

Mechanism of Formation and Propagation of Internet Rumors from the Perspective of Social Psychology

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Abstract: Rumor is a typical social public opinion phenomenon. With the advent of the internet era, the intensity and breadth of internet rumors have increased, resulting in more profound and prominent impacts on society. Current research on internet rumors mainly involves theoretical analysis, but lacks a clear, common theoretical perspective. The social psychology communication perspective is precisely the perspective that studies how social information is disseminated, how individuals and groups in society perceive information dissemination, and how individuals and groups in society respond to information dissemination. This study argues that the social psychology communication perspective is an important theoretical perspective for analyzing the phenomenon of internet rumors. This study suggests that mechanisms such as diffusion of responsibility, cognitive closure, thinking patterns, self-serving bias, and emotional contagion contribute to the continuous generation and rapid spread of internet rumors. This paper also proposes countermeasures and suggestions for governing internet rumors from the perspectives of multiple social entities such as media and regulatory agencies.

Keywords: Internet Rumors; Social Psychology Communication; Emotional Resonance; Governance Countermeasures; Internet Era

1. Introduction

Rumors are a common social public opinion phenomenon, characterized as unverified statements or interpretations disseminated through public or private channels about matters, events, or issues of public interest [1]. They possess three main features: informativeness, diffusiveness, and

uncertainty [2]. The most distinguishing feature of rumors compared to other social information is their “unverified” nature; essentially, they are still “news” and a form of social information. As long as language exists, rumors will exist. The “Lüshi Chunqiu” records: “Dogs resemble monkeys, monkeys resemble apes, apes resemble humans, but there is a great distance between humans and dogs.” This indicates that rumors have accompanied the development of human society, exerting significant impact and influence. In the past, rumors spread orally, with relatively limited intensity and breadth; in the internet era, the rapid development of media technology has accelerated the flow of information online. Internet rumors are rumors spread through internet media, defined in this paper as “unverified information disseminated in cyberspace.” The flow of information has brought more efficient and convenient communication, but it has also led to the rampant spread of rumors in social networks.

Current academic research on internet rumors mainly focuses on their characteristics, dissemination mechanisms, and governance paths. Regarding the dissemination mechanisms of rumors, Gu Jinxin proposed through the “China-Thailand Incident” that the main mechanisms include the generation of anxiety due to rights infringements, the reinforcement of dissemination by information cascades and herd mentality, the social contagion and diffusion of group polarization, the distortion by biased absorption, and the dissipation after countermeasures are taken. Cheng [3] believes the dissemination of internet rumors is an “adding belief” process, where the increase in information and the influence of opinion leaders and portals serve as boosters, making the rumors hard to control once they gain attention. Chen and Shen [4] argue that

under the new media context, the dissemination of internet rumors follows certain patterns: (1) Frequent interaction of information during public emergencies leads to widespread dissemination. (2) The large number and complex identities of rumor spreaders increase information uncertainty. (3) The absence and weakening of the “gatekeeping” process significantly contribute to rumor out of control. (4) The increased frequency of information interaction makes it harder to verify sources. (5) Public emergencies trigger negative emotions and anxiety among the populace. Regarding the governance of rumors, Tan and Yang [5] suggest that government, media, enterprises, social organizations, and individuals should establish a collaborative mechanism in rumor governance, each playing their unique roles. Zeng and Chen [6] propose gradually establishing a long-term mechanism for internet rumor governance, closely monitoring public opinion trends, and promptly addressing public doubts and concerns. Undeniably, the current academic community has conducted systematic research on the dissemination and governance of internet rumors, yielding fruitful results with diverse research methods. By comprehensively using political science, communication, and sociology theories, researchers have deeply explored the harms, dissemination mechanisms, and preventive measures of internet rumors, offering constructive opinions and suggestions. However, most of these studies focus only on external factors like the text of the rumors, social factors, and media involved in the generation, dissemination, and governance of rumors. There is relatively little attention paid to the personal psychological factors of the audience that drive and stimulate the entire process of rumor generation, dissemination, and dissipation. Overall, there is a significant academic gap in the research on “audience psychological factors of internet rumors” that urgently needs to be filled.

