiative Transfer of the Parties Involved in the Case

The victims, as the parties most concerned about the progress of the incident, also use the microblogging platform as the most important way to voice out, clarify the facts, and set their names straight when their lives are seriously disturbed by the rumors.

From September 2020 to February 2021, Ms. Wu posted a total of 16 relevant original microblogs on her personal account, every month, and the content covered all the stages from the first taste of rumor malice to the transfer of the case from criminal self-indictment to public prosecution, and the topics also included the notification of her personal life status and progress in defending her rights, shouting at the rumor-monger, and

interaction with netizens (see Table 1); what Ms. Wu was sharing done was also a direct and major source of attracting netizens' continuous attention to the matter.

Table 1

Number and Percentage of Microblogs on Different Topics

Microblog content topic	Number of CCTV News microblogs	Number of microblogs of The Paper News	Number of microblogs of Ms. Wu	Total number of microblogs	Percentage of total number of microblogs (%)
Personal information of the rumored person	0	4	4	8	26.7
Information about the rumor monger	0	2	3	5	16.7
The process of defending and pursuing responsibility	2	5	4	11	36.7
Voices of the parties concerned in response to online comments	0	0	4	4	13.3
Others	1	0	1	2	6.6
Total	3	11	16	30	100.0

Observations of Ms. Wu's microblogging popularity and followership show that in addition to the initial spread of rumors by the perpetrators, the victims of the rumors are also able to gain attention and initiative by expanding their influence through new media communication techniques. Ms. Wu's video microblogs were basically about reporting her recent situation and progress in defending her rights to netizens and expressing her gratitude to them and the media, which showed that the attention and interaction of netizens also gave Ms. Wu the motivation to continue pursuing her responsibility and boosted the continuous fermentation of the incident. And after the rumors fermented to microblogs and caused a heated public opinion offensive, especially as the beginning of the incident was far away, the rumor-monger was gradually in a passive and invisible position, in contrast to Ms. Wu's resolute defense of her rights and continuous voice on microblogs. During the long fermentation of public opinion, only five microblogs, accounting for a relatively small percentage, were mainly about the rumor-mongers Lang and He (Table 1), and the public's attention to them was mainly focused on their disciplinary actions.

Netizens' Boost to the Fermentation of the Event

Netizens' high attention to the incident and the public opinion discussions they engaged in were the most important factors that made it stay hot for a long time. The public opinion boosting the expanding influence of the incident also objectively brought it to the attention of Hangzhou Yuhang District Procuratorate and the Supreme Procuratorate. The study counted the average number of microblog retweets, comments, and likes of the three accounts in the pre-disinformation stage, the criminal self-prosecution stage, the investigation stage, and the public prosecution stage of the case, respectively, and summarized the bias of microbloggers' attention by comparing the microblogging heat at different stages of the incident (Figure 2).

In Figure 3, the researcher further selected the three most popular microblogs in the sample and observed their content topics and the positions of netizens in the Top 100 comments with the highest number of likes in the comment section (the criteria for evaluating the positions: Comments that support and encourage Ms. Wu and her rights defense and condemn the rumor-mongers are positive; comments that are the opposite of the aforementioned are negative; other comments that do not reveal a clear position or (neutral if the comments are

contrary to the above), in order to grasp the direction of public opinion that plays a leading role in the development of the incident.

