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Communication Misconduct and Media Ethics in Douyin Self-Media: A Study on the Dissemination of the Record-Sealing System

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of the digital age, the establishment of the Public Security Violation Record Sealing System is primarily designed to help minor offenders reintegrate into social life smoothly. However, this system has encountered prominent media ethical dilemmas in the communication field of short-video self-media. Based on netnography, this paper combines perspectives of communication and law to analyze the actual dissemination of the Public Security Violation Record Sealing System on the Douyin platform and its potential ethical impacts. The study finds that driven by traffic logic, the content of some self-media has largely diluted the legal connotation inherent in public policies. On this basis, this paper argues that it is necessary to further construct a normalized governance paradigm of "tripartite co-governance" to better promote the formation of a clean communication ecosystem.

Keywords: Self-Media, Public Security Violation Record Sealing, Communication Anomie, Media Ethics

1. Introduction

In the digital age, the permanent retention feature of internet information makes it difficult for past blemishes left by law-related individuals to be truly erased. For this reason, the Right to be Forgotten has been continuously extended and deepened in China's judicial practice and information protection field. To further help groups with minor violations escape the "labeling" dilemma, the revised *Law of the People's Republic of China on Public Security Administration Punishments,* which will take effect in January 2026, has newly added the Public Security Violation Record Sealing System. The original intention of this system is to help minor offenders reintegrate into society, reduce social instability caused by identity stigma, and promote the sound development of social order to a certain extent. Nevertheless, when this public policy with the goodwill of "restoring rights" enters short-video platforms, it has given rise to non-negligible chaos in the communication process. Driven by traffic logic, some Douyin self-media, when interpreting and disseminating this policy, tend to extract highly controversial labels and narrow the system content covering multiple situations into a single "drug-related record sealing" through concept substitution. Such emotional and extreme narratives adopted to compete for public attention not only weaken the complex legal

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connotation behind the system but also trigger group "media trials" in cyberspace, and even lead to the phenomenon of "online guilt by association" affecting innocent individuals.

This communication anomie reduces the rational discussion of public policies into an emotional traffic carnival. It seriously hinders the popularization of the core values of the legal system and easily deepens public anxiety about social fairness. How to break the cognitive bias caused by emotional incitement and "information cocoons" in the short-video field, and rebuild public trust in the rule of law on this basis, has become an important issue that must be addressed in current media governance. Against this background, this paper adopts the netnography method to observe and analyze the communication content related to the Public Security Violation Record Sealing System on the Douyin platform. From an interdisciplinary perspective, it attempts to explore the communication deviations of this system in the short-video communication field and their potential ethical impacts.

2. Literature review

2.1. Review of research progress on the Public Security Violation Record Sealing System

In the era of digital memory, the permanent retention feature of the internet makes it difficult for past blemishes of law-related individuals to be erased. To address this challenge, the Right to be Forgotten emerged. This concept originated in the field of European criminal justice, aiming to allow individuals who have completed their sentences to avoid continuous public exposure by the media. It was formally established in the digital field in the 2014 Google case [1]. When introduced into China's local context, scholars define it as a special "personal information right"—the right of an information subject to request information controllers to block or delete outdated negative information on the internet that may damage their social evaluation, after weighing public interests [2].

This legal claim first achieved a breakthrough in the field of minor protection in China. The *Criminal Procedure Law of the People's Republic of China,* revised in 2012, formally established the Juvenile Criminal Record Sealing System, marking an important milestone in China's criminal justice moving toward "de-labeling" [3]. However, as China enters an era of lenient punishment, a large number of minor offenders face the "labeling" dilemma in the process of reintegrating into society. This has promoted the further improvement of relevant systems and triggered academic discussions on the "boundaries of law-related record protection". Relevant studies show that although the legal community generally supports the sealing system, there are still differences in its development direction. First, the majority "active expansion school" advocates gradually extending the sealing scope from minors to adult minor violations, and even proposes weakening or eliminating the stigma effect of criminal records through institutional reform [4, 5]. Second, some scholars with interdisciplinary perspectives point out that in the algorithm era, relying solely on internal sealing measures by judicial organs can no longer effectively protect personal information. The Right to be Forgotten should be extended to cyberspace, and platforms' information management responsibilities should be strengthened [6]. Third, a small number of scholars hold a relatively prudent stance, arguing that excessive expansion of the sealing scope may harm the public's right to know and bring potential social risks. They therefore advocate retaining necessary exception disclosure mechanisms in system design [7].

