

Original Research Article

Study of Governance Strategy for False Information Dissemination in Social Media Networks: Based on the Attributes of Social Media

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Abstract: In an era where social media pervades every aspect of life, the rampant transmission of false information has risen to the level of a significant societal crisis. Using a careful literature review methodology, this inquiry delves into the intricate mechanisms underlying false information spread in the social media landscape, resulting in the formulation of a slew of strategic governance initiatives. The study focuses on several aspects of social media, including platform accessibility, audience demographics, profitability rationale, and platform restrictions. It investigates how these characteristics operate as catalysts in the spread of false information, establishing the groundwork for a set of governance initiatives and recommendations. These insights and propositions not only improve our understanding of the dynamics of false information propagation, but also serve as vital resources for the administration and control of social media platforms. The findings and recommendations derived from this study have significant pragmatic consequences for social media platform managers, policy architects, and the general user population, providing assistance in the construction of a healthy and systematic online environment.

Keywords: Social media; False information; Platform attributes; Transmission mechanism; Governance strategy

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Social media, being the preferred method for the public to access information in the information era, plays a vital part in people's daily lives. Every day, hundreds of millions of people use huge social media platforms like TikTok, WeChat, Weibo, and Facebook (Wang Rui and Huang Xiyuan, 2023). They use these platforms to not only read news but also to discuss their life experiences, exchange ideas, engage in various social interactions, and spread a large amount of information. This vast exchange of information, on the other hand, fosters the propagation of erroneous information. Many false messages propagate quickly on these platforms, including "clickbait" titles, falsified entertainment news, skewed social perspectives, edited photos, and video content. They have the potential to mislead the audience and significantly harm the platform's trust and general image. Furthermore, severe false information, such as conspiracy theories and terror-inducing rumors (for example, concerning diseases), can induce public panic, resulting in avoidable social instability and violence (Ackerman, 2017). As a result, in such a difficult setting, it is especially vital to investigate the mechanisms of false information transmission on social media platforms and explore effective governance methods. This is not only useful for maintaining a healthy online environment, ensuring that false information does not harm the public psychologically, physically, or monetarily, but it is also favorable to the harmonious and steady growth of society.

1.2. Literature Review

The dissemination of false information within social media primarily encompasses three essential conditions: initially, the origin of the false information dissemination, namely the disseminator; subsequently, the medium of transmission, that is, the social media platform; and finally, the audience of the false information, i.e., social media users. In past research, scholars have explored the motivations behind the dissemination of false information in social media from various perspectives. These studies typically focus on the user perspective, disseminator perspective, and social media platform perspective, analyzing how various factors affect the dissemination of false information (Kirby, 2016).

From the user's perspective, for instance, Mo Zuying et al. (2023), through variance analysis and cluster analysis, discovered that the primary motivations for social media users to disseminate false information include individual conformity, small circle influence, oversight in blindly forwarding/sharing, and a desire to enhance personal reputation using trending topics. Other scholars have also explored how user cognitive biases, social influences, and emotional drives impact their acceptance and dissemination of false information (Reuters Institute, 2016).

Viewing from the disseminator's perspective, some research has focused on the motivations and strategies of false information creators (Hair et al., 2017). For example, some creators might disseminate false information for political, economic, or social purposes, while others might do so merely for entertainment or experimental purposes. These studies typically explore how false information creators exploit the characteristics of social media to maximize the dissemination of their information.

From the perspective of social media platforms, although some research has focused on how the algorithms and social structures of social media impact information dissemination, studies focusing on the attributes of social media platforms are relatively scarce. (El-Sharawy, 2016) For instance, some research might focus on how algorithms prioritize the dissemination of extreme or biased content, while other studies might focus on how the social network structure forms an "echo chamber" effect. However, there is still insufficient research on how social media platforms influence the dissemination of false information through their design and policies (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2017).

2. The Perils of False Information Dissemination - Why We Investigate This Issue

Esteemed Political Professor Sanstan once explicitly pointed out that in the internet era, everyone could potentially be a creator and disseminator of rumors, but invariably, they will be victims. This statement highlights the adverse effects of false information dissemination on individuals. However, beyond individual harm, the spread of false information also poses negative impacts on social media platforms and even the societal environment (Seabrook & MacLaggan, 2017).

