

The Function Mechanism of Opinion Leaders in China's Political Communication —— Taking the "H&M Boycotts Xinjiang Cotton" as an Example

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Abstract: *Opinion leaders play an important role in the traditional public opinion field. In recent years, with the rapid development of China's market economy and Internet technology, people's awareness of political participation is increasing, and network opinion leaders also emerge as the times require. This paper takes Sina Weibo platform as the research object, revolves around the incident of H&M boycotting cotton in Xinjiang, divides Weibo opinion leaders into three categories: entertainment stars and other public figures, official government or mainstream media Weibo, and self-media Big V, analyzes the role of all kinds of opinion leaders in the process of public opinion development, and then analyzes the role mechanism of Weibo opinion leaders in political communication with the theory of "psychology-behavior".*

Keywords: *Opinion leader, Political communication, Weibo*

1. Introduction

On February 3, China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) released the 47th statistical report on China's Internet development (hereinafter referred to as the report) in Beijing. According to the report, as of December 2020, the number of Internet users in China has reached 989 million., an increase of 85.4 million over March 2020, and the Internet penetration rate reached 70.4% [1]. With the development of new Internet technologies and mobile devices, people's self-awareness has been stimulated, and more and more people can express their opinions through social platforms such as "Two micro and one shake & Liang wei yi dou (in Chinese)" (Weibo, WeChat, Douyin). The current society has entered the era of "everyone has a microphone". However, at present, the general level of knowledge and personal quality of our people are on the low side. In the face of the flood of Internet information that is being updated all the time, they lack the ability to judge and filter information, and are prone to "aphasia". At this time, people need an authoritative and reliable "middleman" to help them filter information. The network opinion leader corresponding to the traditional opinion leader came into being. At the same time, Sina Weibo, as one of the largest social media in China, especially its special "Weibo refuting rumors" column during the epidemic, has greatly improved its information receiving status among the public. It is also a more active platform for network opinion leaders.

2. Sorting out the event of "H&M boycott of cotton in Xinjiang"

On March 24, H&M issued a statement to "stop using" cotton produced in Xinjiang on the grounds of "forced labor" in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, which was posted on the microblog hot search, causing heated discussion among netizens. Then, CCTV and Xinhua Online Review H&M boycotted Xinjiang cotton. Several artists terminated their cooperation with H&M brand.

On March 25, after H&M, Nike and Adidas were also exposed to boycott cotton in Xinjiang. The Ministry of Commerce held a press conference to respond to the cotton incident in Xinjiang. The Ministry of defense held a press conference to unveil the American routine. The China Consumer Association said it was seriously concerned about the H&M incident. China Textile Industry Federation issued a statement against any act of stigmatizing cotton in Xinjiang. The foreign ministry said that China's public opinion should not be bullied and violated, and spoke with historical photos of American cotton picking [2]. The Chinese Embassy and consulate in the UK and the government of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region jointly held a video publicity meeting on "Xinjiang is a good place".

On March 26, the people's Government of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region issued a statement

expressing its firm opposition to and strong condemnation of the rude sanctions imposed by the United States, Britain and Canada. The cotton fields in Kashgar and Aksu regions of Xinjiang are sown by high-powered tractors equipped with Beidou navigation system.

On March 27, CCTV news publicized the development status of Xinjiang and revealed why Xinjiang white cotton was blacklisted.

On March 28, CCTV invited host negmaiti from Xinjiang to bring goods for Xinjiang cotton live broadcast on the CCTV platform. The total number of viewers exceeded 22 million and the total sales exceeded 20 million yuan.

On March 29, the Ministry of foreign affairs and the Xinjiang autonomous region jointly held a press conference on Xinjiang related issues.

On March 31, HM responded to this incident and issued a statement hoping to regain the trust of Chinese consumers. CCTV also responded to this statement

3. Analysis on the trend of public opinion in the event of "H&M boycott of cotton in Xinjiang"

Search the keywords "cotton", "Xinjiang", "H&M" and "boycott" respectively through the "micro index" (Micro index is a data product based on microblog data. Through the statistical analysis of user data, behavior data and content data related to keywords, the index of keyword data is completed, which is to measure the value of keywords in microblog It is an important indicator of the communication and interaction effect and hot discussion.) Platform of sina Weibo data center. The selected time is nearly 30 days (March 8-April 5). The following hot word trends are obtained:

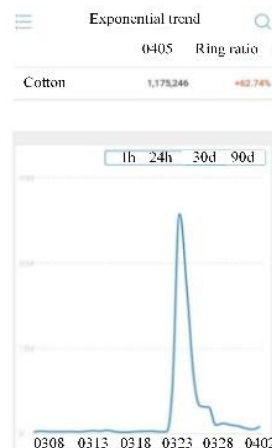


Figure 1: Hot word trend of "cotton" Sina Weibo from March 8 to April 5, 2021

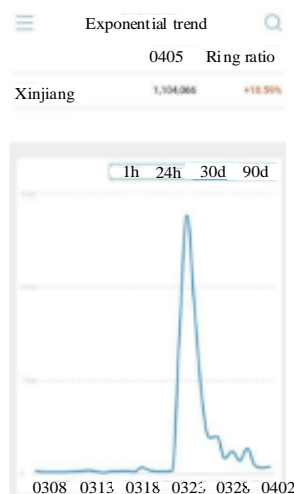


Figure 2: Hot word trend of "Xinjiang" Sina Weibo from March 8 to April 5, 2021

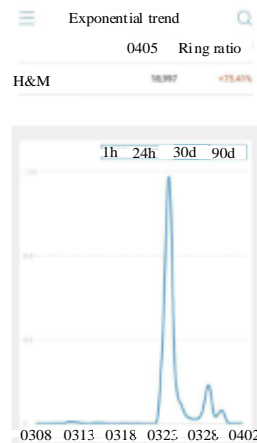


Figure 3: Hot word trend of "H&M" Sina Weibo from March 8 to April 5, 2021

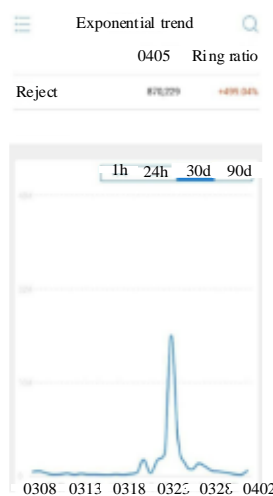


Figure 4: Trend of "boycotting" hot words on Sina Weibo from March 8 to April 5, 2021

From the above data trend pictures, it is not difficult to see that the public opinion trend of this event has the characteristics of rapid and violent arrival and rapid regression. We divide the development of public opinion into three processes: the outbreak stage of public opinion, the development stage of public opinion and the regression stage of public opinion. This is also a starting point for the later analysis of the characteristics of opinion leaders.

4. Analysis on the characteristics of opinion leaders

Opinion leaders are those who are first or more exposed to mass media messages in the crowd. They are a small number of influential intermediary roles in the process of information transmission and interpersonal interaction. They are intermediaries and transmitters in political communication, gates and fliters for organizational communication.

(1) Entertainment stars and other public figures: In the current context of universal entertainment, the strength of the voice of entertainment stars can not be ignored, especially in the current Internet environment, an entertainment star's microblog can affect tens of millions of Internet users in a few minutes.

On March 24, after H&M's statement was hit by a hot search, it immediately set off a "wave of termination" in the entertainment industry. On the same day, several artists issued a statement saying that they had stopped cooperation with relevant brands and that national interests always came first. Through the analysis of the voices of entertainment stars and other public figures, it can be seen that the voices of entertainment stars are usually concentrated in the early stage of the outbreak of public opinion, mainly to express their attitude, which usually affects the public's emotion when obtaining this information. By searching the keyword "stop cooperation", you can find dozens of statements that entertainment stars stop cooperation with the brands involved, and basically each hot search has tens of thousands of

discussions and tens of millions of readings. It can be seen that the group of entertainment stars has effectively expanded the communication scope of the event information, improved the communication efficiency, and affected the public's cognition of the importance of the event with its own strong influence.

(2) Official government or mainstream media microblog

At present, we are in the all-media era, and profound changes have taken place in the ecology of public opinion, the pattern of media and the mode of communication.

General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed in an important speech during the 12th collective study of the political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee: "We should step up efforts to do a good job in top-level design, create a new communication platform, build a new type of mainstream media, and expand the influence of mainstream values." let the voice of the party spread more widely and deeply[2]. In order to meet the needs of social management and Party construction, some government departments began to pay attention to occupying the voice in the network communication environment. Therefore, some government departments have opened their own microblogs and set up special online speaking teams or online speakers [3].

By tracking the voice track of official government microblogs, it can be seen that these official government microblogs or mainstream media microblogs have an earlier voice time, and their voice duration is longer than entertainment stars. They are not only limited to the early stage of public opinion outbreak, but also continue to pay attention to and promote the development of this event, which is more authoritative and comprehensive. In addition, by paying attention to the comments of these official government microblogs or mainstream media microblogs, it can be found that netizens rely on their information, and can well guide the public's attitude and enable the public to take relevant actions to express their attitude.

