

# *The Impact of Public Opinion on Digital Media*

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**Abstract:** As Internet technology rapidly evolves and digital media technology becomes more widespread, Users can not only access content on digital media, but also participate in content on digital media through likes, comments, shares, and other means. This paper mainly studies the positive and negative impacts of public opinion on digital media. Conduct research through methods such as literature analysis, case analysis, and review. This paper finds that individuals have greater opportunities to offer their opinions on digital media. In this way, digital media enhances freedom of expression, and public opinion expressed through digital media serves to safeguard and uphold public rights as well. However, polarized public opinion in digital media can also have adverse effects, such as peer pressure and cyber bullying. Therefore, governments, schools and individuals should take their respective responsibilities to maintain the positive effects of digital media on public opinion, solve problems with public opinion in the digital media and better utilize the benefits of digital media and public opinion.

**Keywords:** Digital media, Public opinion, Internet, Cyber bullying

## **1. Introduction**

Human society has witnessed four communication revolutions in the years. The first one was the invention and use of writing, the second was the invention of printing, the third was the invention of the telegraph, and the fourth was the spread of the use of Internet-related technologies and the resulting rise of digital media [1]. The fourth revolution witnesses the further development of the Internet, promoting several Internet technology upgrades.

With the further development of the Internet, digital media are becoming more popular. Digital media is regarded as a series of new media forms accompanied by the development of the Internet, with digital technology, computer network technology, and mobile communication technology as the main support, and with digitization, interactivity, and overtime as the main characteristics [1].

Digital media plays an important role in constructing social relations. With the rapid development of society, there are many social media have been created and progressed quickly. Based on the development of different types of digital media platforms, the dissemination of content through social media platforms can shape and amply the public opinion that is presented on the platforms.

Public opinion is one of the forms in which social consciousness is directly emphasized through people's verbal expressions, as it is the subjectively inclined thoughts of a large number of people [2].

Public opinion is an enormous force in any era. In the field of public opinion research, Walter Lippmann was the first person to propose a joint study of public opinion and modern media, and he believed that "public opinion is basically the view formed by people's moral interpretation and organization of facts, and further put forward two important concepts of mimetic environment and stereotype", which vividly reveals the interaction between digital media and public opinion [3].

Nowadays, with the development and popularization of the Internet and digital media, it is possible for people to express opinions freely and timely. The establishment of digital media platforms has provided a space for users to share their comments and let them pay attention to a particular topic at the same time. The public opinion was once led by state media while it is led by users now.

In this paper, the impact of public opinion in digital media will be discussed, including the positive impact of Freedom of expression, and the negative impact of peer pressure and cyber bullying. The research of this paper will help the digital media platform understand its influence, especially for the protection of freedom of speech. In addition, the research of this paper helps society understand the positive and negative effects of public opinion on digital media and provides references and suggestions for individuals, schools and governments to implement relevant measures.

## **2. The Positive Impact of Public Opinion on Digital Media**

There are many types of digital media, focusing on different areas, just as Tiktok focuses on short videos, Weibo focuses on hot topics, and Today's Headlines focuses on news and information. These digital media cover a wide range of topics and provide several platforms for people with different interests to express their thoughts. In addition, digital media provide technical support for user interaction, empowering users to exercise their right to freedom of expression and contributing to the formation of public opinion. At the same time, public opinion has a regulatory role, and public participation generates traffic to digital media.

