

# ***Olson's Theory of Collective Action and Online Mass Incidents***

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**Abstract:** This study adopts a case analysis approach, examining the cause of online mass incidents through the fire incident at Zhonglan Apartment Complex of Communication University of China. Ultimately, the author concludes that from the perspective of group size, the primary reason for the occurrence of online mass incidents lies in the disparity between costs and benefits. When costs significantly outweigh benefits, groups are less likely to take action; conversely, when costs are substantially lower than benefits, the opposite occurs. Based on this conclusion, public authorities can devise tailored response measures for online mass incidents involving different group sizes.

**Keywords:** Online Mass Incidents, Olson's Theory of Collective Action, Communication, Online Public Opinion.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Research Origin**

#### **1.1.1. Research Background and Research Questions**

In recent years, with the development of the Internet, online group incidents have frequently occurred. Throughout Chinese society, from the "Xiamen PX Incident" in 2007 to recent incidents such as "My father is Li Gang" and "I drive a big G-class car in the Forbidden City," most of them are rooted in public dissatisfaction with politics, economics, society, and other aspects. Triggered by real-world or online events, they continue to escalate on Internet platforms and ultimately have an impact on the Internet or real society. Therefore, online group incidents have been a research hotspot for scholars in communication and sociology in recent years. Most scholars focus on the causes, classification, and governance of online group incidents. Especially in the research on causes, scholars pay more attention to the issues of government, enterprises, and other entities, as well as the secondary escalation triggered by improper governance. However, there is very little research on the public side.

On May 25, 2024, a fire broke out in the Zhonglan Apartment at Communication University of China. Believing that there were issues such as the alarm bell not ringing and ineffective fire extinguishers, students once again triggered an online group incident on the Internet, holding the university accountable and exercising oversight. Online group incidents are characterized by instant

outbreak, virtual interaction, wide scope, and difficulty in control, and the fire at Communication University of China precisely exhibits these characteristics [1].

Therefore, this study intends to use the fire incident at Communication University of China as an example and employ Mancur Olson's collective action theory to explore the communication reasons of the public in online group incidents.

### **1.1.2. Research Significance and Research Objectives**

For China in the transition period, the successive occurrence of online group incidents can cause public panic and the collapse of common beliefs, making research on the causes and response strategies of online group incidents urgent. Firstly, the application of Mancur Olson's collective action theory to online group incidents is rarely seen in previous research and can fill the theoretical gap between the two, which is theoretically innovative.

At the same time, with the continuous development of the Internet, the frequency and number of online group incidents are increasing. Research results can be applied to the governance of online platforms in the later stage, providing practical significance for real society. From the perspective of public relations, it can provide ideas for governments or enterprises to better understand the formation mechanism of public opinion within the public, thereby providing possibilities for two-way dialogue and bridging the gap between the two.

## **1.2. Literature Review**

### **1.2.1. Mancur Olson's Collective Action Theory**

Based on public choice theory, Mancur Olson proposed collective action theory [2]. Olson's research found that individual rationality does not necessarily promote the development of collective interests, a phenomenon known as the dilemma of collective action. He believed that differences in membership size affect the means and efficiency of collective goods supply [3]. He believed that the problem of collective action is rooted in the non-exclusivity of collective goods [4]. Collective action theory has been recognized by many economists, but there have also been developments in the later period, mainly focusing on the classification of different types of goods.

In response to the dilemma of collective action, Olson proposed the solution of "selective incentives." These "selective incentives" are initiated to motivate certain potential individuals within a group to act in the group's favor, and these incentives can be either negative or positive [5]. Felman and Gamson further classified the economic and social status incentives proposed by Olson as extrinsic selective incentives, and divided the sense of identity within individuals as intrinsic selective incentives [6].

### **1.2.2. Online Mass Incidents**

With the development of Internet technology, "online mass incidents" gradually emerged. Currently, there is no unified definition of online mass incidents. Jie Ping and Xiong Meibao proposed the concept of "people in the network" to define online mass incidents. They believe that online mass incidents refer to events where a group of "people in the network," formed under a certain social background, use the Internet to organize and coordinate for a common interest, openly disrupting the normal operation of the network, causing adverse social impacts, and even endangering social stability [7]. Online mass incidents are the online manifestations of mass incidents. The reason for these similar viewpoints among scholars is mainly due to the influence of malicious public opinion events triggered by the Internet, such as the Xiamen PX incident.

