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The Construction of the Network Media as an Ideal model of Public Information Dissemination During the Epidemic of Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia

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Abstract

This article discusses issue of public information dissemination in the context of the epidemic of Novel coronavirus pneumonia. In recent years, human-oriented mass media have become widely popular, which, however, have not become the optimal model for the dissemination of public information. The author focuses on the problem of decentralized dissemination of public information on the Network media in the context of an infodemic, which derived from the epidemic of Novel coronavirus pneumonia, and the main method used in the study is desk research, that is, collecting and analyzing data from publicly available sources. The empirical base used media content from the Internet sources, media discourse from news broadcasts, international sociological surveys, etc. In this regard, from the perspective of the relationship between the Network media platforms and individual Internet users the following suggestions are put forward for the construction of an ideal model of public information dissemination on the Network media: In the period of public emergencies, the Network media should improve the connection between content of public information and individual Internet users. The Network media should also enhance their own professionalism of the media. Centralized and decentralized communication represented by the media must coexist and assist each other.

Keywords: epidemic of novel coronavirus pneumonia (NCP), public information dissemination, the network media, infodemic, centralized communication, decentralized dissemination, information, Information Cocoons.

1. Introduction

The infodemic is a major problem for the dissemination of social public information, especially in the health sector. Educationist J. Dewey said: "Society not only exists because of transmission and communication, but more precisely, it exists in transmission and communication" (Dewey, 1903: 193-204). The changes that are taking place in the information world should arouse our vigilance. The Network media is still the most authoritative human-oriented channel for most people. Network media brings the communication mode of human-centered media, which is based on the connection between people. The development of technology makes the connection between people more convenient. Lars Backstrom also demonstrated in their experiments that new media can shrink the world from the six degrees of separation previously proposed by Harvard psychologist S. Milgram to four degrees of separation (Lars et al., 2012:

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33-42). There is indeed a degree of connectivity between people today that was never before possible in terms of technology (Kačínová, 2019; Vrabec, Bôtošová, 2020).

With more the Network medias and sources of information to choose from, people still see a certain side of the world that they would like to see. This selectivity was especially evident during a pandemic of NCP, when the flow of information is overwhelming. It is becoming easier for the audience of information to lose yourself in an environment created by the Information Cocoons (Sunstein, 2008: 8).

While promoting people's connection, new media is also in some ways causing people to divide. What is technically possible, however, does not mean that people have really broken through the established divisions of social class, values, positions, culture, etc. (Dong et al., 2020: 18-24). In particular, under the pressure of the infodemic, a derivative of the epidemic of NCP – soft contradictions directly evolved into cracks. Therefore, it is difficult for human-oriented media to achieve full, comprehensive and balanced transmission of information in social communication. Under such a premise, equal and rational public communication becomes more difficult.

When solving the problems in the Network media, improving media literacy is usually the primary solution. However, the improvement of media literacy takes time. Even people with relatively high media literacy are difficult to be immune to all the problems of communication in the Network media. Therefore, we try to provide solutions from the aspect of the responsibility of the Network media platforms for public information dissemination during the infodemic.

2. Materials and methods

The main method used in the study was desk research, that is, the collection and analysis of data from open sources. The empirical basis employ media, such as TikTok, bilibili, Weibo, YouTube and Facebook, content of the Internet resources, media discourse of news broadcast, like People's Daily, China News Network, Sanlian Life Weekly and Caixin Weekly, and the nationwide sociological investigative reports: Report on Media User Consumption and Usage Expectations During the epidemic of NCP Period; GWI coronavirus findings April 2020 – Media Consumption (Release 4); Russian periodical press: Status, trends and development prospects. The article traces the dynamics of information materials related to coronavirus infection for the period from January 1st to April 1st, 2020 on the Network media *Weibo*, *Sanlian Life Weekly* and *Caixin Weekly*.

