Local Government Online Public Opinion Governance in the New Media Era Based on the Perspective of Public Crisis Management

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Abstract: The advent of new media has brought about convenient communication, but it has also posed challenges to the governance of social public opinion. This study analyzes the dissemination characteristics of network public opinion in the new media era, including its main types and basic features. It summarizes the various difficulties in the governance of government network public opinion at present, such as the relatively lagging legal construction, conservative governance concepts, the need to improve the ability to manage network public opinion, and the need to improve response mechanisms. It points out that these are the main reasons for the inadequate guidance of public opinion and governance by local governments at present. This study proposes that improving the construction of legal systems, innovating governance concepts for network public opinion, and improving guarantee systems are specific strategies to enhance the crisis response, public opinion governance, and guidance by local governments in the new media environment.

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, the rapid development of the Internet and the achievements of information technology have brought benefits to people's lives and provided possibilities for the arrival of the new media era. Nowadays, people can access information, transmit information, and understand society without leaving their homes. In this era of accelerated information dissemination, there are also more ways for netizens to express their opinions, and citizen participation in politics has also found new channels [1]. However, while new media plays a positive role in online politics, policy discussions, and governance, its characteristics of wildness, openness, immediacy, and freedom have also accumulated a large number of negative effects. It is prone to hype and exaggeration, which can magnify problems infinitely and easily lead to misleading uninformed netizens, allowing them to vent their dissatisfaction and negative emotions. This has become a dilemma that the government must break through in the process of governing online public opinion. Since the 18th National Congress, the Party Central Committee has put forward new requirements for our country's public opinion management work, attaching great importance to online public opinion and online public sentiment. In the current rapid development of new media technology, online public opinion has presented new characteristics and new problems, posing challenges to

government and social governance. How to view and handle online public opinion in order to improve the level of government and social governance has become a new topic for governments at all levels. This article starts with the characteristics and problems of online public opinion in the new media era, analyzes the challenges that these new changes bring to government and social governance, and explores corresponding governance strategies.

2. Characteristics of online public opinion in the new media era

2.1 Elements of network public opinion

(1) Netizens, "Netizens are the narrow sense of the subject of online public opinion," mainly consist of parties involved in events, ordinary netizens, and opinion leaders. In the process of public opinion development, ordinary netizens, as the majority of the subjects of public opinion, play an important role in the development of public opinion. In terms of quantity, ordinary netizens have an absolute advantage, and their influence is also expanding. Different netizens have their own different opinions on the same public opinion, but most netizens generally have a herd mentality. Their final choices reflect the dynamics of collective behavior, which leads to the continuous fermentation and escalation of public opinion events. "This herd mentality of netizens manifests as a collective preference of the public for a certain opinion, which significantly influences the ultimate polarization direction of public opinion evolution" [2].

(2) Emotion, it is the catalyst that drives the development of online public opinion. Because emotion, like traditional public opinion events, is also an important factor in the generation and evolution of public opinion. Due to the interference of emotional factors, people who express dissatisfaction with certain public events gather on the internet due to similar viewpoints and similar emotions, ultimately triggering the formation of public opinion. In the entire public opinion environment, emotion and rationality are in a state of opposition. When emotion takes the dominant position, emotions can affect rational thinking, and the venting of emotions can seriously affect its fairness and objectivity. When this emotional public opinion accumulates to a certain extent online, it will induce the occurrence of actual social actions and have an impact on social stability and order.

(3) Communication interaction, the two-way interactive relationship between media, government, and netizens in the development of public opinion, to a certain extent, affects the trend of public opinion. After a public opinion event occurs, the media plays an important role in the timely integration and dissemination of information, and in meeting public concerns. According to the characteristics of the development of emergencies, the media can lead different core issues by actively setting the agenda and releasing information in stages. "The two-way interactive relationship between the government and netizens in the development of public opinion constructs the 'growth upper limit model' of public opinion heat: at the beginning stage of a public opinion event, the number of posts by netizens will increase rapidly, and the attention and participation of netizens will also soar rapidly, thereby promoting the escalation of the event. After the event heats up, the hotspot will reverse to increase netizens' attention, forming a positive feedback loop; the heat of public opinion will increase the government's attention and the speed of handling the event, while netizens' satisfaction with the government's handling results is negatively correlated with the heat of public opinion, forming a negative feedback loop" [3].

