

The Composition of Empathy and Public Opinion about Risk Society: Reflections on Some Public Opinion Events in Recent Years

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Abstract—This paper takes empathy as the breach to explore the evolution on social psychology in a risk society, analyzing how empathy influences the public opinion in recent years. The study holds that "empathy" is the motive mechanism for a series of events triggering public opinion in China which evolve from a single event to a event triggering public opinion. Because some common social problems are faced by Chinese people in the transitional period, people tend to unconsciously build a community of shared future for mankind. Otherwise, people pay more attention to others and worry about the society in which they live.

Keywords—Risk society; Empathy; Public opinion

I. INTRODUCTION

Public opinion around many public issues has become a relatively remarkable phenomenon in China during the transitional period in recent years. Traditionally speaking, public opinion is the sum of beliefs, attitudes, opinions and emotions expressed by the public about various phenomena and problems in society. In other words, it is the overall expression of public opinion or collective will. However, at present, China is in the period of social transformation with various social contradictions as well we increasing social uncertainty. With the rapid development of information dissemination and new media's powerful influence, more and more scholars have expounded the complexity of public opinion from different perspectives. The word "post-truth" was chosen by the Oxford English Dictionary as "2016 vocabulary", which reveals that in today's public opinion ecology, public opinion is more easily influenced by emotion and personal beliefs than by statements of objective facts. The development of media technology provides fertile soil for the expression of personal opinions and the formation of public opinion. In the new media environment, public opinion is more vulnerable to emotional impact. In some new media events, the trend of public opinion coincides with the public's emotional trend. There are already a lot of research on the mechanism of emotional mobilization on the relationship between public opinion and emotion. However, not too much analysis are relevant to the way emotions affect public opinion and the reason some single events can evolve into the fermentation of public opinion. This paper discusses some public opinion events that have received widespread attention in recent years,

exploring how emotional factors, especially empathy, affect public opinion as a general social psychology.

II. THE IMPACT OF EMOTION ON PUBLIC OPINION

Traditionally, public opinion is the overall and unified expression of the will of the majority. Rousseau believes that public opinion is a type of public will and the supreme will of the community [1]. Habermas holds that the formation of public opinion in the public sphere is the result of rational thinking of the public, and its role is to promote social progress and the formation of democracy [2]. However, in the present post-truth era, public opinion is far beyond reason, even the truth itself has become irrelevant. People no longer choose to believe in the truth, instead, emotions and feelings have become predominant. Individuals have more and more opportunities to make judgments in terms of their own opinions or prejudices. This type of cognition is more prominent in the current social environment. At present, there are some imbalances in the social structure of our country. Social contradictions are becoming more and more acute. The gap between the rich and the poor, the solidification of the interests of the stratum have caused more psychological imbalances among the public. In this context, the irrational factors in the online environment are prominent, and the emotional public opinion is pervasive in the online space [3]. Le Bon believes that the mutual infection of group emotion determines the choices of group behaviors. Instinctive emotions are particularly susceptible to get infected, while rational and calm emotion has no effect in the group [4]. Some scholars put forward the concept of "emotional community": because of the stimulation of unexpected events and their own sense of injustice, the public is very easy to be infected by the collective emotions of excitement, anger and hatred on the spot.

Because of the complexity of social problems, collective emotion or public sentiment expressed in public opinion play an important role in many new media events. Sentiment and emotion are relatively confusing concepts. Emotion refers to individual or group's psychological experience reflected on a particular event, which is a normal physiological-psychological reflection. However, sentiment is the attitude people hold towards the stable social relations formed in the objective world, and it is an unique emotion of human beings [3]. Sentiment is also used to describe the inner experience with

stable and profound social meaning, which is social and historic [5]. Emotional sociology regards emotion as the product of social structure, which is different from the private psychological feeling in psychology. It concentrates on the common emotion of the whole society and the deep dynamic mechanism of its formation. Raymond Williams coined the term "structure of Feeling", pointing out that this sentiment is a universal feeling of people's real life in a particular era, which is particularly evident in the period of social transformation [6].

