Generation mechanism and countermeasures of overseas online public opinions related to China from the perspective of discourse power

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Abstract. In recent years, with the progress of Internet technology and the rapid rise of new media, the ecology of public opinion and the pattern of media have undergone significant changes. The occurrence and development of major China-related events are rapidly fermenting under the influence of various public opinions on online social platforms, which has a significant impact on the qualitative and trend of major China-related events. This article focuses on the China related reports of CNN, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post, four mainstream American media in the overseas mainstream social platform Twitter, on the two major events of "Xinjiang cotton" and "Pelosi's visit to Taiwan", and the characteristics of online public opinion triggered by them. Combined with the current status of our mainstream media communication work on overseas social platforms, it is proposed that content, audience and product form are the core elements of online public opinion construction on the current overseas social networking platform from the network public opinion generation mechanism and coping methods.

Keywords: Discourse power; Reports on China; Twitter; External communication; Network public opinion

1 Introduction

For a long time, influenced by national politics, ideology and other factors, the western society has a limited understanding of China, often with prejudice, and often used to look at China's development and rise with colored glasses. The western people have always been difficult to objectively evaluate the real environment of Chinese society, and the pattern of international public opinion that the West is strong and the other is weak has not changed. In this case, it is particularly important to understand the generation mechanism of overseas China-related online public opinions and formulate countermeasures.

2   Construction of discourse power and media's international communication power

The so-called international discourse power is a kind of discourse power contested between countries and regions in the world [1]. In terms of how one country's public perception of another country shapes national image, the right of discourse is a combination of goals and effects, a process of generating opinions, gathering attention, guiding public opinion and then forming public opinion. The power of national discourse is closely related to the building of national image and the construction of international media communication. For a long time, the US-led western countries have occupied the dominant position in the international discourse system, which has led to the malevolent distortion and smearing of China's image in the international.

The General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee has clearly emphasized that telling China's story well, spreading China's voice well, and presenting a true, three-dimensional and comprehensive China are important tasks to strengthen China's international communication capacity [2]. To this end, we can start with international reports on China and explore the mechanism of Chinese public opinion formation and its communication characteristics in other countries' international mainstream media, which can help the construction of China's international communication.

3   Generation mechanism of American mainstream media's China-related public opinion on Twitter

3.1   Basic overview of Twitter and American mainstream media

As a social platform with global influence, Twitter currently has about 310 million active users worldwide, of which about 21% are from the United States [3]. Since Twitter users can watch anonymously, they are more active in public issues, and it is easier to arouse public opinion, gather and guide public opinion. Moreover, mainstream media in all countries have official accounts on Twitter with a certain number of followers and influence, so it is representative to choose Twitter as a research platform for generating China-related public opinion.

At present, the accounts of American mainstream media on Twitter have a large number of followers and influence. Among them, CNN as the first TV channel to provide 24-hour TV news reports, is also the first all-news TV channel in the United States, with about 60.08 million fans. It has set up a large number of correspondents around the world, with a wide coverage and a large audience base, and has a high global influence. With about 54.423 million followers, The New York Times is one of the most powerful newspapers in the world. It is distributed all over the world and has a high influence. It has a strong authority in the hearts of the American people for a long time. The New York Times can be seen in almost all public places in the United States. The Wall Street Journal has been called "the newspaper every successful American must read." Its reporting style is serious, and its usual news writing method is called "Wall Street Journal style", which is widely influential in the world. Now, it

has about 20,209 million followers on Twitter. The Washington Post has about 19,893 million followers. It is the largest and oldest newspaper in Washington.

3.2   Generation mechanism of American media's China-related public opinion on Twitter under the "Xinjiang Cotton" incident

In March 2021, the "Xinjiang Cotton" incident aroused widespread concern at home and abroad. The move came after H&M Group posted a statement on its website saying it would stop using cotton produced in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, citing "forced labor" in the region [4]. Since then, international media have published articles in succession, generating a wave of public opinion on Twitter. Based on the occurrence, growth, intensification and decline of the above-mentioned four major American mainstream media waves during the occurrence of the event, this paper divides the generation of China-related public opinion into four stages: "incubation period, outbreak period, recurrent period and extinction period":

