

Generation and Propagation of Internet Rumors in COVID-19

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Abstract

After the outbreak of "COVID-19" epidemic, a large number of network rumors related to the epidemic appeared on the Internet, which seriously hindered the process of epidemic prevention and control. This paper studies and analyzes the generation mechanism, transmission characteristics and psychological characteristics of the audience of rumors during the epidemic period. Then, based on the research results, it puts forward prevention strategies of Internet epidemic such as information transparency, public opinion control and popular science among the masses.

Keywords

Rumor; COVID-19; Mass Psychology.

1. Introduction

The development of Internet information technology makes it possible for the general public to express their opinions on some social events anytime and anywhere. The dissemination of information provides an important channel and method to strengthen the supervision of public opinion, but it also provides space for the development of negative contents such as Internet rumors. In the case of Internet opacity, Internet rumors do great harm and are more likely to cause serious chain reaction in the face of major social crisis events.

The COVID-19 outbreak, which broke out in late 2019, has taken off rapidly and swept the world in a short time. In the face of this sudden public health crisis, although the official experts were quick to analyze the situation, it was difficult to be effective. Under the influence of this external environment, Internet rumors have gained space for development, bringing a loss that cannot be ignored to the whole society. Various insulate the rhythm of "take" on the Internet to guide public opinion, spread false information, such as drinking and smoking can prevent "new crown", "pet cats and dogs can also transmit the new champions", "virus escaping somewhere" false message intelligence and so on, seriously affected the epidemic prevention and control of the process, also the credibility of the government and the political culture ecological negative impact. This study will focus on the origin of the rumors of COVID-19, with the purpose of understanding its causes and mechanisms, and after analyzing the rumor audience, enrich the research strategies for the prevention of Internet rumors in future public health emergencies.

2. The Generation Mechanism of Online Rumors during COVID-19

American sociologists Allport and Postman summarized the earliest Rumor formula as follows: $R=I \times A$, R means Rumor, and I and A are respectively Importance and Ambiguity of an event. After that, the communication scholar Cross modified it as $R=I \times A / C$, C was Criticalness, and the formula was rumor circulation = importance of the event \times ambiguity of the event \div public critical ability. A simple inference can be made from the rumor formula, that is, the stronger the importance of public events in the social scope and the higher the fuzziness, the greater the possibility of rumors and the wider the spread range of rumors.

According to the formula, further interpretation can be made, because the relationship between ambiguity and significance is multiplied, so as long as one of them is zero, the rumor cannot be generated. That is, when all the information about the event is clear and specific enough, or it is irrelevant to the whole society, the rumor will not be generated and spread. The public critical ability is added under the revision of the later Cross. In a social event, if the public has stronger critical ability and better understanding of the event, then the spread of rumors may be correspondingly reduced.

The outbreak of COVID-19 became the triggering mechanism of this online rumor, and the reason can be deduced from this formula. In the early days of the outbreak, the authorities were still unable to give a clear explanation, and the general public did not have a comprehensive and rational understanding of such suddenly infectious viruses. In the relatively blank period of time that professional authorities have been studying and analyzing the epidemic, the ambiguity of the event has reached an unprecedented height.

All kinds of information about the epidemic situation are being updated frequently every day, and news information about the death of infected novel coronavirus is also breaking out constantly. The importance of this type of social major health security event reaches its peak when the safety of everyone's life is at stake.

During this time, the vast majority of the public did not have the appropriate medical expertise, nor did they have the critical capacity to curb the spread of rumors about such events. The public, which is prone to panic and panic from all kinds of gossip, has started a discussion on the easily accessible Internet in order to find a way to distract itself. However, under the control of multiple irrational psychological conditions such as fear, most of the public is difficult to make rational understanding and judgment, and more is to make random speculation. Then such information was accepted by other members of the public and spread again, thus some online rumors were born. In addition, there are many lawbreakers who take this opportunity to attack the government's ability to control the epidemic with one-sided news or false information, thus seriously affecting the government's credibility. Thus, it can be seen that major public health events tend to become a hotbed for the wanton development of rumors, making them rampant and prevalent on the Internet.

