

Composition and Improvement Strategies of News Audience's Media Literacy in the Omnimedia Era

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Abstract: In the era of omnimedia, the methods of news consumption have changed markedly. Based on new characteristics of news consumption and new issues arising therefrom, this article provides an in-depth analysis of the capabilities, including selecting, decoding and coding information from news, which all contemporary news audience should have. Meanwhile, this article proposes the pathway and strategies for fostering and improving media literacy. For example, the government should strengthen top-level design, mass media should comply with media ethics and schools should innovate educational methods. In addition, relevant social organizations, communities and families ought to mutually collaborate with each other in order to jointly build a scientific and rational media literacy education system.

Keywords: omnimedia era, news consumption, media literacy, news literacy

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This article was supported by National Social Science Fund of China regular project "Chinese Internet Advertisement Supervision System Research" (16BXW087), Humanities and Social Sciences Key Research Base of the Ministry of Education key project "Research on the Competitiveness of Chinese Media and Advertising Industry under the Background of Intelligentized Media" (16JJD860002), and Central Institution of Higher Education Basic Scientific Research Fund Special Fund in Support of Wuhan University Independent Scientific Research Project (Humanities and Social Sciences) "Research on the Development Strategy and Rules, Regulations and Policies of the Intelligent Advertising Industry in China"(2018QN039).

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The behaviors of news consumption have multi-level changes. Both old and new media have jointly developed, and the methods of getting information are diverse and numerous. All of these factors constitute the media environment. Additionally, the subject of communication differs in standpoints and professional levels, which in turn affects the production and the expression of news. The news audience is no longer a flat and simple role. Their different roles will bring more possibility of participation and more space for initiative practice. Traditional media literacy has shown certain inadaptability. Re-understanding media literacy and re-examining its improvement strategies are of considerable importance to news consumptive behaviors and a healthy and orderly media ecology.

New Features of News Consumption and Problems in the Era of Omnimedia

Complicated and Massive News Acquisition Channels

In 2010, with the increase of mobile data usage, portal websites roll out mobile client. And, at the same time, some aggregative information platforms emerge at the mobile client. In order to have differentiated, competitive advantages, more diverse news forms have successively sprung up since 2014. This brought about the boom of vertical new media and an innovation that the products from the mobile client design topics by solely using certain news form. More diverse news forms also bring sub-products that use fixed forms to report the news, among which the most common forms include live streaming, short video, H5 and panorama. For instance, “we video” on *The Beijing News* app uses short videos for news report; on *The Paper* app, there is a “panorama on site” in the channel of current affairs that uses 360-degree panorama to present the scene of news; “livestream” in the video channel fixedly use livestreaming for news report. In the same period, traditional news also launched their news apps. Since 2015, the capital market has been actively supporting the growth of we-media. At the same time, technological innovations have made the methods of reporting news more intelligent, more precise and more immersive. With the application of technologies such as artificial intelligence, VR (virtual reality) and robots, the experience of news consumption has kept constantly overturning and expanding.

In the omnimedia era, news audience faces various media which have different characteristics. Therefore, individual's free choice shows different preferences for media. People are continuously seeking updated news consumption. In a certain period, it shows the characteristic of holistic migration. It is common that “information wealth” and “information poverty” to varying degrees both exist in offline consumption of traditional news and online consumption of digital news. As the Reuters news reported in 2018, a key difference between high social class and low social class is whether they have direct access to first-hand news sources (directly visit the website of the news agency or read news on apps). However, people from all social classes seem to have inclination to read news through news distribution platforms (i.e. social media, search engines...) (KALOGEROPOULOS A, IELSEN R K, 2019). The inequality in news consumption is worse in the process of digital news consumption, which mainly represents in the choice of news media. When information overload happens, the audience will either be overwhelmed by the vast amount of information,

or select information with limitation, which badly hurt their initiatives (Z F Ge, 2014). The more a person prefers certain news media, the more easily they will be affected by “mimic environment” built by these media.

Different Levels of the Subject in News Production

The audience’s knowledge and understanding of a news event usually comes from multiple media platforms, and the content they receive also comes from different subjects in news production. This article analyzes these content producers from three dimensions. In a world where media integrate with each other, multimedia platforms could help to tell every important story, to promote every brand, to please every consumer and so on (Henry, 2012, p. 30).

