

Research on the Causes of and Responses to “Post-Truth” News

Yiwen Chen^{1,a,*}

¹Hangzhou No.14 High School, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 310000, China
a. sherry_chen0924@163.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present three factors about how post-truth can be spread through some classical examples. Firstly, rumors during the epidemic period in China not only serves as a way for media platforms to attract the public’s attention, but they are also spread to help netizens express their emotions and alleviate stress. In addition, confirmation bias, a tendency that people normally have, also plays a role in creating post-truth. Secondly, the paper talked about two current ways of identifying post-truth news. However, after evaluation, both ways—having critical thinking and using technological tools or have their drawbacks. Furthermore, opinion leaders should be properly regulated by related personnel. To conclude, the authority and credibility of the news should be improved, and the problems of post-truth are worth keeping a watchful eye on.

Keywords: post-truth, social media, journalism, confirmation bias

1. Introduction

On October 28, 2018, a bus fell into a river in Wanzhou district, Chongqing municipality. According to the surveillance video, the bus crashed into the Yangtze River after colliding with a private car. When the video was exposed online, many media outlets used sensitive words such as “female driver” and “high heels” as keywords, misinterpreting the incident as “a female driver driving the wrong way resulting in a collision between two cars.” The posts soon sparked outrage among internet users, who accused the female drivers of driving skills and disobeying traffic rules, with some of the comments even offensive. However, on November 2, 2018, the incident took a huge turn: the local police office announced that the reason for the bus falling into the river was because the passengers and the driver had a fierce argument and fought each other, causing the car to lose control and eventually drive into the river. Soon, many netizens expressed their apologies to the female driver after realizing the truth. However, the malicious fabrication of the incident by the media and the abuse of the female drivers by Internet users have caused incalculable harm to the individual. In fact, the case is a very typical “post-truth” news. Post-truth is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “less influential in shaping public opinion than content appealing to emotion and personal belief, or words used to indicate this [1].” With the rapid development of electronic media, the “post-truth era” comes into being. As an important bridge in the process of information communication between the public and the outside world, online media sometimes incites the incident emotionally and strengthens prejudices and stereotypes in the dissemination of information. The impact of online media often triggers the emotions of netizens, touches a certain sensitive point in the hearts of viewers, and finally leads to a

series of public opinions. Such outcomes often outweigh the impact of the truth on people. The causes of post-truth news deserve to be studied. In addition, in the post-truth era, how Internet users should maintain a sober attitude to distinguish whether a news story is post-truth or not needs to be explored. This paper will show several reasons for the emergence of “post-truth” news by presenting several specific case studies and discussing some current ways to help people better identify post-truth news.

2. The Truth under “Post-Truth”

2.1. Individual Interests Versus Group’s Emotional Needs

In 2021, a sudden epidemic swept through China, triggering common people’s uneasiness up and down in the country. Under such a rough and furious social atmosphere at the time, some individuals, in order to further expand the level of panic among the people, spread some rumors, which were purely derived from the individual’s spiteful mental base. The rumors spread on social media platforms such as Moments, Weibo, and other platforms. And these rumors are extremely related to the public’s life during the epidemic time. Like it would say that the certain city area was to be lockdown, airspace somewhere needs to be heavily fumigated or, a patient somewhere escaped from a quarantine area. This kind of deliberate rumor actually not only serves to satisfy the rumor-monger’s dark emotions in order to trigger social panic, but also attract a large amount of attention for certain platforms that spread the rumors. Meanwhile, widespread social fear will force the public to seek emotional catharsis [2]. At the beginning of the epidemic, the vast majority of the public was desperate for more information. And these rumors, as a kind of information closely linked to the interests of the people at that time, naturally attracted widespread attention and heated discussions. People were able to relieve their emotions when commenting on and forwarding the news, and at the same time, the rumors were forwarded at a high speed and even “corrected” by the public to become a kind of information that met the psychological needs of the public at that time. In the end, such rumors were widely spread during the epidemic period, misleading the general public. However, rumor identification is difficult and complicated since it frequently calls for time- and labor-intensive investigative journalism and the verification of alleged assertion [3]. Due to the growing volume and dynamism of information, the spread of social media makes it worse. Therefore, automatic and assisted approaches must be created in order to facilitate real-time rumor identification.

