Incomplete Information and Public Opinion Reversal in Online Public Events

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Abstract: Online public events often develop through incomplete and unevenly distributed information. Short videos, screenshots, personal statements, and reposted fragments can quickly shape public judgment before the full facts are known. Once a clear moral narrative forms, comments, repeated sharing, and media coverage may make the first interpretation appear more certain than the available evidence allows. Later recordings, official findings, or responses from other parties can overturn this interpretation and produce a rapid reversal of public opinion. This paper examines how incomplete information contributes to early judgment, how new evidence changes the public narrative, and why reversal often creates a new target of blame rather than a more careful understanding of the event. It also considers the role of platforms and news media in widening the visibility gap between early claims and later clarification. The paper argues that repeated reversals can cause reputational harm, intensify online hostility, and weaken trust in public communication. More responsible communication requires clear distinctions between confirmed facts, personal claims, disputed information, and unresolved questions.

Keywords: incomplete information; public opinion reversal; online public events; early judgment; platform communication; news correction

1. Introduction

Online public events often attract wide attention before the facts are complete. A short video, screenshot, personal statement, or brief news report may become the first account of an event. Users then begin to judge responsibility and take sides before all parties have responded.

Information at this stage is usually uneven. One person may speak first, while another remains silent. A video may show only part of a conflict, and a screenshot may leave out earlier or later messages. Even so, emotional language, visible harm, and familiar social issues can make the first account appear clear and convincing. Limited material may therefore produce a strong judgment before the wider event is known.

Public opinion may change when fuller evidence appears. Complete recordings, verified documents,

investigation results, or later responses can weaken the original account. The person first supported may become the target of criticism, while the person initially blamed may receive sympathy. This shift is commonly described as public opinion reversal.

Existing studies have examined online misinformation, emotional communication, corrective information, and the role of platform algorithms in shaping public attention. Some research treats opinion reversal mainly as the correction of false information, while other work stresses group emotion, selective exposure, and repeated circulation. These approaches explain important parts of the process, but they often separate the formation of early judgment from the later reversal. Less attention has been paid to how incomplete but partly genuine information produces a convincing first narrative and how the replacement of that narrative creates new forms of harm.

Reversal does not always lead to a more careful understanding. The second judgment may be made as quickly as the first, and anger may simply move to another target. A new report can correct part of the earlier account while still leaving other questions unresolved. Yet online discussion often treats the latest version as the final truth.

This pattern can damage reputations, encourage online abuse, and weaken trust in personal testimony, news reporting, and official information. Repeated reversals may also make users more suspicious without making them more patient or careful.

This paper examines how incomplete information shapes early judgment, why later evidence leads to public opinion reversal, and how platforms and media influence the process. It also considers the social costs of repeated reversal and the need for more cautious communication when facts remain uncertain.

2. Incomplete Information in the Early Stage of Online Events

Online public events rarely enter discussion as complete stories (X. Zhang et al.). The first materials are often short videos, screenshots, personal posts, anonymous claims, or brief statements from one party. These materials may reveal a real problem, but they usually show only one part of the event.

A short video may record an argument or emotional reaction without showing what happened before it. Edited footage may remove earlier exchanges or later explanations. The recording itself may be genuine, while the meaning attached to it remains uncertain.

Screenshots can also appear more complete than they are. A message or payment record may contain names and dates, but earlier conversations and later replies may be missing. Users can only see the selected material, so the absent context is easy to ignore.

Personal statements give the event a clear human voice and may draw attention to genuine harm. Yet they still represent one person's position. Memory, emotion, and personal interest may affect what is included. The other party may have a different account or may not yet be able to respond.

Anonymous posts create further difficulty. Anonymity may protect a whistle-blower, but it also makes it harder to judge the source's identity, access to information, and reason for publishing the claim. Edited posts may also combine videos, screenshots, and comments from different times as though they belong to one continuous event.

The timeline is often unclear during the early stage. Users may see a reaction without knowing its cause or an official action without knowing the earlier procedure. One party may post immediately, while an institution waits for internal checks or legal advice. This delay is sometimes treated as guilt or avoidance, although silence alone proves very little.

