

# Why Empathy: A Study on the Formation Mechanism of Network Public Opinion of Hot Events on Weibo

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**Abstract:** Weibo hot events are an important form of information dissemination in the Internet era, and the formation mechanism of network public opinion has also changed accordingly. Based on the theory of empathy, this paper explores the mechanism of the formation of network public opinion of hot events on Weibo, analyzes its transmission characteristics, and discusses the reasons. It is found that empathy, as an important link in the formation mechanism of network public opinion, its communication characteristics are mainly reflected in two aspects: the empathic participation of netizens in microblog hot events and the deep attention to microblog hot events. This research will provide some reference for the network public opinion governance.

**Keywords:** Empathy communication; Network hot events; Network public opinion; Public opinion empathy

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In the Internet era, netizens can not only speak freely on the Internet, but also discuss some hot events and express their opinions on the Internet. Some online hot Internet events can be discussed not only through traditional media, but also through social media. In this context, the Internet has become an important platform for information dissemination, and the formation mechanism of network public opinion has also changed accordingly.

## 1. Empathy analysis framework in the process of microblog public opinion formation

### 1.1 Emotional dimension

From the emotional dimension, the formation of network public opinion can be divided into three stages: the first stage is before the emergence of public opinion information, that is, before the occurrence of the event. At this stage, netizens publish their views on public opinion events through social media platforms and other microblog platforms, and communicate and discuss with other netizens. Since the netizens in this period mainly appeared in the form of individuals, we can call it the individual empathy stage<sup>[1]</sup>. In the stage of individual empathy, the opinions expressed by netizens are affected by their personal emotions, personality and attitudes. However, most of the speeches at this stage are based on their own feelings, personal experience and personal demands, which are quite different from the views of other netizens on Weibo. Therefore, they can be called the stage of group empathy. The stage of group empathy is the most important stage in the formation process of microblog public opinion. For example, the social values conveyed by the comments posted by Weibo users will have an impact on the comments they make on the microblog platform, which is the stage of social empathy. In the stage of group empathy, the opinions expressed by netizens will have an impact on the network public opinion, which is the stage of group empathy.

### 1.2 Emotional dimension

After the occurrence of public opinion events, the dissemination of public opinion information is affected by many factors. This influencing factors change constantly in the development process of public opinion events, forming a dynamic and changing public opinion information dissemination mechanism. Here, we will analyze the formation mechanism of weibo public opinion events from

the emotional dimension. Weibo users will have strong emotional reactions when expressing their speech, and such emotions will have a strong infection ability. This infection ability is first manifested as the polarization of opinion, that is, one opinion can trigger another view, and it can trigger more and more people to join the camp, thus further reinforcing its view. Secondly, the phenomenon of group polarization also shows the convergence or differentiation of opinion expression between groups. In this case, polarized emotions can be reinforced by group awareness. And the group consciousness will further make the opinion tend to be consistent, extreme. In this emotional dimension, emotion has become the most direct and effective means in the process of emotional expression of microblog users, and it is also one of the main factors in the formation process of microblog public opinion.

### **1.3 Cognitive dimension**

In the development of microblog hot events, the large amount of information leads the audience to fall into the state of information overload. When users face a large number of complex information, it is often difficult to distinguish between the true and false, and it is difficult to get rid of information interference. At the same time, due to the communication characteristics of network media, users will also have greater cognitive burden and anxiety when they receive various sources of complex and mixed good and bad information, which further aggravates the cognitive anxiety of netizens. Therefore, in microblog hot events, the audience will form a state of “information filtering” and “emotional expression” coexist<sup>[2]</sup>. When the audience takes the microblog platform as an independent cognitive space, they will substitute their own emotions and opinion tendencies into it, forming self-cognition and attitude judgment. This also leads to the phenomenon of “emotional expression” among netizens in the process of information transmission, and then the irrational participation in and dissemination of relevant topics on the microblog platform.