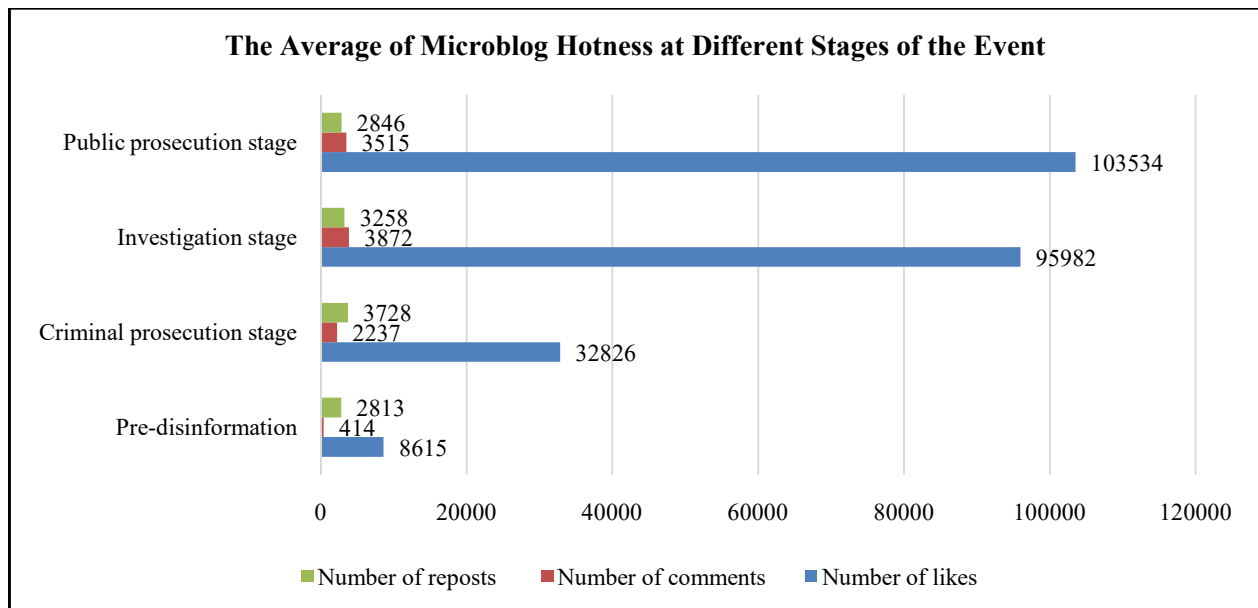


Figure 2. Average of microblogs' hotness in the four stages of the events of the three accounts.

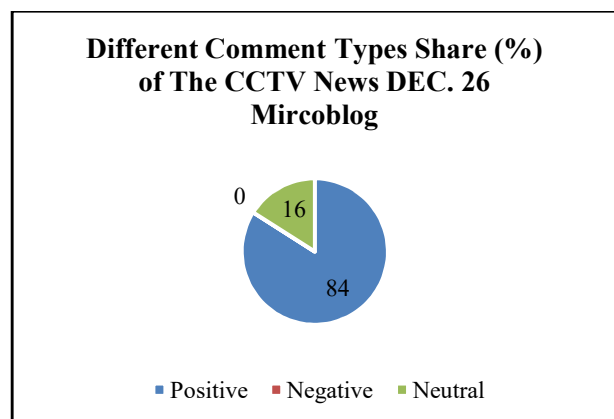
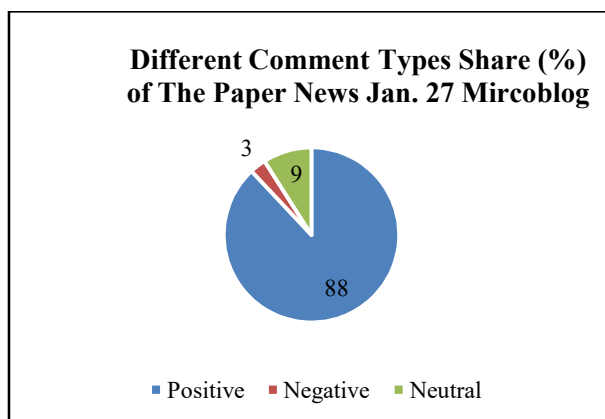
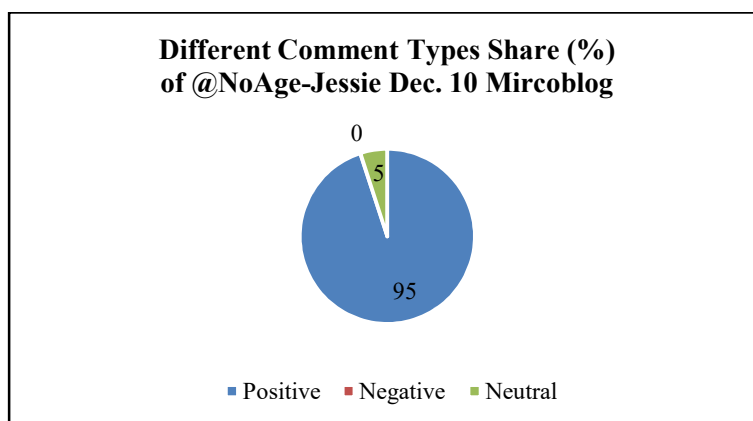


Figure 3. Comparison of the positions of the three most popular microblogs comments.