The origins and mechanisms of online mass incidents have become a key focus of research among scholars. Whether focusing on universities or society at large, scholars tend to emphasize the role of the internet itself—the object and medium in these incidents—in their analyses. However, only a few scholars have directed attention to the subject, specifically how the public propels the dissemination of incidents. For instance, Wang Tianmei and Fan Zheng, among others, conducted a questionnaire survey, revealing that conformity intentions in online mass incidents are influenced by individual attitudes and opinion leaders [8]. This demonstrates a shift in scholars' perspectives towards the central group in incidents, examining their causes from both individual and collective angles.

### 1.2.3. Olson's Theory of Collective Action and Online Mass Incidents

Currently, there are relatively few scholars who have applied Olson's theory of collective action to the study of online mass incidents. In her article "An Analysis of Collective Action in Online Mass Incidents," Wang Yuru employs Olson's theory to uncover the logic of choice in the formation of collective action within these incidents. She also points out that Olson's theory presupposes rational economic actors, which differs from the identities of internet users participating in online mass incidents [9].

The author believes that Olson's theory of collective action offers a novel perspective for studying online mass incidents. When analyzing the causes of these incidents, we can explore the dimensions of group size and the types of public goods (or events) involved. Furthermore, by adopting an individual perspective, we can delve into the costs and benefits of participation in collective incidents, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the agents at the center of these events and the underlying reasons for their occurrence.

## 1.3. Research Methodology

This study employs a case analysis approach, taking the fire disaster in the Zhonglan Dormitory of Communication University of China on May 25, 2024 as an example. Through scientific summarization and induction, the study analyzes the reasons behind the event from the perspective of group size within Olson's theory of collective action.

## 2. Categorization and Analysis of Events

### 2.1. Methodology of Event Categorization

The first step in exploring collective action, as outlined in Olsen's theory, involves identifying the type of event. Based on the dimensions of excludability and rivalrousness, goods are typically classified into four categories: private goods, club goods, common-pool resources, and pure public goods. Olsen's analytical framework is applicable to both common-pool resources and pure public goods, which exhibit relatively low excludability [5].

### 2.2. Categorization and Analysis of Events

Drawing from the case of the fire incident at Communication University of China, large and small groups can perceive the benefits of voicing their concerns as belonging to different categories of goods. For small groups, often organized around dormitories, initiating an online mass incident can lead to compensation for damages caused by the fire. This compensation is non-excludable among roommates, as each individual is entitled to it. However, the total compensation amount is largely fixed, meaning that when one roommate receives compensation, the potential amount available to

others decreases. Thus, the compensation for fire damages, being low in excludability but high in rivalrousness, constitutes a common-pool resource for small groups.

In contrast, for large groups, the primary objectives of instigating an online mass incident revolve around enhancing the school's safety awareness and increasing fire prevention facilities. Both of these benefits are low in excludability, accessible to all students, and low in rivalry as the school treats each student equally, ensuring that similar fire prevention measures are implemented across all areas. Consequently, for large groups, these benefits represent pure public goods characterized by low excludability and low rivalry.

### **3. Common-Pool Resources and Online Mass Incidents Among Small Groups**

#### **3.1. Cost-Benefit Analysis**

The crux of whether the public will take action lies in the costs and benefits involved. From the perspective of benefits, dormitory members may receive compensation, but the amount is uncertain, making it difficult to assess whether it is worthwhile to advocate for their rights through an online mass incident.

Regarding costs, a significant risk of advocating online is the potential compromise of personal privacy, leading to interviews by school authorities. In terms of channels, students can post information on the school's campus wall, but its real-name system poses a risk of personal information leakage. Alternatively, they can use social media platforms like Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat Moments, yet these too can be traced and posts deleted by the school through IP addresses. After being traced, students face the risk of administrative discipline or punishment, which may even result in the loss of their eligibility for postgraduate school exemption. Additionally, reporting to counselors or floor managers may entail dealing with administrative inefficiencies, where unclear responsibilities lead to finger-pointing, requiring students to invest significant time and effort in seeking resolutions. For the school, resolving such issues entails a comprehensive assessment of student property losses, an endeavor that consumes substantial human and material resources, rendering it costly. Thus, for individual students, the cost of seeking compensation far outweighs the value of minor property losses, and their future prospects and alternative uses of time are deemed more valuable. Consequently, few dormitory members whose rooms have been affected by fires express their dissatisfaction or report property losses on internet platforms.