Overall, academia has always sought a balance between privacy protection and the public's right to know. However, in reality, the consequences of "online guilt by association" caused by minor law-related acts remain prominent [8].

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2.2. Review of research progress on media ethics in the intelligent media era

While the legal community strives to help law-related individuals be "forgotten" in real society through institutional construction, the communication community has observed an opposite phenomenon of "memory retrieval" on internet platforms in the intelligent media era, accompanied by media ethical anomie. This phenomenon is closely related to changes in underlying technical logic. "Information communication is not a natural flow, but a process of layered screening and control" [9]. However, in the intelligent media era, the traditional "gatekeeper" mechanism in news communication has gradually weakened, and information screening and distribution rely more on algorithm systems. Yet, to enhance user stickiness, algorithms tend to push conflict-ridden and dramatic content, giving negative information a communication advantage and squeezing the space for rational discussion [10]. This may exacerbate privacy leaks and the spread of false information [11], and easily trap users in "information cocoons" [12].

In this communication environment, short-video media rely more on emotional rendering to compete for attention. Some communicators use audiovisual symbols such as high-intensity background music, exaggerated subtitles, and incendiary narratives to enhance sensory stimulation, making information communication more emotional and weakening the space for rational discussion [13]. This "decontextualized" expression tends to simplify complex events into emotional judgments, and even evolve into "media trials" in cyberspace, exerting new public opinion pressure and secondary harm on the parties involved [14]. It is worth noting that such media trials are also influenced by specific social psychology in China. Some scholars point out that when the Right to be Forgotten enters China's media environment, it often collides with some netizens' moral evaluation tendency of "hating evil as if it were an enemy", thereby intensifying emotional trials in online public opinion [15].

In summary, the legal community has formed a certain research system on the violation record sealing system and the Right to be Forgotten, and the communication community has conducted extensive discussions on algorithm recommendation mechanisms and short-video media ethical issues. However, existing research still suffers from disciplinary segregation.

3. Analysis and results: a picture of communication anomie from the netnography perspective

3.1. Narrowed narratives of minor law-related acts

Some self-media, driven by traffic logic when disseminating public policy content, often replace original concepts by extracting controversial labels to achieve "narrowing" in communication, thereby mobilizing emotions and gaining traffic. The tipping point for the obvious semantic shift of the "Public Security Violation Record Sealing System" occurred on November 28, 2025, when the account "@Nantong Cultural and Tourism" posted a comment under a popular science video by "@Corps Drug Rehabilitation": "Which young master got hooked on drugs?" This sarcastic remark with class implications was quickly captured and amplified by self-media. In subsequent dissemination, the "Public Security Violation Record Sealing System", which covers a variety of minor violations, was gradually simplified and even replaced with a single "drug-related record sealing".

Typical videos collected show that this process is not accidental. For example, the account "@Correspondent Liu Xuesong" released a video with 210,000 likes, themed directly on "The Concerns About 'Drug-Related Record Sealing' Need to Be Noticed". The account "@Lawyer Chi in Shenzhen" used bold yellow subtitles in its video: "Is the 2026 New Rule 'Drug-Related Record

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Sealing' for Drug Users or Ordinary People?" In titles, copywriting, and visual presentation, these expressions intentionally deviate from the original scope of the law, simplifying a complex institutional issue into an oppositional moral choice.

Fundamentally, such concept substitution caters to platform mechanisms and audience emotions. Yu Guoming argues that platform-based media are moving from "information dissemination" to "cognitive construction" through the reorganization of communication relationships [16], profoundly influencing how the public understands relevant issues. The label "drug use" itself is highly sensitive in public perception. When self-media directly link the Public Security Violation Record Sealing System to this label, they are more likely to trigger emotional reactions from the audience, leading the public to form one-sided or even wrong understandings of the system. Eventually, a rational public policy discussion is compressed into an emotional traffic carnival, which to some extent squeezes the content of accounts that conduct rational discussions on the sealing system, hindering the effective dissemination of the system itself.