First, the professional practice between traditional media and new media is clearly different. On the one hand, not all new media editors have received professional training. On the other hand, new media are easily controlled by commercial interests, so they usually think less of real information and the truth behind events. They often take advantage of audience’s emotions and personal views as the stunt in order to obtain more views, clicks and retweets. However, traditional media are consistently charged with supervision through public opinion, and persist in in-depth investigations, which all manifest their belief in truth. Zhu Xuedong, the associate dean of the Media Research Institute of *The Beijing News*, believes that *The Beijing News* values authenticity of news, materialization of investigative evidence and integrity of evidence. The most important thing is that evidence should be completely, evenly reported. These principles are vital to ensure that news remain authentic, objective, holistic and fresh in this era of “attention economy”.

Second, grass-roots media and professional media are being distinct and crucial forces. In some cases, they expand their influence through reflecting on social phenomena. Integrated culture pushes the media into the trend of change, and augments the chance that grass-roots media challenge mass media (Henry, 2012, p. 360). In the past, mass media relied on resource advantages in professional staff and hard news reportage. Their reports in many fields, such as science and technology, economy, international news, politics, have higher quality, better timeliness, deeper analysis and discussion. However, grass-roots media are relatively less influential, but their topics are more specific and closer to life. It becomes more and more common that grass-roots media contribute to the authenticity in reporting hot issues with professional media. In general, grass-roots media has expanded the boundary of news, and has provided different points of view on certain events. However, it is also necessary to pay more attention to their negative inclination to vulgar news and fake news. Furthermore, the snackification of contents is prevalent among some money-driven we-media, as they require sufficient exposure. By using fixed combination of elements and repeatedly applying “best-seller” framework of story, we-media guarantee the predictability of outcomes. All of these psychological laws which take advantage of human frailty become a rational way to assure the efficiency. Under such circumstances, the audience will quickly make a decision and be indulged in audio and visual consumption to obtain a fake or misguided sense of happiness and gratification. This kind of consumption is irrational. This phenomenon is particularly pervasive in articles published through WeChat official accounts, as disseminators usually apply a set of verified rules to produce the fast-food content.

Fusion of News Audience's Three Roles

In the era of omnimedia, the news audience is not only a news receiver, but also a news producer and a news disseminator. Technologies with low entry barriers empower the news audience with the capacity to produce and disseminate information. Therefore, the citizen journalist have become a vital force in news reportage, especially on-site news. The ordinary people with sharp viewpoints can also become the opinion leader on certain media platform or in certain areas through public speech. The audiences receive information from different platforms and simultaneously promote the flow of contents. The circulation of media contents mainly rely upon the active participation of consumers. The process of incorporation takes place in the minds of consumers and is realized by social interactions (Henry, 2012, p. 31).

As content producers, the news audiences have abundant sources such as online materials and news events in daily life. They could bypass complicated reviews and examinations to directly connect with audience. This kind of “centerless” dissemination cannot guarantee a complete factual investigation, which could readily lead to misinformation. These information is usually fragmented, unstructured and unsystematic, only offering the partial truth which might sometimes cause misunderstandings. The lack of objectivity means that personal opinions and emotions may account for a majority of information, and the contents might be inflammatory and infectious, which make the audience easily concentrate on irrational opinions instead of the fact. Consequently, people will lose their attention, and public opinion may lose the original focus. The phenomenon “dissemination gap” is evident among news audience who also play the role of disseminators. The equality in technology has not brought about equality in discourse, and the distribution of KOLs (Key Opinon Leaders) greatly refelets social structure in the real world. It is extremely difficult for ordinary people to have strong communicative capacity and influence.

The Composition of News Audience's Media Literacy in the Era of Omnimedia

The Capacity of Choosing News Information

In an era that is full of excessive and mixed information, the news audience needs the capacity to select information that meets their own demands, including the capacity to search, select and use different media. First, news audience should have the ability to evaluate a medium and to understand basic situations and features of different media organizations, media products and contents' forms. Second, they could choose information in accordance with specific needs, such as the category of news contents, the form of intentional content and the degree of understanding. News contents' categories usually include politics, transportation, environment, culture, society, economy, education, international news and military. For serious news, professional media has the priority. As for soft news, it is necessary to remain vigilant to false information, some news released on search engines are unreliable, outdated and misleading. Intentional content forms usually include written reports, short videos, livestream and so on, and for obscure topics or relaxing reading experience, a visualized form such as short video or livestream, which might be preferable to improve understanding. If the audiences require holistic, continuous attention to a hot topic, it might be optimal to

choose new media. Additionally, the audience are suggested paying more attention to official media instead of grass-roots media. They should also read more in-depth reports rather than fragmentary information, which helps to lessen the chance of meeting fake news or rumors and the chance of being impacted by biases. It is also important to ensure the authenticity of all news information. In the actual process of news consumption, the audience could use the filtering function (i.e. search function or navigation bar) to improve search efficiency or take advantage of search tools in the vertical area to improve search accuracy. Sometimes authoritative media or KOLs also help the selection.