Several media accounts may repeat the same video or statement without obtaining new evidence. The event then appears to have been confirmed by many sources, even though all reports depend on one original post. Repetition increases visibility, but it does not add factual support.

Some information may also remain unavailable because of privacy, ongoing investigations, medical confidentiality, or legal limits. These restrictions are

rarely clear to online audiences. The absence of information may therefore be mistaken for deliberate concealment.

Incomplete information does not mean that every early claim is false. Online attention can expose genuine wrongdoing. The problem lies in treating limited material as a complete account. Early evidence may justify concern, but it rarely supports a final judgment about the whole event.

3. The Formation of Early Public Judgment

When information is incomplete, users often rely on familiar experience to understand what has happened. A workplace dispute may remind them of earlier stories about unfair employers. A consumer complaint may be read through distrust of large companies. These experiences help people make sense of limited information, but they can also lead them to assume facts that have not yet been confirmed.

Online public events are often placed within familiar social narratives. One party is seen as weak, while another is seen as powerful. An individual confronts an institution, an employee challenges an employer, or a customer accuses a business. These patterns reflect real social tensions, so they are easy to accept. Once an event fits such a pattern, missing information may receive less attention.

Stereotypes can make the first explanation even more convincing. A person's gender, occupation, age, or social position may affect how their actions are judged. Some identities attract immediate sympathy, while others are treated with suspicion. Public judgment may then be based partly on expectations about a group rather than evidence about the event itself.

The 2018 Chongqing Wanzhou bus crash offers a clear example. Early online reports claimed that a female driver had entered the wrong lane and caused the accident. The claim quickly drew criticism and fitted a familiar stereotype about female drivers. Later police findings showed that her car had been travelling normally. The bus had crossed the centre line after a passenger and the driver became involved in a dispute and physical conflict. The first explanation appeared credible because it gave the accident a simple cause and a visible person to blame.

Emotional accounts also encourage early judgment (Brady et al. 7313–14). A story about humiliation, loss, injury, or unfair treatment gives users a clear person with whom they can identify. Questioning the account may appear insensitive, especially when the speaker shows visible distress. Emotion can show that a person has suffered, but it does not confirm every detail of the story.

Images and recordings strengthen this effect. Crying, shouting, silence, or anger may be treated as proof of innocence or guilt. Yet these signs reveal only a person's condition at one moment. They do not explain the full event or the intention behind an action. Viewers often move from what they can see to conclusions that the image itself cannot support.

Comments and reposts help stabilise the first interpretation. Highly visible comments often provide a simple explanation of who is responsible and what the event represents. Later users may encounter these judgments before checking the original material. Repeated labels then begin to look like confirmed facts.

The same video or screenshot may also appear on many accounts. This creates the impression that several sources have confirmed the story, although all versions may come from one post. Repetition increases confidence without adding new evidence.

Media reports can give the early account further authority. Even when a report states that a claim has not been verified, the headline and central image may leave a stronger impression than the warning. Users remember the accusation but overlook its uncertain status.

Early public judgment is therefore formed through more than a simple lack of facts. Personal experience, familiar narratives, stereotypes, emotional identification, comments, and repeated circulation all help turn a partial account into an accepted explanation. Once users have publicly supported that explanation, later information must challenge both the original claim and the moral position already built around it.

4. The Process of Public Opinion Reversal

Public opinion begins to change when new material no longer fits the first account. A longer recording may reveal what happened before a widely shared clip. Full chat records may place selected screenshots in a different setting. Official findings, verified documents, or a response from another party may also show that early claims were incomplete.

These additions can change more than a few factual details. They may alter the order of events, the purpose of a payment, or the reason for a person's behaviour. An action that first appeared dishonest may become understandable after earlier communication is disclosed. A person whose silence was treated as guilt may later show that they were waiting for an investigation, checking records, or preparing evidence.

