

Research on Tag-Based Narrative of Online Content and Associated Risks

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Abstract: *The production and dissemination of online content have always been important aspects of cyberspace governance. This paper selects tags as an entry point, analyzing how online content achieves the expression and prominence of its substance through three processes: production tagging, dissemination tagging, and reception tagging, utilizing tags as a narrative technique. Simultaneously, the research explores the risks associated with tag-based narratives during online content dissemination, including content distortion, group induction, and online conflict. It conducts a root cause analysis of these risks, aiming to provide new insights for cyberspace governance through the investigation of their origins. Meanwhile, this paper has discussed some constructive solutions to control the risks associated with the use of tags.*

Keywords: Online Content, Production and Dissemination, Tag-Based Narrative, Risk Research.

1. Introduction

The hashtag was first introduced on Twitter. According to the support page on Twitter, the hashtag is explained as allowing users to search for keywords or topics and easily follow topics they are interested in. Platforms typically suggest users prefix keywords or important phrases in their posts with the “#” symbol to add tags, thereby helping the platform categorize tweets and enable quick searches, ultimately enhancing the user experience. Guided by hashtags, different users in the network gather around topics of interest, forming specific online groups. Thus, tags carve out a virtual space in cyberspace with its own characteristics, referred to as a “third space” [1]. It is precisely this attribute of creating a space for self-expression that makes hashtags and the resulting “third space” crucial nodes for various entities in the network to compete for users and traffic.

Currently, numerous online platforms, including social platforms, shopping platforms, and video platforms, are engaged in fierce competition for users and traffic. Both platforms and users often add tags during the production and dissemination of online content to create distinctive topics that attract users. Consequently, cyberspace exhibits a style of tag-based narrative in online content production and dissemination. On the positive side, this tag-based narrative facilitates user aggregation within the “third space,” strengthens digital connections between others, and enriches their digital lives. However, the widespread use of tags also leads to their misuse, resulting in numerous cybersecurity issues, such as leveraging tags to manipulate group emotions to create cyberbullying, or using tags to create network jargon, concealing illegal information.

2. The Formation Chain of Tag-Based Narrative in Online Content

The tag-based narrative of online content refers to the mapping formed between online content and tags during its production and dissemination. The content is constructed, transmitted, received, and solidified by tags, thereby enabling the tags to express and narrate the content within cyberspace. After a complete tag-based narrative cycle, online content

enters a repetitive, cyclical state of tagging, spontaneously reinforcing its connection with the tags. Typically, a complete tag-based narrative involves three processes: production tagging, dissemination tagging, and reception tagging.

2.1 Production Tagging

The production of online content has evolved through four stages: portal website integrating content, user-generated content (UGC) [2], professional user-generated content (PUGC) [3], and artificial intelligence-generated content (AIGC) [4]. At different stages, the main producers of online content and the forms of content they provide vary.

In the portal website stage, content was primarily aggregated and provided by web service providers. Different providers often branded their websites with distinct themes based on the text, video, or music content they offered. These themes were essentially labels for content differentiation. Although not explicitly called “tags” at this stage, this differentiation contained an evolutionary trend from broad themes towards smaller tags.

With the emergence of social platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Weibo, the main producers of online content gradually shifted from large web service providers to the multitude of smaller users on these platforms. Thus, online content production entered the UGC and PUGC stages. In this phase, online content is primarily provided by platform users. Users expected platforms to offer functionality to make their content stand out visually, while platform providers sought to develop technology to simplify massive content management. The collision of these expectations and needs led to the design, development, and widespread use of practical online tags. Currently, platforms like Little Red Book, Weibo, and TikTok all feature tagging systems. Users can self-define tags based on their content or follow existing tags to publish content, grouping their contributions under specific topic sections. During this process, users, as the production subjects, assign content tags to their online content either by self-defining tags or adopting existing ones. This is the process of production tagging.

