

# Research on the influence of Internet public opinion on public policy and the optimization path

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**Keywords:** online public opinion; public policy; citizen participation

**Abstract:** With the wide application of Internet technology, the influence of online public opinion on public policy formulation is gradually deepening, which requires government departments to pay more attention to online public opinion and continuously improve their ability to respond to and solve the reflected public opinion problems. This paper aims to clarify the relationship between online public opinion and the public policy process, analyze the influence of online public opinion on public policy through online public opinion monitoring in terms of netizens' sentiment, public opinion fervor and subject's viewpoint, elaborate the role and significance of online public opinion on the process of public policy formulation and implementation, and make suggestions in terms of smooth public opinion, guiding public participation and strengthening online public opinion monitoring.

## 1. Introduction

Public policy-making is the entire process from forming a policy problem to the final conclusion of the policy. The American scholar Dye has shown that the public policy-making process is a matter of what the government chooses to do or what it chooses not to do. [1] Public policy-making followed a largely top-down model before the Internet era, which tended to rely more on elite forces. However, as times change, some public policies formulated in this way become anachronistic and are opposed by the public, and a widely accepted policy can only be successfully implemented. After public opinion goes online, online public opinion becomes an important window for decision-makers to understand people's demands, which is of great significance to continuously optimize and improving public policies.

In the Internet era, online public opinion is sufficient to influence the direction of public opinion in the whole society. On the one hand, with the openness and richness of the online expression environment and the speed of dissemination, Internet users with the same or similar opinions and emotions can quickly gather together, bringing public opinion pressure on relevant public policy-making departments, thus making relevant responses, promoting the creation of public policy agendas, and testing the responsiveness and efficiency of public policy departments. [2] However, the Internet is not completely rational, and online public opinion is not completely relevant. In addition to the existence of some online rumors and false information, some people deliberately incite the emotions of Internet users to cause confusion and social panic. Therefore, it is necessary to play a positive role in online public opinion, grasp the intensity and structure of people's attitudes toward public policy issues, guide the direction of online public opinion, and promote the development of public policy formulation in the direction of scientific and rationalization.

## 2. How online public opinion indicators can help present public policy issues

Internet public opinion monitoring and analysis refers to the comprehensive use of Internet information collection technology and information intelligent processing technology to conduct

deep excavation and full analysis of Internet public opinion related to public policy formulation through the automatic capture of massive Internet information. It conducts an all-round in-depth analysis of public opinion indicators such as netizens' sentiment, communication heat, communication trend, communication path, media viewpoint, and experts' viewpoint to objectively reflect the real situation of public policy opinion and promote the presentation of social issues.

### **2.1 Netizen sentiment: the higher the sentiment of netizens, the greater the pressure on public policy**

The general public becomes the direct source of public opinion dissemination in cyberspace. It was mentioned in *The Ubiquitous Crowd* that the exaggerated element in group emotions is exceptionally significant, and the power of any feeling, once shown and spread rapidly through a process of implication and contagion, is greatly increased if it gains obvious recognition. [3] Emotions are often the fuse that ignites online public opinion, and different emotions tend to produce different behavioral orientations, and the emotional tendencies of the public are classified into positive, negative and neutral in the analysis of online public opinion monitoring. Among them, positive public policy sentiment generally refers to people's attitudes toward supporting, embracing, and approving public policies. The neutral sentiment of netizens usually means that they remain neutral towards the policy and hope to wait further and see the policy development. Negative public policy sentiment generally refers to netizens' dissatisfaction, opposition, and questioning of public policies, which often hinder the implementation of public policies. After the outbreak of public opinion events, netizens' emotions are highly infected and resonate quickly, causing controversies. Therefore, the intensity of emotions is an important indicator for predicting the breaking point of public opinion, especially negative emotions are more strongly inflammatory, explosive, and impactful, and generally, the higher the negative emotions are, the more likely they are to cause extensive public debates, form social problems and influence the public policy agenda.

### **2.2 Dissemination fever: the higher the dissemination fever, the more far-reaching the impact on public policy**

The spread of public opinion on the Internet generally refers to the intensity of the spread of an unexpected event. It is usually evaluated by the degree of media attention, the intensity of netizens' emotions, speed of dissemination, duration of influence, and other factors. Generally, the higher the spreading fever, the longer the spread time, the wider the spread, and the deeper the impact, the more it can reflect social problems. Once an unexpected event triggers an explosive concern among netizens and intense discussion, and the media continues to follow up on it, it will turn into a hot event with great influence, which will attract the attention of decision-making departments and then take measures to promote the development of public policies in the direction of conforming to public opinion. Therefore, the monitoring and analysis of the heat of Internet opinion dissemination are conducive to grasping the hot spots of public opinion and responding to the public's concerns on public policies in a timely manner.

