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## Discourse Reconstruction of Official Public Account News Headlines: Elimination and Construction of Uncertainty (Postprint)

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### Abstract

As official accounts have gradually become a crucial channel for information dissemination by official institutions in network society, they exhibit, in contrast to traditional media, a shift in news headline content from substantive to superficial, and in communication objectives from information transmission to guiding audience selection. The essence of this transformation lies in the evolution of news headlines' communication function from reducing audience uncertainty to constructing uncertainty, concurrently reflecting the interactive dynamics between the socialization of network platforms and the individualization of media organizations, as well as the reconfiguration of message structures in response to changes in publishing media. The motivations underlying this discursive reconstruction of news headlines on official accounts can be attributed to transformations in communication effect evaluation methodologies and a gatekeeping process redefined by individual behaviors.

### Full Text

## Discourse Reconstruction of Official WeChat Public Account News Headlines: The Elimination and Creation of Uncertainty

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**Abstract:** As official WeChat public accounts have gradually become crucial channels for institutional information dissemination in the digital society, their news headlines have undergone a notable transformation compared to traditional media. Information content has shifted from substantive to non-substantive, and communication objectives have moved from information transmission to guiding audience selection. This change essentially reflects a functional shift in news headlines from eliminating audience uncertainty to actively

creating it, while simultaneously revealing the interactive dynamics between platform socialization and institutional individualization, as well as the structural reconstruction of messages in response to evolving media formats.

The driving forces behind this discourse reconstruction can be attributed to changes in communication effect evaluation methods and a gatekeeping process redefined by individual behavior.

**Keywords:** official public account; news headline; communication media; discourse; uncertainty

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## 1. Semantic Changes in Official Public Account Headlines on Self-Media Platforms

Since the development of the self-media era, news dissemination has fundamentally shifted from traditional to digital platforms. This evolution, transitioning from civilian to official and from individual to institution-represented communication, has established a complementary ecosystem where conventional and self-media platforms coexist. Among these, the most mature and influential form is the official public account. This paradigm shift from institutional news organizations to direct social dissemination via public accounts has significantly altered how news content is structured, with headline discourse reconstruction being the most prominent manifestation. This transformation stems both from platform-driven content determination and evolving communication objectives.

### 1.1 From Substantive to Non-Substantive Information

In traditional media, scholars identified news as inherently schema-based—a structural and cognitive framework for news production and comprehension [1]. From this viewpoint, all news constitutes discourse. However, contemporary official public accounts have gradually abandoned news' s fundamental role of uncertainty reduction, instead embracing uncertainty creation. In conventional journalism, information is defined as “that which eliminates random uncertainty in the receiver” [2]. When communication purpose shifts from reducing to generating uncertainty, content organization moves from substantive to non-substantive expression.

During major public events like the COVID-19 pandemic, information demand surges while uncertainty about events becomes amplified. Official accounts have played positive roles in authoritative releases, rumor control, and timely updates, becoming primary information sources. Yet even in non-critical contexts, many official accounts increasingly employ non-substantive headlines. For instance, Henan Children's Hospital Service Account published: "8-Year-Old Boy Suddenly Nearsighted, Unexpectedly It's a Disease, This Technology Cracks the Life Code." This 20-character headline fails to convey specific information, instead creating reader demand through deliberate vagueness. Similar patterns appear frequently, such as headlines from Kaifeng Network's official account: "Latest News Regarding Travel, Kaifeng Will Build a Large Batch of..." , "Confirmed, This Sunday," or "Beware! Fake!" These provide no substantive information, with core details replaced by ellipses—an approach rare in traditional journalism but commonplace on self-media platforms, establishing a discourse pattern that manufactures uncertainty to drive readership.

## 1.2 From Informing to Click-Generating

The non-substantive headline reconstruction reflects a deeper shift from efficient information dissemination to rapid click acquisition. Self-media platforms don't release complete information at once; they first publish a symbolic trigger to arouse interest. Unlike traditional media's one-time passive reception—where audiences could select channels but had to consume entire programs—self-media empowers audiences to actively choose whether to click after viewing only the headline. This mechanism fundamentally changes headline functions from conveying key news elements to stimulating click desire.

The Henan Provincial Department of Education's same-day posts illustrate this strategic divergence: "Attention! This Province's Universities Have Dismissed Thousands of Students" versus "Latest! Zhengzhou High School Admission Scores Are Here! Admission Begins Tomorrow!" The first deliberately omits the province name, artificially embedding uncertainty, while the second directly states the news content. This contrast demonstrates how official accounts selectively frame leading symbols: for locally anticipated content, accurate elements activate expectations; for less essential news, uncertainty drives clicks. Thus, headline semantics have shifted substantively, with audience empowerment forcing a conversion from information transmission to click generation.

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## 2. The Internal Logic of Headline Discourse Reconstruction

The shift from substantive to non-substantive content, coupled with the move toward click-driven objectives, represents a fundamental departure from traditional journalism's uncertainty-reduction function. This transformation's internal logic comprises both media logic and content logic dimensions.