In addition to individuals who produce online content,

commercial Internet companies also attach the tag to their own content when using it for promotional purposes. During the annual Black Friday sales, online retailers, including Amazon, use a series of tags such as 'Black Friday discounts' to attract customers to promotional activities. Not only do e-commerce platforms use tags for promotion, but social media companies also assign tags to the online content they produce, and even use columns to express these tags, thereby using tags to express their product culture so that the product can attract more users. For example, through investing in and introducing a large number of anime and manga works, Bilibili has created a series of anime and manga tags. After these tags have been used for a long time, Bilibili has attached the label of 'anime and manga hub' to its own products.

2.2 Dissemination Tagging

In the initial state of online content production, producers exhibit three states regarding tag usage: self-defining and using tags; using already established tags; or not using any tags. The first two states correspond to production tagging. After production tagging, content enters the dissemination tagging phase. In this process, the disseminating entity (often the platform or algorithm) assigns dissemination tags to the content. Dissemination tags are implicit tags that, in conjunction with the content tags, determine the direction and intensity of the content's spread.

For content that hasn't undergone production tagging, the disseminating entity typically uses algorithms to decompose it into content units, analyzes these units, assigns implicit content tags, and then, based on these implicit tags, assigns dissemination tags to facilitate transmission. For untagged content, dissemination tagging attaches two implicit tags: an implicit content tag and an implicit dissemination tag.

For content already possessing content tags, dissemination tagging essentially only assigns the implicit dissemination tag. The dissemination process is then governed by the combined effect of the dissemination tag and the visible content tag. This interplay involves both alignment and conflict between the hidden (dissemination) tag and the visible (content) tag, fundamentally reflecting the alignment or conflict between the production subject (user) and the dissemination subject (platform). In reality, alignment is often the case, with conflict being less apparent, primarily because the production subject is typically the disseminator's customer. The disseminator tends to assign higher weights to the content tag to satisfy the user's dissemination needs.

2.3 Reception Tagging

The final link in the tag-based narrative of online content is reception tagging. This process manifests as information receivers not simply receiving the transmitted content tags and the content itself. Instead, while receiving, they assign their own cognitive labels to the content, its producer, and its disseminator. These labels are evaluative tags constructed by individuals based on their own experiences and cognition.

For content tags they agree with, the receiver's evaluative tag aligns with the content tag. They may become continued creators and disseminators of that tag, perpetuating its spread,

deepening the association between the content and the tag, and solidifying the content tag. For content tags they disagree with, the receiver's evaluative tag conflicts with the content tag. They might self-define new content tags and produce tagged content, using the new tag to refute or negate the original one.

Furthermore, based on the received content, receivers also evaluate the media platforms providing dissemination services, constructing evaluative tags for specific platforms as content disseminators. These evaluative tags regarding content dissemination influence the receiver's recognition and usage level of the platform. A positive evaluation may lead to continued use and user loyalty; a negative evaluation may result in the receiver abandoning the platform or even creating new tags on other platforms to criticize or denounce it.

In summary, the tag-based narrative of online content refers to the process where content is assigned content tags, dissemination tags, and evaluative tags during production, dissemination, and reception. Through these tags, the information contained in the online content is expressed and highlighted. This constitutes the complete chain of tag-based narrative for online content.

3. Risk Analysis of Online Content Production and Dissemination under Tag-Based Narrative

Tag-based narrative expresses and highlights online content through hashtags. However, simultaneously, competition exists between different tags and the content they represent for dominance in cyberspace. In this context, tag-based narrative introduces risks to cyberspace. If left uncontrolled, these risks can spill over from virtual online life into real, material life, causing irreparable damage. Different stages of the tag-based narrative process entail distinct risks: the risk of content distortion during production tagging; the risk of group induction during dissemination tagging; and the risk of online conflict during reception tagging.

3.1 Content Distortion under Production Tagging

In tag-based narratives, tags become the primary focus for production, dissemination, and reception, while attention to the content itself becomes secondary. Consequently, to gain more attention, content producers often choose or self-define tags that are easier to attract others, which may cause producers to produce distorted online content. The content distortion can be classified into three types. In such cases, the produced online content loses its inherent authenticity and causes harm to others or society.

The first situation is that producers use exaggerated content tags; however, the online content they produced is not consistent with the tag they attached. These online content producers hope to increase the readership and click-through rates of their content in this way. In this case, the use of tags does not have a significant impact on society or others. People often choose to ignore such exaggerated tags after reading the actual content.