2.1. Harm to the Audience

The dissemination of false information on social media platforms poses certain threats to the public in aspects such as mental and physical health, value formation, social cognition, and finances. Firstly, regarding mental and physical health: in the health domain, false information could lead people to misuse drugs, adopt incorrect treatment methods, or overlook genuinely beneficial health advice (Silverman & Alexander, 2016). For instance, some unfounded health advice might mislead people into avoiding vaccinations, thereby increasing the risk of spreading certain diseases. Persistent bombardment with false information might also induce anxiety and

panic in individuals, diminishing their quality of life. Secondly, in terms of value formation: prolonged exposure to and belief in false information might lead people to develop biases and discrimination towards certain social issues, thereby distorting their values. For example, prejudice formed against a particular group based on erroneous information might lead to societal division and conflict. Lastly, regarding financial harm: false investment advice or commercial advertisements might deceive consumers and investors, causing substantial economic loss. For instance, an investment project based on false information might lead investors to lose their entire capital (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016).

2.2. Harm to Social Media Platforms

The spread of false information on social media platforms not only inflicts various harms on its wide audience but also brings about severe negative impacts on the platform's own operation and development. Firstly, the platform's credibility is compromised. When a plethora of false information circulates on the platform, user trust will gradually decline, potentially leading to user attrition, subsequently affecting the platform's activity and influence. Moreover, this loss of credibility might further transmit to the national and governmental platform, causing overall media instability. Secondly, an increase in legal risks. If the platform cannot effectively manage and control the dissemination of false information, it may face legal sanctions and penalties from governments and regulatory bodies (El-Sharawy, 2017). For example, the platform might be fined or forced offline for not promptly removing illegal false information. Lastly, financial penalties. User attrition and legal risks not only affect the platform's revenue but might also cause a decline in the platform's market value, further impacting its financial status and investment appeal, and potentially causing fluctuations in the overall economic market.

2.3. Harm to the Social Environment

Furthermore, in terms of public opinion risk, when a big number of people are deceived by incorrect information, it may produce a bias in public opinion regarding a certain event or topic, which may have negative consequences for policy-making and social decision-making. On the one hand, it has the potential to disturb social harmony and stability. For example, conspiracy theories and prejudices founded on erroneous information may ignite social disputes and opposition, leading to societal division and threatening the nation's stability and security (Frenkel et al., 2020). On the other hand, it may impede society's healthy development. False information could misguide government policy and public decision-making, resulting in illogical resource allocation and use, hurting society's economic and cultural growth. False information can also harm a country's international image and ties. For example, the international world may accept inaccurate bad information about a country, influencing its international relations and diplomatic policy (Bessi et al., 2016).

False information transmission has become an unavoidable social concern in this age of information explosion. It not only harms individuals, but it also harms social media platforms and the whole social environment. As a result, investigating the mechanisms of false information transmission and governance strategies has significant theoretical and practical implications for maintaining the health of the network environment, protecting user interests, and promoting the harmonious and stable development of society. via future research, we will look into the transmission paths and characteristics of false information via social media, as well as how to successfully prevent and govern the spread of incorrect information using diverse tools such as law, technology, and education (Jackson & Moloney, 2016).

3. Social Media Mechanisms of False Information Dissemination

3.1. Availability of Social Media

Treem et al., (2020) divide the availability of social media platforms into four dimensions: visibility, editability, persistence, and association, which we will discuss and analyze one by one in this paper. Firstly, visibility refers to the degree to which information is displayed on social media platforms, a concept that directly affects how false messages will be read by platform users and provides a basis for dissemination. This characteristic means that once false information is posted on social media, it can be seen and accessed by a large number of users, and then further forwarded and shared, accelerating its dissemination on social media. Secondly, editability allows users to edit and comment on information. This characteristic not only enhances the interactivity between users and information but also provides the possibility for further dissemination of false information. Specifically, people all have a psychology of curiosity and sharing, and this is infinitely magnified on social media platforms (Adair et al., 2017). Meanwhile, editability may also lead to some information being tampered with or added with false information. For users, editability only affects their curiosity or sharing, but for platforms or social media practitioners, editability may lead them to further amplify false information for profit. For example, users can add their own comments and views to false information, further influencing other users' views and behaviors. Thirdly, persistence refers to the duration of information on social media. Since social media platforms usually do not actively delete information posted by users, false information can exist on the platform for a long time, continuously affecting users. Lastly, association is reflected in the fact that social media platforms usually recommend related content based on users' browsing and clicking behavior, meaning that when users browse false information, the platform may recommend more similar false information to users, further exacerbating the dissemination of false information.

