

Theory of Communication Bias in the Modern Media Environment

Jian SUN

Shanghai Documentary Academy, Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai, China

jianjian088@163.com

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Abstract: Innis, a Canadian communication scholar, first put forward the theory of communication bias and believed that there is a bias in the media. Following its research path, this paper discusses the communication bias in the new media era, and finds that the concept of communication bias in the new media era has changed compared with the past. At the same time, there is a game between time and space in the new media era, showing a state of imbalance on the whole.

1. Introduction

Canadian communication scholar Innis thinks that there are time bias and space bias in media. Based on this, he divided the media into two categories: media conducive to the extension of space and media conducive to the extension of time. For example, inscriptions on stone and clay plates can be preserved for a long time, and the characters can be spread in time, but the stone and clay plates are bulky, inconvenient and difficult to use. On the contrary, the paper is light, easy to transport, suitable for the transmission of information in space, but the paper is not easy to save, easy to damage, not suitable for the long-term preservation of knowledge and information.

Innis divided the world civilization into ten stages, beginning with the Sumerian civilization, from the early stage of printing civilization, the stage of machine printing civilization to the stage of broadcasting civilization. He explored the communication bias of different media in these ten periods. However, due to the limitations of the era of life, Innis failed to study the media after the broadcasting period. The following scholars such as McLuhan have involved in the bias of television and other media, but there is no description of the communication bias for new media which develops quickly.

Innis believed that the development of media has a great impact on the progress of social civilization, and “the advantages of a new media will lead to the emergence of a new civilization”^[1], and only to achieve the balance of time bias and space bias is an ideal state. Based on the research status and focus, this paper attempts to outline the current situation of media communication bias in the new media era, and hopes to take this as the starting point to explore the civilization progress state in the new media era and critically examine some civilization crises in modern society.

2. Media Development in the New Media Era

2.1 Influence of Technology on Media Bias Theory

Every major change in the field of media is inseparable from the progress of technology. The continuous emergence of new media forms in the new media era is closely related to the progress of technology. Let's put aside the controversy about whether technology is harmful or beneficial to human beings and see what major changes has technology brought to the concept of communication bias in the new media era. We know that the communication bias theory proposed by Innis is based on the investigation of the characteristics of the media. The light and convenient transportation of the media makes it suitable for horizontal communication in space. The media is durable and easy to preserve, so it is suitable for vertical communication in time. However, electronic technology and digital technology have completely smashed the traditional concept of communication bias, because under the background of new technology, new media such as the Internet has greatly weakened the

time bias and space bias of media. The media no longer has the characteristics of whether it is bulky and durable, whether it is light and easy to transport. The new media has both the continuity of time and the expansibility of space.

The concept of “earth village” was put forward by McLuhan after seeing the great influence of electronic media, especially television. He thought that the huge progress of electronic media made the distant world close, and space was dissolved. Human beings were re-tribal in a larger range, and the world became a new village. Although the theory of spatial bias is not directly used, this is McLuhan’s real expression on media space bias in the era of electronic media. However, the communication of radio and television in McLuhan’s era was fleeting, and there was still a gap between the broadcast and television in McLuhan’s era and the new media with digital storage function, so McLuhan did not discuss the time bias of electronic media. We can clearly see that the progress of media technology has changed the traditional media bias view. If we still follow the research path of Innis, the research on communication bias will inevitably be stalled. Because in this way, the new media seems to have achieved the balance between media time bias and space bias, but is it true?

2.2 Destruction of Time Bias by New Media

The prevalence of commercialism has a great influence on time bias. In fact, this trend has begun from the era of mechanical printing. “The impact of mechanization on the printing industry is reflected in the increasing importance of short-lived things. To meet the needs of more people, superficial things are bound to become necessary and turn to art. Broadcasting adds importance to the short-lived and superficial things. Looking for entertainment has become an essential pursuit of film and radio.”^[2] Especially in the era of new media, how to attract the audience’s attention, get higher ratings and click-through rate has become the goal of the media. Most of the communication focuses on the realization of commercial value. An entertainment program that can bring huge advertising revenue is more valued by media enterprises than a cultural program with low attention. Therefore, although there is no technical problem in realizing the long-term preservation of information and knowledge, the information presented by the media is mostly redundant and junk information, and the content has lost the value of communication. Today’s information will be meaningless tomorrow. How can it be spread for a longer time? Thus, the impact of commercialism on time is becoming more and more serious.

The increasing function of individualized communication tools also weakens the time bias of new media. In the early stage of human development, whether words or various symbols often contain a kind of sacred communication meaning in it. In the era of new media, this sacred meaning is dispelled, and the one-way communication mode has long ended with the emergence of various new media. The media exists more as an individual communication tool. We update Weibo and send messages in the circle of friends without considering whether the information can be continued in time. It’s just a kind of self-expression. Even if these messages are submerged in the constantly updated information, it will not affect us to continue to use these media to deliver information. Therefore, the shift of the focus of media function positioning also damages the time bias of new media.