The second type is producers fabricating tags contrary to facts.

The online content producer may fabricate content to fit a fabricated tag. This type of behavior often leads to online rumors and defamation, and over time, it can even result in cyberbullying. Take a well-known example, the devastating impact of cyberbullying on adolescents was demonstrated in the USA through the death from suicide in January 2010 of a 15-year-old girl called Phoebe Prince. Miss Prince had been subjected to continuous harassment and taunting from some of her classmates at South Hadley High School, much of which was carried out through online social networking sites and through text messages on mobile phones (Boston Globe, 11 May 2010) [5].

In addition to the above two types of tag-based narrative that distort the content, criminals also use tags to hide illegal and criminal information. These tags are commonly referred to as criminal jargon on the internet. For instance, online fraudsters use tags like “for free” or “cashback” to create nested tags, combined with false content, gradually luring receivers into online scam traps.

Above all, under the process of production tagging, the tag can be misused to exaggerate content, spreading rumours, cause defamation, and form internet slang to distort the authenticity of content so that it can attract others to click on their online content, affect the legitimate rights and interests of others, hide illegal and criminal information, and so on.

3.2 Group Induction under Dissemination Tagging

Gustave Le Bon stated in his work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*: “It is not by reason, but most often in spite of it, that are created those sentiments that are the mainsprings of all civilization —sentiments such as honour, self-sacrifice, religious faith, patriotism, and the love of glory”[6]. In other words, while humans possess reason, irrational emotions often drive them more powerfully. And thus, many behaviors people engage in involve emotional expression. In the process of tag-based narrative, people also use the tags to express their emotions.

In the cyberspace field, real emotions expressed in online content are transmitted through the network and aggregated via identical or similar tags, forming an emotional field within cyberspace. Within this online emotional field, the audience mutually identifies with, infects, and reinforces each other emotionally, leading to the formation of relatively similar attitudes and emotional inclinations. Under this emotional resonance, individual emotions connect, forming a highly consistent torrent of online emotion. This can lead to the formation of extreme group sentiments, triggering severe online public opinion events. Guided by such public opinion, group emotions can even transform into real-world group actions.

Based on the above analysis, during the transmission process, the network platform, as the medium, uses technology to give network content a hidden dissemination tag. The Dissemination tags determine the direction and intensity of content spread. This means platforms controlling dissemination tags can technically dictate the transmission of content and its associated emotions. On the one hand, online platforms, as media outlets, can establish or support tags that

imply the emotions that they want the public to have, and give these tags more web traffic so that the public tends to pay attention to these tags, and even produce more online content that matches these tags. As people’s attention is captured by these tags, the emotions implied in the tags also begin to control people’s emotions. Once people’s emotions are controlled, their behaviour is also largely controlled. Thus, through tagging, the emotions of a group can be manipulated, and through this emotional manipulation, group behaviour can be triggered. On the other hand, platforms serving as communication media can also use the same method to weaken the emotional expression of groups, thereby mitigating group behaviour in reality.

3.3 Online Conflict under Reception Tagging

At the end of the tag-based narrative, the public, based on their evaluation of the tags and their corresponding content, will come into conflict with online content producers and online platforms that act as transmitters. Recipients of online content who are dissatisfied with it may resort to insulting the content producers in the comment section or via private messages. Additionally, dissatisfaction with the online platform may lead them to give lower ratings or repeatedly file complaints through the platform’s customer service. To a certain extent, insults or complaints made by individuals do not have a significant impact, but insults between a group and an individual or between groups often cause significant online public sentiment and cause significant harm to individuals or society.

Long-term verbal abuse of an individual by a group may constitute cyberbullying or cyber harassment. Such behaviour may cause the individual to become overwhelmed, leading to mental illness or even suicide. Not only the above example from the United States, but also the example from South Korea below, corroborate this point. South Korean athlete Go Yu-min, who endured prolonged cyberbullying from netizens over her competition performance and personal life, committed suicide.

