

Public Opinion Governance in China: an Example of the Hebei Tangshan Incident In 2022

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With the rapid development of information technology, the way people spread and receive information has changed dramatically. The speed of information dissemination is increasing, and opinions are becoming more and more diversified. Therefore, the increase in the speed and diversity of information dissemination has not only redefined the way the public obtains information, but also significantly affected the formation mechanism of social opinion. In this context, the effective management of public opinion has become an important challenge for social governance. On June 10, 2022, a serious violence occurred in a barbecue restaurant in Tangshan of Hebei Province, where a woman was beaten and dragged out of the restaurant after refusing sexual harassment by several men. The incident spread rapidly through China's mainstream social media platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou, triggering nationwide attention. The incident not only raised concerns about violence, but also triggered discussions on deeper social issues such as gender security, lack of public safety management and efficiency of law enforcement. The popularity of social media nowadays has facilitated the spread of information and given the public unprecedented opportunities to participate in public opinion, with a direct impact on the course of events and social attitudes¹. While the diverse self-media were spreading rapidly, the official mainstream media were guiding public opinion through authoritative commentaries and reports, shifting the public from emotional reactions to reflections on institutional issues. As a result, in social governance, the difference between the functions of self-media in expanding public attention and official media in providing information verification and direction guidance is realized. This paper will analyze the propagation and governance process of the Tangshan incident from the perspective of the political function of the media after the institutional reform, and explore its implications for public opinion governance.

I. Characteristics of the event propagation path

Starting from the perspective of the self-media. After the video of the Tangshan beating incident spread for the

¹ (PDF) impact of social media and political participation on political efficacy of political science students of Al Al-Bayt University, accessed December 3, 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354403270_Impact_of_Social_Media_and_Political_Participation_on_Political_Efficacy_of_Political_Science_Students_of_Al_al-Bayt_University.

first time through social platforms, it fully demonstrated the powerful function of self-media in information diffusion and public opinion mobilization. The incident rapidly evolved from a local news to a national public opinion focus, thus reflecting the key role of self-media in the expression of public emotions and issue cracking.

First, for the function of information diffusion, the platform operation mode and recommendation algorithm function of social media platforms are powerful boosters for its fast speed and wide range. Most of today's popular social media platforms have a "single column + full screen + autoplay" design. By creating such highly immersive services, social media companies can hold their users' attention for as long as possible.² Based on the long time users stay, social media companies can understand the psychological profile of their users based on their historical records, so that they can accurately push information to users in line with their personalized tastes. Also, the platform would assess the distribution potential of a video based on its initial interaction data (e.g., number of likes and comments) and increase its recommendation for videos with user interaction rates that rapidly climbed in the early stages of video release. Based on this mode of operation, social media platforms first push relevant information to highly related audience groups (e.g., users who are concerned about social news or violence cases), which promotes the video to gain rapid exposure at the initial stage. With the accumulation of video dissemination and user interaction data, the recommendation algorithm further strengthens the push frequency of the video, resulting in explosive spread. With the dynamic spread of interested groups and the formation of explosive communication paths, as of 00:00 on June 22, there were more than 15.85 million related Weibo messages and 2.28 million videos on the whole Internet³. Topics related to the "Tangshan barbecue restaurant beating" incident and its derivatives have firmly occupied the hot search list on mainstream media platforms such as Sina Weibo, Baidu, and Douyin, with Sina Weibo's topic alone having a total reading volume of more than 50 billion times. Thus, self-media, with the support of algorithms, has greatly improved the speed of diffusion of public opinion, and the rapid diffusion speed has laid the foundation for the cracking of public opinion topics.

Mass dissemination allows the public to catch on to hot topics more quickly, while also enabling more people to edit and comment on the original video, thus adding more diverse perspectives to the discussion of the event. For example, in this incident, there are three main extended themes in the direction of public opinion, which are the "protective umbrella" of the gangster forces, the hidden danger of women's safety and gender antagonism⁴. However, all the issues derived from that are negative, which can easily bring the potential danger of emotional public opinion and social instability. For instance, doubts about the protective umbrella of the mafia can easily evolve into doubts about the loopholes in law enforcement of the local government, thus intensifying public discontent with the government. Meanwhile, the discussion of women's safety may lead to a more negative public

² Christian Montag and Simon Hegelich, "Understanding Detrimental Aspects of Social Media Use: Will the Real Culprits Please Stand Up?," *Frontiers in Sociology* 5 (December 1, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2020.599270>.

³ Cyberspace Administration of Hebei, "唐山烧烤店打人事件"网络舆情分析 § (2022).