In social psychology, rumor dissemination is a decentralized cluster behavior of information influence [7], where people collectively communicate by spreading information to continuously seek explanations [8]. Individual cognitive biases, social influence, and group behavior play crucial roles in the generation

and dissemination of rumors. Additionally, the psychological state of the public, social identity, and the emotional tone of information are key factors in the dissipation of rumors. Internet rumors are a form of social information, and the dissemination of social information spreads along social networks, including cultural, power, and relational networks. The social psychology perspective precisely studies how social information is disseminated, how individuals and groups in society perceive this dissemination, and how they react to it. In this context, this paper integrates social psychology theories into the understanding of internet rumors, which is of great academic significance and vital for practical public opinion management and rumor prevention. Social psychology provides a set of theoretical tools and research methods to help us deeply understand the psychological mechanisms of individuals and groups in information processing, decision-making, and behavior expression.

2. Analysis of Psychological Factors in Audience Participation Behavior in Internet Rumors

This study uses two cases from 2024 as examples: the “female entrepreneur seeking payment for a project arrested for ‘sexual misconduct’ with over a billion debts, the government only willing to give 12 million” published by the “China Business Journal,” and the “Spring Festival Gala incident where the entertainment star Bai Jingting ‘privately changed clothes’ and ‘seized the center position’ on the show ‘Shangchun Mountain.’” Through investigating audience trust in the rumors and refutation texts of these two cases, psychological factors, and actions taken, this study aims to deeply understand the psychological mechanisms and behavioral patterns of audiences in internet rumors. The primary research method is an online questionnaire survey, supplemented by constructing an internet ethnography study. The collected data is analyzed to provide theoretical and practical guidance from a social psychology perspective for governing internet rumors. The selection of respondents for the internet rumor study’s questionnaire survey considers audience groups, individual characteristics, and participation levels. In this study, the target groups are broad, including

ordinary netizens, students, media professionals, freelancers, etc. The respondents need to be representative and diverse, covering different ages, genders, and education levels. Finally, the survey considers individual participation levels and psychological factors, including behaviors such as commenting, sharing, and liking, to ensure the reliability and validity of the research results.

The data collection for this study was conducted from February 25, 2024, to March 3, 2024, lasting one week. A total of 778 questionnaires were collected, with the basic information of the 778 respondents shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Analysis of Internet Rumor Audience Demographics

Type	Option	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	378	48.59%
	Female	400	51.41%
Age	Under 18	31	3.98%
	18-25 years old	96	12.34%
	26-35 years old	203	26.09%
	36-45 years old	198	25.45%
	46-55 years old	187	24.04%
	Over 56	63	8.1%
Education Level	Primary school or below	53	6.81%
	Junior high	120	15.42%
	High school	182	23.39%
	Vocational school	335	43.06%
	Bachelor's	67	8.61%
	Master's or above	21	2.7%
Occupation	Students	168	21.59%
	Office workers	376	48.33%
	Freelancers	170	21.85%
	Others	64	8.23%

The audience's trust in the rumor and refutation texts of the "female entrepreneur with over a billion debts, the government only willing to give 12 million" rumor published by the "China Business Journal" is shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Audience Trust in Rumor and Refutation Texts of the Female Entrepreneur Event

Text Type	Option	Number	Percentage
Rumor Text	Trust	566	72.75%
	Distrust	212	27.25%
Refutation Text	Trust	424	54.5%
	Distrust	98	12.6%
	Still Suspicious	256	32.9%

Regarding the audience's trust in the rumor and refutation texts about the entertainment star Bai Jingting in the Spring Festival Gala program "Shangchun Mountain" involving 'private costume change' and 'seizing the center position,' the details are shown in Table 3:

Table 3. Audience Trust in Rumor and Refutation Texts of Bai Jingting's Spring Festival Gala Incident

Text Type	Option	Number	Percentage
Rumor Text	Trust	506	65.04%
	Distrust	272	34.96%
Refutation Text	Trust	397	51.03%
	Distrust	211	27.12%
	Still Suspicious	170	21.85%

Regarding whether people actively verify the authenticity of online information, the details are shown in Table 4:

Table 4. Whether People Actively Verify the Authenticity of Online Information

Type	Option	Number	Percentage
Verify Information Authenticity	Yes	487	62.6%
	No	291	37.4%

Regarding the emotional impact on the audience when internet rumors are generated, the details are shown in Table 5:

Table 5. Emotional Impact on Audience When Internet Rumors are Generated

Type	Option	Number	Percentage
Emotional State	Increased Anxiety, Panic	267	34.32%
	Curiosity	467	60.03%
	Insecurity	450	57.84%
	Resentment, Unfairness	512	65.81%

Regarding the psychological state of the audience when spreading rumors, the details are shown in Table 6:

Table 6. Psychological State of Audience When Spreading Rumors

Type	Option	Number	Percentage
Psychological State	Seeking Traffic	288	37.02%
	Seeking Approval	394	50.64%
	Trying to Cover the Truth	414	53.21%
	Prank Tendency	485	62.34%
	Desire for Influence	550	70.69%
	Desire for Influence	53	6.81%

3. Emotional Resonance: Trigger of Internet Rumors

Why do rumors arise? Allport [9] believes that “rumors provide a verbal outlet for relieving tension and are a projection of a subjective emotional state”. Domestic scholars assert that “rumors are a form of primitive discourse expression elicited by disadvantaged groups in a self-rescue state” [10] and “an expression of public opinion that is distorted on the surface but genuine at its core” [11]. The origin of internet rumors often stems from individuals or organizations with clear purposes and self-awareness. The online environment provides a virtual and covert space for rumor dissemination, allowing the disseminators to conceal their identities and freely express their opinions and views. Thus, individuals who create internet rumors often reduce their exposure through anonymity, increasing the ambiguity of the rumor content. This, coupled with multiple replications and secondary transmissions, makes tracing the source of the rumor difficult. In the process of information dissemination and public emergency handling, the audience plays a crucial role. They are not only the receivers of information but also the interpreters and producers. The feedback from the audience directly affects the flow and impact of information. When information aligns with personal demands, the audience is more likely to adopt a positive attitude and spread it; conversely, if the information contradicts personal interests, it may trigger negative feedback, leading to further controversy and misunderstanding. Interest demands play an important role in the process of information dissemination, especially in the generation and spread of internet rumors. Some audience members might be driven by personal interest demands, urgently converting information that does not align with their interests into a form that does, and then producing and disseminating it through various means.

3.1 Fear and Sense of Crisis: Amplifiers of Rumors

Fear and a sense of crisis are significant triggers for the generation of internet rumors. According to social cognitive theory, people tend to experience fear and anxiety when facing uncertainty and threats. As the main

platform for information dissemination, the internet enables rapid and wide coverage of information. Thus, crisis information online often quickly amplifies people’s fear and sense of crisis. When facing threats, people tend to seek ways to control the environment and protect themselves. These threats can be classified into human-made and natural types. For example, in the case of company layoffs, employees might feel human-made threats, especially from “unofficial news” rumors, which, despite possibly containing incomplete information, are often accurate. For natural threats, such as earthquakes or flash floods, a large amount of event rumors spread rapidly across platforms. Similarly, during an outbreak, rumors about the virus’s origin and transmission pathways quickly proliferate online, further spreading public panic and affecting the implementation of public health policies and social stability.

3.2 Shared Cognitive Interaction: Virtual Safe Haven

In the information age, we often find ourselves in an environment filled with ambiguous facts and uncertainties. Whether facing sudden epidemics or other emergencies, people crave quick access to certain information and explanations. This need is so urgent that we often accept any information that seems to fill this uncertainty gap, even if it might be incorrect or inaccurate. In such situations, rumors act like a painkiller, temporarily alleviating people’s confusion and anxiety, thereby providing a sense of security. Rumors exploit psychological gaps, such as uncertainty about information or distrust of authority, to create a false sense of security, quickly forming in situations where facts are unclear. When people face uncertain information, they feel uneasy and confused, yearning for answers that provide a clear explanation. Consequently, they begin to seek clues and clear doubts, but sometimes such efforts do not yield satisfactory results immediately. In this state of uncertainty, people might be more inclined to believe information that sounds reasonable or aligns with their expectations, even if it is unverified or baseless. For example, some false health information claims that certain foods or medications can prevent diseases, attracting a large audience seeking security and leading to

the spread of these falsehoods, which in turn distorts and deviates public understanding from genuine scientific knowledge.

