

# **Research on Public Opinion Handling Strategies for Emergencies in Private Colleges and Universities in the AI Era**

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## **Abstract**

**The rapid development of artificial intelligence technology has profoundly reshaped the information-communication ecosystem, placing public opinion governance of emergencies in colleges and universities amid unprecedented opportunities and challenges. As an important component of China's higher-education system, private colleges and universities feature particularities in school-running resources, social recognition and management mechanisms, which render their handling of public opinion concerning emergencies more sensitive and complicated. Against the backdrop of the AI era, this paper systematically analyzes the typological characteristics and communication rules of public opinion triggered by emergencies in private colleges and universities. It further explores practical challenges confronted by current public-opinion handling in terms of technology application, management mechanisms and institutional construction. On this basis, it puts forward systematic strategies including establishing an intelligent monitoring and early-warning system, optimizing the collaborative disposal mechanism, improving crisis communication capacity, and perfecting the institutional guarantee framework. It is expected to provide theoretical references and practical approaches for private colleges and universities to enhance public-opinion governance capacity and safeguard campus stability as well as institutional reputation.**

## **Keywords**

**Artificial Intelligence (AI), private colleges and universities, emergencies, public opinion handling.**

## **1. Introduction**

Fueled by generative AI and algorithmic recommendation technologies, information communication has rapidly shifted toward decentralization, emotionalization and fission-driven diffusion. Given their dense populations and high social exposure, higher-education institutions risk emergencies escalating into severe online public-opinion crises. Relative to public universities, private ones suffer constraints in historical accumulation, resource endowments and social recognition, making them more susceptible to AI-driven public-opinion shocks that may trigger cascading damages to enrollment, financing and institutional reputation. Set within the AI-restructured communication landscape, this study examines emergency typologies and public-opinion evolutionary patterns of private colleges and universities, identifies core dilemmas including inadequate technological empowerment, fragmented management mechanisms and deficient institutional safeguards, and develops a systematic response framework covering intelligent monitoring, collaborative governance, targeted communication guidance and institutional optimization. It addresses existing research gaps concerning private institutions' unique vulnerabilities, providing new insights for classified-governance theory in higher education and actionable measures for private

universities to strengthen risk prevention, maintain campus stability and safeguard institutional reputation.

## **2. Analysis of Characteristics of Public Opinion on Emergencies in Private Colleges and Universities in the AI Era**

### **2.1. Types and Characteristics of Emergencies in Private Colleges and Universities**

Emergencies in private colleges and universities refer to events that occur suddenly during the operation of the institution and may have already caused, or are likely to cause, serious impacts on the normal order of the school, the rights and interests of teachers and students, and the reputation of the institution, thereby requiring prompt response and handling[1]. By the domain in which they occur, they mainly fall into the following categories: campus safety incidents, educational and teaching incidents, incidents concerning the rights and interests of teachers and students, and school management incidents.

The prominent characteristics of emergencies in private colleges and universities are manifested as follows: high sensitivity - given the public's certain degree of bias against private education, negative events are more easily labeled and amplified; strong interconnections - core interest issues such as enrollment, employment, and fee collection are often intertwined, and a single incident may trigger a chain reaction; and limited response resources - compared with public institutions, private colleges and universities have relatively fewer resources to mobilize in terms of public relations capacity, government support, and media relations.

### **2.2. New Features of Public Sentiment Propagation in the Age of AI**

The deep involvement of AI has rendered the dissemination of public opinion during emergencies at private colleges and universities fundamentally different from that in the traditional media era.

Exponential acceleration of dissemination speed. AI algorithm-based recommendation systems enable precise information targeting and viral dissemination on the basis of user interest tags. A single piece of negative information may spread across short-video platforms, social groups, and self-media accounts within hours, forming a "viral spread." Meanwhile, generative AI tools lower the barriers to content production, triggering a rapid surge of comments, interpretations, and secondary creations that further accelerates diffusion.

