

An Analysis of the Influencing Factors of Public Opinion Reversal

-- Based on a Case Study of the Hu Xinyu Incident

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Abstract: With the rapid development of social media, netizens are easily guided by the different information online, which could lead to frequent public opinion reversal. This study focuses on the Hu Xinyu incident that happened on the Chinese internet between 2022 and 2023, which caused an intense discussion followed by several public opinion reversals. This paper provides a case study of the incident by dividing the process into four periods, looking at the specific comments, timeline, and reversals, then analyzing the influencing factors of public opinion reversal present in this incident. After analyzing the case, it is found that information type, intensity, time of release, and information leaders are all important factors in public opinion reversal. A long period of time slot with no information from the officials present would be the time when fake information is most intense, and a reversal is at the largest chance of happening. Based on that, this paper then gives a few suggestions. Authoritative media should keep a calm and timely manner when reporting. They should lead the audience on the right track and increase credibility. On the other hand, we media accounts should refrain from making definitive remarks on news events and assist authoritative media. Media users should look at a variety of information and not take sides easily online to avoid being guided by public opinion and avoid public opinion reversal in general.

Keywords: public opinion reversal, fake news, authoritative media, we media

1. Introduction

When a social news item first appears, it spreads rapidly on the internet through different network platforms. Upon seeing the news, netizens initially form their own perspectives on a certain issue and then look at other people's opinions on social media. With today's media being such an open environment, anyone could freely express their thoughts and opinions online, which would be viewed by hundreds and thousands of people per second around the world. Along with the anonymity of the internet, people are more likely to share their thoughts and respond to others' opinions online. As a result, public opinion is formed. Public opinion can be defined as the collective judgments outside the sphere of government that affect political decision-making [1]. To be more specific, public opinion is the concentrated embodiment of netizens' opinions, attitudes, and emotions on the network. However, with the continuous intervention of external information like fake news or extremists in the

crowd, the netizens' attitudes towards the event change accordingly, which could reverse public opinion unexpectedly [2]. During the process, there usually exists information or opinion leaders guiding netizens in different directions, which could be broadly divided into authoritative media accounts and we media accounts. In this paper, the authoritative media is defined as media accounts operated by official organizations, governments, or enterprises, examples include BBC, CNN, New York Times, China Daily, etc. We media is defined as other media accounts operated by personal accounts or unofficial entertainment organizations. For example, anonymous accounts that claim they have information hidden by officials and popular influencers are all considered as we media accounts. These two types of information leaders both have played crucial roles in the reversal process of public opinion. This paper focuses on the Hu Xinyu incident that occurred recently in China and had several different public opinion reversal points due to different factors. The Hu Xinyu incident refers to what happened in China from November 2022 to February 2023 where a high school student went missing for three months, giving rise to various fake news stories and several public opinion reversals. This paper divides public opinion reversal into four parts, including the gestation period, the outbreak period, the reversal period, and the extinction period, to analyze the influencing factors of public opinion reversal in the Hu Xinyu incident [3]. By studying the Hu Xinyu incident and the factors that influenced its public opinion reversal, this paper provides advice to media organizations and netizens on how to promote a better media environment. Media organizations need to report accurate and factual information backed up with evidence to prevent the spread of fake news. Netizens also need to be aware of the factors that can influence public opinion reversal. By promoting media literacy and distinguishing between fake news and accurate information, people can create a better online environment for sharing and discussing social news.

2. The Hu Xinyu Incident

2.1. Gestation Period

The gestation period is the silent period that occurs after the incident but before public discussion starts to emerge [3]. During this period, the media is either unaware of the incident or very few media recognized it and reported it, but netizens are not yet discussing it. The people bringing it to the public might be news organizations or netizens seeking attention. The gestation period is usually the best period to seize the initiative online and guide public opinion. For the Hu Xinyu incident, ifeng.com was the first one that reported and bought public attention to this case where Hu Xinyu, a 15-year-old Jiangxi high school student, has already been missing for one month starting from October 14, 2022. As reported, it was a usual day, the cameras on the campus were working properly and they did see Hu Xinyu walking out of his dorm. However, there was a 100 meters blind area between his dorm and his classroom: that was when Hu Xinyu went missing. Hu's mother stated that when his son went missing, he only brought a recording pen, all the other things like his phone, watch, and identity card were all in his dormitory. Ifeng.com posted the report and a video on November 16, 2022, which was one month after he went missing. During that one month, the school organized search teams and didn't find anything. They reported to the police, but the police and rescue team also didn't find anything inside nor outside of the school. By that time, there were only less than 400 likes and 43 comments under the post, and most of the people online were unaware of what happened. Most of the comments under the post were purely expressing how strange it was that no one had found anything. It was also worth noticing that the school only said that they were still searching and did not let out any other information. Perhaps it was their reluctance and inefficiency that gave people the chance to make up information, which led to the following periods of public opinion reversal.