During China's current transitional period, all the "properly arranged" life under the planned economy system in the past has met tremendous challenges today. Areas such as environment, food safety, the stability of work and even marriage, have become a daily concern. People no longer take chances to think that things happen is a result of accidental meaning, on the contrary, they believe that it is a problem that anyone may encounter at any time in life. Therefore, the awareness of individual risks rises to that of a collective level. This social concern about the general or collective risks has a profound impact on the formation and expression of public opinion.

Many scholars point out the influence of emotion on social events and public opinion from different angles. As early as the beginning of the Internet, Yang Guobin (2009) revealed the role of emotions in new media events, believing that the development of new media events is basically a process of emotional mobilization of media compared with resource mobilization in traditional social movement theory [7]. Scheufele believes that the content of public opinion can be explored from two dimensions: Cognitive Dimension and Affective Dimension [9]. Zhang Zhi'an and Yan Qihong (2016) pointed out that emotional analysis is an important factor in exploring new media and public opinion research. In the subsequent research, the irrational factors which are three dimensions of individual emotion, social emotion and collective will are discussed [3]. Yuan Guangfeng (2016) takes "sympathy" in public opinion as a breakthrough point, analyzing how sympathy is embedded in media reports and public opinion [8]. Although existing research about emotion and public opinion is abundant, it ignores the specific factors of emotion, that is, how the public sentiment, as the formation of the emotional community, plays its role in public opinion. Empathy is not only an individual's personal experience and psychological process, but is a product of political, social and cultural construction. The Internet has reconstructed people's emotional expression form and emotional relationship. In cyberspace, the boundary between private space and public space is overlapping, ambiguous and dynamic. From the perspective of media convergence, social media not only achieves technological convergence, but also blurs the boundaries between individual communication and group communication. The public's emotions are almost accessible to public space. Netizens are more likely to gather based on common emotions. This kind of emotion has an effective emotional resonance with the current social reality, which makes individual events become public events, triggering the emergence of public opinion and affects its direction.

III. THE IMPACT OF EMPATHY ON PUBLIC OPINION

Empathy is a psychological concept, but in recent years it has gradually attracted the attention of many other fields, such as empathy in service design, empathy in health communication. The expressions of empathy in our tradition, such as "sitting in a place", "empathizing with oneself", "comparing one's heart to one's heart" and "doing what one does not want to do to others" in Confucianism are all expressions of empathy. Specifically, "empathy" is, first of all, a kind of ability that we can directly feel other people's psychological state emotionally. It is a subtle, universal, and motivating people to understand other people's emotions and psychology.

For a long time sympathy and empathy have been the same in English, using sympathy. Until about 1950, people gradually used empathy as a separate word. The word "empathy" was first proposed by Lipps, a German psychologist. There is a word in German which means "feeling in", which reminds people of a verb involved. Later, British and American psychologists borrowed the German word "feel in" and turned it into empathy, empathy or empathy [11]. Empathy is often used alternately with pity, sympathy and compassion. Although similar, there are some subtle differences between these words. Sympathy and compassion are very similar and express sympathy, but sympathy has no strong feelings expressed by compassion, which emphasizes deep sympathy for human suffering. As Nussbaum said, if sympathy and compassion in contemporary expressions are different from any other, then the difference lies in the fact that the latter is more emotional for both sufferers and sympathizers. Comparatively speaking, pity refers to the top-down and slightly superior sympathy for the suffering of vulnerable groups, which is quite different from sympathy and empathy [10].