2.3 Impact of New Media on Space Bias

As McLuhan said, the emergence of new media extends people’s feelings and senses. Through the use of various media, people regain the state of sensory balance, and thus form perception of space. In the face of great changes in society, people’s energy is limited, and it is impossible to maintain direct contact with all the external space environment. It is of positive significance for people to understand the real world through various extended senses, that is, the media, so as to form their own environmental cognition and sense of space.

However, this kind of cognitive style also brings some negative effects. People always know the world from the media, so that this “pseudo environment” is treated as a real environment. And this kind of “pseudo environment” is actually a kind of virtual space. We constantly switch between real space and virtual space in our daily life, and even we will exist in real space and virtual space at the

same time. In such a process, the space bias toward regional expansion discussed by Innis began to change. The media no longer aims to expand in physical space, but tends to focus on the possession of the audience. The audience rating, click-through rate and other indicators pursued by the media are evidence of the emphasis on space bias, while the space here is virtual space.

In addition, to a certain extent, the new media has caused some damage to the real space, and the damages originate from the virtual space constructed by the new media. As early as the 1970s and 1980s, some scholars put forward the concepts of “container man” and “TV man”, revealing the negative influence of electronic media on people’s social character. With the emergence of new media forms and the popularity of various intelligent media tools, the squeeze and damage of virtual space to real space is more serious. People are used to creating virtual space and don’t like communication in real space. They enjoy talking to each other on the screen, but they don’t know what to say in interpersonal communication. “Although online communication feeling is instant, it is actually a kind of remote instance. Here, space gives time space, that is, distance forms a safe barrier.”^[3] New media constructs a virtual space for people and constantly expands it, but it makes people isolated and hard to communicate in reality. This can be said to be a great irony of the space expansion of new media. It can also be seen that, in fact, the space bias created by new media tends to be a virtual space, and this virtual space has caused some adverse effects on the real space to a certain extent.

3. Time-Space Imbalance: Game between Time and Space

In the progress of new media, the game of time and space is always there, and they are in an unbalanced state. The space bias of traditional media discussed by Innis focuses on regional expansion, while the space bias of new media pays more attention to the possession of virtual space and audience. To strive for as many audiences as possible, improve the audience rating and click-through rate, the important indexes to measure the expansion of new media space, the media must try to meet the needs of the audience. Japanese scholar Kiichiro Shimizu once proposed that the most widespread and universal demand of the audience is the interest beyond the social attributes of human class, occupation, nation, etc., that is, the instinctive interest related to sex, crime, violence and so on. Facing these contents provided by the media, the audience show great enthusiasm. The media constantly caters to the audience and occupies the market through this way. But these superficial and vulgar content can’t be tested by time and has no value of spreading, damaging time bias. Therefore, media sacrifice time for the expansion of space.

In the new media era, the squeeze of space on time is also reflected in the increasing difficulty of vertical communication. With the rapid progress of information industry, the information produced by the media is continuously transmitted to the audience. Ordinary information has been difficult to touch people to open its title. “Nowadays, the role of the mass media is not to make events ‘memorable’ in the traditional way, but to eliminate them and help people forget them when they come to us from all directions”^[4]. “Although media reports can expand the audience’s horizons, they create a steady stream of shock events and constantly empty people’s existing cognition. If the former shock event is not digested and it is replaced by the latter shock event, people can’t accumulate deep knowledge of the same event.”^[5] As a result, the media constantly submerges the old events with new events, making us feel the information that appears quickly and disappears instantly, and the increasing impact and stimulation. In the end, these events and information can’t escape the fate of being forgotten. Only when similar bigger events appear, can they be picked up from the garbage heap of various events.

Whether it is the media that makes the content vulgar and superficial to occupy more audiences, or the media events that make the information gradually lose the characteristics of being remembered, these communication states reflect the game of time bias and space bias, and the two are in an unbalanced state.

4. Conclusion

“Historical progress shows that time and space are the coordinates of human existence and cultural construction. Every change brought by the compression of time and space means the displacement of human existence and cultural construction coordinates, and means that the context of existence and cultural occurrence of the subject is rewritten”^[6]. Innis explored the development of human civilization from the perspective of communication bias, and also gave a warning bell to the Western civilization which is inclined to expand space. Similarly, after describing the media bias in the new media era, we can also examine our civilization from this perspective, and focus more on the possibility that the communication bias of time-space imbalance will bring our civilization in time and space.

The emergence of any new media will surpass the past in some aspects, and bring new possibilities for the progress of human civilization. However, through our research on the media bias in different periods, on the one hand, we analyze the media communication characteristics from the micro perspective, and on the other hand, we discuss the impact of media on social culture from the macro perspective. We find that no matter what media has two sides, and it is very difficult to achieve the balance between time and space. The emergence of new media can only be a beneficial supplement to the traditional media. Therefore, the complementary and comprehensive use of various media is conducive to the balance between media time bias and space bias. As Innis said, when we recognize the significance of media for all civilizations, we can see more clearly the bias of our own civilization, so that we can be more modest towards our own civilization.

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