Journalistic Professionalism and Objectivity in the Age of Digital Media: A Case Study of the United States

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Abstract: *At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have been greatly impacted by the shift from the Internet to the mobile Internet for that the emergence of the mobile Internet indicates that the channels for audiences to receive information will become extensive and more pluralistic. Traditional media, such as newspapers and television, which had a high market share and viewership, are facing an unprecedented crisis. Today, the essence of many conflict crises in the world lies in the distortion of values caused by the bias of the truth in the process of communication. Therefore, this paper argues that in today's noisy public opinion field and post-truth era, it is necessary to discuss the objectivity of news again for it is an important part of journalistic professionalism, and only a good grasp of the methods and concepts of objectivity can reduce the occurrence of conflicts to a certain extent. In the following, I will analyse the definition, cases and development history of objectivity in America by externalizing the philosophical concept into real cases, and explore the practical significance of the existence of journalistic objectivity in the digital media era.*

Keywords: Digital media, Objectivity, Professionalism, Authenticity, Journalism.

1. Introduction

In the traditional journalism theory of Europe and the United States, objectivity, truthfulness, neutrality and the promotion of democratic values in journalism have been recognized by academia and society at large, and thus have become axioms in the profession (Chang & He, 2021)[1]. For a long time, journalists in Western countries have regarded "objectivity" as the core of journalistic professionalism. With the development of times and social expectations, the concept of objectivity has begun to transcend the framework of professionalism and occupation and become a kind of discipline and norm for journalism. Two American journalism scholars, Professor Chris W Anderson and Professor Michael Schudson, have stated that "We have argued, building on earlier work (Schudson, 2001) that objectivity acts as both a solidarity-enhancing and distinction-creating norm and as a group claim to possess a unique kind of professional knowledge, articulated via work (Abbott, 1988) (Schudson & Anderson, 2020)."[2]

Against the backdrop of the Internet and digital communication technology, New Media has brought great changes to the news eco-system, and the traditional news production institutions are facing the dilemma of decentralization. In the digital information distribution mechanism of the Internet, traditional news organizations, like many self-published netizens, have become nodes of an information network. At this time, some scholars argue that the advent of the digital age will blur the identity of journalists and the boundary between journalistic professionalism and objectivity, and that the new digital media age will lead to a weakening of cultural authority and the production mechanism of the traditional news media industry. However, I believe otherwise. Whether in the past of television broadcasting or the present digital media, journalistic

professionalism and objectivity are the rules that guide journalists toward better journalistic work, rather than being reduced to a formalism as it is believed to be. In this regard, this paper will discuss the changes of objectivity in journalistic professionalism in the digital media era based on case studies of America, explore the meaning of journalistic objectivity in the digital media era, and find out how journalists should respond to a society where technology is changing rapidly and user needs are becoming increasingly diverse.

2. The Nature of Journalistic Professionalism: Objectivity and Authenticity

News has its roots in facts, and the truth of events is the life of news. If the truthfulness of news is lost, then news will no longer be favored by the public and will lose its value of existence. Karl Marx, a German political thinker, said in his discussion of the concept of journalism that adherence to historical materialism and dialectical materialism is the basis of all philosophical theories. What's more, marxist view of the press holds that insistence on the truth is the only way to present good journalism and the nature of news communication is delivering the truth.

2.1 The Meaning of Journalistic Objectivity

In Western countries such as Europe and the United States, they believe that the objectivity of news reporting means that journalists and editors, when writing news reports and editorial pieces, should narrate the facts from the perspective of a third party, rather than adding personal emotions. In terms of commentary, it is important to balance the positive and negative aspects and not to report only the positive while ignoring the negative ones.

In China, what we think of as journalistic objectivity is that journalists should have a rational and comprehensive understanding of the background of events before doing news reporting. They should avoid personal bias and emotional expression, but to base their reporting on facts by taking advantage of the principle of balance and adhering to the Marxist concept of journalism as the dominant ideology. It is worth noting that the “objectivity” we are talking about here is different from the materialism described by Lenin. The “objectivism” in this case refers to a general belief that subjective consciousness is a reaction to objective existence, and it is a viewpoint that transcends the values of different classes and parties to analyze and study bourgeois society, which is different from the concept of objectivity we call in the press.