3.3 Sense of Unfairness: The Driving Force of Rumor Flow

Scheler stated: “Resentment is a self-poisoning of the mind with clear causes and consequences” [12]. In real life, unequal distribution arising from class differences leads to long-standing grievances among the lower strata. Rumors, as a simple emotional expression of the disadvantaged groups, constitute a grassroots discourse system and serve as a self-contained defense mechanism for the lower groups [13].

There is a certain relationship between the generation of rumors and negative social mentality. Firstly, negative social mentality, as a collective psychological state, often causes individuals to be overly sensitive to information and to interpret it negatively, making them more susceptible to rumors. Individuals with a negative mentality tend to believe information that resonates with their emotions, and rumors often meet this emotional need, making them more likely to be accepted and spread. Meanwhile, the spread of rumors further exacerbates the proliferation of negative mentality, creating a vicious cycle. Secondly, China is currently undergoing tremendous economic, social, and cultural changes, which, while bringing prosperity and opportunities, also come with numerous problems and challenges. Especially with the development of the market economy and the acceleration of modernization, the social structure has undergone profound changes, traditional values and lifestyles have been impacted, and people face unprecedented psychological pressure and confusion. This alienation issue intensifies the formation of a sense of unfairness, as the widening wealth gap leaves many feeling discontented and lost, and resentment emotions become increasingly evident in society. Finally, the popularization and development of internet technology have turned cyberspace into a gathering place and dissemination channel for resentment emotions. Many non-mainstream ideologies and negative emotions spread rapidly here, becoming important driving forces for rumor dissemination.

When conflict events occur, binary conflict discourses such as doctor-patient opposition, gender opposition, and rich-poor opposition are incorporated into the construction of internet rumors, triggering extreme emotional identification and escalating conflicts. People often associate themselves with a social group or set of values, and when this identification is threatened or challenged, it generates hostility towards external groups and dissatisfaction with social unfairness. Internet rumors often exploit this emotion, using attacks on external groups or social systems to satisfy people’s feelings of resentment and unfairness. For instance, some internet rumors utilize public distrust of the government to spread false information about government cover-ups or corruption scandals, thereby inciting public anger and dissatisfaction with the government, further destabilizing social stability and order.

4. Core of Rumor Dissemination: The Interplay of Importance and Ambiguity

Communication scholar Cross proposed a formula for rumor dissemination: $R (\text{Rumor}) = i (\text{Importance}) \times a (\text{Ambiguity})$. The spread of rumors requires two important conditions: importance and ambiguity [14]. This indicates that the more important the event and the higher the ambiguity of its description, coupled with weaker public critical capacity, the more likely the rumor is to spread. However, the importance and ambiguity of an event are not entirely controllable. The dissemination of rumors mainly relies on human transmission. The author believes that only by firmly grasping the key factor of people can we clarify the fundamental mechanism of rumor dissemination and thus develop targeted solutions. Sunstein proposed that it is almost impossible to eliminate rumors solely through freedom of speech and legal regulation. The fundamental way to control and weaken the power of rumors is to understand and analyze the social communication psychological mechanisms behind the rumor phenomenon [15]. Media is an important participant in the public space. In the rapidly changing era, new communication technologies are emerging one after another, and traditional media are also continuously transforming into new media. Faced with the equally complex dissemination of rumors, the media also need

to improve their governance capabilities and levels. While fully understanding the mechanisms of rumor dissemination, they should adopt more innovative governance strategies to purify the public space and fulfill their social responsibilities.

4.1 Mechanism of Diffusion of Responsibility

People usually have the motivation to help others, but social psychologist Latané believes that in the presence of a group witnessing someone being harmed, individuals are less likely to offer help. The more bystanders present, the lower the probability of someone helping, known as the “bystander effect.” The reason for this phenomenon is that when an individual faces someone being harmed, they feel the responsibility to help lies with them. However, in the presence of a group, each person thinks this responsibility is “diffused,” making them less willing to take action to help others.

