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An Analysis and Countermeasures of News Inversion in the Post-truth Era

Manghan Ye[a] & Xiuli Zhu[b*]

[1] School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Science and Technology of China, Heifei, Anhui, China

[a] hannah1999@mail.ustc.edu.cn

[b] zhuxiuli@ustc.edu.cn

[*] Corresponding author

Abstract

In the digital age, the swift proliferation of the Internet and new media has led to the frequent occurrence of "news inversion", significantly undermining societal trust and the credibility of mainstream media. Such news, often pivoting on social hot topics, garners extensive public attention and epitomizes the challenges of the "post-truth" era, where traditional journalistic ethics are under siege. This paper aims to dissect the roots and repercussions of news inversion and propose effective strategies to mitigate its widespread influence.

Keywords

news inversion, media literacy, public trust, journalistic integrity

1. Introduction

The phenomenon known as "news inversion" refers to a significant shift in the media's portrayal of a news event over time during the process of Internet communication (Gao, Yan, & Wang, 2021; Wei & Liu, 2021). This shift leads to a polarization of audience attitudes toward the event. In the era dominated by social media, the exposure of a news event can quickly captivate public attention. The incident then becomes the subject of intense debate, with the public forming opinions based on their perception of the "truth." This rapid formation of public opinion can stir a wide range of emotions and reactions (Fu, Jing, Chen, Yang, & Cong, 2020). However, the "truth" in this context is often not the factual account of the event but rather a narrative that the public chooses to believe, based on their

understanding of the situation. News Inversion can suffer from a lack of substantiation and authenticity, as it may include an abundance of disorganized, inaccurate, and extraneous information in its continuous dissemination. The unique nature of communication subjects and processes in such cases results in diverse sources of news, fragmented content, and sensationalized headlines (Aïmeur, Amri, & Brassard, 2023).

2. Causes of News Inversion

2.1 Anyone Could Be a Journalist—Diverse Sources of Information

Compared to the traditional methods of word-of-mouth, newspaper, or radio media for news dissemination, the advent of new media has significantly broadened and accelerated the channels through which information is spread. However, the very low barriers to entry on social platforms mean that virtually anyone can contribute to the discourse. While the public serves as the recipient of information, it simultaneously acts as a disseminator (Deng, 2016). The digital public sphere is a battleground of diverse opinions from various netizens, diminishing the once-dominant voice and authority of mainstream media. People are no longer confined to a singular narrative but are exposed to a vast array of complex information. This influx can distort the authenticity of information, blurring the lines between facts and rumors as everyone voices their opinions without delving into the truth. Misguidance from opinion leaders, sensationalism from marketing accounts, and the muddling of different types of information can culminate in destructive public sentiment.

A case in point is the "Guanjun Luo" incident (Gong & Su, 2021). Liang, a woman claiming to be a victim, played the role of both news publisher and disseminator. She initially posted on Weibo alleging rape and domestic abuse by her ex-boyfriend, Guanjun Luo, which quickly spiraled into public accusations of his supposed misconduct and sexual inadequacies. Given the sensitive nature of gender equality and women's rights, the allegations ignited widespread public debate and support for Liang, accompanied by a barrage of attacks on Luo. However, Luo's attempts to refute the claims, along with his family's clarifications, were largely dismissed by a public biased towards the perceived victim. The narrative shifted dramatically a month later when Liang's attorney issued an apology, revealing that her accusations were the result of a misunderstanding and emotional distress from their breakup. Despite the eventual clarification, the damage to Luo's reputation and personal life was profound and irreversible.

This example highlights the formidable influence of public opinion, which initially condemned Luo based on unverified claims, leading to severe online and real-world harassment. The initial widespread support for Liang underscored the societal tendency to sympathize with and protect those perceived as victims, without critical assessment of the evidence. This case illustrates the complexities of digital discourse, where the rush to judgment and the misuse of the "victim" label can have severe consequences, demonstrating the need for more responsible and discerning engagement with information in the digital age.

12

2.2 One-sidedness of Exclusive News Report

In the pursuit of profit maximization driven by engagement metrics, media organizations frequently chase the immediacy of news, aiming to capitalize on the allure of "exclusive news (Goyanes, Artero, & Zapata, 2021)." This relentless pursuit often leads to a compromised verification process, as the rush to publish can overshadow the need to confirm the authenticity of the news being reported (Kümpel, 2022). In tailoring news content, there is a tendency to skew towards public preferences for entertainment, resulting in fabricated or selectively presented narratives that prioritize viewer engagement over factual accuracy. This approach not only undermines the reliability of news but also disregards the importance of presenting objective facts, thus eroding the foundational principles of trustworthy journalism.