The Capacity to Decode News Information

The capacity to decode news information primarily refers to critical interpretation based upon personal knowledge. The audience should be able to discern different information and have a basic judgment like authenticity, thoroughness and professional level. If reverse interpretation happens, the audience could question. By the way of further search, the audience should be able to make further discernment and judgment before reassessing media information. The outcome of assessment would impact the audience's impression of this media and evaluation of the news consumption experience. Subsequently, it will affect their future contacts with the media. A prerequisite of the capacity to decode news is the capacity to choose news information. For instance, the authenticity of hot news could be estimated by comparing multiple professional media, or by using news verification websites and relevant tools. The objectivity of international news could be analyzed through comparisons between domestic media and foreign media. Doubts about professional information could be verified through the use of professional websites or books. Furthermore, highly professional and highly trustworthy media organizations, media products and experts could be regarded as supplementary sources of information

The Capacity to Code News Information

When we-media possesses the mass communication function, especially when its influence and dissemination exceed mass media, it should retain enough respect for its right of speech. Today, private sectors is becoming increasingly public. The boundary between private space and public space is becoming unclear. Excessive self-mumbling and private notes are broadcasted, which is meaningless and might bring about chaos in information distribution. In this regard, improving news information coding capacity is crucial to the healthy development of the media ecology. Some undesirable phenomena, including fake health information, rumors, immorality and so on, could be mitigated through self-governance of news information coding capacity. It needs attention that content producers should refrain from dispersing information that infringes on the privacy of others, should not fabricate facts, not publish false professional information, and should not publish overly extreme opinions. Before commenting on, people should evaluate and predict the possible outcome of speech, especially avoid violating the right of others. When sharing information, people should first make a critical analysis to ensure the authenticity of the information in case negative secondary transmission such as rumors and fake news. If a piece of news has been refuted as a rumor, people should explain and clarify this matter in time to avoid hurting others. All in all, the news audience should

remain prudent when having a voice, and insist on “triple controls” in the theory of Paul-Michel Foucault, which indicates internal control, external control and subjective control. In this way, the right of discourse is restricted by external factors like law, politics, society and ethics (Jean, 1997, p. 124).

The media literacy of the news audience has both an individual dimension and a collective dimension. Meanwhile, the literacy between subjects is primarily manifested in two aspects: In terms of specific news consumption behaviors, inter-subjectivity exists in the same interest of a topic, because different subjects coexist; as for the same subject, because it simultaneously plays triple roles, it will show a unified inter-subjectivity. No matter which role of the news audience play in the new media era, receiver, producer or disseminator, they are not isolated, because there will always be “others”. As a receiver, the audience might read others’ comments while browsing news. Such intense focus drives this news as a trending topic, subsequently it will become the news which most likely interests the audience. As a producer, an audience and other users discuss or supplement what they have known in the comments section, and publishing news on the internet makes that audience become a member of public journalists. As a disseminator, people choose the communication channel and communication methods based on the perception of their potential readers or audience. Consequently, they will disseminate different contents on different media platforms.

Self-restriction in media literacy impacts others’ information consumption and information production. The higher individual’s media literacy, the higher chances of healthy and normative communication in socialized media practice. In this way, it is more likely to positively reorient a public event, form positive public opinions and positive focus, and contribute to the establishment of consensus between subjects who are mainstreaming, healthy and diverse. The demand for a healthy media ecology will also be possible through such an interactive, identical inter-subjectivity

Improvement Strategies for Media Literacy of the News Audience in the Era of Omnimedia

The structure of public opinion is more complex in the era of omnimedia. Official opinions and public opinions might repel or resonate depending on the news event. The improvement of news audience’s media literacy is conducive to the diversity in viewpoints while minimizing the disparity between official opinions and public opinions. Additionally, it is favorable to effectively cut down media misconducts such as fake news. This project requires collective efforts from the government, media and schools. An environment with low barriers and high approachability, and in which the audiences are encouraged to learn by their own is supposed to be built to ensure a systematic and complete media literacy education. As a result, it will be possible to correspondingly renew and enhance the media literacy of the public in an era with rapid technological changes, which also lays a solid foundation for the sustainable development of media literacy.