2.2 The Meaning of News Authenticity

Nowadays, the advancement of the Internet and mobile Internet has given a strong impetus to the development of social media, making it possible for everyone to become a journalist. However, without education in journalism and training in journalistic professionalism, emotional news and fake news often emerge from time to time, disrupting the normal order of the public opinion field and causing a lot of negative impact on the audience and the parties involved. For example, in 2018, the fake news “the thief who stole the battery was electrocuted to death and claimed 200,000 yuan from the owner” was widely spreading in Sina Weibo. The report is obviously lacking in authenticity, as it does not give any information about the time, place and parties involved, but only contains the causality of the incident and personal subjective comments.

Karl Marx put forward the term “Lebending Pressbewegung” to illustrate the characteristics of print journalism. He believed that a newspaper reporter could only report the facts from a certain point of view, and that each reporter was like a part of a giant machine, with each part doing its own job. Journalists should choose different angles of reporting according to their professional background. For example, a calm investigative journalist would discover the causes of social poverty, while a journalist with an economic background would look for solutions to social poverty. Marx believed that it is Lebending Pressbewegung that reveals the full reality of news events, and that the presentation of authenticity is also a process of constant movement.

What’s more, on concept of authenticity, it can be interpreted from two aspects: micro and macro. From the micro level, authenticity refers to the basic news elements such as people, time and place that are included in the facts written in a news report. From the macro level, authenticity is the objective and comprehensive reflection of the facts reported in the news and the grasp of the objective laws and the essence of the whole news event.

3. The Development and Revelation of Journalistic Objectivity

In the case of the 19th century American press, objectivity can be traced back to its early journalistic practices, which was a product of the country’s early partisan struggles and the dark

years of the party newspapers. The so-called “purely objective reporting” also emerged in the American press at a particular time in history, but its form was still under the framework of explanatory reporting, and it played a certain positive role in the social background at that time. However, “purely objective reporting” at the time did not address the abstract philosophical concept of “objectivity” because there was no way to balance the subjective tendencies and objective stances. Later, bylines began to appear in the United States in the early 1920s, with rare byline columns appearing on the front page of the New York Times and in the articles of Associated Press at the time, for example. The advent of the byline had an intimidating effect on society at the time, as it tied the success or failure of the news directly to the journalist and editor.

In 1924, the Journalism Bulletin of the United States discovered that the press had begun to employ journalists specializing in medicine, health, and automobiles as an alternative to PR draft, in the hope of enhancing the credibility of the product in the minds of the people. In this case, journalists became a symbol of credibility for a time. In the 1930s, the emergence of interpretive reporting began to revolutionize the newspaper industry and conform to contemporary notions of objectivity. The New York Sun and the Richmond News Leader began using this format in 1931, followed by the New York Times and the Washington Post in 1935. The American Society of Newspaper Editors passed a resolution in 1933 that endorsed interpretative reporting in principle. But then a new problem arose: the interpretation of a news event or the introduction of the news background may inevitably compromise objectivity.

Whereas in the 1930s interpretive reporting was seen as the savior of journalistic professionalism, this rigid approach to “getting the facts” was clearly out of fashion in the 1960s, and the very goal of journalistic professionalism was called into question. The context of the time (a culture of rebellion) led to the believes that intellectuals were the embodiment of the “new bureaucracy,” that urban planning had created ghettos, that the courts had created injustice, and that journalistic objectivity had become a “distortion of facts” in the service of the upper classes. As late as the 1960s, young journalists continued to see newspapers and other media as a place to express their emotions and personalities, more as a challenge to serious politics than as a rebellion against “straight news”. The biggest problem with “straight news” is that it is a form of engagement that sees itself as above all politics, partisanship, and power, but is privately complicit in it. The Vietnam War in the U.S. is a prime example of this, where the media, which had all claimed to be impartial and objective at the time of the war, proved to be nothing more than a propaganda machine for the government, ignoring the principles of journalistic professionalism and abandoning the ethical line. The bias of the news does not lie in the intentional prejudices, but in the way the news is gathered that reinforces the social reality constructed by the official.

In the book *Liberty and The News*, American journalism critic Walter Lippmann says: “But where all news comes at second-hand, where all the testimony is uncertain, men cease to respond to truths, and respond simply to opinions. The environment in which they act is not the realities themselves, but the pseudo-environment of reports, rumors and guesses.

