Research on Media Literacy Cultivation Strategies of Chinese College Students in the "Post-Truth Age"

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Abstract

In the context of the "post-truth" age, fake news and news reversal will appear from time to time on the Internet, highlighting the uncertainty of the spread of truth as well as the spread of rumors, which have a negative impact on online public opinion. Therefore, the ability to explore the truth, exactly the core of media literacy, turns to be important now. In this paper it is found that the formation mechanism of the "post-truth" age in China lies in the interaction between the "post-modern" social characteristics and the characteristics of cyberspace. In order to deal with various existing problems that Chinese college students present in the cyberspace, it is suggested to build the media literacy training system of Chinese college students from three levels: the media literacy training system of Chinese college students should be constructed from the knowledge dimension; the six major media literacy abilities of college students should be cultivated from the skill dimension; and the media culture communication platform in campus should be built from the comprehensive dimension to build the media literacy training system of Chinese college students.

Keywords: post-truth age, media literacy, characteristics of Chinese postmodern society, cyberspace

1. Introduction

At the end of 2016, the *Oxford English Dictionary* named "post-truth" as the word of the year in the English-speaking world. The most significant trigger background and reasons are the brexit and the US presidential election. The term has attracted wide attention and entered the broader social agenda since it was first published. It frequently appears in areas including politics, media, economy and international communication.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* "post-truth" is defined as "a circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". But, *The New York Times* interprets it as "a situation in which emotions and personal beliefs influence public opinion more than objective facts". Among them, two concepts are highlighted, that is "emotion" and "public opinion".

"Post-truth" refers to that the disseminator does not present the news facts completely. Instead, it promotes the content that conforms to the subjective cognition of the audience but deviates from the original truth of the event by inciting emotions, reinforcing prejudices and catering to emotions. Hence, the objective facts and rational speculation are left behind by the disseminator and receiver. Under this circumstance, the ability to explore the truth becomes more important, and it is exactly the core of media literacy.

As for the concept of media literacy, academia both at home and abroad understand it from three dimensions (Potter.W.J., 2004:29): one is the dimension of " knowledge mode", which is to establish a cognitive system about how media produce functions on society; the second is the dimension of "skill model". In 1992, the American Media Literacy Research Center defined media literacy as people's ability to deal with all kinds of information in the media, including ability to choose, ability to understand, ability to question, ability to evaluate, ability to create and produce, ability to respond thoughtfully. This focuses more on people's cognition and processing of media information; the third is the dimension of "comprehensive mode", that is, the integration of knowledge and skills. Kai Zhang (2006) believes that people should receive media literacy education. By this, people are able to establish not only a knowledge structure to obtain correct media information, the meaning of information generation, and independently judge the value of

information, but also a knowledge system to recognize how media produce functions for society through cognitive media.

"Post-truth" is not only an issue of epistemology and information dissemination, but also a political and social issue in nature, which reflects many deep problems in social public life. Currently, existing papers on the issue of "post-truth" mainly focus on analyzing its causes and characteristics from the aspects of politics, economy, philosophy, communication, with relatively few studies on media literacy of college students starting from the "post-truth age". Hence, this paper aims at the disconnection between previous studies on media literacy in universities and social context, and focuses on explanatory studies. Starting from theoretical studies, this study takes post-modern studies as the entry point, especially in combination with the social context of the current "post-truth era". For the research content, this thesis focuses on the influence of "post-truth age" on the formation of correct attitude, cognition, values and guidance of public opinion in colleges and universities, the present situation of college students' media literacy under the new situation and ways to improve their media literacy ability.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Post-Truth

As for the emergence of "post-truth", some scholars believe that "post-truth" is a kind of composition, expression and characteristic of the complexity of contemporary social structure and social community. Among them, urban society is the comprehensive field for the generation of "post-truth", and modern media is the technical condition, while system solidification is the institutional reason (Zhong Chen, 2017). In terms of the essence of "post-truth", Xingfu Wang (2017) pointed out that the essence of "post-truth" is post-consensus. In sociology, the issue of truth is equivalent to the issue of production and selection of knowledge. With the emergence of the Internet and self-media, everyone is not only the recipient of information, but also the public provider of information. Referring to the principle of economics, there is a cost, at least a time cost, to sift out the real information from surplus and redundant information. Under this circumstance, when the costs are too great, the recipients of information often rely on personal emotions or habits to choose. Regarding the development of "post- truth" in the "post-truth" age, it happens that people need to lift up high the flag of the truth, because it's not that there's no truth, but it's that there are some errors in the way the public approached it in the past. That is to say, people need to re-establish a framework that approaches the standard of objectivity in a larger context, rather than allowing the gaps left by the truth to shift directly above subjectivity (Jiang Lan, 2017).

