

Emotional Reporting Chaos in the Process of Online Media Communication and Its Psychological Impact—A Case Study of the Chongqing Bus Plunge Incident

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Abstract. With the rapid development of online media, the phenomenon of emotional reporting has become increasingly prominent, becoming a major issue that disrupts the order of information dissemination and affects public cognition. To pursue traffic effects, some media deliberately adopt exaggerated narratives, oppositional frameworks, and even false information, leading to serious deviations in the public opinion environment. Taking the 2018 Chongqing bus plunge incident as a typical case, this paper systematically analyzes the presentation methods, formation mechanisms of emotional reporting at different stages of the incident, and its negative impacts on public psychology and social trust, combined with the "primacy effect" and "spiral of silence" theories in news psychology. Furthermore, the study proposes targeted countermeasures from three dimensions: media responsibility, public literacy, and platform governance, aiming to provide theoretical reference and practical paths for building a rational and healthy online communication ecology.

Keywords: emotional reporting, Chongqing bus plunge incident, spiral of silence, primacy effect

1. Introduction: case analysis of emotional reporting

On October 28, 2018, on the Second Yangtze River Bridge in Wanzhou District, Chongqing, a moving bus collided with a car and then fell into the river. The incident immediately caused an uproar on the Internet. Later, photos of a female driver in a red Mercedes sitting aside making a phone call in high heels were leaked. Netizens instantly pointed the finger at the female driver, believing that she was driving in the wrong direction, which caused the collision between the two vehicles, and arbitrarily speculated that the cause of the bus plunge was related to the female driver. The first focus of public opinion in this incident centered on the female driver. At around 17:00 on the same day, the Chongqing police found that the cause of the accident had nothing to do with the female driver.

On October 29, a report titled "Chongqing Plunge Bus Driver Sang KTV at 5 AM, Accident Happened Four and a Half Hours Later" published by Chengdu Business Daily was reprinted by major media. Everyone then shifted their public opinion to the bus driver and his family, which became the second focus of public opinion in this incident.

On November 2, the Wanzhou Public Security Bureau released the video data from the black box to the public. The data showed that starting at 10:03 on October 28, Liu repeatedly insulted the driver Ran, who turned his head to explain many times but failed. At 10:08, Liu hit Ran's head violently with her mobile phone. Ran took his right hand off the steering wheel to fight back, and the two scuffled. Ran sharply turned the steering wheel, and the vehicle crossed the central solid line and collided with a red car traveling normally in the opposite direction, then crashed through the guardrail and fell into the 71-meter-deep river. After the truth was announced, everyone focused the center of public opinion on "passenger Liu", thus starting the third and final round of public opinion criticism.

2. Analysis of the causes of emotional reporting (from the perspective of news psychology)

2.1. Media: traffic-driven and the "primacy effect"

In the context of increasingly fierce competition among online media, traffic has become a key indicator to measure media influence and economic benefits. To attract the attention of the audience, the media often use the "primacy effect", that is, the audience's first impression of information often affects their subsequent cognition and judgment. In this incident, The Beijing News took the lead in shaping the image of the "female driver" through the "first impression", making the public have a preconceived negative judgment. The influence of the first input information on the subsequent cognition of the object is a comprehensive effect produced by the combination of people's perceptual factors and emotional factors [1]. Some media use this psychology of the audience to release news with strong emotional overtones first when reporting incidents, and shape the public's "first impression" through exaggerated headlines and one-sided facts. Even if there is a reversal later, it takes more cost to correct the cognition. This "traffic-first" strategy has fueled the phenomenon of emotional reporting.

2.2. Society and culture: lack of trust and the "spiral of silence"

The "spiral of silence" theory proposed by German scholar Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann holds that the expression of public opinions is a form of social control, because this kind of expression is a psychological process, which can be explained as "herd mentality" in the Chinese context. When an individual expresses his or her views, he or she first observes the opinions of the majority around him or her, and these majority opinions form the "climate of opinion". If the individual's opinion belongs to the circle of "dominant opinions", the individual will express his or her opinions very actively. On the contrary, the individual will remain "silent" [2]. Emotional reporting can quickly attract public attention and resonance because these social contradictions themselves contain rich emotional factors, and emotional reporting further amplifies these emotions, making it easier for the public to be influenced by emotions. Remarks defending the female driver or the bus driver are likely to be attacked online, leading rational netizens to be pushed into the vortex of public opinion. At the same time, some existing structural contradictions in society (such as gender and regional opposition) have provided a breeding ground for emotional reporting. By amplifying these contradictions, the media can easily arouse public emotions and further aggravate the lack of social trust. It can be seen that the online space where "everyone has a microphone" has also laid the foundation for the growth of "opinions and emotions preceding facts" among the public. If the media do not strictly check or there is no authoritative voice, after the "spiral of silence", those irrational

expressions will become more rampant, and then occupy the top of the public opinion field, causing adverse consequences to society [3].

3. Analysis of the characteristics of emotional reporting

Emotional reporting refers to the phenomenon in news reporting where journalists or the media intentionally or unintentionally highlight, amplify, or even incite certain specific emotions (such as anger, fear, sympathy, joy, sorrow, hatred, etc.), to the extent that the expression of emotions overrides the objective, comprehensive, and calm presentation of facts. Its main manifestations include:

3.1. Using online incendiary remarks: emotional mobilization

Online incendiary remarks refer to remarks made by actors in cyberspace that intend to make an unspecified or majority of people generate or strengthen the determination to commit crimes through persuasion, rumors, defamation, or other methods [4]. In the stage where the truth was unknown, when reporting on the "female driver", the media extensively used unconfirmed qualitative words such as "the 'at-fault' female driver" and "the 'wrong-way' female driver", and through detailed descriptions such as "high heels" and "red Mercedes", implied her unreliable image. These words together constitute a semantic field of "presumption of guilt", successfully guiding the public's anxiety and dissatisfaction with traffic chaos to the label of "female driver", completing the initial emotional mobilization.