Incubation period (before March 24, 2021). At this stage, some relevant information has been spread on the Internet, but due to the small spread scope and low discussion among users, it has not produced a great influence on public opinion. Before the outbreak of public opinion on Xinjiang cotton in China (before March 34, 2021), the Xinjiang cotton event has been fermenting in the Internet for a long time. Including: the Australian broadcasting corporation ABC survey program "around the four corners" published reports on China's Xinjiang region, international fashion company H&M issued a statement about its boycott of cotton from Xinjiang, American researcher Guoen Zheng published an independent investigation report on the Xinjiang Cotton incident, the Trump administration has announced a ban on all cotton and tomato products from China's Xinjiang region, etc [5]. In addition, as early as March 9, 2021, CNN Breaking News posted a story on Twitter titled "First independent report into Xinjiang genocide allegations evidence of Beijing's 'intent to destroy' Uyghur people '[6]. The article mentioned that "China continues to commit genocide against Uyghurs; millions of Uyghurs have been placed in detention centers; detainees have been forcibly sterilized, severely humiliated and inhumane treatment or punishment; suicide incidents are widespread" and other false statements. There is no clear source for these remarks, and there is no evidence in the report to corroborate the authenticity of these remarks. Obviously, the report is completely a rumor and smear to China's national image. As of October 7, 2022, the report had a total of 3,289 likes and 751 comments. After checking, the author noticed that many foreign netizens, influenced by this report, published many fierce words criticizing the Chinese government, including dissatisfaction with the Chinese government's violence against their compatriots, and the Chinese government's genocide against Uyghurs. These remarks further spread on social platforms, causing the false report of CNN Breaking News to set off a wave of smears against China in the incubation period of "Xinjiang Cotton".

Outbreak period (March 24, 2021 -- March 26, 2021). Each public opinion event will have its outbreak period. Through the early incubation and fermentation, the number of media articles and user discussion of the event will show exponential

growth during this period, reaching the peak of hot discussion in a short time. The incident quickly exploded in the international community as People's Daily launched the Weibo hashtag # I Support Xinjiang Cotton # on the evening of March 24, 2021. According to statistics, in a short period of one day on March 25, 2021, the non-mainland media mentioned the event volume as high as 27.5K[7]. And on Twitter, the mainstream American media CNN reported "The US is sanctioning Chinese officials over alleged abuse of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Here's what you need to know"[8]. It appears that the U.S. government is acting as a righteous advocate for Uighurs. The New York Times reported " Why Are China's Consumers Threatening to Boycott H&M and Other Brands?"[9]. It uses the horrifying figure of "more than a million" from unknown sources to accuse the Chinese government of mass detention and forced labor of Uyghurs. The Wall Street Journal reported "H&M Criticized in China Over Xinjiang Forced-Labor Stance"[10]. On the whole, many American media are used to using the wrong words such as "forced labor", "maltreating Uighurs", "large-scale detention of Uighurs" to stigmatize China and Xinjiang cotton in the "Xinjiang cotton" incident. Moreover, the above mentioned American media are particularly good at using news photos to convey and guide the audience's concerns. For example, in The Washington Post media, the picture of the man in the iron gate leads the audience to the idea that the Chinese government is holding Uyghurs. CNN used depressing images of factories with desolate landscapes that led viewers to the idea that the Chinese government mistreated its fellow citizens; The picture of the five-star red flag used by the media of CNN Breaking News, in which the five-star red flag under the shadow and the buildings in the distance lead the audience to have the idea that the Chinese government supposes Uyghur ethnic group (as shown in Fig.1.). Therefore, foreign media often use the headlines and pictures with strong visual impact to amplify the crisis of public opinion, which has a sense of "speaking by looking at pictures". As it is often impossible to tell the whole story in a short space, the information lacks foundation and the rigor of the source is affected. In order to attract the audience in a short space, the media will use some special words to attract the attention. The reports are often out of context, detached from reality, exaggerated and other problems. For example, on April 7, 2021, The New York Times published reports mentioned in "Faced with accusations that it was profiting from the forced labor of Uyghur people in the Chinese territory of Xinjiang, the H&M Group - the world's second-largest clothing retailer- promised last year to stop buying cotton from the region."[11]; On March 17, 2021, in a report published by The Washington Post, "As Western governments assess whether the crackdown on Uyghurs and other minorities in China's Xinjiang region constitutes genocide, Beijing has slowed the information flow from the area to a trickle, obscuring conditions."[12]。 The words "forced labor" and "genocide" in the report are completely out of touch with reality and have a strong guiding meaning, thus achieving the purpose of the media to smear China.

Fig. 1. From left to right, The News reporting media are The Washington Post, CNN, CNN Breaking News (Twitter screenshots)

Recurrent period (March 30 -- April 1, 2021). After the outbreak of a public opinion event, the attention and discussion of all parties to the event make the online public opinion fluctuate repeatedly. In this stage, news reports on social platforms are not only guided by public opinion from the government or enterprise background, refuted rumors and even further intensified, but also prompted by comments from netizens to further ferment the event. For example, on March 31, 2021, H&M issued a statement on its Chinese online platform, claiming that the company is a "responsible buyer" and "remains committed" to the Chinese market [13]. However, after the statement was published, it once again aroused many parties to discuss "Xinjiang cotton" from the perspectives of economic factors and political factors in the international environment. According to statistics, the sound volume of non-mainland omni-channel mentions of "Xinjiang cotton" was 8.75k[14].

