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## The Formation of Discourse Conflict Mechanism in the Online Public Opinion Field from the Perspective of Media Studies: Postprint

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### Abstract

With the advent of the information age, the Internet has gradually become an important medium for expressing public opinion, issuing emotions and guiding ideas, and the problem of uncontrolled discourse conflicts in the online public opinion field cannot be ignored. From the perspective of media studies, this paper will study the formation mechanism of discourse conflict mechanism of online public opinion field through questionnaire survey method and interview method, and deeply analyze the formation of online public opinion field, the motivation of online public opinion discourse conflict, and the active role of netizens in it. From the results of the research, there is a positive correlation between the moral level of netizens and the discourse conflict in the online public opinion field, the negative correlation between the netizens' understanding of the truth of the incident and the discourse conflict in the online public opinion field, and the development of network media technology will also make the discourse conflict in the online public opinion field stronger, and the official and other mass media can play an important guiding role in it.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

#### The Formation Mechanism of Discourse Conflict in the Online Public Opinion Field: A Media Studies Perspective

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**Abstract:** With the advent of the information age, the Internet has gradually become a crucial medium for expressing public opinion, releasing emotions, and

shaping ideas. The problem of uncontrolled discourse conflicts in the online public opinion field cannot be ignored. From the perspective of media studies, this paper investigates the formation mechanism of discourse conflict in the online public opinion field through questionnaire surveys and interviews, conducting an in-depth analysis of how the online public opinion field takes shape, what motivates discourse conflict, and what active roles netizens play within it. The research findings indicate a positive correlation between netizens' moral level and discourse conflict in the online public opinion field, a negative correlation between netizens' understanding of the truth of incidents and such conflict, and that the development of network media technology intensifies discourse conflict in the online public opinion field, where official and other mass media can play an important guiding role.

**Keywords:** Internet public opinion field; Internet public opinion discourse conflict; Media Studies; Social motivation

## 1 Introduction

In network society, technological empowerment facilitates the coupling and deep integration of major online communication media. New media technology provides diversified channels for self-expression, transforming the asymmetric discourse power relationship between traditional media and audiences. Audiences have shifted from passive information recipients to active information prosumers, making online platforms the primary battleground for clashing opinions. People express their views on topics related to public interest, and different opinion climates form across various media fields, thereby influencing and constraining public opinion.

The coupling of online public opinion and information technology can easily lead to opinion suppression, disorderly competition, and even offline protests and social movements. Therefore, confronting discourse conflict in the online public opinion field, reconstructing its spatial relationship structure, and responding to the legitimate demands of cyberspace are conducive to realizing effective recognition and social consensus around core socialist values. However, in the process of participating in public discourse, netizens often exhibit uncontrolled behaviors such as malicious abuse, cursing, coercion, and even direct harassment of individuals involved in incidents, resulting in "social death" of those individuals, serious obstruction of their lives and work, long-term psychological stress, and even suicide under pressure.

Once users have formed their own opinion climate, it becomes difficult to change their views online. Internet technology has granted people the power to influence public opinion, but simultaneously places diverse and open opinions in the same space, where their collision stimulates public opinion conflict. In subcultural circles with a sense of common identity, the public opinion field displays a polite and harmonious group communication atmosphere; in public space fields, however, fierce confrontations such as mutual abuse and forced confrontation

emerge. This raises questions: In the media public opinion field, when does public opinion conflict arise and when does consensus form? What role does the media field play in this process? Why do netizens make different remarks in different public opinion fields? What are their psychological mechanisms? These questions require further discussion and analysis.

## 2.1 A Literature Review of Media Studies

Régis Debray proposed the concept of “media studies” (*médiaologie*) in his 1979 book *Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France*, later refined in works such as *Cours de médiologie générale* and *Introduction à la médiologie*. In Debray’s view, media represents “a collection of means of symbolic transmission and circulation under specific technical and social conditions.” Consequently, media studies is more concerned with the symbiotic relationship between media and ideology in a broad sense.

Chinese scholar Hu Yiqing has systematized media studies, arguing that while it recognizes the importance of media forms, it simultaneously emphasizes that these forms and their related ideologies, social cultures, and organizations constitute an inseparable whole. Zhu Zhenming and Fu Jiajie mention in their article “The ‘Material Turn’ in Debray’s Media Studies” that media studies examines the interaction between culture and technology, or symbolism and materiality, in human society—wherein the message constructs a “grand” event through the mediating process of media studies. The role of intermediary is no longer simply one or several mass media, nor merely a group organization, but rather a “network of actors” device constructed through ideology and communication technology.

