On the Interactive Relationship Between Internet Media and Conventional Media

A View of the Formation and Development of the Public Opinion

Xiaoxiao Zhang

Propaganda Department, Changzhou Campus, Hohai University
Changzhou, China
213022

Jing Chen

Propaganda Department, Changzhou Campus, Hohai University
Changzhou, China
213022

Abstract—**Internet liberated the public voice, and enjoys the opinion privilege that conventional media lacks. But the internet public opinion which is characterized in its grassroot features needs to be promoted and guided by the authority and credibility of the conventional media. Based on the formation and development of the public opinion, internet media and conventional media can interact and cooperate to exert the social influence.**

Key words: internet media; conventional media; interaction; interactive relationship; public opinion

I. INTRODUCTION

As a new carrier to disseminate public opinion, internet media progresses in an amazing momentum. However, by comparison, we find that the influence of conventional public media haven't been weakened because of it, but instead play an active role in the development of internet media. As a result, the deep interaction between the two has strengthened both the influence and effect of social public opinion.

In the academia, fruitful research results have been obtained concerning how public opinion can make effective use of internet media and conventional media. Among all the researches, most of them focus on comparing their respective characteristics and discussing the interaction between them. Zhang Yongxia (2009) analyzes the merits of conventional media such as high credibility, deep coverage and originality and merits of internet media such as information, timeliness and diversity in expression as well [2]. Pengtao and Yangmian (2010), on the other hand, explains in a comprehensive way both merits and demerits the two media have and therefore proposed to combine them [3]. Some scholars, from the perspective of analyzing the influence brought about by the appearance and development of internet media to conventional media and its opinion, has discussed the corresponding factors and the big change taken place in the development of conventional media. Yuan Xiaoxuan (2010) believes that the appearance of internet media is helpful in making potential public will known, confirming public opinion for conventional media and representing public opinion in a more authoritative manner, which gives expression to the huge impact internet public opinion casted on both conventional media and public opinion [4]. In addition, some scholars also conduct research from the perspective that how can conventional media rise to and make use of the challenges coming with the new-type internet media and offers many advice. Xie Jiaxi (2010)

thinks that "internet brings a new opportunity for the development of conventional media. In a new age featured by network, grabbing the opportunity to make media more competitive and improve its self-building will guarantee its success in the future competition [5]. And other scholars discuss the specific ways to combine the two effectively in the new context. Sun Peng (2010) holds that the combination can be realized by networking newspaper, magazine, radio and television[6] while Zhang Libing (2010) that mobile television and digital television are effective forms in achieving the combination[7].

From the discussion above we can see that scholars concentrate on the static relation while studying the interaction between internet media and conventional media in terms of public opinion and that little has been done in how the two should interact in the formation and development of some public opinion. Hence, the paper attempts to explain why and how the two interact, describe the interaction and point out points worth attention in order to realize benign interaction.

II. REASONS LEADING TO THE INTERACTION BETWEEN INTERNET AND CONVENTIONAL MEDIA

A common view in the academia holds that there is a Trigger Effect in all the media, namely, "a media agenda is bound to affect media agenda, making progressing news the focus of hype and concern" [8]. Scholar Noelle-Neumann describes this as reciprocal co-orientation [9], through which both internet and conventional media interact mutually. On the one hand, the topic discussed on the internet is to a large extent affected by the agenda of conventional media; on the other hand, conventional media is often likely to discover some online topics with huge news value, thus interviewing and digging deep into them.

In the recent years, the interaction between internet and conventional media has been heightening and this paper attributes it to the following reasons:

A. Internet Media Has Imposed Pressure to Conventional Media

Internet media enjoys high disseminating speed, convenient retrieval, low cost, bilateral or even multilateral interaction in the development of public opinion, diverse disseminating forms, large information, and timeliness, etc, which make conventional media not good for a march. Thus, internet media plays a more and more important role in the development of public opinion, strongly weakening the

conventional media's position in shaping public opinion.

For a long time, even though conventional media has been an important source of public opinion, it is often intervened and bound by administrative power, making it fail to express and supervise public opinion in some specific conditions. By contrast, the bottom-up internet public opinion sets the right of speech free for common people and always represents the true common will of people. As a result, in the complicated public sentiment system, what the conventional media refuse to discuss will excite the internet media without fail. Furthermore, internet media do well in its expression and supervision of public opinion when conventional media remain silent and meanwhile, force the latter to break silence when the two seem to guide public opinion into different direction.

Case of Sun Zhigang, also called the first internet case in China，is a classic example. On April, 25th, 2005, Southern Metropolis Daily was the first to release the article, Death of Sun Zhigang, an Inmate when conventional media was told to stop reporting on this case. All of a sudden, all conventional media were plunged into "collective silence" in a spell. However, thanks to www.people.com.cn's reprinting the coverage under the title Who Should Take the Responsibility for the Abnormal Death of a Citizen that afternoon, thousands of posts were replied within a couple of hours. After the article was reprinted by several websites, heated discussion was found in forums among net citizens and tremendous tide of public opinion formed within a short time. Thus, we can see that compared with conventional media's limitation, rigorous supervision, internet media are more likely to disseminate and spread public opinion, and even make participation by all people possible, which somewhat imposes great pressure to conventional media and "forces" the latter to interact.

