

RUMOR AS CRISIS DISCOURSE: MEANING- MAKING AND MICRO-RESISTANCE IN SHANGHAI'S DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

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This article examines how digital rumors functioned as crisis discourse during the 2022 Shanghai lockdown, serving both as improvised meaning-making and as fragmented acts of micro-resistance. Drawing on digital ethnography and discourse analysis, the study investigates how residents in a middle-class compound used WeChat groups to circulate, interpret, and act upon rumors amidst strict state censorship and material deprivation. Rather than approaching rumors as mere misinformation, the article conceptualizes them as emergent discursive practices that filled communicative voids, generated grassroots knowledge, and temporarily disrupted dominant state narratives. Grounded in Gramsci's notion of *common sense* and Shibutani's theory of improvised news, the analysis highlights the dialectical nature of rumor as both a survival mechanism and a contested form of bottom-up discourse in authoritarian settings. Framed within the global condition of the post-truth era, this study foregrounds the role of digital platforms specifically WeChat as sites where discourse, power, and control are simultaneously produced, circulated, and contested. In contexts where traditional information infrastructures are compromised, platforms become critical battlegrounds for meaning-making, where rumor emerges as a form of user-generated epistemology. The Shanghai case offers broader insights into how platform architectures, algorithmic visibility, and moderation regimes shape the formation and suppression of alternative discourses during crises. By tracing the micro-politics of rumor in Shanghai's digital public sphere, this article contributes to transnational debates on crisis communication, platform governance, and the shifting dynamics of voice and resistance in digitally mediated authoritarian and post-authoritarian societies.

KEYWORDS: digital rumor; crisis communication; micro-resistance; WeChat; Shanghai lockdown; digital public sphere; authoritarianism

Introduction

Despite a growing body of literature on rumor, grassroots resistance, and digital authoritarianism, few studies have examined how rumor operates as a discursive form of agency within platformized authoritarian infrastructures. While existing work has established the social and emotional functions of rumor during crises (Rosnow, 1988; DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007), less attention has been paid to how rumors not only respond to uncertainty, but actively reconfigure platform communication as a site of hegemonic struggle. Moreover, the interplay between vernacular rumor practices and platform-level governance mechanisms remains under-theorized. This study contributes to these gaps by theorizing rumor as a form

of discursive improvisation and micro-resistance in the context of China's 2022 Shanghai lockdown. By tracing the circulation of informal messages across WeChat groups, it shows how users simultaneously reproduce and subvert dominant crisis narratives. This approach integrates theories of crisis discourse, common sense, and micro-resistance to offer a grounded account of how meaning and power are negotiated in the digital public sphere under authoritarian conditions.

Background: Zero-Covid Policy, Shanghai Lockdown and Wechat

China's Zero-Covid policy, initiated in early 2020, was characterized by extensive testing, centralized quarantine, and large-scale lockdowns. Unlike many other countries that gradually shifted toward coexistence with the virus, China maintained a strict elimination strategy until late 2022. This approach involved top-down crisis management and high levels of state intervention in everyday life. The 76-day lockdown of Wuhan in 2020 was the first full-city shutdown in modern history (Corradetti & Pollicino, 2021), and it set a precedent for subsequent policies across the country. The governance model underpinning this policy relied heavily on information control, legal enforcement, and the mobilization of digital infrastructures to ensure compliance. Official media channels promoted narratives of scientific necessity and patriotic sacrifice, while alternative discourses, including those questioning quarantine conditions, supply chains, or government competence, were frequently censored (Mendis & Wang, 2020). Public hospitals were converted into quarantine camps, and police-enforced isolation measures were extended to entire residential buildings. During these lockdowns, access to accurate, timely, and transparent information was systematically restricted, creating a communicative void in which rumor and speculation flourished (Zhao & Xiang, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020).

The 2022 lockdown of Shanghai represented a significant rupture in China's pandemic governance. As the country's most cosmopolitan and economically advanced city, Shanghai had previously adopted a more measured strategy emphasizing "precise control" rather than sweeping closures. Yet, when Omicron cases surged in late March, the city was subjected to an indefinite, citywide lockdown without formal announcement or transparent policy communication, generating widespread anxiety, anger, and confusion (Wang & Niu, 2022; Zheng, 2022). Material shortages quickly followed: residents were unable to leave their homes, delivery systems collapsed, and government relief packages were erratic. At the same time, platform-based communication became the only viable method of coordination and survival. In the absence of reliable official messaging, residents turned to online rumors—circulating through WeChat, Douyin, and Weibo—to interpret policy shifts, coordinate food access, and share information about quarantine conditions. In this communicative vacuum, rumor became a form of both epistemic improvisation and everyday resistance.