### **2.3 Communication trends: the more complex the public opinion situation, the higher the demand for public policy response**

Dissemination trend analysis is to grasp the whole picture of public opinion and its dissemination trend through horizontal and vertical systematic analysis of public opinion events and to predict whether the future direction of online public opinion will be high or disappear. Public policy opinion dissemination trends are generally divided into the following three stages: first, the stage of hotspot opinion formation, and network opinion monitoring is helpful to accurately find the key points that trigger the heat of public opinion; second, the stage of policy issue formation, which is widely discussed by netizens, and public opinion monitoring helps to grasp how people, media, experts and some opinion leaders set policy issues; third, the stage of convergence of public opinion, after the precipitation and decomposition of the network. At this time, the opinions of netizens are more concentrated and the demands of the people are distinct and strong, causing public pressure on the decision-making level. By grasping the trend of public opinion dissemination, it is conducive

for the government to follow the trend and adjust public policies in a timely and prepared manner according to the direction of public opinion so as to make them more in line with public opinion.

#### **2.4 Dissemination path: the clearer the dissemination path, the more targeted public policy formulation**

Communication paths reflect the main channels relied on for disseminating online public opinion, and different communication channels often produce different public opinion effects. The analysis of communication paths is helpful in understanding the specific elements of the occurrence, development and evolution of online public opinion. At present, public opinion dissemination mainly relies on traditional media platforms, new media platforms, and social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo. Analyzing the specific situation of policy events dissemination in each platform can grasp the characteristics and rules of public policy platform dissemination, which is important for the government to make timely responses and targeted adjustments to public policies.

#### **2.5 Media views: the more directional the media views, the greater the impact on public policy**

Media coverage is an important, influential factor driving the development of online public opinion, and its guiding power cannot be ignored in the context of new technologies. American scholar Wilbur Schramm said that the media could rarely persuade people how to think but can persuade people what to think. [4] On the one hand, the media use their advantages to dig out and amplify those complex and difficult social issues, form certain media views, and draw the public's attention to the online platform. On the other hand, the media also has the function of gathering and integrating information, integrating the interests and demands scattered in the society, and transforming them into clear goals, thus guiding the direction of public opinion and promoting public policy agenda setting. At the same time, condensed media views also greatly shorten the decision-making time and provide decision-makers with a strong value of opinion reference.

#### **2.6 The views of important people: the more accurate the views of important people, the stronger the reference for public policy**

On modern media platforms, important figures often become the boosters of public opinion. Public figures such as celebrities, experts, and social elites act as opinion leaders on the online platform. Due to their own professional and authoritative characteristics, the views of important figures, once issued, are easily shared by the public in the media, thus guiding the direction of public opinion and thus influencing the formulation of public policies. In addition, in the decision-making process, the constructive opinions put forward by experts and scholars provide references for the decision-making level, which is conducive to enhancing the scientific and rational nature of public policies.

### **3. Internet opinion monitoring drives public policy back to public opinion**

Referring to foreign scholars and considering the actual situation in China, domestic scholar Chen Zhenming proposed to consider the operation of policy as a policy cycle, including policy formulation, policy implementation, policy evaluation, policy monitoring and policy termination. [5] Online public opinion's supervisory, influential and guiding roles are throughout public policy. We intend to study the influence of online public opinion on public policy from three aspects: public policy formulation, implementation and evaluation.

#### **3.1 The introduction of online public opinion into policy formulation promotes the open setting of policy agenda**

Policy agenda setting is the first step in the process of public policy-making, and it is a key step in promoting the transformation of social issues into policy issues. [6] The formation of policy agendas often needs to go through two stages: public and government agendas. First, public policy enters the public agenda stage when the general public and social groups are concerned about a social issue, and they put forward policy demands to government departments for measures to be

taken to solve it. The development of Internet technology has greatly shortened the time for social issues to enter the public agenda and, to a certain extent, has increased the openness of policy agenda formation and broadened the sources of policy issues.

The influence of public opinion on public policy is mainly manifested in the following three aspects: First, the long-term accumulated social conflicts in society form public opinion pressure to influence policymakers. Secondly, the outbreak of unexpected events drives the agenda-setting of social issues. Third, the government takes the initiative to solicit public opinion from society, adjusts existing public policies and opens a new round of public policy agenda. The Internet has played a great role in promoting the transformation of social issues into policy issues. With the development of network technology, people can use the Internet to understand information, make comments and express their interests, and they can gather the same opinions to form the power of public opinion and guide the direction of public opinion. Capturing online public opinion constantly deepens the influence of public opinion on public policy making, and online public opinion often becomes the fuel for the establishment of government agenda for modern public policy, thus advancing the whole event resolution process. By capturing public opinion hotspots, the government can better understand the issues that the public is most concerned about and urgently needs to be addressed to more accurately grasp the priorities and catch the main contradictions. The adoption of online public opinion reflects a more open policy agenda.

