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Hate Speech and Cyber Ethics: An Ethical Analysis of the Zheng Linghua Case

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Abstract: Hate speech is a prominent ethical challenge with the digital media era. While social media strengthens public involvement and free speech, it promotes the widespread communication and online bullying. Taking the Zheng Linghua case as the subject, this paper discusses how the platform governance, algorithm recommendation, commercial incentives and users' online behaviors interact to amplify online hate speech. Based on Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action, Gatekeeping Theory, Online Disinhibition Effect and Digital Media Ethics, this study concludes that the tragedy stemmed not only by individuals, but by platform governance and engagement-based algorithms also. The findings suggest that the digital platforms should incorporate the ethical factor in algorithm design, strengthen the platform governance mechanism and foster collaborative responsibility among platforms, users, commercial content producers and regulators, to promote healthier online communication environment.

Keywords: Online hate speech; Cyberbullying; Digital media ethics; Platform governance; Algorithmic governance; Communicative action.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

The evolution of digital media has revolutionised the communication, information sharing and public participation. Social media allowing users to express opinions and share personal experiences. More people are finding that they are not held accountable for their words. Unlike offline communication, online platforms do not reveal a person's identity; who they are, where they work, and what they look like are not displayed. This has become a potential factor in cyberbullying. Irresponsible speech leads to the birth of hate speech, especially as more people begin to share their lives online. And malicious comments left by those less fortunate in their lives emerge like a raging flood. Hate speech is the expressions that attack or discriminate individuals or groups based on race, religion, gender or other protected identities. According to WHO report shows that nearly 16% of teenagers worldwide have experienced cyberbullying, with girls accounting for a slightly higher percentage (16% for girls, 15% for boys). Globally, about 73% of women have experienced cyberbullying, with a staggering 87% of these victims being young women aged 18-24. Many women choose to withdraw from online expression due to cyberbullying, and approximately 39% of victims completely reduce or cease their online activities. Hate speech is not only destructive to individuals but also has a far more profound impact on communities. While previous studies have mainly focused on the cyberbullying and hate speech, there is still less attention on the structural roles of the digital platforms and recommendation algorithms. Engagement-based algorithms tend to priorities highly emotionally provocative and controversial content, unintentionally amplifying the hate speech (Gillespie, 2018). Therefore, an important ethical question is whether digital platforms should be considered as neutral technology providers or ethical gatekeepers who should be responsible to shape the public's communication.

B. Literature Review

Previous studies mainly focus on four aspects: hate speech, cyberbullying, platform governance and algorithmic recommendation. Studies indicate that online hate speech has emerged as a structural social problem that threat the dignity, democratic participation and free speech. The serious consequences of cyberbullying include anxiety, depression, and even suicidal tendencies. Other scholars have pointed out that digital platforms are increasingly playing a gatekeeper role, deciding what content can be disseminated and what needs to be restricted (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Furthermore, the stance of algorithms determines the speed of event dissemination, often amplifying inflammatory content because such content generates greater commercial value. However, previous studies only considered these factors in isolation, didn't explore how the interaction between platform governance, recommendation algorithms, commercial incentives, and user behavior amplifies online hate speech.

So, this study combines all factors into the digital media ethics framework to provide a more comprehensive explanation: How do the platform governance, algorithm recommendation system and individual user's online behaviors in amplifying online hate speech in the Zheng Linghua case?

II. CASE OVERVIEW

In May 2022, Zheng Linghua was graduated from the Music Department of Zhejiang Normal University, dyed her hair pink. Due to her outstanding performance, she was admitted to East China Normal University's graduate program without examination. On July 13, 2022, Zheng Linghua received her admission notice. She rushed to the hospital, hoping her hospitalized grandfather could personally open the notice. However, when she shared the photo on social media, it triggered an unexpected disaster.

The viral image spread across different platforms, the public attention shifted from Zheng's academic success to the pink hair and personal appearances. Many users doubted her professionalism and ability of teacher. Several marketing accounts stole the photo of Zheng Linghua and her grandfather, packaging it as an advertisement for "associate degree to bachelor's degree" courses, and it spread rapidly. Many strangers began attacking her pink hair with insulting language, and some even interpreted the photo as a "May-December,, romance.

After experiencing online harassment for several days, Zheng Linghua dyed her hair back to black, hoping that the malicious comments would stop. However, the online harassment did not stop after she dyed her hair black, leading her to decide to take legal action, but with little success.

In late November 2022, Zheng Linghua's "Rights Protection Diary" transformed into a "Positive Anti-Depression Diary." She informed everyone that she had been hospitalized for antidepressant treatment. Initially, Zheng Linghua updated her diary daily, but it stopped on the ninth day.

In January 2023, Zheng Linghua committed suicide. (CCTV News, 2023).

Therefore, this tragedy is not only a classic case of stereotypical cyberbullying, but also reveals how platform governance, algorithmic flaws, and human malice can amplify hate speech online.

III. THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

A. Collapse of Rational Communication

Based on Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action, the Zheng Linghua case shows how online hate speech disrupted the rational communication at digital public sphere. Habermas (1985) suggested that the public communication should be to achieve mutual understanding by open and truthful and respectful discussion.

However, the communication process of case deviated from the principles in case. Zheng's initial post to celebrate her academic achievement was gradually transformed into the discussions on appearance, pink hair and imagined morality after being reposted by commercial accounts without original meaning. The anonymous engagement and emotional communication encourage speculation and public vilification rather than open rational discussion. Instead of promoting open democratic communication, the online public space functions as a tool to amplify hate speech and reproduce its existence. Therefore, the case not only illustrates individual misconduct, the failure of the online communication environment to uphold ethical public communications.

B. Platform Gatekeeping Failure

Gatekeeping Theory explains the platform platforms' ethical responsibility in controlling the spread of information. Rather than being neutral technology providers, platforms increased control the spread of content through recommendation algorithms and moderation regulation, decide which contents should be spread, restricted or removed (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Although Zheng reported abusive content, multiple reposted content and misleading narratives were still spreading. Meanwhile, engagement-based recommending system promoted controversial discussions since it brought more comments, shares, and view time. We can say that platform governance failed in content moderation and keeping the harmful communication in its early stages from expansion. This case implies the digital gatekeeping should be considered as an ethical responsibility rather than a technical process.

C. User Behavior Analysis

Suler's Online disinhibition effect (2004) explains the why the ordinary user actively participated in the online harassment. The effect of digital communication is to cut off social responsibility of users through anonymity, invisibility and limited interpersonal communication, which motivate users to be more aggressive to hostile than face to face conversation.

In the Zheng Linghua case, many participants had little information about the original post, but they still vilified the appearance and shared rumors and participates in collective violence. Emotional reactions and repeated exposure to similar views have prompted users to follow previous public opinion rather than information- verification. Although users' online environments also influence users' behaviors, it cannot avoid the fact that every user have the ethical responsibility for every comment, repost, interaction. Freedom of expression should be always balanced with respecting dignity and rights of other users.

D. Algorithm amplifying hate speech

Large-scale dissemination of hate speech was further enhanced by the recommendation algorithms. Social media platforms focus on user engagement such as clicks, comments and repost, viewing time more than ethical qualities (Van Dijck, 2013). Since the picture of Zheng that generates increasingly engagement after being decontextualized by commercial accounts, recommendation algorithms continuously promoted the related content on to a larger audience, creating a self-propagating cycle between visibility and engagement. Although algorithms are not the root of creating hate speech, it significantly affects the speed and spread scale of hate speech. Coupled with commercial incentives, the controversial content has economic value due to more attention. Thus, the amplification of algorithm system should be considered as an ethical issue, not merely a technical process. Digital platforms should integrate the ethics into the recommendation algorithms to balance the commercial purposes and public responsibilities.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. Freedom of expression and Human dignity

Freedom of expression is a basic principle in democratic societies and digital communication. Freedom of expression is not a free right, the ethical communication needs to balance the freedom of expression and respect human dignity (Howard, 2019).

The case of Zheng Linghua indicates that many users treated their abusive comments as an opinion, however these comments moved beyond reasonable criticism and transformed into personal attacks to inflict serious psychological damage. Criticism is expected to use rational discussion to challenge ideas or behaviors, while hate speech is to humiliate and scare individuals for personal characteristics. Thus, digital platforms should guarantee Freedom of expression but avoid harassment or discrimination been become commonalities.

B. Commercialization of online attention

Social media platforms increasingly play an attention market where clicks, comments and sharing bring commercial values (Zuboff, 2024). Thus, emotionally provocative and controversial content are more likely to be recommended by algorithm recommendation systems. In Zheng Linghua case, commercial accounts copied her image without permission and created misleading narratives to boost online traffic. They absolutely increased engagement activities, and amplifying the misinformation and cyberbullying as well. Thus, commercial success should not subvert the ethical responsibility, and platform governance should consider both commercial interest and public interests.