IV. THE IMPACT OF EMPATHY ON PUBLIC OPINION

A. *The Awakening of Natural Identity by Empathy*

In recent years, public opinion events have shown a very remarkable feature: the awakening of the public's natural identity in empathy, which is typical in the school bully incident in Zhongguancun Middle School in Beijing in 2016. The incident was initially a complaint from a parent on Weibo, which did not arouse widespread concern until a later article entitled "Every mother and child is a life-and-death friend, I want to accompany him to say NO to the campus bully!" . The incident became a public topic only after the post came out. An important reason behind this change is the sympathy for the awakening of human natural identity. For example, the author said in his post, "Ten years ago today, I desperately gave birth to a son; ten years ago today, my son desperately came to me; every mother and son desperately to meet, but I did not protect him." The author combines the individual narrative perspective with the group perspective to arouse the human sympathy and direct the human heart. Later, when her negotiations with the school were fruitless, the mother wrote, "I am a mother, I want to fight for my child, I want to stand up in spite of everything when he is hurt!" Every mother and child is a life-and-death acquaintance. No matter how hard it is, the mother takes her 10-year-old son to say NO to the bully on campus. Integrating the narrative that happens to the individual into the framework

of collective narrative, awakening the softest "mother" identity in the human heart and arousing people's wide resonance. Empathy makes people resonate with each other in a very short period of time, thus forming a whole community. Through internal communication and external stimulation, empathy is further strengthened and individual suffering is transformed into group suffering. Empathy turns "me" into us. The more intimate those who are with us, the more common they are with us, the more likely they are to arouse our empathy.

"Every mother and son is a life-and-death acquaintance, I want to accompany him to say NO to the campus bully!" This post raises an accidental incident of campus bullying to a collective event of mothers' community. It also conforms to the characteristics of new media communication feature, that is, facts together with emotions make it more appealing. In this incident, the solemn warmth of the weak side contrasts with the indifference of the powerful side. After the incident came to light, @People's Daily sent eight microblogs in succession, commenting that "campus bullying is by no means an excessive joke". After the incident, the parents said that the teacher characterized the incident as "playing an excessive joke", and the parents of the other side thought it was the child's naughty doing. Five days after the public opinion was detonated, the principal of No. 2 Primary School of Zhongguancun made a public voice, denying that the incident was a "campus violence" or "campus bullying" problem and identifying it as an "incidental incident". On Dec. 10, Zhongguancun No. 2 Primary School made a statement on Weibo: "... Since its inception, the school has been actively trying to coordinate, objectively and impartially handle the related demands and contradictions and disputes between several parents. Schools will continue to make efforts to achieve multi-accredited results. We sincerely appeal to the media and the public concerned about this matter... Let educational problems return to the campus for processing. We sincerely accept the supervision and help from all walks of life! "The school's public statement was accused of "indifference", and netizens have questioned the school's practices. When the common people's sympathy for children was aroused, the indifference attitude of the teachers and schools in Zhongguancun No. 2 Primary School to this matter contrasted sharply with the tragic warmth caused by the incident, thus arousing widespread concern and screen brushing.

Similarly, the case of assassinating and humiliating the mother in 2014 also reflects a similar awakening of natural identity case. When the dust settled, the whole social media blasted the pot: Mother was stained, the police dropped a word and left, the son rose up to resist, but was sentenced to life, a flesh-and-blood person, how can it not be painful? In the tweet platform of the message of the first media Southern Weekend, the reader set the top of the message "I will stab them without hesitation" with 42,000 comments. There are also more than 1.7 million comments, a record discussion under the news, which shows the impact of the event on society.

The incident triggered a widespread discussion about whether the mother was humiliated and the son should not be saved by judicial and moral disputes. In the order of value, although life is very important, dignity is above life when one's family is insulted. For Huan, the departure of the police

aggravated his isolation and hopelessness, which eventually led to the cost of saving his life. "When the law can't protect us, we can only break the law." This sentence is very heavy. Looking at the popular comments on Weibo, many of them discuss whether Huan belongs to legitimate defense. When he suffers from rights and interests, can justice come in time, such as a post saying, "Is he not legitimate defense?" The other side did not pose a life-threatening threat to him. But in any case, he has to pay a price for killing, because it is a Chinese law. Ironically, when their rights and interests are infringed, the law is absent and justice is delayed. Others wrote, "This is where we fear and resent. When you face this situation, how do you choose? Should I continue to be humiliated or stabbed at the debt collector, I would rebel in the Jedi anyway. This is an intertwined event of justice and morality, good and evil. "Everyone's constant discussion, indignation and promotion of the change of sentences are just not to want to be in such a hopeless and disorderly society, and not to fall into the abyss of no judicial protection in the future.

