

## Dilemma and Path of Government Network Public Opinion Governance under COVID-19 Epidemic

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### Abstract

**In recent years, the influence of network public opinion on the order of political life and social stability is increasing day by day. Some major network public opinion events make people realize that the network plays a great role in social supervision. However, if the network public opinion emergencies are not handled properly, it is very likely to induce the public's bad emotions, lead to the violation of the rules and extreme behavior of the masses, and then pose a threat to social stability. From the perspective of public management, take the fight against COVID-19 as an example to analyze the difficulties faced by the government in dealing with the network public opinion in this public health emergency, then find an effective way to solve the problem, so as to provide the corresponding guidance and reference for the government to effectively manage the network public opinion in the public health emergency.**

### Keywords

**Government; Network Public Opinion; Governance; COVID-19.**

### 1. Introduction

In December 2019, the new coronavirus pneumonia (hereinafter referred to as the "new crown epidemic") broke out in Wuhan, Hubei Province, triggering a local public health emergency, the epidemic spread rapidly within tens of days, and evolved into a major national public health emergency, the number of domestic infections continued to rise, and then the provinces urgently and orderly launched a major public health event level one response. The fight against the new crown epidemic is a major test put forward by China's modern governance. Under the correct leadership of the Party Central Committee and the active cooperation of the people, the domestic epidemic situation has been effectively contained and has continuously shown a good trend. However, the vitality and influence of network public opinion in the process of epidemic prevention and control cannot be ignored, and the government's performance in network public opinion governance in the prevention and control of the epidemic is worth examining and analyzing. [1]

Today, the world has entered the information era, with the development of new media and information technology, based on the network platform has been set up by the opinion expression, public opinion expression channels and means are more diversified, ordinary people can make use of social media, such as weibo, WeChat, QQ is not restricted by time and space freely express ideas and update the real-time dynamic information. [2] However, the virtual, open, free and real-time nature of the "network society" makes the dissemination of public opinion on the Internet show diversified characteristics of value and interest demands. In the Internet field, all kinds of ideologies and values have their foothold, which are active, healthy, gray and vulgar, in various forms and mixed with fish and dragon. Is a certain deviation at the same time, the network public opinion and public opinion in the field of the Internet is an important part of public opinion, has the characteristics of active and sharp and diversity,

but the network public opinion cannot be equal to the mass position, the construction of the network platform for the majority of Internet users create a chance to speak freely, can be more free and open to express personal views, share intimate feelings. But because the network legal punishment and moral constraints in the field of strength is weak, lack of self-discipline consciousness at this time if netizens, then there will be a group follow blindly, rumors whisper, such as irrational behavior, if it is not to purify network environment, users are highly susceptible to false information induction and blindly follow suit, especially in the prevention and control of major public health emergencies are more likely to create obstacles, It will seriously affect the restoration of social order as soon as possible, and the government will also face the challenge of network public opinion on public health emergencies more severe than before. [3] To distinguish right from wrong in complex and diversified information and effectively manage online public opinion of public health emergencies, so as to master the dominant power of online public opinion and improve modern governance capacity and level has become one of the goals of the government's continuous efforts in daily work. Therefore, this paper takes the novel coronavirus outbreak as a case study to analyze the government's behavior of controlling online public opinions in the prevention and control of the epidemic, so as to explore a feasible path of controlling online public opinions about public health emergencies that is suitable for China's national conditions.

## 2. The Connotation of Network Public Opinion

Since ancient times, public opinion has been attached great importance to national policy makers. It is recorded in the Book guoyu · Zhou: "It is better to guard against the mouth of the people than against the river. When the river floods, it will hurt more people, and so will the people. Is so for sichuan, determined to make guide; He who is for the people, publicizes it." [4] This thought emphasizes the importance of widely listening to public opinion, correcting wrong policies and resolving social conflicts. The popularization of the Internet and the progress of network technology make people tend to use the Internet as a convenient intermediary to express their thoughts, providing a new channel and a new path for listening to and collecting social conditions and public opinions. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out: "Netizens come from ordinary people, and when ordinary people go online, public opinion also goes online. Our leading cadres will go wherever the masses are. Party and government organs and leading officials at all levels should learn to follow the mass line through the Internet and check online frequently to learn what the people are thinking and wishing for." [5]

