

Research on the Impact of Self-Media Mimetic Environment Construction on Online Secondary Political Opinion

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Abstract: *The study explores "network secondary political opinion" within the self-media environment, where fragmented perceptions create a "seemingly but not" state. Self-media influences public sentiment through "opinion leaders" and echo chambers, leading to polarization. The "Hu Xinyu incident" illustrates how self-media intensified negative opinions, eroding trust in official sources and diminishing traditional media's authority. These dynamics foster political apathy and skepticism, highlighting the need for improved media literacy to promote informed public discourse.*

Keywords: *online secondary political opinion; mimetic environment; self-media*

1. Introduction

"Network secondary political opinion" is a political opinion disaster resulting from the secondary processing and fermentation of mainstream network political opinion^[1]. The concept of "mimetic environment" is introduced in Lippmann's book "Public Opinion"; it refers to the subjective image of the real environment formed in the minds of individuals and groups. This represents people's fragmented and virtual analysis of reality, while the true picture of the whole event is complex and time-sensitive, thus creating a "seemingly but not" state. The formation of this "seemingly but not" state is significant^[2]. "Self-media" was proposed by U.S. IT expert Dan Gilmer in 2001 in "News Media 3.0" and later explored by Shein Borman and Chris Willis in their study "We Media." In this study, the definition of self-media is how the general public uses digital technology to enhance the global knowledge system, enabling them to provide and share their own facts and news.^[3]

2. Self-media become the main body of mimetic environment construction in online secondary political opinion

In Dan Gilmore's News Media 3.0, he categorizes current social communication media into three types: traditional media, new media, and self-media. However, in the realm of secondary political opinion on the Internet, self-media has become the dominant form of public opinion media. The mimetic environment they create exerts the most direct and extensive influence on information audiences. The main position of the influence self-media is primarily established through the phenomenon of "opinion leaders," the solidification of group opinions due to the echo chamber effect, the shift from a single communication subject to diversified communication, and the weakening of traditional official media's discourse power. Sociologist Lazarsfeld, in the 1940 Erie survey, found that the influence of mass media is limited^[4]. The information-receiving group tends to accept content that aligns with their own views and positions.

Although Internet media provides extensive and complex information, the public often relies on a small segment of people for guidance. This reliance can lead to polarization in public opinion. In this context, self-media creates "talking heads" who serve as both "opinion leaders." In the age of self-media, traditional communication theories have become inadequate. Traditional media no longer holds a dominant position. The rise of self-media has blurred the boundaries between communicators and audiences. The theory of "secondary communication" emphasizes the transmission of objective and authoritative information through bridges formed by opinion leaders. However, the erosion of government credibility has led the public to seek information and validation from self-media. This shift has made opinion leaders within this space the primary sources of information dissemination. Under

the framework of "News Media 3.0," traditional media has evolved into a diversified platform. The emergence of self-media empowers everyone to act as both communicators and audiences^[5]. This transformation has increased political participation among information audiences. It has also fostered a cohesive self-media mimetic environment in public opinion dissemination, as illustrated in Figure 1. This environment has now become the mainstream of online secondary political opinion.

Self-media, through the influence of "opinion leaders" and the mimicry of environments consistent with audience group formation, effectively holds these groups captive. This dynamic fosters the creation of information silos and the "information cocoon" effect, wherein information audience groups find it increasingly challenging to accept perspectives from other groups. Within these insular circles, individuals continuously reinforce their own viewpoints and sense of identity, ultimately forming an echo chamber within the public opinion environment. Moreover, these audience groups provide dynamic feedback to primary information sources, characterized by selective and biased tendencies. This feedback loop encourages media entities to seek attention and traffic, thereby expanding their influence and realizing a "two-way run" with their audience. The self-media mimetic environment exists independently of traditional official media, which diminishes its influence. While traditional media's selection of information is inherently selective, it remains subject to oversight by "gatekeepers^[6]." These gatekeepers help filter content, ensuring that the information disseminated maintains a degree of credibility and relevance.

When networked secondary political opinion arises, the authority of traditional official media weakens significantly. In a post-truth environment, traditional media struggles to form resonance and identity with information audience groups, ultimately exacerbating the mistrust between official media and the public. This relationship is further complicated by the rapid dissemination of information through self-media platforms, which often prioritize sensationalism over accuracy. As a result, audience groups may increasingly turn to self-media for their news consumption, reinforcing their existing beliefs and biases. The phenomenon of self-media, through the actions of "opinion leaders," effectively captivates these audience groups, creating an illusion of agency while compelling them to accept limited perspectives within their information cocoon. This cycle of reinforcement can lead to polarization within the public discourse, as diverse viewpoints become marginalized. In this context, the role of self-media is not merely as a platform for information sharing but as a significant force shaping public opinion and political discourse in contemporary society. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing the current landscape of information dissemination and its implications for democracy and civic engagement.

