

## ■ ■ ■ Феномен политического доверия в виртуальных сообществах (на материалах сетевых медиа Китая во время пандемии Covid-19)

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**Аннотация.** Политическое доверие является барометром эффективности национального управления, связующим звеном в отношениях между народом и правительством и играет роль политического стабилизатора. Актуальность данной темы обусловлена тем, что сегодня сетевые виртуальные пространства, такие как Weibo и форумы, выполняя коммуникационные функции, способны рассеивать или восстанавливать доверие к правительству, предлагая аудитории для обсуждения форму вопросов и ответов, развеивая сомнения и отвечая на критику, что оказывает влияние на политическую медиазкологию. В статье представлены критический обзор литературы и результаты мониторинга СМИ (сетевых сообществ Китая). Проанализировано проявление «конфронтационного» (конфликтного) дискурса виртуальных сообществ в сетевых медиа в условиях пандемии нового коронавируса и инфодемии. Рассмотрены способы восстановления политического доверия сетевых виртуальных сообществ в контексте инфодемии: (1) включение правительством в сферу национального управления сетевого виртуального пространства и открытие двунаправленных каналов для эффективного взаимодействия с общественностью; (2) улучшение качества дискурса в сетевом пространстве; (3) выполнение сетевыми медиа своих социальных обязанностей, обеспечивая при этом качество сетевого информационного контента.

**Ключевые слова:** политическое доверие, виртуальные сообщества, конфронтационный дискурс, сетевые медиа, пандемия Covid-19

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## ■ ■ ■ The phenomenon of political trust in virtual communities (based on the materials of Chinese social networks during the Covid-19 pandemic)

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**Abstract.** Political trust is a barometer of the effectiveness of national governance, a link in the relationship between the people and the Government, and plays the role of a political stabilizer. The relevance of this topic conditioned by the fact that in the Internet era, 'when everyone 'holds a microphone' on the network media in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, communication in the network virtual spaces such as Weibo and forums is capable of dissipating and restoring trust in governments in the form of questions, doubts and criticism, which has an impact on political media ecology as a whole. The paper is based on the media monitoring of the network communities in China. The author analyses the forms of manifestation of the confrontational (conflict-prone) discourse of virtual communities in the context of the pandemic of the New Corona virus and the following 'infodemic', and considers the ways of restoring the political trust of network virtual communities within this context, whereas: (1) the government should include the network virtual space in the sphere of national governance in order to open bidirectional channels for good communication with the masses; (2) the quality of discourse in the network space of the virtual community should be improved; (3) the network media should fulfill their social responsibilities, while ensuring the quality of the content.

**Keywords:** political trust, virtual communities, confrontational discourse, network media, Covid-19 pandemic

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**Introduction.** The Covid-19 pandemic, which radically changed the life of the entire planet, has set new challenges for researchers. And every outbreak of infectious diseases in history caused infodemic at the same time. The most typical case is an

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<sup>1</sup> Путин: Сила государства не в тотальном контроле и мощи армии, а в доверии граждан (Putin: The strength of the state is not in total control and the power of the army, but in the trust of citizens) // Комсомольская правда, 22.10.2020 [el. source]: <https://www.kp.ru/online/news/4056674/?ysclid=lq4wso5g84785323188> (accessed 22.10.2020).

example of the spread of the Ebola virus. There are rumors that those patients who enter the clinic for treatment will be directly executed and their organs will be shipped abroad. As a result, many patients are afraid to receive treatment. All kinds of true and false information are like another terrifying virus. When the Covid-19 pandemic reached the online media, the phenomenon of infodemic became even more noticeable. The online media were filled with a huge amount of both true and false information, and due to the government downturn, rumors began to surpass the truth, which excited the population and caused strong emotions [Wang, Ding]. The virus of distrust spread together with the Novel Corona Virus, and at the same time, Therefore, a game of official and civilian public opinion was launched in the Network media.