2.2 Main types of online public opinion

The Public Opinion Information Bureau of the Central Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China classifies public opinion into "political network public opinion,

economic network public opinion, cultural network public opinion, social network public opinion, and complex network public opinion; according to the process of formation, it can be divided into spontaneous network public opinion and conscious network public opinion; according to composition, it can be divided into factual information and opinion information; according to domestic and foreign, it can be divided into domestic network public opinion and overseas network public opinion" [4].

In fact, the academic and political circles have many different classification methods, and different classifications have different starting points. Any classification is a description of the objective world, which helps us grasp the clues of network public opinion. At the same time, any classification may also bring various problems, and may lead to the situation of "putting various events into one basket". However, regardless of the classification, network public opinion is related to the following factors. First, network public opinion is closely related to social changes. The current pyramid-shaped social structure in our country brings problems such as unfair distribution of economic and social resources, serious polarization between the rich and the poor, and lack of buffer classes, which easily causes the people, especially the bottom class, to lack a sense of achievement, and thus express their doubts, dissatisfaction, and even resentment online. Second, many network public opinions are closely related to collective events. Rights protection struggles, social disputes, organized crimes, and social venting are relatively extreme forms of network public opinion. The whole process, from online to offline, from onlookers to participants, from the fuse to the explosion, is worth the government's attention, as a series of problems behind the events lead to the occurrence of network public opinion. Third, network public opinion is different from traditional public opinion. The "unorganized organizational power" on the Internet brings problems such as unorganized mobilization, no interest demands, non-authoritative information, and no bottom line rules, which have a far greater negative impact on society than traditional public opinion, and the methods of dealing with it are also different from before.

2.3 Communication characteristics of network public opinion

The current network media is developing rapidly, and the technical means are constantly updating. Network public opinion is frequent, and the ways in which the public expresses demands and emotions have changed [5]. From the perspective of public opinion generation, dissemination, and divergence, the following characteristics are mainly presented.

(1) "Scattering" - Butterfly Effect

In the network, any user can publish information, disseminate information, and express opinions. Combining the real-time and additional characteristics of the network, the consequences of the spread of network public opinion are difficult to control. From the perspective of network public opinion, the butterfly effect usually manifests as netizens expressing false opinions openly and freely due to their one-sided understanding of events and the lack of information. After being amplified and rapidly disseminated through network media platforms, it leads to the emergence of public opinion crises, thus becoming online rumors that threaten social order. The five stages of public opinion development are the incubation period, manifestation period, growth period, evolution period, outbreak period, and decline period [6]. In all these five stages, the butterfly effect can be triggered. In the incubation period, sudden public opinion events occur, and conflicts between relevant public opinion subjects are obvious, especially when sensitive labels such as "involving officials, corruption, and wealth" appear, the "public anger" on the internet easily ignites. In the manifestation period, factors such as videos and photos taken by netizens being exposed on the internet and the lack of transparency in official media information easily lead to negative comments from netizens. In the growth period, the deep disclosure of the involved subjects about

the insider of the event and the comments of opinion leaders easily lead to the follow-up of netizens. In the outbreak period, individual netizens deliberately induce and spread false information and rumors, causing collective confusion. In the decline period, improper handling by government departments and improper intervention by authoritative figures can also keep the public opinion situation high.

(2) "Paranoia" - Primacy Effect

The concept of the primacy effect was first proposed by American psychologist Loftus. When different pieces of information are combined, people tend to pay more attention to the information that comes first. They consider the later information to be non-essential and accidental, preferring to interpret the later information based on the earlier information they have learned, thus forming a consistent impression. In the current development of new media technology, the timeliness of official and news agency releases has weakened. Many public opinion hotspots are first disseminated by the public, forming public opinion points, and then official and news agencies pay attention and report on them. After an event occurs, the public is eager to know the truth. If the authorities cannot provide timely and accurate information in the first place, then the "unreliable" information created by netizens will spread on the internet, leading to a large number of rumors. Even if the authorities try to make up for it later, it is useless because they have already lost control of public opinion. During the growth period of public opinion, a large amount of true and false information about the event spreads explosively. Even if the authorities disclose the truth of the event in subsequent investigations, due to the primacy effect, the public often maintains a skeptical attitude towards the truth, making the facts appear weak and powerless in the face of rumors. Furthermore, the characteristic of internet rumors being ingrained will greatly influence the public's judgment of events, causing a deviation in public understanding and misleading public discourse and behavior.

