

# The Dilemma of Communication Ethics in The Era of Pan-media from The Perspective of "Bias of Communication"

Tan Wang\*

School of Media Science, Northeast Normal University, Changchun 130000, China

\*Corresponding Author

**Keywords:** communication ethics, ethics anomie, bias of communication, pan-media

**Abstract:** In the era of pan-media, the change of media communication mode makes the audience has multiple identities of information producer, communicator and consumer. The technological advance of media not only changes the narrative habit and expression mode of media, but also influences the lifestyle, social atmosphere and value orientation. Starting with the media bias theory, this paper analyzes the aspects of the media bias in the pan-media era and discusses various ethical anomalies in the communication of information by media organizations and disseminators in the context of media change.

## 1. Introduction

In the digital age, mass media is fading away. "Pan-media" technologies, represented by social media, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality and other technologies, are emerging strongly, and have been involved in all aspects of social culture, ranging from individuals' daily life to enterprises, governments and other social organizations. Media not only plays the role of information transmission, but also creates a digital and information-based living environment for us. However, new media technologies bring convenience to users and time hides risks at the same. Postman, a representative scholar of the media ecology, once said: "Every technology has its own internal bias. Under its outer shell, it often shows a predisposition to be used. Only those who don't know anything about technology can believe that technology is completely neutral. [1]" In the era of mass communication, the communication activity features combined with the five principles of ethics, the communication circle has developed the following ethical responsibility standards to restrict the subjects involved in communication: true (the premise and foundation of transmission), justice (propagated scale), humanitarianism (principles to be adhered in communication) and guide actively (the development direction of transmission) [2]. However, with the development of media technology, the phenomenon of ethical anomie in communication occurs frequently, and communication ethics should be endowed with new contents.

## 2. Theoretical background of "bias of communication"

Harold Innis believes that media is a dynamic social resource with the ability to influence people's thoughts and shape different cultural environments and social patterns. After the efforts of three generations of scholars, the school of media environment represented by him put forward three related propositions: the media is not a neutral channel; different media use different techniques and symbols, which make them have their unique bias direction. The inherent bias of media makes different media and the information they transmit have different consequences and influences on people and society [3].

### 2.1 Bias of communication affects users

Postman noted that "In every tool hides an ideological bias and its unique values and worldviews. As such, it leads us to use our faculties, senses and sentiments in a one-sided manner." It can be said that every media has a perceptual bias, content bias, ideological and emotional bias, political bias, social bias and metaphysical bias [4]. Due to the different thresholds and participation conditions

set for the audience, different media have different social preferences. For example, images can convey information more directly than words, and the threshold for audience decoding is lower. The difference in symbolic form results in the difference in information. Different medium transmit information by different symbol forms, so they have different rational or perceptual biases. The meaning of words is abstract and indirect, so the print media requires people to think and read about it, and develops the ability to recognize, choose and judge. Electronic media, on the other hand, shows more images and sounds. Compared with traditional media, social media is easier to express intuitive, simple and emotional content. Besides, the fragmentation of information also leaves space for communicators to release their emotions.

## **2.2 Media structure shapes information characteristics**

In the theoretical of media ecology, media is not neutral, because it has different bias according to its different structure. The media structure includes the material attribute structure and the symbol form. The material attribute structure refers to the characteristics of the technology carrying the code. Material equipment can support encoding, transmitting, storing, decoding and circulating information. The symbol form determines the structure of the combination of symbols. The material attribute structure and symbol form influence the content of dissemination, the form of expression, the material equipment needed for spread, and the effect and feeling of audience understanding.

As Innis said, the nature of the medium can shape the characteristics of the content. After using a medium for a long time, the characteristics and context of the content are also determined. Therefore, when new media technologies appear and the media structure changes, the bias of the media will change, as well as the content and form of information do.

New media takes smartphone as the carrier and takes mega data, algorithms, AI as the technical support. Compared with PC, the small screen of smartphone limits the number of words, layout and the distribution of operation keys on the same page. Portable features adapt to the fast pace of modern life. Due to the limitation of small screen and fragmentation time, it is more convenient for users to receive information in a small amount of decoding process in the shortest time. Compared with large text, the simple and clear meaning pictures and short videos are easier to understand. The communicator has also explored the expression forms suitable for mobile carriers and mobile networks in a short time.

## **2.3 Bias of communication in the era of pan-media**

As the media ecology said, different media have their own bias. At present, the mediated society is in a state of time-space imbalance, because of a deep spacial expansion bias in printing communication, electronic communication and network communication. On the one hand, the expansion of virtual space dispels the real meaning, making people gain information not through social practice, but the Internet. The oral tradition of paying attention to "dialogue" communication is also greatly weakened, and it is difficult for users to reach a consensus. On the other hand, the fragmented information cannot show the cause and effect of the event, because the short text and video content cannot bear the complex reality. Emotional information becomes the content that is accepted and understood most easily by people. Biased media shapes the information environment and changes users' habits of receiving information. It has become a common phenomenon in the era of pan-media that people attach more importance to emotions than facts, they tend to follow like sheep and think less.

