

Study on the Development and Problems of Social Responsibility of Mass Media

Wenxuan Zhan^{1,a,*}

¹*International Department, The Affiliated High School of South China Normal University,
Guangzhou, Guangdong, China*

a. zhanwx.elvis2023@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: As one of the most used public communication platforms and the main source of information, mass media has always received widespread attention. However, there are still deficiencies in the research on social responsibility of the media. This paper argues that social media should provide objective and correct information for the masses, promote social diversity, promote critical thinking of the masses, and protect the rights and interests of vulnerable groups. existing defects mainly focus on the traditional media's excessive pursuit of balanced reporting, which leads to a certain degree of misleading of the audience, the proliferation of false information in various new media, and the information cocoon and other strategies adopted by media with the gradual commercialization trend of media, so that people can only receive information consistent with their original views most of the time. which make it impossible to present diversified information and to think critically. Based on this, this paper proposes the following suggestions: all aspects of society should jointly strengthen the control of false information and the media should give up making profits by constantly pushing the same views to a specific audience, and instead look for other growth points to seek revenue.

Keywords: Social Responsibility, Mass Media, Critical Thinking

1. Introduction

In today's society, with the continuous development and popularization of information technology, the importance of mass media to people is increasing. Whether it is the most obvious function of information transmission, the function of promoting cultural communication, the function of providing a platform for the public to participate in political life, or the driving force of the media industry for economic growth with the digital transformation, the importance of media in the new era is significantly increasing. The study of mass media, on the other hand, mainly focuses on the influence of media. Jacob Amedie highlighted the positive effects of social media in promoting group cooperation, improving student performance, and delivering information quickly, as well as the negative effects of social media in causing anxiety and depression, being used for cyberbullying, and being a major tool for criminals to recruit members and funds [1]. Less attention has been paid to the social responsibility of the media behind this enormous influence to exercise these powers properly. Therefore, the study of this topic will help people to better understand the media from a humanistic perspective and make the media function better by correcting some existing problems.

2. Social Responsibilities of Public Media

2.1. The Concept of Social Responsibility in Mass Media

This paper holds that the social responsibility of news media should mainly be to let the public know the whole picture of the facts, satisfy the citizens' right to know, promote critical thinking in society and protect the rights and interests of diverse groups by fully showing the diversity of social groups.

The discussion on the definition of social responsibility in the media can be traced back to the 1947 Hutchins Commission report, which put forward five guidelines to guide the news media on how to be a socially responsible institution. These guidelines include: providing truthful, comprehensive, intelligent news coverage, providing a forum for comment and criticism, presenting a representative picture of society, presenting and clarifying society's goals and values, and providing comprehensive access to the intelligence of the day. Although these principles were considered to lack precision at the time, and the results did not materially influence the development of the media industry in subsequent years, the guide served as a guide for subsequent research. In 1956, Siebert, Petersen, and Schramm developed the first formal theory of the news media industry -- which, as noted above, they say was inspired by Hutchins' initiative -- "social responsibility." In their theory, this meant an obligation to provide credible and relevant news information, as well as an opportunity for diverse voices to be heard in the public sphere. At the same time, both the Hutchins Initiative and the theories of Siebert and others convey the same signal -- that the public interest should be regarded as a core part of the social responsibility of the news media, which includes specific aspects such as the formation of public opinion, civil society movements, and social and political development patterns. Furthermore, in the discourse ethics proposed by Habermas in 1983, the goals and functions of mass media are identified as the following three points: First, the relationship of equality and reciprocity between the speaker and the actor, that is, in this relationship, no group should have a monopoly on the means of communication. Second, the public sphere should not aim to achieve uniformity, but instead should promote a process of individuation, diversification, and re-perception. Third, the public sphere should facilitate critical discussion, not regulate it [2].