These researchers argue that the intricate relationship between technology and ideology cannot be underestimated. However, existing studies have not discussed the relationship between irrational speech on the Internet and the media domain. While media studies may provide macro-level analytical frameworks for the chaos and irrationality of online public opinion, it has conducted limited research on network communication itself and has not focused on the formation and mechanisms of digital public opinion, necessitating further investigation.

## 2.2 A Review of Research on the Impact of “Media Domain”

To clarify the micro-level mechanisms through which the media domain influences individuals, it is necessary to employ media environment scholar Joshua Meyrowitz’s “media situational theory.” Meyrowitz boldly combines McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” with sociologist Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, arguing that electronic media breaks traditional definitions of situation and creates new situational changes—a system that blurs boundaries between private situations and public spaces, consequently altering people’s social behaviors and roles.

Xu Guiquan and Lei Lizhu mention in their article “Understanding the ‘Pan-media’ Era: A Triple Perspective of Media Environment, Media Studies, and Mediation Research” that the “digital domain” constitutes a “world of QR codes, images, and symbols.” The image domain that dominated the television era contained cultural and social connotations such as individualism, presentism, emotionalism, illusion, efficiency, and economic domination. The transition of the digital domain in the Internet era from mass media to self-media has pushed individualism, presentism, and fragmentation to the extreme. A key feature of the digital domain is the “de-institutionalization” of communication—that is, less institutional and more individual. The weakening of institutional effectiveness changes power relations, not only between state and citizens but also between generations. “We are often in a present state, with no memory and no plan; we nervously track morning, midday, and evening news, experiencing a pressing, immediate, and accelerated time.” This research focuses on the relationship between the macro-level media domain and micro-level individualism, as well as the relationship between media technology empowerment and individual power, moving from macro to micro research.

### 2.3 Review of Conceptual Research on “Implosion”

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan introduced the concept of “implosion” into media research, emphasizing electronic media’s extension into human experience. He pointed out that ordinary people can break through spatial distance in the geographical sense via electronic media, dissolve traditional concepts of time, and eliminate boundaries between time and space. Consequently, authoritative elites can no longer use information asymmetry derived from time and space to control ordinary people, ultimately leading to the dissolution of authority. Scholar Jean Baudrillard extended “implosion” to describe the elimination of all boundaries and differences—a process of increasing social entropy that leads to the collapse of various boundaries, foremost among them the disappearance of the boundary between real and virtual. Electronic media has created a “hyperreal world” where the public can only receive reconstructed or gratuitously constructed information without access to objective reality.

Scholars Cui Jian and Li Sisi mention in their article “Reflection and Criticism of Baudrillard’s ‘Hyperreal’ Theory” that the “hyperreal world” fully absorbs the light and shadow effects deduced by the “simulation” of modern media technology. What people experience is no longer the real thing itself but an imitation of the real landscape. A large number of media-processed images have obliterated people’s perception of reality, and individuals in psychedelic and trance-like states are more inclined to find and accept information from the flood of data in the perceptual world. Information is becoming richer, yet meaning is becoming increasingly monolithic.

## 2.4 Research Questions

Therefore, this article departs from Debray's media studies theory to address the following questions:

How is the network media field formed? What factors intensify discourse conflict in the online public opinion field? What role do netizens play in the arena of public opinion? In the maelstrom of public opinion, do netizens possess their own agency?

## 3 Methodology

This study employs questionnaire surveys and interviews to address the above questions.

### 3.1.1 Hypothesis Development

Based on the research questions, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1:** The higher the moral level of netizens, the stronger the discourse conflict in the online public opinion field.

To test this hypothesis, this study used a questionnaire method to sample the population.

### 3.1.2 Sampling Method

The research subjects corresponding to this hypothesis are the general netizen population, primarily young people, selected because the 51st "Statistical Report on Internet Development in China" released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) in 2023 indicates that young netizens account for 50.5% of total Internet users, constituting the main force of Internet usage. A total of 202 questionnaires were collected, all of which were valid, providing sufficient data for statistical significance.

