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Saving Pets: A Study of Online Mutual Aid Among Marginal Group During the China COVID-19 Quarantine Period

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Abstract

Under the forced and high-pressure situation of the epidemic lockdown, how did marginal groups use digital media to gather, expand and help each other? How do humans, animals and media work together? From the perspective of translation theory, this study examined the emergence and development of online pets mutual aid group in Guangzhou, China during the lockdown period of COVID-19. This study found that digital media are not only translating other actors to become the organizational force of online pets mutual aid group but also translating themselves to promote the long-term development of the group. These two translations strengthen the resilience of the groups. Even if external pressures disappear, the spirit of mutual assistance and innovative mode of operation will continue because of continuous translation. Online pets mutual aid group challenge anthropocentrism. The group was a manifestation of the vitality of human, non-human or animal co-interpretation and an extension of human tolerance and identification of non-human species.

Keywords

Digital Media; Translation; Pets; Online Mutual Aid Group

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Спасение питомцев: исследование онлайн-взаимопомощи среди маргинальных групп во время карантина COVID-19 в Китае

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Аннотация

Как в условиях вынужденного и напряжённого карантина маргинальные группы использовали цифровые медиа для того, чтобы собираться, расширяться и помогать друг другу? Как люди, животные и медиа взаимодействуют в этом процессе? Данное исследование рассматривает возникновение и развитие онлайн-группы взаимопомощи для животных в Гуанчжоу, Китай, во время карантина COVID-19, с точки зрения теории перевода. Исследование показало, что цифровые медиа не только переводят других участников в организующую силу онлайн-группы взаимопомощи ради животных, но и преобразуют сами себя, способствуя долгосрочному развитию группы. Эти два типа перевода усиливают устойчивость группы. Даже если внешние давления исчезнут, дух взаимопомощи и инновационный режим работы будут сохраняться благодаря постоянному процессу перевода. Онлайн-группы взаимопомощи бросают вызов антропоцентризму. Группа стала проявлением жизненной силы со-истолкования человеком, животными и нечеловеческими актантами, а также расширением человеческой терпимости и признания ценности нечеловеческих видов.

Ключевые слова

цифровые медиа; перевод; домашние животные; группа взаимопомощи онлайн

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Introduction

On November 4, 2022, a letter for help was widely circulated on social media. Clivia, a pet owner in Guangzhou, was hospitalized due to COVID-19 infection, and her two dogs were at risk of running out of food. This was a microcosm of the pet crisis in public health emergencies. Under the epidemic prevention requirements of home or designated location isolation, individuals found themselves in a sudden forced disconnection: the streets could be closed, they could not leave their homes, or they could be isolated in designated locations. This was an extreme emergency state. At that time, pets could be isolated from their owners.

Different groups view pets differently. Pets can be companion animals, extensions of humans, or "things that can move." During the COVID-19 pandemic, pets were marginal group in human society, reflecting the fate of other marginal groups. "The party with power and resources always marginalizes others. Therefore, there were many similarities between the fate of animals and the fate of disadvantaged ethnic groups and women" (Huang, 2022). In this paper, the quarantined pet owners were positioned as a marginal group, as their love to pets was primarily excluded from the social assistance system and assistance resources in epidemic isolation systems. Pets owners were forced to separate from their pets which has made them great distress, because they have no official way to obtain assistance.

The sudden ban creates a new connection, a new kind of social laboratory space in which individual was subjected to stress. When disaster strikes, people would mobilize various resources for self-rescue and mutual aid, taking care of the vacuum areas that external resources cannot cover (Lowe & Fothergill, 2003). Because pet owners' physical movements were restricted, they could only connect with each other with digital media. Pet owners in Guangzhou spontaneously formed the online pets mutual aid group, "Guangzhou Come On! Anti-epidemic Mutual Help Pet Friends Group", which has gained rapid popularity. The online pets mutual aid group relied on digital media have become a civilian shelter where pet owners exchanged resources, circulated information and supported each other. Digital media was regarded as a mediator in this article. The mediator emphasizes its translation function, which focused on the connections between intermediaries and based on the construction of networks by actors, finally facilitating the achievement of goals (Latour, 2007). This article will deconstruct the process by which digital media connects various actors to form a pets mutual aid network. This article poses the following questions: 1) In extreme emergency states, how did the cohesive online mutual aid group translate by digital media? 2) In a changing environment, how can digital media enhance the resilience of online mutual aid group to achieve sustainable development? 3) How did the pets mutual aid group change or challenge the existing social order and mainstream concepts?

Literature review

Digital media: A Translator with Agency

The actor-network theory emphasized that human and non-human actors work together in a heterogeneous and diverse manner. Translation is the core concept in the actor-network. Translation was defined by Latour as a transport relationship that leads to the coexistence of two mediators rather than causality (Latour, 2007). The core of translation is the distinction between mediator and intermediary (Valler & Blumczynski, 2024). Intermediary merely transports, transfers, transmits energy from one pole to another. A mediator transforms, translates, distorts, and modifies what they're supposed to express. Through translation, the characteristics of our social order were inscribed on different things (Latour, 1994), which affirmed the initiative of the mediator.