"Post-truth" does not mean that the truth is absent, but rather that the process by which the truth is perceived is bumpier. In "post-truth age", the public are more receptive to lies (fake information) and have a more prosaic attitude towards the truth. Compared with people's persistent pursuit of truth in the past, people in the "post-truth" age tend to put their positions, feelings and interests before the truth. However, "post-truth age" does not mean that "truth" is no longer needed. On the contrary, the ability to explore the truth becomes more important, and it is exactly the core of media literacy.

2.2 The Formation Mechanism of China's "Post-Truth" Age

Research shows that the formation mechanism of the "post-truth" age in China lies in the interaction between the "post-modern" social characteristics and the characteristics of cyberspace. In essence, China's risk society features "double compulsion", and the post-modernization features embodied by the compressed modernization are presented through the form of cyberspace; as for the representational level, communicators, communication modes and audiences conspire together in the network media culture, which makes rational discussion in the network space have to give way to emotional appeal.

2.2.1 Essence: the "Double Compulsion" of China's Risk Society Features

The concept of "risk society" was put forward by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck. With the emergence of some global crisis events, people created unmeasured uncertainty with the same rate of technological development, and we began to enter a situation that is unpredictable, uncontrollable and unspeakable. Compared with western societies, China's risk society is more complex. At present, China's modernization is characterized by both industrialization and spontaneous modernization (Zhenglai Deng, 2010). This is because the current world structure constitutes a "double compulsion" for China's development. On the one hand, the world structure has a mandatory effect on China's institutional and conceptual levels through the global demonstration of the empirical system and its local knowledge. On the other hand, the world structure, through the construction of "risk society" or "ecological society", exerts a mandatory effect on China's discourse construction (Zhenglai Deng, 2006). Unfortunately, this has led to the "synchrony" of many problems in China, such as ecological crisis, epidemic diseases, urban-rural integration and educational inequality, which tend to evolve from regional to national problems. Moreover, our research finds that some

fake news and fabricated news are exactly related to the above issues and cause national discussion, and in the process of discussion, they are constantly distorted, reversed and corrected. China's "compressed modernization" features not only enhance the production risk, but also leave no time for institutionalized expectations and management of risk (Ulrich Beck, 2010).

Due to the lack of flexible civil space in China's regime system, such social characteristics are presented through cyberspace. Most of the outbreak of group events is triggered in the social environment where long-term structural pressure fails to be effectively channeled. Now the Internet platform has the effect of nuclear fission on the spread of such outbreak.

2.2.2 Representation: Collusion of Communicators, Communication Modes and Audiences in Network Media Culture

An open Internet has an important impact on individuals and society, not only serving as a new form of communication, but also reshaping a new social interaction space. Compared with the shrinking civil space in the real world, China's cyberspace is in an extremely active discussion situation. And disseminator, spreading way and audience conspire together in the network media culture. Hence, in the network environment, some opinions of similar sounds were repeated, and even in the form of exaggeration or distortion. As a result, people in a relatively closed environment are likely to think that those twisted story are true, which makes rational discussion in cyberspace give way to emotional appeals.

In terms of communicators, the Internet age, as a famous stage, is more grassroots and popular, and the opinion leaders who are willing to speak and active in social media are greatly benefited. Some opinion leaders set controversial topics in public space, express provocative opinions to attract people, and even incite Internet violence, which aggravates the tearing intensity between rationalism and emotional groups in the public opinion field, and even affects the real environment and escalates the conflict.