3.2. Audience of Social Media

The audience of social media is vast, covering different age groups and social groups. For example, in China, by the end of 2022, the number of people using social media has reached a staggering 1.067 billion (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Due to the large base of the audience, the invisible recipient base of false information on social media platforms is also large. At the same time, affected by the editability of social media, the secondary information transformation and secondary dissemination of the crowd further expand the dissemination range of false information. At the same time, influential bloggers and account forwarding on social media platforms will also accelerate the speed of false information dissemination. In addition, social media users mainly include young users and middle-aged and elderly users. These users have significant differences in sensitivity and discernment when dealing with false information, which we will discuss one by one. Young users may be more familiar with the network environment and the operation mechanism of social media, but at the same time, they may be more easily influenced by false information due to a lack of life experience and are more likely to become disseminators of false information out of the pursuit of stimulation and novelty (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). In contrast, middle-aged and elderly users may be more likely to become victims and secondary disseminators of false information due to their unfamiliarity with the network environment and lack of necessary information discernment ability. In the above discussion, we can see that users of different age groups, due to their unique social media usage habits and differences in information discernment ability, may be deceived by false information from the moment they contact social media and may become disseminators and victims of false

information (Richards, 2007). These users from social media platforms together constitute a complex social network in which false information is rapidly disseminated and spread. Therefore, users of all age groups face the risk of being deceived and misled by false information to varying degrees, which not only threatens personal information security but may also affect social stability and harmony at a more macro level.

3.3. Profit Logic Driven by Traffic

Social media platforms typically adopt a traffic-driven profit model, i.e., generating advertising revenue by attracting a large number of user visits and clicks. This profit model may, to some extent, diminish the platform's enthusiasm for combating false information. False information can often quickly attract a large number of users' attention and clicks, thereby bringing substantial advertising revenue. In this case, the platform may choose to turn a blind eye to the dissemination of false information in the face of economic benefits (Scammell, 2014). This profit logic not only exacerbates the dissemination of false information but also provides a relatively relaxed environment for it.

3.4. Constraints on Comments by Social Media Platforms

In the current social media environment, the platform's constraints on comments are particularly crucial because it directly relates to whether false information is disseminated or not (Fazio et al., 2015). Taking Facebook, Twitter, Weibo, and TikTok as examples, although they have adopted information review mechanisms and reporting systems to some extent, the actual operational constraints on comments are still insufficient. Firstly, there are technological challenges, such as the diversity and complexity of languages, making it difficult for artificial intelligence technology to completely intercept false information; secondly, policy-level differences, such as different platforms defining and handling standards for false information differently, and some platforms may adopt more relaxed management strategies out of consideration for freedom of speech, providing space for the dissemination of false information (Zuckerberg, 2016). In addition, disseminators of false information often exploit platform algorithms, artificially increasing the speed and range of false information dissemination through comment brushing, like brushing, etc., and these behaviors are often difficult to detect and stop by the platform in a short time.

All in all, although social media platforms have taken some measures to restrict and manage the dissemination of false information and harmful comments to a certain extent, the effects of these measures are still limited due to challenges in technology, policy, and operation. The dissemination of false information not only poses information security risks to the public but also challenges the reputation and operation of the platform itself.

3.5. Section Summary

In summary, by deeply understanding the availability features of social media platforms, understanding the audience of social media, and the platform's profit logic and constraint ability, and analyzing the impact mechanism of these features on the dissemination of false information, it will provide important theoretical support and practical guidance for our subsequent exploration of the dissemination mechanism and governance strategy of false information. Especially for the audience of social media platforms, understanding their role and behavior in the dissemination of false information is the focus of this study.