Data collection, collation, and analysis were completed on May 17, 2023. The survey employed both open-ended and closed-ended questions covering: (1) basic demographic information including age and gender; (2) dimensionality reduction statements for the independent variable X; and (3) dimensionality reduction statements for the dependent variable Y. The questionnaire contained 16 questions: 8 multiple-choice, 4 multiple-select, 2 matrix, and 4 fill-in-the-blank items. Distribution utilized online methods through WeChat Moments, QQ Space, and the Questionnaire Star Sample Library.

### 3.2.1 Interview Protocol Development

The interview questions were divided into three main parts. The first part covered basic interviewee information including gender, age, education, and occupation. The second part translated research questions into interview questions,

including views and derivative behaviors based on content about the “Hu Xinyu incident” reported in different periods. The third part prepared for possible in-depth probing.

During interviews, researchers adhered to the four ethical principles highlighted by scholar Alan Bryman: (1) avoiding harm to participants; (2) obtaining informed consent; (3) respecting participant privacy; and (4) avoiding deception. Interviewees could remain silent or withdraw if unwilling to answer any questions or complaints. Statements interviewees did not wish to make public were excluded from the study.

### 3.1.2 Interview Participant Selection

This study conducted 10 semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants of different ages, occupations, and varying levels of understanding of events. Interviews began in April 2023 and concluded in May 2023. Respondents initially included close friends, with additional samples recruited through social networks. Following the principle of maximum variation sampling in qualitative research, sample collection closed when the 10th respondent provided sufficient content to answer the research questions. Respondents varied in age, region, and upbringing, resulting in low homogenization. Interviews were conducted via one-on-one telephone calls, recorded, and transcribed verbatim, producing approximately 1,000 words of transcript processed by the researcher. Basic interviewee information is shown in Table 1 .

**Table 1** Basic Information About Respondents

Gender	Degree	Occupation
Female	Bachelor’s Degree	Student
Female	Bachelor’s Degree	Student
Female	Double Bachelor’s Degree	Journalist
Female	Vocational School	Salesman
Female	Vocational School	Worker
Female	Postgraduate Student	Student
Female	Bachelor’s Degree	Student
Female	Bachelor’s Degree	Student
Female	Postgraduate Student	Teacher
Female	PhD Candidate	Student

## 4.1 The Relationship Between Netizens’ Moral Level and Online Discourse Conflict

The questionnaire sample comprised 50.5% women and 49.5% men. By age group, most respondents (67 people, 33.17%) were between 18-25 years old. In terms of education, most (120 people, 59.41%) held university/college degrees.

Regarding frequency of participation in online topic discussions, most (75 people, 37.13%) were “often involved.” Concerning causes of discourse conflict, most respondents (157 people, 77.72%) selected “verbal attack.” Regarding methods to reduce discourse conflict, most (179 people, 88.61%) chose “strengthening public opinion guidance.”

Scale reliability and validity analysis yielded the following results: For the moral level scale, validity testing showed  $KMO = 0.855$ , Bartlett’s sphericity test  $\chi^2 = 401.857$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; reliability testing using Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  showed a coefficient of 0.854, indicating good reliability and validity. For the online public opinion discourse conflict scale, validity testing showed  $KMO = 0.899$ , Bartlett’s sphericity test  $\chi^2 = 490.908$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; reliability testing using Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  showed a coefficient of 0.868, indicating good reliability and validity.

Correlation analysis examined the relationship between netizens’ moral level and discourse conflict intensity in the online public opinion field, with Pearson’s correlation coefficient expressing the strength of association. The two variables were significantly correlated ( $r = 0.402$ ). Regression analysis revealed a significant linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables, with a regression coefficient of 0.469 and significance of 0.000. These results support H1: the higher the moral level of netizens, the stronger the discourse conflict in the online public opinion field.

We can therefore conclude that higher moral levels among netizens intensify discourse conflict in the online public opinion field. Domestic scholars Wu Peng, Fan Jing, and Liu Huashan demonstrated in their article “The Impact of Moral Emotions on Online Helping Behavior: The Mediating Role of Moral Reasoning” that moral emotions and moral reasoning can stimulate individuals’ online helping behavior, demanding high moral standards of themselves and others in helping contexts. We can infer that when netizens encounter remarks not meeting their moral standards, they perceive the other party as wrong, prompting their “helping” impulse to rise. They then attempt to “help” the other party accept what they believe are correct concepts through refutation and value export. However, due to individual differences, netizens insist on their own ideas, ultimately leading to more intense discourse conflicts in the online public opinion field.

