

# The interaction between trust and public discussion

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**Abstract:** China is now in a special period of economic transition and social transformation, and along with the emergence of a large number of quality new media, the public is gradually becoming more aware of their rights and more aware of the rule of law; the Internet has also provided a platform for the public to grasp the right to speak and participate in public discussions, to express their ideas and to defend their legitimate rights. However, the lack of social trust and group antagonism, coupled with advances in new media communication technology and increased media competition, have led to a dramatic increase in the speed and reach of negative information in public discussion. The interaction between trust and public discussion has led to important issues such as the redistribution of discourse power, public crises and crisis communication management.

**Keywords:** trust; public discussion; public crisis; discourse power; crisis communication

If we compare today's overall social environment to a concentric circle, then the individual is the center of the circle, and the interpersonal network and the wider environment (China is in economic and social transition) ripple outwards from the center like water ripples. The individual is influenced by the radiation of two factors outside the center of the circle, with the most prominent being 'trust', which acts as the main force in public discussion. Public discussion is, in turn, an indirect manifestation of the trust index. The reasons for this interplay can be explained by the inevitable trend created by the development of the media environment. The media environment, consisting of two groups: the professional media and the self-published media, both face the dilemma of having a large number of competitors and the pressure to survive. For the professional media, the absolute dominance of market-oriented media and the rapid progress of media integration and transformation have put them at a disadvantage, while their own obsession with pursuing negative and critical news has led to the uncontrolled spread of public crises; the self-published media environment is also complex and disorderly, with news extortion being a common occurrence. The public debate can sometimes become a breeding ground for negative emotions, which in turn can lead to a public crisis that festers and intensifies, thus raising the level of crisis communication management.

The effect of trust and public discussion is thus like a domino effect in a chain reaction. This paper analyses the mechanisms of trust and public discussion and the steps of their cascading effects, arguing that they are independent of each other on a theoretical level, but are mutually exclusive in their mechanisms of action.

## 1. Theoretical interpretation of trust and public discussion

Trust emerges from the subjective consciousness of individuals and is divided into interpersonal trust and systemic trust. Interpersonal trust expresses the relationship of trust between people, and can be subdivided into special trust (acting on people who are related or close to the individual) and general trust (acting on a large group of people). Systemic trust, on the other hand, reflects trust in a group, in an institution or in a system, and also includes non-personal intergroup or organizational trust. In the context of the current situation, since the new century, with the advancement of news and communication technology, the Internet has given the public unprecedented discourse power, which to a certain extent has initially redistributed discourse power (Hu Baijing 2016, 7), breaking the dominance of the elite discourse system in the traditional era of public crises, and allowing open competition for opinions to exist among multiple stakeholders. The replacement of interpersonal trust by systemic trust is thus a natural consequence of historical change.

However, much of our world is a second-hand 'reality' created by media institutions, and there is no guarantee that this 'reality' accurately portrays our world. (M. McCombs; T. Bell; Guo, 1999, 32) Trust is in crisis when the public realizes that many public crises are created by the mass media through agenda setting and framing theory. Trust, hit by the double blow of disseminating the truth and the traditional structure of trust mechanisms due to the redistribution of discourse, declined to a low level at an extremely rapid pace, causing public discussion to become quotidian in content, emotional and entertaining, and the parties to the debate used to claim to be truth holders and defend their political and moral legitimacy, but in reality the parties deepened the gulf and antagonism in the debate, reinforcing boundaries and prejudices, so that a strong sense of mistrust and confrontation permeates the public arena. The whole process reflects the relationship between trust and public discussion in the dissemination of public opinion.

## 2. Interpreting the interaction between trust and public discussion

The crisis of trust is a common symptom of modern society. (Hu Baijing, 2016.11) The crisis of trust is born under the radiation of the concentric circles social environment mentioned at the beginning, and spreads through the public discussion built on the Internet platform, under which the public crisis (crisis of discourse power, crisis of trust and crisis of legitimacy coexist) also becomes more confusing, and is likely to trigger large-scale resistance or movement at any time, with increasingly The crisis of public opinion (crisis of discourse power, crisis of trust, crisis of legitimacy) has also become more confused and is likely to lead to mass protests or movements at any time, with an increasingly visible social movement and collective resistance. If we want to improve the current situation of public crisis communication, we can start from the mechanism of public discussion and use public discussion to spread positive emotions and propaganda on the issue of

trust, and then make trust itself act on public discussion. In this way, public crises can be easily overcome. The challenge, however, is to give a positive stimulus to trust, which is still a question worth considering.

If the current state of public crisis communication is improved in a positive way, we can not only mobilize and increase the trust of each individual (which is of course very difficult, but with the right strategy and persistence, it can be achieved). Of course, the easiest way to manage crisis communication is based on trust and the overall state of public discussion. For example, the management of issue framing in public conflict management, which uses news as a framework to subliminally guide the perceptions, judgements, emotions and intentions of audiences to manage conflicts and crises, will not be repeated here.

The current crisis communication management has been improved, but it seems that the above-mentioned inverse approach is not very feasible, or has failed to find a good entry point for targeted management, but the interaction between trust and public discussion has the potential to be a breakthrough for both.

Public discussion requires a certain platform, and most of the current platforms are internet-backed media, which are riddled with problems due to the low threshold of discourse power and are a key point in dealing a fatal blow to trust. But one of the few hopeful things is that these media are again finding ways to make public discussion more binding (for example, they now show the location of IPs for comments), which is a small step but indeed a giant step towards regulating public discussion. Public habits also take time to develop, and like the reverse approach to mitigating public crises, it takes one landmark effort after another.

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