## **2. Characteristic analysis of the empathy mechanism of microblog public opinion events**

### **2.1 The transmission process is moving from “single-center” to “multi-center”**

In the past, the process of public opinion communication showed obvious “single-center” characteristics, that is, the subject in the process of public opinion communication is single, and only the individual netizens participate in the communication as the subject. In the hot public opinion events such as “Deng Yujiao case”, “Shandong High-speed Railway Overseat Event” and “Huang Jing case”, Weibo users show obvious “multi-center” characteristics when forwarding and commenting, that is, people with different opinions participate in the topic discussion with different identities. When the traditional media report these hot public opinion events, the official media and the traditional media will generally intervene to guide the diffusion of the public opinion, so as to maximize the role of the mainstream media in guiding the public opinion in the public opinion events. However, in the “Deng Yujiao case” and “Shandong High-speed Railway hegemony Incident”, traditional media, local media and we media all participated in the topic discussion with their respective identities. Different forms of information exchange and information sharing are carried out between we media and official media, local media and we media, which jointly provide information sources for the event. All these have promoted the process of public opinion communication from “single-center” to “multi-center”<sup>[3]</sup>. This diversified communication process is helpful for netizens to understand the truth of the event more comprehensively, and is conducive to traditional media and we media to give full play to their respective advantages and realize the guidance of public opinion events, so as to maximize the effect of public opinion communication.

### **2.2 The communication mode has changed from a single channel of traditional media to a diversified channel of new media**

In the traditional media era, the media communication channel is relatively single. Traditional media mainly disseminate information through newspapers, television, radio and other channels, and the audience’s access to information mainly depends on the media reports and interpretation. With the continuous development of Internet technology, information dissemination channels are becoming more and more diversified, and the ways for audiences to obtain information are becoming more and more diversified. As a new type of social platform, Weibo breaks the communication mode of “one-way information flow” of traditional media and realizes the interaction and communication between “audience and users”. On the microblog platform, the audience can release, receive and obtain information through various ways such as following, forwarding, comment and search. Weibo users can freely communicate and share information, which expands the scope and influence of information. Weibo is characterized by openness and interactivity, which provides users with space for freedom to express themselves, enabling netizens to communicate more freely on the Internet. Users can use Weibo to publish topics they are interested in immediately and interact on social networks. Due to the autonomy and anonymity of the content published by microblog users, the information dissemination in microblog hot public opinion events has diversified characteristics.

## **2.3 The communication effect changes from negative to positive**

The communication effect of microblog hot public opinion events changes from negative to positive, which means that the public opinion hotspots caused by public opinion events have been widely concerned by the mainstream media, and the heat of public opinion keeps rising. In the spread of hot public opinion events on Weibo, the intensity and breadth of news reports reported by mainstream media have been strengthened, the online opinion leaders have actively spoken out, the online public opinion has changed from “forced”, and the mainstream media reports are gradually recognized by netizens. The empathy generated by netizens in news events, on the one hand, provides the hot materials of public opinion for the main streaming media, and on the other hand, also becomes an important support for the mainstream media to guide public opinion. Microblogging users in public opinion events are mainly ordinary netizens, and weibo users make remarks to a certain degree of arbitrariness. Due to the differences in social class, gender, age and other aspects, there are great differences in their expression mode, thinking logic and cognitive level, so there are differences in their public opinion interpretation of social events. For example, in the “Kunshan Longge case”, netizens have quite different views on the behavior of the parties involved in the incident. Some believe the man was guilty of intentional injury; others were guilty of justifiable defense; others said the man was not a crime. In the environment of public opinion, the opinions formed by netizens of different classes and different age groups are greatly different. In order to cater to the public psychology and vent their emotions, some Weibo users will match their views with the mainstream public opinion. In public opinion events, mainstream media should avoid the “one-sided” publicity mode when guiding public opinion, and should actively communicate and negotiate with netizens, so as to improve their own credibility.

## **3. Analysis of the formation mechanism of network public opinion under empathy**

### **3.1 Empathy consciousness: emotional resonance in the process of public opinion formation**

Empathy is a kind of emotional response triggered by empathy experience. It is a process in which individuals resonate with others’ emotions and influence and interact with each other mediated by emotion. This emotional response can place the individual in a state of “empathy” that resonates with the pain of others and spreads this emotional experience to others. Empathy is an important ability in interpersonal communication, the basis for resonance between people, and an important condition for people to build relationships, solve problems and conduct social communication<sup>[4]</sup>. The consciousness of empathy in online public opinion refers to the psychological process in which netizens resonate with others’ emotions or emotional states in the process of public opinion formation, so as to achieve the state of empathy. In some network public opinion events in recent years, netizens have shown strong emotional resonance, and this sense of empathy plays an important role in the formation of network public opinion. For example, on August 17, 2020, a girl in Xi’an was slapped in an argument with an elderly man, which aroused public attention. From the spread of online public opinion, netizens mainly discussed several key words: the girl was slapped, the old man was beaten, the old man did a good deed, the old man and the girl were injured, and the girl attacked the old man. These keywords form the core of the discussion, who believe that girls are wrong and should not be treated like this. The discussion of these keywords on the Internet formed two opposing views: one side thinks the elderly did the right thing and the girl did the right thing; the other side thinks the girl did the right thing and the girl should be slapped. Netizens even had a heated argument when they were emotionally excited. In the fierce dispute, the public opinion further developed to the extreme development, and there were great differences among the netizens, but no one put forward a rational view. These netizens have fierce conflicts and even quarrels due to their different cognition of things, which is caused by the lack of empathy.