The whole reference of thought comes to be what somebody asserts, not what actually is (Lippmann, 1920)."[3], which reflects Lippmann's concern about the subjectivity (ethics) of journalism in the future and his call for professionalism in journalism. He believes that only "science" is the best solution, and that only by defeating false reporting can we somehow earn the dignity of news and make the "objectivity" of news deeply rooted in people's hearts.

Michael Schudson, a well-known American media sociologist, believes that "Journalists came to believe in objectivity, to the extent that they did, because they wanted to, needed to, were forced by ordinary human aspiration to seek escape from their own deep convictions of doubt and drift (Schudson, 2009)."[4], which proves Plato's point that the so-called "perfect form" is like a reflection of people, a spiritual guide to the practice of journalism. This consciousness is just like the law and morality, which restrains the behavior of journalists and gives them a basic bottom line in reporting and writing. If this restraint and norm disappear in digital media and new media, it will leave society as chaotic and empty as a utopia, leading to fake news and lies everywhere and resulting in social unrest.

4. The Crisis of Journalistic Objectivity

In the United States, for example, the news media, which is known as the "fourth power" in the West and has the power of checks and balances, almost always emphasizes the high standards of professionalism, objectivity and neutrality in its reporting. However, the coverage of the 2019 Hong Kong anti-revision law and the two presidential elections from 2016 to 2020 by some media in the U.S. reveals that objectivity and journalistic professionalism that maintain the lifeline of traditional media has been shaken. This problem is mainly reflected in the rise of neoconservatism, the tendency of the news media to take sides and the battle for attention due to the audience fragmentation in digital media.

4.1 The Rise of Neoconservatism

The American press today is facing a crisis of neoconservatism and values. Since the 1960s, a new conservative force has formed in post-war America as a revolt against the liberal and socially radical movements of the past where the youth group has become the backbone of neoconservatism. In a sense, the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election signaled the arrival of a new phase of conservatism that had been unfolding in the United States since the war of World War II.

Mark Lilla, an American political philosopher, has argued that public opinion in the United States is moving in a rightward direction (Li, 2020)[5]. Forty years ago, the Neoliberal revolution in Britain and the United States had triggered the global political and economic crisis. In the current background of globalization, the American market began to shrink again. In the past, the idealized journalism in the United States was carried out under the framework of liberalism, with the First Amendment to the American Constitution explicitly guaranteeing the freedom of the press and reinforcing the media as the "fourth power" of oversight in addition to the government. But in fact, the emergence of neoconservatism has turned the press into a tool of partisan political attack. The privately owned and commercial advertising-dependent British and American journalism has gradually become a political product of a particular class. In this advertiser-funded profit-making news business model, many media have begun to abandon the norm of objectivity and neutrality in order to survive, such as the U.S. Fox News and CNN began to turn to entertainment-oriented news for the sake of gaining attention. Its news reporting appeared to exist the clipping of opinions and facts, leading to distortions of the truth which will seriously affect the binding effect of basic journalistic guidelines. For example, in August 2019, when CNN reported the protests and demonstrations in Hong Kong, it fabricated rumors that Hong Kong police threw petrol bombs at the citizens in the protest, creating fake news by cropping news videos (Figure 1).

Figure 1: CNN's rumor that Hong Kong police threw petrol bombs was proven false, so it deleted the original article and sent an apology letter to the Hong Kong police[6]

Unlike fake news, inaccurate news is still news by nature, but it is a one-sided interpretation of facts and conscious selective reporting of news, resulting in reporting that deviates from its authentic nature and causes misinformation and harm to the

audience. However, both fake news and inaccurate news have an indelible impact on the public. Even though perfect news does not exist in our real life, we can perform the role of a "gatekeeper" and use our journalistic professionalism to

correct the content of news reports, strike a better balance between timeliness and truthfulness of news, and reduce the harm caused to audiences by inaccurate and false information.

4.2 The Tendency of News Media to Take Sides

In fact, the issue of the political and value-based of the American news media has received attention for a long time, but there is a need to re-examine it. One of the reasons for this is that some American mainstream media have now externalized their political or value standpoints, while with the help of digital media, the dissemination and uncontrollability of media personalized political messages is gradually increasing. As a rule, the major mainstream media in the United States should maintain an objective and neutral position, and such subjective information should be placed in talk shows and commentary programs, rather than involving too many personal opinions and attitudes in the news.