The 2024 "Fat Cat" incident illustrates this process. Early discussion drew heavily on selected chat records, transfer screenshots, and statements from family members. These materials supported the claim that the deceased man had been emotionally and financially deceived, and his former partner became the target of intense criticism. A later police investigation found that the two had maintained a genuine relationship, had met each other's relatives and friends, and had exchanged money during their relationship. The police found no evidence that the woman had used a false romantic relationship to commit fraud.

The later findings changed the main public narrative. Attention moved away from the original allegation and toward the way private messages and payment records had been selected and released. The woman who had first been blamed received more support, while criticism turned toward family members, media accounts, and commentators who had promoted the earlier version.

This movement shows that reversal often takes the form of narrative replacement. The first story contains a clear victim and a clear wrongdoer. When new evidence appears, these positions may be exchanged rather than reconsidered with greater care. Users who feel that their sympathy was misled may react more strongly during the second stage. Their anger is no longer directed only at the event itself, but also at those believed to have shaped or exploited the first account.

The language used during reversal can make this change more absolute. Expressions such as "the truth has finally emerged" or "the whole story has been overturned" suggest that all uncertainty has disappeared. Such wording may attract attention, but it often hides the limited scope of the new evidence. A later finding may correct one accusation without resolving every dispute between the people involved.

Official conclusions also have clear boundaries. A police finding that conduct does not constitute fraud answers a legal question. It does not automatically determine whether every action in a private relationship was fair, reasonable, or emotionally responsible. In the same way, a complete recording may correct the timeline without settling all disagreements about motive or responsibility.

Online discussion often overlooks these limits. Once the first account is shown to be incomplete, users may treat every part of it as false and every criticism of the other party as unfair. The wish to correct the earlier mistake can then produce another judgment that goes beyond the available evidence.

Public opinion reversal can repair part of an unfair judgment, but it can also repeat the reasoning that caused the first mistake. Blame moves quickly to a new target, and uncertainty is again replaced by moral certainty. The direction of opinion changes, while the habit of reaching a final conclusion from developing information remains.

5. Platform and Media Influence on Opinion Change

Platforms and media accounts shape both the first judgment and the later reversal. Online events do not reach users in a fixed order. Recommendation systems select content according to attention, interaction, and viewing habits (Hermida and Mellado 868–70). Some users may see the original accusation, others may first encounter a response,

and still others may receive only a later summary. They are discussing the same event, but they may be relying on different stages of information.

Dramatic early claims usually have an advantage (Vosoughi et al. 1146–47). A short video showing conflict, injury, anger, or humiliation is easier to circulate than a detailed explanation. It gives users a clear emotional entry point and often produces more comments and reposts. Later information may be more reliable, but it is usually longer, less direct, and less visually striking.

This difference creates an uneven information environment. The first version may reach a large audience within hours, while a correction appears after public attention has started to decline. Even when the correction is widely published, it may not reach the same users. Many people therefore continue to judge the event on the basis of an earlier account.

The order of exposure also affects interpretation. A user who sees the accusation first may treat later information as a defence or excuse. A user who encounters only the reversal may assume that the first supporters had ignored obvious evidence. Neither group necessarily sees how the information changed over time. Public disagreement then reflects not only different values, but also different sets of facts (Wang et al.).

Recommendation systems can prolong this division. Platforms usually recommend content according to current interest rather than the full timeline of an event. A widely viewed early clip may continue to circulate after a correction has been issued. An old post may return to the feed because users begin discussing the topic again. Unless the original material carries a clear update, new viewers may not know that its claims have already been challenged.

Fast news production can deepen the problem. Media accounts often face pressure to respond while an event is still developing. Early reports may rely on online posts, witness recordings, or statements from one party. Cautious wording may be included, but the headline and central image can still make the account appear more settled than it is. Phrases such as “according to an online post” are easily overlooked when the title already suggests a clear conclusion.

The 2023 “mouse head or duck neck” incident shows how an early institutional response can also affect opinion change. After a video appeared to show a foreign object in food served by a college canteen, the school and local authorities initially described it as a duck neck. A later joint investigation concluded that it was the head of a rodent. The reversal shifted public attention from food safety alone to the credibility of the earlier response.