B. Social Identity

Empathy can awaken not only the public's natural identity, but also people's social identity. The Leiyang case in 2016 reflects the sympathetic recognition of social identity. Social identity is a subjective affirmation of individual social identity. On the one hand, it is the recognition of individual's self-identity. On the other hand, the individual classifies himself or others into a group by classifying them, endows them or others with the characteristics of the group, internalizes their values and accepts their norms of conduct. An important reason for the widespread discussion of the Leiyang case is that the public opinion guided by the people with similar social identities to Leiyang enhanced the public's suspicion of the Leiyang case. When Lei Yang is mentioned in the public opinion field, labels like "Master of the People's Congress", "Cadre of China Circular Economy Association", "New Father" are often added in front. Compared with "Lyric Men", these labels are naturally easier to obtain public sympathy and raise public doubts about the truth of the case. Through social cognition, social comparison and positive distinction, the public classifies themselves or others with similar identities into certain groups, thus gaining social recognition. For example, in the joint proposal of graduates of the National People's Congress, the question of whether Lei Yang's prostitution is true is raised. In fact, professional and technical talents are not equal to moral models. Lei Yang's social identity does not mean that he must have no moral defects. During the whole reporting process, the focus of the report shifted from the conflict event itself to the social identity of the parties, and then transformed ordinary news events into public opinion events. To a certain extent, it caused the gap between groups and the rupture of social relations, which was not conducive to the social coordination function of the media, but triggered new social contradictions.

In addition, one of the reasons for the widespread discussion about Leiyang case is the failure of the government's crisis communication management. After the occurrence of the case, the subjects involved argued about who should be responsible for Lei Yang's accidental death. The Beijing police first made a brief restitution of the case by means of a police report, and reviewed the incident in a very

official tone. The cold official language itself lacks the minimum respect for the deceased, and a simple review of the situation, combined with so-called coincidences, lacks sufficient evidence to prove that Lei Yang is a habitual prostitute who resists the law violently. In today's information is so diversified, this perfunctory coping style, which is full of loopholes from attitude to words, gives the netizens with very active thinking infinite imagination space.

Another important factor determining social identity is class, which has been reflected in many public opinion events in recent years. Identity is the identification of the individual's role, which is largely influenced by the external social and institutional environment. Since the reform and opening up, with the improvement of China's economic level, the social stratum structure has also undergone significant changes, and a new social stratum structure has gradually formed. In recent years, the emergence of the words "the second generation of the poor", "the second generation of the rich" and "the second generation of the officials" reflects the increasing solidification of social strata, the weakening of vertical mobility among strata, and the increasing difficulty of the movement of the lower strata to the middle and upper strata. Therefore, the phenomena of "hating the rich" and "hating the officials" have appeared, and social contradictions are prominent. This influence on social identity, from the initial "My father is Li Gang" to the "Qian Duo Backstage Hard" event, reflects the public's awakening of social identity in public opinion.

C. Resonance of the Social Situation

Compared with the above two kinds of empathy for identity awakening events, empathy can also make the public have common concerns about uncertain risks and resonate with the social situation. In modern society, although China's economy, politics, culture and other aspects of comprehensive development, but there are still many problems. People's worries about income, pension, medical care and other aspects make the life mode of society and human beings irresistibly reorganized and arranged with risk as the core. People generally feel a deep sense of insecurity and crisis, which is reflected in people's insecurity of life, life and property around them. One of the reasons why the Weizexi Incident in 2016 attracted so much public attention was the deep sympathy expressed by people for the Weizexi Incident and their feelings for the social situation.