In terms of mode of transmission, Cass Sunstein summarized the characteristics of information transmission in cyberspace as "collaborative filtering" mechanism". That is, through the same kind of information collection and URL links, the network platform not only provides information, but also leads to "information narrowing" at the same time, thus preventing the penetration of "different opinions" information, which makes the audience easy to form virtual groups due to similar interests when receiving information. Gathering to receive similar information for a long time will lead people to become more extreme.

From the aspect of the audience, compared with the agenda setting of traditional mass media, the information in cyberspace can be received at anytime and anywhere. As individuals, audiences tend to form different emotional orientations due to different values, which can be reflected in their selectivity to different information and their tendency to contact information consistent with their inherent tendency. Audience also has a tendency to identify with information, and values the consistency with their personal views more than the authenticity of information.

In this conspiracy, overloaded negative information and irrational judgment amplify the extreme emotions throughout the black and white position of right and wrong, making the general public in the depth of the public opinion field paralyzed and feel difficult to make independent decisions. This kind of collective anxiety and uneasiness cause strong social emotional resonance.

2.3 Media Literacy

In 1993, the book *Culture and Environment：The Training of Critical Awareness*, jointly published by Leavis and Thompson in the UK, gave the first systematic elaboration on students' introduction of media literacy. They put forward that the basic purpose of media literacy is to "make every effort to protect students from the negative effects of bad cultural and moral concepts or ideologies spread by media" (David Buckingham, 2000). The development of media literacy education in universities is extremely uneven in countries and regions around the world. The United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and other countries started earlier, and media education has been incorporated into the formal higher education. However, Asian countries are still in the initial stage of development. Japan, Korean and China's Hong Kong and Taiwan regions are relatively early in the development process. The media literacy of universities in mainland China is still in its infancy and advancing in exploration.

The phenomenon that a number of network media events in recent years reflects the following typical problems in media literacy of Chinese college students: firstly, the lack of understanding of media ethics. Due to college students' lack of correct judgment on media phenomenon, negative problems will happen such as their leaking others' privacy, abusing media to create Internet rumors, spreading irresponsible remarks and bad information; secondly, the lack of media information identifying ability. When using Internet media, it is possible that some college students are weak in discriminating information and vulnerable to the influence of Internet rumors; thirdly, the incorrect media use motivation. Some college students, during the network communication, often use "poststorm", bar blasting and source

blasting and other inappropriate means, resulting in network operation order chaos (Pengze Wu & Shiyou Du. 2011. Lianhua Wang, 2012).

At present, the research on media literacy of college students in China focuses on the explanatory research on the meaning and importance of media literacy of college students, as well as the status quo of media literacy at home and abroad, and the research methods are mainly qualitative research. Currently, existing papers on the issue of "post-truth" mainly focus on analyzing its causes and characteristics from the aspects of politics, economy, philosophy, communication, with relatively few studies on media literacy of college students starting from the "post-truth age". On the other hand, the research objectives of media literacy of college students in China are mainly explanatory research, experimental research and investigation research, while theoretical research, development research and evaluation research are rarely combined with specific social context.

3. Methodology

This study adopted survey research method and qualitative interview to conduct the research. When exploring the formation mechanism behind the "post-truth" age in China, literature research method was used to analyze, sort out and study the relevant literature on "post-truth" in recent years. And when describing the current situation of Chinese college students' media literacy, literature research and survey research were utilized to refine the concept of "media literacy" into three indicators, namely, media use and information production capacity, information reception and identification ability, as well as social communication and cooperation ability. It is tend to measure the media literacy level of college students. While analyzing the collected survey data, the survey focused on four aspects: the basic situation of college students' use of mobile Internet, their cognition and attitude towards media, their acceptance of media literacy education activities, and their cognition and attitude towards media events such as news reversal in the "post-truth age". Speaking of exploring how to construct an effective media literacy training mode for college students in the post-truth age, this paper paid high attention on the investigation of the educational management practices of several Chinese universities, conducted interviews with relevant managers through the qualitative interview method, and finally proposed specific methods and strategies on this basis.