2.2. The Role of Social Responsibility in Mass Media

Providing the public with complete and objective information should be one of the social responsibilities of the media. First, citizens need objective and clear sources of information to enable them to make rational and democratic decisions. There is no doubt that the mass media is the main way of providing information in the current era. Secondly, the other extreme in this direction -- the proliferation of false information -- may cause unforeseen instability and damage to society. In the seminal work "Democracy and the Media" by Gunther and Mughan, citizens require reliable facts about social, political, and economic conditions to make reasoned choices about governance and policy [3]. If citizens cannot even grasp the real situation, then how can people expect them to make rational decisions when participating in the political or civil field? To prevent this kind of situation, it is necessary to insist on publishing true and trustworthy news, and at the same time, it can effectively avoid the decline of media credibility caused by the frequent publication of false information.

In this age of traffic, there is no doubting the power of social media. With greater ability comes greater responsibilities. Faced with many problems in today's society, social media should use their influence to build a better society. For example, in an era when the world is shrinking, many minority groups that used to be able to live on their own passively integrate into the big society, which inevitably leads to the assimilation or marginalization of these groups. With the influence of mass media, in the field of public opinion, these weak groups can enjoy the world's attention and have their

influence just like other large groups, which provides them with a good way to protect their rights and interests.

3. Current Issues about Public Media's Social Responsibilities

At the same time, this paper holds that the exercise of the major social responsibilities of several media mentioned above has been lost to varying degrees in today's society.

3.1. Problem Manifestation

First of all, the basic responsibility of the media to convey objective and comprehensive information to the masses has been frequently challenged in today's social background where false information is prevalent. According to Post Truth, part of the reason for this problem is the decline of traditional media and the rise of modern media. With the rise of social media, the influence of traditional media is gradually declining, and the daily circulation of old prestige media such as the New York Times and the Washington Post dropped by almost 70% by 2010. To reverse the decline, traditional news organizations began to pursue profitability, which led to the commercialization, entertainment, and dramatization of news content. The focus of the media has gradually shifted from delivering objective facts to publishing "stories" that attract the audience's attention. At the same time, to "differentiate" from new media and adhere to the so-called "balanced reporting", traditional media often give different viewpoints the same exposure, regardless of their scientific or factual basis.

For example, when traditional media programs discuss the issue of climate change, to keep the discussion "objective" and "comprehensive", the media will report the attitudes of both scientists and skeptics, which may mislead viewers into thinking that even an obvious fact such as climate change is still subject to widespread scientific controversy. According to Lee McIntyre, the emergence of partisan news outlets, such as Fox, has also provided a platform for "fake news" to flourish. The book provides several statistics to support this view, such as a 2013 study that found that 69 percent of Fox News guests were skeptical about climate change. A 2011 study found that Fox News viewers are less informed by manipulation [4]. In addition, because of the power of social media and the potential profits that come with it, disinformation is becoming more prevalent in modern society. Albright has asserted, that it is not just the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Facebook, Google, and Twitter each fell prey to election-related meddling by outside actors. And most (sic) every platform is struggling with manipulation, extremist content, and uncivil behavior. It is not just politics. The sheer volume of traffic carried by social media has led many people to fabricate false information just to get attention. The Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom is a good example of disinformation influencing democratic decision-making: Before the referendum, Welsh citizens received false information that the EU would open its doors to more than 70 million Turks, which in part influenced the outcome of the vote. In addition to the above effects, the spread of disinformation may also lead to unnecessary social panic: In the spring of 1995, news wire services reported that 6 million persons in the United States who were receiving calcium channel blockers for hypertension might be increasing their risk for a heart attack by 60%. Persons who were being treated for hypertension became frightened; in some cases, they stopped taking prescribed medication. Physicians' offices were flooded with calls [5]. On a psychological level, fake news can likewise have many negative effects on people, especially teenagers. Since teenagers are still in the stage of forming their world outlook and their ability to recognize information is not enough, receiving wrong information is likely to make them feel anxious and confused and have a distorted perception of reality [6-8].

Unfortunately, due to peer pressure and a desire for approval, studies show that teens often share information with their peers. This means that once false information begins to spread, it often spreads faster and on a larger scale than it normally would, causing a wider impact in the teen community.

