

The Absence and Construction of Rational Communication — A Case Study of Network Public Opinion on the Shanxi Engagement Rape Case

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Abstract. In the post-truth era, online gender public opinions are frequently characterized by emotional polarization, factual deviation and group confrontation. The absence of rational communication mechanisms disrupts network communication order, exacerbates gender conflicts and damages the online ecological environment, posing major challenges to public opinion governance. Focusing on the rational deficiency of gender-related public communication, this paper takes the typical Shanxi Engagement Rape Case as the research object and adopts literature research, case analysis, discourse analysis and content analysis methods. By reviewing relevant theories and analyzing public opinion data, this study explores the core causes of irrational gender communication. The results indicate that algorithmic information cocoons, traffic-driven self-media operation, and prevalent gender stereotypes jointly trigger public opinion alienation and intensified gender confrontation. This paper clarifies the formation logic of gender public opinion chaos and provides practical references for standardizing media reporting, easing online gender conflicts and constructing a rational network communication system.

Keywords: rational communication, network public opinion, gender confrontation, information cocoon, post-truth

1. Introduction

In the current post-truth network environment, hot events involving legal disputes, marriage customs and gender issues can easily trigger nationwide public opinion upsurges, accompanied by frequent communication chaos, such as facts being obscured by emotions, extreme remarks misleading public cognition, and online group polarization, which seriously hinders the construction of a benign network public opinion ecosystem. At present, academic circles have accumulated certain research achievements on post-truth communication and online gender public opinion governance. Existing studies mostly focus on macro public opinion chaos, causes of gender confrontation and general public opinion governance strategies, but there are obvious research gaps. Most studies lack in-depth analysis of typical compound hot cases; rarely explore the complete generation logic of rational communication deficiency in individual hot events from the multiple perspectives of folk customs,

law and gender conflicts; and are insufficient in case-specific refined research and practical governance guidance.

Based on this, this paper takes the Shanxi Engagement Rape Case, which involves legal disputes, folk custom conflicts and gender contradictions, as the core research carrier, and carries out in-depth special research on the deficiency of rational communication in online gender hot events in the post-truth era. Relying on classic communication theories including the post-truth theory, information cocoon theory and spiral of silence theory, this paper systematically sorts out relevant domestic and foreign research literature, and focuses on clarifying two core research questions: first, the specific external manifestations of rational deficiency in the communication process of compound-gender hot public opinions; second, the multiple deep influencing factors inducing public opinion disorder and communication anomie. This research comprehensively uses multiple research methods to systematically comb the communication context of incident public opinions and analyze the generation logic of network public opinion chaos. This study can effectively fill the gap of refined case research on gender public opinions and enrich the theoretical achievements of network communication and gender public opinion governance in the post-truth era. Meanwhile, the research results can provide practical suggestions for standardizing media issue reporting, guiding netizens to speak rationally and eliminating online gender confrontation. It can also provide long-term reference for future online gender public opinion governance, the construction of a clean cyberspace and the reconstruction of social gender consensus; help avoid public opinion anomie in similar hot events; and promote the sustainable and healthy development of the network public opinion ecosystem.

2. The development and communication problems of public opinion on the Shanxi engagement rape case

2.1. Case overview and public opinion development stages

The Shanxi Engagement Rape Case is a typical online public opinion event integrating folk custom conflicts, judicial disputes and gender tensions. After the woman accused her fiancé of rape following their engagement and betrothal gift payment, clashes between traditional folk conventions and modern law, public judicial misconceptions and accumulated gender antagonisms drove related content viral. The month-long public opinion cycle was filled with rumors, biased interpretations and extreme remarks, triggering widespread national debate.

The case's public opinion evolution includes four stages. The budding stage saw initial gender confrontation aroused by fragmented, one-sided online information. In the outbreak stage, self-media distorted facts for traffic to magnify gender conflicts, while algorithmic pushes popularized extreme remarks. The stalemate stage continued partisan debates due to users' rigid cognitive biases against official announcements. Finally, platform governance and mainstream legal popularization cooled public sentiment in the recession stage, guiding public opinion back to rational and legal discussion.

2.2. Media and public opinion characteristics of each stage

At the budding stage of public opinion, ordinary netizens and micro self-media dominated dissemination while mainstream media stayed largely absent. Fragmented, unverified and subjective content embedded inherent gender stereotypes, sowing seeds for subsequent opinion polarization. During the outbreak phase, profit-driven marketing accounts prioritized traffic, stoking gender clashes with biased inflammatory posts and shirking social accountability. Mainstream media

offered delayed, poorly fact-checked responses, passively reposting falsehoods and amplifying misinformation, which transformed discussions on a single judicial case into hostile cross-gender emotional confrontation. In the stalemate period, mainstream media's legal interpretations failed to shake the public's entrenched biased perceptions. Opposing factions distorted official releases, and self-media kept spreading rumors to sustain irrational online debates. The opinion finally faded as platforms intervened with regulatory measures and authoritative legal outreach: extreme posts were taken down, rational rule-of-law content prevailed, and public discourse returned to normalcy. Overall, the whole incident displayed obvious communication anomie marked by self-media overreach, lagging mainstream media intervention, and emotion prevailing over objective facts.