Digital media is a mediator. Latour points out the key role of technology in the process of stabilizing social chains, emphasizing that technology itself constitutes a specific mode of existence (Latour, 2013). Rather than being simply used or regarded as a tool, technology is a mediator, which woven multiple heterogeneous components together. Previous studies on the translation of digital media mainly describe the process of digital media crossing interfaces; e.g., How the mobile dating application Tinder translates an actor network to screen authenticity of users (Duguay, 2017). The complex relationship between digital technology and fan communities influences the translation behavior of fansubbing (Wongseree, 2020). As a digital artifact, the iPod represents an exchange of actions, skills, goals, and capabilities between humans and non-humans (Shiga, 2007). The news client translates the spatial and temporal requirements and characteristics of producers and consumers, possessing strong integrative capabilities (Xie, 2019). Social media translates the oral narratives of COVID-19 survivors into collective practices involving various actors (Zhou, 2020).

Digital media plays a significant role in translating online communities and the developmental stages of digital media have altered the characteristics of online communities. PC Internet communities are replicas, extensions and imitations of traditional communities in the weak-connected stage, and online communities in the strong-connected stage of the mobile Internet are decentralized and flat. With the development of big data and artificial intelligence, a "human-machine symbiosis" relationship network has been created (Su & Fang, 2021). However, previous studies have not clearly demonstrated, how digital media as a mediator transcends technical interfaces, transforms, connects, coordinates heterogeneous elements, and consequently translates communities and promotes social reorganization. What changes will occur to digital media itself during the translation process?

Online Pets Mutual Aid group: Limited social support

As an information and communication technology, digital media is an organizing tool that facilitates community participation and collective action (Hampton, 2003). Previous studies have demonstrated that people exchange resources and information, establish identity and even form collective actions in online communities which construct an important social force participating in public affairs. Individuals and groups become more dependent on the media when the social environment becomes unclear, threatening or rapidly changing (Ball-Rokeach, 1985)

In the aftermath of disasters, community-oriented digital media promote emotional expression and social support exchanges, increasing community cohesion and members participation (An & Mendiola-Smith, 2020). Through participation in online communities, people in distress may gain a sense of happiness, self-confidence and independence, as well as improving social interactions to promote personal empowerment (Barak et al., 2008). People can gain bridging social capital and bonding social capital in online communities (Norris, 2002). During the 2013 flood in Dresden, Germany, the Facebook[1] group Dresden Flood connected people in need with those offering help, facilitating information exchange and resource allocation (Albris, 2018). On its part, pets mutual aid community activated by emergency states could provide emotional support, informational support and instrumental support for their members.

However, several studies have pointed out that online groups are fragile and their influence is limited. The online group primarily focuses on sharing and acquiring heterogeneous resources, which results in the formation of weak ties (Kavanaugh et al., 2005). Weak ties broaden the distribution of members within online group, but also contribute to the fragmentation of these groups, which is detrimental to the continuity of collective action (Diani, 2000). In China, the autonomy of online groups was relatively strong, but their representativeness was relatively weak. Autonomy and representativeness reflect the extent of support that online groups receive from the external environment (Liu et al., 2021). Autonomy implies that groups exhibit spontaneous interests and independent opinions while representativeness can strengthen external communication and gain external support (Deng & Ruan, 2008). In the context of a single emergency, the social connections generated through social media are transient and fragile interactions (Albris, 2018; Fang, 2024). In existing study, online media were mostly regarded as instrumental objects, and their agency has not been highlighted. Moreover, digital media not only influences, but also directly participates in the translation of online communities. Digital media contribute to the evolution and change of online communities and the internal logic among them needs to be explored in greater depth.

1 A social network owned by “Meta”, which is recognized as extremist in Russia

Methods

This study used online ethnography as the main study method. WeChat group "Guangzhou Come On Anti-epidemic Mutual Aid Pet Friends Group" is the study field. In China, WeChat is the most popular digital media and the largest instant messaging service. It has the same functions as WhatsApp, allowing users to send and receive multimedia messages in real time. Users of WeChat can create new groups and invite friends to join them, which means other users cannot join if they have not received an invitation to join. A majority of short-term WeChat groups are event-driven (such as travel groups), whereas most of long-term WeChat groups are relationship-driven (such as family groups and friend groups) (Qiu et al., 2016). The WeChat group system provides a greater sense of community and connectivity compared to traditional text messages (Church & De Oliveira, 2013).

Ethnography concentrates on examining human societies and their cultural practices. Cyber-ethnography extends the scope of study into the digital realm. During the epidemic lockdown, pet owners were physically isolated, but digital media helped them overcome physical and geographical limitations. The interactions of pet owners around digital media have provided rich material for study. By engaging in and observing digital platforms, investigating online behaviors and digital artifacts, such as images, online journals, electronic correspondence, and more, researchers delve into the ways individuals forge social connections and cultivate their cultural identities in cyberspace (Keeley-Browne, 2011).

