The Strategies to Guide Higher Education Institution-Related Online Public Opinions from the Perspective of Crisis Management

Shuwei Wang¹, a, Yu Pang ¹ and Chuanbei Liu ²

¹ University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu 610000, China
² Deyang Intermediate People's Court, Deyang 618000, China

a wsw@uestc.edu.cn

Abstract. Since college/university students are one of the most active netizen groups, higher education institutions become one of “storm eyes” of online public opinions. Suddenly-happened group events often cause uproar online. If they are not controlled immediately, they may damage the image of higher education institutions, have an impact on normal education activities, or even disrupt normal social orders. Therefore, strengthening the research of higher education institution-related online public opinions, attaching importance to the analysis and guide of campus online public opinions, and building a synergetic cooperation mechanism for higher education institution-related online public opinions will have a positive effect on the cyberculture in higher education institutions or even social influence. Combining theoretical research with systematic research and empirical research, this paper firstly introduces several concepts, including public opinions, online public opinions, and higher education institution-related online public opinions. Then the formation and cyclical evolution of higher education institution-related online public opinions are analyzed. Subsequently, the reasons higher education institution-related online public opinions shape up are analyzed from psychological, publicity, and pedagogical perspectives. Finally, the strategies for guiding higher education institution-related online public opinions are put forward, i.e. (1) to build a synergetic cooperation mechanism for online public opinions; and (2) to integrate media literacy education into ideological and political education.

Keywords: public opinion, higher education institution-related online public opinion, synergetic cooperation mechanism, media literacy education

1. Background

According to the 39th Statistical Report on the Internet Development in China, the number of Chinese netizens reached 731 million by December 2016. It increased by 42.99 million in the year. The Internet availability rate was 53.2%, growing by 2.9 percents in comparison with the figure at the end of 2015. From the view of age, the percent of netizens aged 20-29 was the highest, reaching 30.3%. From the view of occupation, the number of students among netizens was the highest. By December 2016, student netizens accounted for 25.0%. Thus it can be seen that, whether from the view of age or occupation, college/university students play a very important role among netizens.

As a special group, college/university students thirst for knowledge and have a strong logic thinking ability and active mind but they are mentally immature. With these psychological features, they are easier to make use of Internet, especially social networks, to express their standpoints and arouse the attention of people of same age. Since Internet is an open, interactive, concealed, and promptly-accessed space, it can result in a hot issue or even group event easily. This is a new challenge for higher education institution managers responsible for public opinion guidance and ideological and political education.

It was point out emphatically in the Opinions on further Strengthening and Improving Higher Education Institution Publicity & Ideological Work under New Situations issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and General Office of the State Council on January 19, 2017 that efforts must be made to strengthen and improve higher education institution publicity & ideological work under New Situations, expand public opinions of mainstream thought, enhance higher education institution ideology guidance and management practically, carry out more positive publicity, and strengthen national security, national view and unity education.
Thus it can be seen that higher education institution-related online public opinions have become a key breakthrough point for ideological and political education. Research findings on how to carry out ideological and political publicity in an innovative way, make use of online public opinion guiding strategies to hold the right of speech, and build an effective long-term online public opinion and public crisis management mechanism may be used for reference by higher education institutions or even the entire education system in China to some extent.

2. Status Quo of Researches at Home and Abroad

By now the phrase “higher education institution-related online public opinion” has not be defined unanimously in the academic circles. In this paper, an attempt is made to define it from the logic of “public opinion – online public opinion – higher education institution-related online public opinion” and from the view of subject, object, and carrier.

Modern scholar Laihua Wang has defined “public opinion” in his works named *Overview of Public Opinion Research*: public opinion refers to the sociopolitical attitude of common people, as subject, toward state administrators, as object, in a certain social space based on occurrence, development and change of an intermediary social event.

It is generally accepted that, in English, “舆情” is “public opinion” which appeared first in the An Essay Concerning Human Understanding published by John Locke in 1781. The book introduced John Locke’s early consideration about the importance of public opinions to a political system. The phrase “public opinion” derives from the word “L’ opinion” used first by Michelde Montaigne, a French writer in the period of renaissance, in 1588. Currently, in many occasions and documents, the phrase “public opinion” is used to represent both “舆情” and “民意”. So, it is generally accepted that there are some same aspects in the researches of “舆情” and “民意” abroad.