2.3 Emotional Impulses Spread Faster than Truth

Instead of delving into the substantive truth behind news stories, people often seek emotional catharsis and resonance. Guoming Yu has insightfully noted that the reason a particular incident captures the attention of netizens and becomes a focal point of Internet public opinion is because it touches upon the "tightest string" within the psyche of netizens and the public at large (Wei & Liu, 2021). This resonant nerve is shaped by underlying social development logics and value demands. Taking the Guanjun Luo incident as an illustrative example, the "tightest string" for the public was clearly the issue of gender equality and the fight against gender-based discrimination. Gender issues have long been pivotal in societal development and have frequently emerged as central themes in public opinion cases. This is precisely why the Guanjun Luo incident elicited such a significant societal reaction, highlighting the profound impact of deeply ingrained social concerns on public discourse and sentiment.

2.4 Information Distortion Caused by Multiple Dissemination

In the contemporary media landscape, the process of information dissemination is markedly interactive, rendering individuals as both disseminators and recipients of information (Deng, 2016). This dual role significantly impacts the integrity of news as it undergoes secondary dissemination. When communicators re-share news content, they often incorporate their own interpretations, speculations, and perspectives, resulting in a divergence from the original message. This addition of subjective elements means that with each subsequent sharing, the factual accuracy of the news is increasingly compromised, leading to a distorted representation of the original events.

Moreover, the pervasive habit of engaging with the Internet has fostered a preference for consuming information in bite-sized pieces, diminishing the general public's patience for comprehending stories in their entirety. This trend towards fragmented consumption exacerbates the issue, as individuals tend to focus on headline-grabbing keywords or sensational aspects, often overlooking critical details. Such selective attention not only impedes a holistic understanding of news stories but also contributes to further discrepancies in the content as it is disseminated. The combined effect of these dynamics is a media environment where the fidelity of information is continually eroded, underscoring the challenges of maintaining accuracy and objectivity in the digital age.

3. Damaging Effects

3.1 Decline in Media Credibility

The credibility of the media is fundamentally anchored in its integrity and the public's confidence in its reporting. The recurrent instances of news reversals have led to a gradual erosion of trust in media institutions. The ancient Roman historian Tacitus articulated a pertinent observation, stating, "Once the emperor becomes the object of people's hatred, both his good and bad deeds will equally provoke people's disdain (Han, 2021)." This insight has been extrapolated to suggest that once a government or any authority loses credibility, all its actions, regardless of their nature, will incite public discontent. Similarly, when media credibility is compromised, the damage is often irreversible, and restoring trust becomes an insurmountable challenge.

The Watergate scandal in the United States serves as a poignant example of how media integrity and the pursuit of truth can play a critical role in maintaining or restoring public trust in both media and government institutions. In 1972, the Democratic National Committee located in the Watergate Complex in Washington, D.C., was burglarized. However, then-President Richard Nixon and his cabinet tried to cover up the truth of the incident and obstructed congressional investigations, leading to a constitutional crisis (Robinson, 1974). Despite initial resistance and attempts by the Nixon administration to discredit The Washington Post's reporting and manage the narrative through government agencies, the chaotic public opinion and mutual criticism between the media made the public's distrust rate of the media once exceed 40%. However, the truth eventually led to widespread public outcry, legal action, and the resignation of President Nixon. The relentless investigation by The Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, heavily relying on information from an anonymous source famously known as "Deep Throat," later revealed to be Mark Felt, the FBI's deputy director, uncovered a web of deceit and cover-up at the highest levels of government, including the Justice Department, the FBI, the CIA, and the White House itself (Liebovich & Nixon, 2003). Their reporting not only heightened public awareness and political and legal repercussions but also showcased the media's role in holding power to account. These instances highlight the critical importance of credibility and transparency for both media and government institutions. Once trust is compromised, the path to regaining it is fraught with challenges, underscoring the need for consistent honesty and accountability in public communication.

3.2 Deterioration of Social Trust Mechanism

Trust constitutes the foundational element of communication and interaction within societies. When social phenomena encounter problems, the resultant effect is often a breakdown of trust, setting off a cascade of reactions that can profoundly impact the fabric of society. Several notable incidents highlight how reversals in publicized events can erode trust and exacerbate tensions within communities.

The "Shooting Case in Qing'an (a county in northern China)" is a poignant example where the initial narrative weakened the bond between the public and law enforcement, heightening tensions and

conflicts between the two entities (Liang, 2017). Similarly, the incident involving an Anhui female college student who was blackmailed after assisting an elderly person amplified public disdain towards exploitative behaviors such as "relying on the old to sell the old" and "scamming" (often referred to as "touching porcelain") (Zheng, 2015). This incident prompted widespread contemplation about the conditions under which acts of goodwill can be safely extended in contemporary society.