Diversification and complication of information forms. Public opinion is no longer confined to text and images; short videos, live streaming, AI-synthesized voices, and virtual digital human narration have become mainstream. The advancement of deepfake technology has made fabricated information increasingly realistic and significantly harder to detect. In an emotionally charged environment, the boundary between fact and opinion blurs, and the space for rational discussion is compressed.

Enhanced unpredictability of public opinion evolution. The AI-driven information ecosystem is highly dynamic and nonlinear. The "information cocoon" effect of algorithmic recommendation may lead different groups to form diametrically opposed perceptions of the same event, intensifying opinion polarization. Moreover, the organized involvement of bot accounts and paid online trolls may manufacture false public opinion momentum, disrupt its normal evolutionary trajectory, and leave private colleges and universities "kidnapped by public opinion."

Compression and recurrence of the public opinion life cycle. In an information-overloaded environment, public attention shifts rapidly and the visible duration of a single event shortens. However, the permanence of digital traces allows old news to be rediscovered and re-hyped,

giving rise to a "long-tail effect." For private colleges and universities, the recurring resurrection of historical negative information continuously erodes institutional brand assets.

### **2.3. The Specificity of Public Opinion in Private Colleges and Universities**

Compared with public institutions, private colleges and universities face a more distinctive predicament in the field of public opinion.

First, stereotyped social perceptions increase their vulnerability to public opinion. For a long time, part of the public has held stereotypes about private colleges and universities, such as "low quality," "poor management," and "profit-oriented operation." Such cognitive bias makes private institutions more prone to falling into the dilemma of being "presumed guilty" in public opinion incidents: even when handled properly, they can hardly enjoy the same tolerance from the public as public institutions do.

Second, the complexity of stakeholders complicates public opinion coordination. Private colleges and universities involve multiple interest-bearing parties, including sponsors, administrators, teachers, students, parents, partner enterprises, and government regulators. An emergency often touches upon the core interests of multiple parties, who may voice their own positions in the public arena, and internal members may even "expose" information or "defend their rights," making it difficult for the institution to present a unified external voice.

Third, resource constraints limit the flexibility of public opinion response. When facing major public opinion crises, public institutions can usually obtain guidance and resource support from their higher-level supervisory authorities, whereas private colleges and universities must rely largely on their own efforts. Insufficient reserves of professional talent, media relations, and legal counsel may lead to delayed and inappropriate handling of public opinion incidents.

Finally, competitive pressure in the enrollment market makes the impact of public opinion more direct. For private colleges and universities, enrollment numbers and tuition revenue are directly tied to institutional survival, and the impact of negative public opinion on recruitment is both immediate and severe. Against the backdrop of examinees and parents relying heavily on online information to make school-choice decisions, a public opinion crisis may rapidly escalate into an enrollment crisis and even a financial crisis.

## **3. Challenges Facing Public Opinion Management of Emergencies at Private Colleges and Universities in the AI Era**

### **3.1. Technological Challenges**

Insufficient technical capacity for public opinion monitoring. Effective public opinion monitoring requires full-channel coverage of information sources-news media, social platforms, short videos, forums, and Q&A communities-as well as real-time collection and analysis of multimodal data including text, images, video, and audio. Private colleges and universities generally lack professional technical teams and sufficient funding, making it difficult to establish comprehensive public opinion monitoring systems. Most institutions still rely on manual browsing and simple keyword searches, resulting in limited coverage and poor timeliness, and making it hard to detect public opinion at its budding stage.

Ethical and capability dilemmas in the application of AI technologies. Even where private colleges and universities have begun to introduce AI-assisted public opinion analysis, they face the problem of insufficient technical application capacity. Semantic understanding biases in natural language processing, misjudgments of cultural context in sentiment analysis, and technical limitations in multimodal content recognition may all lead to errors in public opinion assessment. Moreover, over-reliance on technical tools may cause the human factors and emotional appeals behind public opinion to be overlooked, rendering response measures devoid of warmth and even aggravating conflicts[2].