C. Share ethical responsibilities

The case of Zheng Linghua indicates that the share responsibilities of online hate speech should be shared among platforms, users, commercial content producers and regulatory bodies. Platforms should fortify the moderation and recommendation system, users should engage in responsible communication, commercial content producers should avoid exploiting controversy for commercial profit, and regulators should devise effective legal framework to combat online hater speech. Only through shared ethical responsibility can the digital communication be more respectful and sustainable.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

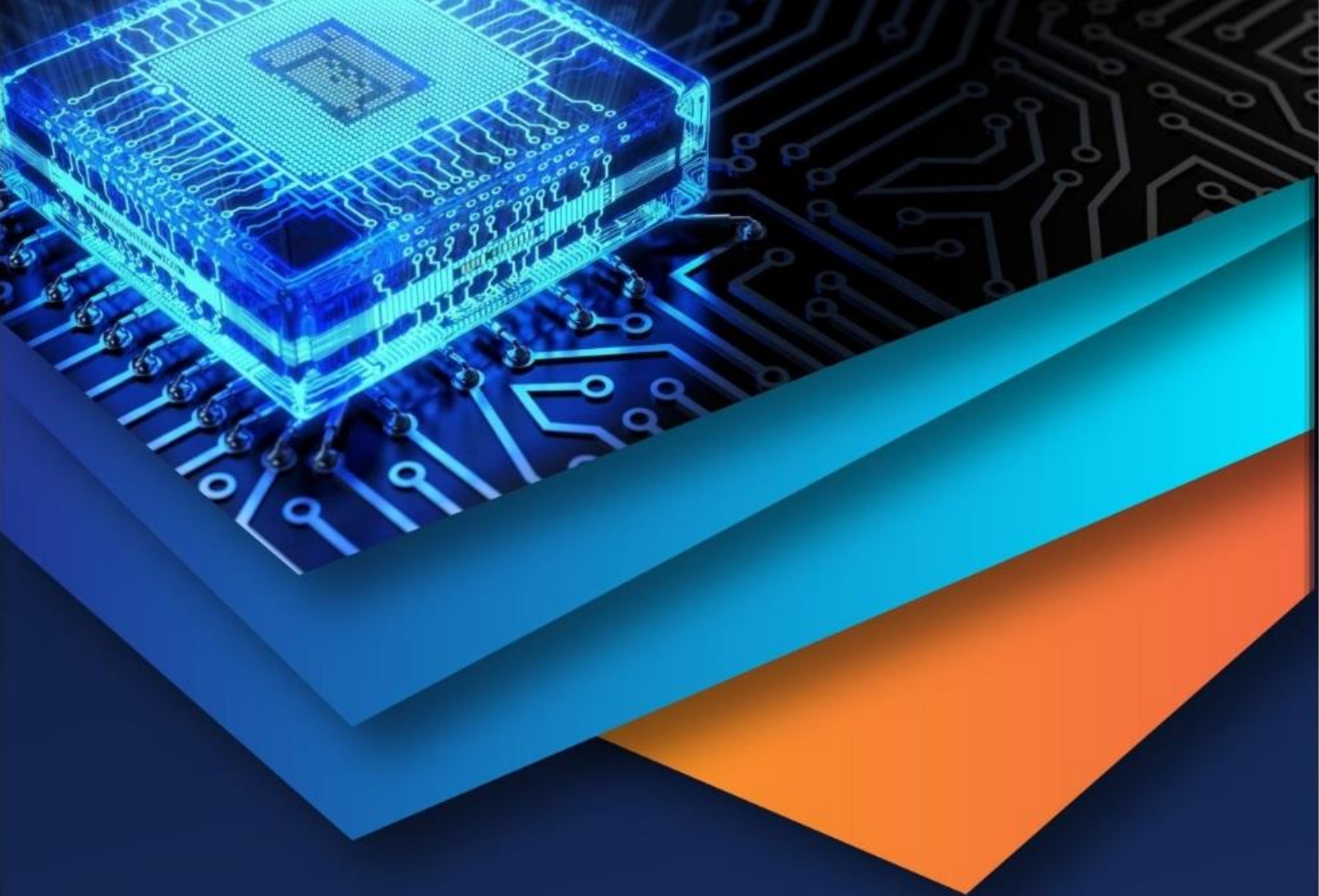
The study results four suggestions: First, social media should reinforce the pro-active content through the combination of artificial intelligence and human moderation, as well as establish faster complaint channels for the victims. Second, the ethical principles should be embedded into recommendation algorithms by reducing the visibility of highly hostile or misleading content and improving the transparency with algorithm governance. Third, governments, educational institutions and civil society should boost the digital media literacy to enable users to differentiate critique and hate speech and promote responsible engagement on the internet. Finally, effective governance is no single responsibility but require cooperation with platforms, regulators, commercial content producers, and users. Collaborative governance is essential to reduce online hate speech but safeguard freedom of expression.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the platform governance, recommendation algorithms, and individual online behavior, uses the Zheng Linghua case as an example to explore the causes and harms of online hate speech. Based on Habermas' Theory of communicative Action, Gatekeeping Theories, Online disinhibition Effect and Digital media Ethics, the findings suggest that the online hate speech results from the joint mechanisms of technological system, commercial incentives, platform governance and the collective behaviors of users instead of single individual misconduct. As an emphasis, in addition to individual behavior, the less obvious mechanistic issues should not be ignored. Strengthening platform governance, improving algorithm design (including the ethical design of algorithms), and enhancing digital media literacy are crucial for creating a healthier online environment.

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