### **3.2 Network public opinion supervises policy implementation and promotes policies to be scientific, fair and effective**

After the legitimization of public policy agenda setting is completed, the next step is ready to enter the policy formulation and implementation stage. [7] The passage of time will make the policy effect deviate from the original intention, which means that the public policy from its introduction to implementation is a process that needs to be continuously adjusted and optimized in conjunction with reality, and online public opinion during this period is a mirror reflecting the implementation of public policies and assumes the task of supervising the implementation of public policies. Public opinion can reflect the current social reality, and to a certain extent, it can reflect whether the implementation of public policies is appropriate, systematic, and comprehensive in terms of their implementation effect, operability, and social value, and ultimately judge the quality of public policies.

Strengthening online opinion monitoring to understand and grasp the public's attitude toward the policy itself and policy implementation is of great value in analyzing the effect of public policy implementation. This auxiliary role is mainly reflected in three aspects. First, by observing the media's communication volume, speed, and content, we can discover the focus of the public's attention and also understand the implementation of public policy propaganda. Secondly, by observing the overall development trend of public opinion, we can grasp the degree of perfection of public policy implementation, judge the operability of public policy, discover specific shortcomings in time, efficiency, and resource allocation in the implementation process, and promote further revision and improvement of public policy. Third, by analyzing the monitoring of regional correlation of public opinion, we can understand the implementation of policies in different localities and the degree of policy correlation between local and central government, and timely find some difficulties and obstacles in policy implementation to correct them as soon as possible. For example, when network public opinion monitoring was not developed, some policies were found to lack necessary supporting facilities in the concrete implementation process due to being too macro and not strong in practicality and eventually did not achieve the expected effect. Suppose we strengthen online public opinion monitoring and play the role of public opinion supervision in policy formulation and implementation. In that case, it will help decision-makers discover the deviations of policies in time, which will help promote continuous revision of public policies and improve the applicability of public policies.

### **3.3 Internet public opinion is used for policy evaluation to test the applicability, reasonableness and sustainability of policy implementation**

Public policy evaluation refers to the detection, evaluation, and judgment of policy effects, effectiveness, and value made by specific evaluation subjects according to certain standards and procedures by examining all stages and links of the policy process. [8] The book "Public Policy" mentions that policy evaluation contains two types: social evaluation with popular participation and formal evaluation led by the government. Formal assessments tend to be easily influenced by policymakers, and the evaluation results are somewhat biased. Social assessments with popular participation tend to be pluralistic, describing intuition from the perspective of the actual public policy implementation's target audience, yielding sharper evaluations than general assessments. However, the existing system of public policy evaluation is not sound enough, with a lack of standardization of evaluation indicators, evaluation procedures, and analysis of evaluation results, and with relatively single evaluation subjects and insufficient interaction, with the roles of professional evaluation departments, experts and scholars, and the public not being brought into play. [9]

Internet public opinion has important reference value in the whole evaluation system, and both the evaluation subject, object, and evaluation principle are influenced by Internet public opinion. By introducing online public opinion into public policy evaluation and listening to public opinion, we can first understand the effectiveness of public policy implementation. By observing the magnitude of public reaction to a certain event, decision-makers can evaluate whether the policy aligns with public opinion and can achieve the expected policy goals. In addition, through the analysis of regional hotspot situations, it is possible to understand whether there is a lack of policy implementation. Finally, comparing the hotspots of netizens' public opinion before and after the public policy helps the government assess the value size and significance of the policy implementation. Empiricism is wrong, and all feedback should be based on research. Only the people have the most right to say whether the policies are effective and whether they can really be put into practice, and public opinion can best reflect reality. In conclusion, the inclusion of online public opinion into public policy evaluation is not only conducive to guaranteeing fair and transparent evaluation and enhancing the credibility of the government but also conducive to giving full play to the supervisory role of public opinion, improving the applicability of public policies and promoting sustainable development of public policies.