Yi Liu has pointed out in his monograph *Overview of Online Public Opinion Research* that public opinion is a combination of multiple emotions, wills, attitudes and opinions of the public, comprised of individuals and the masses of different kinds, toward various public affairs, which they care about or to which their interests are closely linked, in a certain historical period and social space. In the book, he has defined online public opinion as a combination of different emotions, attitudes, and opinions expressed and publicized via Internet. In the opinion of scholar Zhang Yuanlong, in a narrow sense, “higher education institution-related online public opinions” refer to a combination and expression of massive “emotions, wills, attitudes, opinions, and requirements” which take place in the higher education institution education field due to the simulation of higher education institution-related events in a certain period of time and are spread via Internet.

It can be seen from the papers and works on the research of higher education institution-related online public opinions published during the years from 2005 to 2017 that experts, scholars, education authorities, and the government agencies have paid more and more attention to the research of higher education institution-related online public opinions. Meanwhile, the author also finds that high-level research findings in this field are inadequate in number and lacking in innovation, depth, and academic value. Thus there is a large space for future researchers. Therefore, the author decides to probe into this field.

3. Connotations of Higher Education Institution-Related Online Public Opinions

In this paper, setting out from the view of “public opinion – online public opinion – higher education institution-related online public opinion”, an attempt is made to define the concept of “higher education institution-related online public opinion” gradually by analyzing the subject, object, carrier, and noumenon of such concept. According to the concepts put forward by Yi Liu in his monograph *Overview of Online Public Opinion Research*, the subject of public opinions is individuals, the public or a group. The object of public opinions is controllers (individuals or
organizations) of public affairs and those who are directly related to events. The noumenon of public opinions is the contents of public opinions, i.e. a combination and expression of massive “emotions, wills, attitudes, opinions, and requirements” from the public. The carrier of public opinions is the platform via which information and contents of public opinions are publicized. The activator of public opinions is the intermediary stimulus, i.e. a public affair or particular event which is concerned with vital interests of the public.

In this paper, “higher education institution-related online public opinion” is defined as a combination of different emotions, attitudes and opinions toward higher education institution-related events that are expressed and publicized via Internet by college/university students, higher education participants, and other individuals, people and groups who are concerned about higher education institution-related events. College/university students’ tendency of feeling, understanding and evaluation of various social and life phenomena and events at home and abroad is an important integral part of higher education institution-related online public opinions. Higher education institution-related online public opinions are a kind of claim and expression of college/university students for their interests and demands and a combination of wishes to keep improving present situations. As a pattern of manifestation of social public opinions, higher education institution-related online public opinions have changed the form of traditional public opinions and influenced traditional higher education institutions’ governance model more profoundly.

4. Route of Publicity of Higher Education Institution-Related Online Public Opinions

4.1 Type and Distribution of Higher Education Institution-Related Online Public Opinions

Usually, higher education institution-related online public opinions occur suddenly. Through continuous monitoring over higher education institution-related online public opinions, the Higher Education Publicity and Public Opinion Monitoring Research Center of Communication University of China has found that higher education institution-related online public opinions are mainly triggered by hot events in higher education institutions and major social events at home and abroad that are concerned and discussed extensively by the public and media. Education is not a trivial matter. Hot events in higher education institutions may be noticed easily by social groups and then publicized via new media and web 2.0. As a result, such event’s information will be disclosed massively.

4.2 Internal Evolution Mechanism and System of Events Triggering Higher Education Institution-Related Online Public Opinions

From the view of time dimension of event formation, a majority of higher education institution-related online public opinions come into being suddenly. However, the path of formation shows strong structural characteristics. After an event’s information is publicized online, it undergoes three phases, i.e. phase of individual opinion expression, phase of group opinion collision, and phase of online public opinion formation. During the phase of individual opinion expression, higher education institution-related online public opinions are in the womb of time. During the period, a person’s certain demand is not satisfied due to a sudden event. Usually, college/university students are inclined to disclose such event by campus BBS or Baidu PostBar. Generally, the informant is a person whose interest is impacted in such event or a person who is closely linked to the source of the sudden event. Subsequently, Internet Copiers/Pasters (“ICP”) copies original event information to interactive websites with more users, such as Zhihu, where such event is further developed and spread and then go into the spreading phase. ICP is not always the informant.

