

# Research on the Correlation and Communication Effect Between Media Agenda and Public Agenda from the Perspective of Network Agenda Setting--Take Weibo of the Mainstream Media Related to “Ding Zhen” as an Example

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## ABSTRACT

In November 2020, Ding Zhen unexpectedly went viral online because of a video clip, which sparked heated discussion among netizens and attracted the attention of the mainstream media. Through "Ding Zhen", the mainstream media has made a series of agenda setting, and then constructed the characteristics and memories related to Ding Zhen in the minds of the public. In order to explore the correlation between media agenda and public agenda related to "Ding Zhen", as well as the communication effect of mainstream media agenda setting from the perspective of network agenda setting. Through adopting the research methods of big data analysis, text analysis and content analysis, this research studies the Weibo content and comment content of the mainstream media related to Ding Zhen, and divides the mainstream media agenda into six categories, and the public agenda contents match them. It is concluded that the mainstream media agenda in Weibo is related to the public agenda, and the mainstream media agenda setting in Weibo has achieved good communication effects, which has increased Ding Zhen's influence microscopically, promoted the solution of a series of social problems such as poverty alleviation macroscopically, and promoted the development of Litang local tourism economy in the short term. However, in the long term, it is still necessary to consolidate the achievements of poverty alleviation and strengthen ethnic unity cultural education, so as to realize the sustainable development of remote areas.

**Keywords:** *Agenda Setting, Ding Zhen, Mainstream Media, Media Agenda, Public Agenda, Communication Effect*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the continuous development of the mobile Internet and the transformation from traditional media to new media, more and more mainstream media have accounts in Weibo. These new mainstream media have increasingly become the vital force of the CPC and the government to guide public opinion. As a new type of mass media, Weibo has the characteristics of strong interaction, high openness and decentralization, so it has been valued by the majority of mainstream media, and the agenda setting function of Weibo has been highlighted in the process of information communication. Weibo users can quickly push to the climax of public opinion at a certain time through Weibo's repost, comment and like

functions. They can also set topics and change the topic trends of public opinion.

In November 2020, Ding Zhen unexpectedly went viral online because of a 7-second video clip, in which Ding Zhen's clear eyes, innocent and shy smile captured the hearts of countless netizens, obtained a lot of attention, and triggered a series of explosive communication. Then Ding Zhen, by his high popularity, was not only employed as the ambassador of Litang tourism, but also triggered the promotion of cultural and tourism organizations around China. Since Ding Zhen went viral on Weibo in November 2020, the mainstream media have reported not only on Ding Zhen himself, but also have constructed various sub-topics through Ding Zhen. The mainstream media have repeatedly highlighted

the reports on "Ding Zhen" topic, and have combined with various sub-topics to construct the cognitive memory and attributes of "Ding Zhen"-related events in the minds of the audience. With the proposal of the third level of agenda setting, it is necessary to verify the relevance and integration degree between the media agenda and the public agenda, and then explore the communication effect of the mainstream media agenda setting. On the one hand, it plays a certain role in studying the public opinion guiding force and influence of mainstream media in social media; on the other hand, it has certain significance for mainstream media how to set appropriate agenda and public opinion guidance through hot topics.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Agenda Setting

In 1922, Walter Lippmann put forward the conclusion of "the outside world and the vision in our minds" in Public Opinion. Then, in the Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media published in 1972, Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw creatively put forward the theory of agenda setting, and used empirical methods to test the significant relationship between media agenda and public agenda for the first time.