3.2. Emotional incitement and "media trials" in the short-video context

In the short-video communication environment, public attention is a scarce resource. To retain users within a limited time, some communicators often abandon patient and rational explanations of complex issues, instead relying heavily on emotional rendering to create communication effects. Short videos are characterized by fast pacing, strong visual impact, and highly condensed expression. These features make it easy for serious policy discussions to be simplified into confrontations between positions. When such emotional expressions become extreme, they may produce a communication effect similar to a "media trial" in cyberspace. As Neumann pointed out in the Spiral of Silence theory [17], the public opinion environment exerts pressure on individual expression. Dominant opinions expand continuously as they are strengthened, while marginalized opinions tend to fade into silence, further amplifying mainstream emotions.

Take a video released by "@China Blue News", which received over 1.7 million likes. It adopts a news studio setting and anchor appearance, which to some extent enhances the "authoritativeness" of the content. However, its narrative is clearly emotionally charged. Subtitles such as "No matter the reason, drugs must be banned completely" and "Why should we empathize with lawbreakers?" appear on the screen. Such rhetorical expressions directly set "understanding the sealing system" against "defending lawbreakers", pushing the discussable institutional issue further into a moralized and emotional judgment framework.

In this context, viewers are less likely to refer to specific legal provisions to understand the system, and more likely to be led into simplistic moral judgments. In the comment section, a large number of users directly deny or exclude the relevant groups, debating whether they "should be forgiven". It can be seen that such communication changes the way of discussion through emotional mobilization, weakens the space for rational judgment, and easily exerts new public opinion pressure on relevant individuals. This emotional catharsis led by short-video media not only constitutes a substantial "media trial" against specific groups but also emotionally dilutes the spirit of the rule of law.

3.3. Expansion of punishment logic and the phenomenon of "online guilt by association"

In the short-video communication environment, emotional incitement easily leads to public opinion polarization, characterized by mutual weakening, dilution, conflict, and confrontation [18]. Discussions often shift from the policy itself to specific individuals, and even evolve into online

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violence. In China, the revision of laws (such as the Public Security Violation Record Sealing System) is a rigorous legal process. Deputies to the People's Congress put forward motions based on investigations, which is a normal performance of duties. However, in the context of media anomie, this process is greatly simplified. Some netizens turn their dissatisfaction with the system into personal attacks on specific deputies, leading to the unlimited expansion of "punishment logic" in cyberspace.

The online violence against Zhu Zhengfu, a deputy to the National People's Congress, is a typical example of this problem. Zhu Zhengfu previously called for the establishment of a "criminal record elimination system" to help law-related individuals "restore rights" and reintegrate into society. However, after the relevant policy was narrowly disseminated by self-media and public emotions were amplified, some netizens targeted him personally, engaging in "doxxing" (online human flesh search and privacy exposure), fabricating and spreading rumors online that "the deputy's son took drugs, so he advocates record sealing". Eventually, Zhu Zhengfu had to publicly refute the rumor that "no family member has ever been involved in drugs" and report the relevant acts to public security organs.

This chaos profoundly exposes the abnormal spread of "punishment logic" and the prevalence of "online guilt by association" in online society. On the one hand, netizens adopt a conspiracy theory perspective of "presumed guilty", stigmatizing deputies' legitimate performance of duties and policy proposals as "abuse of power for personal gain". On the other hand, such attacks cross personal boundaries, quickly spreading from the deputy himself to his innocent family members. In recent years, the legal community has strongly called for addressing the disorderly expansion and generalization of the consequences of minor law-related acts [8]. Such "online guilt by association" in the digital era has to some extent broken the basic boundary of modern rule of law, which is "individual responsibility for one's own crimes" [4].

3.4. Analysis of positive cases avoiding the abuse of the "public interest" discourse

Faced with the common concept substitution and emotional incitement in the short-video field, breaking "information cocoons" and rebuilding public trust in the rule of law has become the key to media governance in the intelligent media era.