(3) "Blind obedience" - Herd Mentality

Due to the complexity of the composition of netizens, "blind obedience" is an important phenomenon that exists in some netizens in terms of expressing opinions, and the "herd effect" comes from this. Different channels of information acquisition and different media focuses on news reporting all to varying degrees limit netizens' understanding of information. In an information society with an expanding desire for expression, sudden events can cause waves of opinions, without a comprehensive understanding of the whole event, netizens begin to express their own views. In the process of public opinion fermentation, some netizens either do not have a clear opinion or choose to abandon their own opinions and follow the views of others in order to cater to the so-called "mainstream". The "one person posts, many people pay attention" network appeal can sometimes become a turning point or tipping point for public opinion. Due to the lack of independent thinking habits among most netizens and the fixed mindset of "going with the flow", after being encouraged by "opinion leaders", public opinion can become one-sided, and the herd effect arises as a result. The herd effect can bring about extreme speech, quickly leading to the polarization of public opinion, which is not conducive to the revelation of the truth of the event and can also harm social health. However, the herd effect is not a terrifying threat, if it is guided, it can also achieve the rapid dissemination and popularization of information, increase information transparency, and improve efficiency. Therefore, the "herd effect" in online public opinion can also be utilized by the government to improve the efficiency of information dissemination, and guide the development of online public opinion in a healthy and positive direction.

3. Existing problems of local government's online public opinion governance in the new media era

In the information society, the influence of online public opinion on social stability and public sentiment is becoming increasingly important. Accurately grasping online public opinion and correctly guiding online public opinion is of great significance for maintaining social stability. Since 2010, new media represented by Weibo has set off a wave of public participation in social governance. The response strategies of governments at all levels have also changed from the initial stable suppression of "blocking and intercepting" to a more gentle, inclusive, and mature approach [7].

3.1 Lack of legal texts on crisis response and new media norms

The emergence of new media has brought us great convenience, but everything has two sides. For example, most Weibo users are anonymous and often have problems such as irresponsible forwarding and commenting, liking to watch negative news, and not analyzing false information. In addition, in recent years, netizens have paid high attention to topics related to supervision of public power, livelihood, and human rights. "Weibo governance" has gradually become a new form of people's participation in social affairs management. The spread characteristics of new media are combined with various social problems, and emotional venting and populist tendencies caused by interest conflicts often fill Weibo space.

Online public opinion affects the government's image. As early as the 20th century, countries such as the United Kingdom and South Korea began to try relevant network legislation, trying to regulate new media from a legal level. It is worth mentioning that South Korea is the earliest country to establish a "network real-name system" and "blacklist system". Through the formulation of the "Internet Content Filtering Order" and the "Identification Standards for Improper Internet Sites", relevant government departments are given the power to review and filter Internet content without violating the law, and encourage netizens to supervise and report information. At the same time, the real-name system can also regulate the behavior of communicators from the source. If someone uses the Internet for illegal activities and harms the rights of others, their personal information will be held accountable by government departments and bear legal responsibility.

In the process of government public opinion governance, the existing laws and regulations based on the eight-part legal system cannot fully cover it. The government still has problems of "copying" or "borrowing" existing laws and regulations that are not compatible [8]. From legislation to law enforcement, and then to interpretation of the law, the problem of the lack of laws and regulations can be reflected in various aspects of the judicial system, and it can even be said that there is insufficient legislation, lax law enforcement, and impunity for violations.

3.2 Lack of awareness of the significance of public opinion governance

With the development of the times, the government's closed management concept of "stability overrides everything" has gradually been replaced by a more diverse and inclusive open mindset. Faced with online public opinion, there are fewer crude traditional methods such as "blocking, blocking, and suppressing". Various levels of media have begun to learn to use new media such as Weibo and WeChat to release information, so as to cut off the spread of online rumors from the source and achieve administrative transparency. It is undeniable that there are still problems in the handling of sudden public incidents by governments at all levels. Although the Chinese government is paying more and more attention to online public opinion, there is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored, that is, the higher-level government pays more attention to the ideological trends on the