Likes, as an important representation of netizen interaction in microblogging, are part of the microblogging opinion ecology, and selecting the hundred comments with the highest number of likes is a reasonable way to examine the public opinion position for a particular microblog. Looking at the content of the microblogs, they are about Ms. Wu's first public statement about her insistence on defending her rights and her decision to pursue criminal responsibility, the fact that the rumor-monger has been filed for investigation, and the fact that the case has ended its investigation and been transferred to the Hangzhou Yuhang District Procuratorate—the contents of these three microblogs are at some key points representing the progress of the incident and are at the stage of criminal self-prosecution versus the investigation stage of the case. At the same time, the majority of netizens have a positive attitude towards the fermentation of the case, and the comments are basically related to encouraging and sympathizing with Ms. Wu, hoping that the law will severely punish the rumor-mongers, and affirming the significance of the law regulating the Internet. However, it is observed that the positive comments are not without some vulgar words, and the media literacy and self-control behind the keyboard and screen still need to be improved.

The Public Significance of Media Guidance

In the stage of rumor disinformation and clarification, the media's first attention and guidance often play a crucial role in the subsequent development of rumor events. From Figure 1 and Table 1, when the content or influence of the rumor is no longer limited to the private sphere but has a public nature, the role of the media needs to be reflected more. From Figure 2, the contents of the microblogs published by the two media accounts mainly track the progress of the case and tend to announce the response and treatment of the national and local corresponding authorities at the first time, which is different from Ms. Wu's personal microblogs, has a more official and public sounding board position. In addition, Figure 4 helps to explore the media's information guidance and content control behavior in this case from another perspective. The researcher followed a total of 14 microblogs from two media accounts in which the presence of guiding words and images somewhat attracted attention and increased the heat of the event, which, together with the fact that the media tended to use a mixture of microblog types in multiple forms (see Figure 5), also increased the action of netizens to click, understand, and participate.

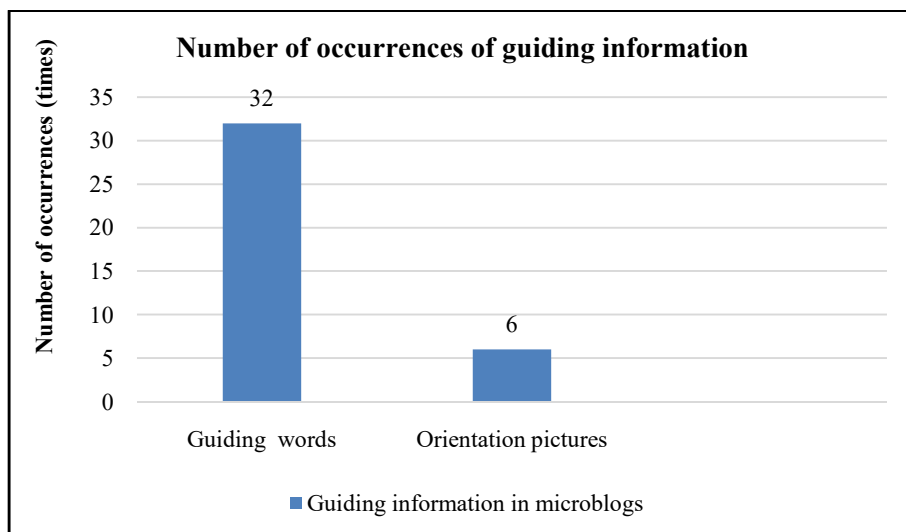


Figure 4. Number of occurrences of guiding information in the two media microblogs.