Extinction period (after April 1, 2021). During the recurrent period, the Chinese Foreign Ministry and China's mainstream media repeatedly refuted rumors with factual evidence. As time went by, the number of relevant articles published by the US mainstream media gradually decreased, and the attention of netizens was diverted by other events, and the news heat of the "Xinjiang cotton" incident gradually faded.

3.3   Generation mechanism of US media's China-related public opinion on Twitter under the event of "Pelosi's visit to Taiwan"

In early August 2022, Pelosi's visit to Taiwan attracted wide attention at home and abroad. CNN, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post carried intensive reports on the event. On Twitter, they project an image of China as authoritarian and militarily ambitious. The perspective of related reports, the number of articles published and the feedback of online audiences reflect the usual means of US media to create China-related public opinions, which has become an important part of the generation mechanism of China-related public opinions under this event:

3.3.1 Reporting perspective: The reporting perspective is single, and the "China threat theory" becomes the focus.

Through the study of American media reports on "Pelosi's visit to Taiwan", it can be found that they all have one thing in common in their reports on this event -- single Angle, that is, most of the reports are from the perspective of "China threat theory". Such as CNN's report on August 4, 2022,"China fires missiles near Taiwan in live-fire drills as PLA encircles island"[15], use the word "encircle" distorted the justice of the Chinese people's liberation army military response; And The New York Times reports on August 5, 2022, "China Sends Ships and Planes Toward Taiwan, Defying Rising Criticism"[16]. It is intended to imply that Beijing's military response has not been well received by the international community. Obviously, such reports ignore the integrity of China's sovereignty and the universally recognized basic norms governing international relations that "Taiwan is a part of China". They repeatedly use malicious words to imply and guide online audiences to interpret the normal response of the Chinese government as a negative image of autocracy and bullying. The American mainstream media's single and fact-based perspective on China-related reports confine the overseas Internet audience's thoughts in a narrow and irrational category, which further aggravates the negative effect of China-related public opinion on China's national image.

3.3.2 Number of publications: Publish multiple reports in a short time to accelerate the formation of public opinion.

In the event of "Pelosi's visit to Taiwan", the American media released several reports in a short period of time, and public opinion was quickly formed under the linkage of various media. By searching the keyword "Pelosi" on the official accounts of the four major American media on Twitter, we counted the total number of China-related reports released by the four media from August 1 to August 10, as well as the number of retweets and comments (as shown in Fig.2.), and found that the number of posts by the four media was very high, and most of these reports contain a certain volume of retweets and comments. These reports coalesced into a barrage of anti-China messages on Twitter, resulting in a short period of public opinion that turned against the Chinese government.

	The total number	The total amount of forwarding	The total number of comments
CNN	34	4720	5725
The New York Times	34	8684	5150
The Wall Street Journal	23	1658	1086
The Washington Post	26	2488	2066

Fig. 2. Statistics of media publications (draw it myself)

3.3.3 Audience feedback: Influenced by the report, the comments are "one-sided".

In addition to media reports, user feedback is also a very important part of the public opinion generation mechanism. The information flow between media and users is

often complicated. The information views between foreign media and domestic media, and between foreign users and domestic users are mutually circulated. While media reports affect users' views, users' views are also fed back to the media to a certain extent. They influence each other and jointly promote the generation of public opinion. Some netizens commented under the CNN report that "Taiwan is a republic, China is a dictatorship" and called China a "autocrat". Some netizens commented under the report of The New York Times that "Taiwan has its president" and Pelosi's visit to Taiwan is "how the free world works"; Another netizen commented under The Washington Post report that "China dearly wants a war over Taiwan" and "China is ramping up its aggressiveness on Taiwan" (as shown in Fig.3.). These netizens are believed to have taken words out of context by the US media and slandered China's reports. Their comments are "one-sided", which is not conducive to the establishment of China's good image in the world. To some extent, their responses reflected the great incitement of American media reports and further promoted the spread of public opinion.