3. Discussion

At the beginning of 2020, the epidemic of NCP spread globally. During the epidemic, surveys data around the world have shown that people's dependence on the media has increased significantly (CSM..., 2020; GWI..., 2020; Rossijskaya..., 2021). Although the way people obtain information has become faster and more convenient, it seems that it has not become easier to understand a more comprehensive world. When people build their own social Networks, homogeneous social information sources will not necessarily expand people's horizons, but will further promote the narrowing of people's horizons and positions, viewpoints, and people's personal preference for information selection will be strengthened. During the epidemic of NCP, when the flood of information comes, this selectivity is particularly prominent.

The author of this article collected nearly 5,000 data from the top 50 hot daily searches on the Network media Weibo from January 1st to April 1st, 2020, and analyzed it. Moreover, the author analyzed the research from the service for publication and analytic in the Network media Mediascope, which analyzed from March 30 to April 12 depersonalized activity data of more than 4.3 thousand of its users in Russia, as well as subscribers of their pages on the Network media (Mediascope, 2020). Through analysis we can see an increase in engagement of users. At the same time, we also see that some people reposted ports from official media accounts, and some preferred to repost energy contents from mainstream media, and some people were constantly sharing articles with various fake news or conspiracy theories, and some people found themselves outside the epidemic. Scientists predicted that in the Networks medias, information will continue to focus on personal preferences and positions.

According to the concept of the information cocoon proposed by Sunstein: the information field that people pay attention to will be habitually guided by their own interests, so as to shackle their lives in a "cocoon room" like a silkworm cocoon. This is the most serious global public health crisis that mankind has encountered since entering the information age. The ubiquitous media directly shape people's judgment and perception of the world.

The information cocoon room is a metaphor for selective psychology and its results, and selective psychology has been confirmed by psychological research. The cognitive dissonance psychology of American psychologist Leon Festinger can partly explain the motivation for this selectivity. People has a consistent or balanced orientation between their views, attitudes, behaviors, etc. If the balance cannot be achieved, disorders will occur (Festinger, 1954: 117-140). Selective psychology is a way to solve disorders, that is, to increase exposure to information that can reduce disorders and avoid exposure to information that may increase disorders (Festinger, 1962: 93-106).

The establishment of a social platform facilitates the connection between people, and when it reaches a certain user scale, it will inevitably become a public information dissemination platform. The connectivity between people and content, as well as the breadth and quality of the connection, depends to a large extent on the communication mechanism of the platform. For example: during this special period, in order to get some key facts, many media members were on the front line in Wuhan, and the editorial team devoted all their energy to tracking and creating countless comprehensive and three-dimensional full reports. These materials focused on ordinary people in the epidemic zone of the NCP, the opinions of medical specialists, and restoring the key nodes of the epidemic. However, the reports produced by many mainstream state media, such as *People's Daily*, *Caixin Weekly*, and *China News Network*, which opened epidemic reports to all users for free during a specific period of time, and at the same time send news about the pandemic on their official accounts of online media, still did not have an advantage for users. Short videos are very popular. On platforms such as TikTok, bilibili, and YouTube, videos that were only a dozen seconds long and had millions or even tens of millions of views. The problem lied not in the report itself, but in the online media dissemination model.

In addition to these reports, there were some key rumor-refuting information, which also could not reach users smoothly. And there were still all sorts of rumors about the coronavirus. The media, spreading information about disasters, excite the public, causing a very wide range of feelings – horror, fear, disgust, panic, sympathy. The media can “turn off” common sense (Melnik et al., 2020).

Fear-driven people would pay more attention to rumors in times of distress, Festinger said. Rumors provide cognition in tune with fear in the sense that people accept and believe them (Festinger, 1999). In addition to finding support for fear, people also need some rumor support to stick to their positions. Therefore, in times of disaster, the spread of rumors will suddenly increase.