WeChat, China's dominant all-in-one communication platform, played a central role in both enabling and constraining discourse during the lockdown. As previous studies have shown, WeChat's affordances such as group chats, embedded mini-programs, and synchronized payment systems allowed residents to organize bulk purchases, seek medical help, and track infections informally (Qian & Hanser, 2021). These features made WeChat indispensable for daily survival under lockdown conditions. Yet WeChat also functions as an arm of the state's surveillance apparatus. Group chats are monitored; administrators (group owners) can be held legally accountable for the content shared by members (Zhang, 2018). Accounts that

disseminated "sensitive" information were frequently suspended or deleted. This dual role, as a site of grassroots coordination and digital authoritarian control, made WeChat a battleground of discursive tension. Rumors circulating within this hybrid space were not merely unverified claims, but discursive responses to state opacity, reflecting public attempts to reclaim voice, visibility, and meaning in the face of institutional silence.

Theoretical Framework: Rumor in Crisis, Common Sense and Resistance

In crisis situations where official information is delayed, withheld, or distrusted, individuals often turn to informal communicative practices to make sense of uncertainty. Rumors, in such contexts, are not merely distortions or noise in the information environment; rather, they serve as *improvised discourse*—a means through which communities negotiate ambiguity and construct provisional knowledge in the absence of trusted authorities. As Shibutani (1966) famously theorized, rumors are "a recurrent form of communication through which people caught in ambiguous situations attempt to construct a meaningful interpretation by pooling their intellectual resources" (p. 17). He conceptualizes rumor not as an anomaly, but as a *substitute news system*, emerging in moments of institutional breakdown. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this interpretive function of rumor became especially visible in authoritarian settings such as China, where information was tightly controlled. As Zhao and Xiang (2022) observe, health-related rumors circulated widely in digital spaces due to public anxiety, unclear messaging, and fragmented authority. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2020) demonstrate how rumors during the outbreak filled crucial informational voids, enabling individuals to take action in response to perceived threats. These studies support Rosnow's (1988) contention that rumors are best understood as "social constructions" that serve to reduce anxiety and promote group cohesion in high-stress contexts. Rumors in times of crisis thus perform a meaning-making function. As DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) explain, individuals engage with rumors not only to transmit information, but to *interpret and reframe experience*, often collaboratively. In this sense, rumors resemble what Wetherell (1998) describes as "discursive practices that both reflect and shape social realities," particularly under volatile or unstable conditions. While mainstream public discourse may attempt to suppress rumor as irrational or subversive, the persistence of rumor in crisis contexts points to a deeper epistemic need: the creation of shared sense in the face of official silence or contradiction.

While rumor offers an improvised form of meaning-making during crises, it also operates within broader ideological terrains. In Gramsci's framework, "common sense" (*senso comune*) refers to the diffuse, taken-for-granted beliefs and practical knowledges that organize everyday understanding of the world (Gramsci, 1971: 323–324). Though often fragmented and contradictory, common sense is not politically neutral; rather, it is a key terrain on which ideological hegemony is reproduced. Through institutions such as the media, education, and law, dominant groups embed their worldview into what appears "natural" or "self-evident" (Gramsci, 1971: 333–334). In authoritarian settings like China, this process is especially visible during crises, when official discourse seeks to maintain narrative dominance by framing obedience, sacrifice, and state-led control as both rational and patriotic. Yet as Gramsci noted, moments of crisis can rupture hegemonic stability, opening space for alternative forms of common sense to emerge (Gramsci, 1971: 210). When dominant narratives lose credibility or fail to provide answers, subaltern communities may generate competing explanations to

interpret their reality—what Gramsci would call “organic” or counter-hegemonic sense-making (ibid.).

Rumors in this context become discursive instruments for articulating everyday critique. They serve not only to fill epistemic gaps, but also to challenge the coherence and legitimacy of state discourse. As Liu (2016) argues in his study of environmental protest and rumor in China, grassroots communities often develop “vernacular discourses” that question official claims without directly confronting the ideological order. These informal accounts reflect subaltern knowledge practices that operate beneath the threshold of open dissent, yet signal collective skepticism and resistance (Liu, 2016: 22–27). Similarly, O’Brien and Li (2005) describe such engagements as forms of “rightful resistance”—oppositional practices that invoke the state’s own rhetoric and rules to critique its failures, thereby creating ideologically compliant, yet politically charged, counter-discourses (O’Brien and Li, 2005: 238–239). In authoritarian societies where overt protest is constrained, resistance often manifests through subtle, everyday practices embedded within routine communication. James Scott’s (1985) concept of “*everyday forms of resistance*” provides a foundational framework for understanding such acts not as organized movements but as “infra-political” gestures that operate below the radar of formal power. These include evasions, code-switching, ambiguity, and rumor circulation. They are often uncoordinated, fragmentary, and temporally limited, yet they allow marginalized actors to express dissent and negotiate state authority within the bounds of control (Scott, 1985: xvi–xvii). In the context of China’s digital media landscape, such micro-resistance often unfolds within platformized environments that simultaneously enable and regulate communication. Platforms like WeChat, which function as hybrid spaces for commerce, communication, and governance, provide affordances for peer-to-peer interaction but also incorporate extensive surveillance, censorship, and content moderation mechanisms (Han, 2018; Qiang, 2019). These systems limit explicit protest while allowing for ambiguous and indirect modes of oppositional discourse, such as the circulation of emotionally charged rumors or irony-laden posts.