Internet, while the lower-level government neglects it. Government departments at all levels pay more attention to official website forums and pay less attention to non-governmental or private forums. They attach great importance to the online forums of central-level media, but pay less attention to local online forums. Local government departments take no action in the early stages of the outbreak of online public opinion, missing the golden opportunity for intervention. Some local government departments have insufficient understanding of the status of monitoring online public opinion, their responses to sudden public incidents are official and stereotyped, they do not grasp the key points of public concern, and they even have narrow and one-sided views on online public opinion, which gives people a clear sense of lack of sincerity. In the era of new media, everyone is a self-media, and everyone can express their opinions. Everyone has a microphone in front of them, which puts higher requirements on the government's network information management and governance. When dealing with sudden incidents, it is far from enough for the government to only rely on past experience to release information. It should also timely understand and grasp various public opinions and respond to public doubts, and do its best in every aspect. If one aspect is not done well, it will not only fail to ease the situation and resolve conflicts, but also easily lose the initiative in the discourse.

3.3 Inadequate response to public opinion after its emergence

Crisis public opinion and the suppression of the spread of public opinion have become issues that the government must consider when facing online public opinion crises. If the government handles it improperly, it will lead to the rampant spread of rumors, which can exacerbate the situation and undermine the government's credibility. (1) Delayed response refers to the government's failure to react promptly and take the initiative to understand the evolution of public opinion when facing online public opinion crises. Especially in the era of new media, delaying response often means the diffusion and spread of public opinion. (2) False response refers to the government's adoption of negative behaviors such as fabricating excuses, perfunctory actions, and lazy procrastination to manage the development of emergencies. Such an attitude easily triggers criticism and backlash from netizens, leading to more crises and "secondary disasters" arising from a single crisis. (3) Overstepping response. Relevant government departments adopt mandatory administrative measures in response to online public opinion, such as restricting personal freedom and imposing property penalties on relevant individuals using state power. Such authoritarian measures are likely to trigger a new round of public opinion backlash.

4. Countermeasures for Local Government Online Public Opinion Governance in the New Media Era

4.1 Strengthening Regulatory Construction

(1) Further improvement of the legal system on government crisis response

From a micro perspective, legal and institutional innovation should be given top priority in the current public opinion management strategy. National laws and regulations should be enacted as soon as possible to address issues such as inappropriate content dissemination and infringement of citizens' privacy rights in new media communication. Government departments and judicial authorities should accelerate legislation. At the same time, the enforcement of real-name registration on the internet should be strengthened, ensuring that there are laws to abide by, strict law enforcement, and accountability for violations. Online public opinion is not without limits and must be bound by the law. Online speech should comply with the law, uphold public interests and social norms. From a macro perspective, the formulation of a basic law specifically for the governance of

internet public opinion should be expedited, in line with the fundamental requirements of the Constitution and compatible with the Criminal Law, Civil Law, State Secrets Law, and the Emergency Response Law of the People's Republic of China. Reference should be made to the existing Regulations on Internet Security Protection Measures, Interim Provisions on Jurisdiction of Internet Information Network Cases by Internet Supervision Departments, Measures for the Administration of Internet Information Services, and Regulations on the Disclosure of Government Information of the People's Republic of China, elevating these regulations to the status of laws. Emphasizing the importance of government's attention to the governance of online public opinion, it also establishes legal standards for government execution [9,10]. The legal system should be improved from three aspects: the purpose, object, and content of legal regulation.

(2) Further improve the legal system related to government information disclosure

It is not enough to establish laws related to public opinion for the government, media, and netizens. It is also necessary to address the crisis events themselves. The crisis events themselves may not be controllable by humans, and it may not be possible to legally restrict them. However, the government can regulate the response measures after the crisis occurs, such as government information disclosure. In the face of crisis events, the principles and methods of government handling can be regulated through legislation. In China, no regulations have been made at the level of handling, and local governments at all levels resolve them according to the actual situation. The United States established the first law related to crisis handling as early as 1950, namely the "Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act," which detailed the principles and coordination methods for government response after a crisis event occurs. Subsequently, the "Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act" was supplemented in detail. Examples include the "National Security Law," "National Emergency State Law," "Disaster Reduction and Emergency Assistance Law," as well as regulations such as the "National Emergency Plan" and "Federal Emergency Plan," forming a relatively complete legislative system for emergency response to sudden events. With the regulation of the legal system, the government has laws to rely on in the process of handling crisis events, which can avoid multiple standards causing public questioning and triggering a new round of online public opinion.