"Guangzhou Come On Anti-epidemic Mutual Aid Pet Friends Group" is an online pet mutual aid group that emerged in response to epidemic lockdown. Its establishment and growth were set against the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Guangzhou, where local residents were in a state of uncertainty. Pet owners were also actively seeking refuges for their pets. A companion animal rescue group in Guangzhou, known as Group A, established this WeChat group. Initially, the online group consisted only of a few volunteers from Group A, but later, an increasing number of responsible pet owners from Guangzhou joined, seeking both instrumental and emotional support for their pets. During the epidemic lockdown, the number of group members remained between 495 and 500 (including the researcher). Most of the members in the group raise cats, dogs, guinea pigs, rabbits and other exotic pets. Because of the limit on the number of members in the WeChat group, the pets mutual aid group was divided into several subgroups with the same founders and group rules. The rules of the pets mutual aid group include the following appeals: 1) Let's work together to fight the epidemic together. 2) Please change your nickname when joining the group to facilitate mutual assistance. Format: nickname (as short as possible), area (district, street), number of cats and dogs, current lockdown status. Example: MC, Liwanqiao Middle School, 3 cats and 3 dogs, home quarantine. 3) Please do not post help or

fundraising posts that are not related to the epidemic, and do not cover the help information. We greatly appreciate your cooperation.

Despite the abundance of studies on online mutual aid groups, the uniqueness of this study sample lies in its establishment for the purpose of rescuing pets during lockdowns due to the pandemic, and its operation centered on the welfare of pets. The online pets mutual aid group is an intersection of humans, non-human animals, and digital media, which breaks through the anthropocentric perspective and affirms the agency of digital media and non-human animals.

Comprehensive and extended fieldwork provided empirical material support for the knowledge construction of this study. The researcher of this study joined the group at its inception for participatory observation, with a field observation period of one and a half years. The study was divided into two stages. The first stage was from November 5 to November 30, 2022, which was a stage of strict epidemic prevention and control. The second stage was from December 1, 2022 to April 2, 2024. During this stage, epidemic prevention and control were cancelled and citizens lives were returned to normal. Researchers continuously monitored messages within the group without arbitrary departures. Through long-term participatory experience and observation, first-hand empirical data was obtained and detailed field notes were formed.

It is worth noting that in online groups, people's daily life, social interactions, and emotional expressions are presented through text, symbols, or videos, and the groups conditions presented online may differ from the actual offline situations. Furthermore, the activity levels of WeChat groups members vary, and in this study, most members participated less in online interactions, which was consistent with previous research findings (Yan et al., 2023). Therefore, focusing only on the online agenda topics set by active members is not sufficient to represent the entire group.

Therefore, based on the first phase of the investigation, the researcher selectively participated in four offline pet rescue operations. During the rescue process, researcher engaged in in-depth conversations with various participants, observed their actions and division of labor, and the off-line operation process of the mutual aid group was documented.

In addition, this article uses in-depth interviews as an auxiliary research method to conduct in-depth interviews with 15 members of the rescue group. Researchers conducting interviews collect descriptions of the interviewees' life world through dialogue and interpret the connotations of the described phenomena, allowing researchers to deeply understand others' perspectives during the interview (Kvale, 1996). Researchers should allow the conversation to flow naturally and strive for rich details. To achieve this, researchers should carefully "listen" rather than speak (Dörnyei, 2007). The interviews were all conducted online, ranging from half an hour to one hour. The questions involved included but were not limited to the experience of participating in the pets mutual aid group,

the stories that happened in the group, etc. In addition, the researcher flexibly adjusted questions according to the actual situation, timely adjusted the focus of the discussion and the content of the questions. At the same time, the researcher encouraged the interviewees to actively participate, influencing the process and direction of the interview.

In the selection of interview subjects, there were both active groups' opinion leaders and "lurkers" who did not post in the WeChat group. The community identities of the interview subjects included epidemic prevention volunteers, ordinary members, rescue team members, temporary volunteers. The interviewees included in this article played different roles in the group in order to ensure the richness of the material. This article strives to present the mutual aid scene comprehensively, deeply, and completely, revealing cultural significance.

Findings

This research found out that the translation of digital media for online pets mutual aid group was divided into two steps. The first step was to translate other actors to establish a pets mutual aid group. In the state of emergency, the digital media WeChat group, centered on the goal of pet rescue, actively translated various heterogeneous actors such as pet owners, pets and emotions and established a collaborative online community. Next, it involved self-translation to promote the sustainable development of the online community. Digital media continuously translated itself to improve its own functionality through functional compensation, role norms and technological detour. It adapts to dynamic changes with its inherent plasticity, striking a balance between the translation objectives and potential deviations.

Translating pet owner: from isolated individual to digital helper

The translation procedure of pet owners by digital media is divided into two stages. First, disconnected individuals aggregate into an online entirety due to the recruitment effect of digital media content. During Guangzhou Epidemic in 2022, repost the WeChat tweet "The Voices and Appeals of Thousands of Pets Owners during the 2022 Guangzhou Epidemic" to WeChat Moments was a permission for pet owners to join the pets mutual aid group. The tweet was written in a pet owner perspective:

> "The epidemic has become very serious recently... I am extremely anxious searching the Internet for approach to rescue my pets, or seeking assistance from a variety of organizations... I request assistance from the Epidemic Prevention and Control Command Center, Street Office and relevant government departments! Are channels for pet available in isolation hotels, or can we left one family member to take care of the pet at home... I hope Guangzhou, a city of love, will also love cats, dogs and small animals. The epidemic was ruthless, but people are kind... Thousands of pet owners ask government for assistance."

