

How Digital Empowerment Affects Dissolution of Segmentation Effect and Construction of Opinion Leaders in Isolated Communities: Ethnographic Investigation of Leprosy Rehabilitation Groups

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Abstract : The fear of leprosy has been longstanding throughout the human history. In an era where isolation is practiced as a means of epidemic prevention, the leprosy rehabilitation group has itself become an isolated community with an entrenched metaphor. In the process of new mediatization of the leprosy isolation community, what are the relations among media literacy, the leprosy internalized stigma and social support? To address the question, the "portrait" of leprosy rehabilitation group is re-delineated through two field studies in the "post-leprosy age" in 2012 and 2020, respectively. Taking an isolation community on Si'an Leprosy Island in Dongguan City, Guangdong Province, China as the study object, it is found that new media promotes the dissolution of segregation effect of the leprosy isolation community and the cultivation of opinion leaders by breaking spatial, psychological and social segregation and by building a community of village affairs and public space in the following way: the cured patients with high new media literacy, especially those who use WeChat and other applications and largely rely on new media for information, have a low level of leprosy internalized stigma and a high level of social support, and they are often the opinion leaders inside their community; on the contrary, the cured patients with low new media literacy, a high level of leprosy internalized stigma and a low level of social support are often the followers inside their community. Such effects of dissolution and construction are reflected not only in the vertical differentiation of the same individual at different times, but also in the horizontal differentiation between different individuals at the same time.

Keywords : segregation, the leprosy rehabilitation group, new mediatization, digital empowerment, opinion leaders

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