

Research on the Formation Mechanism of Reversed News Based on the Social Combustion Theory

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Abstract: With the rapid rise of the Internet and new media, reversed online public opinion has become increasingly common, challenging public cognition and the principle of news authenticity. From the perspective of social combustion theory, this paper explores the mechanisms behind such reversals. Reversed public opinion resembles a "combustion" process: "combustible materials" are factors causing social instability, "accelerants" include social media platforms and public emotions, and the "ignition temperature" represents sudden impactful events. Once public emotions reach a tipping point, reversed news emerges rapidly. Self-media often rush to publish unverified information in pursuit of traffic, becoming a key source of reversals. Journalists lacking professional ethics and objectivity further intensify the phenomenon. The public, influenced by cognitive biases and emotional triggers, inadvertently amplifies these reversals during dissemination. To reduce the societal harm of reversed news, mainstream media should guide public opinion by restoring facts through authoritative reporting. Journalists must adhere to ethical principles of objectivity and truth, while the audience should enhance media literacy, approach news critically, and avoid spreading unverified information. Collaborative efforts are essential to fostering a healthy and orderly media environment where online public opinion serves societal development.

Keywords: Reversed News, Social Combustion Theory, Mechanism, Online Public Opinion, Public Opinion Heat.

1. Introduction

In today's society, where information spreads rapidly, reversed news frequently appears in the public's view. Reversed news refers to news reports about events in which the initial dissemination of information is incomplete, inconsistent with the facts, or even entirely contradictory. As the event undergoes further investigation, the information becomes more comprehensive, resulting in a reversal of the narrative and restoration of the event's true nature. This type of news not only attracts significant attention but also often triggers widespread social discussion, sometimes even impacting the structure of social trust. This paper innovatively introduces the Social Combustion Theory to explore the formation mechanism of reversed news. By studying the rapid dissemination of information in society and the phenomenon of "emotional combustion," the paper investigates how the interaction among communicators, receivers, and official information sources (state agencies) contributes to the emergence of reversed news.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Reversed News

Reversed news events primarily refer to news reports where the presentation and dissemination of information are incomplete, inconsistent with the facts, or even entirely contradictory. As the event progresses, the information gradually becomes more diverse and comprehensive, resulting in a reversal of the narrative and, subsequently, a shift in public opinion and attitudes.

In recent years, domestic scholars have conducted extensive research on the phenomenon of reversed news, focusing mainly on its causes and mechanisms, dissemination paths, and social impact.

Regarding causes and mechanisms, Huang Hongye [1] attributed the causes of public opinion reversals to the following factors from the perspectives of journalists and readers: catering to readers' fragmented reading habits, reporters without expertise in specialized fields covering such topics, and journalists excessively empathizing with seemingly disadvantaged groups, thus aligning public opinion with the weaker party. Some studies have explored three primary factors—technical mechanisms, user mechanisms, and public opinion mechanisms—that lead to the occurrence of reversed news. In terms of "user mechanisms" and "public opinion mechanisms," Sun Jinhua [2] noted that some online media, while bearing the responsibility of being the main communication entities, lack strict oversight. Combined with certain media outlets' excessive "user awareness," news is overreported and emotionally charged, leading audiences to form collective opinions, which ultimately escalate public opinion reversals. Wang Jingwei et al. [3] suggested that stereotypes, lax media gatekeeping, a lack of media literacy among audiences, and susceptibility to "opinion leaders" are the primary reasons for the emergence of reversed news. Huang Chuxin et al. [4] explored the causes and countermeasures of reversed news from the perspective of a lack of professional skill sets among professionals and a deficiency in journalists' professional ethics. According to Yu Jiaxin [5]: "The development of science and technology has promoted the transition of information interaction from the era of mass media to the era of integrated new media... Under this background, transmission lines are also increasingly being challenged. False news, frequent inversions of news, and communication anomalies are constantly emerging." Additionally, another paper suggested that the fundamental changes in the communication ecology brought about by technological advancements and the power struggles between official and grassroots public opinion spheres are critical reasons for the frequent occurrence of reversed news [6]. In summary, most analyses of the causes of reversed news events focus on the media, news dissemination models, and audience perspectives.