### **3.2 Emotional empathy: irrational expression and rational thinking coexist**

In the process of network public opinion, their behavior is often irrational. At present, online public opinion events emerge in an endless stream, and with the advent of the Internet era, people’s life style has also undergone great changes, followed by great changes in people’s values, behaviors and other aspects<sup>[5]</sup>. The coexistence of irrational expression and rational thinking in the process of the formation of network public opinion. When the network public opinion event occurs, the netizens tend to follow the crowd. With the development of the event, netizens’ attention to the events of online public opinion increases, and some negative information will also cause extensive discussion among netizens. However, due to the uneven quality of Internet users, some netizens are vulnerable to their own emotions and ideas, and will follow the trend of following the crowd in some negative news. These blind conformity behaviors lead to the irrational characteristics of network public opinion events. At the time of the event, due to the limited cognitive ability, knowledge reserve and judgment ability, individuals are easy to be instigated and seduced. With the development of information technology, the channels for people to obtain information are increasing and the amount of information is increasing. However, due to the limited personal cognitive ability and the lack of correct values, netizens are easy to be instigated. Some people are influenced by

it to follow the herd mentality. When there is negative news, netizens often have a psychology of “eating melon” to watch the event, express their opinions and vent their emotions. This psychology leads to netizens’ easy to have bad emotions and behaviors in the face of some negative events.

### **3.3 Rational analysis: the cognitive mechanism in the process of the formation of network public opinion**

From the above cases, it can be found that netizens have a strong emotional tendency in the formation process of network public opinion, but at the same time, they are also conducting rational thinking, which is the so-called rational analysis. When netizens participate in the network public opinion event, they analyze the events and draw conclusions through “rationality”, so as to have an impact on the network public opinion. When netizens combine “rationality” and “emotion”, it is a process of the formation of network public opinion. From the present point of view, the netizens show the following characteristics in the rational analysis. First, the attention to the event itself is more important than the attention to the subject of the event. In the process of the formation of network public opinion, netizens pay more attention to the event itself, but lack the necessary attention to the individuals and groups in the event. Second, in the process of rational analysis, netizens tend to use the method of “eliminating the false and preserving the true”. When conducting rational analysis, netizens are more about thinking and judging from their own standpoint, and lack of in-depth and comprehensive understanding and understanding of the things themselves<sup>[6]</sup>. As a result, in the process of rational analysis, netizens will look at the problem from their own standpoint and draw conclusions, but there is no way to look at the problem in a comprehensive and objective way. Therefore, netizens often have a certain emotional color when conducting rational analysis, such as the “stewardess death case”, the Internet public opinion questioned the results of the “flight attendants” and the police involved, and the netizens were not satisfied with the result of the police involved and took “human flesh search” to express their dissatisfaction. This kind of unemotional rational analysis often causes the netizens to deviate in the process of rational analysis, and then forms the network public opinion.

### **3.4 Public opinion guidance: effective control under the environment of network public opinion**

The Internet is the expression channel of people’s emotions, but it should not be a garbage can for catharsis, nor should it be an “amplifier” of irrational emotions. Therefore, the Internet should assume its social responsibilities, always adhere to the people-centered concept in the guidance of network public opinion, and guide people and rally people’s hearts with correct public opinion. In order to realize the effective control under the network public opinion environment, the government, the media and the Internet users need to work together. In the current environment of network public opinion, the government should pay attention to the guidance and guidance of netizens’ emotions, improve the credibility of the mainstream media and the ability of public opinion guidance, so as to achieve the expected effect.

#### **Tag:**

To sum up, in the Internet era, empathy has become a key factor of network public opinion, affecting the development direction of network public opinion. As an important channel for Internet users to obtain information, microblog carries a large amount of network public opinion information. In the post-truth era, it is common that public views have changed dramatically. The carrier of news communication, the structure of communication and the psychology of the audience have all changed, and the public has a certain immunity to this reversal of public opinion. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the governance of online public opinion, and make full use of social media to present the truth of the event objectively, fairly and deeply.

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