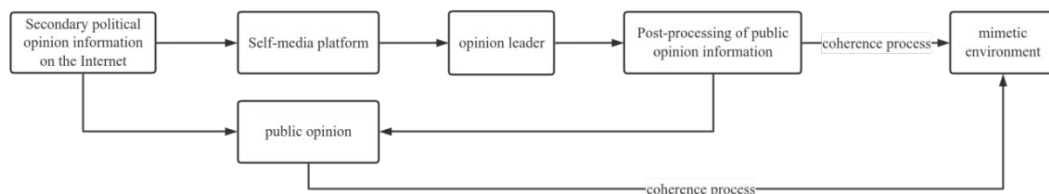


Figure 1: Self-media mimetic environment coherence process

The information audience groups increasingly turn to self-media in their pursuit of truth. Within this framework, self-media utilizes "opinion leaders" to construct a consistent opinion environment, thereby creating an information cocoon that effectively binds these audience groups. This dynamic benefits both parties: the audience receives affirmation of their beliefs, while self-media platforms enhance their engagement and influence. However, this relationship also leads to a dysfunctional state for the information subject, which struggles to construct meaningful public opinion discourse in the context of online secondary political opinion environments. The traditional media's discourse authority has been significantly undermined, resulting in a diminished ability to shape public narratives. Consequently, the self-media environment becomes the predominant space for opinion formation, where the aggregation of public sentiment is heavily influenced by the self-media's mechanisms. In this landscape, public opinion information primarily serves the needs of information audience groups. The subjects constructing secondary political opinion online are often determined by who aligns with or supports particular viewpoints. This creates a feedback loop, where the reinforcement of certain narratives further solidifies existing beliefs among audience members. Moreover, the information cocoon effect leads to increased polarization within public discourse. As audience groups become isolated in their perspectives, diverse viewpoints are marginalized, ultimately hindering constructive dialogue. This dynamic raises important questions about the role of self-media in shaping democratic discourse and

civic engagement in contemporary society. Understanding these complexities is essential for analyzing the implications of self-media on public opinion and political communication.

In summary, while self-media provides a platform for engagement and expression, it also poses significant challenges for the construction of a coherent public opinion discourse. The interplay between audience groups and self-media not only shapes individual perceptions but also influences broader societal narratives, thereby playing a crucial role in the evolution of political opinion in the digital age.

3. Self-media mimetic environment for controlling and guiding online secondary political opinion

At 00:00 on 29 January 2023, Tencent.com published a report titled "Missing Hu Xinyu to find? The net rumors that he climbed the train to go to a faraway place-Is it true?" This report brought the Hu Xinyu incident to the peak of public opinion on the internet. From 29 to 30 January at 16:52, related public opinion reached 1,476,076 articles, of which 23.4% were negative, only 0.23% were positive, and 76.37% were neutral. Taking Weibo as an example, 18,185 self-media V-users were involved in the incident, alongside 1,030 from the government, 307 from enterprises, 774 from the media, and 152,500 ordinary users. Notably, the content of negative public opinion was significantly higher than that of positive public opinion.

The fans of self-media V with positive comments numbered 3,866,196, while those with negative comments reached 10,548,905. In the online secondary political opinion disaster triggered by the Hu Xinyu incident, self-media and ordinary users comprised over 70% of the primary information disseminators and audiences. Negative public opinion outnumbered positive public opinion, with the proportion of negative comments among ordinary users reaching 70%. The influence of self-media in guiding negative public opinion was greater than that of positive opinions; thus, the public opinion orientation of the general public and self-media tended to align. Some self-media attracted public attention by exaggerating, speculating, and creating rumors to gain traffic, constructing "opinion leaders" through influential figures to lead the public away from the real information provided by official media. During the incident, delays in releasing official information, questioning from family members, and an increase in related cases tied the school to the government through public opinion pressure. This dynamic led to a decrease in political trust between the government and the public. Self-media utilized negative headlines to attract attention and fabricated conspiracy theories during the information gap to satisfy public curiosity, thus fostering an impression of political distrust towards the government and the school.

By employing negative public opinion, self-media created an irrational mimetic environment, causing the public to view events with prejudice. Ultimately, this resulted in self-media's dominance and control over secondary political opinion on the internet.