People must repost this tweet to their Moments before joining the group. This tweet was a joint commitment of pet owners. Reposting tweet in their moments represents their recognition of the pets mutual aid group demands and actions, and the parties publicly acknowledge their willingness to make a joint commitment under well-known conditions. Joint commitment makes individuals act together as a group, promoting the realization of a specific goal. Through the fission-like dissemination of social network media, pet owners have flocked to the pets mutual aid group. WeChat groups can have a maximum of 500 members, so pets mutual aid subgroups emerged one after another.

The second step was to disperse the online entirety into individuals who could assist one another digitally. Through the change of group nicknames, information of the pet owners was abstracted into a set of data containing core information which included status and location. After pet owners joined pets mutual aid group, they need to mark their block location and status (normal, Lockdown Zone, Control Zone, home quarantine, etc.) in the remarks, such as "CoCo (pet nickname) + District A B Street (area and street) + 1 cat 1 dog (pet breed and number) + home quarantine (status)". Although individual range of activity was limited in emergency situation, members of the pets mutual aid group in the same location could share resources, in different locations could allocate resources.

Xiao A once gave his beloved guinea pig to an adopter living in T Village. However, the epidemic spread throughout T Village, so the adopter left Guangzhou and the guinea pig was left alone in T Village. Xiao A was anxious and sought help everywhere. Due to the neighborhood locations marked by pets mutual aid group members, the guinea pig was quickly matched with a group member who lived in T Village and was willing to solve the problem.

With the development of technology and the expansion of the market, modern people tend to live in atomization in real life. However, in this case, through the translation of digital media, the connections between people are tighter. Pet owners could get nearby support through their location information labeled on the pets mutual aid group. Mobile location-based services and applications have been shown to increase individual awareness of shared space and their participation in community activities (Ganoe et al., 2010), while the location logic of digital media has altered the logic action of mutual aid. Individual actions were scattered and sporadic, while pets mutual aid group was comprehensive and sustainable. Latour stated that tools make the globalizing successive interactions be realized (Latour, 1996). Integrated coordinated action is generated under the rule of digital media. Specifically, scattered message, like individual geographical locations, could be integrated effectively under the naming rules of nickname in the pets mutual aid group.

Translating emotion: from isolation to satisfaction with digital shelter

Fighting for resources for pets in extreme emergency situation challenges people opinions about non-human animals. "The more advanced civilization is,

the more likely animals and nature are to be treated as others who should be expelled. Once they cross the line, they will be considered a terrifying threat" (Huang, 2022). Epidemic prevention worker Hao Yu once posted a message about pets feeding assistance in a resident group. However, some residents expressed disgust and stated that everyone was too busy with their own business to worry about survival problems of pets. "People considered us unreasonable", a pet owner said, "They think that we should not call for help for just pets in public place under an emergency situation that even mankind survival problem was unresolve" (I10). But pet owners thought that the anti-epidemic measures were not accommodated their pets adequately. Moreover, due to lack of social recognition, most pet owners more willing to keep silent in the cyberspace to avoid criticism from other groups. The isolation was the main cause of their suffering.

For all the people joined the pets mutual aid group, obtaining mutual aid resources in a safe and friendly space and seeking shelter for their pets in uncertain period were their common prospect. Pet owners created a space to protect themselves and their companion animals, to some extent, it transfers personal isolation into satisfaction from material and spiritual risk avoidance. By sharing a variety of types of information and human resources in pets mutual aid group, digital material risk avoidance can be used to meet people's needs for avoiding and managing risks. "My cats are easily stressed if they leave their familiar environment. I am very nervous since I do not know when our area would be locked down. I would like to join the organization in case of emergency situation", — Yu An said before joining the pets mutual aid group, but he left the group in a few days and said, "This group doesn't seem to be of any real use, so I left it." However, a few days later, Yu An reapplied to join the pets mutual aid group and said "Since there was no sign of the epidemic easing, I decided to rejoin the group because staying in the group always makes me feel more at ease." (I2).

The shared documents in the pets mutual aid group contain information about two major sections: Information Sharing Post and Strategy Post. In the Information Sharing Post, there was a query link of the lockdown area of Guangzhou, QR code for errand boys and QR codes for pets mutual aid subgroup of each street grid. Through these QR codes, resources could be shared in real time. Strategy Post were a Q&A section about how pet owners cope with the epidemic crisis, like "What can we do for pets before we are going to be transferred and quarantined?", "What should we do if we are about to be transferred and quarantined and there was no surveillance camera at home?", "Whether it is possible that pets left at home will be killed?", "What we can do if the food of pet is running out in the lockdown area?", "What should we do when pets are sick at home?" and Case experience (Strategy to transfer our pets before lockdown or transfer of ourselves).

