

Journalistic Power in The Post-Truth Age

Chi Zeng

University of Sanya, Sanya, Hainan, 572022, China

ABSTRACT

In recent years, Internet communication technology has undergone a qualitative leap, and news communication is no longer used exclusively by traditional mainstream media and professional reporters, the microphone of communication is in the hands of everyone, and the diversification of communication subjects brings about the complication of communication behaviour. In the process of communication, the audience are lost in the mass of information, and fragments of true and false information are intermingled and flooded. In the media space, emotions have become more important than facts, leading to frequent lack of facts and truths in news communication activities. Emotional venting and opinion interpretation are popular, and the post-truth age follows. After entering the post-truth era, the authenticity of news faces frequent rumours, news reversal become normal, and the media's failure to trust the people. This will cause the loss of online public opinion, the decline of media morality, the loss of public groups, and the loss of government credibility. These undoubtedly challenge the meaning of journalism professionalism. The methodological basis of the dissertation is based on the study of the literature, the application of general scientific methods (method of analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, comparison, classification), as well as the study of news cases.

KEYWORDS

Post-truth; Journalistic power; News inaccuracy; Communication subject; Online media; Media credibility

1 Introduction

The relevance of this topic is due to the dilemmas faced by the media industry, the mainstream media, news practitioners and the general audience have to deal with in the post-truth era.

The purpose of this research is to reveal the shifts in the ways and means how journalists exercise their power over the minds and hearts of their audiences in post-truth conditions.

The object of research – journalists, other producers of news content for media industry.

The subject of the research – regularities and tendencies in the ways the news media exercise their influence of audience's minds. As an outcome of the research, the author obtained the following results:

Features of journalistic power are undergoing changes due to the changes in media space. Diversification of media space occurs due to the development of new media technologies. The influence of media on the audience minds is customizing. Receivers of news media products collect news from various sources and shape their images of current events that best meet their own psychological expectations. In the such public opinion ecology, multiple subjects should work together to fight against challenges such as news inaccuracy, false information, and public opinion reversal.

Adhering to professionalism at the media level and improving media literacy at the citizen level, rebuilding public trust, and rationally using new technologies are the means to curb the escalation of the crisis in journalism in the post-truth era, and to make news in the post-truth context.

2 Post-Truth as Contemporary Circumstances of The Media Environment

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell pointed out in his work «The Problems of Philosophy» (1912): «Truth is composed of some forms that are consistent with beliefs and facts». At this level, a distinctive feature of post-truth is that facts are weakened or underpinned by belief, and post-truth essentially reflects emotion and faith is if they are better than fact as “foundation”. Whether or not, individuals based on emotional and belief appeals accept facts as pre-existing cognitions has a psychological basis.

2.1 Definition of The Post-Truth Age

From the perspective of psychological motivation, in the post-truth era, people put their emotions and beliefs first, and express their views or opinions on online platforms. Emotions and beliefs have become the primary maintenance goals, and under the guidance of this directional cognition, the authenticity of news facts is gradually blurred. Objectives such as truthfulness of facts are no longer the primary motivation of the individual, but instead are the individual's emotions and beliefs, becoming a reasoning process in which the truth weakens emotions. In other words, in the post-truth era, people's “emotional needs” are more important than the truth itself. People will selectively receive and interact with

information according to their own emotional needs. Some information content that can meet people's emotional needs will be obtained instead for better dissemination. The post-truth era is an era dominated by emotions and beliefs, where truth becomes subordinate to emotional beliefs, or even dispensable. In an era where "emotions have more influence than facts, emotional beliefs take precedence over factual veracity". Compared to emotions and personal beliefs, objective facts have only a relatively small impact on the formation of public opinion». This meaning has become the mainstream, specifically: even if netizens are angry in a certain incident on the Internet, even most people online support the same point of view, it does not mean that this represents the true public opinion of the people. In fact, in many social public opinion events, people's opinions only represent some of their emotional expressions rather than true convictions and opinions.

Thus, the post-truth era is a time when some people, for their own benefit, ignore objective facts and blindly appeal to the emotions and psychology of their audience, using assertions, speculations, feelings and other expressions to reinforce and polarise a particular viewpoint, to attack and discredit their opponents, or to gain eyeballs and support, resulting in fake news, reversed news, gossip and anecdotes spreading virally, with the truth taking a back seat. In short, truth and logic are ignored in the process of information dissemination, and emotions dominate public opinion. It no longer matters what the truth is, and people are more concerned with the emotions generated by events than the facts themselves.