Rumors don't have to be fake news. Judging the authenticity of information is a very professional job, and it cannot be completely solved by the media literacy of ordinary users, nor even some power agencies can judge it based on their experience, but depends on professional investigation and verification. However, it is still necessary to refute rumors based on careful investigation and verification, and it is even more necessary to disseminate these rumors widely. In response to the rapid spread of rumors, most of the Network media has adopted a simple and rude method of “deleting posts”.

In fact, on the Network media, it is possible to realize the mandatory connection between content and people, and the wide dissemination of information. For example, advertisements in WeChat's circle of Friends and Facebook can be pushed to all users, and sometimes they can be targeted to different groups of users. In the algorithm recommendation, it can also be adjusted to tilt towards important content (Yu, Qu, 2020: 127-133). It is not difficult to solve the wide coverage of certain information technically. The key is that the Network media needs to make adjustments in the dissemination mechanism to provide such a channel resource for information of important public value.

During the extraordinary period, *Caixin Weekly* took the lead in launching a full-record channel for the new crown pneumonia, and canceled the “paywall” for reading, so as to report the epidemic situation in an all-round way for the public. *Caixin Weekly* also launched nine consecutive issues with heavy coverage on the cover, investigating the development of the epidemic in a panoramic manner. At the same time, the publication gave advice and suggestions on the prevention and control of epidemics, created a system of columns, and offered comments on the hotline. Many articles were widely disseminated, which aroused widespread praise, support and protest in the society. However, some researchers criticized the phenomenon that some of the Network medias only follow the trend of technology, and have not made progress in the professional level of journalism. Du Junfei, professor of Journalism and Communication at

Nanjing University in China, even pointed out: “If it cannot report real news, it is all fake media. If it cannot provide the public with close services, it is all fake innovation” (Du, 2020).

New technologies are greatly changing the communication pattern, the living environment of the media, and the relationship between the media and users. Compared with the epidemic of SARS in 2003, the channels and modes for the public to obtain information have undergone tremendous changes today. Rumors, fake information that in the past could only be spread via text messages on mobile phones, are now pouring from all sides on the Network medias. Although platforms such as Weibo, TikTok and Facebook have brought a lot of false information, it is also because of them that more people knew the real situation of the frontline of the fight against the epidemic in Hubei, where the epidemic of NCP broke out.

P.Q. Fors and D.M. Barch noted an association between electronic media use and both anxiety and depression, with a stronger association with depression than with anxiety (Fors, Barch, 2019: 907-917). Due to the blessing of new technologies, the forms of online media reports are diversified, and the content of reports is difficult to receive reasonable control, which can easily lead to frequent online rumors during the epidemic, and the public is nervous and panic. Therefore, the new technology has not reduced the professional requirements for the media. Especially nowadays self-media people can also participate in content production, and only with a higher professional level can the media have a sense of presence. For example: during the epidemic of NCP period, Sanlian Life Weekly realized content value-added through content IP and knowledge production.

The rise of new medias, especially the popularity of the Network media, has brought about decentralized communication, and the authority of new media, which used to be at the center of communication, has been weakened. However, during the epidemic period, traditional media and their new media platforms have once again attracted attention. According to the Report on Media User Consumption and Usage Expectations During the epidemic of NCP Period conducted by the survey agency CSM, nearly three-quarters of the respondents indicated that they watched more TV than before, and more than half of the respondents believed that traditional media websites can help it obtain more reliable and high-quality epidemical information, ranking first among all options; the second is TV media; while *WeChat* and *Weibo* are ranked third and fourth respectively (CSM..., 2020).

Pushing information of public value through centralized communication also helps to break through the blockade of individual “cocoon rooms”, and promotes individuals’ understanding and attention to society and other groups. Centralized content production and dissemination can guarantee the level of content to a certain extent. When it is necessary to mobilize the whole people, the effect of centralized communication is often immediate, and the non-discriminatory, full-coverage communication mechanism can achieve the wide and efficient arrival of information.