Online public opinion is a collection of influential and tendentious opinions and opinions held by netizens on hot social events with the help of Internet communication. [6] The positive significance of online public opinion lies in: First, promoting public participation in the formulation of public policies. Network public opinion in virtual sex fermentation and high degree of freedom of the Internet field, for the people dare to express their true thoughts create the conditions, at the same time, due to the equality of main body participation, making it possible to the broad masses of people to participate in policy formulation, complex network public opinion, pointed directly, and provides policy makers with real and comprehensive reference to public opinion. Second, to realize equal political participation by the people. In real life, because of the people to the limitation of subjective and objective conditions, make its cannot directly, widely for political participation, and the popularity of the Internet to make up for the defect of people gathered spontaneously and form a network through the network group, the group effect to enhance the social influence, finally achieve to the purpose of the government decisions and actions have an impact. So as to safeguard their vital interests and achieve political stability. However, the space of online public opinion is a virtual world, which determines that the online public opinion transmitted under the Internet background is quite

different from the general social public opinion, mainly manifested in the following aspects: first, the complexity of online public opinion information. Due to the anonymity of the Internet, netizens can express their views and positions on social hot issues and public emergencies relatively freely without being constrained by their real identities. Therefore, it is easy for netizens to follow the "freedom of speech principle" and turn themselves into an "angry youth", who freely vent and make irrational remarks on the Internet, and even abuse each other. Some influential network promoters constantly produce false information. Due to the lack of a strong and perfect monitoring mechanism, they cannot audit the relevant speech and information, resulting in ambiguous sources of public opinion information, difficulty in distinguishing true from false, and lack of authenticity and reliability. [7] Second, the limitations of online public opinion information. With the rapid development of Internet technology, the main body of online public opinion has been growing. According to the survey, more than 70% of China's Internet users are young people aged between 18 and 35. While they have active thinking and strong sensitivity, they are also emotional and irrational, and lack comprehensive rational thinking about some social problems, and fail to analyze and judge from multiple perspectives. As a result, a series of negative and extremely emotional voices can be spread and spread. On the contrary, positive and rational voices are often ignored and drowned. Third, the rapid spread of online public opinion. The interest demands contained in online public opinions will directly arouse the attention and even resonance of social groups and make them participate in online discussions. Online public opinion has a powerful mobilizing effect that can produce a "snowball" effect. Posting and Posting, flooding and shooting, exchange and communication, discussion and confrontation, netizens around a certain intermediary event or hot social issues have different opinions, resulting in a large amount of online public opinion information instantly gathered. [8]

### **3. Characteristics of Online Public Opinion in the Context of COVID-19 and the Dilemma of the Government's Online Public Opinion Governance**

#### **3.1. Characteristics of Online Public Opinion in the Context of COVID-19**

##### **3.1.1. The Trend of Development was Unexpected**

Public health emergencies are extremely shocking and explosive, and because they are closely related to the public interest, the public is completely shrouded in fear and unknown, and the resulting stimulation and sensitivity are easy to trigger online public opinion. In a series of previous events, such as SARS and H1N1, the public, with a strong sense of self-protection, showed a high degree of alertness to such information. Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, it has attracted wide attention, and the online public opinion is very hot. On December 31, 2019, a suspected case was reported in a hospital in Wuhan, which aroused public concern. Public opinion on COVID-19 began to form. The next day, the wholesale seafood market in South China was closed, and major media tracked the market situation and news related to the epidemic, and the online public opinion on COVID-19 reached its first climax. Before Academician Zhong Nanshan's confirmation of novel Coronavirus "human-to-human transmission", two groups of experts successively concluded that "no obvious evidence of human-to-human transmission" had been found, and wuhan Municipal Health Commission immediately issued relevant notices, which temporarily eased the panic and anxiety of the public, and the trend of public opinion fell back. On the evening of January 20, Academician Zhong Nanshan confirmed in an interview with CCTV news that novel Coronavirus pneumonia was definitely transmitted from person to person. At around 2 am on January 23, Wuhan was officially put on lockdown. The whole country is paying close attention to the epidemic. The public in the affected areas are worried about the spread of the epidemic and the impact of city closures on daily life and production. The public outside the affected areas are paying close

attention to the changes of the epidemic situation. In addition, negative events such as rumors of large-scale diagnosis and death, patients beating doctors in the hospital in the epidemic area, and director of Huanggang Health Construction Commission's ignorance of the epidemic came one after another, which undoubtedly worsened the panic of the public and eventually led to the formation of major online public opinion, and the heat continued to rise.