Fig. 3. From left to right, The media commented by netizens are CNN, The New York Times and The Washington Post (Twitter screenshots)

4   Coping strategies of Chinese mainstream media in overseas public opinion

Based on the specific situation of overseas mainstream media's China-related reports on social platforms in the above events, we can draw the generation mechanism of overseas public opinion information flow (as shown in Fig.4.). First of all, there are two most important links in the mechanism of generating public opinion: media and users. The reports released by the media will affect the stance and opinions of the audience to a certain extent, and the comments and opinions published by the audience will also reflect the influence of the media reports on users to a certain extent. Media are divided into foreign media and domestic media, and users are also divided into foreign users and domestic users. In the Internet era, information barriers have been broken, and reports and comments from foreign media and domestic media, as well as foreign users and domestic users, can be exchanged through social platforms, influencing each other to a certain extent.

According to this mechanism diagram of public opinion information flow generation, we can do the following three things: First, monitor the public opinion dynamics.

By mastering the generation mechanism of overseas public opinions, we can better improve the public opinion monitoring system, timely grasp the dynamics of overseas public opinions related to China, and guide the direction of public opinions; Second, learn from the experience of Western media. As the saying goes, " Know yourself and your enemy, and you will never be defeated", we can learn the communication experience of western media according to this figure, so as to provide reference opinions for the construction of China's external communication, so that we can lay out in advance and better deal with the public opinion about China when it appears overseas; Third, cultivate a solid audience. In view of the long-term online public opinion problems, we should combine the attributes of social platforms, and cultivate a solid audience as an important link in the construction of China's external communication, in the hope that when facing the smear of western media, our audience can work together with Chinese media to respond and speak out for China.
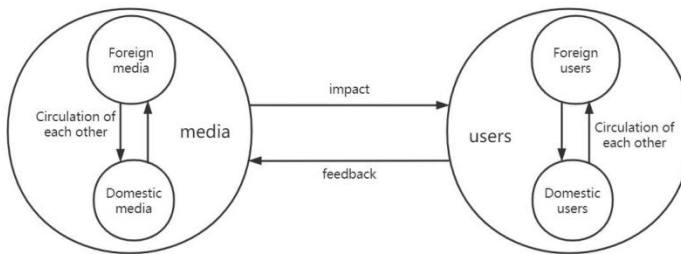
Fig. 4. Generation mechanism of overseas public opinion information flow (draw it myself)

In order to better cope with the difficulties and pressure faced by Chinese international communication in the present stage, Chinese mainstream media can gradually strengthen the external communication construction from the three perspectives of content, audience and product form:

First of all, in terms of content, we should lay a flat state of mind and attach importance to in-depth news. In the external communication work of overseas social platforms, it is necessary to take "depth" as the key point of content production, for three reasons. First, not everyone can do in-depth news. China's in-depth news, only China's mainstream media can do well; Second, depth news is irreplaceable. With the development of the Internet and the rise of "citizen journalists", in-depth news can only be done by professional news organizations; Third, there are few mainstream media that can make in-depth news a trump card on overseas social platforms. Chinese mainstream media should seize this gap and make in-depth reporting our highlights.

Secondly, in the cultivation of audience, we should pay attention to the multiple attributes of audience identity in the new media environment. For example, from the perspective of cultural attributes, one of the main reasons for the prevalence of criticism and smear is the barrier between different cultures. In this regard, our mainstream media should, on the one hand, actively and confidently replace Chinese slogans with Chinese stories, so as to dissolve the cultural alienation in a more vivid and

three-dimensional narrative form. On the other hand, we should also pay attention to the important position of common emotion in the audience's acceptance psychology. That is, we should not only tell our stories, but also explore the intersections in each other's cultural stories. We should make the intersections solid and deep with love as the bond.

Finally, in the form of products, we further explore the emotional commonality and practice product thinking. In the process of investigating the events of "Xinjiang Cotton" and "Pelosi's visit to Taiwan", we found that the main news reporting products of the four major mainstream media in the United States are still the traditional combination of pictures and texts, and the development of VR news, AR news, game interactive news and other product types is still less. From this, the mainstream media can broaden the form of news products in China's external communication, attract more overseas audiences and enhance their own characteristics.

5   Conclusions

Nowadays, the rise of overseas social media has further squeezed the space of our mainstream media using traditional channels for external communication. How to use overseas social platforms to carry out external communication is more important. Based on the events of "Xinjiang Cotton" and "Pelosi's visit to Taiwan", this paper summarizes the basic generating mechanism of overseas public opinion on China. On this basis, according to the current status of the external communication of China's mainstream media, this paper proposes that in the next stage of publicity work, the creation of in-depth news should be taken as an important way to explain and tell good stories about China. Exploring emotional resonance based on the multiple attributes of Internet audience identity is an important means to cultivate international audience. And combining with new media technology to produce multi-form news products will give our international news products lasting vitality.

In a word, for Chinese foreign publicity journalists, there are always conflicts between overseas public opinions related to China and international discourse rights. The task of building China's national image is a long and arduous one, and all parties can only go forward hand in hand.

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