Rumor and Conspiracy Formation in Post Truth Era under COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The technique of event and news dissemination is evolving as the Internet grows in popularity and social media becomes more prevalent. Users may only get one side of an event or one of many viewpoints on an event when they get information via social media. Based on medical information distributed on social media during the COVID-19 epidemic, this paper will examine the influence of the post-truth age on the Internet environment. Further analysis will be carried out in this study by consulting scholarly literature and obtaining pertinent data from it. This paper will discuss how the Internet environment in the "post-truth" period is influenced by numerous elements such as Internet information, community, content creation style, and algorithm. This paper gets the conclusion that the spreading of rumors involves multiple aspects, including users' emotions, interpersonal communication on social media and algorithms.

Keywords: COVID-10, Post-truth, Rumor, Conspiracy formation

1. INTRODUCTION

There are several studies on "post-truth," but they mostly focus on how the "post-truth" age affects human psychological mechanisms [1], the impact of the "post-truth" era on political activities [2], and, of course, the impact of the "post-truth" era on social media [3]. This study will examine the emergence of the "post-truth" period and its impact on media viewers from a variety of angles, including Internet content creation, platform algorithms, and community characteristics. This article focuses on a sequence of incidents that occurred during the COVID-19 epidemic as a result of fear and misinformation in the media. The author feels that this is an excellent starting point for additional study and analysis since it completely embodies the features of the "post-truth" era and a sequence of impacts of the "post-truth" era's communication on audience behavior. This paper focuses on how Internet information, community, content production, platform algorithms, and other factors interact to create a "post-truth" era and conducts a thorough analysis of the data obtained by capturing content published on social media and analyzing relevant literature and specific events. This study defined the relationship between the Internet and post-truth for the general public, offered additional connections between the Internet and post-truth for scholars, and gave more resources as a basis for future research.

2. INTERNET AND POST TRUTH ERA

The Internet has entered the Era of Web2.0 with the advent of a variety of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Wechat, and Weibo [4]. In this period, the Internet has evolved from a material commodity to a knowledge-based market, enabling users to generate information and connect with other users through actions such as commenting and forwarding [5]. Social media, as a key information transmission medium on the Internet, is also known for its openness and involvement [6]. The characteristics of social media contribute to distinct ways of data transfer from the pre-Internet period, and various ways of communication lead to the emergence of the "post-truth" age, which has a connection to the widespread dissemination of rumors and conspiracy theories on the online platform. The disappearance of a shared objective standard of truth and the slippage between facts and alternative facts, information, views, beliefs, and truths' are referred to as post-truth in philosophy and politics [5].

There were several rumors circulating on the Internet during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, such as that the new Coronavirus was a radiating bacteria that could be eliminated by gargling with salt

water [7]. The proliferation of these falsehoods and the present media form of the Internet are inextricably linked. People can better grasp the features of the post-truth period, as well as the function and impact of the audience, by examining the link between Internet media and rumors.

3. HOW FOMO AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA SPREAD RUMOR

To begin with, it is evident that people began to worry in the early days of the pandemic as it progressed. People felt out of control as the new virus spread and the potential of death loomed, and the collection of viral treatments helped them restore control. However, in the process of gathering knowledge, the Internet presents a tremendous amount of data that is beyond the capability of an individual's entire reading and comprehension, leading to FOMO, or fear of missing out [8]. The user will be concerned that he or she will not be able to comprehend all of the information and will miss a message while gathering data. The progression of the cause of an event is the first time so that users continue to use social media, and long-term use of social media means that users continue to immerse themselves in a wealth of details, thereby further bolstering the information to the users missed nervousness, while anxiety causes users to make irrational judgments and thus to believe rumors and conspiracy theories [9]. Information screening is vital when individual users are confronted with a significant volume of information, and individuals with relatively tight personal relationships play a greater role in information suggestion [10]. The procedure of informing family and friends about the outbreak might be considered a sort of two-step communication. To put it another way, family and friends first get some information from a medium that acts as an opinion leader, and then act as an opinion leader in the process of sharing the issue with others, therefore increasing the credibility of the suggestion [11]. However, it is worth mentioning that the Internet's arrival completes the second stage in two-step communication. In other words, the present social media allows the second phase of two-step communication to be distributed more broadly in the process of individuals functioning as opinion leaders in their interpersonal interactions. For example, there is no minimum number of people required to establish a group chat on the Chinese social media platform WeChat, and a group may rapidly reach hundreds of participants. When one person in a group chat shares a rumor or conspiracy theory about the pandemic, the information is broadcast to a huge audience. This is because of the Internet's tribal drum character, which promotes sharing and gathering as a medium [12]. Individuals are completely capable of sharing their own knowledge with others on social media, and even play the role of opinion leaders in this process,

as opposed to communicating inside a network of friends. The line between "functioning as opinion leaders in secondary communication" and "opinion leaders" is blurred to some extent by social media. The introduction of WeChat public accounts, for example, is one example. Individuals create public WeChat accounts and post information on them, garnering admirers in the process. Users have completed the metamorphosis from individual users to opinion leaders when they gain hundreds of thousands or even millions of admirers through official accounts' media. Individual users can transmit particular information to more people on social media and even become thought leaders as a result of the Internet's influence. This technique gives rumors credence and allows individual users to propagate them on the Internet indefinitely.