In the dissemination of internet rumors, there is often a startling number of rumor forwards, but few are willing to verify or investigate the authenticity of the message. This includes the psychological aspect of diffusion of responsibility. If an individual forwards a message for the first time, they might still consider the authenticity of the information before spreading it. However, when they see a large number of likes and forwards, they believe the responsibility to verify the information has been diffused and does not lie solely on them. Even if the message is later proven to be false, people feel it is impossible to punish every person who forwarded the message, and the consequences of the error have minimal impact on themselves, thus they are more inclined to forward it directly. “In the context of diffusion of responsibility, the ambiguity of whether others need help is also an important reason for the diffusion of responsibility” [16]. The same applies in the context of rumor dissemination. Whether a piece of information has been verified or how true it is remains ambiguous. Forwarders do not know if the message needs verification, is still in the process of being verified, or has already been verified. When this information is ambiguous, people are more likely to forward rumor information rather than responsibly verifying its authenticity.

4.2 Need for Cognitive Closure

The need for cognitive closure is a stable cognitive characteristic of people [17]. Cognitive closure refers to the cognitive characteristic of processing information when facing uncertain and ambiguous situations, i.e., “having a definite answer is better than chaos and uncertainty” [18]. The need for cognitive closure drives people to continually seek an answer when faced with uncertain or ambiguous states, achieving a closed loop of thought. People with a high need for cognitive closure are less tolerant of ambiguous states and more inclined to quickly obtain answers and make decisions. Researchers have found that people with a high need for cognitive closure are more likely to quickly judge things based on suggestive clues and are less likely to change their original views when confronted with new information after making a judgment [19].

After a sudden event, the initial period often faces problems such as insufficient information, with the event remaining in an unresolved ambiguous state, failing to meet people’s need for cognitive closure. Based on this, the audience urgently wants to obtain definitive answers to complete their cognitive loop, creating a fertile ground for rumor dissemination. False rumors can be quickly and massively produced without the need for investigation and verification, providing immediate satisfaction to the audience. For example, after the Fukushima nuclear power plant crisis, questions such as whether China would be affected by nuclear radiation and whether using iodine salt could prevent nuclear radiation effects were widely raised. Due to initial information insufficiency and the time needed for expert opinions to be conveyed, rumors like “eating iodine salt can prevent nuclear radiation” spread widely, instantly meeting people’s need for cognitive closure, breaking the current ambiguous psychological state, and receiving widespread forwarding. More seriously, once people meet their need for cognitive closure, their cognition solidifies, making it harder to change their original views, which is why debunking rumors is so difficult.

4.3 Characteristics of Thinking Patterns

Social cognition research suggests that people

generally adopt two types of thinking patterns when making decisions and taking actions: heuristic thinking and analytical thinking [20]. Heuristic thinking relies on intuition and stereotypes, is automatic, and consumes fewer psychological resources. Analytical thinking relies on rational analysis based on rules and facts, takes longer to process, and consumes more psychological resources [21]. Since heuristic thinking consumes fewer psychological resources, it reduces cognitive load by using intuition and stereotypes for decision-making, aligning with people's cognitive laziness. In contrast, analytical thinking requires focused attention and rational thought, requiring effort to gather factual evidence and perform logical analysis, thus increasing cognitive busy-ness.

In the context of social rumor dissemination, heuristic thinking leads to unthinking forwarding, spreading, and believing rumors. Unlike the professional fields people work in, rumor dissemination usually occurs in the public space. People often face their work tasks and life pressures, leaving limited cognitive resources for public space events. In other words, people usually don't have the time to think about public space events. This cognitive laziness or busy-ness leads people to adopt heuristic thinking patterns when engaging in public discussions, without examining the authenticity of information, and instead making quick decisions based on stereotypes. False rumors often create a seemingly "reasonable" logic, but on closer inspection, much of the information obviously violates common sense, such as "cotton meat floss," "plasticizer noodles," or "eating instant noodles detoxifies in 32 days."

4.4 Self-serving Bias

Heider proposed that people generally have a self-serving cognitive bias [22]. This bias is usually to maintain self-esteem and enhance self-image, showing a more positive and correct side of themselves. This self-serving cognitive bias causes people to make decisions and draw conclusions using only "naive" analysis methods, ignoring obvious facts. Miller & Ross [23] suggested that cognitive bias exists because people typically want things to happen that benefit their image. Under severe self-serving bias, many social rumors arise from public concerns about

social events related to public safety and disadvantaged groups. People forward these rumors with the good intention of ensuring public safety and supporting disadvantaged groups. Some rumor "stories" even satisfy people's motives for "exposing social injustices" or "criticizing the dark side of society." These good intentions and righteous motives lead to self-serving cognitive bias, causing people to thoughtlessly forward and support rumors, thus further spreading them.