With the improvement and empirical research of agenda setting theory by many scholars, agenda setting has experienced three levels. The first level of agenda setting is the Object Agenda Setting, that is, the significance of attitude object is transferred from the media agenda to the public agenda.<sup>[1]</sup> As the research enters a new stage, the media can not only tell the public what they think, but also tell the public how to think. The second level of agenda setting is the Attribute Agenda Setting, and the media can not only set the agenda of the importance of the topic, but also affect the public's judgment of the attributes of the topic. With the emergence of social media and big data, the traditional agenda setting theory has been impacted. McCombs and Guo Lei put forward the third level of agenda setting, that is, the Network Agenda Setting (or NAS), they proposed that the public's understanding of topics, attributes, or the combination of topics and attributes is similar to the network structure in which different nodes are connected to each other, not in a linear arrangement.<sup>[1]</sup> The change mainly lies in the way of thinking from linear to relevance, from hierarchical to network in cognitive method, and introduced the network analysis into the research of agenda setting. It is mainly assumed that "the associative network of topics/attributes/topics and attributes can be transferred from the media agenda to the public agenda".<sup>[2]</sup>

In foreign countries, McCombs and Guo Lei respectively carried out three empirical researches, the initial two focused on the attribute of the object, proved

the existence of the effect of network agenda setting,<sup>[2][3]</sup> and the third empirical research was based on the whole United States. It is proved that the significance of network relevance in the media agenda can be transferred to the public agenda.<sup>[4]</sup> The existing researches on network agenda setting have found a significant relationship between the media network agenda and the public network agenda through individual country cases and multinational comparative analysis. Therefore, the third level of agenda setting believes that the mass media can tell us "what to contact and how to contact". There have been some empirical studies on online agenda setting in China. Scholars Li Benqian and Zhang Guoliang tested the relationship among public agenda, media agenda and reality from the economic field through empirical research.<sup>[5]</sup> Some scholars have studied the event of "illegal construction of the luxury apartment of Chief Executive Liang Zhenying in Hong Kong, PRC" and found that there is a strong correlation between the media and the public network agenda.<sup>[6]</sup> Some scholars collected Weibo data to compare the media agenda and public agenda in breaking and non-breaking news events, and came to the conclusion that "traditional media can no longer dominate Weibo public opinion".<sup>[7]</sup> At the level of research methods, some scholars chose to use the methods of questionnaire survey and network analysis, for example, scholars Jiang Qiaolei and Cheng Yang used the methods of questionnaire survey and network analysis to analyze the case of "THAAD event". It verifies the significant transfer of the media agenda to the public agenda, and divides the implicit and explicit public agenda.<sup>[8]</sup> Other scholars Hao Shuai and Luo Chen studied the "Li Wenxing event" to verify the relationship between the agenda network corresponding to different attributes of media and the public agenda network, and found that the agenda setting ability of traditional media is stronger than that of social media.<sup>[9]</sup>

However, at present, there is still a lack of Chinese empirical research on network agenda setting in Chinese context. Follow-up studies can also further explore digital media such as traditional media and social network platforms, as well as complex topics/attribute interactions and impacts among the public.

### 2.2. Research on the Agenda Setting Theory and Communication Effect

The research of communication effect has gone through the stages of Magic Bullet Theory, Limited Effect Theory, Moderate Effect Theory and Powerful Effect Theory. According to the NAS theory, the main purpose of communication effect research is to verify the relevance or causality between media topics and public topics and attributes. At present, the trend of research on social media agenda setting through the analysis method of data mining is gradually emerging. At present, scholars no longer only pay attention to the "media-centric

theory", but also pay attention to the public agenda, especially the research results of the social media public agenda are becoming more and more obvious.

For the research of communication effect, it is necessary to analyze the attributes of the target audience as variables, and the research of public effect mainly plays a role in three aspects: cognition, attitude and behavior. With the arrival of the mobile Internet era, the new mainstream media need to pay attention to the micro "attitude" level of communication effect, because to coordinate social contradictions, build social consensus and strengthen the national centripetal force, it is necessary for the audience to form a sense of identity through the change of attitude.<sup>[10]</sup> The change in attitude is the result of the interaction between the media agenda and the public agenda. The network agenda setting pays attention to the cognitive structure of the audience and makes an integrated analysis of the objects and attributes of the agenda setting.<sup>[11]</sup> Therefore, the research on the communication effect of the new mainstream media needs to be based on the communication structure of "new media is the relationship",<sup>[12]</sup> and comprehensively consider the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda.

