An Analysis of the Formation Mechanism and Risks of Law-Related Rumors in the Age of Intelligent Media

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Abstract: *This paper examines the formation of law-related rumors in the age of smart media caused by the rapid dissemination mechanism of social media, the confusion of public and private discourse space, and rumor-making by artificial intelligence, and analyzes in depth their harm to the security of public opinion, including social division triggered by cyber-violence, privacy leakage threatening the trust of the society, and information manipulation leading to gender antagonism. Through case studies, the negative impacts of these problems on society and individuals are revealed, and it is emphasized that effective measures should be taken to maintain public opinion security and ensure social stability in the age of smart media.*

Keywords: *Law-related rumors; cyber violence; privacy breaches; information manipulation*

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of digital technology and social media, people have entered a brand new information era - the age of smart media. In this era, the speed and breadth of information dissemination have reached unprecedented levels, and social media have become the main channel for information flow, shaping public opinion and social cognition. The Smart Media Era, with its high degree of interconnectivity and information fragmentation, has brought new challenges to public opinion security. Social media platforms have become an important place for information exchange, however, the new form of communication is accompanied by the frequent emergence of law-related rumors. The law-related rumors published by Rule of Law Network in the first half of 2023 cover different topics and breeding channels, including but not limited to hot events, emergencies, gender-related rumors, and official-related rumors. Against this background, this paper takes the top ten law-related rumors in the first half of 2023 as the object of study, and through careful analysis of specific cases, we will dig deeper into the formation mechanism, dissemination channels, and social reactions of law-related rumors, aiming at revealing the serious challenges of law-related rumors in the era of smart media.

2. Mechanisms for the formation of law-related rumors

2.1. Rapid spread of social media

The rapid dissemination mechanism of social media is the key to the formation and dissemination of law-related rumors.2023 The officially announced law-related rumor breeding channels all come from microblogging, posting, Xiaohongshu, WeChat group and even the whole network of multi-platforms, while the short video dissemination method is a common mode of dissemination among the many channels, whose readability and immediacy make the rumors form the peak of public opinion in a very short period of time. At the same time, the interaction of users accelerates the spread of rumors, and the forms of commenting, liking and sharing make the information more infectious as well. Of the 242 law-related online rumors, 111 were born on short video platforms, accounting for 45.9%. On the one hand, this is related to the fact that short video platforms have sunk deeply in recent years, with a dramatic increase in the number of users and a low threshold for content release; on the other hand, short video formats are vivid and intuitive, with a large amount of information to carry, and under the simple principle of "seeing is believing", they are often more likely to gain the trust of netizens than graphic content, which gives rumor-mongers an opportunity to take advantage of the situation. The extensive use of social media platforms and large user groups make it possible for

law-related rumors to reach a large number of potential audiences in a short period of time, forming a scale of dissemination. In the network era where everyone is a communicator, while Internet platforms have constructed a network public discourse space for netizens, they have also been used by people with an ulterior motive, and have become a "hotbed" for fabricating and spreading rumors.

2.2. Confusing public and private discursive space

Online public opinion is often associated with the "public sphere," which Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher, argues that it is "a sphere situated between the private sphere and public authority, constituting an unofficial public domain. It is within this sphere that the public evaluates the public authority, its policies, and other issues of common concern."[1]. However, on social media platforms, individual and public discourses are often intertwined in the same space, making it difficult to identify the source and authenticity of information. Individual speech can easily be treated as public information, while public information may also be influenced by the subjective views of individuals, allowing law-related rumors to be confused in the space of public discourse. An individual's speech can be seen by a large number of users through retweeting and commenting on social media, which can be mistaken as public. In this case, law-related rumors can be confused with public discourse in the name of individual speech, and then accelerate the spread of rumors. This confusion makes it difficult for users to accurately judge the credibility of the information they consume, which provides the ground for the spread of law-related rumors.

2.3. Artificial Intelligence Concocts Rumors

The rise of artificial intelligence has revolutionized information dissemination and online public opinion, and the emergence of AI applications such as ChatGPT has significantly improved the automation and intelligence of disinformation. Compared with online rumors created by ordinary netizens, AI technology has demonstrated a powerful "faking ability", which easily imitates the language style of news reports and online posts, making the content of rumors even more vivid and difficult to distinguish the truth from falsehoods. Specifically, in May 2023, the Internet Security Team of Kongtong Branch of Pingliang City Public Security Bureau in Gansu Province successfully cracked a case of online rumors involving artificial intelligence. In this case, the suspect used AI software to modify and edit the time, location, and other details of news, spreading fabricated information about "a train hitting road workers, resulting in the death of nine people" to multiple regions, including Pingliang, Lanzhou, Longnan, Dingxi, and Qingyang, causing low-cost rumor dissemination but bringing tremendous negative impacts. This case highlights the potential risk of AI becoming a "rumor-mongering machine," disrupting the order of online communication and triggering a broader crisis of social trust.