In terms of dissemination paths, Li Mei and Wang Jianan [7] explored the dissemination mechanisms and paths of reversed news using a fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis method (fsQCA). Grounded in the 5W model as the theoretical foundation, they analyzed 30 cases and utilized theoretical perspective and phenomenon summary methods to identify the shared characteristics and commonalities among the samples. From this, they extracted six variables influencing the high popularity of reversed news dissemination: source, channel, event attributes, emotion, event location, and labeling as explanatory variables, with dissemination popularity as the outcome variable. They assigned values to the explanatory and outcome variables, and their analysis identified two high-coverage dissemination paths: Social media as the first release channel + social events occurring in large cities + labeled keywords + non-authoritative information sources. Social media as the dissemination channel + non-social events + positive emotions + large cities. Zeng Xiangmin and Dai Jinrong [8] used a qualitative comparative analysis method and purposive sampling to study the dissemination paths of hotspot events based on small-sample cases. By reviewing cases from 2014 to early 2020 and compiling literature, they analyzed reversed news events using the five elements of news dissemination: communicator, content, channel, audience, and dissemination effect. They extracted nine explanatory variables related to time gaps in the emergence

of reversed news: Initial release media, Event orientation, Public demands, Reversal factors, Number of reversals, Reversal timing, Form of news source, Participation of public figures, Responding media. Using QCA, they assigned values to the variables based on a "binary attribution principle," categorizing them into explanatory and outcome variables. The resulting truth table and analysis revealed eight dissemination paths where public opinion peaked before the reversal, with five high-coverage event combinations: Path 1: Two reversals within three days + public questioning + government/department or enterprise/institution involvement. Path 2: One reversal after three days + public questioning + government/department or enterprise/institution involvement. Path 3: Two reversals after three days + public questioning + individual/group involvement. Path 4: Within three days + public questioning + government/department or enterprise/institution involvement + emotional appeals. Path 5: Two reversals within three days + public questioning + emotional appeals.

In terms of social impact, Zhang Xueting [9] indicated that the frequent occurrence of reversed news tends to erode public trust in the media, negatively affecting the structure of social trust. The effects of reversed news vary between short-term public opinion dynamics and long-term perceptions of social trust. Specifically: Personal awareness of reversed news negatively impacts perceptions of social trust. Existing attitudes toward reversed news positively influence social trust. Motivations for engaging with reversed news exhibit differentiated mechanisms in their effects on social trust. Content preferences positively moderate the relationship between existing attitudes and social trust while negatively moderating the relationship between awareness of reversed news and general trust. Other studies have shown that the occurrence of reversed news significantly undermines the credibility of the media. However, from a dissemination path perspective, reversed news often originates from specific events and undergoes fermentation, integration, and evolution in online environments, creating a dynamic public opinion landscape characterized by emotional swings [10]. Reversed news, which often triggers public opinion reversals, involves active participation from news media, netizens, and the individuals or groups reported on. This process broadens the scope of expression within the public opinion space, fostering diverse perspectives and contributing to the awakening of civic awareness in China. The challenges and stimuli brought about by the expression of information and opinions serve as a form of informal self-education in media literacy for the public, enhancing and refining their competencies. During the reversal of public opinion, as continuous public discussion is maintained, news producers supplement, exclude, or correct event details. In doing so, they often consciously or unconsciously emphasize collective emotions and public sentiment to attract audience participation, fostering short-term collective identity. "As reversal news not only harms the individuals involved but also damages media credibility, it represents a waste of media and social resources. In the context of new media, reversal news can potentially be avoided by appropriately censoring news communication, balancing the accuracy and timeliness of reports, and enhancing public media literacy" [11].

2.2. Social Combustion Theory

Social Combustion Theory, proposed by scholar Niu Wenyan, applies principles of natural combustion to draw an analogy between societal disorder, instability, and unrest and combustion phenomena in nature. Based on this analogy, the theory seeks to address specific social contradictions and has been applied to areas such as maintaining social stability and managing social crises. The theory posits that societal issues such as imbalance, disorder, and loss of control require the combined action of three key elements: "combustible material," "accelerants," and "ignition temperature." According to the theory: "Combustible material" refers to factors of disharmony in the relationships between "humans and nature" or "humans and other humans," which underlie societal disorder. "Accelerants" are erroneous public opinion directions or incitement that fuel social unrest. "Ignition

temperature" is represented by sudden events of sufficient scale and impact to trigger social turmoil [12].