The relevance of this study is due to the need to study the political trust of the virtual online community in the context of the infodemic during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the problematic area, such a problem has arisen as the use of 'confrontational' discourse by people in online virtual spaces, such as Weibo and forums, to undermine trust in the state in the form of doubts, suspicions and criticism, which affects the entire political ecology, which cannot be ignored. The purpose of this study is to analyze the 'confrontational' discourse of virtual communities in the context of the pandemic, as well as ways to regenerate the government's trust in the virtual community in the context of the infodemic.

**Research material and methods.** This paper presents a critical review of the literature regarding the terms 'virtual community', 'confrontational discourse', and 'political trust'.

Based on the nature of society, people have always gathered into communities based on common goals and expectations to carry out life and labor, and participate in economic and political activities. With the progress of human society, human social nature is manifested everywhere, and the concept of human-centered community has undergone multiple evolutions, especially in today's society where Internet technology is changing with each passing day, it has broken through the boundaries of time and space, and a new existence that transcends traditional communities has emerged – virtual communities. Many international scholars have defined the concept of virtual communities from different angles. According to Howard Rheingold, a virtual community is a "social education that is formed on the basis of computer-mediated communication, when a certain number of people maintain communication for a long time, and at the same time human emotions and a network of interpersonal relationships arise" [Rheingold]. Through a comparison of virtual and real, Manuel Castells answered the question about the virtuality and reality of online communities. He believes that although virtual communities are not as realistic as traditional ones, online communities are indeed communities. Such communities are "mostly based on weak bonds, extremely diverse and specialized, but they can also generate reciprocity and support due to the dynamics of continuous interaction" [Castells 2000: 21]. M. Castells believed that virtual network communities are "self-organizing electronic networks

of interactive communications that are united around people with common interests or goals, although sometimes communication becomes an end in itself" [Castells 2001: 55]. The web implies not only information but also participation, i.e. inclusion in communities, as is evident from blogs, forums, Twitter and all the other social networks [Sharkov, Kirillina: 237]. Chinese scholar Du Junfei also supports a similar view. He downplayed the physicality of the community's existence space, arguing that the virtual community is an online community formed by people from all sides based on common interests and needs [Du Junfei]. All in all, virtual communities are formed by relying on the vigorous development of the Internet and various communication technologies. They are social groups formed by people based on common topic cognition, hobbies, knowledge structure, etc. and gathered in the online virtual space. Compared with real communities, virtual communities have characteristics such as virtual nature, spontaneity, looseness, and uncertainty.

'Dominant' discourse is a kind of universally recognized discourse that is empowered and empowered. This kind of discourse has enough power to legitimize specific policies and practices [Liu: 38]. 'Confrontational' discourse, that is, untamed discourse, is a process of confrontational expression in which subordinate communities influence dominant discourse by questioning, doubting, criticizing, etc. based on their interests. It is usually embodied as challenging the shared norms that provide the basis for public rationality. The specificity of the confrontational strategy lies in the fact that it is directed against the communication partner: the communicant strives to achieve his goals by acting actively and independently, not paying attention to the goals and interests of the communication partners [Gulakova]. Therefore, when, in the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic, everyone is a recipient of information and its distributor in the online media, confrontational discourse spreads massively in online virtual spaces such as Weibo and forums, dissipates and restores trust in the authorities through questions, generating doubts and criticism, which has an impact on the entire political ecology that is impossible to ignore it.