3. Law-related rumors infringing on the security of public opinion

3.1. Under Cyber Violence: Individual Harm and the Threat of Social Division

In today's society, cyber-violence highlights a series of potential risks to the security of public opinion, both in terms of fragmentation of society as a whole and in terms of substantive harm to individuals. When using verbal violence, some people are both the controlled (by the violence of the language itself) and the perpetrators of the violence. Once they occupy a dominant position in verbal violence, they are more often perpetrators. On the other hand, the "victim" is in a passive position in the same context, constantly suffering from harm. That is, the implementation of discourse power is unequal. That is, the implementation of discursive power is not equal. Foucault believes that power is not only individuals moving back and forth in the line of power, but these individuals are also always in the state of implementing power.[2] In the virtual space, individuals are vulnerable to malicious attacks, physical assaults and humiliation, which are not only limited to the internet, but may also spill over into real life. This poses a serious psychological and physical threat to the victim, which may trigger psychological problems such as depression and anxiety, and even lead to self-isolation and social avoidance of the individual in reality. In a law-related rumor published in 2023, the mother of an elementary school student who died after being run over twice by a car in a school in Wuhan, Hubei province, was subjected to numerous rumor attacks and "cyberviolence" on the Internet because her dress did not match the scene, and cyberviolence became an indirect dagger in the mother's suicide in this incident. This threat is not only a product of the digital age, but also a direct challenge to social and individual stability.

As a kind of extreme speech behavior, cyber violence not only triggers speech disputes in the virtual space, but also profoundly aggravates the division within the society. This phenomenon is not only manifested in the fierce confrontation between different ideologies, but also in the profound contradictions between groups. Offensive speech and hate speech have plunged people into antagonistic sentiments and formed a divide between different social groups. Cyber violence has led to one-sided information dissemination, with people more inclined to accept information that is consistent with their own views and skeptical of heterogeneous views, creating information silos. This restricted flow of information within society makes society more and more divided. At the same time, cyber violence closes the social circle, and people avoid communicating with those who hold different views, creating a powerful collective of people with the same viewpoint, while those with different viewpoints are gradually marginalized. This trend of social fragmentation contributes to social tensions and hinders the common progress and development of society.

3.2. Under Privacy Breach: Social Trust Disintegration and the Threat of Insecurity

With the rapid development of information technology (IT), large-scale collection, dissemination and analysis of personal information has become possible, however, this also makes the risk of privacy leakage gradually appear. Sandra Petronio uses the concept of "Privacy Boundary" to distinguish between information belonging to the public sphere and the private sphere, and this theory has become an important theoretical foundation for understanding online interpersonal communication. Some scholars have conducted research on how social media usage affects people's privacy concepts from the perspective of cultivation theory. Some scholars have studied how social media use affects people's privacy perceptions from the perspective of culmination theory.[3] The analysis shows that social media use triggers more open and inclusive privacy attitudes among Internet users, and the satisfaction gained in the process of using social networks pushes users to be more proactive in self-disclosure. Self-disclosure will inevitably lead to privacy leakage, and social trust is built on the basis of information transparency and mutual trust between individuals, individuals and organizations, once privacy leakage incidents occur frequently, people's sharing of information and trust will gradually weaken, and the social trust system is threatened, which may lead to the obstruction of information exchange and social relations alienation. On March 27, 2023, an incident involving a male student surnamed Zhao from Soochow University fabricating rumors about female classmates by modifying images was exposed. The rumormonger transformed the selfies from the victim's social media into pornographic pictures and spread them. After multiple investigations, the female student finally identified the rumormonger as her high school classmate. This behavior not only inflicted mental distress on the victimized female student but also eroded the trust among members of society.