### **3.1.2. The Scope and Speed of Diffusion are Different**

Relying on Internet technology, the spread speed of online public opinion is increasing day by day, which enables the general public to obtain relevant public opinion information in the shortest time. This unprecedented rapid spread permeates and ferments at all levels. At the top level, authoritative media such as People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency reported the epidemic news immediately with the help of the Internet, confirming the basic nature of the incident and further arousing the public's strong desire to follow up the progress of the incident. At the middle level, we media and all kinds of short video platforms process relevant information to conform to the trend of network communication and accelerate its diffusion to a wider range of people. At the lower level, social media gave full play to its advantages of high directivity and pertinence, and spread epidemic information in an all-round way through mass and private messages. With no blind spots and high speed transmission, epidemic information quickly occupies the entire Internet field, and the public cannot ignore its existence, let alone avoid its impact.

### **3.1.3. The Hedge of Public Opinion Field Appears, and the Gap between Mainstream Public Opinion and Folk Public Opinion is Significant**

The development of mobile Internet has created conditions for the modern governance of the government. Governments at all levels have actively taken measures to carry out propaganda and guidance with the help of new media. However, due to the continuing influence of traditional media and the differences in the positions and viewpoints of the government and the public, since the outbreak of COVID-19, the official "public opinion field" composed of mainstream media and the private "public opinion field" composed of "we media" have been at odds, resulting in a certain estrangement. The official "public opinion field" focuses on the macro level of epidemic prevention and control and ignores the individual feelings and emotions of the public, while the civilian "public opinion field" is suspicious of the government's response to public opinion and disclosure of relevant information. [9]

### **3.1.4. The Rumors are Numerous and Vague**

Public health emergencies have a strong explosive force and tension. With the rapid spread of public health emergencies, a large number of rumors also flood into the public's view along with real reports. However, Internet rumors are not equal to fabricating out of thin air, but are a kind of tampering or exaggerating of real events, with vague features of identical appearance and different reality, and it is difficult to distinguish the true from the false. Because of rumor mainly through the lower social media such as diffusion WeChat group, their circle of friends, and such strong social media, strengthening the social relation network, potentially enhance the credibility of the rumors, and constantly catalytic fear of the public, making it a booster, the spread of rumors for epidemic prevention and control with great resistance.

## **3.2. The Dilemma of the Government's Online Public Opinion Management in the Context of COVID-19**

COVID-19 is not only a test of China's modern governance, but also a challenge to the government's management of online public opinion in the face of public health emergencies. In the early stage of the epidemic, a series of public opinion incidents disrupted the normal order of epidemic prevention and control and posed a serious threat to social stability. In this process, the fermentation of public opinion incidents and their adverse effects further revealed the

obvious deficiencies of the Chinese government in the management of online public opinion in public health emergencies.

### **3.2.1. Backward Cognition and Governance of Public Opinion**

The leadership system of hierarchical management makes local governments ignore the important role of online public opinion outside the system in social governance, which is mainly reflected in their relatively outdated governance concepts. The "public opinion field within the system" has long been disconnected from the "public opinion field", which leads to the slow response of local governments to online public opinion. Its traditional value concept and instrumental rationality mode cannot meet the needs of effective response to the current stage of network public opinion. After the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, all kinds of comments on the Internet are overwhelming and it is difficult to distinguish the true from the false, which makes the already chaotic social order become even more chaotic and further aggravates people's psychological panic. However, due to the lack of understanding of the local government of network public opinion has failed to effectively realize the impact of network public opinion under the outbreak, especially the negative effect brought by the public opinion, lead to the lack of the attention of the public opinion, the public opinion is not governance issues on the government work agenda, make public opinion response lag, failure to seize the moment to reasonable guidance of network public opinion, Fully master the leading power of public opinion control.