Difficulty in identifying disinformation and algorithmic bias. In an environment flooded with AI-generated content, the technical threshold for distinguishing authentic information from disinformation continues to rise. When faced with malicious rumor-mongering, out-of-context quotations, and the rehashing of old news, private colleges and universities often lack effective technical means of verification and channels for rumor refutation. Meanwhile, negative information is more likely to be favored by traffic recommendations-that is, the "negative bias" tendency of platform algorithms-so that an institution's positive responses can hardly achieve equivalent dissemination effects, resulting in the passive situation where "refutation can never outrun the rumor."

### **3.2. Challenges at the Management Level**

**Weak Crisis Awareness and Incomplete Emergency-Plan System.** Some administrators of private-run colleges and universities hold a fluke mentality that "public opinion crises will never happen to our university", resulting in insufficient attention paid to public-opinion risks. Even though emergency response plans for unexpected incidents have been formulated, they often exist only on paper. There is a lack of special plans and regular drills targeting public-opinion communication. Most plans suffer from serious homogenization, without customized designs tailored to the university's own characteristics and the communication laws in the AI era.

**Poor Inter-departmental Coordination Mechanism.**Public-opinion management involves multiple departments including publicity, student affairs, academic affairs, logistics, security and legal affairs, which requires efficient cross-department collaboration. Nevertheless, departmental barriers and information silos are common under the hierarchical management system of private-run universities. After unexpected incidents break out, departments may deliver divergent or even contradictory responses out of departmental self-interest. This leads to inconsistent information release, leaving the public the impression of "chaotic university management".

**Structural Shortage of Professional Talents.**Public-opinion handling requires professionals with interdisciplinary knowledge covering journalism and communication, psychology, law, information technology and other fields. Private-run universities are relatively less competitive in salary packages, career-development prospects and staffing security, making it difficult to attract and retain high-caliber public-opinion management talents. Most existing practitioners are part-time employees or transferred-from-other-post staff with inadequate professional competence and practical experience. Their capacity for decision-making and implementation under high-pressure scenarios is limited.

**Improper Timing and Strategies for Official Responses.**The golden response window for public-opinion disposal has been further shortened in the AI era. Some private-run universities respond slowly after incidents and miss the optimal response time. Some rush to release statements before facts are fully verified, only to be contradicted later and land in a passive position. Others trigger secondary public-opinion crises with arrogant attitudes and rigid wording in their replies. Striking a proper balance between "speed" and "accuracy", as well as "verbal responses" and "practical actions", poses a realistic challenge for private-run universities.

### **3.3. Challenges at the Institutional Level**

**Decision-making Dilemmas Caused by an Incomplete Corporate Governance Structure.**Some private-run colleges and universities are plagued by problems such as excessive intervention in school administration by sponsors, an ineffective board of directors (council), and ambiguous powers and responsibilities of the president. In the public-opinion disposal of unexpected incidents, complicated decision-making chains and blurred boundaries of

responsibility may lead to missed opportunities for crisis response. Divergent interests between sponsors and administrators in crisis management may also undermine the consistency and continuity of response strategies.

**Difficulties in Balancing Information Disclosure and Privacy Protection.**Public-opinion disposal requires universities to release relevant information in a timely and accurate manner to satisfy the public's right to know and respond to social concerns. However, unexpected incidents in universities often involve sensitive factors such as students' personal privacy, minor protection and judicial investigation procedures, making it hard to define the boundary of information disclosure. Excessive disclosure may infringe upon the rights and interests of the parties concerned and trigger new legal risks; insufficient information disclosure may arouse suspicions of "covering up the truth" and aggravate public speculation.

**Absence of a Regular Public-opinion Risk Assessment Mechanism.**The public-opinion management of most private-run universities still follows a passive "fire-fighting after-the-event" response mode. There is a lack of systematic investigation and assessment of potential public-opinion risks in daily operations. Pre-assessment of public-opinion impacts is absent from the decision-making process of high-risk areas including enrollment publicity, tuition-charging policies, student management and faculty appointment. Consequently, many avoidable hidden public-opinion hazards fail to be eliminated in advance.