2.3. Specific manifestations of the lack of rational communication

This public opinion event exhibited prominent rational communication deficiencies in four core dimensions. First, self-media distorted and fragmented case information, fabricating false narratives that undermined the factual basis of public discussion. Second, online discourse became extreme and labeled, as netizens divided along gender lines, replacing legal case analysis with group confrontation and abusive remarks. Third, public cognition was stance-driven: people judged the case based on inherent prejudices and one-sided information rather than legal evidence and logic. Fourth, the spiral of silence marginalized rational voices, allowing extreme emotions to dominate online discussion. Additionally, sensationalized news headlines aggravated gender conflicts and misled public perception [1]. Such communication chaos stems from the systematic coupling of technological, media, audience and social factors.

3. Analysis on the causes of the lack of rational communication

The public opinion polarization, rational aphasia and gender confrontation chaos triggered by the Shanxi Engagement Rape Case are typical manifestations of judicial public opinion anomie on gender issues in the post-truth era. The irrational communication of this public opinion is caused by the superposition and coupling of multiple factors, including technical mechanisms, media ecology, audience psychology and social concepts. An in-depth analysis of its causes helps grasp the polarization law of gender public opinions and provides a basis for constructing a rational network communication ecosystem.

3.1. Technical level: negative impacts of algorithmic mechanisms

Platform algorithms serve as the fundamental technical driver of public opinion polarization and rational communication deficiency. Short-video and social platforms prioritize interactive data in traffic distribution, adopting a "conflict and emotion first" push logic. Emotional content concerning gender and judicial conflicts gains algorithmic preference over objective legal and official information, enabling extreme narratives to dominate public discourse and undermining the benign communication ecosystem.

Big data user profiling exacerbates information cocoons and echo chambers by delivering homogeneous content and blocking diverse viewpoints, isolating netizens in fixed cognitive loops and preventing cross-stance understanding. Gender dispute opinions easily form algorithm-driven discourse barriers that deepen group cognitive division [2], and solidified user cognition often resists subsequent official corrections and legal interpretations, sustaining prolonged public opinion confrontation.

Algorithm systems prioritize traffic profits while lacking rational correction and balanced perspective mechanisms, failing to rectify extreme users' biased information intake. One-sided algorithm recommendation strengthens self-reinforcing information cocoons and compresses rational discourse space [3]. Furthermore, the emerging "emotional cocoon" impairs public empathy and critical thinking, erodes social consensus, and has become a recurring technical factor behind persistent polarization and rational aphasia in gender-related public opinions [4].

3.2. Media level: traffic orientation and lack of professional norms

Media anomie directly triggers the alienation of irrational public opinions. Nowadays, self-media and marketing accounts control public opinion dissemination under the traffic-first mindset, discarding journalistic professionalism and factual verification. High-conflict, high-traffic topics including marriage, sexual assault and gender disputes are their major tools for follower growth and profit monetization. Driven by profits, they selectively edit judicial details, twist case attributes, invent fake clues and hype gender conflicts to produce provocative confrontational posts. Besides, biased gender reporting by certain media reinforces stereotypes and deepens online gender rifts [5]. Most marketing accounts have loose content checks and no communication boundaries. They rely on subjective guesses to spread misleading information stoking gender opposition. In this incident, self-media fabricated claims like "betrothal gift equals consent to cohabitation" and claimed judicial rulings carry gender bias, manipulating netizens' sentiment, pushing public opinion polarization and ruining rational online discussion. Delayed response and weak guidance from mainstream media worsen such media disorder. In the critical early stage of opinion fermentation, mainstream media did not release verified case facts and authoritative legal interpretations in a timely manner, letting self-media false narratives occupy discourse dominance and shape fixed biased public cognition. Some even chased sensational headlines and reposted fragmented untrue information, abandoning their guiding function. As Yang Yue noted, lagging and skewed media coverage lets irrational narratives prevail in judicial public opinion [6], blocks the penetration of rational rule-of-law thinking and fuels persistent opinion polarization

3.3. Audience level: cognitive bias and group psychological effects

Audience cognitive biases and group psychology constitute the core subjective causes of irrational public opinion. Deeply rooted gender stereotypes lead netizens to judge cases based on preset stances rather than facts and legal logic, forming a "stance-over-truth" cognitive loop that eliminates rational discussion.

Furthermore, group polarization, herd mentality and the spiral of silence suppress rational voices. Homogeneous online communities validate extreme remarks and marginalize neutral opinions, prompting most netizens to conform to mainstream radical views and worsen public opinion confrontation. Relevant studies verify that online circle pressure and community exclusiveness weaken critical thinking and allow extreme discourse to dominate gender-related public opinions [7, 8].

Insufficient public media and rule of law literacy further fuels irrational communication. Most netizens cannot effectively screen misleading self-media content and lack basic legal knowledge of marital and sexual assault disputes. Consequently, online discussions deviate from factual and legal norms, and emotional gender-based stance-taking continuously intensifies public opinion polarization and gender confrontation.