Peng Guochao and Cheng Xiao [13] applied the Social Combustion Theory framework to reversed news by identifying six antecedent conditions that contribute to high public opinion heat for reversed news: interest demands, media participation, news irregularities, topic type, reversal intensity, and the number of reversals. They explored these paths using fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). Bai Zhihua [12] utilized Social Combustion Theory in the context of online public opinion management. Bai argued that: The "accessibility" of new media expands the "combustible material" triggering online public opinion. The "empowerment of discourse" in new media extends the "accelerant space" for online public opinion. The "amplification effect" of new media raises the "ignition temperature" of online public opinion. This framework was proposed as a theoretical basis for addressing the risks of online public opinion in the era of new media. Similarly, Zhang Jiahui and Chen Qiang [14] applied Social Combustion Theory to the analysis of online mass incidents, identifying: Social contradictions as combustible material. Online emotional and behavioral mobilization as accelerants. Provocative events as the ignition temperature. They argued that online accelerants serve as incubators for provocative events and aggregators of social contradictions. In another application, Hu Yong, Zhou Kaigui, and Lei Yurao [15] used Social Combustion Theory in their research on resolving land disputes and constructing risk early warning mechanisms during urbanization. They framed: Multifaceted interest allocation as the combustible material. Changes in the social environment as accelerants. The escalation of incidents as the ignition temperature. These elements collectively led to land disputes, and their study proposed feasible solutions for mitigating such disputes.

Taking "China Eastern Airlines MU5735 crash incident" as an example, we explore the process of emotion evolution of Internet users from the perspective of social combustion theory. Through the analysis, we dug out the emotional evolution trend of Internet users' attention content and themes with evolutionary relationship at each stage of the life cycle. By analyzing the reasons for the emotional evolution of Internet users during the evolution of online public opinion events, we proposed relevant emotional guidance measures, which are of great significance to prevent the emotional polarization of Internet users.[16] What's more, in the field of campus crisis, from the perspective of social combustion theory, discord and disharmony of relationships within nature, between humans and nature, and among humans are the combustion substances that cause campus crisis. The interaction of combustion substance, combustion promoter and ignition temperature leads to campus crisis. [17] According to Jiali Yin and Chuyi Lin [18], they select university students as the research group, takes social combustion theory as the theoretical basis, and takes public crisis events as the background to study the mechanism of university students' emotion transmission under the Internet public opinion. A study applied social combustion theory to construct a logical relationship between the core category and main categories. The results show that changes in the physical and communication environments are the root elements ("combustion substances") of spatial conflicts; the driving factors are landless peasants' risk perceptions and community governance capabilities; direct elements ("ignition temperature") are residents' space perceptions and space competition behavior.[19]

3. Formation Mechanism of Reversed News from the Perspective of Social Combustion Theory

This study investigates the generation mechanism of public opinion heat for reversed news based on Social Combustion Theory. It analyzes how reversed news evolves into trending topics through three dimensions: "combustible material," "accelerants," and "ignition temperature."

3.1. Combustible Material

Social Combustion Theory likens the occurrence of societal phenomena to the combustion of materials in nature and equates factors causing social instability to "combustible material," such as disharmony in "human-nature" or "human-human" relationships. Certain challenging or controversial issues, once disseminated online, can immediately attract public attention and evolve into hotspots of online public opinion [12].

Due to societal transformation in China, imbalances have intensified social contradictions, resulting in the emergence and accumulation of new conflicts and widening gaps in social interests. The unmet needs of the public have led to the frequent occurrence of collective social events. These social contradictions, during the process of information dissemination, often undergo reversals, contributing to the rise of reversed news.

Disseminators—including media outlets, social platforms, and individuals—play a crucial role in the spread of information. Disseminators may selectively report specific information and emphasize particular "combustible material," thereby stirring public emotions. For instance, certain media outlets might focus on highlighting negative incidents or emotionally charged narratives, leading to public misunderstanding of events. The proliferation of digital media and social platforms has accelerated the speed of information dissemination, but it has also made it harder to verify the authenticity of information. When information is spread in an exaggerated or emotional manner, it can easily provoke public panic and misunderstanding, setting the stage for reversed news to emerge. The commercial or political interests of disseminators may further influence the selection and presentation of information, resulting in distortion or exaggeration of the "combustible material" associated with particular events. For example, to attract clicks, media outlets may sensationalize headlines or content, exaggerating facts and thereby creating conditions conducive to reversed news.

From the perspective of individuals in society, the rise of new media has enabled ordinary people to become information creators, processors, and disseminators. As a result, anyone can become a "fire point" in the emergence of public opinion. The "accessibility" of new media significantly expands the "combustible material" triggering online public opinion.

Receivers of information, including the public and netizens, play a crucial role in the formation of reversed news. Their reactions and interpretations significantly influence this process. When receiving information, receivers often interpret it through the lens of their emotions and experiences. When a news event strikes an emotional chord with the receivers, they are more likely to believe and share that information, which may lead to misunderstandings and the formation of reversed news. Due to cognitive biases regarding certain events, individuals often process information in ways that align with their existing perceptions. This bias makes receivers more inclined to accept information consistent with their prior beliefs, further fueling the dissemination of reversed news.