Although after more than 30 years of reform and development, China's social and economic development is very rapid, and people's living standards are rising rapidly, but the social gap is growing, people's living costs are high, and the pressure of life is unprecedented. Therefore, people's ability to resist risks is not very sufficient. Any family encounters a situation similar to that of Wei Zexi, which is a great blow both economically and spiritually. This is also an important reason why the post "Middle Age in Beijing under the Influenza" in 2018 attracts so much attention.

In addition, in the process of social transformation, the institutionalized risk has become increasingly prominent through the level of social order, mainly manifested in social anomie and the sharp increase of social conflicts. One of the important manifestations of social anomie is the weakness of

institutional capacity, that is, in the presence of institutions, institutions and norms are still vacant or evaded, specifically in the form of political marketization or market greed. (ii) In the Wei Zexi incident, an important reason for widespread public discussion is the query of Baidu's bidding ranking system. Baidu is China's largest search engine, and most people need to rely on Baidu to search for answers. However, Baidu gains profits through competitive ranking, which has triggered criticism. In other words, what the public is discussing is how Internet companies balance the conflict between business interests and ethics. This reflects the public's deep concern about the anomie of power, wealth and morality in the process of social transformation.

D. Empathy for the Disadvantaged Groups

Empathy also manifests itself in the public's sympathy for vulnerable groups. The more typical event is the Xia Junfeng incident. After the incident, people showed great sympathy for Xia Junfeng and his wife and son, but ignored the victim Fang Chengguan, which reflected the sympathy for the disadvantaged groups and hatred for the powerful groups. The sense of vulnerability already exists not only in some vulnerable groups in the traditional sense, but also in some so-called elites in the tradition. Not only in terms of food and clothing or property possession, but also in terms of people's sense of injustice, deprivation and inadequate protection of civil rights in social competition. Xia Junfeng has brought a lot of people a kind of sadness because of the identity tag of the vulnerable groups and the orphans and widows left behind. In public opinion, Xia Junfeng is a hawk, a vulnerable group concerned by public opinion, while urban management is a strong group in law enforcement. Among them, too many people pay attention to the strong-weak confrontation, but ignore the cause of the confrontation, which is the cause of people's sympathy for the Xia Junfeng incident. Secondly, from the emotional point of view, as husband and father, Xia Junfeng is the pillar of the family. Therefore, Xia Junfeng's death is a family tragedy. But too many people only pay attention to the tragedy of one family and ignore the separation of the other two families. Behind this biased concern is the social public opinion which brings the sympathy of the vulnerable groups and hatred of the urban management class into the case evaluation. With the development of society, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, social inequality and inequity are ubiquitous, which makes people hate power and sympathize with the weak. In other words, it is a reflection of the public's sympathy for its own situation and its confrontation with injustice.

V. CONCLUSION

Although the basic starting point of public opinion is rational, emotions have an important impact on the judgment of opinions and facts in public opinion. At present, public opinion in our society is a mixture of emotions, facts and opinions. In the post-truth era, the facts provided by new media, especially self-media, are limited. At the same time, in order to pursue the goal of traffic, the new media will pay more attention to the opposition, confrontation and drama in content, which will have a greater impact on the facts.

Empathy is a kind of social psychology prevalent in China under the risk society. It is a hotbed or dynamic mechanism for some incidents or individual incidents to ferment into public events and trigger public opinion. People have a natural sense of empathy and empathy for the unfortunate or life-threatening events around them. This general social psychology has a greater influence under the impetus of the new media platform. Several cases in this paper are typical cases in the endless public opinion events in recent years. These cases arouse people's collective feelings from different levels and arouse the public's sympathy and sympathy to the greatest extent. In the period of social transformation, crises and risks are inevitable. Every individual is a fragile individual when facing risks and crises. Therefore, under this background, "community of destiny" will naturally form. In such a community, empathy is an inevitable product, and concern for others is a deep concern for the times in which they live. But at the same time, because of the sense of public emotions, the public will influence the rational judgment when judging public affairs. Sometimes, we need to be vigilant about private relief to put a proper cloak on the irregularity of the event itself.

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