In sum, rumors in crisis contexts are not merely aberrations of rational communication, but culturally and politically situated discursive acts. They function simultaneously as epistemic improvisations and as vehicles of subtle resistance, embedded in everyday vernacular and digital repertoires. In authoritarian environments like China, such discourses allow ordinary citizens to both make sense of volatile realities and negotiate the constraints of hegemonic narratives. Recognizing rumors as sites of meaning-making and micro-contestation invites a methodological approach attuned to the textures of language, context, and mediated interaction. It is with this orientation that the present study undertakes a discourse-centered analysis of rumor practices during the Shanghai lockdown, grounded in digital ethnography and critical interpretive frameworks.

Methodology and Data

This study adopts a digital ethnographic approach to examine rumor circulation and discursive resistance during the Shanghai lockdown in 2022. The primary field site is a middle-class residential compound in Dachang Town, Baoshan District, located on the western edge of Shanghai. Established in 2018, the compound comprises 1,075 households across 48 buildings and is representative of the new suburban middle-class communities in Chinese megacities. The site was chosen for its hybrid characteristics: its residents are economically

stable and digitally literate, yet faced severe constraints during the lockdown, including food shortages, movement restrictions, and limited access to reliable information. By focusing on this site, the research captures how digital rumors function as tools of survival and resistance in an authoritarian crisis context. The study foregrounds the tension between trust and control, where residents are caught between state narratives and everyday uncertainties, and where meaning-making unfolds within highly mediated environments.

The data corpus consists of interactions collected from twelve WeChat groups, as listed in Table 1, active during the lockdown period (April to June 2022). These groups served various functions, from organizing bulk purchases of food and medical supplies to sharing policy updates, neighborhood gossip, and emotional support. The groups ranged in size from under 100 to over 400 members, and daily message volumes varied from approximately 200 to over 1,000. Participant observation was conducted in real-time during the lockdown and continued retrospectively through saved chat histories. Observations included textual messages, emojis, images, voice notes, and forwarded screenshots or external links. Offline behaviors were also noted, particularly how group discussions translated into real-world actions such as coordinated bulk purchasing, rumor-based resource stockpiling, or self-imposed quarantine measures.

The key rumor categories identified through initial inductive coding indicated in Table 2 which are: 1. Food and supply shortages; 2. Omicron outbreaks; 3. Infections within the compound; 4. Covid testing protocols; 5. Quarantine policies; 6. Timeline for lifting restrictions. This typology reflects both the immediate concerns of survival and the broader socio-political uncertainties shaping everyday life. All observations were conducted with attention to ethical research practices. Informed consent was obtained from key members in each WeChat group, and participants were provided with a clear explanation of the research purpose. Consent forms were distributed and signed digitally. To preserve privacy, all identifying information was anonymized, and the researchers refrained from any form of participation that could influence group dynamics.

Table 1. Twelve Internal WeChat Groups of the Compound

Code	Name of Chatgroups	Number of Users	Average Number of Daily Messages (Text, Images, Videos and Others)
SHM	“Second-Hand Market”	435	807
GBFL	“Group-buying: Flour”	267	586
GBMM	“Group-buying: Meat and Milk”	261	653
NB	“Neighborhood”	254	1089
NGB	“Neighbor Group-buying”	210	866
CPN	“Covid Prevention Necessities”	189	230
GBFR	“Group-buying: Fruit”	149	389
TPS	“Toilet Paper & Sanitizer”	123	265
GBR	“Group-buying: Rice”	91	233
GKS	“Group for Kids Stuff”	89	198
No.#	“No. # Houseowners”	87	320
CDH	“Charitable Donation for HOA”	76	228

Given the heightened sensitivity of the context, special care was taken to avoid collecting or reporting any information that could be traced back to specific individuals.