### **3.2.2. Lack of Coordination and Linkage Efficiency among Multiple Subjects**

In network public opinion governance, local governments should give full play to the role of public opinion guidance and public opinion governance coordinator. But in fact, the coordination and linkage between local government and network media, field experts, network opinion leaders and other multi-subjects is seriously inadequate. Governments at all levels lack unified and efficient leadership over online media, which makes online media go their own way, and some false rumors flow among the public, making it difficult to distinguish between true and false information in the field of public opinion, and seriously polluting the cyberspace. At the same time, due to the lack of effective communication and consultation between local governments, experts and network opinion leaders, public opinion governance decisions lack scientific and democratic, causing secondary network public opinion crisis, increasing the difficulty of public opinion governance. [10]

### **3.2.3. Insufficient Psychological Intervention and Guidance for the Public**

Outbreak, the government's focus on the epidemic prevention and control itself, ignoring the psychological intervention and guidance of the public, especially those with diagnosis, isolation, frontline staff, volunteers and other groups, unable to objective, calm and rational analysis of epidemic situation development situation, the lack of a sense of security and confidence, to overcome the outbreak psychology become fragile, The initial anxiety and panic turned into doubts, anxiety and depression, which led to extreme behaviors that affected social stability and brought great hidden dangers and obstacles to epidemic prevention and control.

## **4. The Implementation Path of the Government's Online Public Opinion Management in the Context of COVID-19**

Opportunities and challenges coexist. In the context of COVID-19, the government is faced with many problems in managing online public opinion, but there are also many opportunities. To effectively solve the problems and seize the opportunities, maximize the utility of online public opinion and better improve the government's ability and level to deal with online public opinion of public health emergencies.

## **4.1. Innovate the Cognitive Concept and Governance Mode of Online Public Opinion**

### **4.1.1. Establish a Sense of Crisis and Actively Face up to Online Public Opinions**

The sense of preparedness is the survival wisdom of the Chinese nation. It means to be alert to possible difficulties and dangers that human society may encounter and to make forward-looking preparations for possible risks. Human beings are in a high risk situation, with a sense of danger, always keep a safe attitude, is the best choice to avoid risks. As government staff, the first thing to do is to be aware of potential dangers, always sensitive to public opinion, strengthen their own knowledge of public opinion training and learning, deeply understand that "epidemic prevention is a race against time, information is also a race against time"; Secondly, it is necessary to attach great importance to online public opinion, change the traditional cognitive concept of online public opinion, abandon the public opinion management concept of "focusing on prevention and neglecting", and proactively disclose epidemic information in a timely manner to avoid the occurrence of subsequent online public opinion crisis.

### **4.1.2. Reject the "Containment" Processing Mode and Build the "Big Data + Dredging" Mode**

Local governments need to change their traditional ways of dealing with online public opinions, give full play to their leading role in information technology, combine emerging technologies such as big data and artificial intelligence with public opinion guidance, and release authoritative information in a timely manner through special web pages. Local governments should release timely and accurate data on confirmed and suspected cases, and further explain the relationship between such data and treatment and prevention and control, so that the public will no longer doubt and panic when faced with complicated and difficult online information. While ensuring information transparency, local governments should firmly crack down on behaviors that create extreme rumors and disrupt the order of public opinion.

## **4.2. Improving Coordination and Interaction among Multiple Entities**

Public opinion governance is a complex process integrating monitoring, analysis, research and judgment, guidance, participation and disposal, which requires the organization and mobilization of various forces to participate. [11] The government should give full play to the coordinating and guiding role in public opinion governance. While maintaining the traditional status of mainstream media and attaching great importance to emerging "we media", relevant experts and network opinion leaders should be encouraged to participate in it.