3.1 Participation and Framing Effect on Social Media

As previously said, one of the hallmarks of the Internet and social media is that "everyone may engage," which decreases the media's gatekeeper function. Editors of periodicals and newspapers served as "gatekeepers" in the days before the Internet. They used professional expertise to assess the worth of news and then selected important material for publishing [13]. However, due to the widespread use of social media, anybody with a smartphone and a suitable account may now post material on the Internet. Information is no longer checked, or the screening process is carried out by the public's sending and likes, rather than by a particular individual. As a result, on the Internet, high-quality popular science knowledge and low-value misinformation coexist. Individual users can only be vetted by themselves in the process of getting information to pick more reliable information in the spread of information on the Internet [14]. Ordinary users may believe that information provided by acquaintances is more credible because of the Internet's tribal drum characteristic, which makes it simpler for them to get information from their network of acquaintances [15]. However, the Internet's free-for-all nature amplifies the framing impact. When an individual disperses information, he or she does not directly grasp and share the information, but rather uses a frame to process the information or event into a shape that he or she can grasp [16]. The individual's understanding of the incident may differ from the reality as a result of adopting the framework. When a person expresses such a divergence, the material with the variance is shared on social media. For example, because of panic or a lack of medical expertise, a user sent a rumor regarding COVID-19 therapy to a group chat during the pandemic. Other users in the corresponding section may see the gossip, and a person with the same anxiety may notice the appropriate information and pass it to them. In this process, the first users in the group who forward rumors play a role as

opinion leaders to some extent. However, because of their limited emotions or knowledge, users functioning as opinion leaders' comprehension and expression are likewise skewed. Individual users have a more positive role in the process of Internet communication, but the Framing Effect's prejudices cannot be ignored, and these biases facilitate the propagation of rumors to some extent.

3.2 Participation and Framing Effect on News Organization

It's important to note that the Framing Effect's bias manifests itself not only in specific customers, but also in the news media's reporting process, where factors like organizational tension and limitations, professional procedures, journalists' thinking and political leanings, and so on will all contribute to the Framing Effect and influence the final report [17]. News organizations, rather than medical and scientific institutions, have been more engaged on social media in this situation. According to statistics, news organizations account for 74% of the material on Facebook, whereas medical institutions and scientific research institutes account for just 1% of the articles [18]. Variations in the reporting process by news media may exist, and these deviations may be exacerbated through secondary transmission by consumers. When deviations are exaggerated to a certain amount, or when certain people purposely exaggerate variances to gain attention, rumors might emerge.
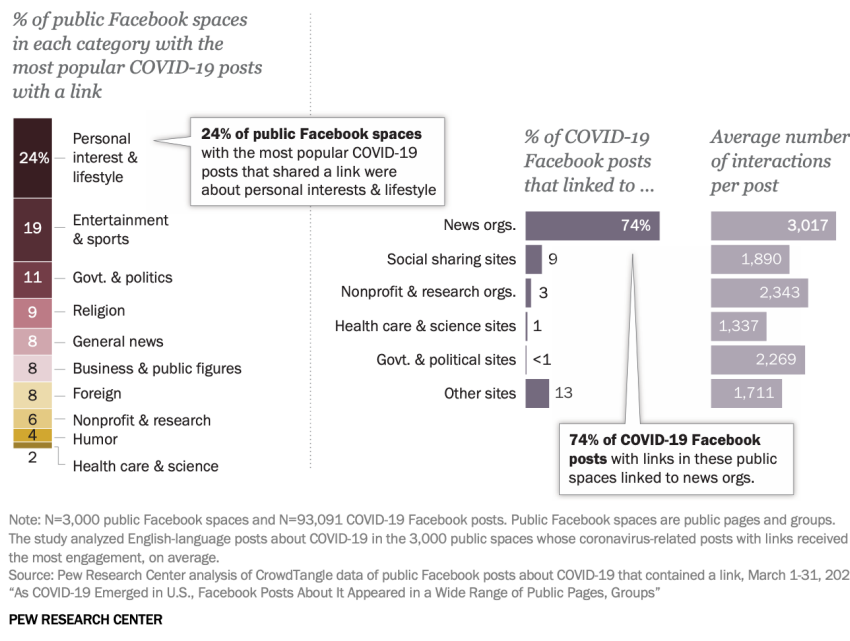
Figure 1 Statistic of percentage of COVID Facebook linking source

4. THE ROLE THAT ALGORITHM PLAYS IN RUMOR SPREADING

In addition to misunderstandings between users and the media, social media algorithms encourage the spread of misinformation. On many social media platforms, a software algorithm will screen out information that users may be interested in and propose it to them based on their interests using a keyword collecting algorithm [18]. In the process, if the user has access to relevant rumors of the new crown treatment method, the algorithm may recommend to users more about the content of the new champions league treatment, though this is unlikely to include official information. Instead, the algorithm may refer to the above results, the spread of information on social media or primarily information media institutions.