2.2 Reasons for The Coming of The Post-Truth Age

In the era of all media, the sovereignty of communication has been lowered, and everyone has the power to communicate. "The audience is the transmitter, and the transmitter is the audience". Today, the quantification of information has become the norm. In the face of numerous and complex news events, it has become a major test to distinguish the authenticity of information. Many public opinion reversals are caused by initial misjudgment of information. This study mainly discusses the psychological mechanism of the audience.

In the post-truth era, the so-called news facts or truths are no longer measured by the standard of truth and falsehood. Instead, it is whether this truth conforms to individual logic - opinion, or group consciousness - consensus. Therefore, facts can only be generally accepted by the audience if they work on these two levels.

the extreme polarization and uncertainty of audience psychology is an important reason for the suspension of traditional communication mechanisms. The audience psychology in the post-truth era has the following four manifestations:

2.2.1 Skeptic

As soon as Weibo appeared, most netizens found a new platform for public discussion. Under the leadership of some "opinion leaders", some netizens began to promote the government's information disclosure and put forward opinions and suggestions on public policies, so that some scholars have referred to social platforms such as Weibo as a "pressure-reducing valve for society".

During this period, the main characteristic of audience psychology is questioning and criticism. However, individual doubts are gathered through the Internet and social media platforms to gradually form a collective doubt. "Under the influence of collective power, many netizens will strengthen and amplify their doubts, and may even form paranoia of doubting everything". In the post-truth era, this kind of paranoia once developed into a trend: as long as it is the mainstream and official voices, «no matter what you say, I don't believe it» or "I only believe what I believe", and even take advantage of the discussion to vent. dissatisfaction with public power. This has created the post-truth era, the audience's nihilistic attitude towards facts and truth and even cynicism.

2.2.2 Herd Mentality

Conformity is a concept in social psychology, which refers to the fact that members of a group, after being influenced by external groups, either voluntarily or under pressure, show the same consciousness and behavior as the majority. This psychological characteristic is not a unique product of the post-truth era, but it has gradually developed into the main way audiences perceive truth and understand the world.

In the post-truth era, traditional authority is facing the great danger of being completely deconstructed, and the face of facts and truth has become blurred. People are more inclined to rely on the values of the majority because of fear of being marginalized by groups or public opinion.

2.2.3 Projection Psychology

Projection psychology refers to a psychological phenomenon in which individuals unconsciously transfer their personal thoughts, wishes, attitudes, emotions and other characteristics to others and external things. In the post-truth era, because of the overload of information and the lack of valid facts, audiences often adopt this interpretation path when they understand their own environment and social phenomena. In the post-truth era, audience projection psychology has become an important driving force for the spread of rumors and fake news.

2.2.4 Polarized Psychology

In the post-truth era, some audiences have developed extreme psychological characteristics and even conspiracy theories. As Eli Pariser shows, the nowadays individual who uses the Internet as a source of information about the world around him finds himself trapped in a kind of "filter-bubble" that forms around him as he interacts with the algorithms of new media. Individual preferences, which the individual inevitably signals in the information that surrounds him, do not allow new, unexpected, non-standard information to penetrate his consciousness. Personalized information search and recommendation services play an important role in the formation of the "filter-bubble". The personalized information search and recommendation services, which are abundant on the Internet and in mobile applications, play an important role in forming a "filter-bubble". They provide the user with the exact information he or she prefers, they "adjust" it to the user's tastes and preferences, leaving even fewer chances to information, different opinions, i.e. they actually lead to intellectual isolation in the company of like-minded users.

For example, in the GMO debate led by Fang Zhouzi and Cui Yongyuan, the two people gradually developed from a scientific truth dispute about GMO food safety to a dispute of opinions and ideology, and each developed a group of die-hard fans, cheering for them. In the end, it even became an online scolding war. As Sandos foresaw, audience psychology catalyzed by the Internet and new media technology is more prone to extremes. It is conceivable that if there is conclusive evidence that genetically modified foods are healthy, harmless or risky in the future, the party who is proven wrong may still continue to be stubborn. This actually shows that from a postmodern perspective, the connection of netizens in cyberspace is not local, and these atomized individuals who lack real identity often rely on value attachment to obtain a sense of existence and belonging in virtual space.