⁴ Ibid

perception of women's safety. And gender antagonism may even create a tendency for social division, thus causing social anxiety. In addition, some self-media will use exaggerated language or disseminate unverified information in the process of expressing their ideas to gain attention. Such emotional content can lead to irrational discussions in public opinion, thus making it more difficult to manage public opinion and social stability.

Overall, the extensive participation of users on self-media platforms has pushed the Tangshan beating incident from a single case to a multidimensional issue, which is indeed conducive to increasing the diversity of opinions and attracting the attention of the government to solve the corresponding social problems. However, this kind of in-depth participation also tends to cause public opinion to become overly emotional and irrational, thus leading to social instability, and it is urgent for platforms and related institutions to strengthen their guidance and management.

If self-published media have widened the reach of public opinion and expanded the perspective of view on social issues, the traditional official media have played a different role. China's traditional media have long been recognized as the mouthpiece of the Chinese government⁵. The primary role of the media is to fully implement the CCP's agenda and to keep all content consistent with its policies. Media outlets act as channels for the dissemination of CCP directives and ideology, while diluting potentially destabilizing news⁶. They not only deliver authoritative information, but also play a crucial role in public opinion guidance and social governance.

First, the involvement of the official media helped to establish the dominance of public opinion and thus guide its direction. As mentioned earlier, while the rapid dissemination and extensive discussion of self-media has triggered social concern, it has also been accompanied by emotional and extremist discussions. Against this background, official media such as the People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency intervened. They directed the public's attention from negative violence and concerns about social security to reflections on social governance, legal justice and anti-triad through the release of authoritative reports and commentary articles. For example, the People's Daily official Weibo post said, "The incident was shocking and challenged not only the law, but also the social order and the public's sense of security." The report firstly emphasizes the impact of the incident on social order and security to gain public resonance, which helps to enhance the sense of identification with the officials and thus reduce the dissatisfaction with the government. At the same time, all the contents presented objective facts, which was conducive to promoting public opinion from emotional outbursts to rational discussions.

More than just a guide to public opinion, the official media can promote the escalation of public opinion issues and focus on reflections on local governance issues. For example, CCTV News posted an article saying, "What

⁵ Dechun Zhang, "Media and Pollution in China: Mouthpiece or Watchdog?," *The International Journal of Sustainability Policy and Practice* 17, no. 2 (2021): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.18848/2325-1166/cgp/v17i02/1-7>.

⁶ Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

exactly has been reflected in this terrible incident in Tangshan? Is the fight against gangsterism in some places thorough or not? The vicious forces that nuisance the peaceful life of the people must not be tolerated.” This report directly reveals the weaknesses in Tangshan's fight against the crime and shows the need for more effective measures to enhance the deterrent effect of the law. It directly shows a reflection on local law enforcement and the maintenance of social order. Such an escalation of the issue not only triggers public scrutiny of specific policies and implementation effects, but also prompts relevant departments to reassess and optimize policy implementation to ensure the authority and effectiveness of social governance.

Overall, the official media can guide the direction of public opinion and escalate the topics of discussion as well. As a result, public opinion can shift from emotional concerns to rational discussions and exploration of the root causes of problems. This not only helps to dissolve social emotions, but also promotes the improvement of the governance system and the monitoring of the government's work, which helps the government to adjust its policies and implementation efforts promptly in response to the public's concerns and the society's needs.

In the actual case, the rapid spread of the Tangshan beating incident and the high-pressure environment of public opinion caused by the synergy of self and official media had a significant impact on the response of the local and central governments. After the incident, it was initially the self-media that exposed the surveillance video at 15:00 on June 10,⁷ which quickly drew the attention of society and the government. However, due to the diversity of their information sources and the lack of a censorship mechanism, there was some distortion of information and emotional discussion, and at around 16:30, official media such as China Newsweek and Xinhua News Agency stepped in to report the incident. As for the government, the police bulletin had been issued at 18:00 that day stating that the suspects had been targeted, and the Tangshan government met that night to emphasize the importance of the case, and at 24:00, two suspects had been arrested. In less than 24 hours, the grass-roots public security departments have already completed most of the work from investigation to arrest. This reflects the public opinion pressure exerted on the government by the rapid dissemination and extensive discussion in the media, which prompted the government to speed up its response and measures. In addition, the wide range and multi-perspective diffusion of the incident by the self-media has realized the role of public opinion forcing, and promoted the improvement of the government's work in the administration. After the incident spread, Tangshan launched a trend of real name reporting of triad forces on the social media. As a result, the Tangshan government launched the “雷霆风暴” special operation specifically designed to receive reports and crack down on the triads, thereby strengthening the governance of social security.

