Analysis of Internet Populism and Public Opinion Management: The Case of Stars Attending the National Theatre

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Abstract: In the case of the 2022 stars attending the National Theatre, some irrational people thought they represented the interests of the general public, putting stars and others in complete opposition to the general public, taking an all-round negative attitude towards stars, and even inciting negative emotions among the masses, inducing the occurrence of online violence. This part of irrational speech is implicitly tinged with Internet populism, leading to confusion in the court of public opinion. This article examines this incident of stars attending the theater, takes a rational view of Internet populism, and discusses strategies for coping with public opinion from the perspective of individuals and the state.

1. Introduction

6 July 2022 The National Theatre of China has announced its proposed 2022 intake, which includes Yi Yangqianxi, Hu Xianxu and Luo Yizhou. This means that the three stars have gotten the government job with the "bianzhi", which is an iron rice bowl, protected from the risk of being fired and enjoying good benefits and job security. As soon as the news was released, it quickly made its way to the top of Sina Weibo's popular search list, sparking a huge public opinion storm. There were many rational and irrational statements in the court of public opinion. Reasonable comments such as questioning the authenticity of the exams and asking the National Theatre to disclose information about the exams are rational comments. The comments that directly launch a cyberwar against the stars, that they should not have taken the exam or that they must have cheated to be admitted are irrational. This part of the irrational discourse is implicitly populist on the Internet, leading to a chaotic field of public opinion. This article explores the causes and effects of Internet populism, starting with the case of the stars who attended the National Theatre, and proposes relevant strategies to maintain a clean online environment and social stability.

2. Overview of the development of the event

On 6 July 2022, the National Theatre announced the list of proposed candidates for the 2022 fresh graduates, which included three stars, Yi Yangqianxi, Hu Xianxu and Luo Yizhou. The news then quickly hit the Weibo hot search. The related event was read by over 300 million people and the total

number of public opinion messages exceeded eight million. Some of these netizens expressed their appreciation for the actors; however, some of them also raised questions. Through various enquiries, they suspected that some of the stars were likely to have cheated and demanded that the Theatre publish information about the exam to prove fairness. These comments sparked a heated debate in the court of public opinion about "celebrity privileges" and "carrot pits". In addition, some netizens said that celebrities already earn so much money that they should leave the opportunity to ordinary people and should not take the exams.

On July 7, 2022, the public opinion continued to ferment. The National Theatre responded: will reply uniformly.

On 8 July 2022, the National Theatre responded to the controversy: it had not been accepted, and was temporarily in the public announcement period. The Chinese News Weekly published an article, "Why can't Yi Yangqianxi take the exam? And why should I take it?" The article mentioned that "people in the town who only know how to do practice exercises work hard every day in training classes to do the question papers, but they still can't win the job in the system that gives them a sense of security. So, when they see stars who can make a lot of money from the market and have to take a few places, they always feel like they are robbing themselves of their own pits". These comments about "people in the town who only know how to do practice exercises" put Yi Qianxi in opposition to ordinary people, which greatly aroused public discontent and stimulated the spread of populist rhetoric on the internet. These comments about " people in the town who only know how to do practice exercises " put Yi Yangqianxi in opposition to ordinary people, which greatly aroused public discontent, and the Internet populist rhetoric quickly developed in the public opinion arena.

On 16 July 2022, the National Theatre issued a statement: "After a review, the proposed candidates meet the recruitment requirements of the relevant departments. And there is no question of "special post for someone" "carrot recruitment".

On July 17, 2022, Yi Yangqianxi posted on Weibo that he decided to give up his job at the National Theatre. Hu Xianxu posted various evidence on Weibo that he did not enjoy any privileges.

3. Causes of the incident

3.1 Social factors

After the reform and opening up of China, the country entered a new stage of development, with the development strategy of "letting some people get rich first" stimulating people's enthusiasm for production and making a significant contribution to the country's rapid development. However, due to the unfair distribution of social resources and the imbalance between urban and rural development as well as regional development, the happiness index of some regions and groups of people is relatively low, while that of other groups of people is relatively high. The Internet, in turn, has revealed the working and living conditions of different classes, showing significant differences in people's living standards and triggering negative sentiments among the public. Some social contradictions can be resolved through short-term rectification, however, some deep-rooted contradictions can only be resolved through long-term advancement and improvement. In addition, the popularity of the Internet has made it easier for people to see social injustices. In the long run, negative sentiments gradually accumulate, and it is very easy for people at the bottom of the social ladder to hate those who are above their social status and the existing social system, or even to create antagonisms and conflicts. As a result, it is very likely that in the anonymity of the Internet, they will abandon moral restraints and rational thinking, and use bad language to hurt people, and finally promote the growth of online populist ideology at will.

The news of stars, such as Fan Bingbing, evading taxes and Zheng Shuang's suspected daily salary of $2.08 million, has sparked discussions on the excessively high incomes of popular celebrities.