## 4.2 Tracing Public Opinion Development: Technology, Dynamic Audiences, and Official Media

Interviewees’ responses regarding attitude changes before and after learning the truth of incidents support this analysis: “I will learn about the incident through official announcements on Weibo, and I will also observe others’ attitudes when they discuss the topic, or search for the incident on other platforms to see if there is more information, and then discuss it with friends on WeChat.” (S1) “At the beginning, I saw many people online saying Hu Xinyu was murdered, even involving conspiracy theories like human organ trafficking, offending powerful

people, and being killed by the school. I also felt this matter was not simple. Later, when the official statement said it was suicide, I actually didn't believe it." (S2) "Subsequently, the police gradually released the entire chain of evidence for this incident. After reading it, I found it could be connected. I believe in the police's ability to handle cases, and China is also a country ruled by law—such appalling things would not happen. I believe the official factual conclusions." (S3) When we conducted further in-depth interviews about how interviewees viewed the "Hu Xinyu incident" and whether they would participate in the online public opinion field, we found that people's attitudes toward the incident changed gradually as the truth emerged.

#### 4.2.1 Mass Incidents in Cyberspace Are More Likely to Ferment

At the macro level of social structure, technology is the primary driver of social-historical change, as seen in the "information society" theories proposed by scholars such as Daniel Bell and Yoneji Masuda, which posit that information technology development transforms social structure. At the micro level of daily media application, technology causes subtle yet profound psychosocial changes, as in McLuhan's "the medium is the message" view, which holds that media technology shapes and extends human psychology and senses. Internet development has promoted the transformation from traditional to integrated media, and self-media has become popular. After major incidents occur, major social platforms issue relevant reports, and self-operated public accounts can publish specific content and opinions about events, forming multi-media coverage. Netizens can use the Internet as a carrier, take events as the core, ignore temporal and spatial limitations, and express their views, emotions, attitudes, and opinions in the public domain, interacting with other unfamiliar netizens to form an opinion climate with certain tendencies and influence.

From Debray's media studies perspective, the causes of discourse conflict in the online public opinion field are inextricably linked to the characteristics of network media technology, which mainly include: platformization, decentralization, interactivity, fragmentation, immediacy, and double-edgedness. Liu Haiyan mentions in "The Generation Mechanism, Dissemination Mode and Guidance Strategy of Online Public Opinion" that the Internet's openness and anonymity allow netizens to express opinions more freely, giving online public opinion a distinct grassroots character. Precisely because of the randomness of online public opinion and the arbitrariness of speech expression, some self-operated public accounts and marketing accounts ignore journalistic truth principles to generate profit, publishing only attention-grabbing content that confuses the public. Netizens struggle to distinguish the authenticity of received information, and some individuals possess low moral literacy, resulting in online public opinion becoming a mixed bag where positive, healthy discourse that helps reflect public opinion coexists with lowbrow, vulgar, and obscene content, making online public opinion a potential fuse for sudden social mass incidents.

#### 4.2.2 Users in Network Discourse Conflicts

In the open and shared cyberspace, the audience is not a target that “falls when shot” but rather node-based users who play a vital role in the development of online public opinion. The “digital domain” is a new media domain concept proposed by Debray based on his observations of the Internet era. He noted that the digital domain’s transition from mass media to self-media is accompanied by “de-institutionalized” communication characteristics—that is, less institutionalized, more individual, with autonomy and authority gradually dissolving. Compared with unfamiliar “authoritative experts,” netizens are more willing to trust familiar or more grounded self-media bloggers. The problem brought by the “digital domain” is that it pushes individualism, presentism, and fragmentation to the extreme, and some ill-intentioned individuals exploit this to spread false information. These liars fabricate and distort facts according to the inherent attraction and conflict of events, provoke netizens’ negative emotions, and add “labeled” entries that attract public attention to cater to public stereotypes and the inertia of fragmentary information extraction, making lies become “carved-in-stone words.”