(3) Self-media big V

Compared with other types of opinion leaders, self-media leaders often earn their living income by means of flow. Therefore, this kind of leaders are often the most active on microblog and focus on their areas of concern. Therefore, they are also the reference for people to obtain information when reading information. For example, in this event, the blogger with the microblog account of "waves in the South China Sea" analyzed the event from the perspective of the military field on the day of the event, updated the event development within the next two days, and liked to forward relevant microblogs. It can be seen that the first one related to this event has been forwarded 1547 times, 303 comments and 3748 likes.

Through data analysis, it can be found that we-media big V represented by "waves in the South China Sea" often speaks during the outbreak of public opinion. Its voice content is mainly to strengthen the original attitude of netizens from the attitude level, so that netizens can more firmly believe and dare to express their original attitude.

5. Action mechanism of opinion leaders

Through the identification, classification and analysis of opinion leaders in the "H&M boycott of Xinjiang cotton" event based on the microblog platform, and according to the "psychology behavior" theory, it can be found that opinion leaders mainly play a role in the public, public opinion and events at four levels:

(1) Information dissemination level

In the process of political information dissemination, opinion leaders with their strong popularity and influence can greatly expand the scope of dissemination and improve the efficiency of dissemination. The Internet-based environment may even cause explosive proliferation, and this role is mainly reflected in the voice of public figures such as entertainment stars.

According to the "spiral of silence" theory (proposed by German scholar Elizabeth Noel Neumann in 1974), in order to prevent being isolated and punished by society, people should first observe the surrounding opinion environment before expressing their views. When they find that they belong to the "majority" or "advantage" opinions, they tend to express their views actively and boldly; On the contrary, when they find themselves in a "minority" or "inferior" opinion, ordinary people will succumb to environmental pressure and turn to silence or agreement. Therefore, the silence of the weak opinions or the courage to express them in agreement with the dominant opinions will make the dominant opinions have more advantages.

(2) Cognitive level

According to the agenda setting theory, the news media can't tell people what they think, but they can tell people what they think. The mass media can effectively influence what facts and opinions people pay attention to and the order of their discussions by providing information and arranging relevant topics.

Again, Opinion leaders as "intermediaries" of communication "Has the same effect. In the Internet environment, different opinion leaders can forward comments on an event, which can affect the psychological status of the event in the hearts of the audience. The higher the opinion leaders pay attention to the event, the greater the importance of the event in the hearts of the audience. In the "H&M boycott of Xinjiang cotton" event, whether it is the voice of public figures or the voice of official government microblog, which is the screenshot released by entertainment stars and other self-Media big V microblog in Figure 7, this event has spread rapidly and become a political hot event in a short time, making the audience's awareness of the importance of this event rise rapidly. Through the comparison of these two cases, we can know that opinion leaders can give priority to the dissemination of certain information with their own influence and authority, so that the audience imperceptibly believes that this information is in an advantageous position, so as to affect the audience's attention and discussion focus from the cognitive level, and then affect the development of political communication.

(3) Emotional level

In the post truth era, what really affects the trend of public opinion is often the emotion of the audience. Observing the comments of the audience under the microblogs released by these opinion leaders, most of them are strongly emotion-oriented words such as "boycott", "H&M out of China", "poor quality" and "block". By influencing the emotions of the audience, and then affecting the trend of political communication, it is a link that can not be ignored in the role of opinion leaders. In the current network environment, the first thing most netizens are exposed to is rarely the authenticity of the event, which is often a certain emotion that can be affected in a short time. People seldom carefully identify the authenticity of this report. They often believe it completely, and then they are infected by emotions, which affects the development of political communication.

(4) Behavioral level

The impact of behavior is often based on the development of the first three levels, mainly through people's words and deeds. For example, in the "H&M boycott of Xinjiang cotton" event, under the influence of opinion leaders, with the help of the trend of the Internet era of "everyone has a microphone", the audience dared and took the initiative to respond to this event, from the trend of public opinion on the Internet to the boycott of relevant brand products in reality, and then to the high sales of Xinjiang cotton products, It can be seen that the voice of opinion leaders for information will affect the speech and behavior of the audience, so as to expand the effect of political communication.

6. Conclusion

With the continuous development of China's market economy and science and technology, more and more people participate in political affairs. While the people's sense of participation has been improved, there are also information confusion, aphasia and so on. In particular, China is currently in the period of social transformation. Facing the complex network environment, on the one hand, we should actively formulate laws and regulations to rectify the vulgar and backward expression of "opinion leaders" and overcome the negative role of opinion leaders; On the other hand, we should also actively use the positive role of network opinion leaders in political communication to promote the development of democratic politics in China.

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