Similarly, network conflicts between groups can also cause significant social harm. The public’s understanding and evaluation of symbolic tags shape their collective understanding of the symbols. Individuals with similar circumstances, preferences, motivations, and symbolic systems find it easier to validate each other’s logic, achieve tacit understanding, and create exclusive contexts compared to those outside their discourse system [7]. Consequently, netizens sharing the same evaluative tag for certain content tend to cluster together, forming exclusive online groups. Driven by exclusivity, these groups often engage in negation and conflict with others bearing different evaluative tags. In cyberspace, conflicts between groups may initially manifest as arguments, then escalate into mutual insults, and finally, online insults may turn into offline insults and physical altercations. Once offline arguments and fights occur, online conflicts turn into real conflicts, which may cause physical harm to the people involved in the conflict, disrupt normal social life and work order, and cause irreparable damage.

The expression of online content uses tags as a narrative technique. From a normal narrative perspective, the attributes

of narrative techniques should be neutral, but how these techniques are used can lead to different results. Therefore, we need to explore the causes of the risks associated with the misuse of tags.

4. Root Cause Analysis of Risks in Tag-Based Narrative of Online Content

Tag-Based narrative creates different risks in its different processes. We explore the root causes of risk generation from three aspects: self-actualization for content producers, technology application for content deliverers, and rational cognition for content receivers.

4.1 Self-Need Fulfillment Stimulates Acquisition of Web Traffic

To explore the causes of content distortion under production tagging, we must examine the allure of online traffic. Particularly as the internet enters the Web 3.0 era, cyberspace exhibits a Rabelaisian marketplace atmosphere as depicted by Bakhtin. In this marketplace, adjacent relationships between people are equal, free, and devoid of hierarchy; it is all-encompassing and regenerative [8]. This means digital life overall presents a decentralized pattern and trend, implying that individuals in the network can become traffic nodes or traffic centers.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, he posits that human motivation has five levels, from low to high: the basic needs, the safety needs, the belongingness and love needs, the esteem needs, and the need for self-actualization [9]. In the internet age, massive traffic can help individuals fulfill these five levels. Becoming a traffic node or center allows individuals to monetize traffic to meet basic physiological and safety needs. Simultaneously, as online traffic increases, individuals become "opinion leaders" within groups in cyberspace, helping them attain higher-level satisfaction. Thus, traffic monetization brings material satisfaction, while opinion leadership brings spiritual satisfaction. Driven by this trend, individuals seek to gain traffic and become traffic centers to fulfill their own needs. Therefore, in the Rabelaisian marketplace-like cyberspace, people define self-tags through the production, dissemination, and reception of online content, hoping to gain attention and increase traffic by highlighting these self-tags, thereby satisfying their own needs.

4.2 Technology Dominance Forms Digital Power Control

In the tag-based narrative of online content, both production and dissemination are attached to tags. People's reception of the information contained is largely dependent on the expression of the tags. Therefore, human subjects in cyberspace essentially receive fragments of information. In Baudrillard's theory, he described postmodernism as a playing with the fragments and vestiges of past cultures, theories and ideas; meanwhile, he claims that in contemporary postmodern society "reality" has dissolved into fragments and subjects are in the process of disappearing [10]. This fragmentation causes the subject to lose control over the original information, leading to an inverted state where the subject and object are reversed: fragmented information gains

control over the subject's cognition. This control is a form of symbolic and media control, stemming from symbolic power and media power. Through this power, control and induction of groups can be achieved.

Currently, the symbolic and media power in cyberspace is dominated by dissemination platforms that master technology. The information received by users on major platforms is matched and pushed by algorithms. In other words, the production, dissemination, and acquisition of information are actually dominated and controlled by algorithmic technology. Algorithmic technology constructs the power structure within cyberspace. If online users want to gain significant traffic and increase their visibility to others, they must submit to the dominance of technology and the dictates of algorithms. This technological dominance and power control manifest throughout the tag-based narrative process. On one hand, power control over content production is exerted through the control of content tags, achieved by regulating existing tags. On the other hand, power control over content dissemination is exerted by attaching hidden dissemination tags via algorithms, thereby controlling the direction and intensity of online content dissemination and regulating traffic for different content to ensure production aligns with platform requirements. For content receivers, technology uses algorithms to precisely deliver content carrying fixed tags. By flooding receivers with large volumes of content bearing the same tags, it manipulates their information intake, thereby forming cognitive control through the sheer volume of identical information labels. Thus, dissemination platforms, wielding technology, achieve power control and dominance within cyberspace through technological hegemony.