If state agencies fail to release timely and transparent information following an incident, rumors and misinformation may arise, ultimately contributing to the occurrence of reversed news. For example, in the context of a sudden event, insufficient official information may lead the media and the public to independently interpret and disseminate inaccurate or false details. The stance and attitude of state agencies directly impact public perception. If the official explanation of an event conflicts with the emotional responses or expectations of the public, reversed news may emerge. This disconnect can result in the public distrusting official information, suspecting that the truth has been concealed.

3.2. Accelerants

In Social Combustion Theory, the exaggerated reporting of news events by social media, which misleads the public and amplifies social psychology, is likened to "accelerants" that contribute to societal instability.

High media participation and journalistic irregularities, as accelerants, are key conditions for generating high public opinion heat around reversed news. From the perspective of disseminators, they may choose to report on emotionally charged or highly controversial events. Some media outlets tend to amplify the impact of negative events or use exaggerated language in their reports to capture readers' attention. Journalistic irregularities are a necessary condition for the development of high public opinion heat in reversed news. This underscores the catalytic role of accelerants in escalating the popularity of events, ultimately resulting in reversed news. Additionally, some media outlets frequently use emotionally engaging content to resonate with audiences and fuel public emotions. For example, they might leverage tragic stories or intense visual effects to evoke sympathy or anger. This emotional stimulation can lead the public to rapidly disseminate reversed news without verifying its authenticity.

Receivers, when confronted with a specific event, are often driven by emotions. When trending news resonates emotionally with them, individuals may accept and disseminate the information without sufficient evidence. In social networks, individuals are frequently influenced by group opinions. If strong emotional reactions or controversies emerge within a group, receivers may follow the group's emotional flow and propagate related information. At this point, the role of accelerants becomes particularly significant, as they amplify the sense of group resonance, ultimately contributing to the formation of reversed news.

The expansion of "accelerant spaces" makes the dissemination of online public opinion more concealed and blind, complicating the precise identification of its origins. The networked public spaces provided by new media often lead to chaotic scenarios during sudden events, as the direct stakeholders may be overshadowed by the involvement of non-direct stakeholders. This results in a noisy public sphere in the new media environment, with various emotional expressions dominating the discourse. Such a space facilitates the incubation, brewing, and spread of risks. Media technology enables anyone to act as a journalist, allowing the immediate publication of sudden events through new media. However, the lack of professional skills in news collection, editing, writing, and publishing inevitably undermines the authenticity of the information being disseminated. This can result in sensationalized headlines and distorted content, further complicating the landscape of public opinion.

In some cases, state agencies may control or filter the dissemination of information for management purposes. If public distrust of official information increases, people may turn to unofficial channels for information. These unofficial channels often contain accelerants, such as emotional commentary or false reports, which can more easily trigger reversed news. The policies and responses of state agencies can also act as accelerants. For instance, the government's attitude and measures in handling public events—such as adopting a hardline approach or concealing facts—may provoke public dissatisfaction and resistance, thereby amplifying the spread of reversed news.

3.3. Ignition Temperature

In Social Combustion Theory, sudden events with significant societal impact are likened to "ignition temperature." In the era of new media, where everyone is a potential "seed of public opinion," any individual can act as a "fuel bearer" contributing to the rise in public opinion temperature. As China undergoes a phase of rapid development, the structure of societal interests is continuously being adjusted. Conflicts between interest groups are increasingly frequent, and when the demands of

socially connected groups are not adequately met, social contradictions intensify. These escalating contradictions lead to a growing number of sudden events, which accumulate alongside these societal tensions, serving as ignition points for the spread of public opinion and reversed news.

When an event's "ignition temperature" is high, disseminators often choose to report the most impactful or controversial details. This selective reporting can evoke strong emotional resonance among the public, rapidly amplifying the event's influence. However, disseminators may oversimplify the event's background, leading to public misunderstanding and the creation of reversed news. High "ignition temperature" events are typically accompanied by intense emotional reactions. Disseminators may leverage these emotional elements to capture audience attention. While this emotionally charged narrative style can increase engagement, it also risks presenting a one-sided view of the information. Consequently, the public, driven by emotions, may accept and spread inaccurate information, further contributing to the phenomenon of reversed news.

In modern society, social media has become a crucial channel for information dissemination. When "ignition temperature" events occur, users on social media rapidly share and comment, resulting in an exceptionally fast spread of information. This environment creates conditions for misinformation and reversed news to proliferate quickly.