(3) Further integrate the legal system for the dissemination of new media

The development of online media has posed new challenges to China's online public opinion environment. As the birthplace of the Internet, the United States has a fairly comprehensive legal system for the management of new media. In the face of the complex and diverse public opinion arena, the constraint on online public opinion should follow the steps of rule of law review. The rule of law norms for netizens' speech should not be implemented based on traditional written law thinking, but rather based on case law, which can have a more effective result in managing public opinion. By using past cases of punishment for netizens' speech and through the publication of case regulations, netizens' words and actions can be regulated in a clear and understandable manner. Whether it is the legal norms for the government or the norms for the media and netizens, the improvement of laws and regulations should be combined with the new media-led public opinion environment. We should learn from the Western legal system, combine it with China's national conditions, integrate the existing laws and regulations related to online public opinion, and establish a perfect and advanced legal system for public opinion.

4.2 Innovative Concepts of Online Public Opinion Governance

(1) Establish a people-oriented value orientation. It is the core of the scientific outlook on development and applicable to various fields of government operation. The government should consistently adhere to the "people-oriented" value orientation, apply it in crisis public opinion

management, and fully leverage the important role of people in public opinion governance. In the process of network public opinion governance, attention should be paid to media literacy, crisis management literacy, and humanistic feelings. Relevant personnel in the release venue should first express concern and sympathy for the casualties, inconvenience, and pain caused to people. They should not "disturb grief" or cause secondary harm to the families of victims of crisis events. It is necessary to adhere to the principle of people's safety first and government public opinion guidance.

(2) Standardize moral self-discipline and restraint. Moral self-discipline and restraint are divided according to personnel types, including government, media, and netizens. Media self-discipline and netizen self-discipline rely on government's correct guidance and are also subject to legal constraints. The media regularly receives training from the government propaganda department to cultivate self-discipline awareness and improve the level of public opinion information dissemination. Opinion leaders such as online celebrities and forum administrators should be particularly good at self-discipline training to form a benign network public opinion environment of self-restraint.

(3) Improve the principle of equality and justice. Public opinion governance is not only the government's business but also that of the media and the public. The media literacy and crisis response skills of the government, media, and the public should be improved, and no one should be left behind. The government, media, and the public all have the right to create public opinion, and in the face of obligations, each one is equally important. In the Internet era, the three are equal. When a public opinion event occurs, the government should establish a platform for equal dialogue between the government and netizens based on the people-oriented value orientation. First, government leaders at all levels should treat the media and the public equally, maintain an equal communication mode, objectively and impartially solve problems, especially with netizens. Second, the government's discourse must stand on the people's standpoint, eliminate bureaucracy and formalism under the official-oriented system, and avoid public opinion rebound. Third, the government should adhere to the policy of open dialogue, listen to and record the people's long-standing wishes, do not refuse to discuss on the grounds of national secrets, do not use "no comment" to refuse, and cannot fabricate and deceive the people.

4.3 Improvement of the safeguard system

The improvement of the organizational structure system of government departments mainly involves the improvement of internal functional division of labor and external collaborative cooperation. The improvement of internal functional division of labor involves gradually forming a management model with hierarchical reporting, leadership responsibility, and supervisory accountability. The improvement of external collaborative cooperation involves striving to create a management method in which various administrative organizations cooperate, share information, and coordinate with each other. Communication and coordination between internal and external organizations form a synergy to create a government department capable of efficiently handling online public opinion crises. The person in charge of the location that plays a leading role in online public opinion management often directly affects the effectiveness of governance. Therefore, attention should be paid to the division of labor between the central and local governments.

The government should establish a division of labor system for public opinion management, especially the spokesperson system, and simultaneously use big data methods to monitor public opinion, closely grasp the level of attention to crisis events, the affected population, the current state of dissemination, the development trends, and changes in netizens' emotions. Decisions and judgments should be made targeted according to the trends of public opinion. These requirements at the professional level require the establishment of a talent team with professional standards. When

introducing professional talents, the government should focus on the combination of practicality and comprehensiveness, absorbing versatile talents with journalism expertise, administrative service capabilities, statistical analysis abilities, keen observation skills for information, and a strong understanding of the social environment.

5. Conclusion

With the rapid development of new media technology, network public opinion has presented new characteristics, which in turn has created new problems and challenges for government social governance. How to perceive and handle network public opinion in order to enhance the level of government social governance has become a new topic for governments at all levels. This article starts with the characteristics and problems of network public opinion in the new media era, analyzes the challenges that these new changes bring to government social governance, and explores corresponding governance strategies.

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