## **3. Ethical anomie of media communication in the era of pan-media**

### **3.1 Concept of communication ethics**

Communication ethics belongs to the category of applied ethics. There is no unified definition of communication ethics in the academy at present. The difference among media ethics, communication ethics and media ethics is just a name. Some scholars believe that communication ethics refers to the moral relationship and communication ethics involved in the communication

process or communication behavior. Communication ethics includes not only the moral quality and moral cultivation of a disseminator, but also the dissemination of moral concept, moral code, moral behavior, moral evaluation, and so on [5].

### **3.2 Communication ethics dilemma in the era of pan-media**

In an environment of co-creation and sharing and diversified channels, pan-media users tend to ignore their actual responsibilities and the rules that they should abide by, because they are in the virtual space. So these pan-media behaviors damaging the real world. The electronic media, that has a bias towards spacial extension, weakens the advantages of oral dialogue. Individuals blindly accept and spread fragmented information, and the ability of thinking and dialogue is weakened. So they become a channel for information circulation. Besides, misunderstandings among different groups are easily deepened. Therefore, when pan-media users on the Internet express their opinions on controversial issues, they tend to constantly strengthen their understanding of the debate and fail to absorb or accept others' opinions. The communication effect is poor, showing a state of division and opposition among different groups.

#### **3.2.1 Excessive entertainment, weaken thinking**

On January 28, 2018, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) hold talk with officials in charge of Sina microblog to urge Sina to rectify. Sina had to rectify microblog's top search list, top Trending Microblog list, emotional section and the emotional section for a week. After the rectification, the hot search list has become national hot events and political news based list. Before the top search list on Microblog was reformed, the updates of certain celebrities had been at the top of the list for years. After idol Lu Han announced the romance, the number of hits even caused the serve of Sina Micro to crash. Entertainment information seemed to be the most important thing for users of Sina microblog. A large number of unjust events, which should be noticed, are left out of the list. As a gathering place for consultation, the top search list on Sina microblog not only conveys information to users, but also serves as an "agenda-setting" based on statistics of click volume and even capital intervention, which affects users' perception of the actual changes in the real world.

McLuhan proposed that the electronic medium was an extension of the human central nervous system, and "extension means interception". Algorithms of new media help the media and communicators to get precision marketing and push the content that users like to see and are willing to see. But at the same time, algorithms of new media also deprive the audience of some freedom and ability of screening. Their nerves gradually become numb and degenerate while nervous system extending.

According to the 2017 China New Media Trends Report released by Tencent, 58.5 % of new media readers prefer humorous expressions to calm and traditional styles. And 44.2% of news media users want news to be written in a humorous style [6]. In order to make profits, media organizations and disseminators use the characteristics of new media that can easily spread emotional information to process information. To some extent, what they do guides the audience's entertainment-oriented needs.

#### **3.2.2 The formation of information cocoon room, emotion is greater than the fact**

APP such as Tou Tiao also bears a heavy responsibility. Although the algorithm of artificial intelligence can accurately capture users' needs and preferences, the information that does not conform to the app users' preferences is automatically filtered. Thus, Information Cocoons, which is caused by information narrowing, reduces the type of content that users receive, causing users can not fully understand real life. The Echo Wall effect of social media also strengthens information of the same kind, which causes the duplication and waste of information resources. Information Cocoons and Echo Wall will deepen misunderstanding and conflict among different groups. Than social contradictions may be intensified.

In addition to the Information Cocoons, the "post-truth" is also increasingly obvious. German Chancellor Angela Merkel had said that we are more interested in our subjective feelings in the post-truth era than in objective facts [7]. Before the full picture of "Jiang Ge Case" was revealed,

We Media author Mimeng published "Liu Xin and Jiang Ge Case: The Law Can Punish the Murderer, But Who Will Punish Humanity?" It can be seen from the more than 100,000 likes that, compared with calmly and restrained stating the objective facts, expressing personal feelings can better arouse the audience's resonance and influence the audience's cognition and public opinion.

Compared with detailed and complex narrative events, fragmented information is easier to express emotions and arouse resonance, which is the nature of new media. Through the dissemination of fragmented information, the space of expressing emotions is expanded. So releasing emotions instead of objectively showing the whole picture of the event becomes the ultimate goal. Disseminators and media organizations conform to this tendency to obtain the pleasure of emotional catharsis or the benefits brought by the increasing number of like.

