

An Analysis of the Causes and Governance Paths of Cyber Violence in the New Media Environment: Postprint

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Abstract

With the continuous development of network technology, social media has become increasingly enriched and has emerged as a popular platform for information dissemination. Various types of public opinion incidents emerge incessantly on the internet. Owing to the anonymity and decentralization of the internet, netizens can express their thoughts and opinions regarding public opinion incidents and the parties involved without restraint, leading to frequent occurrences of online violence incidents. These online violence incidents, which evolve from online public opinion, are characterized by rapid dissemination, extensive domain involvement, and severe harm to the parties involved, thereby propelling online violence to the forefront of public discourse once again, with increasingly strong calls to reject online violence. On March 1, 2020, China officially promulgated the “Regulations on the Governance of Online Information Content Ecology,” which explicitly prohibits online violence and doxxing, and academic research on online violence has gradually increased.

Full Text

An Analysis of the Causes and Governance Paths of Cyber Violence in the New Media Environment

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Abstract: As network technology continues to develop, social media has become increasingly abundant and emerged as a popular information dissemination platform. Various public opinion incidents emerge endlessly online. Due to the anonymity and decentralization of the internet, netizens can express their thoughts and opinions unscrupulously about public opinion incidents and those involved, leading to frequent cyber violence incidents. These cyber violence incidents, evolved from online public opinion, spread with alarming speed across

broad domains and cause significant harm to victims, once again pushing cyber violence to the forefront of public debate. The call to reject cyber violence has grown increasingly strong. China formally promulgated the *Provisions on the Governance of the Ecological Environment of Online Information Content* on March 1, 2020, which explicitly prohibits cyber violence and human flesh searches. Academic research on cyber violence has also gradually increased.

Keywords: New media environment; Cyber violence; Governance path

1. Definition of Cyber Violence

Cyber violence is a form of fanatical and blind behavior that uses the power of online public opinion to wantonly launch personal attacks on others. Such behavior is often initiated by a single individual but involves numerous participants, features high-frequency public interaction, and spreads across platforms. It is characterized by low cost, difficulty in accountability, and unpredictable, uncontrollable harmful consequences.[1] Online “executioners” often occupy the moral high ground, conducting “human flesh searches” through “commenting” and “exposing,” using unscrupulous, vulgar insults and defamation to wantonly violate the personalities of those involved, thereby obtaining a sense of cathartic pleasure and moral superiority. This is essentially a form of online vigilante “justice” that uses violence to counter violence, a collective denunciation representing an online “tyranny of the majority.”

2. Characteristics of Cyber Violence

(1) Extensive Spontaneous Participation and Blind Conformity

Due to the anonymity of the internet and the ease of participation, netizens are readily drawn into cyber violence incidents unrelated to themselves. The unique structure of China’s internet user population leads to strong conformist tendencies, and combined with information asymmetry between communicators and recipients, creates a herd effect in public opinion dissemination.

(2) Naive Justice of Initial Motivations

“Justice” is regarded as the noblest ideal and pursuit of human society, and the basic value orientation of social management. Most cyber violence incidents themselves involve controversial factors that violate basic ethics and morality. The general public views itself as moral guardians, using a sense of justice to conduct moral trials of those involved, attempting to compel them to return to moral baselines under the pressure of public opinion. However, this naive justice of initial motivations is often distorted as public opinion escalates.[1]

(3) Value Distortion

Traditional values are the fundamental views and attitudes toward behavioral standards formed by a nation through long-term historical accumulation. Cyber violence incidents themselves often violate the bottom lines of traditional values,

and the values promoted by those involved frequently contradict fundamental social values, deviating from mainstream values and causing value distortion among the online public. This is what netizens often refer to as “complete destruction of the three views” (worldview, outlook on life, and values).

(4) Infringement on Personal Interests

Cyber violence takes personal rights and interests as its behavioral object, and its consequences have a certain personal dependency and often lead to non-virtual consequences. From verbal attacks to human flesh searches to indirect real-world impacts, all cause direct or indirect harm to the physical and mental health and property of those involved, and in severe cases may endanger life safety.

(5) Malicious Sanctioning

The anonymity and lack of accountability on the internet make it a breeding ground for netizens’ emotional catharsis. Netizens wave the banner of “moral guardians” while essentially conducting irrational attacks, imagining and distorting facts, and maliciously sanctioning those involved indiscriminately.

3. Exemplary Cases

In 2006, the landmark cyber violence incident—the “High-Heeled Shoe Cat Abuse Case”—entered public view. Over the past 16 years, the online world has been fraught with turmoil, and cyber violence has intensified. “Born light, return clean.” This was the suicide note left by the disheartened missing-person search youth Liu Xuezhou. “The term ‘social death’ was unfamiliar to me before. I only learned about it after the ‘Luo Guanjun Incident’ and ‘Tsinghua Senior Sister Incident.’ I feel that I have become associated with ‘social death.’” This was the bewilderment of Ms. Gu from Hangzhou when she was falsely accused of “a lonely young woman picking up express delivery and having an affair.”