Digital spiritual risk avoidance means members can communicate or discharge their feelings in pets mutual aid group without worrying about social evaluation.

> "In this period of time, everyone seems to be depressed. I was also depressed and could not sleep. I try to relax myself and find something happy to do. I chat with everyone and share video of my cat. Groupmates always encouraged and comforted me. I felt they understood me. Some people said they wanted to give me a hug. Only people keeping pets can share a resonance when they gather here." (I11).

As an actor who listens and records, WeChat groups connect individuals and groups. When members of pets mutual aid group share their stories about their pets, those who share the same feelings will also respond positively. The unique instant interactive function of the digtal media allows one-to-many sharing. For minority groups in crisis, people with the same feelings for pets have more emotional resonance. Their sufferings, concerns and problems were remarkably similar. Personal inner feeling they are hiding or words they are shy to speak out are expressed in a tangible and understandable way. The fear of being isolated was disintegrated and self-isolation state ended in an interested-based group. The experience- sharing and emotional exchange of people with similar experiences contribute to the formation of social assistance, social integration and sense of belonging of marginal groups.

Translating pets: from marginal groups to digital healing subjects

Pets are the others in human society. In extreme emergency situations, they are the weak waiting for rescue. However, they are also the main body translated by digital media to facilitate healing. Pets are benefit to human physical and mental health. Specifically, they can reduce human anxiety, depression, loneliness and enhance individual happiness as well (McConnell et al., 2011).

In tense and depressing time of COVID-19 pandemic, watching and sharing "cat and dog movies" was a form of entertainment and also enabled personal narrative and self-healing. Sharing photos and videos of pets were the most common form of interaction within pets mutual aid group. A photo of a pet stretching or a video of playing with a ball of yarn was enough to trigger rounds of heated discussion in pets mutual aid group. Pets were considered "smooth beauty" in visual-centric digital media due to their round eyes, smooth fur, and flat facial features. Smoothness does not harm, nor brings resistance. Smooth things eliminate their opposites, and all negativity was eliminated, as the positivity of smoothness alone induces tactile compulsion, erasing the distance between the viewer and the work (Han, 2019). "I seldom talk in the group, but I often appreciate cats of and dogs of groupmates and listen their stories which heal me." (I8). Besides enjoying the experience of petting cats and dogs remotely, group members use technology as a mean to stimulate their subjective initiative. Through reprocessing the pictures, GIFs and videos in the group and summarize them in short sentences, they gain emotional comfort in the experience of using digital media.

> "Through the joint writings of Internet users, the concept of cats was reconstructed, gradually becoming visual and personalized, thus creating a new way of presence centered around distant viewing" (Peng et al., 2022).

Hao Yu (I1), who was fresh out of college, was a long-term epidemic prevention worker stationed in the core lockdown area. She has been stationed in the lockdown area for one month and often working all night long. She needed more patience and understanding when communicating with residents. The intense work and the stressful atmosphere made she exhausted. But in addition to her daily work, she also volunteer to take the task of feeding cats and dogs and cleaning up their feces in the homes of hospitalized residents every day. In WeChat Moments, she recorded the warm welcome from cats and dogs.

> "Despite having a high-intensity job, I spend a few hours every day feeding cats and dogs. I am very happy to touch them. I feel that it was an emotional healing process. We help them and they heal us as well."

When Hao Yu visited the pet-owner-home to feed and change the water, interact and play with the pet, she usually took and shared pets photos or videos. She also had video chats with the owners. "Once, when we opened the door, the cat rushed to let us touch, begging for cuddles, very clingy obedient. We gave it two big bowls of cat food and it ate them up the next day. So, we took a video and sent it to their owner. The owner was surprised to say that the cat was usually very cold, never easily touched, and rarely ate so much. I felt warm because the cat seemed to know we were here to help", Hao Yu exclaimed with pride. The network of actors affirms the power of non-human actors. In reality, pets were marginal groups, isolated and hidden family members. However, after being translated by digital media, they become a group, full of personality and healing subjects, which helps pet people obtain spiritual care and subjective production capacity.

Functional compensation: synergistic translation of digital media

The main function of virtual online group is information sharing and access to heterogeneous resources; as a result, weak ties are generated (Kavanaugh et al., 2005). These weak ties are indeed conducive to improving the distribution of virtual group members. However, virtual spaces are fragmented, which makes collective action difficult to sustain (Diani, 2000; Elin, 2013). WeChat group has the characteristics of convenient formation, direct communication and quick information acquisition. However, due to the convenience of dialogue and the universality of members, valuable information was swamped by rapid and large amounts of small talk. At this time, members often cannot identify the exact and valuable information content from the information of WeChat groups. The interface of group chat was disorderly and miscellaneous and the matching of help information and resources was accidental, so there were a lot of information entropy. Information entropy is a measure of information disorder. Information entropy is related to information content, information volume and system structure.

In his information theory, Shannon stated that the higher the entropy of an information system, the greater the chaos and freedom of the system.

> "Every day when I open the pets mutual aid group, there were hundreds or even thousands of unread messages. I never read them from the beginning one by one. I only open it occasionally to skim. When I come across an incident like anal prolapse cat, I will pay more attention." (I6).