After the truth was announced, the media's incendiary language turned to the passenger who had a dispute with the driver. Words with strong moral judgment such as "shrew", "chief culprit", and "buried with the lives of the whole bus" filled the reports. The public's grief and anger were also greatly spread and reached a peak because the media reprinted the reports with sensational headlines. The public quickly pointed the finger of public opinion at the passenger Liu, and the sudden reversal of public opinion made Liu the target of public criticism [5]. These languages are no longer intended to clarify the fact chain, but through extreme emotional attribution, simplify the complex tragedy into a "confrontation between good and evil", thus providing the most direct outlet for the public's grief and shock.

3.2. Adopting oppositional narrative frameworks: amplifying conflicts

In the initial reports, the core of the reports was the conflict between "individual female drivers who violate traffic rules" and "the majority of law-abiding and innocent traffic participants". This framework accurately hit the long-standing controversy between gender and driving skills in society, instantly stimulating the opposing emotions of the majority of netizens, and making the possibility of rational discussion on the causes of traffic accidents zero. When a biased online news event appears in the public's sight, people with the same stance and information selection preferences gather in different "pseudo-environments". The public disseminates their own identical views and gains recognition from others in this environment, gradually deepening their stereotypes, constantly strengthening prejudices, and engaging in group social interaction. When public opinion is deliberately manipulated and controlled by communicators who seem to hold the same stance, these people will express their opinions and attack those who hold opposite views [6].

After the truth was announced, the narrative framework quickly transformed into the conflict between "reckless individuals" and "drivers and passengers responsible for public safety". Although

this framework is closer to the facts, its narrative method is still oppositional. It attributes all responsibilities to the "evil" of a single passenger, while systematically obscuring systemic risks such as the driver's emergency response capabilities, the bus's safety protection measures, and the public's intervention awareness. This framework successfully aroused the national outcry against the "black sheep", but once again excluded in-depth reflection on social structures from the public agenda.

4. Countermeasures to govern emotional reporting

4.1. Strengthen supervision and optimize algorithm recommendation

As an important carrier of information dissemination, online platforms should assume the responsibility of supervision and guidance. Optimize the algorithm recommendation mechanism to avoid excessive push of emotional content. The algorithm recommendation system should comprehensively consider the authenticity, authority, and value orientation of information, establish a "rumor tracing and rapid rumor refutation mechanism" large model led by the government, collaborated by platforms, and participated by the media, construct a closed-loop process of "early warning - monitoring - identification - rumor refutation - punishment", and compress the living space of false information [7]. Promote the normalization of media literacy education, guide the public to express rationally and judge scientifically, and promote the formation of a rational, peaceful, positive, and orderly online public opinion ecology [8].

4.2. Improve public media literacy and reduce emotional comments

The public is both participants and audiences of information dissemination. Improving the public's media literacy is crucial for governing emotional reporting. The public should learn to distinguish the source and authenticity of information, avoid blind following and spreading unconfirmed content. They should also enhance their sense of social responsibility, recognize their role in online public opinion, take the initiative to reduce their own emotional comments, maintain rationality, and promote the resolution of problems. Some users hope to attract official attention through emotional comments to promote the resolution of things. However, emotional comments are not only useless for the resolution of the incident, but also make the information more complicated, and even damage the reputation of the parties involved, becoming the last straw that crushes them [9].

4.3. Enhance media responsibility awareness and improve credibility

The credibility of news media refers to the public's trust and loyalty to the media, which reflects the degree to which the reports issued by news media can be trusted and recognized by the audience [10]. In this networked era where everyone is a We-Media blogger, more and more audiences turn to believe the content released by non-professional media such as We-Media and citizen journalists. However, these non-professionals lack relevant professional news knowledge and media literacy, and their qualities are uneven. At the same time, they often disregard the truth and objectivity of news for the sake of traffic, blindly pursue the "attention economy", and the released content has a very strong individualistic color. This will not only affect the audience's judgment on the news, but also easily lead the audience to emotional extremes. Therefore, it is imperative to rebuild the credibility of professional media [11].

Traditional media should enhance their sense of responsibility, return to the essence of news, and improve their own credibility. Adhere to the principles of objectivity, impartiality, and authenticity,

abandon the mentality of putting traffic first, help the public understand the complexity and diversity behind events, play the role of public opinion guidance, and avoid adopting emotional reporting methods to attract attention.

5. Conclusion

As a prominent chaos in online information dissemination, the emergence and spread of emotional reporting are the result of the joint action of traffic-driven economy, audience psychological mechanisms, and social structural contradictions. By analyzing the three public opinion reversals in the Chongqing bus plunge incident, this paper reveals how emotional reporting shapes the public's initial cognition with the help of the "primacy effect", suppresses rational voices through the "spiral of silence" effect, and then leads to public opinion disorientation and social trust crisis.

Governing emotional reporting is a systematic project that requires multi-party coordination and comprehensive measures to build a true, rational, and responsible public opinion ecology in the complex and diverse online context, and promote public discussions to return to the basis of facts and value consensus.

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