According to Marx's labor theory of the value, it is reasonable for stars to earn more than the average worker, but Fan Bingbing's income has far exceeded her reasonable remuneration, which is one of the reasons why her tax evasion has quickly attracted attention [1]. These incidents have led to public perception of inadequate social distribution system in China and strong resentment. Furthermore, the world economy has been in recession, surpassing the 2008 global financial crisis, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in high unemployment rates [2]. In such an economic situation, the attendance of stars at the National Theatre sparked public discontent. The controversy surrounding this incident mainly includes whether wealthy stars should take up a place in the iron rice bowl, and whether stars are using their privilege to cheat. As a result, the incident caused a huge wave of public opinion on the internet, which, combined with the populists' use of the negative sentiments of the internet users to incite dissatisfaction and antagonism towards the social system, induced this Internet populism.

3.2 Internet factor

Compared to traditional methods, the internet offers diversified participation and freedom from time and space constraints. The openness and immediacy of the internet allow people from diverse backgrounds to freely express themselves online. Any hot topic can spread quickly, bringing endless resources for the populism's development, and all kinds of information can be exploited by populists on the Internet [3]. In this celebrity incident, apart from the exam information being exploited by Internet populists, some other information was also continuously mined and exploited in order to intensify netizens' hatred towards the elite. Moreover, internet equality and anonymity enable ordinary individuals to freely voice their opinions, breaking the dominance of elites in discourse. However, this has also led to problems, as some internet populists freely air grievances, spread rumors, and exploit sensitive incidents to fuel public discontent.

4. Governance

Internet populism has many negative effects on our country and therefore measures need to be taken to curb its development. Firstly, individuals should enhance media literacy and legal awareness. The spread of populist ideas online highlights limitations in information access and discernment for certain groups. We should therefore read more authoritative news, improve our ability to interpret information and not believe in rumours. Additionally, raising awareness of the legal system and actively learning about online behavior laws are crucial. Only when the overall quality of Internet users is improved can we effectively eradicate the soil of Internet populism and maintain online order and social peace.

Considering how to govern Internet populism at the national level, we need an effective method to prevent its occurrence in the first place. For example, an effective vetting mechanism should be set up and real-name authentication should be adopted to control the source of messages. In order to lead people to suppress the elites, Internet populists usually create public opinion by means of disinformation, packaging false statements as the so-called "public opinion". Therefore, an effective vetting mechanism must be set up to eliminate false content, and it is necessary to set up real-name authentication to strictly control the source of information. However, it should also be made clear that emotional speech on the Internet is not always irrational. "Justice" is born in the "emotional" field. "Emotion is the link between the public, the glue of society, and contributes to the formation of the "public". Therefore, "emotion" should not be easily equated with "irrationality", and the content of people's personal feelings should not be stifled in the cradle[4].

Secondly, a public opinion monitoring system needs to be set up in order to monitor and grasp the direction of public opinion in a timely manner. Internet populism mostly takes the opportunity to ferment public opinion online through the use of hotspot events, triggering public discontent. Therefore, while strengthening the regulation of netizens' speech, we should also strengthen the real-

time supervision of online public opinion and establish an opinion monitoring system to make scientific judgement on the trend of public opinion on online events. In addition, the public opinion monitoring system is also an important wind vane, which can help us understand the public's true views as well as indicate the government's strategy in crisis management.

Additionally, we need to focus on cultivating a team of Internet opinion leaders who possess Marxist theoretical literacy, democratic political knowledge, and intellectual media communication skills. They can help Internet users rationally understand issues such as the gap between the rich and the poor and social injustice, respond positively to all kinds of populist remarks, fully understand the new forms and true nature of Internet populist trends, avoid being swept along by them, reverse their one-sided, anti-elite values, and guide them to identify and consciously stay away from populism.For those "Internet Vs" who openly disseminate radical populist comments, it is necessary to strengthen supervision and, depending on the severity of the impact of their comments, issue the necessary warnings or pursue their legal liabilities in accordance with the law.

"At the root of the matter, the elimination of Internet populism is all the more important to ensure the realisation of fairness and justice in the process of socio-economic development, and to regulate and deal with the distribution of benefits in the interest of those who benefit the least..."[5] Therefore, we should focus on social and livelihood issues in a comprehensive manner, promote social justice, commit ourselves to advancing common prosperity and improving the income distribution system, and address various distributional inequities and practical problems in safeguarding the basic rights of the people, especially in the areas of employment, medical care, education, housing, and other livelihood issues, and we should prevent the concentration of dominant resources in large and medium-sized cities in a sustained manner. At the same time, it is necessary to firmly oppose the abuse of power, improve various monitoring and punitive mechanisms, and strictly prohibit public officials from making use of "connections" and other means to obtain undue benefits.

The phenomenon of Internet populism should be recognised as being closely linked to social conflicts that have not yet been fully resolved. Therefore, in the face of negative public opinion, we should tend to adopt a diversionary approach rather than blindly blocking the mouths of netizens. The government should truly address the people's aspirations, stand from the people's perspective and respect their voices before the soil of populism can be completely eradicated.

5. Conclusions

Internet populism in China is an inevitable result of social transformation, reflecting conflicts and contradictions. However, the resolution of social conflicts does not happen overnight and requires our persistent and concerted efforts.

To address sudden populist public opinion, timely alerts and efficient responses can put out populist fires. When faced with the problem of Internet populism today, we must nurture rational judgment, prioritize the people, and listen to their reasonable demands. Only by truly addressing the concerns of the public can we curb Internet populism at itsroots. I believe that with the joint efforts of all parties, China can effectively manage Internet populism and build harmony.

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