4.5 Emotional Contagion

People generally have the ability to observe and perceive emotional cues in life and respond emotionally in kind [24]. In the context of rumor dissemination, the emotional cues contained in rumors significantly influence subsequent dissemination. Most rumors often carry strong emotional cues, reflected in emotional vocabulary, background sounds, and emotional arousal in visual content. According to the affective and social information model [25], Anthony's 1973 experiment with Philadelphia high school students, grouped by anxiety levels, showed that anxious individuals are more likely to spread rumors [26]. Similarly, when reading information, people process emotional information as part of social information. Actions of forwarding and spreading rumor information are largely influenced by emotional cues rather than the information itself. Under the influence of emotional contagion, the richer the emotional cues in the information, the more intense the emotional responses in forwarding comments, leading to higher identification with the emotions and greater likelihood of spreading the information.

5. Conclusion

According to the questionnaire survey, after the official media released relevant rumor refutation messages, the trust ratio of the audience in the refutation messages of the female entrepreneur event and the Bai Jingting event was 54.5% and 51.03%, respectively, while the rejection ratio was 12.6% and 27.12%, respectively. This highlights the importance of official rumor refutation work. Based on the analysis of the formation and dissemination mechanisms of rumors from a social psychology perspective,

this paper argues that managing internet rumors is a comprehensive and systematic task requiring the cooperation of various social entities to weaken the negative impact of internet rumors. As an important participant in the public space, the media should play a more active role in governance. Meanwhile, platforms and legal systems also play crucial roles in collaborative governance. Only by enhancing the collaborative governance role of all aspects can the public space be continuously purified, and the social dissemination of rumors be effectively curbed.

5.1 Convincing Truth

Rumors come with a sense of mystery, sparking public curiosity and making the truth elusive. Therefore, at the onset of a rumor, it is urgent to clearly clarify the truth. Firstly, self-media, as the main channel for information dissemination in the internet era, can guide the audience's attention by quickly and timely affirming the truth and denying rumors. Internet opinion leaders can facilitate the public's swift and accurate follow-up on rumor refutation by using open and transparent information release channels, verification by authoritative experts, and the presentation of data and facts. This increases the attractiveness and persuasiveness of the refutation information, further enhancing public recognition and trust in the truth. Mainstream media, with their broader influence and higher credibility, can delve into the news value behind rumors, conduct in-depth investigations, and report the truth comprehensively. They can produce substantial and impactful rumor refutation news to guide the public in correctly handling information and cultivating the ability to distinguish between true and false information. Secondly, repeated dissemination of refutation information helps break the continuous spread of rumors, fundamentally curbing further dissemination. Besides the refutation information dissemination matrix, the secondary and tertiary dissemination of refutation information should be strengthened. This means not only publishing true information on refutation platforms but also presenting it three-dimensionally, comprehensively, and repeatedly to the public through various channels. By continuously conveying true information to the public, the

spread of rumors can be gradually weakened, reducing their impact scope and ultimately eliminating the rumors.

5.2 Expanding Dissemination Scope: Mainstream Media as the Ballast of Truth

Rumors often spread faster than the truth, posing a significant challenge to rumor refutation work. Research in communication and cognitive psychology shows that rumors spread quickly because they possess high-quality dissemination characteristics that cater to the audience's novelty, emotional, and curiosity needs. In contrast, although refutation information focuses on the same topic as rumors, it often cannot achieve viral dissemination like rumors and struggles to gain the same attention and dissemination effect.

Currently, the public has diverse sources for obtaining news and public social information. If the media rely on the single-channel dissemination methods of the past, their influence will weaken. Therefore, the media must transition from a single print medium to online and offline, all-platform, multi-channel dissemination methods, achieving integrated media development. They should issue the same message across different channels and platforms, using short videos, news briefs, interactive media, and other popular dissemination forms to optimize the presentation of refutation information and stimulate audience interest. They can use captivating titles, vivid illustrations, and other methods to increase the attractiveness and readability of the information, attracting more readers' attention. Only by continuously expanding the media's influence as a positive energy role in the social public space can the impact of high-quality information be enhanced and the spread of rumors be weakened.