**Imperfect Linkage Mechanism with External Stakeholders.**Effective public-opinion governance requires universities to build regular cooperative relationships with external stakeholders such as competent government authorities, mainstream media, industry associations and legal institutions. Nevertheless, private-run universities tend to remain relatively isolated in this regard. Their communication channels with local publicity, cyberspace administration and education departments are not smooth enough, and daily connections with the media are insufficiently close[3]. Hence, it is difficult for them to obtain effective external support in times of crisis.

## **4. Strategy Construction for Public-opinion Governance of Unexpected Incidents in Private-run Higher-learning Institutions in the AI Age**

### **4.1. Technology Empowerment: Building an Intelligent Public-opinion Monitoring and Early-Warning System**

**Constructing an all-media intelligent monitoring platform.**Private-run universities should upgrade technical infrastructure and deploy campus-adapted public-opinion monitoring systems. Such systems support multi-source data collection across mainstream social and news platforms, enabling full-modal monitoring of text, image, video and audio content. Powered by natural language processing and machine learning, they can identify sensitive campus-related information, analyze public sentiment, track information dissemination and generate visualized reports. Constrained by limited technology and funds, private universities can adopt a hybrid model combining in-house basic functions and outsourced professional public-opinion services.

**Establishing a hierarchical and classified early-warning response mechanism.**A data-driven public-opinion risk assessment model should be constructed. Based on influence scope, emotional intensity, propagation speed and topic sensitivity, public-opinion incidents are categorized into four levels: ordinary, relatively serious, major and extremely major, with corresponding response protocols. Integrated with campus on-duty and emergency command systems, the platform can deliver early warnings to responsible personnel in a timely manner. Furthermore, a public-opinion calendar mechanism strengthens targeted monitoring and early warning during high-risk periods including enrollment, graduation, examination seasons and major holidays.

Enhancing information identification and rumor refutation capabilities via AI technology. To counter false information and malicious online hype, universities should optimize fact-checking mechanisms. Technologies such as blockchain evidence storage, digital watermark traceability and multimodal content verification can effectively identify forged information. Universities shall build dedicated rumor-refutation channels and release authoritative clarifications via official platforms and mainstream media to restrain rumor proliferation. AI-generated visualized charts and short videos can also be applied to improve the credibility and communication effect of refutation content.

Strengthening technical safeguards for data security and privacy protection. AI-enabled public-opinion monitoring must comply with the Data Security Law and Personal Information Protection Law. Universities should establish standardized data access mechanisms and desensitize teachers' and students' personal data to prevent information abuse and leakage. Regular data security assessments and emergency drills ensure the secure and stable operation of intelligent monitoring systems.

#### **4.2. Mechanism Optimization: Improving Public-opinion Response and Collaborative Disposal Mechanisms**

Establishing a Flat-structured and Efficient Emergency Command System. A leading group for public-opinion emergency disposal shall be set up, headed by senior university administrators, with an affiliated office in charge of routine work. The group shall be granted supreme decision-making power to shorten decision-making chains and enable rapid responses to major incidents. The first-inquiry responsibility system and time-limited completion system shall be implemented, clarifying deadlines and responsible parties for public-opinion monitoring, analysis, decision-making, information release and feedback. A public-opinion disposal flow chart shall be formulated to translate institutional rules into actionable guidelines.

Optimizing the Cross-departmental Coordination Mechanism. Departmental barriers should be broken down, and a joint-conference system led by the publicity department and participated by relevant departments shall be launched. Clear-cut responsibilities are assigned to each department: the publicity department takes charge of information release and media communication; student-affairs departments conduct student ideological guidance and emotion-relief work; academic-affairs departments explain teaching-related issues; logistics and security departments handle on-site disposal and safety guarantee; the legal-affairs department evaluates and responds to legal risks. An information-sharing platform shall be built to ensure real-time updates and unified external statements. Joint office work and centralized consultations will be adopted for major public-opinion incidents to boost collaborative efficiency.