But this centralized communication model is not perfect. After the emergence of social networking media, people migrated to it one after another, and decentralized communication gradually emerged. The benefits of decentralized content production and personalized content distribution are obvious: the threshold for content production is lower, the content supply side has experienced explosive growth, and the growing content needs of users can be met; the content distribution efficiency is higher, and thousands of people face thousands of people (Seong et al., 2010: 1-8).

The advanced algorithm screens out the information that the user is most interested in from the massive amount of information, so that the individual needs of the user can be met. Under the impact of the epidemic, we have seen some new changes in the era of decentralization: on the one hand, high-quality platforms are regaining user trust. These together promote the establishment of a more high-quality content ecology.

The extraordinary period of the epidemic has also concentratedly exposed the problems of decentralized communication, such as insufficient information acquisition, information confusion, emotional communication, etc. Along with this epidemic of NCP, the infodemic also had become explosive on the Network media platforms. Some content industrial practitioners regarded traffic as the only operational goal, created hotspots, actively produced or disseminated false news, front-page content, pseudo-knowledge and other low-quality content. During the epidemic, rumors such as “drinking alcohol can kill bacteria and prevent infection”, “academician Zhong Nanshan suggested gargling with salt water to prevent viruses” and other rumors spread, which had a serious impact on epidemical prevention in society.

To improve the public information environment and public communication environment, and establish an ideal public information dissemination center, one cannot rely solely on a certain mode of communication, centralized or decentralized. Sometimes, they need to coexist.

4. Results

The Network media has brought about a human-oriented communication model, which is based on the connection between people. The development of technology has indeed made the connection between people reach an unprecedented degree today. Even short video platforms with relatively weak social connections are also an important communication platform during this epidemic. However, it does not mean that people have really broken the existing divisions such as social circles. Especially during the epidemic period, people's personal preference for information selection will be strengthened, and the phenomenon of information cocoons on the Internet is particularly prominent. Therefore, we need to rethink the responsibility of social platforms in public information dissemination in public emergencies and their possible solutions.

The infodemic, which was born almost at the same time as the epidemic of NCP, has caused mixed information in the public opinion field at home and abroad. But as we know that rumors are not necessarily rumors or fake news. Some information that we cannot judge as true for the time being cannot be simply classified as "rumors". The spread of some "rumors" may even obscure important facts, resulting in unpredictable consequences (Tang, Sun, 2021: 171-181). However, respecting the user's choice has become a necessity today. Modern social platforms need to rethink their roles in public information dissemination and public communication, and they also need to assume corresponding responsibilities. This responsibility is not only reflected in "deleting posts", but to ensure the diversity of the information environment as much as possible. The completeness of information can maximize the sufficient and smooth communication between public content, high-quality content and users.

Improving professionalism in news production does not conflict with the application of technology. Whether it is an emergency period such as an epidemic, or public communication under normal circumstances, a wider collection, in-depth research and integration of news information, or analysis of the background and forecast trends of news events will help media workers improve their professionalism. New technologies can also affect professionalism. Although the changes in the new media era began with technology, yet the content of the information turned out to be decisive.

Centralized and decentralized communication have their own advantages and complement each other. When mass mobilization is required, the centralized communication effect is efficient and fast. Decentralized communication can bring some satisfaction that centralized communication cannot, but decentralized communication can easily cause infodemic.

5. Conclusion

In the era of mass communication, communication research has already revealed the mechanism of people's selective exposure, understanding, and memory of information. The current communication ecology has brought about the worry of information cocoons. In recent years, the rise of personalized information recommendation algorithms has generally aggravated people's concerns about information cocoons. Especially in the face of a global public health crisis, building an ideal public information dissemination channel is the top priority. Platforms need to improve the connectivity between public content and individual users. In addition to paying attention to technology applications, the media also needs to improve the professionalism of news content production. The centralized communication and decentralized communication of the media will still coexist in the future to deal with the infodemic.

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