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Research on International Public Opinion

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International public opinion provides an essential window for understanding the global landscape and international trends. It not only guides practices but is also important for academic research.

In some fields, international public opinion refers to international news in a traditional and narrow sense. However, with social developments, technological progress, and the broadening of the concept of public opinion, the connotation of international public opinion should also become more extensive. In terms of types of publishers, sources such as news media, self-media, think tanks, academic institutions, and government agencies should be included in international public opinion. Regarding content, the concept should cover not only news, but also think tank research reports, government information and perspectives, and views from influencers or impactful groups on social media. Above situation imposes higher requirements on international public opinion research and works.

Currently, there are several issues with regard to understanding

international public opinion that require attention and reflection.

I. How to recognize and position China-related issues in identifying general trends in international public opinion.

When trying to understand the general trends of international public opinion, some research tends to over-emphasize China-related issues. For example, researchers may regard China-related issues as mainstream and long-term focus in global public opinion; treat China-related issues as the core focus of Western (or other countries' or regions') public opinion during a specific period; or overestimate or overreact to the intensity of China-related issues in some specific countries and regions.

Assessments of general trends of international public opinion involve not only the rigor of academic research, but also premises and order of policy research. There are two possible scenarios. In the first scenario, researchers believe that China-related issues are at the heart of public opinion in a specific country or region and devote themselves to analyzing such issues every day. In contrast, in the second scenario, researchers are convinced that public opinion in a specific country or region consists of multiple concerns, including—but not limited to—China-related issues. These two assessments lead to completely different policymaking premises. Research on international public opinion should be unbiased.

Although China has received increasing attention from international society in recent years, China-related issues are not the core focus if international public opinion is viewed as a whole from a long-term perspective. The fact that China-related issues are not central should not necessarily be seen as the unimportance of China, and it is determined by the nature of public opinion. First, public opinion in major countries pays more attention to domestic issues, especially in the United States, European countries, and Japan. Second, the general public, including

self-media users and opinion leaders, is more interested in topics related to their own lives.

The problems that arise during research and work, however, are both subjective and objective. With regard to subjectivity, it is understandable that Chinese researchers and practitioners pay more attention to China-related issues when observing international public opinion. As for objectivity, working methods, patterns, and cognitive inertia should receive greater attention.

For example, there is a vast array of information from international media, think tanks, social media, and other sources every day. Researchers can identify many monographic study topics and produce meaningful results if they concentrate on China-related issues. However, researchers should keep the big picture in mind when examining China-related materials and pay attention to sources when identifying general trends. Quantitative analysis is required when researchers make qualitative assessments. Researchers should at least be able to address the following questions: During a specific period, what issues do people within a specific area pay attention to? Among these issues, what is the overall intensity of China-related issues, evaluated in terms of the proportion of publications and social media comments that such issues appear in? Aside from China-related issues, what other topics receive the most attention, and how much more attention do they receive in comparison? Are there differences in attitudes toward and the intensity of hot topics or China-related issues across various countries or regions, such as the United States, the West, and developing countries? From a mid- to long-term perspective, how important is the change in attention paid to China-related issues at a given point? Addressing these questions is the prerequisite for understanding the world.

The world is diverse. People from different strata, regions, and countries enjoy unique social environments, lifestyles, and thinking

habits. Work and research on international public opinion should take this into consideration and approach changes in international public opinion from a broader perspective. Only then can the work and research reflect global trends comprehensively and objectively.

II. Paying more attention to sources, levels, and trends when assessing public opinion concerning China.

1. Unbalanced conclusions due to overreliance on certain sources.

Overreliance on sources and platforms that focus on China-related content will produce path dependence, leading to unbalanced conclusions with regard to public opinion concerning China.

Relying on the Chinese editions of international media outlets is an example of this issue. Many renowned international media outlets have set up Chinese websites. Their Chinese branches have connections with the main outlet; however, their news editing processes are relatively independent and have uneven levels of proficiency. For example, most content displayed on The New York Times' homepage focuses on domestic issues, aside from subjects such as Trump's relationship with Russia—an international subject that is intrinsically domestic. International affairs without concerning the U.S. seldom appear. In contrast, the Chinese version of The New York Times focuses more on China-related issues. In addition, many Chinese website designs have no strict correspondence to those of the English websites. Moreover, much of the content on the Chinese website has little impact on the global level. Thus, relying on the Chinese editions of international media outlets will undoubtedly lead to biased conclusions if researchers treat them as a vital source of international public opinion. Instead, the Chinese website should, at most, be regarded as a platform that conveys the American perspectives to China and as a source for examining the changes in American news priorities.

2. Insufficient understanding of the richness of international public opinion on China and lack of multidimensional analysis.