The research adhered to institutional ethical guidelines regarding digital data collection and participant confidentiality. The analysis combined thematic coding with discursive interpretation, focusing on how rumor texts functioned as improvisational responses to uncertainty and tools of everyday resistance. Each rumor was categorized not only by topic, but also by its social function whether it triggered group action, fostered anxiety, strengthened solidarity, or signaled distrust toward state narratives. The coding process tracked rumor trajectories: emergence, amplification, reinforcement (often via individuals with industry contacts), and resolution (clarification or debunking). Attention was also paid to the aesthetics and affect of rumor discourse such as voice notes conveying panic, or humor used to mask critique. The WeChat platform itself was analyzed as a discursive infrastructure both enabling and constraining. It facilitated rapid peer-to-peer rumor circulation but simultaneously hosted embedded surveillance, moderation algorithms, and pro-government narratives. These platform affordances shaped not only what could be said but also how it was said—often in coded, ironic, or ambiguous forms.

Table 2. Six Major Rumor Topics Circulated in WeChat Groups

Themes	Specific Subjects with Examples			
Food	<i>Government Supplies Corruption</i>	<i>Accessible Platforms to Get Food</i>	<i>Fruits and Fast-Food Orders Carrying Virus</i>	<i>Necessity of Stocking up Food</i>
	Town mayor sold governmental supplies to residents in other districts	Tricks to order online groceries; Shanghai government food aid website	Strawberries and KFC are contaminated by deliverymen to spread Covid virus	Government shuts down roads/bridges to suburban farms
Omicron	<i>Transmission</i>	<i>Symptoms & Side Effects</i>	<i>Treatment</i>	<i>Lethality</i>
	Long-distance and persistent dispersion through the air	Loss of taste and smell; Pneumonia; Paralysis;	Traditional Chinese medicine	Invalid Chinese vaccines
Infection in Compound	<i>Infected Buildings</i>	<i>Infected Locations</i>	<i>Returned Infected Residents</i>	
	Buildings with infected residents	The units and Apt numbers of infected	Refusal of returned infected from quarantine camps	
Covid Testing	<i>Medical Staff</i>	<i>Testing Method</i>	<i>Results</i>	
	Non-Shanghai medical staff are rough and rude	Different accuracy of single tube and mixed tube sampling	Fake/ Wrong results	
Quarantine	<i>Quarantine Policy</i>	<i>Living Condition</i>	<i>Isolation Time</i>	
	Separate quarantine without parents for children under seven; Compulsive in-house sanitization; Extermination of pets (infected or not).	Unfinished construction buildings without bed and any appliances; Temporary cabin with cracked roof and broken toilets	Minimum 14 days if test negative after admission	
Lifting Date	<i>Cues from Official News</i>	<i>Other Compounds and Districts</i>	<i>Speculation and Hearsays</i>	
	Military troops from other provinces to suppress protests	People in eastern Shanghai went on streets to buy food	The Lockdown continues to October until Xi gets re-elected for third term	

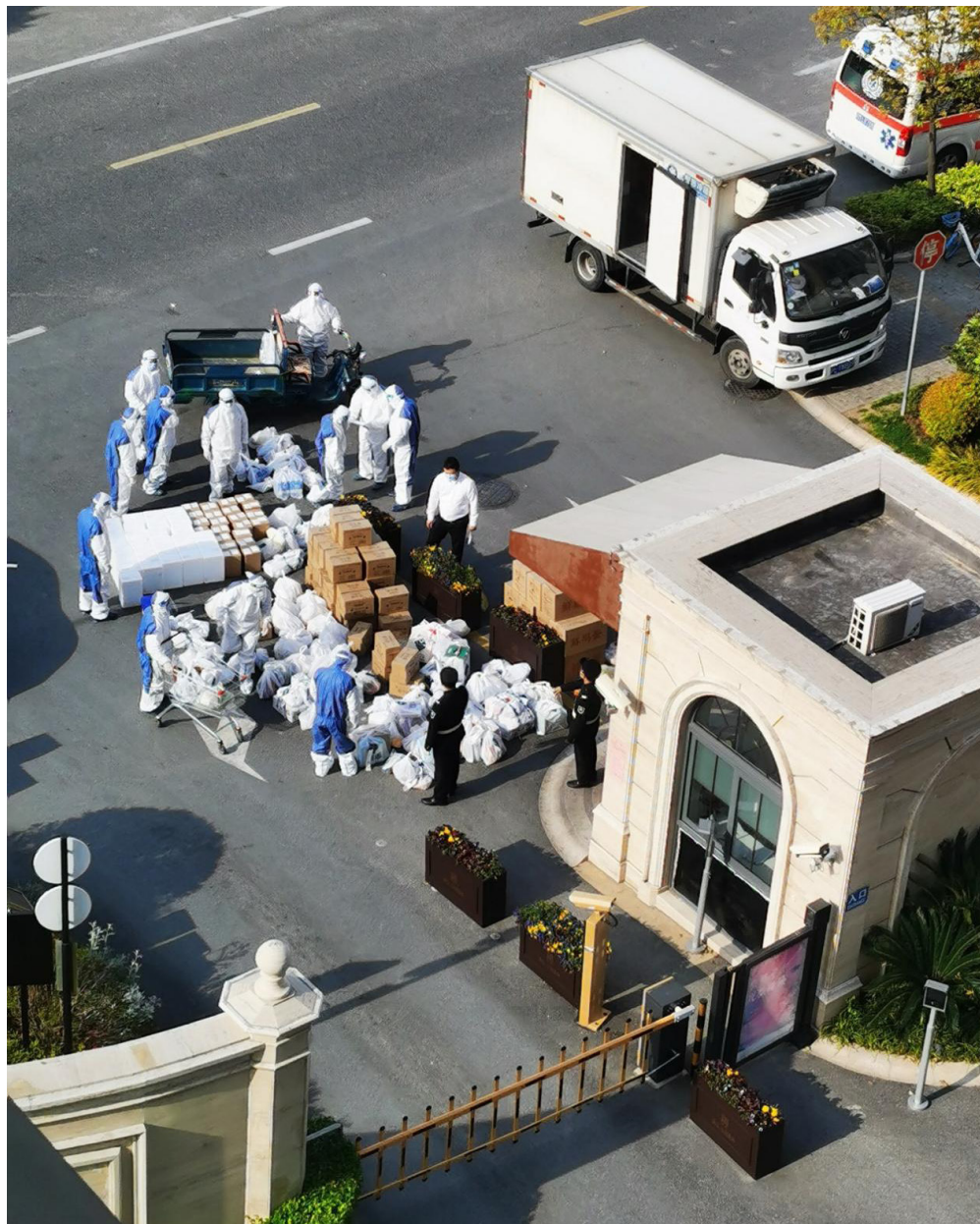
This research is limited in several respects. First, the focus on a single, middle-class compound means the findings may not generalize to other demographics, such as working-

