

# *Research on the Governance of Internet Rumors in a Major Epidemic*

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the rapid spread of online rumors about public emergencies has become a major problem for government departments to maintain social stability and network order. This article selects the new crown epidemic as a typical case of public health emergencies to analyze public health emergencies. The reasons for the formation and main effects of the Internet rumors of the incident, summarize the emergence cycle and main content of the Internet rumors of the new crown epidemic in my country, and further propose optimized ideas and countermeasures for the management of online rumors of public health emergencies, hoping to provide relevant government departments with valuable information reference.

## **1. Introduction**

At the end of 2019, the new crown epidemic suddenly broke out. When the whole people worked together to fight the epidemic, online rumors spread wantonly with the help of online information technology. For example, on January 26, 2020, when Wei from Du'an County was chatting with Su on WeChat, he told Su about false information about "The person who returned from Hubei in Banling has died, and the whole village has been sealed up." Su forwarded the screenshot of this content to other WeChat groups without confirming it, which led to the rapid spread of information and the negative social impact of panic among the masses. The police detained the two persons for 10 days and fined them 500 yuan in accordance with the "Public Security Administration Penalty Law." Cases like Wei and Su are not uncommon during the new crown epidemic. These online rumors not only hinder the control of the epidemic, but also cause a series of social problems and should be taken seriously.

## **2. The Regularity of Online Rumors about the New Crown Epidemic**

### **2.1 The Cycle of Online Rumors Spread during the New Crown Pneumonia Epidemic**

According to data from the Weibo anti-rumor platform during the COVID-19 outbreak, the spread of rumors about the COVID-19 outbreak on the Internet is divided into four periods, as follows:

#### **2.1.1 The Budding Period of New Crown Network Rumors**

In the early stage of the outbreak of the new crown epidemic, the first online rumors to refute rumors recorded on the Weibo anti-rumor platform occurred on January 2. The rumor is that “the Internet spread that a suspected infectious patient was found on a flight out of Wuhan.” There was no record of refuting the rumors of the new crown from January 6 to January 16. From January 17th to January 25th, rumors are on the rise. Among them, there were two major rumors. On the evening of January 20, Academician Zhong Nanshan said in an interview with CCTV that “the phenomenon must be passed from person to person”; on January 23, the news of Wuhan’s “closed city” revealed a major signal of the epidemic. January 2 to January 24 is the budding period of rumors about the new crown epidemic on the Internet. It has gone through a stage of development and then development.

### **2.1.2 New Crown Internet Rumors Skyrocketing Period**

After January 24, the number of online rumors about the new crown epidemic rose sharply. January 24 to February 10 is the peak period for the number of online rumors. At this stage, the World Health Organization announced that the new crown epidemic has become a public health emergency of international concern, but the symptoms and mode of transmission of the new crown are not clear. The “Li Wenliang Incident” and the “Wuhan Red Society Incident” occurred during this period. The outbreak of the new crown epidemic and the ineffective prevention and control caused social dissatisfaction, and rumors about the spread and treatment of the epidemic were endless.

### **2.1.3 Stable Period of New Crown Network Rumors**

From February 11th to March 12th, the country’s fight against the epidemic was effective. People were encouraged, panic subsided, and the number of new online rumors began to decline, but the total number of rumors remained at a relatively high level. During this period, the prevention and control measures related to the new crown epidemic were gradually put in place, the vague information in the epidemic was gradually reduced, the information needs of the people were gradually met, and the government authority departments also properly handled online rumors.

### **2.1.4 Decline Period of Rumors on the New Crown Network**

After March 13, with the effective control of the domestic new crown epidemic, online rumors about the epidemic entered a period of decline. But the epidemic has not completely disappeared, so the rumors have not completely disappeared. The globalization of the epidemic and Sino-US relations have become the focus of public opinion, and mainstream media reports on the status of the epidemic abroad have increased.

The online rumors of the new crown epidemic have gone through four periods of “sprouting”, “surge”, “stable” and “decline”. We can find that when the information about the epidemic becomes clear, the country’s prevention and control measures are gradually put in place, the severity of the epidemic gradually decreases, and online rumors will continue to decline until they disappear.

## **2.2 The Content of Online Rumors during the New Crown Epidemic**

According to official data, online rumors about the new crown epidemic are mainly divided into 14 categories, including “prevention and control rumors,” “virus rumors,” “diet prevention rumors,” “anti-epidemic material rumors,” “spreading rumors,” and “rumors about epidemic conditions.” Among them, prevention and control rumors accounted for the largest proportion, accounting for 15.04%, which shows that people have a vague understanding of prevention and control measures.

For example, “Shuanghuanglian” can prevent the new crown; wearing goggles can prevent the virus from entering the body; only KN95 masks can stop viruses, etc.