3.4. Social level: conflicts between traditional concepts and modern rule of law

Social conceptual conflicts and accumulated gender tensions are the deep-rooted causes of irrational public opinion. Traditional folk customs regard engagement and betrothal gifts as valid marital commitments, while modern law prioritizes personal autonomy and bodily rights, refusing to recognize folk conventions as legal justification for sexual conduct. This cognitive gap frequently triggers public disputes over marital judicial cases [9] and fuels gender confrontation in this event.

Long-term online gender frictions have built up massive negative group emotions, turning gender division into a regular online discourse pattern. High-profile gender events often serve as outlets for collective emotional venting rather than objective legal discussion [10]. The Shanxi Engagement Rape Case, containing multiple conflicting elements, became a carrier for gender antagonism, shifting public debate from legal analysis to pure gender confrontation and triggering thorough public opinion polarization.

Inadequate rule-of-law popularization and gender equality education further widen social cognitive division, leaving the public unable to distinguish folk customs from legal norms and form rational judgment. This enables biased and confrontational gender narratives to dominate online space and repeatedly trigger public opinion rifts. To conclude, the deficiency of rational gender public opinion communication is a systematic problem jointly caused by technical constraints, media anomie, audience cognitive biases and social structural conflicts.

4. Discussion on construction countermeasures of online rational communication

4.1. Platform-side optimization and management measures

As core carriers of public opinion dissemination, online platforms should eliminate technical barriers to rational communication via systematic optimization. They need to revise traffic algorithms to prioritize authoritative legal and neutral content while limiting the exposure of emotional, confrontational posts. Platforms should also build cognitive correction mechanisms to break users' information cocoons, adopt human-machine joint review and graded penalties to curb false and provocative gender-related content, and set up public opinion emergency zones to release authoritative information timely and restrain rumor spread.

4.2. Media-side adherence to communication norms

Mainstream media must uphold journalistic professionalism by issuing timely, objective and law-based reports on gender-related judicial cases during early public opinion stages, avoiding biased, conflict-driven narratives and sensational headlines to counter misleading self-media content. In addition, industry self-regulation should standardize self-media behavior, clarify content red lines, implement dynamic account supervision, and penalize rumor-mongering and gender-confrontation provocation to maintain rational and truthful communication.

4.3. Audience-side improvement of media literacy

Diversified education and publicity efforts are needed to enhance netizens' media and rule of law literacy. Integrating rational internet literacy into general education and conducting regular official popularization can help the public distinguish authoritative information from emotional marketing content. Targeted publicity on marital laws, sexual autonomy and gender equality helps correct folk custom misunderstandings and gender stereotypes, eliminating one-sided labeled thinking.

Furthermore, advocating inclusive and rational online communication can curb irrational confrontational behaviors and shift gender issue discussions from emotional conflict to legal and rational analysis.

4.4. Improvement of network public opinion supervision mechanism

A multi-department collaborative governance mechanism is essential for normalized early warning and timely disposal of gender-related public opinions. Coordination among cyber, public security and judicial authorities enables efficient information sharing, rumor elimination and public opinion rectification. A tiered early-warning system allows targeted, early intervention to restrain public opinion polarization. Strict regulation and heavier penalties for rumor-mongering, gender confrontation incitement and online violence raise the cost of irrational speech. Meanwhile, continuous official output of equal, rational and rule-of-law content alleviates long-term gender tensions and fosters a healthy online public opinion environment.

5. Conclusion

The public opinion polarization, gender confrontation and rational discourse aphasia stemming from the Shanxi Engagement Rape Case epitomize the typical communication dilemmas of gender-related judicial public opinions in the post-truth era, reflecting the prevalent lack of rational communication mechanisms in online public discourse. Rather than being an isolated incident, the case's public opinion anomie arises from the systematic coupling and layered interaction of technical, media, audience and social factors.

Algorithm systems prioritizing emotional and conflict content consolidate user cognitive biases and information cocoons. Traffic-driven self-media abandons journalistic ethics, spreading false and confrontational narratives to exacerbate gender divisions. Meanwhile, netizens' inherent gender stereotypes, inadequate media and legal literacy, and group polarization foster stance-based rather than rational, evidence-based public discussion. Fundamentally, the friction between traditional marital folk customs and modern rule-of-law concepts, along with accumulated online gender tensions and insufficient legal popularization, lays the social groundwork for irrational public opinion fermentation, turning a single judicial case into large-scale online gender confrontation.

Building a rational online communication ecosystem requires systematic, multi-stakeholder governance rather than unilateral intervention. Joint efforts from platforms, media, audiences and regulatory authorities are essential to optimize the online public opinion environment. Platforms should upgrade algorithm mechanisms to break information cocoons; media should uphold professional norms and deliver authoritative guidance; the public needs to improve media and legal literacy to form critical rational thinking; and regulators should refine supervision systems and impose stricter penalties on irregular online behaviors. Such coordinated governance can curb false and extreme discourse, mitigate online gender conflicts, redirect public discussions on gender and judicial issues toward facts and the rule of law, and foster a clean, rational and benign online public opinion ecosystem.

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