Setting up a Professional Spokesperson System. Full-time or part-time university spokespersons shall be appointed and certified after systematic training. Qualified spokespersons are expected to possess sound media literacy, communication skills and psychological quality, with a good command of campus conditions and frequently-asked questions. A standardized news release mechanism shall be established. Appropriate forms including press conferences, media briefings, written statements and official social-media announcements can be adopted according to risk levels and evolving situations. Spokespersons should follow the principle of "release facts quickly, state causes cautiously and emphasize attitudes", and avoid ambiguous wording and responsibility-shifting expressions.

Expanding the External Cooperation and Support Network. Regular communication channels shall be maintained with local publicity, cyberspace administration and education authorities to obtain professional guidance and resource support during major public-opinion crises. Good working ties with mainstream media should be cultivated through daily positive publicity, so as to secure objective and fair media coverage in emergencies. Professional public-relations

consultants and legal counsels can be engaged to provide third-party suggestions for crisis disposal. Universities may also join public-opinion work alliances or higher-education associations to share resources and draw on peer experience.

#### **4.3. Capacity-building: Enhancing Public-opinion Guidance and Crisis Communication Capabilities**

**Strengthening Media Literacy Training for Management Personnel.** University leaders and middle-level administrators are key decision-makers in public-opinion disposal, whose media literacy directly determines crisis-response outcomes. Specialized, regular training on new-media communication rules, public-opinion evolution, media-interaction skills and crisis-decision-making shall be delivered. Scenario simulations, tabletop exercises and case reviews can be adopted to improve managers' judgment and decision-making capacity under high-pressure circumstances. Meanwhile, the concept that "public opinion represents public will" should be established.

**Cultivating a High-quality Professional Public-opinion Team.** A well-structured, competent public-opinion workforce shall be built through internal training and external recruitment. Systematic professional training covering online public-opinion monitoring, news writing, photography, video production, psychology and law should be provided for relevant staff. An incentive mechanism shall be launched with preferential policies in salary, professional-title evaluation and career development to boost job attractiveness. A case database and experience-sharing system for public-opinion work also need to be constructed to facilitate knowledge accumulation within the team.

**Fostering a Positive Campus Cyber-cultural Ecosystem.** The fundamental goal of public-opinion governance is to win public recognition. Universities shall strengthen online ideological and political education, guiding students to treat online information rationally and improve their media critical-thinking ability and legal awareness. Influential campus new-media matrices should be developed, and groups of faculty-student opinion leaders and cyber-civilization volunteers with firm political stances and online influence shall be cultivated. They can spread positive energy in daily operations and deliver positive guidance during crises. Rich online activities such as cyber-culture festivals and short-video contests can enhance teachers' and students' sense of identity and belonging, and build healthy online community relations.

**Improving the Capacity for Emotional Communication and Humanistic Care.** Public-opinion disposal in the AI era cannot rely merely on technology; emotional demands should also be valued. Official responses shall show understanding and care for the parties concerned, avoiding rigid and bureaucratic tones. Regular channels for teachers and students to voice demands, such as president's mailboxes, online Q&A sessions and forums, shall be set up to resolve potential public-opinion risks in daily communication. In crisis disposal, the people-oriented principle shall be followed, prioritizing the life safety and legitimate rights and interests of teachers and students, so as to gain public understanding and trust through practical actions.

#### **4.4. Institutional Guarantee: Perfecting Rules and Regulations for Public-opinion Management**

**Improving the Specialized Institutional System for Public-opinion Management.** Public-opinion management should be integrated into the university's overall governance system. Supporting regulations, including Measures for the Administration of Online Public Opinion, Working Procedures for News Release in Emergencies and Administrative Provisions for New-Media Platforms, shall be formulated. The basic principles, organizational structure, workflow, division of responsibilities, rewards and penalties of public-opinion management shall be clearly defined to ensure rule-based practice. A supervision and inspection mechanism for

system implementation shall be established to conduct regular assessment, and regulations shall be revised in a timely manner in light of practical feedback and changing circumstances.