With the rise of the Internet era, Weibo, as a kind of social media for sharing information instantly, has become the main place for the public to discuss public affairs and express their own opinions. The transmission power of its information is strong, and the communication relationship belongs to the weak link. It is conducive to the spread of information. And Weibo participants are diversified, so data collection is more feasible. Because the topic type (Ding Zhen) has controlled the variables, this research adopts the research method of the combination of content analysis and data mining. Firstly, it makes a quantitative, objective and specific analysis of the media agenda through the method of content analysis. Then it carries on the relevance analysis and text emotional tendency analysis of the public agenda through data mining, verifies the research hypothesis, and draws the research conclusion.

Based on the above discussion, this research puts forward the following research questions:

RQ1: With "Ding Zhen" as the main topic, what is the attribute of mainstream media agenda in Weibo?

RQ2: What are the attributes and distribution status among the elements of the public agenda in Weibo comments?

RQ3: With "Ding Zhen" as the main topic, what is the relationship between mainstream media agenda and public agenda in Weibo?

RQ4: With "Ding Zhen" as the main topic, what is the effect of mainstream media agenda in Weibo on its communication effect?

### **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

In this paper, the research methods of big data analysis, text analysis and content analysis are adopted to study the content and comment content of the mainstream media related to Ding Zhen in Weibo: under the trending topics related to Ding Zhen, according to the previous observation and a large number of Weibo posts and comment data collection, with Ding Zhen as the main agenda, the Weibo sub-agenda is classified. In order to divide the mainstream media agenda into six categories: ethnic unity, poverty alleviation, tourism publicity, ethnic culture, social concern and ecological environment, and comprehensively consider the number of reposts, comments and likes, according to this classification, six Weibo posts published by mainstream media are selected as typical samples for analysis; in order to ensure the effectiveness and interaction of comments and avoid repetition, adopt the first 200 comments of each Weibo to sort out the focus and emotional bias that users pay attention to, and explore the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda.

In this research, a third-party crawler tool, Octopus Collector is used to extract Ding Zhen-related mainstream media Weibo comments according to the algorithm recommendation mechanism developed by Weibo's own most-like comments, a total of 1,200 comments were extracted from the Weibo comment area of Ding Zhen-related mainstream media, and the data were cleaned, and the duplicated copies were deleted. Finally, 1,197 valid samples were obtained.

### **4. RESEARCH CONTENT**

#### ***4.1. Attribute of Mainstream Media Agenda***

McCombs and Shaw found that the agenda that the public can really pay attention to is between 5 and 7. Zhu Jianhua mentioned that there is competition among public agendas, and the increase in the level of attention on one topic may lead to a decline in the attention of other topics. The primary premise of the effect of agenda setting is that the topic can be "seen" by the public. Weibo is currently the largest platform for obtaining, sharing and spreading information in China, in which the Weibo Trending has become an important window to reflect public opinion, allowing topics to enter the field of public affairs in a timely manner. Weibo Trending, as an agenda setting mechanism of the media platform, is different from the traditional agenda setting. Weibo Trending ranks according to users' information acquisition behavior, allows users to set the public agenda, and triggers public participation and interaction. It is more credible and

public, and it has become an important basis for the public to judge the degree of attention of an event, phenomenon and person.

Based on this, in terms of screening criteria, Ding Zhen's main topic is taken as the coding unit from November 29, 2020 to March 8, 2021. The relevant Weibo samples under the topics of "Ding Zhen" on the

Weibo Trending are divided into six major topics: patriotism and unity, poverty alleviation, tourism publicity, ethnic culture, social concern, and ecological environment, with the top two of the related topics as the selection criteria. Finally, six Weibo posts related to Ding Zhen published by mainstream media were selected as the research sample, as shown in Table 1:

**Table 1** Contents of Mainstream Media Agenda Setting

Topic	Date	Trending Topic	Weibo Account of Mainstream Media
Patriotism and Unity	February 12, 2021	#Tseten Dolma and Ding Zhen Sing Folk Songs to the CPC Again#	People's Daily
Poverty Alleviation	November 29, 2020	#What are we concerned about behind Ding Zhen? #	CCTV News
Tourism Publicity	November 29, 2020	#The Battle among Various Official Weibo Accounts Triggered by Ding Zheng# #The Truth behind the Battle for Ding Zhen is Inspiring#	People's Daily
Ethnic Culture	February 23, 2021	#Ding Zhen and A'duo Contributes to the Ethnic Culture#	People's Daily
Social Concern	February 8, 2021	#Ding Zhen's Letter#	Sichuan Culture and Tourism
Ecological Environment	March 8, 2021	#Ding Zhen and Prosecutors Shot a Public Service Announcement#	Supreme People's Procuratorate

**4.2. Attribute of Public Agenda: Object Semantic and Word Frequency Analysis of Public Concern**

As shown in Table 2, among the 1,197 comments under the six Weibo posts selected, it can be found that the largest number of Weibo audience comments is concentrated in Ding Zhen, nationality, region and culture. In addition, they also pay attention to the environment, country, hometown, poverty alleviation and tourism. However, it is worth noting that under Ding Zhen-related Weibo posts, netizens do not only pay attention to Ding Zhen himself, but follow the media agenda to pay attention to Ding Zhen's sub-topics, and because Ding Zhen is a Tibetan boy, therefore, people pay more attention to the nationality, culture and region. Under different sub-topics, netizens also have a high degree of discussion on the topics that appear in Weibo, such as "#Ding Zhen and Aduo Contributes to the Ethnic Culture#", in which netizens mentioned "Adou" 77 times in their comments. Thus it can be seen that under the network agenda setting, the media agenda still has a great influence on the public agenda.

In view of the 475 entries related to "Ding Zhen" (including "Ding Zhen", "Tsundue" and "Tenzin

Tsundue"), we can see that in the Weibo comments on which Ding Zhen is the main topic, the focus of public attention is still on Ding Zhen. Secondly, attention also was paid to other things related to Ding Zhen's sub-topics. When receiving information, the audience will screen according to their own psychological needs to make it in line with their own mind and psychology. First, the audience's attention to Ding Zhen is reflected in their psychological dependence on the new media represented by mobile phones to some extent, and then they will actively participate in and immerse themselves in Ding Zhen's agenda discussion. Second, Ding Zhen's ingenuous image breaks the abnormal aesthetic, simple and kind-hearted in line with people's current aesthetic needs and experience. Third, with the increase of the pressure of daily life, people yearn for the realm of "poetry and distance", while Ding Zhen invisibly becomes the sustenance of public emotion, allowing the public to find a sense of comfort. In the selected sample, we can see that the emotional color of the comments tends to be positive. For further analysis, the public has a positive attitude towards Ding Zhen-related media agenda and its sub-topics in Weibo, and can be moved by the topics.

**Table 2** Total Word Frequency of Weibo Comments

Category	Key Words	Word Frequency
Ding Zhen	Ding Zhen, Tsundue, Tenzin Tsundue	475
Nationality	Nationality, Unity, One Family, Great Unity, Chinese Nation	267



From the perspective of micro effect, through the media agenda setting, Ding Zhen's popularity and influence has been expanded. "Ding Zhen" is the most frequently word mentioned by netizens in Weibo comments. On the one hand, Ding Zhen has gained a lot of popularity and flow under people's attention, increased Ding Zhen's exposure and popularity is effective for shaping the Litang tourism ambassador. On the other hand, it stimulates the aesthetic retrospect of the audience and their yearning for pure and simple characters and life, while Ding Zhen did not become a commercial slave, but became a tourism ambassador, realizing the integration of social value and personal value.

From the perspective of macro effect, the setting of "Ding Zhen"-related Weibo posts can achieve the positive guidance of public opinion from the mainstream media and promote the solution of a series of policy and social problems such as environmental protection and poverty alleviation. In the Weibo posts with "Ding Zhen" as the main topic, there is often accompanied by sub-topics, and the mainstream media trigger audience's participation and discussion through these sub-topics. Therefore, with the vigorous publicity and promotion of various mainstream media, the audience has seen the results of poverty alleviation work in Litang County and perceived the effectiveness of environmental protection.