In this public opinion event, some self-media incited confrontation in the name of "warning against traps", while some creators tried to explain the issue more rationally. A "pseudo two-person debate" video released by Douyin blogger "@Oatmeal Is a Golden Retriever" is a representative positive case.

In the video, the blogger plays both the "pro" and "con" sides alone, presenting the deep conflict between "emotion" and "law". The con side, representing the public's perspective, expresses anger rooted in the public's historical memory of drug issues, emotional resonance with the sacrifices of anti-drug police officers, and vigilance against privileged groups exploiting system loopholes. It should be noted that such emotions cannot be simply regarded as expressions of "legal illiteracy". At a deeper level, they are a true reflection of the generalized moral psychology of "hating evil as if it were an enemy" in Chinese traditional culture in cyberspace [13]. Meanwhile, the pro side corrects the common misunderstanding that "the sealing system only targets drug users", clarifying that the Public Security Violation Record Sealing System does not serve a specific group. Its more important institutional significance lies in protecting vulnerable groups at the bottom who are labeled as administrative violators due to excessive behaviors such as wage claims and rights defense, helping them achieve a certain degree of "restoration of rights" and regain the opportunity to return to normal social life [5]. In addition, the video mentions exceptions to the system, explaining to the

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audience that the Public Security Violation Record Sealing System retains strict exception disclosure mechanisms in specific scenarios such as handling cases by state organs. This explanation alleviates the public's legal concerns that "absolute sealing" may affect public security to a certain extent [7].

From the perspective of media ethics, the significance of this case lies in that it breaks away from the pattern of "exploiting public interest to harvest traffic", and truly fulfills the social responsibility of mass media to objectively clarify and correctly guide public opinion on complex social issues [14]. The ending of the video is thought-provoking: "Public anger is not only directed at a specific law, but also a deep anxiety about whether the bottom line of social fairness is being eroded"—as the saying goes, "Water can carry a boat, but it can also overturn it". How to conduct rational communication while understanding such emotions may be a more noteworthy direction in the dissemination of similar issues. Only by respecting the emotional background and local cultural psychology of the audience, and transforming grand legal discourse into grounded and logical rational communication, can we effectively penetrate the fog of public opinion and achieve true reconciliation between the goodwill of national rule of law and the people's simple sense of justice.

4. Discussion: ethical reconstruction based on social responsibility and the concept of "restoring rights"

4.1. Resetting rights: reinterpreting the sealing system

Correcting communication anomie first requires guiding the public to re-understand the original intention of the Public Security Violation Record Sealing System. In the narrow dissemination of self-media, this system is often simplified as a tool to whitewash a small number of "drug users" or "privileged groups". Legally, however, its original purpose is to reduce the impact of labeling on minor offenders and help them reintegrate into society. Against the background of lenient punishment in China, some grassroots groups may be identified as administrative violators due to behaviors such as wage claims. If relevant records are permanently retained and repeatedly disseminated, they will continue to face obstacles in employment and daily life.

Therefore, resetting rights means breaking the "black-and-white" moral trial mentality and placing the localized practice of the Right to be Forgotten in a broader perspective of social fairness. The sealing system is not a tolerance for illegal acts, but an embodiment of the principle of "proportionality between crime and punishment" in the spirit of modern rule of law. As Zhang Mingkai emphasized, criminal law should adhere to the principle of proportionality between crime and punishment to avoid imposing excessive social evaluation burdens on perpetrators [19]. At the same time, we must face up to and respond to the public's reasonable concerns. In communication, it should be clearly explained to the audience that the system is not "absolute sealing", and it retains strict exception disclosure mechanisms in specific situations such as handling cases by state organs. Only by objectively explaining the legal goodwill of "granting rights to restore rights" under the premise of fully protecting the public's right to know and public security can we effectively resolve the audience's resistance caused by historical trauma memories and generalized moral psychology, reduce misunderstandings, and facilitate rational public discussions.