4. The impact of self-media mimetic environments on the production of information groups in the context of online subaltern political opinion

4.1. Information audience groups develop political apathy

In the mimetic environment constructed by self-media and information audience groups, netizens exhibit a pronounced lack of trust in the government and official institutions, which are typically seen as central to the formation of public opinion. The internet has emerged as a crucial channel for information audience groups to engage in political life in the digital age. However, through online platforms, these groups have increasingly observed the shortcomings and errors of the government and official institutions. This scrutiny has led to a significant decline in their enthusiasm for political participation, resulting in a widespread reluctance to engage in meaningful communication with these authorities. Consequently, a phenomenon of political indifference has emerged, where citizens feel disconnected from the political processes that affect their lives^[7]. On the other hand, within these information audience groups, interests may converge or empathize with specific events, fostering a collective consciousness. This mimetic environment not only influences the behaviors and ideas of the masses but also makes them more likely to direct their frustrations and criticisms at information subjects. Over time, this dynamic contributes to a growing climate of political mistrust, wherein official institutions are increasingly viewed with skepticism and doubt.

In traditional media, official institutions historically served as the central agents in public opinion

construction, dominating the discourse and promoting objective and rational views among information audience groups. In this context, the acceptance of the mimetic environment by these groups was largely grounded in a sense of objectivity and rationality. However, with the advent of internet platforms, there has been a notable shift. Public opinion guidance and control have gradually decentralized, resulting in the erosion of the dominance once held by official institutions. Self-media, distinct from official institutions, operate with different responsibilities and motivations. While official institutions are tasked with the obligation to report the truth and construct an objective environment for public discourse, self-media often prioritize the pursuit of interests and traffic. They employ a range of strategies, utilizing both positive and negative means to maximize their visibility and engagement. In the absence of stringent regulatory frameworks governing internet platforms, self-media leverage their inherent timeliness advantage to secure a prominent position in the news dissemination landscape. For instance, the initial media coverage of the Hu Xinyu case illuminated how public opinion was shaped. It revealed that official media tended to prioritize objective and truthful reporting, focusing on the facts surrounding the incident^[8]. In contrast, self-media often exhibit a strong subjectivity, which is frequently skewed towards negative interpretations of events. This subjectivity enables self-media to capitalize on their extensive information resources, attracting information audience groups with sensationalized narratives that resonate with their emotions and concerns.

As these groups repeatedly encounter such biased views, they contribute to the formation of a negative mimetic environment surrounding the government, schools, and other official institutions. This environment not only amplifies public distrust but also triggers significant communication blockages between information audience groups and the primary sources of information dissemination. In essence, the interplay between self-media and the audience creates a feedback loop that further entrenches mistrust and shapes the political landscape in a way that challenges traditional narratives.

4.2. Self-media triggers the absence of public opinion in the main body of information dissemination

In the realm of secondary political opinion on the Internet, official organizations and the government, as the primary entities responsible for information generation, have experienced a notable absence in the dissemination of public opinion. In the mimetic environment constructed by self-media, these official bodies occupy a subordinate position, leading to a scenario where their role in information generation is diminished. The news disseminated by the government and official organizations is no longer deemed significant, as this information is often filtered, screened, and selectively reported by self-media outlets. While hot social events typically sit at the center of mainstream political discourse, any misguided or inappropriate interventions by government and official agencies can trigger a shift in public opinion. In such instances, the center of discourse may revert to these institutions, which subsequently lose credibility during the event, leading information audience groups to overlook the efforts of the government and official agencies due to the selective dissemination practices of self-media. Consequently, the mimetic environment that emerges tends to favor self-media platforms over the official bodies of information generation, thus reinforcing the absence of traditional information generators in this context. At this juncture, self-media platforms dominate the public opinion landscape.

Taking the Hu Xinyu incident as an illustrative case, the volume of information released by official institutions and media often fails to match that of self-media. The information from official sources is typically serious, formal, and objective, yet can also appear dull and complex. This results in a greater public interest in self-media compared to official entities. Furthermore, the prevailing distrust of official institutions among the general public amplifies the likelihood of these bodies being ignored during public opinion events, leading to their pronounced absence. As the primary entities responsible for information generation, official institutions aim to cater to the public audience rather than self-media. However, they also require feedback from the masses to enhance the dissemination of public opinion. In the context of secondary political opinion, diverse self-media have emerged as the primary force in information dissemination, playing a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions^[9]. Self-media contribute to the construction of a mimetic environment characterized by diversity. This includes not only negative influences that shape public views regarding official institutions but also expressions of skepticism and disappointment. Positive mimetic environments can also impact public sentiment toward these institutions. The resulting diversity in the mimetic environment cultivates perceptions that official institutions are arbitrary and multifaceted.

The cumulative effect of such diverse mimetic environments not only influences the current state of public opinion but also triggers long-term stereotypes regarding official institutions. Ultimately, this

amalgamation of mimetic environments exerts a significant and lasting impact on the reputation and perceived efficacy of both official institutions and the government.