Trust is a complex concept. Different people have different interpretations of trust in different contexts. G. Simmel assigns a central place to this type of trust in the creation and maintenance of social ties of modern society [Simmel]. President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin at a meeting of the international discussion club "Valdai" on October 22, 2020 rightly noted that "the strength of the state is not in total control and the power of the army, but in the trust of citizens"<sup>1</sup>. Some Chinese scholars believe that political trust is an interaction between the public and political organizations [Xiong], some believe that political trust is the public's positive

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<sup>1</sup> Борьба с инфодемией на фоне пандемии COVID-19: поощрение ответственного поведения и уменьшение пагубного воздействия ложных сведений и дезинформации (Fighting infodemic against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic: encouraging responsible behavior and reducing the harmful effects of false information and misinformation) // Всемирная Организация Здравоохранения, 23.09.2020 [el. source]: <https://www.who.int/ru/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation> (accessed: 23.09.2020).

expectation of the government's trustworthiness [Xu], some believe that political trust is the dynamic process of cooperation between the public and the government [Tang, Wei], and others advocate that political trust is the public's positive evaluation of government capabilities and optimism [Yang: 34]. It can be summarized that the concept of political trust includes basically three elements: the main part of political trust is the people and the government, and the content of political trust is the people's trust in government policies, organizations, and officials. Political trust is embodied as a *dynamic psychological expectation*.

The empirical part of research is based on the analysis of comments on Weibo from Sina News, CCTV News and Xinhua in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic (from January 23, 2020 to April 5, 2020). The study showed that the confrontational discourse of the virtual community manifested itself in the following forms: (1) doubt about the high level of national health services; (2) doubt about the government's ability to respond to the health crisis; (3) criticism of the character and behavior of civil servants.

**Research results.** Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the Network media has become the mainstream channel for disseminating information about the pandemic. On the one hand, governments of various countries have released relevant information on fighting the epidemic through social networks for the first time; on the other hand, a large number of false information has also spread rapidly through social networks, exponentially amplifying people's panic, splitting social consensus and harming the reputation of governments and international organizations. For example: the stigmatization of the Chinese pandemic, the demonization of Bill Gates, and the unprovoked accusations against the World Health Organization, etc. The World Health Organization pointed out that the 'infodemic' refers to the rapid spread of a large amount of information, including rumors and gossip, through mobile phones, social media, the Internet and other communication technologies in the context of infectious disease epidemics, which makes it difficult for people to find trustworthy sources of information and reliable guidance, and hinders effective measures for epidemic prevention and control<sup>1</sup>. The most intuitive consequence of the infodemic is to cause irrational fear among the public, and even large-scale social panic, and ultimately have a destructive impact on social stability. When faced with rumors that threaten information security, such as prevention and treatment, people spread rumors, guided by the fear of "I'd rather believe". The higher the panic of the recipient of the rumor, the more widely the rumors that are more in line with their vital interests spread. In this context, under the technological empowerment and discourse empowerment of the Network media, the confrontation of virtual communities against official dominant discourse in an abnormal state has become more prominent. Overall, during the Covid-19 pandemic, questioning, doubt, and criticism were the main manifestations of confrontational discourse in the

<sup>1</sup> Wuhan time: 20 days from the arrival of the expert group to the mystery of the city closure // Eeo.com, 7 Feb. 2020 [el. source]: [http://www.eeo.com.cn/2020/0207/375826.shtml?bsh\\_bid=5481008559](http://www.eeo.com.cn/2020/0207/375826.shtml?bsh_bid=5481008559) (accessed 10.08.2023).

virtual community, while deconstructing mainstream discourse and dissolving political trust were derivatives of 'confrontation' that could not be resolved in time.

### **Questioning the level of national public health services**

Doubts about the level of public health services mainly occur in the early stages of pandemic prevention and control. When the external environment cannot meet the individual's expectations, it will arouse anger, and when the individual finds that he cannot control the development of things, it will lead to panic [Adikari et al.]. The criticism of Chinese netizens pointed directly at the Wuhan Health and Health Commission and other functional departments and the first group of experts appointed by the National Health and Health Commission to Wuhan. In the face of the confusing pandemic, people's confrontational emotions are fierce, and various doubts, criticisms, and accusations have emerged on Weibo, circles of friends, and various forums. For example, in the comment area of "Wuhan Time: 20 days from the arrival of the expert group to the closure of the city" reposted by Sina News on its official Weibo, as of April 5, 2020, more than 38,000 people participated in the comments, and nearly 600 hot comments were displayed<sup>1</sup>. Analyzing these hot reviews, it was found that most of the hot reviews were aimed at the criticism and accusations of the first batch of experts who went to Wuhan. When the public encounters a sudden event, they usually show a lack of awareness and ability to deal with it due to the inability to find real information in the massive amount of information, and they have a fear of the pandemic. Infodemic has led to the fact that people will not be able to make the right decisions because of fears and will blindly follow false information.