But starting in 2016, when Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States, took office, the U.S. media seemed to begin a clear distinction between camps, and a standoff developed as a result. For example, left-wing media listed as anti-Trump include CNN and the Washington Post, while Fox News and the Washington Examiner are right-wing media that support Donald Trump. In addition, when confronted with the issues of gun control in the U.S. and women's abortion rights, it is clear that the U.S. mainstream media tend to add subjective opinions to their coverage.

In the early days of Trump's presidency in 2016, the hottest topic was undoubtedly "Russiagate". From the very beginning, CNN has made a big deal out of Trump's "Russiagate", clinging to the anonymous source's claim of having financial information on Russian agents and Trump as a way to reflect the collusion between Russian forces and President Trump. Outraged by CNN, at the press conference, Trump even directly rejected questions from CNN reporters and accused the digital news platform BuzzFeed of being in cahoots with CNN. But it didn't take long for John Bonifield, a CNN employee with more than a decade of experience, to say in a surreptitious video that "Russiagate" was made up for ratings. In response, President Trump tweeted, "So they caught Fake News CNN cold, but what about NBC, CBS & ABC? What about the failing @nytimes & @washingtonpost? They are all Fake News! (Wemple, 2017)"[7]

At the same time, for the first time in U.S. history, there is an unprecedented battle between the liberal left-wing and conservative right-wing media, which directly led to the loss of objectivity and neutrality of mainstream media. This battle has pitted user groups against each other, polarized the audience, and escalated social restlessness, leading to events such as the occupation of the U.S. Capitol by Trump supporters on January 6, 2021.

4.3 Battle for Audience's Attention

According to Internet World Stats, the total number of Internet users worldwide has reached 4.6 billion from 2011 to May 2020, an increase of about 67 percent compared to 2.267 billion in 2011(Figure 2). The 2020 Global Digital Report released by We Are Social and Hootsuite also mentions that

digital media and social media will become an integral part of our daily lives since more than 3.8 billion of the 4.6 billion Internet users are using digital and social media (Figure 3). According to the Report, it is also mentioned that in 2020, global Internet users basically spend nearly 1/3 of their time (an average of 2 hours and 24 minutes) on social media. Traditional media is facing the dilemma of declining sales and ratings as it enters the digital era, in which its adoption of the fusion media format may become the best way to redeem the situation.

Figure 2: Global Internet industry market analysis in 2020: user size exceeds 4.6 billion people [8]

Figure 3: Digital Around the World in April 2020[9]

From the perspective of audience research, we need to understand the motivations of current audiences to use media, which are mainly information acquisition, emotional needs, entertainment needs and escape needs. In social culture, audiences are actually limited by their own conditions, such as educational, cultural and social backgrounds. When they are confronted with media content individually or as a group, they will respond to media or media content that meets their value orientations. However, before the digital age or the new media, audience fragmentation were not evident because the speed and breadth of information was not yet enough, and this lack of information narrowed the audience's access to specific information or prevented them from knowing comprehensive information to analyze the problem. After entering the Internet and mobile Internet era, tens of thousands of information flooded in front of users, leaving them at a loss. At this time, the emergence of microblogs in China, Facebook and Twitter in the United States made it possible for their users to interact with information on the Internet platform, and this interaction effectively brought users closer to each other psychologically. Later, the appearance of opinion leaders led to the clustering of users, and each individual in such a diverse group was able to find a group that was in line with their value identification.

Then, there's a problem here, as the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget argued, that the so-called objective reality is actually defined by the subject according to his own cultural environment and cognitive structure. Then the audience will go through the two processes of "media display" and "psychological reality". In this process of transformation, the audience will be influenced by the three selective psychology, namely, selective exposure, selective memory and selective understanding, to accept the existence of objective facts.

The emergence of "fast food culture" has further compressed the time users spend on information, discouraging them from spending more time reading articles that exceed a thousand words, in newspapers or e-newspapers. Today's audiences prefer Twitter, TikTok, etc., because they can get more information in less time. Technology and algorithms, as well as personalized tweets, have exacerbated the audience fragmentation, as audiences have lost the right to consume and choose. They have no way to predict what these social media or new media platforms are going to show them, and they can only receive all of it, which eventually leads to events like "Cambridge Analytica gathering information of millions of Facebook users" in 2018. This also means that in the digital era, the core of the battle for users and market between traditional media and new media lies in seizing attention time. In this battle for attention, some traditional media sacrifice their objectivity and professionalism and choose to blindly follow the social media, only falling into the trap of clickbait and exaggeration.