2.2. Outbreak Period

The outbreak period is when the incident is first reported on the media and gains widespread attention. During this period, netizens share their initial reactions and thoughts on the incident, and public opinion then starts to form [3]. Rumors and fake news appear, which causes the polarization of public opinion,

In the Hu Xinyu incident, three main types of fake information appeared on different social media platforms that guided people's opinions, including made-up causes for the disappearance of Hu, fabricated progress of information, and impersonation of relevant people. First, ever since the incident occurred, many we media accounts have speculated reasons for Hu's disappearance, provoking antagonistic emotions, causing confusion, and mixing the truth. The Baidu account "darling18425" claimed that Hu's school purchased a large amount of surgical equipment and Hu was taken for research since he had panda blood. The Weibo account "7812608894" released that Hu must have been deceived into the mountain, and his murder was disguised as a suicide. Some people said that Hu's organs were sold for transplantation with the TikTok account "hjd475" posting an audio clip that recorded a doctor's voice talking about it [4]. These we media accounts caused a bad social impact with many leading public opinions on the incident, as people start to doubt the official's credibility. Many comments under these posts questioned the authoritative media for hiding certain things, saying that they didn't dare to declare any results because of other powers. Moreover, many online accounts also took advantage of the public's high attention to the progress of the incident and fabricated a lot of posts on the "latest news of the Hu Xinyu incident" as clickbait for popularity and commerce motivations. Examples include Hu being found in a secret laboratory in the mountains, Hu being found with missing organs, or other clues like clothes with blood in the woods or broken bones in the septic tank of the school [4]. These online rumors had no basis and were only intended to disturb people. They were detrimental to the investigation and caused great interference in the public opinion reversal process. Impersonation of relevant people worked the best, as people would tend to trust the people with less power and those who acted sincerely. Examples include a Baidu user named "ilusions" calling for help online while claiming that he was Hu Xinyu himself and that he had been kidnapped and imprisoned. TikTok accounts like "ssyg800" and "96222866030" changed their alias to Hu Xinyu's sister, brother, or even father, and posted fake videos under that title [4]. Due to all these kinds of fake information, the Hu Xinyu incident gained widespread attention online with thousands of comments under different posts and millions of views for videos associated with this topic. Altogether, these types of accounts and information were increasing rapidly as people saw how effectively and efficiently videos and posts related to this topic could bring them popularity. Most importantly, they brought detrimental effects on the investigation process as well as the credibility of officials and authoritative media accounts. At this point, public opinion is guided in different directions by different information leaders on the internet. The netizens have a hard time trying to distinguish what is fake and what is real, public opinion is dispersed and chaotic.

2.3. Reversal Period

The reversal period is when public opinion starts to shift due to external factors. These factors can include new information or the actions of government or authoritative media organizations [3]. In the Hu Xinyu incident, the most important external factor was Hu's dead body finally being found. On January 29, 2023, Hu Xinyu's dead body was found in the woods beside a granary not far from his school. When he was found, he was hung with his shoelaces, but recordings in his recording pen were deleted. With the discovery of Hu's dead body also came the false tales betraying itself, as many rumors were proved to be wrong. By this time, public opinion online started to lean towards the officials and authoritative media, more and more people stood out and called on people to believe in

the authorities. Still, there were people saying that what we see is not the truth and there are pieces of information hidden, but they were not the majority. On February 2, 2023, CCTV news held a press conference on this case. On that conference, they again explained and clarified many rumors and fake news on social media. The audio files in the recording pen were recovered, they recorded Hu Xinyu himself expressing suicidal intent. For the question of how he was able to get out of school, there were moss remains on the soles of his shoes which was evidence that he climbed out. No organs were missing, no drug residue, and no sign of homicide. After this press conference, public opinion is reversed, and the truth is finally revealed. Hu Xinyu committed suicide because of his loneliness, autism, and world-weary tendencies. The farce on the internet stems from both parents not paying enough attention to Hu Xinyu's psychological condition and the search work not being thorough enough, resulting in long-term chaos of public opinion and rumors.

2.4. Extinction Period

The extinction period is when public interest in the incident begins to fade, and public opinion returns to its original state [3]. During this period, it is important for media organizations to continue to report accurate and factual information to prevent public opinion from being swayed once again. In the Hu Xinyu incident, the officials and organizations continued to clarify different rumors and fake news, bringing back the truth to the public. Psychologists posted videos online, calling on schools and parents to pay more attention to adolescent mental health. Feb 2, 2023, *People's Daily* published an article titled "The Hu Incident: Present the truth, let the rational return" giving a conclusion to the whole incident [4]. On February 12, 2023, cac.gov.cn reported that 1,894 accounts were punished for spreading rumors, guiding public judgment, and causing adverse social impact [5]. The authoritative media stood out and took the step out to warn we media users spreading rumors that they are seen and will have to bear the consequences. At this point, the Hu Xinyu incident which lasted nearly four months finally came to an end and gradually faded out of the public's view.