From Debray’s media perspective, ideological differences among netizens also create discourse conflict situations in the online public opinion field. Ideology refers to a collection of ideas and can be understood as the understanding and cognition of things. It is not inherent in the human brain but originates from and exists within society, affected by thinking ability, environment, information, value orientation, and other factors. Different ideologies produce different understandings and cognitions of the same thing. Netizens’ ideological construction is closely related to personal growth environment, education level, cultural literacy, moral accomplishment, and thinking style, which together determine netizens’ views and attitudes toward events. Domestic scholars Liu Yongzhi and Qi Min mention in “Ideological Security Risks and Governance of the ‘Post-truth’ Era in Online Public Opinion” that cyberspace ideology has multiple expressions and high concealment. Currently, the circular and interactive coupling of Internet space has formed a “post-truth” environment where people are more willing to accept emotional expressions and value beliefs detached from truth than objective facts. Individuals typically select views or theories roughly similar to their own beliefs or positions to maintain consistency. “Post-truth” one-sidedly amplifies the power of beliefs, resulting in solidified homogeneous group thinking, information blockage, and the choice of “shielding” when facing constantly reversing social public opinion, eventually leading to belief cocooning. In the face of constantly reversing news and public opinion, heterogeneous groups often detach from the event itself and engage in “scolding wars” with each other, eliminating the truth of incidents and generating secondary public opinion, transforming topics from arguments about objective facts into struggles of subjective beliefs.

Notably, the public receives information that has been reconstructed or arbitrarily constructed without access to objective reality, becoming immersed in a

“hyperreal world.” Shi Lina mentions in “New Media Literary Criticism in the Transformation Era of the ‘Hyperreal’ World” that the hyperreal world brings subversive changes to people’s entire social life. From economic and material necessities like food, clothing, housing, and transportation to spiritual and cultural needs, people’s lives have become deeply integrated with network media and information technology. This informational material culture and social form inevitably brings great changes to literary creation and criticism.

Obviously, when netizens browse information about various events, they receive both true and false information without being able to distinguish reality from unreality. Netizens are easily emotionally provoked in such a hyperreal world, where rational thinking is replaced by emotional venting. The information received is very rich, yet the meaning of content becomes very monolithic, eventually moving toward extreme thinking and unwillingness to accept heterogeneous views, making discourse conflict in the online public opinion field more intense.

#### **4.2.3 The Major Role of Mass Media in Online Public Opinion Conflict**

Mass media refers to large-scale media with extensive audiences, controlled by official institutions such as newspapers or television stations, using certain technical means to reproduce and disseminate information. Niklas Luhmann defines mass media in *The Reality of Mass Media* [13] as “the concept of mass media encompassing all social settings that use reproduction techniques to disseminate communication.” In the past, mass media were responsible for publishing newspapers, magazines, and books, releasing the latest news while people could not directly contact or interact with each other, forming a closed operational nature that isolated people outside the circle. In the information age, the network has broken the isolation of time and space, allowing people to communicate directly on network platforms, shaking the monopoly position of mass media. However, it should be noted that because of its proximity to the people, large audience, and support from official institutions, mass media still holds certain discursive power and influence in the digital public opinion field, and its reports and comments can greatly affect public opinion orientation.

### **5 Summary and Reflection**

This study conducts media theorization of discourse conflict phenomena in the online public opinion field through questionnaire surveys and interviews, attempting to answer questions about the formation mechanism of such conflict. The research finds that higher netizen moral levels correlate with stronger discourse conflict in the online public opinion field, while greater exposure to truth correlates with weaker conflict. The hypothesis that “more frequent participation in topic discussions by netizens leads to stronger discourse conflict” was not supported. This is mainly because moral emotions and moral reasoning can stimulate individuals’ online helping behavior, hoping to persuade other netizens to accept their “correct views” through discourse conflict. People are

more inclined to speak within their familiar circles, and the development and application of electronic media have created opportunities for netizens to speak across multiple circles, expanding the scope of the digital public opinion field and making discourse conflict more likely to occur.

This study's examination of discourse conflict formation mechanisms from a media studies perspective reflects the development of media science regarding online public opinion phenomena. Simultaneously, it provides a theoretical basis for understanding discourse conflict mechanisms in China's contemporary "everything is media" context.

However, this study also finds that online public opinion discourse conflict produces negative effects such as authority dissolution, post-truth dynamics, and implosion, warranting vigilance and reflection. Due to theoretical limitations, this study inadequately addresses uncontrolled online public opinion phenomena and governance methods. Future research in network communication and information public opinion should pay greater attention to uncontrolled online public opinion phenomena and expand research and practice on online public opinion governance.

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