In response to information entropy, WeChat groups translate other media to achieve functional compensation. For example, it is fixing the help message as a shared document. The shared document could be edited by many people in real time and forwarded in other groups. Specific information about the person seeking help could be gathered, enabling an accurate match between the person seeking help and the person providing help. Aside from the last column, volunteer rescuer response message, which was completed by the member who could provide assistance, the remainder of the document was completed by the person seeking assistance. In order to protect the privacy of the pet owner, it was not necessary for the pet owner to fill in house number, while their contact details can only be visible to the administrator. Shared documents create a new field for information communication and resource sharing in the emergency state on the WeChat group, which reduces excessive information entropy, alleviates information overload to a certain extent, and focuses members' attention on rescue information.

> "The original intention of using mutual aid form was to efficiently collect rescue information, update the content of rescue information in real time and expand the dissemination range of rescue information." (I7)

When old media cannot meet the needs and only carry out incomplete dissemination of information, old media would translate the new one and cover the shortage in a cooperative way. Taking the translation of Xiaohongshu and WeChat groups as an example, People often openly post their lives on Xiaohongshu and leave their Wechat IDs at the end of the post. After get in touch with the blogger, audiences interested in this content will be invited to join the WeChat group, so that they can form a closer social circle. This is a translation of Xiaohongshu to the WeChat group. The shared document takes WeChat as a carrier and WeChat enhances information function with the shared document. This type of translation between media enhances the efficiency of action of online communities.

Role norms: hierarchical translation of digital media

Information sharing, resource exchange and institutional legitimacy do not always exist in an organization. It has been showed that some online forums and post bar boards tend to stay at the level of information sharing, resulting in the generation of some weak ties with more extensiveness than action (Hwang et al., 2006; Nah et al., 2006). The temporary mutual aid group has the characteristics of complex members and temporary structure.

The influx of a large number of members leads to internal member overload, which is manifested as the lack of normative behavior of members and the lack of strict and clear rules within the group. The pets mutual aid group presents a chaotic state of weak individual embedment and difficult resource integration, which ultimately leads to the member's independent action difficult to sustain. How to complete the efficient work allocation and make each member play the maximum role has became the difficulty of the group work.

> "The group was loose and ruleless. Every member had their own need. We were hard to motivate people to do anything. People in the lockdown area were unable to protect themselves and volunteers in the lockdown area were powerless." (I3).

Based on the main pets mutual aid group with 500 members, multiple subgroups were created. Some pets mutual aid subgroups consisted of core members of the main group and the discussion focused on decision-making and task allocation. Some subgroups were established for specific assigned tasks, and the discussion focused on the task.

The actors in pets mutual aid group during the epidemic have been classified into three categories: community leaders, free riders and help-seekers. Group leaders showed more desire to participate, sense of responsibility and ability to act than ordinary residents in public affairs. A free rider was a member of a group who enjoys some benefits by paying little or no cost (Yan et al., 2023). This study divided human actors into fixed volunteers and ordinary group members who could be converted into each other through digital media. Ordinary group members were composed of rescuers and help seekers who could transform into each other. They do not have fixed tasks in the pets mutual aid group. Most of the regular volunteers were converted from ordinary group members. Their love for pets was their motivation to work. They take on regular work to maintain the daily operation of the pets mutual aid group. The annotation in the pets mutual aid group were their regular jobs, such as anti-epidemic information releaser, external liaison officer, etc.

Yang Li was a regular volunteer in the pets mutual aid group. She was a normal cat owner, but she was recruited as a volunteer because of her enthusiasm for the group affairs. Her group annotation was anti-epidemic information releaser. Since Yang Li had a full-time job, she could only squeeze out fragmented time to sort out the information of the pets mutual aid group.

> "My responsibility is to transfer information. When there were help requests or valuable information in some groups, I will integrate them and spread them to other groups." (I4)

When the main WeChat group cannot carry complicated and diverse narrative content, the sub-group model refines the core actors and core circles to make the pets mutual aid group a complex system with levels and forms, thereby promoting orderly and effective interaction within the group.

Technological detour: dynamic translation of digital media

During the initial stage of the translation process, the problem of core actor is the obligatory passage point (Callon, 1984), that is, the common problem faced by the group. The previous study pointed out that crisis brings people together and group will eliminate without crisis. As emergencies subside, online communities will dissipate in a self-degrading manner. The social connection of individuals under abnormal conditions is short-lived and fragile (Fang, 2024). Once the external conditions are changed, the tight group interaction will disappear. However, in this case, when the compulsory isolation policy was cancelled, the pets mutual aid group did not dissipate, but a new obligatory passage point was formed to continue the translation.

In December 2022, the New Ten Measures for epidemic prevention and control were announced and the mandatory centralized isolation measures were withdrawn. It was no longer necessary for pet owners to separate from their pets. The obligatory passage point for mutual assistance was eliminated. The change in the external field dramatically reduced the information sharing and topic discussion about pet mutual assistance, and the rescue operations of the actor network have come to an abrupt end. Many pet owners withdrew from the action network after the obligatory passage point disappeared. Until then, the number of group members had been maintained at a saturation state of 500.