class or rural communities. Different socio-economic contexts may produce different rumor ecologies and discursive strategies. Second, the reliance on digital data, while rich in interactional detail, may overlook non-digitially mediated forms of resistance or information flow. Lastly, the Shanghai context, with its high digital penetration and relatively vocal middle class, may differ significantly from other Chinese cities with varying governance and media ecologies.

Rumor as a Survival Infrastructure

In the first week of the Shanghai lockdown, residents inside the compound repeatedly refreshed the government delivery app, waiting for the promised relief packages. On April 2, one resident shared a photo in the WeChat group “Neighborhood” showing a food box labeled for “Dachang Town” found in Pudong. Several users immediately speculated that these packages had been rerouted. One resident responded: “Maybe the Dachang mayor sold our supplies to his relatives in Pudong.” While the rumor could not be verified, it triggered a practical reaction. In a message posted at 7:38 p.m., a group admin in “Group-buying: Flour” announced, “From now on, let’s stop waiting. I have a bakery friend with extra inventory—we can organize a bulk order.” Within 24 hours, the group grew by over 100 members, each volunteering to coordinate transport, payments, and packaging. Messages were pinned with order forms and digital receipts.

Rumor here was not merely misinformation. It functioned as a mobilizing narrative that gave residents interpretive clarity and a rationale for switching to informal procurement. Rather than awaiting an opaque state response, residents began to build self-organized logistics through preexisting social ties, often using industry connections and alumni networks. This behavior demonstrates how digital rumor operated as a bottom-up meaning-making device in times of uncertainty. It did not require verification to be effective; its real function lay in coordinating material responses under conditions of deprivation. By April 6, multiple WeChat groups were running parallel procurement efforts. Residents shared success stories of food delivery in chat logs, offering validation and encouragement to others. In one post, a resident wrote, “Got my milk today. Thank goodness for group-buying. If we waited for the government, my kid would starve.”



Pic 1. Group Purchase – Photography by Anonymous Resident

On April 12, a resident posted a short video in the “Covid Prevention Necessities” WeChat group. The clip, taken from Douyin, showed three toddlers crowded onto a single hospital bed in what appeared to be a quarantine facility in Jinshan District. Their faces were blurred, but the crying was unmistakable. The post sparked a flurry of reactions. Although no death was confirmed, this unverified rumor spread rapidly through several groups. A mother in the “Group for Kids Stuff” group wrote, “Our whole family is locked down. I just pray my child doesn’t test positive—we can’t let him be sent to a place like that.”



Pic 2. Health Control Bus for Covid Positive Resident – Photography by Anonymous Resident

In these exchanges, rumor acted as an emotional intensifier—a means through which individual fear became collective panic. Parents began discussing how to avoid mass testing, fearing that a single positive result would lead to forced family separation. In “Neighborhood,” one father posted, “we can’t be sent to quarantine.” Others agreed, privately messaging their plans to hide symptoms and avoid government reporting.