B. *Conventional Media Gives Helping Hand to Internet Media*

Generally speaking, conventional media is equipped with policy support, necessary capital, mature production flow, high authority score, easy access and stable disseminating region, etc. By comparison, news websites have neither their own journalist team nor right to interview, not to mention BBS and Blog. Therefore, the rise of internet media will not go as far as to replace or even crowd out conventional media. Instead, the intervention from conventional media helps internet media a lot.

Take the much concerned Li Gang Gate for example. On October, 17th, 2010, a net friend called Volunteer of Hebei University posted a car accident incident in Hebei University onto the internet and drew attention from all walks of life very soon. Cited from the post, remark made by the perpetrator of the accident that "my father is Li Gang" was spread with extraordinary speed among net friends, stirring a huge tide in the internet public opinion. In order to keep track with the latest follow-up of this case, the net friend renewed his posts several times a day. Seeing this situation, conventional media started to intervene, conducting comprehensive interview and relevant investigation. From 17th thorough 22nd of that month, the net friend gave six posts on the homepage of www.tianya.cn and got more than 500,000 hits. According to the statistics sorted out by the author, among about 150,000, more than one third of the worth-reading posts directly reprints or cites the reports from

conventional media. Remarks cited from the articles of conventional media are widely spread in their replies, including Who Is to Close Li Gang Gate (from China Youth Daily), The Public Opinion Focus behind My Father Is Li Gang (from Economic Observer), Sub-consciousness behind My Father Is Li Gang (from Chutian Metropous Daily). And the leading role these posts played in spreading public opinion is apparent. Thanks to them, on the 22nd of the same month, Li Gang, the father of the perpetrator, gave a public apology on the program of CCTV, News 30', with a bow as long as 30 seconds and even chocked with sobs and regret on the show. After this, several senior media again reported on this case, giving birth to a new round of public opinion spreading in the late period of this incident.   Thus, we can see that the Li Gang Gate gives us a glimpse of the fact that although internet media are capable of stirring public opinion extensively, their influence will definitely be weakened without the support and deep report from conventional media.

Due to the assistance from conventional media, the internet media can produce more far-reaching influence and sensation in public opinion. "The eventual effect and influence achieved by today's internet public opinion always result from the cooperation of conventional media reports"[10]. That is to say, strong resonance would be produced when both internet media and conventional media pay attention to a certain incident and the latter would be helpful, furthering their interaction.

C. *Internet Media Calls for Positive Guidance from Conventional Media*

The most essential characteristic of internet public opinion lies in its bottom-up grass-root, which gives it a great play in representing the will of the people, pushing forward democratic course, supervising public opinion and affecting public policy making and meanwhile imposes great impact on conventional public opinion. However, it is exactly these characteristics that determine the irrational side in the best part of internet public opinion. Compared with internet media, conventional media's required accuracy, authenticity and rigorous political examination give its irreplaceable characteristics, namely, high authority score and strong political consciousness.

In the recent years, internet public opinion incidents with tremendously mass responses are not uncommon. Among them, examples like Wenchuan Earthquake which earns for the participation of rescue cadres overwhelming praises from net friends and like the blog of two sessions which becomes the center net friends competing for attention and active participation are positive. On the other hand, negative incidents like Tiger Photo Gate, Nude Picture Scandal, Director of Real Estate Who Smokes whopping priced cigarettes and Claimed Death by Hide and Seek in Yunnan Province, get millions of hits. The internet public opinion is getting more and more attention. It also should be admitted that while internet media play a positive role in the spreading of public opinion, it indeed is bothered with problems such as rampant false information, abuses and attacks, emotional rage out of boredom and infiltration of hostile force. By comparison, with authority and credibility, conventional media can fulfill people's right to know, curb the spreading of rumors, eliminating the false remarks from the internet and make internet public opinion more healthy.

Hence, whether from the perspective of news value or that of social responsibility, public opinion, especially internet public opinion, calls for major conventional media's appropriate intervention in appropriate time and manner, giving positive and appropriate guidance in their interaction.

III. INTERACTION PROCESS AND EFFECT BETWEEN INTERNET MEDIA AND CONVENTIONAL MEDIA

With the participation of popular media, public opinion generally comes into being through an ordinary process, including the formation of agenda, public opinion field from individual opinions, the appearance of opinion leader and major opinion and the formation of social public opinion. According to their respective characteristics, internet media and conventional media would interact mutually in the formation and development of public opinion, which includes three stages in general:

Stage one: formation of public opinion agenda. The internet topics may come from the coverage of conventional media in the first place. But they are more likely to be disclosed on the internet forum by related individuals and then involve more and more people to discuss them before conventional media notice them or when they remain silent. This stage is actually a preliminary stage which discovers agenda and forms public opinion. By comparison, the scope of conventional media's "information antenna" is far small so that internet media is playing a more and more important role in the discovery and formation of agendas.