### **3.2.3 Inducing trial by public opinion and network violence**

In the comments on the Jiangge case and similar events, audience's pain points are touched, so we can often see netizens' approval and appeal for the trial of public opinion and even network violence. The fragmented information and emotional expression brought by new media make it easy for audiences to make an impulsive judgment before they know the whole picture of the event. According to a survey conducted by Tencent, more than 70 percent of China's information users regularly browse comments, mainly to judge whether news content is right or wrong. When the communicator makes extreme comments on similar events, audience's judgment on the events is easily influenced and even misled.

The situation of "after the front" becomes familiar, because new media has the inherent tendency of backward communication and the interactivity of new media blurs the boundary between private and public fields. This situation makes people more and more acceptable to show their living conditions and information, but also gradually ignore the risk of invasion of privacy and the accompanying danger. When it comes to knowing that someone has moral stains but has not been punished by law, users, who are both receivers and disseminators, habitually take advantage of the interactive and open features of social media and adopting the method of "human flesh search" to launch cyber violence to punish the "criminals" in their hearts. Some We Media authors even distorted the fact to attract attention with emotional expression. They accelerate the ferment of public opinion and confuse the truth of the event, so that they step into the blind area of media ethics.

## **4. Reflection on the anomies of communication ethics in the era of pan-media**

Faced with serious anomy of communication ethics, it is of great urgency to construct new communication ethics suitable for The Times. In the past, the ethics of communication was journalistic professional ethics [8]. However, in the era of pan-media, due to the decline of the right of communication, the audience plays both the roles of information producer and communicator. Communication ethics is no longer limited by professional ethics. Communication ethical subject is expanded to all users participating in the communication link. So its content should also have universal applicability.

### **4.1 Build a controllable path for content authenticity**

Truth is the premise and foundation of communication. However, in the current communication ecology, it is difficult to distinguish true information and false information, facts and emotions are intertwined, and reverse news appears frequently. Since it is difficult for professional organizations and individuals to verify whether information is true or false, individuals who are involved in communication activities should re-participate in communication based on the analysis and judgment of information based on common sense. Do not fabricate information to reduce the noise in the transmission process. To indicate the source of information in secondary or multiple transmissions for easy tracking. Supplement or query the information in your field of expertise to ensure the authenticity of the information as much as possible.

## **4.2 Ensure that the content of communication is understood by the public**

In the era of pan-media communication, there is still an interesting community culture brought by network communication. Cyber residents gather together for their common interests and then form their circles. Although the symbols and expressions used by each circle strengthen the sense of belonging among members of the community, they also cause the overall division of users to some extent. As the subject of communication, individuals should choose the communication behavior which is suitable for the communication platform, the nature of the event and the mutual relationship, and participate in the public discussion in a way accepted by most people in public communication.

## **4.3 Respect for individual differences and multiple values**

In the era of decentralized communication, the "ego" of users has been released to a great extent, so they express their opinions and argue endlessly about all kinds of affairs, causing chaos and division in the field of public opinion. Communicators should respect other users and abide by humanitarian principles. They should avoid verbal violence even if they do not recognize the value judgment of the other party, and they should not force the other party to agree with their views through public opinion judgment, Internet violence or human flesh search. Individuals should regard other members of society as collaborators in communication activities, depend on each other, and participate in communication practice with mutual trust and mutual benefit, to promote the accumulation of social capital and maximize the benefits of communication.

Although the media has tendentiousness and influences the information which is passing through itself, media organizations and professionals need to recognize the bias of communication and protect the bottom line of communication ethics. As a new media user with three identities, he/she should also realize that his/her words and deeds in the anonymous space of the network affect the ecology of the virtual world. So they should improve his/her media literacy and abide by communication ethics to build a clean and vibrant virtual space.

## **References**

- [1] N. Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, London: Penguin Books, 2005, pp.72-74.
- [2] Cao, Y.N., Yang, S. "Pluralism of Communication Ethics Responsibility in the Era of Big Data". *Journalism and Mass Communication Monthly*, no. 3, pp. 42-46, 2016.
- [3] Zhang, L.X. "The Change of Media Influence View of Media Environment School -- From the Perspective of Media Technology". *Contemporary Communication*, no. 6, pp. 37-40, 2016.
- [4] N. Postman. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007, p.50.
- [5] R. D. Cheng. *Communication Ethics*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006, p. 8.
- [6] 2017 China New Media Trends Report, [online] Available: [https://www.sohu.com/a/205157697\\_100019887](https://www.sohu.com/a/205157697_100019887).
- [7] Hu, Y. "Post-truth and the Future of Politics". *Journalism & Communication*, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 5-13, 2017.
- [8] Zhang, Y.H., Jia, N. "Sino-Western Perspectives on Communication Ethics Concept: Research and Digital Context". *Journalism & Communication*, no. 2, pp. 120-125, 2016.