On January 16, 2024, 11 students of Huazhong Agricultural University reported their professor's suspected academic misconduct in real names on a digital media platform [4]. They wrote a report that "under the cover of false data and results, Professor Huang and related beneficiaries not only did not receive any disciplinary action but also obtained a large number of scientific research funds and project funding, as well as academic reputation and status", they called on the relevant authorities to thoroughly investigate and seriously deal with the professor's fake behavior. Then, netizens retweeted and commented on the incident on numerous digital media platforms, providing support for the behavior of the 11 students. The event once reached No. 1 on the Weibo hot search list, with 480 million topic reads, 37,000 discussions and 729,000 interactions [5]. The public opinion on digital media pushed the university to quickly investigate the incident and immediately set up a task force that night to initiate the investigation process. In the early morning of January 19, the university initially found that the professor had committed academic misconduct, stopped all of his positions and work on campus, and set up a supervisory group to be fully in charge of the cultivation of postgraduate students of this subject group. The university insists on zero tolerance for academic misconduct and teacher misconduct, and will further conduct a comprehensive investigation into the reported problems and deal with them in accordance with the rules and discipline according to the final conclusion of the investigation. This is a good example of how digital media helps users realize their freedom of expression and even helps them defend their rights.

As can be seen from the above event, digital media provide a platform for public opinion to be heard, and users can participate in guiding public opinion, enjoy freedom of expression, break down the role of power, play a regulatory role and contribute to a fairer society.

### 3. The Negative Impacts of Public Opinion on Digital Media

Indeed, public opinion in digital media has many positive impacts and brings lots of benefits to users' lives, such as platform content enrichment, enhanced interactivity, freedom of expression and public supervision and management. However, there are also some problems with public opinion in digital media, incorporating peer pressure as well as cyber bullying.

#### 3.1. Peer Pressure

First of all, fellow pressure is one of the negative effects caused by public opinion on digital media. Peer pressure is the influence felt by individuals in a peer group from their peers on their own attitudes, values, and behaviors to change their behavior in order to conform to the norms of the group [6].

For example, celebrity body image propaganda and so-called popular aesthetic trends in digital media often trigger body image anxiety among female groups. On digital media, the body image challenges such as A4 waist, putting coins on the collarbone, and comic legs are endless, and the public opinion's praise for slim body image is gradually polarized and deteriorated into the shackles of body image, especially the strict requirements on female body image, which brings great physical and psychological pressure to female groups.

Among them, the popular A4 waist challenges began with a female celebrity's personal microblog. In 2016, Yuan Shanshan, a Chinese celebrity, posted a picture on Weibo to show off her good figure. She placed a vertical piece of A4 paper in front of her waist. The width of her waist was about the same as the length of the short side of the A4 paper and captioned it with the message A4 waist. The microblog has 12,000 retweets, 24,000 comments and 399,000 likes [7]. Subsequently, many netizens competed with each other to imitate and show their A4 waists on digital media, and the A4 waist challenge triggered heated debates on digital media, and the A4 waist became synonymous with "perfect body" in public opinion. Then, public opinion in digital media keeps pressurizing women. Because of the pursuit of trends or the pressure of public opinion, women are trying to lose weight to get a slimmer waist, or even resorting to medication, surgery, and other means of damaging their bodies, which greatly jeopardizes their health.

In the newspapers at that time, in response to these crazy public opinions, experts had pointed out that unreasonable ways of losing weight would bring many hazards to people, such as osteoporosis that may be triggered, etc., long-term use of weight-loss drugs would also lead to kidney failure, and unreasonable dieting to lose weight would lead to heart failure. Therefore, experts suggest that a reasonable way to lose weight should be to maintain a healthy diet, actively participate in appropriate fitness exercises, do not blindly thin for beauty [8].

Nowadays, although the A4 waist challenge is no longer as hot as it was eight years ago, the notion that an A4 waist represents a good figure has become a stereotype that continues to influence the public's aesthetic judgment. Every day on digital media platforms, some netizens still take having an A4 waist as a compliment to others, posting and sharing their quest for an A4 waist. To a certain extent, this stereotypical aesthetic concept inhibits the development of diverse aesthetics, and especially undermines the individual's right to pursue the freedom of body image.