Since December, members of the pets mutual aid group have begun to leave the group one after another. On July 13, 2023, the number of group members was 407. About 19% of the members left the group within a month. However, the number of people in the group has remained relatively stable since then, and there has been no large-scale members loss. As of April 14, 2024, the number of people in the group was 375, because the group has translated a new obligatory passage point, the rescue of stray pets.

Technical detour refers to the changes in people's abilities, goals, demands and status in the combination with technological objects. After pet owners gain group support or update their pet-raising concepts in pets mutual aid group, they will expand their focus from their own pets to stray pets. Pet owners do not longer care only about their own pets, they are also willing to use the power of online communities to change society with a public spirit. Due to the previous epidemic prevention and control policy, the number of stray pets has skyrocketed. When group members encounter stray pets, they will take photos and send the information to the group, or when they see pet rescue information in other groups, they will forward it to this group. The pets mutual aid group was transformed into an information publishing group for rescuing stray pets and finding owners or adopters for them. At this point, the short-term event-driven group becomes a long-term relationship-driven group.

Nevertheless, once the external pressure has been removed, the extraordinary period will return to normal. While pets mutual aid practices established under

external pressure and emergency translation were not easily sustained, and no single emergency trigger is likely to enable the growth of a mutual aid civil society, they will continue the rescue framework and retain the innovative spirit underlying mutual aid. After the external pressure relieves, society will return to normal. Although it is difficult for a single emergency to trigger the growth of a mutual assistance civil society, the common emotion for pets continues the rescue framework and the innovative underlying spirit of mutual assistance is preserved.

Limitations

This study mainly has the following limitations. 1. Official and commercial actors have not been included in the discussion framework. During emergency, the policy orientation and the official actors' authorization of organizational legitimacy have significant impact on the development of mutual aid networks. Especially in the later stages, some official actors also gradually joined in. In the meanwhile, Commercial actors also affect pets mutual aid group. Both of them can become separate topics under digital media translation. 2. Although cyber-ethnography and in-depth interviews can effectively capture the interviewees' true feelings and subtle emotional changes, they also have a considerable degree of subjectivity. This may stem from the researchers' own understanding or the subjectivity of the collected data. Therefore, the next phase of this study could employ quantitative research methods, such as questionnaire survey, to verify the results and enhance the credibility of the study. 3. The time node selected in this study has its particularity and the social environment is difficult to replicate. Digital media is not an independent translator, it is interdependent with social culture, economic order, political system and so on. Therefore, the cultural background of the city, the legal management regulations for pets, and the maturity of social organizations are all important forces affecting the development of pets mutual aid community and these areas need to be further explored.

Conclusions

Previous studies acknowledge the role of digital media as a translator for online communities; for example, digital media possesses distinct advantages in facilitating mobilization (Brennan, 2018) and fostering a collective consciousness (Carroll et al., 2014). But the previous study context for these conclusions is mostly obtained during the initial establishment and operation of online communities. Incomplete translation of digital media becomes apparent when online communities enter the stage of standardization and refinement, and the collective action is hard to sustain. However, this study demonstrated that the translation mechanism of digital media has enhanced the resilience of online communities. Resilience refers to the ability of individuals and communities to actively adjust to ongoing changes by developing their capacities and resources (Roberts et al.,

2017). Based on the analysis above, this study posits that the resilience of online communities refers to their ability to provide cohesion among a diverse and extensive membership, and to integrate resources and self-renew in response to internal demands and external changes, thereby gaining the capacity for action and sustainable development.

Firstly, this resilience stems from the synergy between digital media and other actors. Latour believed that technology was a new way of exploring the existence of the others (Latour, 2013). Technology connects different elements and produces specific effects around the same goal and consequently established a modus operandi that coordinates various heterogeneous factors (Latour, 1999). Synergy means that each component constantly explores various positions, creative movement processes or new reaction processes with each other. It generates an orderly structure from an open system (Geary, 2013). Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer have explored how heterogeneity and synergy coexist within groups. That study points out that the key to translate different viewpoints are the standardization of methods and boundary objects. Their analysis of the synergistic work around Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, involving hunters, collectors, patrons, and scientists, pointed out that scientists use a clear set of methods to "discipline" other actors, and develop boundary objects such as specimens, maps, and field notes, which enable the smooth operation of the museum (Star & Griesemer, 1989). They also indicated the fundamental position and implementation method of synergy in the translation process. This study further points out that synergy refers to the deep translation of digital media to various actors followed by joint action, including the synergy between digital media and human actors, between pets and human actors, between emotions and human actors and so on. According to Latour view, the translation process should take into account the mutual composition of humans and non-humans, as humans and non-humans allow, authorize and empower each other. This mutual construction is actually a kind of synergy.