3. Characteristics of the Spread of Internet Rumors about COVID-19

There are countless social platforms in the network space, and the emergence of each platform makes the information transmission on the network more complex and diversified. At the same time, the information transmission on the network is not independent of the reality, and it often interacts with the offline interpersonal communication, making the trajectory of information transmission more complex and difficult to track. During the epidemic, most online rumors were born on social media such as WeChat, Weibo, QQ, Kuaishou, Douyin, etc., and then transmitted from the same information platform to another platform for transmission, presenting a radiological spread, and finally forming a situation of simultaneous online and offline transmission.

Compared with the mass communication era dominated by traditional media such as magazines, radio and TV, the current network communication environment provides rumor-mongers with more convenient communication channels to spread rumors. In addition, the unique anonymity in the network environment results in the weak check on the network information, which makes the rumorist pay less for spreading rumors, thus making the spread of rumors more unbridled. At the same time, due to the low threshold and convenience of network information transmission, it only needs to click the forward button to spread information, which also makes the general public unconsciously act as the disseminator of rumors, which makes the spread of rumors become difficult to control.

4. Psychological Analysis of Audiences of COVID-19 Online Rumors

Through the third-party questionnaire system "Questionnaire Star" to distribute and collect the questionnaires, and through the psychological analysis of the questionnaire fillers, three kinds of reasons for the masses to accept the rumors can be obtained.

4.1. Fear

In the event of major health events such as COVID-19, which is highly related to one's own life, the public will be stimulated to have a large number of memories of past epidemics such as SARS and avian flu, and then the fear and anxiety of unknown death will arise. Driven by this fear, the public will start to actively seek information from online channels to explain the current unknown situation. In this case, the information of many authorities is particularly critical. When some rumour-mongers fabricate rumors in the name of official institutions, they are easily accepted by the public as a solution to the current psychological state of fear. However, after the public pays attention to such rumors, even if the related refutation information is released later, it will be difficult to be affected because of the deep memory generated earlier.

4.2. Satisfaction Mentality

The resources an individual can control are related to his social status. The lower his social status is, the fewer resources he can control. In the immediate aftermath of the outbreak, the need for definitive information from testing and research by government and other authorities has collided sharply with the anxiety of the public for clear official results. In this case, when people come into contact with rumors about the epidemic, they are likely to have a sense of satisfaction from exclusive information, and they take the initiative in information communication and exchange with others, so as to obtain a sense of satisfaction from interpersonal communication in the process of spreading rumors.

4.3. Dissolve Stress

Because the impact of COVID-19 has seriously affected the work and life of the people, and thus spawned a large number of dissatisfaction, but it can not be effectively resolved. At this time, some rumors provided a window for the disgruntled masses to relieve their pressure. For example, "The boss of the South China Seafood Market is the daughter-in-law of the Vice Chairman of the Hubei Provincial Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference" and other rumors not only aroused people's anger over the illegal sale and purchase of game, but also intensified the contradictions between the ordinary people and the officials. The original accumulated discontent is like a powder keg, and such rumors serve as the corresponding fuse, allowing the public discontent to get the wrong but direct direction of discharge. Under the control of this kind of psychological emotions, the masses are often unable to make rational judgments and expect to gain a sense of control over events by believing this kind of rumors.

5. Preventive Measures Against Rumors

Rumor is a phenomenon that has existed since ancient times, and with the evolution of communication means, rumor has also changed accordingly. It is impossible to eliminate rumors, but measures taken at the beginning of a major public health event like this can also be effective in preventing rumors and minimizing their negative impact.

In this kind of public crisis situation, first of all, the government and other professional official institutions need to make relevant information transparent in the first time, respond to the questions of the public, and at the same time, strengthen the gatekeeping effect of network information, and try to nip rumors in the bud before they appear. At the same time, a large

number of media resources need to be controlled accordingly, and the comments made by opinion leaders such as Weibo Big V should be checked in the first time, so as to prevent the public opinion from developing into evil and unhealthy drive. Finally, it is necessary to strengthen the popularization of science among the masses, so as to enhance the critical ability of the public, so that the masses themselves have the ability to identify rumors, so that rumors cannot be spread.

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