2.2. Confirmation Bias: People Tend to Believe What They Believe

Confirmation bias refers to people’s tendency to process information by seeking out or interpreting information that is consistent with their existing beliefs [4]. This biased approach to decision-making is largely unintentional, and it causes a person to ignore information that is inconsistent with their beliefs. These beliefs can include a person’s expectations in a particular situation and their predictions for a particular outcome. According to the psychological theory, some consciously inclined people are more likely to believe, or even create, post-truth news. Sometimes, after a video or photo of unknown meaning is exposed online, netizens tend to make their own understanding and even over-reasoning based on past experience and stereotypes. Later, netizens will comment on such information, and even directly post their “conjecture” about this information on their own personal media, causing misunderstanding and confusion to other netizens. For example, on June 13, 2023, a video of a dispute between a city police and a vendor in Sichuan, China, was exposed on Weibo. For a time, many netizens commented that the city police should not bully and force vendor to follow the rule. But in fact, at the beginning of the video, the city police obviously communicated with the vendors and discouraged them from leaving. Furthermore, it is the vendor tried to drive his car and then attack the city police, which caused the latter to be outrageous, and beat against. In this case, it is obvious that, according to netizens, vendors are vulnerable groups, and city police, as superior

managers, are bound to take advantage of their power to conduct some boorish acts against vendors. Under the influence of confirmation bias, as people tend to believe their pre-existing belief and expectations, netizens may focus on the behavior of the city police pushing the vendor's food truck in the video, or even strengthen it, but they will ignore that at the beginning of the video, the small vendor attacked the city police first, or even tried to hurt him with his car. The city police's response, though angry, is actually more like self-defense.

3. Insight into the Post-truth

3.1. Critical-thinking

It is beyond doubt that netizens in the post-truth era are surrounded by post-truth news. Therefore, the ability to discern post-truth news is crucial for the public. First, the public must think critically and ask themselves, "Is it?" when browsing a large amount of information. Sometimes, when you read a piece of information, you probably don't know whether it's true or not, and if there's even a shred of doubt in your mind, you're probably right. The good questions, like "Does this story attack a specific group?" "Is the source of this news reliable?" "Is the headline on this message too aggressive?" can help you better use the strategy of critical thinking, which is a good way to determine whether a piece of information is really accurate and fair about a matter rather than deliberately pulling you to a more extreme, controversial point. However, according to Antino Kim et al., they argue that people are unlikely to have critical thinking while surfing the internet because they tend to have a hedonic mindset, causing confirmation bias to prevail [6].

3.2. Technology to Combat Post-truth

In the era of rapid dissemination of post-truth news, the tools for identifying the authenticity of information are also evolving with the times. Some platforms, such as TinEye, Google Search by Image, InVid, and others, allow people to identify different news items and even videos, which is a simple and useful tool for identifying post-truth news. However, people might not want to use these tools because they think they are troublesome. However, according to Chinn et al., people may still face a great challenge in distinguishing post-truth news even when they are mindful of this false information [4]. Illusory-truth effect that when people hear the same false information many times, they tend to believe it. In that condition, people may still trap in the post-truth information.

3.3. Regulation for the Effect of Opinion Leader

According to Qiang, Xu, et al., opinion leaders can considerably affect netizens opinions by providing information, opinions, and advice to others and exerting personal influence on others [7]. Meanwhile, opinion leaders tend to have a group of followers, attracting more attention and forwarding more information than common people. For this reason, online platforms should improve relevant rules and regulations, urging opinion leaders to be responsible for their own remarks and not easily comment on or forward unverified rumors.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, post-truth news is produced for various reasons, including intentional rumor, personal mood, political factors, and psychological factors. It is almost impossible to avoid the causes of post-truth news in such an advanced mass media. The public should have a dialectical mind to make the right judgment or use the tools to distinguish truth from falsehood when browsing through the vast amount of information at a time. However, both the human mind and technological tools are subject to omissions. Therefore, it is worth looking into how to improve the overall authenticity of news.

Additionally, the regulation of opinion leaders should be improved. And government, as a more powerful entity than individuals, should pay more attention to promoting the overall network environment in the future, decreasing the frequency of post-truth news.

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