5.3 Sincere Dialogue

In recent years, there have been multiple instances where official rumor refutations have instead sparked more skepticism. Some rumors remain hard to dispel even after official debunking, not because of errors in the objective events, but due to insufficient capability in official rumor refutation. For the public, there is a need to shift thinking patterns and no longer view the phenomenon

of rumors in binary opposition. Traditionally, people tend to see rumors and the truth as two opposing extremes. Once a rumor is refuted, it is assumed that the truth must be revealed. However, the actual situation is often more complex. Even after refutation, some people continue to believe the rumors or remain skeptical of the refutation information. Therefore, the public should view rumors more rationally, recognizing that rumors are not simply opposites of truth but rather complex phenomena in social reality. For rumor refutation media, it is essential to deeply understand the actual and psychological needs of the public, respond promptly, and handle situations decisively. In the work of debunking rumors, it is not enough to merely provide information; there is also a need to address the emotional needs of the public to better guide them in correctly handling information. Additionally, for those who maliciously fabricate rumors, decisive measures should be taken to deal with them according to the law, sending a strong message to society about the severe attitude towards rumor-spreading behavior. Besides releasing an official “blue post” document, official rumor refutations should also publish more investigation details through appropriate news media while protecting privacy and not involving classified information. This supplements and verifies the authenticity of investigation results, making the complete picture and details of the facts withstand scrutiny and avoid self-contradictory statements. For previously spread rumors, timely supplementation and feedback of true information are necessary to complete people’s cognitive closure. Rumor information should not only be refuted; the truth should also be restored and actively fed back to reduce the public’s time and effort in seeking true information, thereby recalibrating public cognition.

5.4 Strengthening Internet Institutional Safeguards

The allocation of responsibility must be guaranteed by formal legal and regulatory systems. The “Internet Post Comment Service Management Regulations,” implemented in October 2017, clearly stipulate those online users, whether posting, replying, leaving messages, or posting bullet comments,

emoticons, and punctuation, are required to register with their real names. The real-name system eliminates the problem of complete anonymity online, making responsibilities clearer and less ambiguous. The core reason for the diffusion of responsibility mechanism is the ambiguity of responsibility, especially in the presence of many people, where responsibility becomes more blurred and dispersed, making it difficult for people to take responsibility voluntarily. The core of real-name management is to establish a baseline for regulating online rumors. Individuals who first, proactively, and intentionally spread rumors must ultimately be responsible for their actions. Since 2018, regulations formulated by the National Internet Information Office, such as the “Microblog Information Service Management Regulations” and the “Network Audiovisual Information Service Management Regulations,” require platforms to establish comprehensive rumor refutation mechanisms, providing legal and institutional guarantees for rumor governance. These regulations require platforms to establish comprehensive rumor refutation mechanisms, timely and effectively debunk rumors, enhance public information discernment abilities, and reduce the spread of rumors. This year, the Ministry of Public Security launched a special action against online rumors. Public security agencies cleaned up over 420,000 pieces of online rumor information, shut down or silenced more than 10,000 rumor-mongering accounts, and took legal action against rumor-mongering netizens, demonstrating that spreading rumors must come with the cost of disrupting public order.

With the development of artificial intelligence technology, platforms now have stronger capabilities to identify and deal with rumors. By applying AI technology, platforms can more quickly identify potential rumor information and take appropriate measures to address it, effectively curbing the spread of rumors. The use of such technological means will greatly enhance the efficiency and level of rumor governance. For example, the Weibo platform has established a rumor refutation section, speeding up the processing of reported information, strengthening the verification strength of the rumor refutation team, and developing information labeling

functions to improve platform governance. For instance, Weibo labels fast-forwarded information with “this post is unverified, do not believe it easily,” and labels verified rumor information with “this content is false, already handled.” Some social platforms also mark behaviors that misuse images with “the system recognizes that this image has been used within the site before.” Such labeling mechanisms break the strong need for cognitive closure, interrupt the heuristic thinking used in quickly browsing information, and remind and warn users that the information is “unverified,” “not necessarily accurate,” or “risky.” This delays the public’s need for cognitive closure, encourages analytical thinking about the message, and reduces blind forwarding behavior. Moreover, such labels clarify the potential for the information to be a rumor, as most people do not want to pay the social image cost of forwarding rumors, directly reducing the possibility of secondary rumor dissemination.

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