After the event becomes popular rapidly in campus BBS, Baidu PostBar, and websites, such as Zhihu, it will be reported by mainstream media. Soon public opinions will break out on a full scale. Usually, opinion leaders will appear in the online public opinions of a sudden event. Depending on
advantageous information resources, they will reprocess and comment event information so as to
guide the direction of public opinions. Of course, the fluctuation of higher education
institution-related online public opinions varies with the change of event information, the
participation of opinion leaders, and the change of the number of participants.
Finally, with the breakout of public opinions online, higher education institution managers and
the society pay enough attention to the event and handle it. The demands of the parties concerned
are satisfied or the problem of the hot issue is not solved in a long period of time but the focus of
attention of netizens has moved away as time goes by. Eventually, the event triggering higher
education institution-related online public opinions will go into a declining period.

5. The Strategies to Guide Higher Education Institution-Related Online Public
Opinions

5.1 Main Problems Existing Currently in the Handling of Higher Education
Institution-Related Online Public Opinions

1) There is no online public opinion warning mechanism in higher education institutions.
Currently, most of higher education institutions have no online public opinion warning
mechanism. As a result, they have no rules to follow and have to obtain public opinion information
and handle the online public opinion crisis in a simple and clumsy way. Since they have no
professional teams or systems responsible for public opinion monitoring and information collection,
they cannot collect information thoroughly or take targeted measures.

2) Higher education institution-related online public opinion management methods are
undiversified, lacking in pertinence and interactivity.
As an online public opinion event makes first appearance, the high education institution where
such event takes place should check erroneous ideas at the outset, guarantee smooth information
communication, avoid escalation of the event, and reduce its impact on students’ normal study and
life. However, some high education institutions still stick to the traditional way to handle a crisis, i.e.
to prevent comments by deleting messages posted. However, in the context of highly-developed
online media, there is no way to control information source, publicity speed, and content
authenticity and diversity. For high education institutions acting as the subject responsible for
guidance and management, it is very important to release information timely and accurately in the
process of handling suddenly-happening online public opinions.

5.2 To Build a Synergetic Cooperation Mechanism for High Education Institution-Related
Online Public Opinions

Since the parties triggering public opinions are very complicated, the principle of synergy
characterized by overall planning and coordination, rapid response, and clear responsibility should
be followed in the process of handling public opinions. Under the guidance of synergetic
cooperation ideas, a series of management means should be used to collect and analyze information
of the sudden event, make a decision, draft a plan, work out measures, take measures to control and
coordinate the event, and sum up the experience of the event. Meanwhile, as the person in charge of
the public opinion event, higher education institutions should also communicate actively with
competent education authorities so as to play a role in overall planning and coordination.

5.3 To Integrate Online Media Literacy Education into Ideological and Political Education

College/university student netizens are the first information contactors of higher education
institution-related online public opinions. After a public opinion event occurs, usually some parties
concerned or groups in the vicinity of the event publicize information via campus BBS, school
PostBar in the phase of individual expression. Later such information is moved to websites with
more audiences, such as Microblog, Zhihu, by ICPs. This phase is decisive to whether such online
public opinion event can be controlled effectively. Therefore, the online media illiteracy of students
concerned, groups in the vicinity of the event, and ICPs is very important. After higher education institution-related online public opinions go into the breakout phase, the result of whether college/university students can distinguish and analyze public opinion information and understand such information critically and rationally will have a direct effect on the development trend of such event.

Since higher education institutions are principal managers of higher education institution-related online public opinions, it is necessary for them to integrate online media literacy education into routine ideological and political education. Regular online media literacy education courses should be included in the course system of higher education institutions. Definite course objectives and assessment standards should be worked out to strengthen college/university student education in respect of online media-related law knowledge.

Ideological and political education workers may create ideological and political education information independently according to the subject and social hot issues in the present era to make ideological and political education closer to the times and more attractive and grasp the opportunity of important social events and milestones to hold various “WeChat-based activities” to make ideological and political education information more appealing so as to attract more college/university students to receive ideological and political education.

References

[1]. Laihua Wang, Overview of Public Opinion Research, Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2003.

[2]. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.

[3]. Yi Liu, Overview of Online Public Opinion Research, Tianjin People's Publishing House, 2007.

[4]. Yuancheng Zhang, About the Definition, Differentiation and Analysis of Public Opinion and Related Concepts, Zhejiang Academic Journal, 2009 (03).