The ability for individuals to operate "we media" on social media increases the likelihood of rumor spreading. Individuals may exaggerate information deviations in order to attract attention, resulting in the emergence of rumors. As a result, official statements get lost in the quagmire of media streams. Rumor-spreading media may overstate the existing situation in a language in order to draw in more viewers [19]. When people read such knowledge, they will become nervous, expecting to alleviate their worry by learning more, and the algorithm will then offer more comparable stuff, creating a vicious spiral. This may be viewed as a hybrid of the information cocoon home construction process and the Bandwagon Effect. Information cocoon refers to when individuals are presented with large amounts of information online, they tend to see just what they want to see, and the algorithm picks the information they like, progressively reducing

their field of vision, much like a silkworm creating a cocoon for itself [3]. The bandwagon effect refers to people's proclivity to embrace particular habits, styles, or attitudes merely because others are doing so. More specifically, it is a cognitive bias in which public opinion or behavior can change as a result of a public rallying around certain acts and ideas [13]. When an individual pays attention to a certain piece of news, social networks will repeatedly push similar content to him, limiting the amount of information he knows [20]. The Bandwagon effect states that when a person gets a message frequently, he or she will believe it is more credible. This is especially true for low-credibility sources, where a strong Bandwagon cue will boost their credibility [21]. When an individual user contacts a rumor on social media, the platform will recommend more comparable information to the user based on an algorithm, and in the procedures, users will receive similar information in order to strengthen their confidence in the rumor, thus reducing contact, or ignoring other details, and may even spread gossip more in the system. Content with more clicks and retweets is much more likely to be noticed by more people in the social media algorithm [22]. When a rumor is shared widely, it is more likely to be recommended by social media algorithms, which enhances the rumor's propagation and diminishes the chances of real announcements being viewed.

Rumors on social media are not only a form of communication, but they may also be harmful to users. Individual users may disregard the necessity of preventative measures when they observe and believe that the innovative Coronavirus rumors of gargling with salt water dissipate coronavirus rumors, exposing them to specific health hazards. Simultaneously, the development of a huge number of rumors will drown out official information, making it more difficult to distribute reasonably objective information. It is worth mentioning that, in comparison to rumor production, rumor removal is quite slow. Generally, rumors on social media sites are identified and removed by moderators, or they are cleared when users report rumors. The former technique has a small number of moderators compared to the number of publications, making it impossible to entirely erase the rumor, whereas the latter method implies that the rumor has spread widely. To combat the harmful societal impacts that rumor propagation might have, social media platforms may need to adopt more effective methods of rumor control.

5. DISCUSSION AND LIMITATION

This paper discusses the form of social media and how to spread rumors and conspiracy theories, but it focuses primarily on the characteristics of social media, which are relatively significant discussion, about the specific form, such as chatting, public, whatever has played a role in the spread of concrete, is how to communicate knowledge, and the problem of how to impact the viewing public is not fully discussed. It is hoped that future studies will further discuss how to influence the audience.

Second, this paper's case study focuses primarily on the impact of "post-truth" social media communication and rumor propagation in the COVID-19 outbreak. Although the impact of post-truth on politics on social media is not addressed, the communication theory expressed in this element is worth considering. The impact of the information cocoon on voter intentions, in particular.

Again, this article focuses on WeChat; however, there is no further discussion of social media in other countries, such as Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. Under different cultures, social media in a rumor-spreading way, whether there will be differences, compared to WeChat, what different ways of communication are worth further discussion.

The actual analysis of the rumor itself is likewise deserving of more attention and investigation. This study simply states that the rumor will further distort the truth in order to capture the attention of a larger audience. What needs to be considered, however, is how rumor rhetoric affects the communication process. It's also an issue of how, depending on the platform and society, it distorts rumors through changes in wording, structure, and function. All of these arguments are worthy of additional consideration.

6. CONCLUSION

To summarize, this paper discusses how the popularity of social media platforms during the Web 2.0 era ushered in the post-truth era, as well as individual user emotions, the social interaction of friends and colleagues encouraged by social media, the borders between individual users and thought leaders, and the individual emotions of users. The future orientation and social networking algorithms work together to encourage rumor dissemination, the inadequacy of rumor management, and the potential impact of whispers on civilization.

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