

Research on the Anti-Silence Spiral Phenomenon in the Transmission of Internet Public Opinion

—Take the Incident of “Corporal Punishment of a Girl with Asthma in Guangzhou to Cause Hematemesis” as an Example

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Abstract

With the continuous progress of Internet information technology and the innovation of public opinion dissemination mode, the Spiral of Silence theory has been impacted and gradually transformed into a new communication mode—The Anti-silence Spiral, which plays a pivotal role in the current network public opinion dissemination. Based on the evolution of the Spiral of Silence theory, this article explores the reasons for the Anti-silence Spiral phenomenon and takes the corporal punishment of a girl with asthma in Guangzhou to cause hematemesis as an example to analyze the possible problems in the spread of the Anti-silence Spiral, in order to explore the construction of network public opinion guidance mechanism.

Keywords

The Spiral of Silence, The Anti-Silence Spiral, Internet Public Opinion Dissemination

1. Introduction

On February 3, 2021, China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) officially released the 47th “Statistical Report on Internet Development in China”: As of December 2020, the number of Internet users in my country has reached 989 million, an increase from March 2020 85.4 million, with an Internet penetration rate of 70.4% (CNNIC, 2021). In the context of the rapid prosperity of the Internet, a large number of inaccurate post bars, blogs, forums, etc. have also

emerged. Netizens can express their personal views on the Internet platform and exercise their freedom of speech. Compared with traditional media, the new media era has given the public more channels to speak out. Those with a “minority” view will have the courage to choose to express their true thoughts when facing mainstream voices. With the development of the communication process and the passage of time, different views have been collided and exchanged, and the views of the “minority” have gradually gained more recognition until they surpassed the previous “majority”. At this time, the Spiral of Silence was reversed, and the Anti-silence Spiral pattern was formed (Xu & Zhu, 2018). This article attempts to explore the evolution of the Anti-silence Spiral in online public opinion and its causes, and uses this as a basis to interpret the formation of the Anti-silence Spiral in the incident of “corporal punishment of a girl with asthma in Guangzhou to cause hematemesis”, so as to deeply analyze the existing problems and put forward practical suggestions.

2. Related Theoretical Research

2.1. The Spiral of Silence Theory

The Spiral of Silence is a hypothetical theory put forward by the famous German communication scientist Neumann in the article “the Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion” in 1974. It believes that people will think about the views of others before expressing their personal opinions. If the personal views and group views are the same, they will actively participate in the discussion; but if they find that personal views and group views are completely different, the fear of loneliness will make them choose to be silent. This kind of cycle shows a spiral development process in which the voice of one party becomes stronger, while the voice of the other party becomes more and more silent. Since the Spiral of Silence theory was proposed, it has been controversial: Are everyone passive? Will all keep silent for fear of being isolated?

2.2. The Proposal of the Anti-Silence Spiral

With the advent of the era of new media communication, the Spiral of Silence theory has encountered more intense challenges and doubts. From the perspective of the analysis of the nature of network communication, Wang Bifen and Wu Ying clearly stated in “The Theory of ‘Silence Spiral’ and Time Limitations” that, due to the anonymity of network information transmission, people have relatively loose and free networks. The environment to express one’s true thoughts and opinions is a condition that the Spiral of Silence theory does not possess. From the perspective of online communication audiences, Liu Jianming (Liu, 2002) pointed out that audiences are not passive and irrational animals in front of online media, but a social subject with subjective initiative, often using the Anti-silence Spiral to publish a personal opinion. Starting from the analysis of the main characteristics of the current online public opinion form, Yao Jun (Yao, 2004) proposed that when the “minority” with the influence of public opinion publishes opinions that are contrary to the current public opinion on the

Internet, it will often give birth to the audience's reverse thinking. At this time, The Spiral of Silence quickly reversed, and the pattern of the Anti-silence Spiral was formed.

3. Reasons for the Anti-Silence Spiral in Internet Public Opinion

In the era when human beings and Internet technology are closely integrated, as a new mode and phenomenon of public opinion dissemination flow, the emergence of the Anti-silence Spiral phenomenon can be mainly summarized into two reasons: the unique attributes of network communication and the change of audiences.

3.1. Based on the Unique Attributes of Network Communication—Compared with Traditional Media Communication

3.1.1. The Anonymity of the Internet—The Failure of Group Pressure

Anonymity is the most significant difference between new media network communication and traditional media communication. The virtual network environment can reduce the moral and emotional constraints from real life, reduce social contextual hints (Wang & Dai, 2010), and give netizens more relaxed freedom of speech. This loose and free network environment has weakened the public's pressure on individuals, and the courageous voice has replaced the herd mentality, and the pressure of public opinion from the group has gradually failed.

3.1.2. Changes in the Way of Online Communication—Weakening of the Agenda-Setting Role

In traditional media communication, the limitations of information acceptance and powerful media news expression methods dominate public opinion to a large extent. However, in the current environment of the new media era, a large amount of information and widely diversified communication channels have weakened the influence of traditional agenda-setting, gradually showing a situation of the mutual game between the media and the mass agenda setting (Bian & He, 2021). Under this situation, information dissemination has achieved decentralization and attracted more social subjects to join it, making network information dissemination a universal power.