4. Findings

4.1 The Current Media literacy Situation of Chinese College Students

According to the current situation of Chinese college students' media literacy found in literature review, Interviews with ideological and political educators in some universities in Guangdong province also corroborate this situation to some extent. Combined with literature research and interview results, media literacy of Chinese college students presents the following characteristics:

4.1.1 Frequent and Strong Dependence on Media Contact

According to the *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* (2018), by December 2017, young students accounted for the largest proportion of mobile Internet users in China, with 30 percent of Internet users aged 20 to 29, and 25.4 percent of students. College students have become the main users of the Internet, mobile phones and other new media. In terms of media contact, the study found that more than 90% of college students spend 4.5 hours surfing the Internet on mobile phones every day. Meanwhile, mobile phones (91%) and computers (80%) are the media with the highest contact frequency, while traditional TV and newspapers are both less than 10%. Furthermore, 70 percent of respondents said they felt bored and overwhelmed when they couldn't access the Internet. This shows that college students use new media very frequently and they strongly rely on mobile phones and other new media.

4.1.2 Lack of Social Attention and Rational Judgment Ability in Media Cognition and Understanding

From the aspect of the dimensions of media information cognition, the research found that as for media content, college students pay more attention to the personal field and entertainment information, but lack of attention to the country and society. 70% of college students are interested in animation, commodities and other personal consumption and entertainment information, while less than 50% are interested in national affairs and social issues.

In terms of receiving media information, college students have some judgment on media information. Only less than 9% of college students will completely receive media information without thinking, but this kind of judgment lacks rational identification and critical ability, and relies more on emotional judgment. When confronted with information inconsistent with personal values, more than 80 percent of college students will choose to ignore it. On the contrary, when confronted with unclear information consistent with personal values, more than 70% of college students will choose to accept it. Less than 20% of college students choose to check the truth against more sources. Faced with the "post-truth" age, this easily leads to the trust crisis and trust alienation of college students on national image, government credibility and social identity in some important media events, causing serious negative consequences such as rumor identification, Internet cynicism and populist politics.

4.1.3 Certain Ability but Weak Active Consciousness in Media Application Mode

At the media application level, more than 80% of college students browse information through new media. However, less than 50% of college students choose to take the initiative to speak out on various new media platforms. When speaking of whether the media is helpful, 60% of college students do not think the media information is not helpful to them, while only 20% think it is helpful. This indicates that college students' media participation in the network is not very active, and most of them are passive recipients. The positive guidance effect of media information on college students is not significant.

4.2 China's Media Literacy Cultivation Strategy in the Post-Truth Age

4.2.1 Knowledge Dimension: Constructing the Media Literacy Knowledge System of National Identity

Identity is a complex psychological structure. On the surface, it is the obvious behavior pattern of people; in the middle level, it is the individual's cognition of the commonness with the same group and the awareness of self-identity; at a deeper level, it is about the emotional experience of identity (Shuhua Zhang & Haiying Li, 2012:5). This is a process from the shallow to the deep, from "compliance" to "identification" and even "internalization". In nationalist countries, the key to national identity is to build a community of symbol interaction, identity and imagination. Anderson (2005) found that people's national identity is achieved through love deliberately shaped by cultural symbols, which is reflected as "patriotism" in the Chinese context. So, when setting up the course system of media literacy, colleges should add the content of patriotism education positive social energy to cultivate students' emotion of "family-country" as well as positive social identity.

4.2.2 Skill Dimension: Focusing on Cultivating Six Major Media Literacy Abilities of College Students

It is suggested that colleges actively cooperate with media organizations, enterprises and government departments of media education to carry out diversified media literacy education activities on campus, focusing on cultivating six major media literacy abilities of college students. Like the ability to select and evaluate media information, the key is to establish the values of national identity of college students, and to conduct education activities such as "network civilization in campus" and "network information popularization in campus"; for understanding ability, questioning ability and critical thinking ability, colleges need to teach more knowledge about media in classroom, and cultivate students' critical thinking through innovative courses; in terms of creation and production capacity, it is necessary for colleges to improve students' media participation in the network from the practical dimension.