#### 3.2. Cyber Bullying

The second problem that will be discussed is cyber bullying. Some scholars are of the view that "cyber violence should be defined as illegal and criminal acts in which individuals or groups of individuals consciously disseminate illegal information through the Internet in order to target specific individuals or groups of individuals to commit repeated and sustained violations" [9]. Since cyber violence is widely manifested as cyber language violence, some scholars believe that "cyber language violence refers to the behavior of massively and centrally expressing insults, abuses and other personal attacks

against the person concerned of a certain event in cyberspace, resulting in damage to the right to reputation and other harmful consequences" [10]. The Regulations on the Management of Violent Information on the Internet (Draft for Public Comments) drafted by the Internet Information Office of China defines "violent information on the Internet" as follows: it refers to illegal and undesirable information such as insults and abuse, rumors and slanders, invasions of privacy, as well as moral abductions, degradation and discrimination, malicious speculation, and so on, that are centrally published on individuals through the Internet, and that seriously affect their physical and mental health. Undesirable information. Professor Liu Yanhong defines it as, "Cyber violence is a misbehavior that uses the Internet as a medium to infringe on the personality rights and interests of others and jeopardize the normal order of the cyberspace by means of defamation and insults, incitement of nuisance, publicity of privacy, and other forms of personal attacks" [11]. Digital media gives netizens the opportunity to express their opinions, but the polarization of public opinion has become one of the causes that induce cyber violence.

In recent years, cyber violence has occurred from time to time. On July 22, 2022, a 23-year-old girl, Zheng Hualing, shared a set of photos on her personal social media platform. In the picture, she dyed her hair pink and handed her master's degree acceptance letter to her grandpa in his hospital bed. The pink-haired girl lost her mother when she was 6 months old, and was raised by her grandfather. Letting her grandpa see her become a graduate student was one of her motivations for her to go to graduate school [12]. Zheng wanted to become a music teacher after graduation, but her photo was rumored to be fake news of "an old man who got into graduate school with an illness and married a little girl," which was read by more than 3 million people. The netizens did not know the truth, but they badmouthed Zheng.

Although Zheng kept explaining the truth rationally, insulting words still appeared frequently in his comment section. The cyber violence lasted for half a year, Zheng suffered from depression, and still took the proper way to protect his rights by calling the police, filing a complaint, organizing the information about the cyber violence, and looking for a lawyer, but it made little difference. The cyber violence also spread to real life, and even evolved into violence in schools. On January 23, 2023, Zheng committed suicide.

Exploring the logic behind the incident, anonymity on digital media, while promoting freedom of expression, also makes it harder for regulators to enforce the law, making it difficult for rumors to be completely banned. At the same time, the public's stereotypical image of students makes it biased against students who dye their hair. In addition, the media literacy of both media organizations and netizens needs to be improved. Most netizens, without a full understanding of the comments to be made and with weak critical thinking, are easily influenced by media organizations, leading to the polarization of public views. At the same time, some Internet users do not realize the great impact of their own negative comments and fail to take responsibility for their own words. Finally, the popularity of the Internet allows people of multiple ages to participate in the same platform, which can easily lead to arguments and confrontations due to generational differences and different concepts. Overall, the anonymity of digital media, the stereotypical influence of the public, and the lack of media literacy combine to make public opinion incidents easy to occur and induce cyber violence.

#### 4. Conclusion

With the rapid development of Internet technology and the popularization of digital media technology, the public has more opportunities for participation and evaluation. Digital media promote freedom of expression, and public opinion in digital media plays a role in regulating and defending public rights, but polarized public discourse also leads to negative impacts, such as peer pressure and cyber violence.

To perpetuate the positive impacts of public opinion in digital media and ameliorate the negative impacts, the government must establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to identify areas that

need improvement and formulate policies that mandate the inclusion of media literacy education in the national education system. Schools can introduce media knowledge and skills courses or workshops into the formal education system and encourage students to participate in various media-related practical activities. It is important for individuals to expose themselves to a wide range of media sources to gain a balanced and diverse understanding of information and develop critical thinking skills to evaluate the credibility, bias, and accuracy of media content. In these ways, create a cleaner online environment. In this paper, the impact of digital media on public opinion has not been discussed in depth, and the research methods of questionnaire survey and data analysis have not been used in the research process. Future research can focus on the impact of digital media on public opinion.

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