Under the dominance of fear, people are prone to make irrational judgments. At the level of discourse expression, they may go to two extremes, either silent or passionate confrontation<sup>2</sup>. Fear will stimulate the confrontational nature of public discourse to a certain extent. Rational confrontation is a positive display of people's emotions. When the doubts are answered in a timely manner, it will help to enhance the country's political trust and promote the prevention and control of the pandemic. On the contrary, irrational confrontation is a negative display of people's emotions. If it is not guided and dealt with in time, it will dissolve the country's political trust and lead to a secondary crisis of trust.

### **Doubt in the government's ability to respond to the public health crisis**

In order to prevent the epidemic from continuing to spread and cause uncontrollable disastrous consequences, timely and effective public health crisis management must be carried out. The public health crisis should be managed by the government, that

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<sup>1</sup> Пандемия не смягчила конфронтацию, а стала одной из ее арен (The pandemic did not soften the confrontation, but became one of its arenas) // Коммерсантъ, 7 апреля 2020 [el. source]: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4315911> (accessed 10.08.2023).

<sup>2</sup> The director of Huanggang Health Commission was removed from office // CCTV.com, 31 Jan. 2021 [el. source]: <http://api.cportal.cctv.com/api/newsInsert/ywnr.html?id=Arti4IB74L5m1NMmaZWb6EIQ200130&preview=1&version=724> (accessed 10.08.2023).

is, the government adopts countermeasures and management activities to the crisis in accordance with the crisis management plan and procedures [Kutyrev et al.]. Crisis management is a full range of management, including risk monitoring, crisis early warning, crisis intervention, damage control, crisis resolution, post-mortem feedback and other measures. Responding to major emergencies is one of the public management functions of the government. The government plays the role of manager, decision maker, and organizer in the whole process of crisis management. Political trust is the people's positive psychological expectations of government officials, policies, organizations, and abilities. In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, whether the people trust the government is essential to resolve the crisis in a timely and effective manner and maintain social stability. On the contrary, the timely and effective resolution of the crisis will help to regenerate, strengthen, and enhance the people's political trust in the government.

During the pandemic, everyone is at risk of health damage, and the public is more sensitive to the government's response ability and the effectiveness of its measures. Due to the needs of epidemic prevention and control, all citizens are quarantined at home and reduce social activities to reduce the risk of infection. At this time, cyberspace has become the main field for people to communicate with the outside world, and the Network virtual community's discourse on the pandemic is particularly active. The people have placed high expectations on the pandemic prevention and control measures. Once the government's performance is not fully realized, all kinds of doubts will immediately arise, and political trust will either be eliminated or reconstructed. For example, on February 26, 2020, Hu Xijin, a commentator of the Global Times, on his Weibo posted a short video about the incident of a woman surnamed Huang who had been released from prison breaking through the pandemic prevention and control line and leaving Wuhan and entering Beijing. Then the virtual space instantly set off a storm of public opinion. The virtual community expressed the hope that Wuhan officials and prison management agencies will explain the matter in a timely manner. Otherwise, it will affect people's confidence that Wuhan's city closure is still being implemented seriously. In addition, some netizens believe that the pandemic has exposed problems in administrative management capabilities.

In the difficult stage of pandemic prevention and control, the people supervise the government's prevention and control measures through rational confrontational discourse, which helps to improve the government's policy performance, contributes to good interaction between the people and the government, and strengthens the people's confidence in the government.