4.3 Information Constraints Lead to Lack of Rational Judgment

Whether it's online rumors, online fraud, or cyberbullying, their transformation into real harm is influenced to some extent by the audience's level of subjective rational judgment. The higher the rational cognition and judgment level of netizens, the lower the likelihood of these risks materializing. However, as human individuals are a combination of rationality and sensibility, logic and hormonal regulation, their understanding and judgment of things can only be bounded rationality. Human rational judgment is influenced not only by emotional factors but also by the quantity and quality of information. Quantitatively, as the internet permeates life, it inundates individuals with vast amounts of content and information. Bounded rationality makes it difficult for individuals to process this, leading to a gradual loss of rational understanding and judgment in the ocean of information. Concurrently, amidst this deluge, individuals often spend prolonged periods selecting information that aligns with their interests. This confines their cognition within relatively closed information environments known as "information cocoons" [11]. In such environments, highly homogeneous fragmented information degrades the quality of information necessary for rational understanding and judgment. Thus, information binds the rational cognition of netizens both quantitatively and qualitatively. This makes it difficult for them to rely on rational judgment to avoid corresponding risks when receiving online content laden with various tags.

5. Discussion: Solutions to Control Risks in Tag-Based Narrative of Online Content

In the process of tag-based narratives, the misuse of tags can pose certain risks and cause harm to society and others, but this does not mean that such risks are uncontrollable. Since these risks can have an impact on society, controlling them is not only the responsibility of the public and online platforms involved in the production and dissemination of online content, but also requires supervision and governance by the state. The public, online platforms, and the state should assume their respective responsibilities within their respective roles, forming a long-term mechanism for effective control and governance that combines formal and informal measures.

From the public's perspective, the public should pay attention to maintaining rational thinking. Through rational thinking, whether the public is using or receiving labels and the corresponding online content, they can maintain their own subjectivity. The public maintained its own subjectivity, meaning that public sentiment cannot be easily controlled or manipulated by tags. As a result, group polarization and online conflicts are less likely to occur, and real-world group behaviour will not take place.

From the perspective of online platforms as communication media, platforms need to establish and improve tags and content review mechanisms. In addition to strengthening reviews through regulatory mechanisms, platforms should also establish platform conventions to call on netizens to use tags, produce and receive online content, and conduct themselves online in an appropriate manner. By combining regulatory mechanisms with advocacy through conventions, platforms can govern tags and content, thereby reducing rumors, defamation, bullying, and other harmful content in cyberspace.

From the perspective of the state, what the state needs to do is to supervise the platform and the technology it uses, and address any adverse effects. Algorithm Technology can influence public sentiment on the internet through the control of tags. The state needs to supervise platforms to ensure the technology is used correctly. In addition, the state should promptly address any adverse events that occur on the internet. For example, in the case of online rumours that have a significant impact, the state should quickly ascertain the facts and dispel the rumours as soon as possible.

Through the combination of the public, platforms, and the state, a governance triangle for the production and dissemination of online content is formed. In this way, the tagging of online content can maintain its positive narrative, thereby maintaining the normal order and development of cyberspace.

6. Conclusion

As a symbol and narrative technique in the production and dissemination of online content, tags carry emotional transmission and social significance. On the positive side, tag-based narrative significantly promotes individuals' expression and highlighting of self-characteristics, while also facilitating information management and control. However,

from a negative perspective, the risks it brings—false information, group polarization, and cognitive security — cannot be ignored. Therefore, during the tag-based process of online content production and dissemination, the use of tags should be positively controlled from multiple dimensions and paths, including production, dissemination, reception, and supervision. This aims to harness tags as an important force for building a harmonious online society and promoting cultural prosperity.

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