The Government Strengthens Top-Level Designs and Makes Education and Regulations Progress at the Same Time

The role and the function of the government focus on the media and the public. While ensuring the

healthy and orderly development of the media ecology, the government also promotes media literacy education among the public.

First, make progress on the design and the implementation of media literacy education system. For special population such as the old, students and people living in remote regions, it requires respective educational system design and stronger cross-disciplinary collaborations during the process of reviewing, amending and updating media literacy education (Wang, 2015, p. 89). The views of scholars in journalism, communication and cultural research are important, and sociology, social psychology and political science could provide valuable insights into the aspects of information dissemination, dissemination effects and political bias. Meanwhile, experts in the fields of law, computer science and economics could offer professional opinions with regards to communication laws, Internet laws, digital technology theories and practices, and media management. These are all crucial components in the basic knowledge framework of media literacy.

Second, strengthen Internet media's legislation, law enforcement and Internet users' legal education. Online communication are virtual, anonymous and interactive, which increases some criminal activities that damage the online environment, for instance, rumors, vulgar even illegal messages. Only with forceful management and maintenance by rules and laws, the misconduct with feeble ethical restrictions could be mitigated. At present, the existing internet legislation in China includes Administrative Measures for Internet Information Services, Provisions for the Administration of Internet News Information Services and so on, which are still less systematic, of limited scope and have insufficient governance. Therefore, it requires full-spectrum management of the online environment, a holistic plan and top-level design, specification of illegal acts and intensifying the punishment for criminal behaviors that threaten the online media ecology. At the same time, the popularization of new media law should be disseminated through official media to raise the legal awareness of both media and the public.

Third, carry out the moral development for online media and users. It is feasible to set positive examples, amplify the influence, cultivate key opinion leaders on media platforms, and create online information and public opinion ecologies that are clear and positive. At the same time, pay close attention to existing key opinion leaders. It is necessary to ensure that large numbers of audience will not be misguided and that social stability will not be impacted due to their inappropriate values. Advocate a society that values proper morals and ethics through the support of promotional videos, television drama and other cultural products.

The Media Must Observe Ethics, Insist on Self-discipline and Guidance

Traditional media needs to uphold their own professional ethics and disciplines and build a positive information environment for audience, while, in accordance with their own resources, they should take charge of promotional and educational functions to some extent. Such efforts would not only help to alleviate misunderstandings in communication, but also aid the audience in improving their media literacy and in protecting news audience from fake news. Commercial media needs to find an appropriate equilibrium between technical rationality, humanistic care, economic returns and social interests. Then they utilize technical optimization to help audience free from information cocoons, so that the audience can see a more

real and more objective world.

Media needs to build a set of applicable rules for self-discipline. Based on different characteristics of different media, it needs objective and quantifiable indicators to formulate and define rules. Fake news, invasion of privacy and other problems, which severely annoy the audience, need attention. Media needs to improve fact verification mechanisms. For instance, the *New York Times* has set up the full-time position of “fact-checker” to its D.C. bureau and Facebook has applied OCR and machine learning to expand the scope of “fact-checking tools” to videos and photos. These examples prove that media still has a lot of room for improvement in terms of eradicating fake news.

Media could attract more participation by developing new products or organizing some activities. During the process of the interactions, it can help the audience to establish the knowledge of news and the perception about the value of news. In early 2018, BBC rolled out a game called iReporter. The player plays a journalist in the BBC news editing room. They “accomplish” their missions, including selecting a news topic and publishing the news on their own, with the absence of a chief editor. This game rates the player’s performance from three perspectives: news accuracy, clout and timeliness. Even this game represents realistic scenarios for the divisions of labor and cooperation, which enables the player to gain more understanding of news production, and raises people’s interest in journalism.

Media has the obligation to help the audience free from their information cocoons and provide coalescent opinions rather than single-minded and extreme viewpoints. This is how the media safeguards the public. Proposed by Eli Pariser in 2010, the concept of “filter bubble” refers to how highly homogeneous information under predictive algorithms hinders people from learning the real world (Roland, 2012). Algorithm-based pushes will pamper the audience by offering contents they are interested in and opinions that fit their points of view. Over the long term, the audience will lose the ability for critical thoughts and turns into what Herbert Marcuse called “one-dimension man” whose perceived world is much different from the real world. BuzzFeed unveiled the “Outside Your Bubble” function, which adds to many ideas and comments with different standpoints and from different platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Reddit at the bottom of hot articles. News aggregation websites in China should also set up corresponding artificial intervention to train algorithms, while utilizing humanistic care and human wisdom to bring high-quality experience to the audience.