Due to the sudden nature of the new crown pneumonia, relevant authorities have not yet grasped the nature of the virus in the early stages of the epidemic, so rumors about the virus ranked second, accounting for 10.69%. For example, there are rumors that Xue will be accompanied by the new crown virus, and even that it will spread the new crown virus through a single look. This also shows the panic and pressure that the virus has brought to the public.

The rumors about the new crown are really all odds. In the face of all kinds of online rumors, we should rationally analyze the causes of them and use them to better manage online rumors.

### **3. The Cause and Impact of Online Rumors**

#### **3.1 Causes of Online Rumors about Public Health Emergencies**

Allport once pointed out that the importance of events and the ambiguity of information are the two basic conditions for the appearance of rumors. That is, when events have an important impact on life, and the information people receive is vague, rumors will appear and spread. However, this article analyzes the reasons for the formation of Internet rumors from three different perspectives.

##### **3.1.1 Widespread Use of Social Media**

There are two main reasons for social media to attract rumors: weak guarding and massive users. The larger the scale of social media users, the wider the spread and spread of online rumors, and the more likely it is to be favored by rumors and rumors. For example, in the case of Du'an rumor, Su used a WeChat group, with a large number of users and a fast spreading speed, which led to the increasing scope of the rumors, which eventually exceeded Wei's expectations.

##### **3.1.2 The Public's Ability to Discern is Not High**

There are two main factors that affect the public's ability to distinguish: the public's scientific literacy and the public's psychological state. On the one hand, public health emergencies involve a lot of professional knowledge, and distinguishing the authenticity of relevant information requires the public to have high scientific literacy; on the other hand, when facing public health emergencies, the public's mental state is often anxious. It is even fearful. In this state, it is difficult to make a rational judgment on the authenticity of the information. We can find that the rumors of the new crown are mostly spread among ordinary people. Most of these people have low academic qualifications and insufficient knowledge of the facts. For example, there are rumors that “Shuanghuanglian oral liquid can prevent the new crown virus.” “Yellow lotus seed paste moon cakes” shows that these people who participated in the looting of moon cakes have low scientific literacy and do not understand the new crown virus. At the same time, they are affected by the epidemic and have a fear of the virus. Listening to the wind is rain, which reduces their ability to distinguish.

##### **3.1.3 Weak Government Credibility**

The strength of government credibility will affect the formation of online rumors, and the formation and dissemination of online rumors will also counteract the strength of government credibility. The two influence each other. On the one hand, if the government's credibility is strong, the public will be more likely to trust the government, and the trust in the gossip will decrease; if the government's credibility is weak, the public will easily hate the government and believe in

various rumors. On the other hand, the formation and spread of Internet rumors will also weaken the credibility of the government. In this cycle, the government's credibility will become weaker and the spread of online rumors will become more and more rampant.

### **3.2 The Negative Impact of Online Rumors about the New Crown Epidemic**

The emergence and dissemination of online rumors about public health emergencies have brought many negative effects on personal life, social stability, and government image. This article uses the new crown epidemic network rumors as the main case to analyze and summarize the adverse consequences of the network rumors of public health emergencies.

#### **3.2.1 Affect the Normal Life of the Public**

Internet rumors about the new crown epidemic often involve sensitive words such as “virus”, “infection”, and “death”, which will have a negative impact on the normal life of the public. On the one hand, for the parties to the rumors, the slander, slander, or other false information on the Internet rumors will seriously affect their normal work and life, and bring harm to the parties' psychology and spirit. On the other hand, for the general public, Internet rumors with fascinating sentiments are easy to believe and make people feel nervous and anxious.

#### **3.2.2 Obstruct Epidemic Prevention and Control and Medical Treatment**

After the outbreak of the new crown epidemic, the most important thing is to make every effort to prevent and control the epidemic and medical treatment. However, the emergence of online rumors, on the one hand, will mislead the public's perception and affect epidemic prevention and control and medical treatment. On the other hand, the government needs to spend time and energy to rectify Internet rumors. This will distract the government's efforts in epidemic prevention and control and medical treatment, and it will also consume more resources.

#### **3.2.3 Disrupt the Network Order**

The advancement of Internet technology facilitates people's access to information, but also provides opportunities for the spread and development of rumors. These false and untrue information are flooded in the network environment and are reposted and read in a large amount, which will definitely affect the normal development of the network order. On the one hand, it will pollute the network space and reduce the quality and level of network information acquisition; on the other hand, it will mislead public opinion and disrupt the healthy and stable network order.

## **4. Governance of Online Rumors about Public Health Emergencies**

### **4.1 Give Full Play to the Leading Role of the Government**

#### **4.1.1 Improve the Legal System for Controlling Online Rumors**

With regard to the punishment of rumors and rumors, currently, more reference is made to Article 25 of the Law on Public Security Administration Punishments, which imposes a fine of not more than five days and not more than ten days for spreaders of rumors. Compared with the loss of victims of online rumors, such punishment is obviously too light. Therefore, the government should improve the laws and regulations governing Internet rumors. Specifically, it is necessary to introduce a set of professional laws and regulations governing Internet rumors, which shall provide specific, clear and detailed regulations on the definition, nature, liability determination, damage

measurement, compensation standards, management entities, and disposal procedures of Internet rumors. Make it complete, feasible and operational. Law enforcement agencies should strictly investigate the rumors and spreaders in accordance with relevant laws and regulations, hold them accountable and impose penalties in accordance with the law, and break the fluke psychology of rumors and spreaders trying to evade responsibility.