4. Governance Strategies for the Spread of False Information in Social Media

4.1. Governance Measures for the Availability of Social Media Platforms

The availability of social media platforms, encompassing visibility, editability, sustainability, and associativity, facilitates the dissemination of false information. Each dimension has its unique characteristics, thus requiring different strategies and measures for governance.

4.1.1. Governance of Visibility

Visibility refers to the extent to which information on social media platforms can be seen by a large number of users. False information, by enhancing its visibility on the platform, can rapidly spread to a vast user base. To govern this issue, platforms can manage by enhancing the transparency of information (Datu et al., 2017). For instance, for unverified or suspicious information, platforms can add labels or warnings to the information display, explicitly informing users that the authenticity of the information has not been confirmed. Furthermore, platforms can also optimize recommendation algorithms, reduce the weight of false information in user recommendations, and decrease its visibility on the platform (Charity Watch, 2016).

4.1.2. Governance of Editability

Editability refers to the ability of users to freely edit and forward information on social media platforms. False information often spreads further through user forwarding and commenting. To reduce the spread of false information, platforms can strengthen the information review mechanism (Schweizer, 2015). For example, platforms can use artificial intelligence technology to monitor and review information published by users in real-time, and once false information is found, it is immediately deleted or marked, and certain penalties are imposed on users who publish false information, such as restricting their information publishing rights and reducing their weight on the platform. Additionally, to prevent the secondary spread of false information, platforms can restrict forwarding or commenting on topics with risk labels.

4.1.3. Governance of Sustainability and Associativity

Regarding sustainability and associativity, which directly determine the duration and development of false information, platforms can set an "expiration date" for information, limiting its lifecycle (Andrews et al., 2017). For instance, for some unverified or suspiciously marked information, platforms can set a shorter validity period, and once this period expires, the information will automatically be removed or enter a low-visibility status. Thus, even if it is false information, its survival time on the platform will be limited, thereby reducing its continuous impact on users.

Secondly, platforms can optimize recommendation algorithms to break the associated transmission chain of false information. For example, platforms can "isolate" information marked as false or suspicious, i.e., reduce the weight of this information in the recommendation system, decrease their associated recommendations with other information, and thereby block the associated transmission path of false information (Ha et al., 2013).

In summary, when implementing the above governance measures, platforms need to fully consider user experience and the right to free information dissemination, ensuring that while reducing the spread of false information, the normal operation of the platform and the normal use of users are not affected. At the same time, platforms also need to continuously optimize and improve governance measures to cope with new characteristics and challenges of false information dissemination.

4.2. Measures for Social Media Platform Users

4.2.1. Measures for Young Users

Young users are typically more active on social media platforms and play a crucial role in information dissemination. However, they often lack sufficient information discernment capabilities and are more susceptible to false information. Therefore, platforms can reduce the impact of false information on them by setting age restrictions, pushing age-appropriate content, etc. Simultaneously, enhancing cyber literacy education, guiding young users to correctly identify and handle false information, and cultivating their healthy internet usage habits is vital. For instance, platforms can collaborate with schools, parents, and other social forces to conduct cybersecurity education activities, enhancing young users' information security awareness and capabilities.

4.2.2. Measures for Older Users

Older users typically act as receivers and disseminators of information on social media platforms. Due to a lack of internet usage experience and information discernment capabilities, they are often more susceptible to false information. Platforms can help them more easily identify false information by simplifying the operating interface and providing more intuitive information markers. At the same time, providing more convenient reporting channels and encouraging them to actively participate in combating false information is crucial. For example, platforms can add conspicuous report buttons to the user interface, simplify the reporting process, and ensure that older users can conveniently and quickly participate in combating false information.