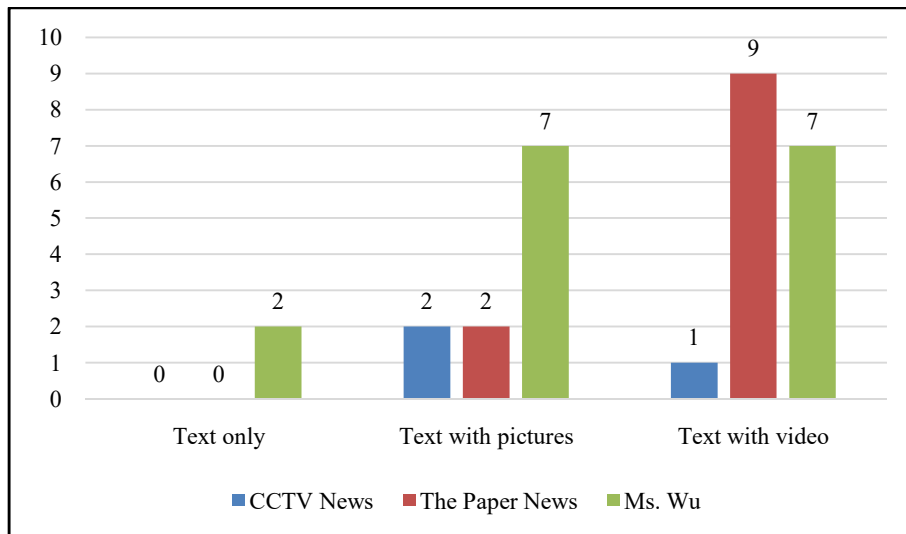


Figure 5. Distribution of the number of microblog types posted by the three accounts.

Enlightenment and Discussions on the Dissemination Mechanism of Online Rumor Events

Modern network communication has reconstructed the social trust mechanism, and the traditional interpersonal relationship model can no longer represent the efficiency and ripple effect of the spread of online rumors. The technological empowerment in the new media era cannot simply be regarded as the gospel of free expression. As the rumor incident discussed in this paper shows, various subjects, from platforms to netizens, act as a link in the propagation mechanism and make an enhanced effect.

The Basis for the Spread of Internet Rumors: Technological Empowerment of the Media and Fragmented Communication

Technological empowerment is the basic guarantee and original driving force for the rise of online expression (Yan & Li, 2020). When the social care contained in empowerment is associated with the new media communication, Ding (2009) has concluded that the practice of new media makes it possible for disadvantaged groups to be empowered in the fields of discourse, economy, culture, and social capital, and contains a great potential for achieving social justice. The Internet has intensified the decentralization and deconcentration of power, providing new and more convenient channels for the dispersed people to express their opinions (Zhu, 2002). So in a sense, the process of media technology empowerment often means the redistribution of discourse through communication activities. This has greatly amplified the communication power and influence of the general public.

The spread of this rumor from the initial WeChat group to the microblogging platform, on the other hand, also reflects the publicization of interpersonal communication as Liu (2020) said for user news communication. With all the rhetoric flying around, the resulting gulf in the reputation of the rumored person will always be revealed to the public, the cost of correcting information is high, and the regaining of trust becomes increasingly difficult.

At the same time, the information dissemination and acquisition in the new media era is characterized by significant fragmentation, and the fragmented communication environment also affects the thinking habits and value judgment mode of the audience in the process of receiving information. In the forged chat records, the rumor-mongers use the most intuitive language and images to lure simplistic and one-sided thinking directions,

such as “rich married woman”, “lonely woman”, “seducing”. The whole incident was shaped into a sensational event with extremely concentrated concept and strong impact.

Rumor Fuels: Network Users in the New Media Era

Internet communication makes countless individuals converge into groups, and the group interaction brought by the network is one of the root causes of online rumors and online violence to be traced by many researchers (Peng, 2014). Although it is biased to use theories such as group polarization and collective unconscious to summarize the whole image of online groups, they do reflect a part of the collective shared features in the mechanism of online rumor propagation.

The parties involved in the event: The small but powerful rumor center. The rumor-monger and the rumored person in the center of the incident, both as the core subject of public opinion fermentation, passively bear the sizzling focus of netizens, and at the same time play their own initiative of network expression as netizens.

The low-cost act of secretly photographing the woman who picks up the courier and faking the online chat records reflects the result of the casual abuse of network communication technology in the position of the rumor-monger. The fact that simple rumors without deliberate planning can produce fissionable effects reflects the arbitrariness of the content of online rumors and the universality of the technological dividend, as individuals' capture, recording, and publication of any content are basically accommodated, and the new media environment contains great freedom. In the perspective of the rumored person, the way of subjectivity's origination becomes different. The rumored person, after his life has been eroded by rumors, can quickly cooperate with netizens' sympathy for the victims and collective condemnation of the rumor-mongers to stop the damage in time and help himself fight for further rights and interests, winning justice supported by the mainstream moral consciousness of society in the wave of public opinion. Throughout the process of subjectivity transfer between the two parties relying on the same type of media platform, the network technology in the new media era does not have a strict pre-determined value and position screening in its contribution to the effectiveness of communication, but is tolerant to create opportunities for all parties to express themselves, and although this may embed the value orientation of equality and freedom, it also hints at the misleading risk of convenient Internet communication still existing under the current network regulation system.