The role of the official media came to prominence after the operation began. It has portrayed the “雷霆风暴” operation as an exemplary case of the Government's governing in accordance with the law and responding positively to the concerns of the public. The State-controlled media were able to coordinate shifts in public

⁷ Cyberspace Administration of Hebei, “唐山烧烤店打人事件”网络舆情分析 § (2022).

attitudes that went against their initial stance on policy issues to adapt to the changing domestic and international environment.⁸ Public opinion that would have been skewed in a negative direction is transformed into a positive one that enhances the credibility of the government through the guidance of the official media. Thus, the role of the official media in maintaining social stability through public opinion guidance in the governance is irreplaceable. However, with the current development of social platforms, the official media's speed and breadth of dissemination is ultimately less efficient than that of the self-media. Meanwhile, from the above analysis, the self-media also has an important role in monitoring and promoting the work of the government, but because of the lack of supervision, so there are certain potential problems. In this case, the two need to work together to achieve a balance, to better realize the governance through the media.

II. public opinion governance functions based on institutional reforms

The media is not only the main source of public information, but also a bridge between the government and the public. Self-media-driven online public opinion has exerted strong pressure on the government's public governance and changed the course of events to a certain extent⁹. In turn, the official media can directly influence the stability of the public opinion and the solution of social problems. The combination of both not only provides social supervision for the handling of events, but also pushes government agencies to respond quickly. This shows that the media has become an indispensable part of social governance, and its importance is especially emphasized in emergency situations. In recent years, China has strengthened its media governance system through institutional reforms, providing institutional guarantees for the integration of self and official media.

First, the institutional reform has broken the fragmentation of official media and self-media through the integration of the functions of the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee with those of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) and the Cyberspace Administration, realizing cross-platform fusion of opinion-guidance functions. According to the Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions, the Publicity Department added the function of directly managing the content of radio, television and online information, allowing it to focus on regulating the quality of content¹⁰. Meanwhile, the Cyberspace Administration has centralized its efforts to manage online public opinion. While the Publicity Department grasps the direction of public opinion in the official media, the Cyberspace Administration deletes unfounded rumors and inaccurate information from the self-media and collaborates with social platforms such as Douyin and Weibo to control the distribution of specific content. Both works together to ensure the effective dissemination of authoritative information. The reform has redistributed authority and responsibility, making the Publicity Department the

⁸ Jennifer Pan, Zijie Shao, and Yiqing Xu, "How Government-Controlled Media Shifts Policy Attitudes through Framing," *Political Science Research and Methods* 10, no. 2 (July 21, 2021): 317–32, <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2021.35>.

⁹ Huaxin Zhu, "网络舆论倒逼中国改革," *China Reform* 1 (October 1, 2011).

¹⁰ 深化党和国家机构改革方案 (Beijing, CHINA: General office of the CPC Central committee, 2018).

central coordinating agency, which greatly reduces the possibility of delayed response due to fragmented management by multiple departments, and improves work efficiency and emergency coordination. It has also strengthened the centralization and precision of public opinion guidance through institutional synergy.

The effects of this reform were fully realized in the Tangshan beating incident. The Publicity Department coordinated the dispatch of official media resources, and as mentioned in the previous analysis of the People's Daily and CCTV News, through the release of authoritative commentaries, quickly shifted public opinion away from emotional discussion of the incident itself to reflection on social governance. Also, While handling the incident, the official media publicized the progress of the case promptly. Every investigation or arrest progress was announced timely through social media channels such as Weibo. Such transparent handling strengthens the public's confidence in the government's work. Meanwhile, with more and clearer working scope and authority after the reform, the Cyberspace Administration has capitalized on its cooperative relationship with major media platforms. First, in response to the many inaccurate information on the Internet, such as rumors about the victim's death, it quickly coordinated with the major platforms to remove them to prevent further radicalization of public sentiment and to maintain the basic order of the court of public opinion. Also, the Cyberspace Administration utilizes a combination of technology and administrative management. It works with social media platforms to disseminate more official information through algorithms to reduce self-media information, while instructing platforms to improve public opinion monitoring mechanisms and strengthen content auditing and information flow control. These measures simultaneously reinforce the effectiveness of information dissemination and the rationalization of public opinion.