In the face of sudden events, public emotions are often highly sensitive and easily influenced. For socially sensitive events, such as the "Yulin Maternal Suicide Case," the "Hangzhou Internet Celebrity Assaulting Pregnant Woman Case," and the "Henan Zhoukou Baby Abduction Case," the connection to topics like doctor-patient relations, social morality, vulnerable groups, and child safety—issues closely tied to the public's daily lives—significantly increases the ignition temperature. These events quickly capture the attention of netizens, driving the intensity of the discussion to a peak on the internet. Through the strong emotional and expressive reactions of netizens, an online momentum is created, granting them the power to voice opinions on specific issues or events. This transforms passive "spectators" into tightly united "collective actors." The originally scattered individuals achieve a high level of unity in thought and action through emotional mobilization, triggering collective online actions. Ultimately, this process ignites public opinion and turns these events into major online discussion topics.

After an "ignition temperature" event occurs, if state agencies fail to release timely and transparent information, it may lead to public unease and dissatisfaction. The absence or delay of information often drives the public to seek alternative sources, increasing the likelihood of rumors and reversed news emerging.

The response strategies of state agencies during crisis events are critical. Effective crisis management can alleviate public anxiety and doubts, preventing the spread of reversed news. Conversely, improper handling of such events may intensify societal unease, further fueling the formation and dissemination of reversed news.

4. Discussion

This paper has explored how the interactions between disseminators, receivers, and official information (state agencies) contribute to the emergence of reversed news. Based on these findings, it is proposed that mainstream media, journalists, and the public should collectively work to mitigate the negative impacts of reversed news on society.

Firstly, mainstream media should enhance their sense of responsibility in information dissemination. By implementing rigorous fact-checking processes and utilizing diverse information sources, they can ensure the accuracy and impartiality of their reports. Additionally, mainstream media should exercise emotional restraint in their reporting, avoiding unnecessary emotional embellishments to reduce the risks of societal panic and misunderstandings.

Secondly, journalists need to enhance their professional training, improving their sensitivity to and ability to discern the authenticity of information. This will help them avoid compromising objectivity in pursuit of trending topics. They should also actively participate in public media literacy education, guiding the public to correctly interpret and assess news. Journalists must uphold their commitment to providing society with reliable and truthful news, adhering to professional ethics and social responsibility. To maintain the integrity of news, they should verify the reliability of sources and trace the origins of events before reporting or sharing news. This diligence will help prevent the dissemination of false or misleading information and ensure the reliability of news content. Journalists should take on the role of information verifiers, contributing to the authenticity and accountability of the news they report.

Finally, the public should enhance their own media literacy, actively verifying information sources and rationally analyzing and reflecting on the news content they receive. The government should establish mechanisms to prevent the spread of online rumors by ensuring that accurate information is promptly disclosed through various platforms, such as mobile devices, the internet, and television, to provide the public with verified information. This approach can limit the spread of rumors in terms of both time and space. Furthermore, the government should strengthen legal frameworks for online governance, identifying and legally penalizing those responsible for creating fake news. Legal constraints can help control the spread of rumors and false news while addressing the root causes of misinformation, ultimately restoring the truth. In the process of information dissemination, all stakeholders must collaborate to establish a more transparent and trustworthy news environment to reduce the negative impact of reversed news on society. According to Wu Yixuan [20], from the public's perspective, there is a need to cultivate a sense of responsibility and enhance rationality. In the current information age, everyone has a voice and the ability to influence public discourse. While the public can actively participate in discussions, it is important to maintain calmness, objectivity, and value-based judgment, ensuring that their contributions do not unduly sway or exacerbate others' emotional responses in public opinion.

5. Conclusion

Based on the above research, it can be concluded that the emergence of reversed news is driven not only by the nature and impact of sudden events themselves but also by the combined effect of multiple factors in the information dissemination process. Disseminators, through selective reporting and emotionally charged narratives, can quickly trigger public emotional reactions, thereby influencing the spread and reception of information. Receivers, when faced with high "ignition temperature" events, are easily influenced by emotions and group behavior, which facilitates the spread of inaccurate information. Additionally, the responses and transparency of information released by state agencies are critical to maintaining public trust and emotional stability. Effective information management and crisis response strategies can significantly reduce the risk of reversed news emerging. In summary, the formation mechanism of reversed news reflects the complex interplay between disseminators, receivers, and state agencies. It underscores the importance of establishing effective communication mechanisms and enhancing information transparency in a rapidly changing informational environment.

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