### **Criticism of the behavior of civil servants**

In addition to questioning the level of national public health services and doubting the government's ability to respond to the public health crisis, the character and behavior of government staffs are also important influencing factors in the formation of political trust. The character and behavior of government staffs are the professional abilities



and professional ethics that they must possess in the performance of their duties. Civil servants are concrete executors of the government's political decisions, are open to the people and express the image of the government. The ethics, service level, and work efficiency of the civil service group will directly affect the people's perception and evaluation of the government, thereby further affecting the people's political trust in the government.

In the Internet era, the Network media technology empowers people to influence the entire the Network public opinion market. In the prevention and control of the new crown pneumonia pandemic, the confrontation of the virtual community's discourse is not only reflected in questioning the level of public health services and the effectiveness of crisis response, but also in the criticism and accountability of the character and behavior of government staffs. For example, on January 2020, the Chinese Central Supervision team went to Huanggang city to supervise the prevention and control of the pandemic. Tang Zhihong, director of the Municipal Health and Construction Commission of Hubei Province, could not answer any questions when asked about the situation of the epidemic. Then dissatisfaction of netizens poured out on the Internet. In a high-pressure environment where the whole society is engaged in a pandemic prevention war, the people can no longer tolerate the slightest vague facts, nor can they tolerate any inaction of cadres<sup>1</sup>.

The virtual community's criticism of the character and behavior of civil servants to a certain extent contributed to the implementation of the control function over them by the private sector. But it cannot be denied that the negative psychological emotions released by people in cyberspace are extremely contagious. People affected by the non-fulfillment of duties by individual civil servants may downplay or ignore the work of the most diligent and responsible employees, label groups of civil servants as violators of official duties, and even express irrational assumptions caused by imagination. This causes great damage to political trust and may even cause a crisis of public opinion.

**Discussion.** In a public health emergency, the government needs to dialectically treat the "confrontational" discourse of the online virtual community, neither deny it nor allow it to grow barbarously, and build a good relationship of trust between the government and the masses. The generation of political trust is a dynamic process of good interaction between the government, the people and the media. The regeneration of political trust in the Covid-19 pandemic prevention and control stage is not only the responsibility of the government, but the joint regeneration path of government self-shaping, people's self-discipline and media self-control.

Firstly, the government is the leading force in the regeneration of political trust in the pandemic prevention and control stage. It is necessary to embed the online virtual

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<sup>1</sup> The director of Huanggang Health Commission was removed from office // CCTV.com, 31 Jan. 2021 [el. source]: <http://api.cportal.cctv.com/api/newsInsert/ywnr.html?id=Arti4IB74L5m1NMmaZWb6ElQ200130&preview=1&version=724> (accessed 10.08.2023).



space in the modernization of national governance, communicate well with the people, and enhance the ability to respond to major public health emergencies.

Chinese President Xi Jinping mentioned in his speech at the symposium on cybersecurity and working with information technologies that Internet users are ordinary people, their public opinion is also represented on the Internet. We must carefully study and learn from the well-meaning criticisms on the Internet and the supervision of the Internet, whether it is for the work of the party and the government or for leading cadres. In the early days of the epidemic, due to the need for prevention and control, the virtual space became the main platform for people to express their attitudes and vent their emotions. Facts have proved that at this stage, the government listens to different voices and accurately grasps public opinion, which is conducive to the timely detection of problems in the prevention and control of the pandemic, the timely adjustment of pandemic prevention and control measures, and the prevention of the spread of infodemics.

During the epidemic prevention and control period, whether it is the formulation or specific implementation of epidemic prevention and control countermeasures, such as 'isolation' or 'tracking of personal activities' due to epidemic prevention and control, these measures are inseparable from the support of the consensus of the government and the masses. The key to achieving consensus between the government and the masses lies in effective communication. Those in power should change their communication methods and communicate with the people in easy-to-understand words. In the prevention and control of the new crown pneumonia pandemic, advertising methods such as "Don't go outside, put on a mask when you go outside" not only allow the masses to be aware of epidemic prevention measures and policies, but also reduce the anxiety of people affected by the epidemic and create a favorable atmosphere. A good atmosphere for political and mass communications contributes to the formation of political trust. When responding to public crises, the government must demonstrate the ability to be responsible that matches its behavioral ability, and a responsible government can more easily win the trust of the people [Wu, Fu].