The core function of media politics is to serve as a link between the government and the public through the integration of information propagation, public opinion guidance and social governance. The institutional reform has created a governance pattern focusing on media politics by reallocating the functions of key departments including the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee and the Cyberspace Administration in media. The Tangshan beating incident demonstrates how the political function of the reformed media plays a synergistic role in social governance. On the one hand, the Publicity Department strengthened the dissemination of authoritative voices by integrating mainstream media resources. On the other hand, the Cyberspace Administration made full use of its technological regulatory advantages to achieve accurate management of information flow through algorithmic intervention and public opinion monitoring. The political function of media is not only an emergency response to specific events, but also a long-term governance mechanism. This model can accelerate the efficiency of government decision-making and enhance public trust in the government, providing a new path for social stability and modernization of governance capacity.

III. The dual effect of public opinion governance

While it is true that the public opinion governance plays a positive role in social governance, it also presents potential challenges to a certain extent. First, the public opinion governance can quickly contribute to the solution

of social problems. The potential of social media appears to be most promising in a political context, as they can facilitate greater political participation,¹¹ which means incorporating the concerns, needs and values of the public into the decision-making processes of Governments¹². Public opinion exerts pressure on government departments through social monitoring and strong public concern, thus prompting the government to respond quickly and profoundly. In addition to the Government's significant breakthrough in the detection and arrest of the case within 24 hours of its occurrence, the “雷霆风暴” campaign derived from public opinion in this case shows that public opinion governance can also help to lead the government to focus on and solve long-standing social problems, thereby enhancing the foresight of public policy.

However, public opinion governance also poses potential risks, especially when public opinion is biased out of balance. First, the risk of emotional public opinion is particularly significant. In the Tangshan incident, some of the public's skepticism about the local government was amplified through communication, resulting in an overall negative sentiment toward government enforcement agencies. Such emotional public opinion may not only weaken the credibility of the government, but also trigger social instability and division¹³. Apart from the credibility of the Government being challenged, the credibility of the official media is another important challenge in public opinion governance. Although the official media have unique advantages in conveying authoritative information and guiding public opinion, delays or errors in the process of information dissemination can lead to public skepticism of the official media and suspicion of government information. Media trust significantly affects the public's choice of media in crisis situations¹⁴, thus influences the way information is received and disseminated. When the credibility of official media is insufficient, the public tends to turn to self-media where the authenticity and authority of the source of information is difficult to guarantee and may lead to risk of information dissemination. In addition, imbalance in expression is also a key problem in public opinion governance. The rise of self-media does have provided more opportunities for more people to express themselves, but the censorship of information content by some social platforms under the influence of the Cyberspace Administration may have led to a weakening of the diversity of public voices. Some platforms may selectively block in content censorship or heavily promote certain content through technology. This may unintentionally limit the breadth and depth of public discussion, thereby affecting the fairness of information dissemination and the public's right to know.

¹¹ Stefan Stieglitz and Linh Dang-Xuan, “Social Media and Political Communication: A Social Media Analytics Framework,” *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 3, no. 4 (August 25, 2012): 1277–91, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-012-0079-3>.

¹² James L. Creighton, *The Public Participation Handbook Making Better Decisions Through Citizen Involvement*(Johanneshov: MTM, 2013).

¹³ “新媒体环境下网络谣言的传播与治理,” *电子通信与计算机科学* 6, no. 9 (2024): 79–81, <https://doi.org/10.37155/2717-5170-0609-27>.

¹⁴ Yariv Tsfati and Joseph N. Cappella, “Do People Watch What They Do Not Trust?,” *Communication Research* 30, no. 5 (October 2003): 504–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650203253371>.

To summarize, the Tangshan beating incident shows the synergies and dual effects of self media and official media in public opinion propagation and governance. The different roles played by self-media and official media were first seen through different propagation paths. On the one hand, self-media significantly increase public attention to social issues through rapid transmission and diversified expression, which provides significant pressure and chances for the government's management; on the other hand, the official media effectively reduce social instability brought by emotional public opinion through authoritative information dissemination and public opinion guidance, and promote profound reflection on institutional deficiencies. Then, the optimization of China's public opinion governance process after the institutional reform is sorted out. The reform has resulted in a more centralized and efficient governance system, especially the synergy between public propaganda and information management, primarily through the reintegration and restructuring of key functional departments. The integration of the functions of the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee and the Cyberspace Administration has made the coordination of information resources possible. However, the incident also revealed deficiencies in public opinion governance, such as emotional discussions and unequal discourse rights. Under this background, the optimization of the collaborative mechanism between the self-media and the official media, the strengthening of the regulation of information authenticity, and the enhancement of the precision and transparency of public opinion guidance will become the key paths to achieve more effective public opinion governance in the future.

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