According to Michel Callon view, the translation process can be divided into four basic steps, problem presentation, benefit endowed, enrolment and mobilization. Among them, problem presentation is to set obligatory passage point. Benefit endowed is to enroll actors to become network members through various devices and strategies. Mobilization involves actors ascending to the level of spokesmen of the network and exercising power over other actors in order to keep the network operational smoothly (Callon, 1984). However, the above four stages are insufficient to summarize the whole process of digital media translating online groups. Synergy should be added to the translation process of pets mutual aid group by digital media. Synergy makes pets mutual aid group equal and inclusive, gaining a horizontal action power formed by the connections of various actors.

Furthermore, resilience comes from the self-translation of the digital media. The diverse functionalities of the digital media itself, along with the practical needs

of human actors, have facilitated the renewal of the ways in which the digital media is utilized. In Latour's view, technology relies on the formidable power of metamorphosis, extracting unknown new capabilities from entities of reproduction (Latour, 2013). Metamorphosis represents the plasticity of an entity, that is, its ability to cope with change. Paul Levinson pointed out the concept of "remedial medium," suggesting that all media require continuous compensation and remediation (Levinson, 2000), and new media that emerges is a remedy and compensation for the functional deficiencies of a previous media. Remediation is not only present between different media but also within a single media itself. This study showed that WeChat group could translate themselves by coordinating with shared documents, forming a hierarchical system and setting new obligatory passage points, giving pets mutual aid group lasting vitality.

This study provides an in-depth description of how pet owners, pets and digital media act together to establish a resilient pets mutual aid group in the face of social upheaval and unequal treatment. Translation is not a mere inanimate and static structure. It is a dynamic, vibrant occurrence (Blumczynski, 2016). Even after the state of emergency was lifted and external stimuli vanish, the underlying spirit of mutual assistance continues, just as the pet-owning community has established a rescue network for stray animals after the end of the epidemic. The sustainable development of the pets mutual aid group challenges anthropocentrism, promoting inclusiveness and recognition, care and contemplation across species, bringing attention to marginal groups composed of humans or other species.

However, it cannot be denied that the pets mutual aid group was still relatively weak in strength and had limited external support. Changes in group practices related to digital media are not only the result of technological progress, but also of social progress and cultural development. In the current pet social culture, a pet can be considered a member of the family, a friend or an extension of the self. Pets are the recipients of emotional sustenance of pet owners, and also companion species. In this study, pets as actors are also the core force in the construction and operation of online pets mutual aid group, changing the behavior of human actors. As Haraway has stated, humans and companion species train each other in communication ways that neither fully understands, physically constituting one another, and despite obvious differences, they are significant others to each other (Haraway, 2003).

Thompson E P. systematically elaborates the concept of moral economy, describing how, in a laissez-faire economic system, the previous social consensus is disrupted, and the lower strata of the population engage in a series of struggles due to the unmet satisfaction of their rights and needs to survive (Thompson, 1971). Moral economy scrutinizes economic activities with morality and reciprocity, paying attention to the living conditions of marginal groups. In fact, while the commodification of pet life has brought about a robust pet economy, on the other hand, it has led to the disregard for pet life and the abandonment of

pet bodies. Stray pets have become a dilemma in urban management, and the government needs to invest a significant amount of resources to address this issue. Although valuing pet welfare contradicts the goal of maximizing efficiency, it is the "moral economy" for harmonious coexistence between humans and non-human animals and the development of social civilization. Speaking for the voiceless animals, reminding humans to expand their own feelings, to experience the pain of animals in the completely helpless deprivation and slaughter, like walking alone in the long night, do not let oneself lose the imagination of understanding and feeling in civilization (Huang, 2022). There is currently no corresponding companion animal protection law in China, and social attention and care for pets is still very limited. The development of mature and sustainable group mutual assistance still requires the support of institutional guarantees and mature moral concepts.

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Figures and Tables (Appendix)

Table 1. Overview of the participants in the in-depth interview

serial number	Name	Group Role	Profession
I1	HaoYu	Epidemic prevention volunteer	Company employee
I2	Yu An	Ordinary members	Lawyer
I3	AMY	Rescue team member	Rescue team member
I4	Yang Li	temporary volunteer	Business owner
I5	Fish	Ordinary member	Postgraduate
I6	Wu	Ordinary member	Company employee
I7	JONE	temporary volunteer	Teacher
I8	Bob	Ordinary member	Company employee
I9	Yu	Ordinary member	Studying master
I10	Night Lover	Ordinary member	Freelancer
I11	Tea	Ordinary member	Student
I12	WenWen	temporary volunteer	Programmer
I13	Jie Zai	Rescue team member	Doctor
I14	ANN	Ordinary member	Company employee
I15	Marble	Ordinary member	Editor

Table 2. A shared document summarized the help information

No.	5
Release date	11th Nov.
Level of assistance	Urgent
Area	Haizhu district
Street	Fengyang Subdistrict
Grid	13
Address	No.xx, Dunrenli, Lujiang
Epidemic prevention policy	high risk lockdown. All the people in our community were sent to the quarantine hotels
Pet Owner Status	the lady living on the 3rd floor hold the spare key
Pet category and name	white cat Name: Xiao Mi
Pet status	The cat has been trapped for 6 days. The cat food was already damp on the ground
Requirement	Please come to my house and change the damp cat food
Resolved or not	Yes
Contact Detail	132xxxxxxx