Pic 3. Video shared in WeChat Groups Where were Believed to be Temporary Quarantine Locations for Covid Positive Patients

The health rumor ecology extended beyond children. Images circulated in multiple groups showing quarantine sites in disrepair: unfinished buildings with no beds, toilets leaking across the floor, and communal spaces without basic ventilation. One user claimed, “That place was just a newly built construction site, not a hospital at all,” one user claimed. This was accompanied by a photo of a half-plastered wall, supposedly from the site. These unverified rumors produced actionable behavior. Residents began to reframe the threat of infection: not as a health issue, but as a logistical trap. Infection meant detention. Safety became not a matter of hygiene, but of avoiding the attention of health authorities. In effect, public health discourse had inverted: people feared the cure more than the illness. In this context, rumors functioned not merely as falsehoods but as situated, affective knowledge expressing what official channels refused to acknowledge and triggering behavior consistent with a survival-first mindset. The trauma embedded in the rumor stories (especially those involving children) sharpened community-wide efforts to avoid detection and minimize contact with state-managed health systems.

In addition to concerns about quarantine sites, the fear of infection itself was exacerbated by rumors that visualized and spatialized viral spread. A notable example is the case of “Strawberry Cluster” at Shangnan Third Village, where an image widely circulated on WeChat and other messaging platforms claimed that the entire neighborhood had been infected due to a COVID-positive fruit vendor. The post included a detailed residential map annotated with infected zones, highlighting the supposed epicenter and drawing an implied causal link between the infected vendor and community-wide transmission. Such rumors were often accompanied by emojis (e.g., crying, facepalm) that simultaneously expressed humor

and despair, suggesting a blend of helplessness and sarcasm. These user-generated “infection maps,” although not officially verified, served as an informal epistemology of risk, guiding residents’ behavior and reinforcing hyper-vigilance. By offering a tangible visualization of threat, rumors like this transformed abstract anxieties into actionable boundaries. Residents would avoid certain blocks, refuse deliveries from specific areas, or even blame individuals for community spread. These discursive artifacts did not simply misinform. They reorganized the mental geography of risk during lockdown.



Pic 4. Screenshot of Covid Positive Strawberries

Rumor as Disputed Resistance Tool and Limitations

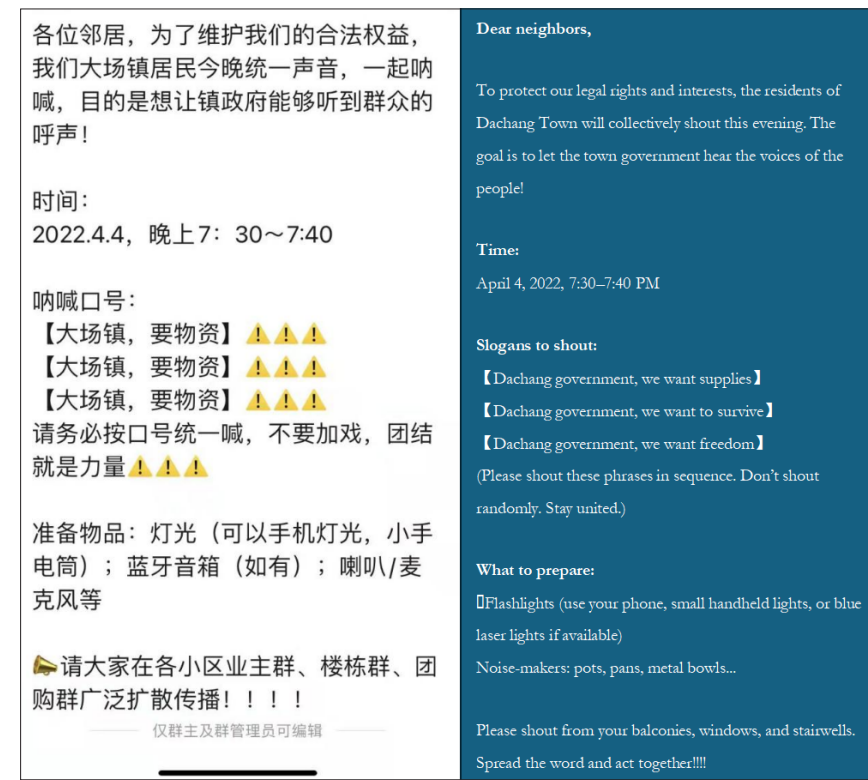
As the lockdown persisted, digital rumors also began to serve as tools for resistance against governmental control. The Baoshan Corruption incident did not only urge the residents to form their own food supply infrastructure but also pushed some online protest movements in the district. Screenshots of Weibo posts under the hashtag “Baoshan Corruption” began to appear. The hashtag, at its peak, was reportedly viewed over 5 million times in a single day, although many posts were swiftly taken down. A resident of Jingbei Compound shared a screen recording of them trying to repost the hashtag, only to be met with an error message

and then a temporary account suspension. Beyond online resistance, rumors also played a role in coordinating offline protests. For example, when residents in a nearby Gu Village organized a protest, the details were shared through WeChat, including textual descriptions and pictures of the event. This sparked a sense of solidarity among other compounds, and soon after, a video of people shouting in the streets, assumed to be from Dachang, went viral within the compound. Though it was later discovered that the protest had actually taken place in Qingdao, a northern city, the rumor nonetheless inspired local residents to plan similar collective protests.