#### **4.1.2 Improve Government Credibility**

The government's credibility affects the formation of online rumors and the effectiveness of the government's governance of online rumors. Rumors stop at openness and transparency. In the management of online rumors, increasing government credibility must pay attention to the openness and transparency of epidemic information. First of all, in the communication work during the crisis, the government must grasp the initiative of external reporting and provide the public with information related to emergencies. Second, the government must provide information in a timely manner to meet the urgent information needs of the public. Finally, the government should try its best to provide all the accurate information. Even if the information held by the government department is limited, it should provide the public with all the information it has. When providing all the information, you should explain the situation to the public and promise to continue to update the latest news to gain public understanding.

#### **4.1.3 Improve the Government's Ability to Manage Online Rumors**

First of all, the monitoring and collection of network information should be carried out by government when an incident occurs, which mainly monitors and collects information on the status of the incident, spreading trends, casualties, prevention and treatment methods. Second, compare the collected information with the information held by the government to verify the authenticity as soon as possible. Finally, announce and dispose of the information confirmed to be network rumors. When handling rumors, it is necessary to increase the speed of dispelling rumors, increase the persuasiveness of dispelling rumors, and improve the effectiveness of dispelling rumors, and effectively deal with the source of online rumors, so as not to let the rumors get lucky.

### **4.2 Guide the Internet Industry to Implement Self-Discipline**

#### **4.2.1 Strengthen Internet Industry Regulations**

To give full play to the role of the Internet industry in governing Internet rumors, on the one hand, it is necessary to strengthen the self-discipline of the Internet industry and not lack principle because of profit; on the other hand, it is necessary to further strengthen the influence of the Internet Association and attract the majority of Internet users to join hands in resisting Internet rumors. We will not spread rumors, believe in rumors, or spread rumors, and jointly create a clear and clear cyberspace.

#### **4.2.2 Establish a Reward and Punishment System for the Network Platform**

Internet service providers should supervise and manage the information posted by users on this website and platform. If users publish false or untrue information, or deliberately spread Internet rumors, they will be punished by deducting credit points; if user information in terms of publishing, it has a good reputation, or monitors and reports other users' bad behaviors, and can be rewarded with points or member benefits.

### **4.3 Encourage the Public to Realize Behavioral Awareness**

### 4.3.1 Enhance the Public's Legal Awareness

At present, the public's legal awareness of online rumors is relatively weak, and many people do not know that random dissemination of false information is prohibited by law, so it is necessary to raise the public's legal awareness. On the one hand, let the public know that it is illegal to spread rumors at will and bear the legal responsibility. On the other hand, let the public develop good habits of abiding by the law and resolutely resist publishing any false information and disrupt social order. Publicity and explanation can be carried out by holding related lectures and theme activities in schools or society.

### 4.3.2 Improve the Scientific Literacy of the Public

Fabricating, publishing, or believing and forwarding Internet rumors are related to the public's low scientific literacy. The public's scientific literacy is not high. On the one hand, the public's scientific knowledge reserves are insufficient, which can easily be biased by the perceptual explanations in Internet rumors; on the other hand, the public's scientific attitude is insufficient, and they lack rational thinking in the face of complex Internet information. And independent judgment. To improve the scientific literacy of the public, on the one hand, it is necessary to enrich the scientific knowledge reserve of health and safety in the public's daily life; on the other hand, it is necessary to improve the public's scientific attitude, and keep a cool head and think rationally in the face of diverse network information.

### 4.3.3 Unblock the Public's Rights Protection and Reporting Channels

On the one hand, it is necessary to unblock the rights protection channels of online rumors and encourage individual victims or organizations to defend their rights through legal means; on the other hand, online rumors are active on public information platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and Tieba. If users cause trouble, they should improve the reporting channels for online rumors and encourage netizens to actively report online rumors.

## 5. Conclusion

In emergencies of public crisis, online rumors can cause public panic, hinder the management of the epidemic, disrupt the order of the Internet, impact the government's credibility, and cause a series of social problems. Therefore, studying and managing Internet rumors has become a social problem that the country needs to solve urgently. The governance of online rumors is not accomplished overnight, nor can the government handle it unilaterally. Instead, it is necessary to form a governance model led by the government and the participation of the whole society and persist in it for a long time, using a strong joint force to effectively improve the state and society's response to online rumors. We will promote the modernization of online rumors governance capabilities and governance systems in emergent public crises.

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