Liu Xuezhou was unfortunate. After experiencing a long and bitter childhood, he finally succeeded in finding his birth parents only to be rejected by them, and subsequently suffered successive waves of cyber violence, ultimately choosing to depart from this world. Ms. Gu was fortunate. With the promotion of the procuratorial organs, the case was ultimately transformed from a private prosecution to a public prosecution. The two individuals involved, Lang and He, were sentenced to one year in prison for defamation, with a suspended sentence.

4. Causes of Cyber Violence

(1) Incomplete Legal Framework Emboldens Many Netizens

In response to the laissez-faire phenomenon of netizens’ online behavior, neighboring South Korea has enacted relevant laws and regulations. In 2005, after

a series of cyber violence incidents occurred in South Korea, the South Korean government resolved to implement a real-name system for the internet that year, and issued and amended laws such as the *Framework Act on the Promotion of Information and Information and Communications Network Act* to provide a legal basis for the real-name system. The *Basic Act on Electronic Communications* stipulates that those who publicly disseminate rumors through new media for the purpose of harming public interests shall be sentenced to up to five years in prison and fined up to 50 million won (approximately 260,000 RMB). Furthermore, South Korean criminal law also stipulates that using violence to maliciously intimidate or damage personal reputation online can be sentenced to up to seven years in prison. In 2019, after South Korean female entertainers Sulli and Goo Hara committed suicide due to cyber violence, South Korean legislators proposed further amendments to relevant bills.

However, to date, China still lacks specific and clear legal provisions and judicial interpretations to regulate cyber violence. Provisions regarding cyber violence are scattered across various laws including the Civil Code, Criminal Law, Public Security Administration Punishments Law, Cybersecurity Law, and Personal Information Protection Law. Consequently, the situation of incomplete legal provisions, poor operability of laws and regulations, and insufficient punishment is very prominent. Problems such as the lack of comprehensive systematicity in cyber regulations and the difficulty of law enforcement in the online environment prevent relevant laws from forming strong constraints on netizens. Additionally, the insufficient punishment for cyber violence incidents that have occurred and caused adverse effects, making it difficult to exert the deterrent effect that should be expected, is also an important reason for the frequent occurrence of cyber violence incidents.

(2) Anonymity of the Internet Weakens Netizens' Legal, Moral, and Responsibility Awareness

The anonymity of online communication not only increases the difficulty of monitoring and constraining communicators but also weakens their legal awareness and moral responsibility. The reason some netizens are so unscrupulous is that they rely on anonymity. They are the “nameless majority,” not having to bear any legal or moral responsibility for their actions, with risk approaching zero.

(3) Characteristics of Netizens Make Online Speech More Emotional and Blind

China's internet users are characterized by youthfulness and low educational attainment. The youthfulness of netizens leads many to exhibit characteristics of psychological immaturity, emotional vulnerability, and vague values. They are prone to impulse when encountering events, lack the ability for self-control and calm thinking, easily develop conformist psychology under the influence of others' speech, and often rush to express their positions and viewpoints on matters. Low educational levels also constrain their ability to conduct objective, detailed, comprehensive, and in-depth thinking about matters, often preventing

them from making correct judgments about right and wrong. This provides the possibility for the formation and expansion of cyber violence. From a certain perspective, it is precisely netizens' lack of legal awareness and the conformist psychology of groups in online communication that breeds cyber violence.

(4) Development of Cyber Democracy Has Also Brought Negative Effects of Cyber Violence

Cyber democracy is a new form of democratic development that provides broad space for direct public participation. But the internet is a double-edged sword; while promoting democratic development, it also brings negative effects such as cyber violence. The collective power of netizens is a de facto "public power," and the excessive use or abuse of this "public power" can easily lead to the occurrence of cyber violence.[2] When everyone becomes both a receiver and disseminator of information through the internet, demonstrating the power of ordinary people, if effective supervision and restraint are lacking, some netizens may abuse this right, even using it as a tool for personal gain. This represents a majority lacking respect for others.

5. Impact of Cyber Violence

(1) Verbal Violence Causes Harm to Relevant Stakeholders

Foucault sharply pointed out that discourse does not passively reflect a "pre-existing reality" but is rather "a violence we inflict upon things." In cyber violence incidents, those involved are pushed to the forefront. Some irrational and emotional language instead receives substantial approval, with the public viewing it as an expression of popular will, when in reality it is an irrational venting of emotion. Public opinion continuously launches discursive attacks on those involved, causing psychological burden or substantive harm to relevant stakeholders. For example, after the "Syrup Grandpa" in Wuhan became popular, he attracted considerable questioning and cyber violence. Some questioned his failure to wear a mask or gloves and the cleanliness of his ingredients, while others spread rumors that the elderly man's descendants were unfilial. The "Syrup Grandpa" responded with tears: "I have never cried before, but when others say my work is unclean, it feels like a knife in my heart."