Pic 5. Video shared in WeChat Groups of Protest in another town named Da Chang

One notable offline action was a proposed “Han Lou” (喊楼) – collective shouting campaign, where residents were encouraged via WeChat to shout slogans from their windows at a designated time. However, the plan caused immediate concern within the group, with residents posting comments such as, “Let’s quickly leave more messages to roll that up” and “Don’t send such dangerous information anymore.” The panic was fueled by a 2017 law that held group advocates legally responsible for their members’ actions, resulting in hesitation to engage in any potentially illegal activities (Zhang, 2018). This led to a culture of self-policing within WeChat groups, stifling dissenting voices before they could escalate into substantial movements. As the government tightened control, many WeChat accounts and groups that shared dissident views were either banned or “blown up” (炸号). This was a devastating blow to residents, as WeChat was their primary platform for accessing up-to-date information and coordinating survival efforts. While the Baoshan corruption protests led to small victories, such as the eventual delivery of food supplies, the larger-scale resistance against the zero-Covid policy was fragmented and ultimately unsuccessful. The use of rumors as a resistance tool became increasingly limited as the government’s censorship mechanisms and WeChat surveillance curbed the spread of dissenting information, leading to a short-lived and disjointed resistance movement. The call for collective shouting from balconies ultimately transformed, within the sampled compound in this study, into a collective balcony performance of the patriotic song “I Love You, China.”



Pic 6. Screenshot shared in WeChat Groups about “Han Lou”

The tension between resistance and compliance is constantly shifting and mutating. Another example is the case of nucleic acid testing which exemplifies how even small acts of resistance were quickly suppressed. When residents in one building refused to go downstairs for testing after hearing rumors that someone in their building was infected, they demanded that the medical staff conduct tests at their doors instead. This minor standoff, however, was short-lived as residents feared the consequences of defying government orders, particularly losing access to their “health codes” (健康码), which were required for daily life. The fear of legal repercussions and government sanctions effectively curtailed even minor forms of resistance. In the final weeks of lockdown, the atmosphere in WeChat groups shifted from open resistance to compliance, as residents prioritized survival over protest. With food channels stabilized and residents gaining access to selective luxury items like tiger prawn, civet coffee, and La Mer, the once-strong voices of dissent faded into silence. However, small-scale protests persisted in specific contexts, such as when residents of other districts smashed rotten food in the streets or clashed with police over forced home expropriations for quarantine sites. In these cases, the rumors spread on WeChat were more about specific grievances rather than calls for broader resistance, further highlighting the fragmented nature of digital protest under the surveillance state.

Constructing Informal Truths: Digital Rumor as Everyday Meaning-Making

The following picture is one of the clearest indications of the Shanghai government’s loss of public trust during the lockdown emerged not from what was disclosed, but from what

was denied. On March 22, 2022, online speculation about an imminent citywide lockdown—spurred by inconsistent policy signals and rising case numbers—spread rapidly across digital platforms. Rather than providing transparent clarification, the Shanghai Public Security Bureau issued an official bulletin on March 23 stating that a 42-year-old man surnamed Sun had been administratively detained for “fabricating” the claim that “Shanghai will be locked down for 7 days.” The statement emphasized the illegality of spreading rumors and warned the public not to “believe or spread false information.” Yet only a few days later, the very scenario described in the alleged “rumor” unfolded in full: the city entered a protracted, two-phase lockdown starting March 28. The punitive treatment of preemptive information as “falsehood” laid bare the state’s strategy of managing public emotion through suppression rather than clarity. This moment marked a turning point in the credibility of official communication—when citizens realized that not only were rumors sometimes more accurate than government channels, but that truth itself could be retroactively criminalized.



Pic 7. Governmental Announcement of Debunking Fake Rumor of Citywide Lockdown

In authoritarian digital environments, when formal channels of communication are censored or distrusted, rumors become vernacular epistemologies—informal, often fragmentary truth claims that circulate in digitally mediated spaces such as WeChat or Weibo (Liu, 2016). These rumors help ordinary users navigate everyday survival, but also allow for the construction of *alternative knowledge systems*, however precarious. In the context of the Shanghai lockdown, rumors about food availability, quarantine policy, and infection rates did not merely fill gaps left by the state; they became discursive acts of interpretive agency. They enabled individuals to participate in bottom-up knowledge production, thereby momentarily reconfiguring power over meaning.