Schools Innovate Educational Models Combining Both Knowledge and Experience

In terms of course content and teaching methods, schools should continually optimize curriculum designs based on existing resources and provide targeted training courses to fill the need for different proficiencies. IREX, a non-profit global development and education organization, implemented an L2D program (Learn to Discern) that focuses on educating the public on how to discern fake news and how to select and process news. The “Train the Trainers” model has trained more than 15,000 Ukrainian citizens in various age groups and with different professional backgrounds. Eighteen months after the completion of the training course, an investigation concluded that the experimental group that underwent the L2D regiment possessed stronger abilities in analyzing false information and better understandings about the

news and media environment. The impact of the course remained with the trainees for one year and a half, which indicates L2D is a particularly effective method (Mitchell, 2006, p. 7). For creative expressions that are leaned on the framework of art courses, such as the foundational training for narrative literature, schools could incorporate news media production experiences. Through utilizing learning and practice for fictional story narratives and real news compositions to allow students to obtain comprehensive knowledge about the production and the dissemination of news. One way to encourage students to partake in news media is to facilitate their critical thinking in the participation of the news media production (Gombrich, 2016, p. 152).

In terms of course length and teaching subject positioning, it is necessary to highlight the sustainability of curriculum and periodic attributes. Curriculum needs to make specific adjustments in accordance with students in different age brackets and the ever-shifting media environment. For 5th and 6th grades (ages 11 to 12), upon the foundation of teaching a series of creative production skill-sets, an Australian media literacy course granted students the chance to “consider the ethical behaviors and functions of community groups and organizations in the management of the acquisition of media artworks”. The term “media artwork” here has a broad definition and includes news reportage. In a French media literacy education system, students in lower grades are taught mainly using media texts in a visual arts course to hone their literacy in discerning and understanding media information. Students in middle grades need to gradually rely on reading books, periodicals and online information to analyze and understand the meanings that graphics and texts attempt to convey. Students in upper grades are required to possess rational critical ability, analyze the media themselves and the use of media languages, and ultimately improve their own self-development process through the employment of media technologies (Cartwright, 2013, p. 225). It can be seen that the capacity to choose news information, the capacity to understand, compare and analyze news information and the ability to produce news information are all involved throughout the curriculum system, which gradually progresses from easy to difficult tasks and in steps to aid students in building a complete and holistic media literacy knowledge and skill framework. Media literacy courses in China could take cues from these models based on actual situations.

The government, media and schools are the three main powers behind the development of media literacy education. Other than that, relevant social organizations, communities and families are also vital to overall progress. Based on their functions, social organizations could provide appropriate media literacy activities that cater to different groups like the elder, children and the disabled. Communities and families could regularly organize learning or activities, incorporating media literacy education into scenarios in daily life, which may lead to positive results. Only with mutual collaborations and assistance from different parties could a scientific and full-spectrum media literacy education network be created. Japan, a neighbor of China in the Eastern Asia cultural circle, in the 21st century has been endeavoring to establish a media literacy education and implement “Actor-Network” jointly comprised of departments from various levels of the Japanese government, non-governmental organizations, academia and the commercial sector (Norman, 2004, p. 104), of which NGOs (non-governmental organizations) function as the main entity, governmental organizations function as proponents, academia and the education domain provide theoretical and practical support, while the commercial sector cooperates, and all involved parties jointly promote the implementation

and development of media literacy education (Ching & Juroszek, 2016, p. 3). The news audience also needs to learn on their own in such a climate, bear social responsibility for the production and dissemination of news information in the digital world, and contribute wisdom and power conducive to a stable and harmonious media ecology, thus contributing to the optimization and improvement of media experiences.

The complexity of the era of omnimedia manifestes in the variety of media channels, the diversity of content producers and the role changes of news audiences after they are delegated the right of speech. The audience lives in an information environment with constant media production, hence it requires holistic literacy promotion, which is associated with every step of the information processing. Reliance on a certain or several types of capacities cannot effectively meet audience's media expectations, meanwhile it is also unable to realize the ideal communication effects. The news audience desire truthful information to satisfy their needs of eliminating the uncertainty about the real world. This purpose can only be effectively achieved if the audience possesses basic knowledge and foundational skills in every aspect, including the selection, the analysis and understanding of news and information. The entire media ecology will also be positively affected by the positive participation of news audience and acquire more sustainable force and vibrancy that will consequently nourish every individual.

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(Translator: Arthur; Editor: Fu Chun)

This paper has been translated and reprinted from *Chinese Editors Journal*, No. 8, 2019, pp. 15–26.