4.3. Measures for Profit Logic

The profit logic of social media platforms is often directly related to the platform's traffic, which to a certain extent also provides conditions for the spread of false information, such as obtaining a reward of 100 RMB for 10,000 views on the YouTube platform. Referring to this practice, if the playback or forwarding volume of false information on social media platforms reaches a certain level, the corresponding department can introduce corresponding penalty systems, penalize the source of false information dissemination through targeted investigations, and thereby enhance the platform's vigilance against the spread of false information. Similarly, for such users, the platform can reduce their information recommendation weight, reduce video traffic, and restrict video publishing permissions as punishment. At the same time, for users who actively participate in combating false information and report false information, the platform can provide certain rewards, such as increasing their information recommendation weight and providing platform points. Such a reward and punishment structure can not only reduce the spread of false information but also mobilize more users' enthusiasm to jointly maintain the platform's information security.

4.4. Measures for the Constraint Intensity of Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms play a pivotal role in the governance of false information dissemination. However, the current constraint on user speech by platforms is often not strong enough, mainly because platforms tend to uphold users' freedom of speech and worry about the user loss and reputation damage that may be caused by excessive intervention. Against this backdrop, how to effectively constrain the spread of false information while protecting users' freedom of speech has become an urgent issue to address.

4.4.1. Defining the Boundaries of Speech

Firstly, we need to clarify the boundaries of platform speech. While freedom of speech is a fundamental right for everyone, it does not mean that speech can be entirely unrestrained. Platforms need to define some

insurmountable boundaries, such as prohibiting the dissemination of false information, hate speech, and incitement to violence, based on respecting freedom of speech. The determination of these boundaries can refer to relevant laws and industry standards and can also be moderately adjusted according to the platform's positioning and the characteristics of the user group.

4.4.2. Industry Constraints and Platform Norms

Secondly, we need to enhance the self-discipline and constraints of the industry. Industry associations and regulatory agencies can formulate a series of industry standards and norms, clarifying the basic requirements and evaluation criteria for platforms in information review, user management, and false information disposal. Simultaneously, regular assessments and certifications can also be conducted to encourage platforms to strengthen their management and norms.

4.4.3. Platform Punishment Mechanism

Lastly, platforms need to establish a comprehensive punishment mechanism to effectively penalize users who violate regulations. This includes, but is not limited to: silencing, fines, banning accounts, and blocking IPs. Specific punitive measures need to be moderately chosen according to the severity of the violation and the user's violation history. For example, users who violate the rules for the first time and in a minor way can be given a warning and education; for users who repeatedly violate the rules or violate them severely, more stringent measures, such as restricting account functions, temporary or permanent banning, etc., need to be taken (Fu et al., 2017).

In the process of implementing these measures, platforms need to fully consider the protection of users' rights and ensure that the punishment is fair, reasonable, and transparent. For instance, platforms can set up a special appeal channel to provide users with opportunities for appeal and reconsideration; before implementing punishment, platforms also need to give users sufficient explanation and communication to ensure their right to know and to a hearing.

5. Conclusion

Based on the global issue of the dissemination of false information in social media in the age of information explosion, this article examines the transmission mechanism of false information in social media through a literature review, paying special attention to how social media characteristics such as availability, audience characteristics, profit logic, and platform constraints influence the spread of false information. Taking a comprehensive look at the impact mechanism of social media features, this article presents a set of focused governance measures and recommendations from three perspectives: the social media industry, social media platforms, and social media consumers. The study's results and recommendations have important practical ramifications for social media platform management, policymakers, and regular users. It not only gives a full understanding of the mechanism of false information transmission in social media, but it also provides theoretical support and practical instructions for developing and executing appropriate governance solutions.

Although this study produced some useful findings and recommendations, it also has major drawbacks. For example, this study is mostly focused on the process of literature review, which may neglect some recent empirical research findings. Furthermore, the transmission and governance of false information is a complex social phenomenon influenced by a variety of social, cultural, political, and economic issues, and the impact of these aspects may not have been adequately examined in this study. We intend to do additional empirical research and case studies in the future to investigate the transmission mechanism and governance strategies of incorrect

information. We also hope to have more exchanges and collaboration with social media platform managers and regulators, to jointly explore and practice more effective governance strategies, and to make greater contributions to maintaining the network environment's health and promoting social harmony and stability.

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