### **4.2.1. While Giving Full Play to the Leading Role of Mainstream Media, the Positive Effects of Emerging "We Media" should be Coordinated**

The communication of public opinion has the first sound effect. In public opinion emergency happens, the government should be in a timely manner to the public focus on the mainstream media platform, support, leading the mainstream media in quickly to ensure the truthfulness of the events in a timely manner on the basis of a first, to gain the initiative in public opinion direction, positive guidance, to strengthen the mainstream media play a leading role in the field of the network. At the same time, the government should attach great importance to emerging "we media". At present, the number of Internet users in China reaches 1.032 billion. Once public opinion is generated, the public cannot ignore their existence, let alone be affected by them. Therefore, the government needs to attach great importance to the emerging we-media, and further understand the real thoughts and appeals of the public through these emerging media platforms.

#### **4.2.2. Strengthen Cooperation with Experts in the Field to Release Positive Energy of Opinion Leaders**

Government in the process of information capture and decomposition, to strengthen the cooperation with relevant experts and scholars, the authenticity of information together to distinguish, in ensuring the accuracy of the information, scientific, on the basis of unified caliber, designated official release window, in a timely manner through the website, weibo, such as the true information to the public, to block the spread of bad information, The public will have access to credible official information as soon as possible, enhancing public trust in the government and strengthening the public's faith in the fight against the epidemic. In addition, the government should fully release the positive energy of network opinion leaders. Network opinion leaders are rooted in ordinary netizens. They have a huge fan team and a strong network influence. They can obtain information through different channels, integrate the fragmented thoughts of netizens, release the positive energy of the network and promote the evolution of public opinion crisis. Therefore, the government needs to strengthen communication and management of online opinion leaders, give reasonable responses to their interest demands and opinions, stabilize netizens' emotions, exert their positive influence, and effectively resolve public opinion crisis. [12]

#### **4.2.3. Stepping up Efforts to Guide and Actively Respond to Public Demand**

The public is the main body of online public opinion activities, and any information on the Internet is the result of individual information behavior. The government should adhere to the "people-centered" work orientation in the governance of online public opinions, stick to the original intention of serving the people, and always achieve the heart of the people. On the one hand, it insists on "people-centered" and actively responds to the public. The government should do a good job in all aspects of public opinion publicity and guidance, popular knowledge of public opinion related knowledge, timely answer questions for the public. Implement a transparent government public opinion governance mechanism, face up to the government's public opinion governance problems in epidemic prevention and control, so that the public knows clearly what the government is doing or not doing. At the same time, we will release and interpret relevant policies and measures with authoritative information, timely and actively respond to the masses, and enhance the directivity and timeliness of public opinion guidance. On the other hand, we should guide the public to use the Internet in a civilized way to enhance the cultural literacy of netizens. The government should pay attention to the cultivation of moral quality and self-discipline of the public, both during the epidemic prevention and control period and under normal epidemic prevention and control. Meanwhile, the media literacy of netizens should be improved. In the event of a major outbreak of the epidemic, adverse information and false information on the Internet should be resolutely resisted, and the conscious awareness of "no rumors, no rumors, no rumors spread" should be established.

### **5. Conclusion**

With the rapid development of economic society and science and technology, people's main body consciousness and democratic consciousness generally increased, the social problems and government work also gave the attention of more and more high, so the network public opinion to become the government public crisis management work should not be ignored, as part of the pressure from the network public opinion has brought new challenges to the government's governance. In this paper, based on the current government in the major public health emergencies of network public opinion to deal with the short board, revealed by epidemic prevention and control is put forward under the background of the government's response to the path of the network public opinion suggestion, mainly to innovate government network public opinion on the cognitive concept and management method, improve

coordination and linkage between efficiency with organizations and strengthen guidance and positive response to public demand. Everything has two sides, so does online public opinion. It is of vital importance to stimulate its positive role, try to avoid its negative impact, and fully release the potential power of online public opinion for political order and social stability. In the rapid development of information technology today, from the perspective of network public opinion mining efficiency of the government in dealing with the major public health emergencies, realizes the network public opinion tool rationality and the value of a public health emergency management of rational and effective integration, to promote the government emergency management ability, improve the government public crisis management system has a far-reaching influence.

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