In Olsen's theory of collective action, he argues that small groups are more prone to providing competitive common-pool resources because, with fewer members, the per capita benefits are greater. While Olsen's analytical approach is insightful, the behavior of small groups often contradicts this prediction. This can be explained by examining costs and benefits: when costs significantly outweigh benefits, even small groups facing common-pool resources may engage in passive rights protection. Therefore, during incidents, campus platforms rarely see voices from fire victims, and information is largely sourced from unofficial channels and mainstream media.

#### **3.2. Continuous Fermentation of Public Opinion**

Olsen argues that small groups are more capable of influencing the government, primarily because they may be embedded within the administrative hierarchy of society. For instance, large corporations, as small groups in their own right, benefit disproportionately from government policies and, as a result, exert greater efforts to sway governmental decisions. This underscores the influence wielded by small groups comprising large enterprises. Similarly, if the benefits accruing to the small group involved in a dormitory fire incident could be enhanced, there would be a greater likelihood of them initiating an online mass incident, thereby strengthening oversight over the

school. For example, if the affected dormitories were predominantly occupied by members of the student union, they would have a stronger chance of influencing school decisions and urging changes, potentially leading them to voice their opinions on the internet.

Furthermore, the presence of an individual with a more pressing need within the incident increases the likelihood of an online mass incident. For instance, a student from a disadvantaged background, whose life has been severely disrupted by the fire, might persistently inquire about and demand support from the school. Standing alone against the school, the most effective avenue for such an individual is often through social media due to its rapid dissemination and wide reach. This scenario can easily spark an online mass incident, as students are often perceived as vulnerable, and leveraging this perceived weakness can evoke sympathy and ignite public discontent towards the school, fueling a larger wave of public opinion.

#### **4. Large Groups' Access to Public Resources and Online Mass Incidents**

For large groups, disseminating information about dormitory fires on the internet primarily serves to enhance safety awareness within schools, which constitutes a pure public good. From a benefit perspective, since schools tend to prioritize fire safety equally for all students and areas, any improvements made in this regard will benefit each student equally. Moreover, the benefits of fire safety extend beyond material gains; they are intimately tied to the most fundamental aspect of students' lives—safety. Therefore, students may be willing to incur significant costs in pursuit of this vital benefit.

Regarding costs, firstly, as the size of the group grows, so does the number of students who prioritize fire safety. The recent fire in a densely populated dormitory building, with its thick smoke, served as a stark reminder, even though no fatalities occurred, of the potential dangers. Many students reported feeling terrified even after the incident, indicating a heightened awareness. Hence, more students concerned about their personal safety are likely to voice their opinions on social media, contributing to the formation of public opinion. When the number of participants reaches a critical mass, it becomes increasingly difficult for the school to trace individual contributors and control the spread of opinions, making it less likely for the school to take disciplinary action against them. Consequently, the individual cost borne by students is relatively low.

Secondly, students who prioritize safety issues are more likely to become the driving force behind online mass incidents. Some students may compose articles and publish them on social media platforms like WeChat Official Accounts or Xiaohongshu, while others simply forward the information with a click, taking mere seconds of their time. Social media expedites the dissemination process, transforming it from point-to-point interpersonal communication into a widespread, network-based transmission. In contrast, in smaller groups, each member might need to craft their own message to rally public support. Thus, the time cost for large groups is significantly lower.

Given that large groups encompass more individuals and their benefits far outweigh the costs, they are more likely to leverage online mass incidents to prompt the school to take action.

When examining the causes of online mass incidents from both individual and group perspectives, the primary focus should be on costs and benefits. Rational individuals, whether belonging to large or small groups, will analyze the relationship between costs and benefits before taking action. If the costs are lower than the benefits, the group is more inclined to take action, facilitating the spread of online mass incidents.

The outbreak of online mass incidents is still a manifestation of underlying societal issues, with the internet merely serving as a channel for dissemination. Therefore, to reduce the occurrence of such incidents, the fundamental issues in society must be addressed as much as possible. Secondly, enhancing citizen participation and leveraging public opinion to oversee government operations can

also contribute to the healthy development of society. However, in cases where incidents become overly severe, relevant measures can be taken based on the analysis of the event's dissemination patterns presented in this paper.

## 5. Conclusion

When examining the causes of online mass incidents from both individual and group perspectives, the primary focus should be on costs and benefits. Rational individuals, whether belonging to large or small groups, will analyze the relationship between costs and benefits before taking action. If the costs are lower than the benefits, the group is more inclined to take action, facilitating the spread of online mass incidents.

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