**Establishing a Pre-evaluation Mechanism for Public-opinion Risks.**Public-opinion risk assessment shall be incorporated into the university's major-decision-making procedures. When formulating wide-reaching and highly-sensitive policies such as enrollment policies, tuition-fee standards, personnel-reform plans and student-management regulations, universities shall carry out simultaneous assessment on public-opinion impacts. The assessment covers potential risk points, affected stakeholders, public-opinion response prediction and suggestions for contingency plans. High-risk projects identified in the assessment shall be adjusted or equipped with special response plans prior to implementation, so as to reduce hidden public-opinion risks from the source.

**Optimizing the Information Disclosure and Response Mechanism.**In accordance with the Measures for Information Disclosure of Institutions of Higher Education, universities shall update their information-disclosure catalogs and take the initiative to release public-concerned information, including school-running qualifications, enrollment data, tuition standards, teaching quality and graduate employment. Time-effect standards for public-opinion responses shall be set. For public-opinion incidents concerning the vital interests of the university, teachers and students, an initial response shall be issued immediately after verification (within 2 hours in principle), followed by continuous information updates based on investigation progress. An evaluation mechanism for response effectiveness shall be built to optimize response strategies through communication-data analysis and public feedback collection.

**Strengthening the Mechanism of Legal Safeguards and Accountability.**All public-opinion disposal activities shall be standardized within the legal framework. Evidence shall be collected against malicious rumors and defamation targeting the university, teachers and students, and legal means shall be adopted to safeguard legitimate rights and interests. Meanwhile, an accountability system for public-opinion disposal shall be implemented. Relevant personnel shall be held accountable for dereliction of duty in public-opinion monitoring, buck-passing in crisis handling or seriously false information release. Public-opinion management shall be included in the university's annual assessment and leading-cadre performance-reporting system to consolidate responsibility implementation.

## **5. Summary**

The rapid development of artificial-intelligence technology provides powerful technical tools for public-opinion governance of unexpected incidents in private-run universities, while bringing more complicated challenges. Within the algorithm-driven information-communication ecosystem, private-run universities face severer tests in public-opinion fields than public universities due to their distinctive school-running systems and social-recognition status. Nevertheless, technology is merely a means rather than an end. The effectiveness of public-opinion governance ultimately depends on human concepts, professional capabilities and institutional guarantees.

Public-opinion disposal for emergencies in private-run universities in the AI era should adhere to the basic principles of "valuing both technological empowerment and humanistic care, combining proactive prevention with emergency response, and integrating internal governance with external collaboration". The construction of an intelligent monitoring and early-warning system can realize the transformation from passive response to proactive prevention. Improved collaborative disposal mechanisms help shift from isolated efforts to systematic joint operations. Enhanced crisis-communication capabilities promote the transition from rigid official replies to sincere dialogue. A sound institutional-guarantee framework facilitates a shift from ad-hoc handling to regularized governance. These four

dimensions support one another and form an organic whole, jointly building the core framework for the modernization of public-opinion governance capacity of private-run universities.

Looking ahead, with the continuous evolution of artificial-intelligence technologies, emerging technologies such as the metaverse, virtual digital humans and brain-computer interfaces may further reshape the patterns and rules of information dissemination. Private-run universities should maintain sharp insights into technological changes, continuously update governance concepts, methods and tools, and improve governance capacity through dynamic adaptation. In this way, a safe, stable and harmonious campus environment can be created to foster young talents capable of shouldering the mission of national rejuvenation.

## Acknowledgments

This research is the outcome of the 2026 project "Research on the Response Mechanism of Online Public-Opinion to Emergencies in Private-run Universities in the AI Era" under the Educational Scientific Research Project of the Liaoning Provincial Private Education Association.

Project Number: LMJX2026102.

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