Secondly, it is necessary to avoid the negative effects of confrontational discourse in virtual communities that affect political trust. In addition to the government's self-shaping of trust, it also depends on the improvement of the discourse quality of the virtual community in cyberspace.

The Internet provides people with a wider space for expressing opinions than in real society, and people have received unprecedented opportunities and channels for creating discourse. The rapid development of new online media such as Weibo and Tik Tok has stimulated people's interest in discourse. The expression of people's discourse in the virtual online space is connected not only with the receipt and dissemination of information, but also with the defense of interests and their rights and the emotional expression of their views. The right of people to express their opinions is an important right to participate in political discussions and social governance. However, in the face of a highly uncertain, unstable, and hidden virtual network space, as well as

the overwhelming and uneven flow of information under the infodemic, the virtual community should remain rational, have a good quality of discourse, and express their words impartially and objectively. The Network is imperceptibly changing the dissemination path, expression carrier and discourse field of ideological discourse [Kochetkov]. Users get and actively use the possibility to choose the format, the channel and the content based on their personal experience, psycho-emotional state, socio-cultural characteristics. However, the users choice is not always conscious, and besides that, the users self-identification and further choice of channel and content is often based on 'friend-or-foe' principle, which leads to an increase in social and political polarization in the process of media consumption [Kirillina: 177].

The Internet era is an era of a big explosion of information. The information varies greatly, the authenticity is different, and the sources are diverse. Compared with the period of traditional media, the network media is an information environment that has lost its context, bringing together a large amount of information without context. In the network virtual space, it is actually difficult to find credible, useful, and usable information. It is necessary for people on the Internet to improve their information recognition capabilities and avoid falling into the information cocoon.

Thirdly, the network new media strictly adheres to industry standards to ensure the quality of online information content.

The value concept of journalism requires the media to report news truthfully, objectively and impartially, with the core goal of serving the public. The social responsibility of the Network media is mainly reflected in the performance of social services and the promotion of mainstream values [Li]. Every responsible media should stick to the bottom line of the industry, ensure the quality of online information content for the regeneration of political trust. False news, such as rumors, not only prevents people from accessing the truth, but also consumes the resources of social trust. Network media must strictly control information and filter out from the huge flow of information that is true, reliable and meaningful for transmission to users.

**Conclusions.** During the development of human civilization, major emergencies have always arisen, including those related to diseases that claimed thousands of lives (plague, smallpox, SARS, Ebola virus, coronavirus pneumonia, etc.). Pandemics are characterized by high suddenness, contagiousness and destructiveness. They not only lead to the death of a large number of people, but also block economic development, affect the international situation and even cause rapid social and cultural changes. The future development and direction of the development of human society depends on whether it will be possible to effectively control the epidemic.

The prevention and control of the new crown pneumonia epidemic is a challenge to the governance systems and capabilities of various countries. Political trust is an important factor affecting the level of national governance ability. Confrontational discourse contains rational and irrational factors, which may have both positive and negative effects on national governance. During the Covid-19 pandemic, although the

virtual community's confrontational discourse expression in the virtual public opinion field played a certain role in supervising government work, the savage and disorderly growth of discourse "confrontation" also dissipated political trust and blocked the implementation of public policies. It is not conducive to the prevention and control of the epidemic, is not conducive to the country's economic development, is not conducive to social security and stability, and is more likely to erode the authority of national governance. Therefore, in the context of the new crown epidemic, the regeneration of political trust in the virtual community requires the joint efforts of the government, the people and the media.

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