Some researchers pay great attention to opinions about China from Western media and think tanks, especially those from the U.S. However, as mentioned above, international public opinion exists at multiple levels. Paying attention to only Western opinions falls far short of meeting the requirements of current research and work.

Take international public opinion on social media as an example. Over the past few years, we have witnessed huge differences between the perspectives expressed on mainstream media and those expressed on social media within Western countries, such as the United States. Opposition and splits are common in these countries. Mainstream media no longer represents the entire field of public opinion. Therefore, it is essential to consider opinions and voices expressed on social media and to pay more attention to differences between grassroots self-media and mainstream media.

Dealing with the relationships between public opinion from Western and non-Western countries, and between opinions in English and in other languages is another example. There are differences in public opinion concerning China within Western countries as well as among Western countries and other countries. Another scenario should also be considered: on a given China-related issue, within a single country, there may be significant divergences between opinions expressed in English and those expressed in local languages, even in Western countries. This phenomenon is not only reflected in local official media but also on social media platforms. In addition to the backgrounds and features of some English language media outlets, communication techniques and other operational factors may contribute to such divergences.

3. More emphasis on real-time and short-term research while lacking

medium- to long-term analysis regarding international public opinion on China

Assessment of international public opinion on China involves risk evaluation, as well as regular hotspot and trend analysis. For example, if one particular issue is examined from a short-term angle, researchers may conclude that there is rising tension. However, from a medium- to long-term perspective, the situation may be far from severe in comparison with its past levels of tension. Researchers may falsely regard the current “episodes” as “crises” and “low to medium risks” as “high risks.” This, in turn, may cause policy overreactions if the researchers lack essential knowledge of history and of changes in public opinion concerning China over the past few decades.

With regard to risk warning, the enumeration of potential risks is possible. However, excessive risk warnings may bring about excessive policy reactions. To facilitate policy decisions, more precise evaluations are needed. In general, defining a specific issue with solid arguments provides a rigorous foundation for policy research and does not generate major risks. To accomplish this, researchers must have an in-depth understanding of history, a comprehensive mastery of and insights into medium- to long term trends of international public opinion concerning China.

III. Research methods for analyzing international public opinion should be more scientific and modern.

1. Interactions among research on international public opinion, international studies, and foreign service should be strengthened.

In many cases, research on international public opinion can be viewed as the infrastructure for international studies and foreign service. As builders for the fundamental infrastructure, researchers should understand users’ demands better, especially their needs under new circumstances.

During the COVID-19 crisis, open-source information has become the primary channel for glimpsing the outside world due to limitations on in-person interactions. Many institutions and researchers have increasing demand for research to help them better understand situations and trends with regard to specific regions and issues; however, this increased demand has yet to be met by the supply side. The supply side may possess a great deal of open-source information without knowing where the demand and researchers' requirements are. It functions ineffectively as a result of following the old working model. The interaction mechanism between the demand side and the supply side urgently needs to be upgraded.

2. The integration of technology and practice should be strengthened.

With technological development, advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and big data, have been extensively adopted in tasks related to public opinion and have achieved promising results. The integration of technology and practice has yet to be strengthened in the field of international public opinion research and works. Technology and practice can fuel each other greatly.

The adoption of advanced technologies can serve as a “multiplier” to work proficiency in international public opinion research and works. Recently, a research report by The Daily Beast combined technology and manual labor to investigate internet ghostwriters used by different American political forces to attack each other. The report digs deeply into ghostwriters' social media accounts, in which the ghostwriters claim to be think tanks or media professionals. It reveals that internet ghostwriting has advanced from registering ghost accounts to push public opinions to utilizing fictitious identities, targeted marketing, and the massive production of opinion leaders. If U.S. public opinion researchers lack the essential technical means to discover and circumvent issues such as ghostwriting, they will inevitably become victims of information warfare.

3. Public opinion research should consider incorporating field research methods.

For a long time, research on international public opinion primarily adopts open-source information research methods. Ideally, it should also include field research methodology, such as polling and field trips. In this regard, several international think tanks and research institutions, such as the Pew Research Center, already have rich experience and strong foundations. Polls may indeed contain various possible errors; however, comparing poll results with open-source information can improve the accuracy of research findings. It is difficult to achieve the same effect through open-source information research alone. Research on international public opinion in China still has much room for improvement.

IV. Conclusions

Comprehensive and accurate mastery of the current landscape is the foundation for academic research and the first step of decision-making. Researchers should work reliably and avoid following others blindly. In view of a fast-changing world, research on international public opinion in China requires immediate improvements. It also has vast potential for further development. For China, leveraging international public opinion research ability is vital for understanding the outside world and properly dealing with domestic and foreign issues. While research standards are rising, more resources and attention should be devoted to the further development of international public opinion research in China.

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