3.2. Analysis Based on the Characteristics of Audience Changes in Internet Communication

3.2.1. The Guidance of Hardcore and Opinion Leaders

Intermediaries with weak opinions are the key force for the emergence of the Anti-silence spiral phenomenon. They can quickly gather consensus to expand the influence of the team, guide the team to fully express the weak opinions and gradually broaden them, or even subvert the superior opinions. There are opinion leaders among the hardcore members, and the continuous expansion of the team of opinion leaders will make more and more different voices. When indi-

viduals with “minority” opinions find that their views are consistent with opinion leaders, they feel that they have found an organization and choose to support opinion leaders without thinking.

3.2.2. The Awakening of the Audience’s Self-Awareness

In the era of new media, the audience is no longer the “target” on the shooting range in “Gun and Bullets”, but has changed from only passively receiving information to grasp the dominant power of information dissemination. Manuel Castel pointed out: “Identity is the source of people’s meaning and experience.” In anonymized cyberspace, audiences have greater initiative and can fight against mainstream views in order to obtain a new identity. Until the truth of the event was revealed. The individual changed from a “limited individual” to a “networked individual”, thus gradually forming an “anti-silence spiral”.

4. Analysis of the Anti-Silence Spiral Phenomenon in the “Corporal Punishment of a Girl with Asthma in Guangzhou to Cause Hematemesis”

4.1. A Storm of Public Opinion Ignited

On May 30, 2020, Liu (microblog name: The Sea in the Island) posted on Weibo that Liu Yan, the headteacher of Guangzhou Fangyuan Experimental Primary School, had physically punished her six-year-old daughter for running around the playground when she knew her six-year-old daughter had asthma. On 10 laps, she caused her to vomit, cough, vomit blood, and was sent to the hospital for emergency treatment. At the same time, she also claimed that Liu Yan had received 60,000 yuan and threatened to be beaten. After this Weibo was released, it received many retweets, and then “Liu Yan” appeared on the hot search list of Weibo topics, which immediately aroused the enthusiasm of netizens and began to condemn schools and teachers. A large number of celebrities have also participated in the “crisis on the army”, and the popularity of online discussions has continued to rise.

When corporal punishment, bribery, helplessness and other social negative events of great concern occurred, people’s sense of justice and empathy was instantly ignited. Most netizens expressed anger and began to scold teachers and schools, which led to the incident. Intensified, public opinion is showing a one-sided trend. During this period, a small number of “hardcore members” thought rationally, and voiced doubts from medical perspectives such as blood stains and cases, and drove the public to think logically with limited power. Although their voices were minimal, they did not gradually turn to compromise and convergence because of concerns about the pressure brought by superior opinions. At this time, you will see the difference from the Spiral of Silence phenomenon. The “minority” will no longer remain silent.

4.2. Public Opinion Reversal Stage

In the early morning of May 31, Guangzhou Baiyun Public Security announced

relevant investigations: Liu admitted that his daughter was vomited blood due to corporal punishment, the teacher threatened to beat the parents, receive money, etc. It was a deliberately fabricated lie. The “bloodstains” on the clothes in the photo were actually with cosmetics and water, his daughter is currently in good spirits. At the same time, the police also obtained relevant evidence that Liu was suspected of hiring others to conduct online hype. In just a few days, Liu’s “personal design” has undergone a huge change, from “victim mother” to lawbreaker, and the majority of netizens have also turned from support and sympathy to crusade.

Looking back on the whole incident, Liu used a pitiful and helpless tone to ask for help on Weibo, preconceivedly constructing a so-called “public opinion fact”, and by hiring network navy forces to speculate, he tried to use the traffic of online media, Weibo big V, and netizens. Sense of justice and empathy make the opinion environment out of balance, thereby influencing and restricting public opinion to achieve their own goals. However, the disadvantaged minority did not choose to compromise and silence. On the contrary, they thought logically and put forward reasonable doubts. At this time, rational people will eventually choose to stand in the same position and speak together in the face of “superior opinions.” After the police reported the truth of the incident, the opinions that were originally in a superior position began to change and no longer accused the teacher, and the opinions that were originally in a disadvantaged position became “advantageous opinions” because they were more objective and more in line with the real situation. As a result, the opinion environment has changed, and the phenomenon of the Anti-silence Spiral has appeared.

5. Analysis of the Problems and Countermeasures in the Spread of the Anti-Silence Spiral

5.1. Problems in the Spread of the Anti-Silence Spiral

5.1.1. Fragmented Information Makes Public Opinion Splashes Easily

The fragmentation of information in the current cyberspace is very serious, and fragmented information related to sensitive events (mainly including education, medical care, social and people’s livelihood, etc.) is flooded, which can easily arouse public attention and discussion, and the spread is extremely high. When a sensitive event with a strong negative colour occurs, it will be repeatedly spread, and the negativity of the event will be strengthened. In the habit of netizens to accept information without discrimination, the accusation focuses on the negative nature of the incident, which quickly aroused the splash before public opinion reversed. In the event of vomiting blood caused by the corporal punishment of a girl with asthma, the serious consequences caused by the teacher’s corporal punishment of the student are sensitive education events. After the incident attracted public attention, various fragments of information were spread in cyberspace, and most of the condemnation of the teacher involved, and related critical negative public opinion quickly formed and spread.