4.2. Correcting discourse: rectifying emotional and extreme expressions

Short videos tend to simplify complex issues when disseminating public policies. To compete for attention, some communicators abandon rational analysis of complex legal issues, instead relying on

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high-intensity emotional rendering and fallacious rhetorical strategies, triggering "media trials" that bypass judicial procedures in cyberspace.

To change this situation, adjustments must be made in communication methods. "In public communication, the media is not only an information provider but also bears the responsibility of maintaining social order and public rationality" [20]. For example, the debate video mentioned above demonstrates that excellent media expression should acknowledge and respect the rational logic behind public anger, while patiently dissecting legal principles based on solid data and objective legislative context. In future media practice, such a "two-way examination" communication strategy should be vigorously promoted. Grand and abstract legal discourse should be transformed into grounded and logical rational communication. Extreme narratives such as "inciting confrontation" and "forcing empathy" must be abandoned. A complete and objective picture of facts should replace out-of-context marginal labels, thereby penetrating the "information cocoons" woven by algorithms and guiding the public from emotional catharsis to rational policy discussion.

4.3. Promoting the paradigm: normalized governance of "tripartite co-governance"

Faced with the complex and ever-changing communication ecosystem in the intelligent media era, relying solely on a single subject's strength can no longer effectively curb communication anomie. Addressing the public opinion chaos caused by the Public Security Violation Record Sealing System requires the construction of a new normalized governance paradigm integrating "platform heteronomy", "legal regulation", and "content self-discipline".

First, platform heteronomy: Establish content supervision and distribution guidance mechanisms, and introduce algorithmic recognition for sensitive law-related terms. As a core node of information distribution, platforms should not merely act as technically "neutral" entities but also assume basic gatekeeping responsibilities. In the dissemination of public policies, more flexible content identification and correction mechanisms can be established. When deliberately simplified or misinterpreted expressions such as "drug-related record sealing" spread rapidly in short videos, platforms should use algorithms to identify relevant content and appropriately restrict the spread of emotional and confrontational videos. Meanwhile, explanatory content from mainstream media and professional legal accounts can be introduced to help users access complete information and reduce repeated recommendations of one-sided and emotional content.

Second, legal regulation: Improve liability investigation mechanisms for malicious exposure acts. In cyberspace, amplified emotions easily shift discussions from institutional issues to personal attacks, and even evolve into online violence and "online guilt by association". Clearer legal constraints are needed for acts such as doxxing, rumor-mongering, and defamation by some self-media and netizens exploiting public issues. The liability investigation mechanism for infringement can be further improved to lower the threshold for victims to collect evidence and safeguard their rights, and increase penalties for malicious doxxing and fabrication of facts. Meanwhile, typical cases can be used for guidance to gradually clarify the clear boundary that "cyberspace is not a lawless place", better protect personal privacy and reputation rights, and ensure that normal public expression is not excessively interfered with.

Third, content self-discipline: Strengthen self-inspection awareness before content release. Whether professional news organizations or grassroots self-media, content creators are the cornerstone of the media ecosystem. The majority of creators should consciously improve media literacy and legal awareness. Especially when interpreting legal policies, they should strive to maintain the integrity of information and avoid simplifying or exaggerating expressions out of

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context. Creators should always take social responsibility as a criterion to examine whether their content crosses moral boundaries or easily triggers group confrontation. Only by strictly controlling the quality and ethics of content from the source can we jointly create a rational, healthy, and clean legal communication network environment.

5. Conclusion

The warmth of the rule of law is often reflected in whether it can reserve space for individuals to reform and start anew; the responsibility of the media lies in whether it can adhere to basic rationality and restraint even when public opinion emotions are constantly amplified. When dealing with similar public policy issues, communication practices should not only cater to emotional resonance driven by traffic logic but also return to factual basis, legal interpretation, and social responsibility.

This study still has some limitations. On the one hand, the samples selected are mainly from the Douyin short-video platform, with insufficient attention paid to other media fields such as Weibo and WeChat Video Channel. On the other hand, this study mainly adopts the netnography method and has not incorporated large-scale data mining, audience questionnaires, and other research methods. Subsequent research can expand the scope based on this study and conduct more systematic cross-platform comparisons to present a comprehensive picture of the legal communication ecosystem in the intelligent media era.

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