On March, 8th, 2009, Wang Tingting whose net name is "Perfume Girl of Beijing Foreign Studies University" released several articles on her blog that lashed on China's current education system. On 16th of the same month, the girl claimed on her post that her university attempted to force her to drop out of school due to her criticizing education system. In the wake of releasing this latest blog log, there was a huge emotional stir on the internet with some net friends criticizing Ministry of Education and Beijing Foreign Studies University. In less than 20 hours, the blog got about 400,000 hits. It is not uncommon to find similar agendas which are disclosed on the internet in the first place. Hence, we can see that internet media plays an important role in the formation of public opinion agenda.

Stage two: formation of public opinion, including public opinion field composed by individual opinions and therefore leading opinion. A variety of individual opinions are released on the internet or conventional media and eventually reach an agreement supported by the majority through a long-term, complicated and discrete process of exchange, selection and mingling. However, the more sentiment-provoking the public opinion is to a group, the more heated the internet discussion it will sparkle. In the internet forum, there will be numerous leading opinions and diverse opinion fields.

In the above case, while the girl was disclosing the bad thing happening to her, her classmates launched an activity, Refutation against "Perfume Girl" by Students from Beijing Foreign Studies University, disclosing the different story they knew about this incident. Among them, Wu Qiongxiao, a teacher from the German Department of the university, burned midnight oil to release log on the Xiaonei (a website for socializing student) and pointed out sharply that the incident was hype-natured. The appearance of opinion leader got more and more students to join the discussion, making the refutation snowballing. This shows that the timeliness

and bilateral or even multilateral exchange make it more convenient for the public opinion fields and opinion leaders to form in the forming process of public opinion, in which internet media still have a big play.

However, conventional media can also have their own public opinion field through coverage of and comment on this incident in this stage. Being authoritative and professional, they can make use of their own superior resources along with the current branch public opinions to make a more comprehensive and careful summary, interact mutually with internet media, and produce new opinion field and opinion leader.

Stage three: formation of social public opinion, generally a stage with intervention from conventional media and three-dimensioned dissemination. Either the heated discussion from the internet or the follow-up of some conventional media are bound to draw more attention in society so that if conventional media put all discrete discussion together and give a full report, it is definite to make it more heated. In this process, conventional media will list, summarize and select and make comment on the remaining branch public opinion and leading opinion to give birth to broader social public opinion. Again in the above case, on March, 17th, 2009, Liu Houguang, the direction of Students' Affair Division of the university, confirmed that the girl applied to leave school on her own part instead of being forced to do it and that on the university's part, they had been talking her into coming back. With media's investigation and availability of more information, the lie had been made lighten at last, temporarily putting an end to this incident. But after that, subsequent report and discussion from both internet media and conventional media again has sparkled another round of heated discussion and the reflection on this incident gave rise to the new social public opinion.

In the forming process of social public opinion, conventional media displays incomparable merits. With its mature, abundant media resources and high recognition of information authority from receptionists, it finds out the truth through deep interview and investigation, and produce social public opinion through summary of internet public opinion. In this interaction process, conventional media is playing a bigger role.

The above stages show that conventional and internet media interact and communicate mutually in every stage according to their respective characteristics. Public opinion gaining momentum under the interaction between internet media and conventional media will invite attention and intervention from relevant government departments and even the whole society, thus affect the development and ending of incidents. Although we cannot quantify such influence, it is true that the combination of internet media and conventional media produce a "Resultant Effect.

IV. POINTS WORTH OF ATTENTION IN ORDER TO REALIZE BENIGN INTERACTION

From the profound influence on the development of public opinion imposed by the interaction between internet media and conventional media, we can see that internet media is endowed with incomparable advantages in aspects such as discovering agenda, forming agenda and spreading public opinion, etc, but conventional media play a more reliable and critical role in guiding public opinion to be

positive. Hence, benign interaction between the two is indispensable in order to conduct correct control and guidance in the forming process of social public opinion, and apparently conventional media take more responsibility for this.

In interaction, what should be put in the first place are still the basic news principles, namely, independent, objective and true. While infinitely approaching the truth, media should also shoulder their due responsibility as public media, laying foundation for China to become a democratic society ruled by law. To be specific, attention should be paid to the following points:

First, with the advantage of credibility, conventional media should intervene into internet public opinion as soon as possible to identify, select and filter information, keep a close track of its development, and try their best to find out the truth so as to eliminate rumors and guide public opinion in a timely manner.

Second, with regard to the means of intervention, apart from releasing authoritative information, conventional media should make full use of the rapid and effective interactive feedback mechanism of internet public opinion to reflect and guide public opinion.

Third, conventional media should guard truth and extend its space and depth in intervening internet public opinion despite the political pressure in reality.

Fourth, conventional media should strengthen its control over text while making comment on and analyzing internet incidents and public opinion so as not to harm media's reputation due to improper narration.

Internet can reveal truth with net friends' help and use the internet interaction to form public opinion field rapidly, which is absent in conventional media. However, internet public opinions also needs conventional media which are endowed with credibility, authority, reliability, to help in selecting, filtering, magnifying and extending itself, thus controlling and guiding it. Only through effective cooperation and benign interaction can internet media promote the formation of social public opinion and play a more important role in bring about change to our society.

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