3. Influencing Factors

The widespread fake information on social media was the main reason why the Hu Xinyu incident gained so much attention. A study by Hou Zhu and Bin Hu used an agent-based model to prove that information would affect public opinion reversal. The study stated that information as a broad topic could be subdivided into information strength, time of releasing information, and types of information, all of which had different levels of impact on the reverse process of public opinion [6]. In this case, the long blank period between Hu Xinyu missing and him being found gave we media accounts and users the time to make up and spread different kinds of fake information. Moreover, since the authorities didn't have enough information and could not clarify all the rumors, the information strength for information provided by we media accounts were very strong. Netizens in the process easily fell for information that seemed trustworthy without the authoritative media's intervention. Combining strength, blank period of time, and the three types of information, these external information spreading rumors for the Hu Xinyu incident were both intense and strong, and proved to be extremely successful in guiding public opinion. Furthermore, the discourse power was divided among the authorities and all the different people holding what they call the "true information", leading to a decrease in trust in the police and authorities, a rise in public opinion, and eventually public opinion reversal. On the other hand, two studies both mentioned the importance of information leaders in such a process, these might be people who made up fake information for popularity and commerce motivations, but they also might be the so-called "populists" on the internet. Populist groups believe that the interest of ordinary people is suppressed by power elites. For a hot social event, they often incite netizens' emotions and attack people with different opinions [7,8]. In the Hu Xinyu

incident, these are the people who always talked about conspiracies. They did not believe in the police or the authorities, spreading information that the authorities and police were suppressed by the rich and therefore didn't pay attention to really investigating the Hu Xinyu incident. They backed up their statement, claiming that even if they did pay attention, the reality was also hidden and suppressed due to illegal reasons. Moreover, they described the case to be more mysterious, provoking people's emotions on all the bad things that could have happened, which in turn intensifies the media environment, leading to public opinion reversal.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Authoritative Media

As today's media environment builds up upon a quick-paced spread of information, multiple media are in seek of hot spots and public interests instead of the truth, which is why fake news and rumors appear online. Authoritative media, being one of the main sources netizens get their information from, their role in opinion reversal is critical and their response is a necessary condition for the outcome [9]. If the authoritative media continues to report correct news, they could lead the opinion towards the truth. In contrast, if the authoritative media reports false news, doubt could easily be created, and public opinion reversal could easily follow after. In the case of Hu Xinyu, it can be seen that under the posts by authoritative media, most people showed support and belief towards the information they gave out. Therefore, authoritative media should take their role to stand out and clarify certain rumors or false information and keep the audience on the right track. Moreover, when reporting the news, they should maintain a timely and calm voice to lead the public opinion in the right direction.

4.2. We Media

The current we media accounts are the main leading forces for public opinion reversal. Since there is a relatively low barrier of entry, and most people are posting for popularity and commerce motivations, anyone could be we media accounts leading public opinion online with a very low credibility. However, due to so many different information online and the authoritative media not responding to certain rumors, the discourse power is easily dispersed between different accounts, which disturbs the media environment. Therefore, it is important for the we media accounts to strengthen news reporting skills and journalism professionalism, and refrain from making definitive remarks on news events when the full picture is unknown. Influencers should try to have a positive influence on any incident online by assisting and supporting authoritative media accounts or alerting netizens to not easily trust information online.

4.3. Media Users

As the media environment today is very complex with a lot of fake news present, most internet users are easily guided by other people's opinions. In the study "psychology of fake news" led by Gordon Pennycook, they found a substantial disconnection between what people believed and what they will share on social media [10]. When linked with the concept of "conformity" in psychology, people would likely follow what the majority says online even if it's not what they really think. This idea links to public opinion reversal because as more and more different information appear on the internet with people supporting different sides, there is eventually going to be a reversal. Therefore, users should improve media literacy and independent thinking abilities. When encountering a piece of information online, they should have the ability to identify fake news, to question it and even criticize it. In addition, they should look at a more diverse range of platforms to get a bigger picture of the real case, instead of looking at one post and believing everything it says. A study led by Tinggui Chen

found that individual conservation is very important in the process. If the individual conversation is strong, even if there is a high amount of external information intervention, there will be no obvious reversal of public opinion [11]. Therefore, it is also important to not take sides easily, but remain neutral and listen to the different views from both sides, avoid being guided by public opinion and fake information.

5. Conclusions

In summary, this paper is set out to understand the influencing factors of public opinion reversal through the incident of Hu Xinyu that happened in China. By dividing the incident into four periods: the gestation period, the outbreak period, the reversal period, and the extinction period, it is found that information and information leaders are crucial in influencing the process of opinion reversal. These findings suggest that in general the media environment still needs to be enhanced. The different media accounts and media users should be careful with the information they send out or receive and take a positive role in guiding public opinion. An important limitation lies in the fact that it was not possible to assess the specific number of public opinions moved by fake news and fake information, therefore the intensity of the effect is unknown. Moreover, the generalizability of these results is subject to certain limitations as it is unknown if all the public opinion reversal processes are similar to the Hu Xinyu incident. More information on the intensity of public opinion reversal and the effects by fake information would help us to establish a greater degree of accuracy on this matter.

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