

## Viewing the Impact of Grassroots Culture on Media through “The Voice of China”: Postprint

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### Abstract

The Voice of China is a variety show launched by Zhejiang Satellite TV designed to help grassroots individuals realize their musical dreams. This genre of variety show undoubtedly exhibits the entertainment function of mass media to its fullest extent, presenting to the public the lighthearted and entertaining dimension of mass media through the appeal of grassroots auditions and by granting voting rights to audiences. Simultaneously, such programs may also impinge upon other essential functions of mass media, including information acquisition and dissemination, cultural transmission, and public opinion supervision. Consequently, mass media must place equal emphasis on constructive public opinion guidance while developing its entertainment functions.

### Full Text

#### The Impact of Grassroots Culture on Mass Media: A Case Study of *The Voice of China*

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### Abstract

*The Voice of China* is a variety show launched by Zhejiang Satellite TV to help grassroots individuals realize their musical dreams. This type of variety show undoubtedly showcases the entertainment function of mass media incisively and vividly, presenting the public with the relaxed and entertaining side of mass media through the affinity of grassroots auditions and by granting voting rights to audiences. Simultaneously, however, it may also impact other essential functions of mass media, such as information acquisition and transmission, cultural inheritance, and public opinion supervision. Mass media should therefore emphasize benign public opinion guidance while developing its entertainment function.

**Keywords:** *The Voice of China*; grassroots culture; entertainment function; public opinion guidance

## 1. The “Strong Momentum” of Grassroots Culture in the Early 21st Century

In China’s cultural domain, “grassroots” has been endowed with the meaning of “ordinary people at the grassroots level,” making grassroots culture synonymous with civilian culture and popular culture. Once integrated with television programming, grassroots culture has given rise to a distinctive genre of grassroots television shows. Unlike traditional high-quality programs featuring celebrities and professional artists as the main subjects, these programs center ordinary civilians as their protagonists, thereby more easily resonating with grassroots audiences and securing higher ratings.

Influenced by entertainment-oriented concepts, media grassroots culture centered on “reality talent shows” gradually gained prominence in the early 21st century, with such entertainment variety shows entering people’s daily lives. Beginning with *Super Girl* in 2004, a program fully produced by Hunan Satellite TV, this marked the creation of a new era for Chinese musical theater. The show’s ratings, advertising revenue, and social influence represented an epoch-making miracle in the history of Chinese television media. Following the success of *Super Girl*, various television stations rushed to emulate its format, leading to a proliferation of reality-based grassroots talent shows such as *Happy Boys*, *Dream China*, *My Style My Show*, and *The Voice of China*. These talent competitions demonstrated the diversified development of grassroots culture in television programming and multi-dimensional interaction, allowing ordinary audiences not only to appear on television but also to deeply participate in and disseminate grassroots culture. They embodied a cultural connotation of equality and self-expression, gradually paving the way for grassroots culture to exert its “strong momentum.”

## 2. Grassroots Culture in *The Voice of China*

Since its debut in 2012, *The Voice of China* has been a popular entertainment variety show broadcast on Zhejiang Satellite TV. The program engages renowned music masters who, through hands-on teaching practice, cultivate a group of grassroots amateurs with dreams and talent into gifted musicians under the spotlight, thereby leading the development of Chinese music. Four coaches conduct blind auditions based on their personal preferences, forming their own teams and conducting musical competitions within their respective groups. Through this format, the concept of “grassroots culture” gradually entered the audience’s field of vision.

In this talent show, the four music coaches face away from the stage during their initial evaluation of contestants, demonstrating that “voice” is their sole

criterion and that they pay no attention to the contestants' external appearance. This practice reinterprets and reconstructs the musical "signified." Simultaneously, the face-to-face dialogue between ordinary grassroots amateurs and excellent music teachers transforms the discourse structure of television reality shows. The participating grassroots contestants hold various identities in daily life—university students, full-time mothers with young children, ordinary migrant workers—and each contestant tells a personal story before performing, explaining their reasons for pursuing their musical stage dreams. *The Voice of China* strives to discover a new discursive power from the bottom layer, using inspirational stories of grassroots individuals pursuing musical dreams to move audiences, thereby transforming the narrative discourse of elite television into a foil for popular culture and enriching its modes of expression. Furthermore, the popularization of contestants' identities narrows the distance between the program and every viewer in real life.

### 3. Critical Reflections on the Entertainment Culture of *The Voice of China*

Entertainment talent shows like *The Voice of China* satisfy the primary demographic of grassroots citizens, fulfill the public's desire for participation, and remain closer to real life and ordinary people. However, in today's flourishing media entertainment environment, if mass media blindly caters to audience entertainment psychology and excessively pursues grassroots entertainment culture, it may bring many negative consequences.

The competition format of *The Voice of China* generally consists of five parts: coach selection, coach assessment, coach battles, peak night, and glory battle. All five segments employ a brutal elimination system, meaning that vocal strength alone is not the coaches' sole evaluation criterion. Instead, the emotional atmosphere gradually influences the scores given by the four music coaches, with sensationalism and overacting becoming commonplace. Mass media's excessive catering to audience entertainment needs prevents its other functions from being fully realized, leading to over-entertainment.