## **4. The path of promoting positive interaction between online public opinion and public policy**

Internet public opinion is a "barometer" for understanding social and public opinion and a "weathervane" for moving forward. The relationship between public policies and online public opinion is complex and intertwined with conflicts and mutual promotion. In the process of modern social development, the study of online public opinion is not only to calm down online public opinion but also to maximize the positive effect of online public opinion on public policy by using online public opinion as a means to govern society. Suggestions are made for the governance of online public opinion from the perspectives of unobstructed public opinion, expanding citizen participation in policy formulation, strengthening the management of online public opinion, and improving the monitoring system of online public opinion:

### **4.1 Smooth public opinion: build a platform for positive interaction between the government and the public, and promote public policies to respond to public opinion**

At present, Internet users mainly use social networking platforms, news websites, and mainstream media's online political platforms to participate in the public policy process, post comments and start discussions. Policymakers rarely interact with each other, resulting in inefficient communication and unsatisfactory participation. In the face of such a situation, first of all, it is necessary to build a platform for direct government-people dialogue, construct a more extensive government-population interaction and communication system, expand the scope of online political

questioning, and realize two-way interaction between the government and society. Through the direct dialogue platform, public opinion is pooled, public wisdom is collected, and public worries are solved so that the channels of public opinion expression can be smoothly opened to help decision-makers understand different interests and demands and public policies that are more targeted and can effectively solve public problems can be introduced. Secondly, to play the role of public opinion monitoring. The public opinion feedback channel is open, the deviations between the theory and practice of public policy can be found in time, and the policies can be adjusted according to the problems reflected by the public, which is conducive to the continuous improvement of public policy and the development of public policy in the direction of public opinion.

#### **4.2 Guiding public participation: optimizing the environment for the expression of public opinion, improving the transparency of the public policy process, and promoting diversified public policy participation**

Currently, the attention of public opinion to influence public policy-making is still relatively weak. [10] The political participation of the public is not optimistic. Therefore, first, the network infrastructure should be strengthened to avoid missed opportunities for political participation due to the widening of the digital divide, and the network ethics should be strengthened to guide the public to use the network to express their opinions correctly and strengthen the sense of self-discipline among Internet users. Second, to stimulate people's participation in the public policy process, firstly, active publicity should be conducted before public policies are formulated, public policy issues should be adjusted according to public opinion, and cautious decisions should be made for those issues that are more controversial. Furthermore, after the public policy is introduced, the policy information should be disclosed to the maximum extent law allows. At this point, we should play the role of new media, using the media to explain the new policy in all aspects, and keep the public policy process open and transparent, which is conducive to helping the policy to be fully known and accepted by the public and then smoothly implemented. Finally, the public should be guided to actively participate in policy evaluation and listen carefully to their views and opinions on the actual implementation of public policies to make an objective evaluation of public policies and promote further adjustment and improvement of public policies.

#### **4.3 Paying attention to network public opinion analysis: improving network public opinion monitoring mechanism and forming institutionalized guarantee**

At present, China has not yet incorporated online public opinion monitoring into the public policy process, which leads to the tendency to ignore the influence of online public opinion on public policy formulation in the governmental decision-making process. [11] In addition, because of the strong subjectivity of online public opinion and the uneven performance of online information, rational and irrational voices often exist simultaneously, which makes it difficult to provide direct reference values for decision-makers. Therefore, to build an online public opinion monitoring platform, the government should apply online public opinion monitoring and analysis to the entire public policy formulation process and establish institutional norms. Through the public opinion monitoring system, it can grasp the development of public opinion in a timely, accurate and comprehensive manner and analyze the potential risks of public policies to scientifically adjust public policies to respond to them. At the same time, it establishes a sound mechanism for working on network public opinion and incorporates public opinion information work into the index assessment system. Departments that respond well to online public opinion should be rewarded, and those that do not should be criticized and educated so as to encourage all local departments to pay attention to the impact of online public opinion on public policies and to use online public opinion as an important tool in their daily work, so as to promote public policies to serve and benefit the people.

### **5. Conclusion**

For a policy to be recognized, followed, and effectively implemented by the public, the

government must listen to public opinion, collect public wisdom, address public concerns, and safeguard public interests in the policy-making process. With the development of the Internet and new media technology, people's access to the Internet is becoming more convenient, and the influence of online public opinion on public policies is increasing daily, and it continues to penetrate the whole process of public policies. It not only helps to unblock public opinion and expand the scope of people's political participation but also helps to discover the shortcomings in the process of public policy implementation, correct policy deviations in time, reduce policy mistakes, and improve the quality and level of public policies. Based on this, the government should strengthen the construction of an online public opinion monitoring system, improve the online public opinion monitoring system, maximize the positive effect of online public opinion, guide the direction of public opinion, and assist in decision-making and governance. This will improve the scientific and democratic level of public policies, promote public policies to truly respond to public opinion, and adhere to the value orientation of "people-centered" at all times.

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