In this case, the problem was not only incomplete information. A firm conclusion was issued before the evidence had been fully examined. When the later finding contradicted the first statement, the correction did not simply add new facts. It weakened trust in the institution that had spoken earlier. Users began to question why the initial response had been so certain and whether similar statements in other events could be trusted.

Media coverage often follows the same rhythm. The first stage focuses on the accusation, the second on the response, and the third on the reversal itself. Each stage may be presented as a separate news event. Headlines highlight the latest change because reversal itself attracts attention. Users who do not see all three stages receive different versions of the same incident.

Repetition also increases the authority of one account. Many channels may repost the same footage or statement, giving the impression of independent confirmation. In fact, the reports may all rely on one source. During the reversal, the same process may happen again. A new official finding is repeated across many accounts and quickly becomes the next dominant explanation.

Visible interaction data can strengthen this effect. Large numbers of likes, comments, and reposts make an interpretation appear widely accepted. Users may mistake popularity for evidence. Once one version becomes dominant, media accounts have an incentive to continue reporting from that angle because it already attracts attention.

Corrections are often weaker in form as well as reach. They may appear as a short notice, a revised caption, or a separate follow-up report. The original post may remain more visible because it has already collected large amounts of interaction. Users who encounter the old version later may never notice that the account has changed.

Platforms and media do not create every reversal, but they influence its speed, reach, and intensity. Their distribution systems can enlarge the gap between early claims and later clarification. When users receive different parts of the event and see them in different orders, public opinion changes without a shared factual basis.

6. The Social Costs of Repeated Reversal

Repeated public opinion reversal can cause lasting harm even when later information corrects the first account. People involved may face criticism, exposure of personal information, workplace pressure, or threats before the facts are settled. Once names, photographs, private messages, and contact details have circulated, later clarification cannot fully remove them.

Reputational damage is often the most immediate cost. A person may be labelled dishonest, cruel, irresponsible, or manipulative on the basis of an early post. These labels can spread quickly because they give users a simple way to describe the event. Employers, relatives, friends, and colleagues may also be drawn into the discussion. The original dispute then expands into a broader judgment of the person's character and social relationships.

Digital records make this damage difficult to repair. Even when the first post is deleted, screenshots, reposted videos, archived pages, and copied comments may remain online. Search results may continue to connect the person's name with the original accusation. Someone who encounters these materials later may never see the correction. The event can therefore affect employment, education, business relations, and private life long after public attention has moved elsewhere.

Clarification also does not guarantee that the public will accept the revised account (Lewandowsky et al. 112–15). Some users may distrust the new evidence, especially when it comes from an institution they already view with suspicion. Others may continue to believe that the earlier accusation was "partly true," even when its central claim has been rejected. Reputational harm may remain because the first label is easier to remember than the later explanation.

Reversal can also create a second round of harm. When users believe that their sympathy has been misused, anger may move toward the person who first made the claim, family members, media accounts, or commentators. The earlier target receives less criticism, but online punishment does not end. It simply moves to someone else.

The "Fat Cat" incident shows this pattern. Before the police findings were released, the woman involved had already faced large-scale abuse and exposure of personal information. After the dominant narrative changed, criticism shifted toward relatives and accounts that had promoted the first version. The reversal corrected part of the public understanding, but it did not restore a calm discussion or remove the earlier harm. It created a new group of targets.

This movement of blame can affect people who played only a limited role. A relative may be attacked for sharing incomplete information. A journalist may be criticised for reporting an early claim with insufficient caution. Ordinary users may have old comments collected and reposted as evidence of poor judgment. The search for responsibility expands beyond the original event and turns earlier participation into a new source of conflict.

Repeated reversal also influences people who are not directly involved. Users may become less willing to believe personal accounts of workplace abuse, emotional harm, consumer fraud, or misuse of authority. A genuine victim may be told that the story is probably another attempt to gain sympathy. Public caution is necessary, but it can gradually become general suspicion.