5.1.2. “Vulnerable Groups” Deliberately Create a Communication Effect

In the network reversal incident, in order to attract attention, some “vulnerable” groups used exaggerated words and forged evidence in the process of telling the “facts” to attract public attention, so as to form a strong communication effect. This behavior often runs counter to objective facts and social norms and is not conducive to creating a healthy and orderly network environment. In the incident of vomiting blood caused by corporal punishment of a girl with asthma, Liu quickly promoted the discussion and spread of the incident using text denunciations, photo recordings and even hiring an online navy, which stimulated negative emotions among netizens in a short period of time and caused negative public opinion to spread rapidly.

5.1.3. The Interest-Driven Nature of Online Public Opinion

The formation of public opinion begins with the spread of personal opinions. The way of network communication gives everyone the right to freedom of speech, thereby lowering the threshold of public opinion and the cost of dissemination. Some groups have commercialized online public opinion and benefited from it, intervening in the spread of online public opinion by hiring online naval forces, posting and deleting posts for a fee. In the incident of vomiting blood caused by corporal punishment of a girl with asthma, Liu paid only 760 yuan to the navy company to make Internet hype, causing his Weibo to be reposted 1.4 million times and topic hot searches were read 540 million times. This approach of almost manipulating public opinion has disrupted the law of public opinion itself.

5.2. The Construction of Network Public Opinion Guidance Mechanism in the Anti-Silence Spiral Phenomenon

5.2.1. Establish a Good Public Opinion Management Mechanism

On the one hand, the government must establish a sunny government image in the hearts of the majority of netizens, fully demonstrate the government’s leading role and credibility, and supervise and guide the correct direction of public opinion. On the other hand, the government and other authoritative organizations should improve relevant laws and regulations, strengthen the normative construction of information dissemination through online media, and do their utmost to eliminate false information from the source. In addition, we should severely punish those illegal behaviors that publish false statements, maliciously accuse others, and disrupt the order of the Internet, and create a good atmosphere of compliance and law-abiding on the Internet, so that the public can be more rigorous and serious when they express their opinions on the Internet.

5.2.2. Strengthen the Media’s Ability to Discriminate Online Information

In recent years, the post-truth phenomenon has increased, and reversal news has repeatedly appeared (Jin & Zhang, 2021). The emergence of reversal news is greatly related to the timeliness and insufficient investigative nature of online media reports. Therefore, online media should increase their sensitivity to online

information dissemination and report facts under the principle of objectiveness and fairness. Before reporting the news, we must use more channels to verify and screen the authenticity of the event, instead of immediately grabbing news to report without thinking; when the fake news is not spreading, promptly dispel rumours to prevent the spread of fake news, and be a piece of good online information the “gatekeeper” of communication to enhance the credibility of the media.

5.2.3. Strengthen the Guiding Role of Hardcore Members and Opinion Leaders

When irrational opinions occupy the high ground, the public who do not fully understand the truth will blindly stand on the side of the “superior opinions”, even if they are contrary to their personal opinions, and fall into the phenomenon of the Spiral of Silence. When rational views are in a disadvantaged position, hardcore members and opinion leaders, as special public opinion representatives of vulnerable groups, should give full play to their leadership and guide the audience through logical thinking and analysis. Therefore, hardcore members and opinion leaders must strengthen their sense of responsibility and discrimination, and on the premise of analyzing and interpreting the authenticity of the incident, they should rationally and objectively express their opinions to the public and shoulder the mission of public opinion communication (Chen, Guo, & Chen, 2019).

5.2.4. Improve Public Media Literacy

The public, as the most important participant in online social life in the new media era, plays a pivotal role in the trend of public opinion in online emergencies. On the one hand, the government should vigorously cultivate and improve public responsibility awareness and media literacy. By organizing activities such as civilized Internet propaganda, related keynote speeches or popularizing legal knowledge, netizens’ public opinion behaviors are regulated, and the public’s ability to distinguish the authenticity of online information and independent thinking ability is cultivated to cultivate their sense of social responsibility and discipline. On the other hand, the public should restrain their online behavior. When facing the online public opinion of the incident, it is necessary to think logically and analyze the problem, treat the public opinion objectively, do not arbitrarily spread unverified information, and maintain good order in the online world.

6. Summary

1) The Spiral of Silence was proposed based on the traditional media environment. However, due to the unique attributes of network communication in the new era and the changes in the audience during the communication, the phenomenon of the Anti-silence Spiral has emerged and continues to develop.

2) Through the analysis of the anti-silence spiral phenomenon in the incident of “corporal punishment of a girl with asthma in Guangzhou to cause hemate-

mesis”, the problems in the spread of the anti-silence spiral phenomenon were analyzed, and effective suggestions were put forward from the government, media, hardcore members and the public, so that the network can play its positive role.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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