(2) Human Flesh Searches Violate the Privacy of Those Involved

Privacy leakage and human flesh searches are the most prominent manifestations of cyber violence in recent years, seriously violating the privacy of those involved and causing them psychological and real-world harm. Netizens irresponsibly expose detailed information such as videos and photos of those involved, which, driven by public opinion, evolves into a massive human flesh search. It is like an unofficial "wanted notice," an endless net that reaches into every corner, leaving the searched individuals with nowhere to hide.[3]

(3) Development into Offline Malicious Group Behavior

Offline malicious group behavior is the most direct and pernicious type of harm to victims among all forms of cyber violence. During the continuous fermentation of online public opinion incidents, audiences are affected by infection mechanisms, and the contagion of emotions and ideas, along with the influence of suggestion, drives group psychology toward extremes, with a tendency to immediately transform suggested viewpoints into action. Therefore, in public opinion incidents, netizens' behavior has a sense of immersion, with each participant being a member of the drama. When their "performance" subconsciously shifts toward moral criticism, their interactions become more confrontational. Coupled with the internet's function of diffusing responsibility, the "stage" can easily shift from online to offline, causing real-world attacks on those involved.[4] For example, after the Tangshan assault case occurred, it caused a huge uproar online. The owner of the barbecue restaurant involved stated that he was mistaken for the perpetrator and suffered cyber violence, receiving continuous harassing calls starting from noon the next day. Some people even sent wreaths and chrysanthemums to his shop, seriously affecting his normal life.

6. Governance Strategies for Cyber Violence

(1) Strengthen Netizens' Media Literacy

The frequent occurrence of cyber violence incidents reflects ethical deviations in netizens' moral cognition, moral emotions, and online behavior. We should clearly define online moral norms, improve netizens' moral cognitive abilities, and strengthen their moral responsibility to resolutely stop online moral vigilantism and cyber populist discourse hegemony that uses violence to counter violence. On the one hand, netizens should be made fully aware of the potential illegal consequences of "human flesh searches," and their moral and legal awareness, especially among young people, should be enhanced. On the other hand, in the new media era, topics hotly debated by netizens can easily trigger viral spread, and the dissemination process is accompanied by various online rumors. Netizens' verbal violence against those involved can even spill over into real life. Therefore, it is necessary to regulate online language, guide genuine kindness, and cultivate correct values.

(2) Strengthen Platform Gatekeeping Responsibility

The open nature of the internet without entry barriers increases the difficulty of screening and review, making it hard to effectively play the role of traditional media "gatekeepers." In the diffusion and dissemination of information, various platforms still play a critical role. Currently, driven by profit, some network operators often relax their scrutiny of information authenticity, deliberately amplify public opinion to attract audiences for click-through rates, and even intentionally mislead public opinion. Therefore, some representatives at the Two Sessions have suggested that in addition to judicial intervention, online platforms and service providers must also play their proper role in punishing cyber violence.

As communication platforms, website, forum, and app operators can quell cyber violence incidents when they first emerge and have not yet caused significant impact: On the one hand, they should set up daily supervision measures to remind users to enable privacy protection and isolation; on the other hand, they should promptly preserve relevant evidence after receiving reports for future use as court evidence. At the same time, accounts with seriously inappropriate speech should be warned or banned, and posts that incite conflict or spread rumors should be promptly removed. Furthermore, Article 80 of the Law on the Protection of Minors clearly stipulates that “when network service providers discover that users are using their services to commit illegal and criminal acts against minors, they shall immediately cease providing network services to such users, preserve relevant records, and report to public security organs.” Therefore, during the process when perpetrators commit cyber violence, especially against minors, platforms should strengthen communication and coordination with judicial organs and cooperate in assisting investigations. All of these require network service providers to fulfill their due obligations of management, supervision, and review, and to truly make good use of backend operations and regulatory channels.

(3) Strengthen Cyber Law Enforcement, Improve Online Public Opinion Supervision Capacity, and Perfect Supervision Methods

The frequent occurrence of cyber violence reflects deficiencies in China’s online supervision. First, the government should provide technical and financial support to network service providers to help them improve technical supervision methods and strengthen online information supervision. According to media reports, at this year’s Two Sessions, 40 representatives jointly proposed special legislation against cyber violence, and some members suggested “including serious cyber violence in public prosecution cases.” Higher-level technical means should be used to analyze, screen, and filter information, to monitor harmful information in a timely manner, and to prevent the exaggeration and dissemination of negative information, so that online public opinion develops in a healthy direction and ensures the initiative in handling online information.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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