False information has become the norm in teenagers' social networks. Not only that, but the proliferation of false information is likely to erode teenagers' trust in others [9]. When teenagers encounter opinions that differ from their previous perceptions, they are likely to feel distrust and doubt about the source of the information. This distrust further weakens their willingness to engage openly in discussions on important issues, believing that such discussions are meaningless because they cannot tell whether the information is true or false, and they may fear that their participation in such discussions will lead them to be misled or even exploited. If the young generation, or the future of society, has lost confidence and enthusiasm for social discussion, it will undoubtedly hinder the further development of society. All in all, the rampant false information may have a serious negative impact on the normal operation and healthy development of society, which is undoubtedly the social responsibility that the media needs to pay attention to and take up.

3.2. Technical Issues

Second, it remains to be seen whether the media are doing a good job of showcasing social diversity and promoting critical thinking. A concept that has become increasingly familiar in recent years, the information cocoon, makes one wonder whether even if diverse information is indeed posted online, it can be accepted by the public through the push of big data and the distribution of algorithms. As the European Journal of Operational Research puts it: "Because certain topics are classified as 'relevant' to users, they are given 'more of the same', which means that users' assumptions and biases are echoed and reinforced". As for the media's responsibility to promote critical thinking in society, it seems to be slipping away. At the same time, as the media industry becomes more and more commercialized, to make money, media organizations will find ways to find what people want to hear. So while it may appear that media organizations have increased diversity all the time and that the views presented in their programs are becoming more diverse, in reality, these media outlets have chosen their customers from the very beginning, and all they do is make these specific groups hear what they want to hear (and therefore pay for their programs). And do nothing to help their true mission of promoting mutual understanding and social acceptance of new concepts. As the authors of Post Truth put it, the point of these media outlets is not to debate, but to "build a sense of community among people who are already inclined to agree with each other" [4].

4. Possible Solutions to Correct the Situations

4.1. Strengthen Supervision

As for the proliferation of false information, it requires the joint efforts of many aspects of society to eradicate the problem as much as possible. At the top of the list is surely to strengthen the control of media officials over false information. First of all, the censorship of recent hot topics should be strengthened. With the rapid and iterative development of AI technology, large AI models can be applied to the preliminary and extensive review of such topics, and some false information that can be easily judged can be filtered out using identifying key words and other means. For example, the automatic fake news detection model developed by Federico Monti et al is mentioned in their article Fake News Detection on Social Media using Geometric Deep Learning. The detection model has been proven to have high accuracy and robustness in detecting fake news through testing, which fully demonstrates the potential of such models in detecting false information [10]. After the preliminary examination, the information that is widely disseminated and forwarded within a short period should also be paid attention to, because if it contains false information, it is most likely to cause widespread social panic. If such information is proven to have no factual basis, the platform should restrict or even delete it directly and give explanations to calm the situation. Accounts that spread such information should be punished, such as blocking their accounts.

It should be noted that these solutions have their limitations: the development of AI has also made it a means to create false information, such as using AI to imitate human voices or even directly produce videos that are not different from reality. These videos are likely to be easier to believe because of their highly realistic nature. Therefore, the regulation and labeling of AI is also an area for social media to pay attention to. Video site Bilibili, for example, will label certain videos as possibly made by AI, which is a good way to draw attention to the lack of authenticity. As for the supervision of hot events, social media should adhere to the principle of maintaining social stability when performing this task, and should not be involved by other departments or mixed with other irrelevant purposes, so that the supervision of the truth and falseness of information will become a tool of speech control, which is against the social responsibilities of the media mentioned above. Which is against the social responsibilities of the media mentioned above. As for the punishment of the publisher such as the title, it should control the transfer or opening of the account too easily, and ensure that the publisher cannot avoid or reduce the loss of the title by changing the number or manipulating the water bugle frequently. In addition to strengthening the supervision of social media, other aspects of society should also be responsible for this, such as the legislation on behavior and judgment. In some countries or regions, freedom of expression may be over-protected or restrictions may not be fully applied to the Internet. In this regard, legislative bodies should keep pace with The Times and recognize that social media has increasingly become a vital part of the public space. It should be value-oriented to serve the interests of society, which means that it should be treated with higher requirements. In many cases, it is the anonymity of sources and the privacy protections afforded by law that make it difficult for the police to detect and prosecute those who upload illegal and inappropriate content on social media. Secondly, legislatures should also emphasize the responsibility link between social media users and platforms, that is, if a platform user seriously affects social order through the use of a platform, the platform must be punished to some extent. In the United States, most social media platforms operate under California state law and tend not to be classified as publishers or media companies. In this way, they can avoid the legal liabilities that come with being a publisher, and avoid being subject to the same legal restrictions and public service obligations as traditional media. With this strengthening of ties, social media platforms will be more aware of their important obligations to curb the spread of disinformation.