Huge internet users: The “crowd” enabled by information fragments. All netizens who are willing to add fuel to the fire in the process of spectating, spreading, and discussing are also indispensable subjects for the proliferation of rumors. In describing the group's suggestibility and gullibility, Le Bon (2018) said that the group thinks in images, and the image itself immediately gives rise to a series of images with which it has no logical relationship. The process of spreading false information is the process of mutual guided persuasion and infection by the Internet users' group, in which headlines, oriented words, and other rumor fragments are pieced together by the Internet users to create an objectively chaotic picture of reality. Another layer of group behavior embodied by Internet rumors is unconscious behavior. The Internet users have not yet made it their duty and education to judge the importance of facts and communication values, and the transmission process of rumors is mostly the spread of ideas under unconsciousness, which is also one of the powerful forces of the group.

Compared with traditional society and real space, the decentralized and de-individualized characteristics of online communication will further reduce the awareness of responsibility and risk of expression subjects.

The online interactive space constructed by virtual technology is a typical “deviation space”, and because of its low cost of intervention and digital dissemination of information, it forms a field of public opinion with multiple subjects and decentralized responsibility (Jiang, 2011). Peng (2014) has used the concept of “group wisdom”, which promotes group complementarity and order of division of labor, and “group disorientation”, which leads to collective loss of rationality, to summarize the two possible evolutions of group interaction among Internet users^[15]. And the huge volume of public opinion in rumor cases more urgently requires timely media coverage and commentary. The huge volume of public opinion in the rumor cases more urgently needs media reports and comments to give correct value guidance in time, or to neutralize the extreme thinking and inappropriate words in them, so as to make the gathering and interaction of groups in the network more towards “group wisdom” rather than “group disorientation”.

References

- Allport. (2003). *Rumor psychology*. (J. P. Liu, Y. Y. Liang, & L. Huang, Trans.). Shenyang: Liaoning Education Publishing Press.
- Chao, N., & Huang, X. (2004). Research on the phenomenon of “rumors” in Internet communication. *Information Studies: Theory & Application*, 27(6), 586-590.
- Dai, S. F., & Wang, Y. (2011). A Preliminary Study on the Causes and Countermeasures of Network Rumors -- Communication Interpretation of “March 16” Salt Snatch Event. *Journalism and Mass Communication Monthly*, (04), 11-12+29.
- Ding, W. (2009). New media and empowerment: A practical social research. *Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication*, (10), 76-81.
- Jiang, F. (2011). “Cyber violence”: Concepts, root causes and their responses: An analytical perspective based on risk society. *Zhejiang Journal*, (6), 181-187.
- Kapferer. (1991). *Rumeurs: Le plus vieux media du monde*. (R. L. Zheng & Q. Bian, Trans.). Shanghai: Shanghai People Press.
- Le Bon, G. (2018). *The crowd: Group psychology*. (Q. Dong, Trans.). Hangzhou: Zhejiang Literature and Art Press.
- Li, Z. (2010). Characteristics of rumor propagation and its hazards in the Internet era. *People's Forum*, (2), 86-87.
- Liu, P. (2020). “The whole world is talking”: Research on user generated journalism cases via digital media during the COVID-19 epidemic. *Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication*, 42(9), 62-84.
- Peng, L. (2014). The mob wisdom or mass lost: Observation on both sides of the Internet community interaction effect. *Contemporary Communication*, (2), 4-7.
- Tang, X. M., & Lai, S. Q. (2018). Study on Denying Rumors Strategy in Unexpected Events—The Case of “Taifu Middle School”. *Journal of Intelligence*, 37(09), 95-99.
- Tian, S. (2021). Rumor propagation and governance of the “Shuanghuanglian incident” in the context of social governance. *Journalism Research Guide*, 12(1), 23-25.
- Yan, G., & Li, N. (2020). Moral anomie in public network expression and its governance. *Journal of China University of Mining & Technology (Social Science)*, 22(2), 131-144.
- Yuan, H., & Xie, G. (2015). Research on the rumor mongers of public event online rumors—Content analysis based on 118 influential public event online rumors. *Journalists*, (5), 58-65.
- Zhang, N., & Zhao, Y. (2015). The spread and governance of online rumors in the context of risk society. *China Higher Education*, (10), 47-49.
- Zhu, G. (2002). *The governmental process in contemporary China*. Tianjin: Tianjin People's Press.