5. Derivative Issues Arising from the Self-Media Mimetic Environment in the Online Secondary Political Opinion

The widespread proliferation of Internet rumors has emerged as a significant societal challenge. Several key factors contribute to the generation and dissemination of these rumors, including information asymmetry, heightened public attention, diverse channels of communication, and the inherent appeal of the rumors themselves.

Firstly, information asymmetry stands as a fundamental cause of rumor propagation. In environments characterized by information asymmetry, the public often lacks full access to the true circumstances surrounding an event, thus creating fertile ground for rumors to flourish. Secondly, heightened public concern amplifies the dissemination of rumors. Rumors leverage their sensational and inflammatory nature to capture attention, thereby accelerating their spread within communities. Thirdly, the diverse channels through which rumors are disseminated, particularly the rise of social media, facilitate rapid communication across various platforms. This widespread accessibility enables rumors to traverse networks swiftly. Finally, the inherent impact and allure of rumors, often marked by exaggerated or dramatic narratives, enhance their capacity to pique public interest and stimulate further sharing.

In a self-media-dominated environment, the traditional one-way communication model of legacy media has been supplanted by a two-way interactive self-media model. This transition not only broadens the scope of information dissemination but also significantly increases both the speed and volume of information exchange. The interactivity and openness of self-media platforms allow rumors to proliferate rapidly within cyberspace, resulting in a marked acceleration in their dissemination and a corresponding expansion of their influence. Consequently, in the Internet era, the velocity and impact of rumors have intensified relative to the traditional media landscape, fostering a more complex and challenging public opinion environment. The distorting nature of rumors can adversely affect political trust. For instance, during the Hu Xinyu incident, public opinion consistently questioned the suicide conclusion, focusing on several key issues: the failure of officials to investigate the body's corruption, the family's need to independently seek a third-party autopsy, and the ineffective search-and-rescue operations contrasted with the eventual discovery of Hu Xinyu in a grain silo.

Due to widespread distrust of official institutions, many individuals sought the truth through self-media platforms, which often magnified these concerns via "opinion leaders" and other mechanisms, thereby amplifying rumors within the virtual environment. As a result, rumors proliferated extensively, prompting the microblogging platform to address 138 self-media accounts involved in spreading misinformation during this incident.^[10] In addition, the strategy of pan-entertainment plays a significant role in the spread of rumors. Self-media attract public attention through dramatic and entertaining content, facilitating the rapid dissemination of rumors. Although traditional media are also driven by the pursuit of profit and traffic, they typically consider the authenticity and authority of information during the dissemination process. In contrast, self-media often lacks such regulatory mechanisms, resulting in a communication pattern where "everyone is a media outlet." In this environment, the focus shifts away from the authenticity and integrity of the information. Instead, the emphasis lies on general entertainment and exaggeration to capture attention and increase traffic. While this approach can swiftly draw public interest, it also undermines the authenticity of the information. Consequently, this leads to a significant increase in both the scope and speed of the spread of false information and rumors.

6. Conclusions

The rapid development of the Internet has significantly contributed to the swift rise of self-published media, leading to an increase in the diversity of information available to the public. This transformation has not only altered traditional modes of information dissemination but has also complicated the mimetic environment in which individuals engage with this information.

In the realm of online political opinion, self-media dominate communication channels due to their sheer volume of information, the influential roles played by opinion leaders, and the underlying principle of traffic supremacy. This dominance fosters an irrational and pan-entertainment environment

that prioritizes sensationalism over factual accuracy. In such a setting, the truthfulness and objectivity of information are frequently overlooked, making it increasingly difficult for the public to obtain an accurate understanding of significant events. Consequently, this lack of reliable information leads to a weakening of government credibility, an increase in distrust toward officialdom, and significant impediments to effective problem-solving. The accumulation of distrust and skepticism toward governmental institutions may pose a potential threat to social stability. As citizens become more disengaged and suspicious of official narratives, the likelihood of social discord increases. Moreover, this dynamic may catalyze further polarization within public opinion, as individuals gravitate toward self-media sources that align with their pre-existing beliefs, thereby reinforcing echo chambers.

Therefore, understanding and responding to the self-media-dominated pan-entertainment mimetic environment is crucial for maintaining the healthy development of online political opinion. Additionally, it is essential for fostering a positive and constructive relationship between the government and the public. Policymakers and officials must recognize the importance of engaging transparently and authentically with the public to rebuild trust. Initiatives aimed at enhancing media literacy among the public could also empower individuals to critically assess the information they encounter, ultimately leading to a more informed and resilient citizenry.

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