2.3 Current Situation of Network Communication from The Perspective of Post-truth

In the post-truth age, the massive amount of information brought by the innovation of media technology meets the needs of the audience on the one hand, but also increases the risk of news chaos on the other hand. The authenticity and seriousness of the traditional media era of the past is challenged in today's information environment.

In this era, audiences "believe what they believe", and fake news is often supplemented by emotional elements to construct issues, such as the use of pictures and videos. Based on the mindset of "there are pictures and truths", the credibility and appeal of fake news are improved, the audience's emotions are fully aroused with a sense of presence, and the importance of the truth is placed behind. At the same time, negative news tends to spread more easily, leading to wider emotional arousal. The positive and neutral reports in the sample are far less than the negative ones. Social content, such as the cold reception of the brave, female employees lining up to kiss the boss every day, are more likely to arouse the public's sympathy, anger and jokes. The present emotions and emotional positions help. Pushing fake news is widely accepted and discussed. The frequent occurrence of news inaccuracies also means that the reversal of public opinion will follow.

(1) The main body of public opinion-irrational emotionalization. The Internet media has brought people a freer environment for public opinion dissemination. When dissemination activities are no longer restricted by space and events, the behavior of public opinion subjects will be irrational. The continuous hype of the media can easily incite the audience's emotions. With the further development of the event, the audience's emotions will become more extreme and emotional, and the audience's judgment of facts will be affected by their own emotions. When a hot event develops to a key node, the audience's sensitivity to the event may be far beyond their imagination. Post-truth is the product of social differentiation and social anxiety, and audiences tend to bring their own emotions into their judgment of news facts. Strong emotional biases are more influential than complex social factors, and are more likely to cause the public's emotional biases. The reason why online public opinion is easy to reverse is because people often regard the truth influenced by emotions as facts.

(2) The object of public opinion—the topic is hot. Reversal news is the focus of attention. Observing the reversal events in recent years, we can see that most of the reversal news have strong sensitivity and are likely to cause strong public opinion fluctuations, which is actually related to the current situation of social development in our country. close relationship. At present, my country's social development is in a transition period, some social contradictions are more

prominent, and related social problems frequently occur. From political economy to social culture, all hot news events closely related to public interests will trigger intense public discussion. Once the news event has adhesion, it means that when the information reaches the audience, it will not easily disappear from the audience's sight or be erased from their memory. Due to the difference between the audience's focus and the traditional media's focus, the audience's attention is focused on life events, people's livelihood events or anecdotes. The «Zhoukou Baby Boy Loss Case» that occurred in April 2019 is a typical case. In recent years, news reports related to baby theft have emerged one after another. In addition, the public is more sensitive to baby theft. The topic has been heating up. All discussions have stayed on the issue of baby theft. As a result, it was confirmed that the incident was caused by an extramarital affair. One of the farce of the drama was planned, directed and acted by the woman Liu, which caused a major reversal in public opinion. In many cases, the influence of relevant social hot topics caused by events often exceeds the importance of the event itself.

(3) Ontology of public opinion—covers a wide range. In the era of self-media, the channels for information dissemination are more diverse, but because the management mechanism is not yet perfect, reversal events often involve multiple aspects of information. The subjects of multi-party events have their own opinions, which will also make public opinion more complicated. Especially when an event in which the victim has suffered losses due to multiple factors occurs, it is more likely to arouse public attention and discussion. Take the case of “women claiming to be harassed and threatened on Weibo” in 2019 as an example. According to Weibo data, in this incident, netizens discussed nearly 910,000 related topics. About 310,000 topics related to the word “man” or “men”, accounting for 34%; about 242,000 articles mentioned the word “online video”, accounting for 26.5%; about 14% of the topics related to “harassment threats” 10,000 articles, accounting for 15%; about 120,000 articles on the topic of “selling counterfeit goods”, accounting for 13%; 98,000 articles on other topics, accounting for only 10.7%. From a practical point of view, these words often appear in various hot and sensitive topics, and the appearance of any hot word will lead to tit-for-tat public opinion of different stakeholders. When an event involves multiple sensitive words, each sensitive word can arouse active public participation and heated discussion, which undoubtedly creates conditions for the reversal of public opinion.

3 Changes and Influence of Journalistic Power

Journalistic power is the ability of journalists to influence policymakers and public opinion through the role of journalists as truth-tellers. In this regard, one of the research problems is the distinction between journalism and activism. As associate professor at Emerson College, Gino Canella argues, “journalism is never neutral, truths are never disinterested, and journalists’ epistemic practices are influenced by the power dynamics embedded in the socio-political and historical contexts in which they work”.