In addition, the sense of insecurity caused by privacy leakage is another important challenge facing society. With data from social networks, machines are trying to get closer to a truer picture of the user step by step. As data surveillance becomes easier and easier, Internet users seem to be living in a digital circular prison. The circular prison is characterized by the "visible" and the "unknowable," meaning that Internet users are becoming aware that they are being watched, but at no time are they able to see the watchdogs.[3] The insecurity about personal information has led to questions about social institutions, technological development and the information society. The fear of identity theft and misuse of personal privacy has become a common psychological state among members of society, and this sense of insecurity further exacerbates the tense atmosphere in society and may raise concerns about the stability of social functioning. Although social media users are fully aware of the risks of privacy breaches, they do not stop sharing personal information, a phenomenon described as the privacy paradox.

3.3. Under Information Manipulation: Interference with Rational Cognition and the Threat of Gender Dichotomy

In the age of intellectual media, information manipulation poses a serious challenge to rational cognition in the context of gender issues. Information manipulation is mainly manifested in the dissemination of false information, the exaggerated rendering of facts and the intentional confusion of expressions. The dissemination of false information deliberately creates an exaggerated or distorted image of a certain gender group through the dissemination of false statements, leading to the formation of stereotypes by the public and affecting the rational cognition of gender equality. Factual exaggeration, on the other hand, overstates certain aspects of gender issues, triggering the public to become overly worried or emotional and weakening rational thinking. Intentionally confusing expression creates confusion by blurring or distorting the expression of gender issues, causing bias or misunderstanding in the public's understanding of gender issues. These means of interfering with rational cognition will cause society to pay excessive attention to gender issues while ignoring more

pressing social issues. As the German sociologist Max Weber pointed out, "As long as actions are driven only by the pursuit of utilitarian ends, they will inevitably disregard the essence of human emotions and spiritual values."[4]

In gender issues, the misinterpretation or distortion of gender roles and gender identity through information manipulation will lead to public misunderstanding of gender issues and affect social understanding and support for gender equality. Emotional dramatization is one of the commonly used techniques of information manipulation. By exaggerating certain gender issues and creating an emotional response from the public, it will lead to confrontation and tension in society on gender issues. Such emotional dramatization may hinder rational discussion and make people more inclined to emotional positions, thus contributing to gender antagonism. More than half of the ten law-related rumors published by the Rule of Law Network involve gender issues.2023 In the incidents of "Yunnan college girl sexually assaulted by three black men" exposed on April 17 and "A female kindergarten teacher fed contraceptive pills to a toddler in Taiyuan" exposed on June 19, the rumor-mongers were not aware of any of the rumors, but of the fact that the rumor-mongers were not aware of them. In the case of the incident of a female kindergarten teacher feeding contraceptive pills to a toddler in Taiyuan on June 19, the rumor-mongers manipulated the information so that specific groups of people were intentionally provoked into confrontation and inter-gender tensions. Their behaviour manifests itself in the form of discrimination and stigmatization of a particular gender; for example, the term "fairy" is now often used by some men to discriminate against women in gender-conflict incidents, and even to inspire hate speech and violence. The intensification of this gender antagonism not only undermines social harmony, but also poses a direct threat to the realization of gender equality.

4. Conclusion

The problems of cyber violence, privacy leakage and information manipulation in the age of smart media pose serious challenges to society and individuals. Cyber violence not only causes individuals to suffer from verbal violence in the virtual space, but also deepens the division within the society and intensifies the confrontation and contradiction between different viewpoints. Privacy leakage threatens the foundation of social trust and raises concerns about information security and privacy, which may lead to the obstruction of information exchange and alienation of social relations. Information manipulation interferes with rational cognition under the issue of gender, creates prejudice and misunderstanding of gender issues, and contributes to excessive social attention to gender issues. In the face of these problems, we must deepen our knowledge of the risks of law-related rumors in the age of smart media and take effective measures to address the challenges. Social media platforms play a key role in guiding public opinion, and these platforms, as the main places for information dissemination, should strengthen their own management and standardize the order of information dissemination. First, social media platforms should strengthen the audit of information posted by users and establish a more effective information filtering mechanism to stop the spread of false information. Secondly, platforms should strengthen user education, improve users' ability to recognize the authenticity of information, and reduce the spread of false information among users. Through the use of technical means and artificial intelligence, social media platforms can identify and block potential rumor information in a timely manner, slow down the spread of rumors, and thus reduce the negative impact of rumors on society. In the era of smart media, law-related rumors have become an obstacle that cannot be ignored in social governance, and require the joint efforts of the whole society to maintain public order and social stability in cyberspace.

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