## 2.1 Media Logic: Socialized Platforms and Individualized Institutions

The self-media era has transformed the Internet into a significantly socialized dissemination platform, restructuring mass society from a system of groups and official institutions into a network society of independent individuals [3]. While appearing more socialized through deeper participation, network society's essence is an individualized communication system where transmission and reception become increasingly personal. Platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and forums serve as technologically-mediated socialized platforms that connect individuals into groups, forming complex network societies.

When individualized release and acceptance become the basic logic of network society information flow, official institutions must conform to this paradigm, shifting from institutionalized to individualized communication. This process can be described as follows: traditionally, an official department's information release involved professional media institutions conducting multi-layered gatekeeping and review before institutional dissemination to an indeterminate majority. When this department transforms into an official public account, these institutional processes largely disappear, replaced by simple organizational units or even individuals releasing information as personal self-media. Consequently, the audience shifts from an uncertain majority to a definable follower group.

## 2.2 Content Logic: Subversion and Reconstruction of Message Structure

Official public account headlines' uncertainty creation and subversion of traditional writing styles reveal not only discourse reconstruction but also deeper structural transformations. Traditional news structure, built upon print media foundations, includes headlines, leads, bodies, backgrounds, and conclusions, with headlines and leads delivering crucial information through an inverted pyramid structure. This model no longer governs self-media content organization.

Structural changes manifest in several ways. First, traditional boundaries blur: leads, bodies, and backgrounds merge indistinguishably. Content becomes fragmented by images, music, and audio-visual materials, with text serving as auxiliary explanation for visual symbols—a phenomenon particularly evident in process or on-site reporting. This fragmentation completely deconstructs conventional discourse structure. Second, copywriting styles become colloquial. While traditional official media employed formal written language, official public accounts exhibit pronounced individual characteristics. Beyond forwarded notices, their information displays casual, relaxed tones—reflecting institutional individualization. Message discourse no longer follows institutional language logic but adopts personal styles that blend institutional functions with publisher personality. Over time, some accounts develop unique release styles, personifying the account with distinct character. This personalization alters audience psychology, affecting reception depth and sharing behavior. While official authority becomes more approachable through individualization, reduced persuasiveness

simultaneously increases audience uncertainty.

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### **3. Two Driving Forces Behind Headline Discourse Reconstruction**

Official public account headline discourse reconstruction represents an adaptive response to evolving media environments. While internal logic explains environmental causes, individual behavioral changes in effect evaluation and gatekeeping mechanisms constitute the primary motivational forces.

#### **3.1 Visualization of Communication Effect Evaluation**

Self-media platforms have revolutionized effect evaluation methods. Traditional media relied on post-broadcast surveys producing inaccurate, lagging metrics like ratings and circulation, requiring professional analysis institutions. This made content urgency consistently outweigh evaluation effectiveness, with news dissemination emphasizing social benefits based on facts and societal needs.

Official public accounts have overturned these probability-based statistics, replacing them with real-time click and view counts as new value-assignment methods. While seemingly providing accurate, immediate feedback on audience attention and absolute precision in reach monitoring, deeper analysis reveals that real-time metrics embed official information release within network society's value assignment process. As individualized media structures abandon traditional evaluation systems for real-time value assignment, headlines inevitably shift toward uncertainty creation to monetize view volume.

#### **3.2 Gatekeeping Mechanisms Redefined by Individual Behavior**

Official public accounts' individualized characteristics fundamentally motivate headline discourse reconstruction. Beyond visualized effect analysis, this individualization redefines media gatekeeping mechanisms. Traditional media's complex institutional gatekeeping ensured authoritative information release, with systematic gatekeeping proportional to media socialization. Self-media public accounts, conversely, reduce systematic gatekeeping to individual behavior.

From a communication perspective, discourse can be understood as “verbal statements more important than sentences” [4]. Official public account headlines thus transform from institutional to individually-colored verbal statements, primarily manifested through suspense-driven uncertainty creation and colloquial expression. Xinhua News Agency's public account headline “Bride Just Picked Up, Photographer Records the True Side of the Bride's Family” hides core news elements to create suspense. “Guangzhou Huangpu Release” used “Hey Guys, Want to Buy Medicine?” as a colloquial individual expression. “Youth Shanghai” posted “This Head Teacher Was Besieged by the Whole Class,” directly using colloquialism to present uncertain information as the headline. This

individually-defined gatekeeping transforms official authority into approachability while stripping uncertainty-reduction functions from headlines, converting them from information carriers into advertisement-style triggers for audience selection.

In the foreseeable future, official information channels on self-media platforms will become crucial sources of authoritative information and important components of network society. The transformation from fact-stating to behavior-guiding headlines, from substantive to non-substantive content, all manifest the shift from eliminating to creating uncertainty. This discourse reconstruction represents continuous adaptation to new network environments—a trend that will persistently evolve.

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

*Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.*