Gatekeeping consciousness weakens in the post-truth age. In the pre-post-truth age, people in professional circles were more likely to be constrained by rules, regulations and ethical norms, and abide by the authenticity of news in their profession. In the post-truth age, diversified communication subjects have joined the production and dissemination of information content. These “outside the multi-circle” personnel do not have stricter news professional regulations and sense of responsibility than traditional mainstream media personnel in the past. Therefore, in such an environment with relatively loose constraints, in order to obtain scarce attention resources, the gatekeeping and verification of news often do not pay enough attention, resulting in a lack of “gatekeeping awareness”. In order to gain the emotional resonance of the audience, the authenticity of the information content is often left behind. This gatekeeping standard also makes the audience move towards emerging media in large numbers.

In addition to the generalization of information production subjects, the lack of “guardian awareness” of some emerging media platforms also has a collision of content value standards. With the development of multi-cultural society, the demand value of the audience and the value of news professionalism have produced certain contradictions in information production. In order to adapt to the development of the information market, the market environment and the current situation faced to a certain extent have changed the habits of content producers. To a certain extent, it affects the value standard of information content selection. Driven by business logic, in order to cater to the audience to obtain click-through rates, some media will lack “guardian awareness”. These factors affect the choice of “gatekeepers” for content value standards in the process of information content production to a certain extent. Some media are torn between “professionalism” and “commerciality”, and some emerging media cannot even maintain the balance between the two. The latter was chosen between professionalism and commerciality.

Hence, the sources of journalistic power are transformig in the follong way:from inside the professional circle to outside the multiple circle due to generalization of communication subjects;from the pursuit of the truth to the creation of the truth because they are driven by the logic of commercial interests;from objective to «observable» due to changes in news gatekeeping standards.

4 Conclusion

News truth is a compulsory course for every news producer. It requires news to pursue objective truth and reduce subjectivity and emotion. In the post-truth era, the truth is gradually drifting away, and the authenticity of news is gradually weakened to emotionality. The advent of the post-truth era makes emotionality more and more attached to the truth, and the public is wrapped in information with emotions and beliefs. It is impossible to objectively recognize the truth in the torrent of information, which exacerbates the subjective distortion of information content. «Emotional downtown» weakens the authenticity principle of news to a certain extent, and is not conducive to the positive development of the news communication environment.

The mainstream media is the mainstay of the journalism industry and bears more public responsibilities. The mainstream media should highlight the pursuit of truth and journalism professionalism in the post-truth era. Therefore, in the post-truth era, the construction and guidance of mainstream media's authoritative discourse power is particularly important in the pursuit of truth. By building authoritative discourse power, mainstream media can improve the "crisis of trust" faced by the journalism industry and enhance the influence of mainstream values. In addition, media organizations in the journalism industry cannot give up the pursuit of truth in every link.

It requires not only the follow-up of technology, but also the adherence of various media to the principle of authenticity and the guidance of correct values. The positive development of the communication environment also depends on the improvement of the public's overall media literacy. Both the "production field" and the "reception field" of news content must "seek truth", "keep it true" and "very truthful" to news reports. Only in the post-truth era can Better to face the truth.

References

- [1] Lin Fangwei. 2016 Words of the year reveal that the world has entered the «post-truth» era[J/OL]. <http://www.zaobao.com/news/fukan/gen/story20161228-706858.01/06/2022>.
- [2] Cui Baoguo, Zheng Weixiong, He Danmei. Innovation and Development of the Media Industry in the Digital Economy Era[J]. *News Front*, 2018, 11:73-78.
- [3] Qingguang Guo. A course in communication [M]. Beijing: People's University of China Press, 2011:34-35.
- [4] Canella G. Journalistic Power: Constructing "Truth" and the Economics of Objectivity[J]. *Journalistic Practice*, 2021:1-17.
- [5] John R. Bittner. Mass Communication: An Introduction Theory and Practice of Mass Media in Society[M]. Prentice Hall PTR, 1977: 512.
- [6] Haifeng Chen. News and truth in the post-truth era [J]. *Future Communication*, 2017, 5:143.
- [7] Lidan Chen. Why does fake news spread? [J]. *Journalist*, 2002, 2:22-23.
- [8] Cheng Bo, Gong Chengbo, Guan Lin. History of Communication Studies [M]. Beijing: China Radio and Television Press, 2014.