4.2. Enhance Self-Responsibility Awareness and Technical Ability

Second, the problem with the media's failure to live up to the responsibility of showcasing social diversity and promoting critical thinking is that both traditional media and new social media are trying to provide their users with something in line with their original values, which make the media simply fail to live up to this responsibility. As for the traditional media, this paper argues that the state should provide more support and assistance to such organizations so that they can adhere to the same principle as decades ago: reporting the purest and truthful news, rather than abandoning this principle in pursuit of profit. As for new social media, platforms should reduce the control of users' information cocoons through algorithms. Considering that giving up this behavior in the short term may hurt the profits generated by the platform, social media can achieve the balance between promoting diversified displays and revenue by finding other growth points. For example, social media can generate more direct revenue by forging alliances with groups that crave attention or a greater say, helping such groups gain exposure and earn money from it, which creates a win-win situation for both sides while also doing good for society. New media platforms can also learn from some traditional mass media, such as the New York Times and The Guardian, which adopt a subscription system that can not only help the media receive a stable income but also stimulate them to provide the audience with high-quality content. These are all ways that media can receive profits while not contradicting their social responsibilities without using unhealthy ways to control their audiences.

5. Conclusion

This paper mainly explains that the social responsibility of the media should mainly focus on delivering objective and correct information to the public, promoting diversified critical discussions, and protecting the rights and interests of minority groups. However, at the same time, most of these functions of the media have been lost to varying degrees, mainly manifested in the proliferation of false information and the push of similar information by algorithms or human factors such as information cocoons, which makes people unable to get access to views different from their own, let alone achieve diversified thinking and discussion in society. This paper suggests that to solve these problems, firstly, all aspects of society, especially media platforms, should strengthen the supervision and control of false information. Meanwhile, media platforms should gradually give up control of users' behavior through algorithms to obtain profits and turn to other interest growth points. Future research on this aspect can focus on whether media have other new social responsibilities with the development of The Times and the surge of the AI wave, and whether there are other ways to better help media realize their social responsibilities given existing problems and possible problems in the future. Also, since concrete methods like using the AI model to detect fake news are not so developed at this moment, future studies can explore how to make AI more suitable for helping media achieve their social responsibilities.

References

- [1] Amedie, J. (2015). *The Impact of Social Media on Society*.
- [2] Middleton, M. (2009). *Social Responsibility in the Media*. Center for International Media Ethics CIME, Oxford University PCMLP, 2-3.
- [3] Gunther, R., Maughan, A. (2000). *Democracy and the Media*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post Truth* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press
- [5] Shuchman, M., & Wilkes, M. S. (1997). *Medical Scientists and Health News Reporting: A Case of Miscommunication*. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 126(12), 976-982.
- [6] Khan, M. K., Ali, G., Malhi, A. T., & Shahid, J. (2023). *Analysis of Diffusion of Misinformation on Twitter: Effects of Fake News among Youth of Pakistan*. *Online Media and Society*.
- [7] Aishwarya, C., Venkatesan, M., & Prabhavathy, P. (2023). *Effects of User Behavior in the Propagation of Fake News on Social Media*. In *2023 3rd International Conference on Smart Generation Computing, Communication and Networking (SMART GENCON)*, 1-7.
- [8] Kyianytsia, I. (2024). *Instruments for prevenTing media dependenCy and fake news using ai*. *Baltic Journal of Legal and Social Sciences*, (3), 179-184.
- [9] Tandoc, E. C., & Seet, S. (2023). *Winning the Game Against Fake News? Using Games to Inoculate Adolescents and Young Adults in Singapore Against Fake News*. *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*.
- [10] Shu, K., Sliva, A., Wang, S., Tang, J., & Liu, H. (2017). *Fake News Detection on Social Media: A Data Mining Perspective*. *ACM SIGKDD explorations newsletter*, 19(1), 22-36.