5. The Significance and Necessity of Maintaining News Objectivity in the Digital Era

Taking the development of the media industry in the United States, as mentioned above, into consideration, we can see the importance of maintaining the objectivity of the news. In the media environment at that time, the absence of journalistic objectivity in the United States is characterized by the following four features: first, the lack of scientific observation methods; second, the rise of neoconservatism and the crisis of values; third, the absence of norms and guidelines; and fourth, the value of objectivity and neutrality is challenged. The paradox of this situation is that its values and institutions are being questioned. We can look at this problem through two dimensions. First, from the perspective of excessive interpretation and self-glorification of journalistic objectivity, people have invariably constructed an ideal journalism, but in fact we should not just self-glorify, but should establish a set of laws or norms to limit the occurrence of some behaviors. Secondly, the objectivity of news is realized by objective process and objective result. However, it is worth noting that the technique itself is different from the basic principle. The word "neutrality" actually represents a tool or a tone that aims to convince the public that a certain communication concept or information is fair and accurate. We allow for differences in the style of content expression, but these are differences in our views, not differences in the way we see it.

While pragmatism challenges objectivity, "the pragmatists proposed that knowledge and reality were not fixed by but instead were the result of an evolving stream of consciousness

and learning (Patterson & Wilkins, 2019)."[10] This also means that the definition of reality is subject to change in response to social, historical, psychological, and cultural changes. Nowadays, readers' value judgments about objectivity do exist, but they are fundamentally different from factual judgments. Independent individuals are limited by their own understanding, and there are also various frames to limit them in social practice. Therefore, the key to achieving the objectivity of news lies in the "scientific spirit" rather than merely relying on the conclusion of regulation and the restriction of production mode. Canadian scholar Robert Hackett, in his book *Sustaining Democracy? Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity*, argues that "objectivity is considered as a ruler. It has no alternative. It is a measure of the way journalism is conducted today, and that the existence of journalistic professionalism can better establish the will and identity of journalists, while it will also be a basis of social legitimacy for journalists."

6. Conclusion

With the change of media technology and the further reduction of the cost of news production, there are many information producers or we-publishers in the digital era who are not professionally educated in journalism and do not understand the professional code of the journalism industry, resulting in the production of content filled with contradictory, false and emotional information, which often triggers class antagonism and uneasiness among netizens. Under the pressure of new media, traditional media have also begun to gradually transform to gain the competitiveness of newspapers by means of integrating media. In this process of transformation, many media are obsessed with speed and even publish yellow journalism in order to capture the audience's attention, resulting in the loss of professionalism and objectivity in journalism. From the perspective of the history and recent development of American journalism, there are three main problems of journalistic professionalism and objectivity: the rise of neoconservatism, the tendency of news media to take sides and the battle for attention due to the audience fragmentation in digital media.

In an era where "everyone can be a journalist", new communication technologies and new media platforms have created a diversity of news formats. And, the novelty and effectiveness of these new formats threaten the traditional news production mechanism, thus prompting media organizations to constantly update and improve their news gathering, production and distribution processes in order to strengthen themselves in response to competition brought by digital news organizations and We-media (Qiu & Chen, 2018)[11]. In this regard, only by sticking to the journalistic professionalism and presenting true, objective and neutral news information to the audience can the mainstream media contain and reduce the impact of Fake news and Misinformation. At the same time, the Internet Information Dissemination law and departmental supervision should be strengthened to prevent the generation of rumors. It also calls on Internet media to strengthen industry self-discipline and formulate corresponding professional standards according to their own characteristics, so as to fulfill their media responsibilities of self-examination and self-correction. As a way for people to understand the objective world, only by

correctly understanding the dialectical relationship between subjectivity and objectivity can we grasp the true facts in the news more comprehensively and objectively. The “perfect chair”, as Plato called it in *The Republic*, is not a tool, nor is it a vain decoration, but a spirit, a constraint that leads media workers in the new era to make the right choice.

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