4.2.3 Comprehensive Dimension: Building Media Culture Communication Platform on Campus

Knowledge is the foundation, while skill is the flexible application of knowledge based on understanding. And comprehensive dimension is the combination of the two. On the one hand, Chinese colleges should strengthen the construction of media literacy curriculum system for college students. Media literacy is suggested to be set as a general literacy course, covering media knowledge, media use skills, media information identification methods and media ethics laws and regulations. Furthermore, colleges are supposed to not only focus on the media ethics and moral education of college students, but also pay attention to the cultivation of college students' media skills. On the other hand, the media can serve as the state's machine and mouthpiece and become an important carrier of ideology transmission, shaping and transmitting ideology. Meanwhile, Chinese colleges are required to strengthen the construction of network culture in colleges, build a platform in campus for media cultural exchange, create a positive cyberspace with the national mainstream values and traditional culture, in order to guide college students to rationally use the Internet, and deliver positive energy of the Internet. According to the psychological characteristics of college students, it is available for colleges to make use of hot topics among college students as well as online platforms to scientifically set media information and agenda, guide the media information focus of college students, and effectively promote media literacy education.

5. Discussion and Implications

Previous studies on media literacy in Chinese colleges focused solely on the use of media, and rarely studied the media spatial form as a "scene" and the according social mechanism behind it. However, this paper studies the characteristics and formation mechanism of China's "post-truth" age from the perspective of risk society mechanism. After depicting China's cyberspace form, this paper explores the deep reasons for the current situation of college students' media literacy. Many Chinese scholars have discussed the characteristics and formation mechanism of China's "post-truth" age, and most of them believe that it is related to the characteristics of China's post-modernization society. Chinese scholar Quan Yan (2017) mentioned that the most prominent social problem brought by the "post-truth age" is the trust crisis in social networks, which leads to the alienation of trust. Trust alienation is caused by trust anxiety in the context of modernity, the disintegration of systematic trust in Internet politics and the variation of moral and emotional trust in the post-modern situation, which will lead to negative consequences such as rumor identification, network cynicism and

populist politics. The findings of this paper are also consistent with this kind of views. The formation mechanism of the "post-truth" age in China lies in the interaction between the "post-modern" social characteristics and the characteristics of cyberspace. In essence, China's risk society features "double compulsion", and the post-modernization features embodied by the compressed modernization are presented through the form of cyberspace. However, the socialization process of China has not completed the modernization, but has revealed the social characteristics of post-modernization ahead of time. This is the underlying reason for the emergence of many problems at present.

In view of the social characteristics of the post-truth age in China, this paper proposes to construct a media literacy training system for Chinese college students from three dimensions of knowledge, skills and synthesis. In terms of knowledge dimension, it is necessary to build a "family-country" media literacy knowledge system. By adding the cultural symbol of "patriotic education" to create an imaginary community, it is necessary to establish the national identity of Chinese college students and become part of their own value judgment. On the dimension of skills, focus should be placed on cultivating the six media literacy abilities of Chinese college students, including classroom teaching, network civilization into the campus and other activities. In the comprehensive dimension, actions can be taken by building a platform for media culture exchange in Chinese universities, creating a positive cyberspace with mainstream values and traditional culture, and effectively promoting media literacy education. This model is based on the specific practical experience that some universities have already implemented and achieved certain results, and can be extended to other universities in China, which makes the research results of this paper have certain value theoretically and practically.

However, China's regime is different from the west, and the path of social development also has its own characteristics. The theoretical perspective adopted in this study, both the risk society theory and the media literacy theory, originated from western studies. Utilizing them as methods to observe the applicability of China still needs to be further explored by more localization studies. On the other hand, this paper focuses on qualitative research on media literacy of Chinese college students. In order to describe the status quo of media literacy of Chinese college students in a more comprehensive and profound way, more empirical studies are needed as evidences.

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Notes

Appendix

Interview of ideological and political educators in some universities in Guangdong province

1. What do you think is the most important source of information for college students?

2. What are the characteristics of college students' media use and motivation?

3. According to your observation, what do college students usually do when they see a statement that is obviously distorted?

4. What are the shortcomings of college students in media ethics?

5. Do you think it is necessary to update our media knowledge now?

6. Does your university have a similar media literacy training program for college students? Is there any media literacy training for college students?