This has a clear chilling effect. People with real complaints may hesitate to speak because they fear being accused of manipulating public opinion. They

may also worry that any missing detail will later be used to discredit the whole account. Those with limited evidence, weak institutional support, or little media experience are especially likely to remain silent.

At the same time, repeated reversals can encourage another harmful response: users may refuse to take any early claim seriously. They may treat uncertainty as a reason for complete indifference. This is also problematic. Some events require public attention before all documents and official findings are available. The challenge is to remain open to possible harm without treating an early account as a final verdict.

Trust in professional media may also weaken. When news accounts repeat uncertain claims and later change their reporting, users may see them as careless, rushed, or driven by traffic. A correction may be interpreted not as responsible revision, but as proof that the earlier report was unreliable. If this pattern occurs repeatedly, even careful reports may struggle to gain public confidence (Ye and Sun 536–39).

Official communication faces a similar problem. When an early statement is later contradicted, users may treat future responses as defensive or incomplete. The "mouse head or duck neck" incident is a clear example. The later correction did not only change the conclusion about the object. It also damaged confidence in the institution that had issued the earlier explanation.

There is also a cost to public discussion itself. Attention shifts from understanding the event to identifying who should be blamed for the latest version. Users search through old comments, expose earlier positions, and attack those who supported the first account. The discussion becomes a record of personal mistakes rather than a process of revising shared knowledge.

This environment makes people less willing to change their views openly. A user who admits that new evidence has changed their judgment may be mocked for having believed the first version. Others may avoid correction and defend their earlier position more strongly. Public reasoning becomes harder because changing one's mind is treated as weakness rather than a normal response to new facts.

Repeated reversal also creates emotional fatigue. Users may feel that every widely discussed event will eventually change direction. They may become cynical, detached, or hostile toward all parties. This weakens the possibility of careful attention when a serious case genuinely requires public concern.

Changing one's judgment after new evidence appears should be a normal part of public reasoning. Yet repeated reversal often turns revision into another conflict. The result is not greater care, but wider reputational harm, stronger suspicion, weaker trust, and a growing fear that any early position may later become a reason for public attack.

7. Public Communication Under Conditions of Uncertainty

Online public events cannot always wait until every fact has been confirmed. Early reports may be necessary when an incident concerns public safety, possible misconduct, or urgent social harm. The aim should not be to prevent discussion, but to make the limits of available information clear.

Early reports need to separate confirmed facts from personal claims. A video can be described as showing a particular action without treating it as proof of the whole event. A personal statement can be reported as one party's account rather than a final conclusion. When the source, date, or full sequence is uncertain, this should appear clearly in the headline, subtitles, and main text.

Silence should also be handled with care. A person or institution may need time to check records, contact those involved, or follow legal procedures. The absence of an immediate reply should not be described as an admission of guilt. Reports can state that no response has yet been received without assigning a motive to the delay.

Later information should remain connected to the original story. A correction or update needs to identify which earlier claim has changed and why. Platforms and media accounts can add visible notices to earlier posts, link new findings to

previous reports, and keep a simple timeline of major developments. Publishing a separate update is often insufficient because many users may never see it (Y. Zhang et al.).

Recommendation systems also need to reduce uneven exposure. When a widely viewed post is corrected, users who watched, shared, or commented on it should have a greater chance of seeing the new information. Old clips should carry dates, source labels, and update notices when they circulate again. These measures cannot guarantee that every user receives the full account, but they can narrow the gap between the first claim and later clarification.

Media accounts should resist the pressure to give unfinished events a complete moral structure. Headlines that immediately identify a victim, a liar, or a guilty party may attract attention, but they also make later revision harder. More restrained wording does not weaken public concern. It leaves room for facts that have not yet appeared.

Users also have a role in this process. Concern can be expressed without exposing private information, organising harassment, or demanding punishment before verification. Sharing a claim is itself a form of participation in its spread. A brief pause to check the source, date, and current status of the event can reduce harm.

Uncertainty is not a failure of communication. In many developing events, it is an honest description of what is known at that moment. Public communication becomes more reliable when it allows concern, investigation, and revision to exist together, instead of forcing every unfinished event into an immediate and final judgment.

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