From the perspective of short-term effect, the media agenda has aroused the audience's expectation and attention to tourism in western Sichuan, which, to a certain extent, can promote the development of tourism in Ganzi Prefecture and help consolidate the results of poverty alleviation. After the video of Ding Zhen's World was released on Weibo, it sparked heated discussion. The natural scenery, Tibetan culture and Ding Zhen's smile all attracted many netizens to yearn for the world of Litang in Sichuan and visit it, which not only increased the popularity of local tourism, but also stimulated the enthusiasm of the cultural and tourism industry, the sluggish tourism industry after the epidemic has been improved.

From the perspective of long-term effect, on the one hand, how to create a positive character in line with public opinion and meet the needs of the people, give full play to popularity and flow, and carry out correct guidance of public opinion and transmission of values through this symbolic character, is a topic of urgent concern. On the other hand, as the "Ding Zhen topic" fades, people's attention to Litang is not as good as it used to be, and the local government and mainstream media need to explore a new way. Netizens' comments can also be used for reference, and the mainstream media can increase the coverage of Litang's local positive figures and related deeds. From the discussions related to "Ding Zhen Writes Chinese Characters", we can see that strengthening local culture and education and promoting the blending and reciprocity of Han culture and Tibetan culture can not

only strengthen ethnic unity, but also consolidate the success of tourism industry and the achievements of poverty alleviation, so as to achieve sustainable development.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The third level of network agenda setting theory is a new breakthrough made by McCombs to the traditional communication effect research agenda setting theory, and the communication effect research needs to verify the correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda. In recent years, there have been a large number of studies on agenda setting based on new media, from "media-centric theory" to paying attention to public agenda, and there are more and more studies on public agenda.<sup>[10]</sup> However, few scholars combine the theory of network agenda setting with the theory of communication effect. Therefore, this research uses the methods of big data analysis, text analysis and content analysis to collect the Weibo content and public awareness of the mainstream media related to "Ding Zhen" on the social media platform of Weibo, verify the correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda, first analyze the agenda setting, and then further explore the communication effect of the mainstream media agenda setting. It is found that the content of the two agendas is closely related to the content of the communication effect, which not only enriches the research methods and content of the network agenda setting, but also expands the content level of the communication effect.

To be honest, there are still some shortcomings in this research: first, the representation of word frequency is insufficient, and there is no unified standard. The second is the sampling research on Weibo. The sample size is too small to reflect the problems and the overall situation that we want to study. In the future, if possible, the current network agenda will be used to set the commonly used social network analysis, and related regression analysis will be carried out.

With the rise of social platforms, the direction of information has become diversified, it is possible to reverse the agenda setting, the audience's attention and discussion on the topic can continue to influence the agenda choice of the mainstream media. Ding Zhen's popularity attracted the attention of the mainstream media. To a certain extent, it has the influence of "reverse agenda setting". It is necessary to construct sub-topics through the main topics concerned by the public and get the attention of the audience. At the same time, it is also necessary to give full play to the value of the main topic characters, guide public opinion and achieve a good communication effect.

After getting a certain amount of attention, Ding Zhen entered the attention and follow-up of all kinds of media, quickly entered the public view, and obtained the

attention of the mainstream media. And then Ding Zhen was invited around China and became the tourism ambassador of Litang County and attracted countless tourists from all over the country. But at the same time, Ding Zhen's popularity encountered some controversies. Through the excavation of the comments, we can see that people hold different opinions on Ding Zhen's education and personal habits, and think that his perfect image with innocence has quietly collapsed. Therefore, the value leadership of the mainstream media is particularly important. In the report of Ding Zhen event, we should not only pay attention to his appearance, but also praise his truth, kindness and beauty. The mainstream media needs to excavate Chinese stories, turn attention into energy, and cultivate socialist core values, so as to drive the resonance of social positive energy and build a social concentric circle with patriotism as the core.

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