Furthermore, the "Surgical Operating Table Selfie in Xi'an (a city in western China)" incident raised serious concerns about the professionalism of some medical practitioners, leading to increased strain in the doctor-patient relationship (Wang, 2015). These examples of reversals not only deteriorate interpersonal trust but also contribute to the weakening of societal trust mechanisms. Once the pillars of trust are undermined, restoring them becomes an arduous task, as the foundation for mutual confidence and respect in society becomes increasingly fragile. Such situations underscore the critical importance of maintaining transparency, accountability, and integrity in all social interactions to prevent the erosion of trust and the potential disintegration of community cohesion.

3.3 Increase of Potential Individual Mental Harmness

The intricate nature of facts contrasts sharply with the often-straightforward nature of emotions, leading to scenarios where the latter overshadows the former in online discourse. Many netizens, driven by the desire for momentary engagement or excitement, leap to conclusions without a comprehensive understanding of the events at hand. This can result in accusations, verbal abuse, and even doxxing of individuals involved in controversies, thrusting them into unwelcome scrutiny. The case of "Guanjun Luo" serves as a stark example of this dynamic. Despite subsequent apologies from netizens once the truth emerged, the damage to Luo's life was irreparable (Gong & Su, 2021).

Instances of online aggression and harassment have become alarmingly common, inflicting severe emotional and physical distress on those unjustly targeted. These occurrences highlight a critical issue within digital culture: the rapid spread of misinformation and the readiness of the online community to engage in what can effectively be described as mob justice without due diligence. The consequences of such actions extend far beyond the digital realm, affecting the real lives of individuals and underscoring the urgent need for more responsible online behavior and better mechanisms for verifying and contextualizing information before it leads to irreversible harm.

4. Possible Solutions and Mitigations

4.1 Improve Legislation to Emphasize the Seriousness of News

The phenomenon of news inversion, where initial reports of an event are later contradicted by new findings, causing public opinion to shift dramatically, can be attributed to several factors. One critical aspect is the accountability, or lack thereof, of those disseminating information. Without adequate oversight or punitive measures in place for spreading misinformation, there's little to deter individuals or organizations from engaging in such practices. Currently, unless the dissemination of false information leads to severe consequences like harming national interests, endangering public safety, or

15

disrupting social order, the individuals or entities responsible often face no legal repercussions.

To address this issue, it is imperative for legislative bodies to reassess the legal framework surrounding news dissemination. By increasing the legal ramifications for producing and spreading "news inversion," the state can help ensure a higher degree of accuracy and integrity within the news industry. Enhancing policies and regulations will not only underline the seriousness with which news should be treated but also serve to protect the public from the harmful effects of misinformation.

Moreover, as the news media acts as a conduit between the government and the populace, it is crucial for official media outlets to exercise a degree of influence and control over the narrative to guide public opinion constructively (Schnell, 2001). Strengthening the role and credibility of official media can help counteract the spread of misinformation and foster a more informed and discerning public. By amplifying the voice of official media and reinforcing its credibility, the state can facilitate a healthier environment for news and communication, benefiting both the industry and society at large.

4.2 Enhance the Social Responsibility of Media Practitioners

In the quest for efficiency, popularity, and traffic, media professionals must not lose sight of the journalistic integrity that underpins their industry. They are tasked with reporting news in an objective, truthful, and accurate manner, without resorting to sensationalism or distorting facts to capture public attention. As intermediaries between the government and the populace, journalists bear the critical responsibility of guiding public opinion constructively and fostering societal positivity. To this end, the media industry must enhance its news verification processes and refine its incentive and disciplinary systems. Such measures are essential for minimizing the incidence of news inversion and preventing misinformation, thereby maintaining the credibility and trustworthiness of the media landscape.

4.3 Enhance Audience's Ability to Discern Misleading Information

In navigating the vast and complex landscape of online information, audiences are encouraged to approach content with discernment and rationality, rather than passively conforming to prevailing trends. It is imperative for individuals to enhance their media literacy, honing their skills in evaluating and interpreting the vast array of online information accurately. Furthermore, as active participants in the information dissemination process, audiences should adopt the role of "gatekeepers," contributing to the cultivation of a healthy environment for news distribution (Gao, Yan, & Wang, 2021). By doing so, they can help foster a more informed and critical public, capable of distinguishing between reliable news and misleading content, thereby supporting the integrity of information in the digital age.

5. Conclusion

In this new media era, adopting a wait-and-see approach, encapsulated in the phrase "let the bullets fly for a while," has emerged as a common stance among users, reflecting a broader deterioration of the social trust system and diminishing interpersonal trust. In response to this crisis of confidence, the media's paramount task is to realign its focus towards delivering reality-based news and elevating content to its rightful prominence, eschewing the pursuit of mere sensationalism and popularity. By

16

committing to the dissemination of objective and accurate information, journalists can play a pivotal role in reconstructing the trust relationship between the media and the public. Such efforts are essential for fostering a healthy journalistic environment in the country, enabling the media to fulfill its fundamental duty of serving the populace effectively.

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17

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