In digitally mediated authoritarian contexts, such as the Shanghai lockdown, these

grassroots discourses are shaped by and embedded within platform architectures. Platforms like WeChat become arenas of discursive negotiation, where rumors emerge as micro-level textual disruptions of official hegemony. Residents engaging in rumor circulation were not simply reacting to uncertainty, but actively reframing dominant narratives about the Zero-Covid policy, quarantine conditions, and state responsibility. These rumors constituted temporary “counter-publics” (Fraser, 1990: 67) fleeting spaces of oppositional discourse produced within, and constrained by, the dominant communicative regime. Yet this resistance is rarely explicit or sustained. As Gramsci warned, common sense is a contradictory space, often containing both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic elements (Gramsci, 1971: 423). Rumors can destabilize official narratives, but they can also be reabsorbed into dominant discourse. For example, when skepticism mutates into resignation, or when protest devolves into rumor-driven panic. The discursive field is thus dialectical and unstable, shaped by ongoing struggles over meaning, legitimacy, and voice.

O’Brien and Li’s (2005) notion of “*rightful resistance*”, therefore, can be extended to the platform-specific forms of resistance observed during the Shanghai lockdown. For instance, residents shared screenshots, hearsay, or videos within semi-private WeChat groups to question the legitimacy of lockdown measures, or to mock state narratives under the guise of concern or confusion. These actions constituted discursive cracks in hegemonic control, made possible by the blurred boundary between private and public communication on Chinese platforms (Herold and Marolt, 2011: 12–14). However, the nature of these digital micro-resistances is inherently precarious. The design of Chinese platforms embeds architectures of responsabilization, where group administrators can be held legally liable for “harmful” content, thus encouraging preemptive self-censorship and internal policing (Zhang, 2018). This produces what Yang (2009: 13) calls “controlled inclusion”—a system in which limited expressions of dissent are tolerated, but structurally constrained. As a result, acts of micro-resistance often remain episodic, individualized, and fragile, lacking the continuity or institutional support necessary for long-term transformation.

Nonetheless, these everyday discursive acts such as spreading rumors about food corruption, exaggerating quarantine risks to avoid relocation, or organizing bulk purchases through informal groups can be seen as forms of improvised agency. They reconfigure platform use from passive consumption to strategic survival and discursive contestation, even if only temporarily. The WeChat-based communication during the Shanghai lockdown illustrates how the digital public sphere in China is not a dichotomy of control vs. resistance, but a dialectical space where power and voice are constantly being renegotiated in granular, contingent ways (Dai and Chen, 2022).

Conclusion and Implications

This study has examined how digital rumors operated as both survival tools and improvised counter-discourses during the Shanghai lockdown of 2022. By focusing on everyday communicative practices in a middle-class residential compound, it has highlighted the ways in which residents used rumors to navigate uncertainty, express discontent, and construct localized forms of meaning-making under conditions of heightened control. While many of these acts were ultimately constrained by platform governance and political suppression, the ephemeral and adaptive nature of rumor-based communication points to a deeper cultural

logic of resistance under authoritarian rule. Yet the relevance of this study extends far beyond its original context. Since 2022, global events have continued to demonstrate the centrality of informal, decentralized, and emotionally charged information flows in times of crisis. From the rapid spread of war-related rumors on Telegram during the Ukraine invasion, to AI-generated misinformation during the 2024 U.S. election cycle, to WhatsApp-driven panic during the India-Manipur ethnic violence, we see a transnational pattern of digital rumor becoming an essential feature of contemporary public life. In each case, the blurred boundary between truth, speculation, and affect becomes not an anomaly but a systemic condition of platformed communication.

Theoretically, this reinforces the need to reconceptualize rumor not as a failure of rational discourse, but as a discursive response to epistemic fragmentation, institutional distrust, and emotional urgency. In an age marked by post-truth politics, platform monopolies, and fragmented publics, rumor emerges as an adaptive, situational, and collectively authored mode of knowledge production. It fills the vacuum left by collapsing institutional credibility, offering provisional truths when no stable narrative is available. Rather than dismissing rumor as irrational or dangerous, we must understand it as a vernacular epistemology—a mode of knowing rooted in lived experience, shared affect, and tactical ambiguity. Its fragility and volatility are not signs of its weakness, but of its responsiveness to crisis. As such, the rumor should not be treated merely as an object of regulation or correction, but as a lens through which to understand how publics, especially under authoritarian or uncertain conditions, seek to make sense of the world and to reassert agency, however momentarily, in the face of imposed silence.

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