Secondly, the judging principles of the four music coaches gradually deviate from the program's original theme of "discovering talented grassroots musicians." The excessive insertion of contestants' life backgrounds and dream-chasing stories transforms what should be a rational and rigorous talent show into an entertainment program overloaded with sentimental elements. Moreover, the notion that the champion selection follows a "script" has slowly fermented online, indicating that the coaches' judging standards are gradually losing audience recognition and generating various speculations and doubts. Such performative and entertainment elements inevitably influence the thoughts and values of television audiences.

#### 4. The Impact of Grassroots Culture on Mass Media

Mass communication media refers to the intermediary between professional communicators and the public in the information dissemination process, encompassing machinery for copying and transmitting information, communication organizations, groups, and their publications, film and television programs, and radio broadcasts. Its functions include propaganda, news dissemination, public opinion supervision, practical functions, and cultural accumulation. Although the grassroots culture, entertainment value, and reality-based elements of reality talent shows like *The Voice of China* cater to popular tastes, everything has two sides. Excessive catering to audience psychology may cause mass communication media to forget its original intention in program production, creating a strong impact on society and the entire mass media industry.

##### (1) Excessive Grassroots Entertainment Content Misleading Audience Aesthetics

Grassroots culture has risen and gained widespread popularity because it satisfies the primary demographic of grassroots citizens, fulfills the public's desire for participation, and remains closer to real life and ordinary people. Furthermore, the market demand for entertainment variety shows like *The Voice of China* is reflected in audience requirements for entertainment program content. As living standards continuously improve, people's thirst for spiritual culture, particularly leisure and entertainment culture, grows increasingly strong. In today's environment, where life pace accelerates and life pressure intensifies, more people choose leisure culture for relaxation. *The Voice of China* satisfies the public's leisure and entertainment needs while the "grassroots nature" of contestants enables broad audiences to easily resonate with them, thereby providing spiritual comfort.

However, variety shows grounded in grassroots production have precisely seized viewers' desire for entertainment and relaxation, leading to a content production model of "view counts and popularity above all." Some programs even incorporate extremely boring and embarrassing jokes, forcing guests to pretend to catch the cues and artificially manufacturing comedic content. This causes mass media content to subtly implant vulgar and over-entertainment-oriented values into viewers' lives, misleading audience aesthetics and glorifying sensationalism.

##### (2) Grassroots Culture Programs' Impact on Mainstream Culture

The functions of mass communication media generally refer to social functions—that is, the role mass communication media plays in human social life. American political scientist and communication scholar Harold Lasswell proposed three macro-level functions of mass communication media in his essay "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society": environmental surveillance, coordination of response, and transmission of heritage. Later, American communication scholar Wilbur Schramm refined this understanding from a micro-level

perspective, arguing that mass media serves as a watchdog, awakens public attention, possesses persuasive decision-making functions, provides audiovisual education for socialization, and finally fulfills its entertainment function. This demonstrates that mass communication media's primary function is to disseminate society's core values and mainstream culture. China's core socialist values constitute the mainstream culture that mass communication media must transmit, providing standards for judging good and evil.

However, grassroots culture programs often prioritize impromptu entertainment effects for ratings and popularity, neglecting other functions of mass communication media and making entertainment their primary pursuit. As grassroots celebrities multiply and public understanding of grassroots culture deepens, some folk vocabulary becomes popular and spreads to audiences through mass media. Such grassroots culture programs lack diversified values and continuously transmit nutritionally deficient content, thereby impacting mainstream culture. Programs like *Sisters Who Make Waves* and *Call Me by Fire*, although entertainment variety shows, express core values beyond mere entertainment by simultaneously transmitting positive, inspirational mainstream core culture.

### **(3) Entertainment Culture Contributing to Media's Lack of Social Responsibility**

Because mass communication media possesses the socialization function of audiovisual education, grassroots culture in entertainment variety shows plays a significant role in society during its dissemination process. However, the "profit above all" core of many current variety shows seriously neglects social responsibility.

Today's entertainment industry increasingly exhibits bizarre phenomena and deep-seated problems. In the past, whether in film and television, crosstalk, or the era of popular Chinese songs, celebrities possessed solid skills and treated every work seriously to satisfy audiences. Now, the extent of manipulation in variety show production exceeds audience imagination. Previously, teleprompters were used only when forgetting lines, deviating from topics, encountering excessive script volume, or dealing with program accidents. However, in today's variety shows, we can clearly observe many guests staring intently at teleprompters during recording, directly reading complete scripts word for word. Additionally, an increasing number of talent shows feature coach voting predetermined by capital, with netizens even revealing that voting devices given to studio audiences in some programs are fake. Such fraudulent behavior in many talent shows, designed to create audience-attracting segments, reflects how entertainment culture contributes to media's lack of social responsibility and violates social justice.

## 5. Strategies for Promoting the Healthy Development of Grassroots Culture

### (1) Injecting Inspirational Core Values into Grassroots Culture

Amateur talent shows can incorporate more inspirational values to encourage audiences. For instance, in *Sisters Who Make Waves*, participants include actors, singers, and hosts. Some have remained obscure, others have experienced ups and downs with peaks and valleys, while still others are regular targets of online mockery. The program portrays them as ignoring these challenges and choosing to stand on stage with their heads held high. Grassroots entertainment culture is a bottom-level culture rooted in the people, and the people's love and affection for it is the purest. When producing grassroots talent shows, television stations must not forget to establish excellent images of grassroots people. When outstanding grassroots contestants step onto the stage of public opinion, their voices become more powerful, and their influence in spreading positive energy far exceeds that of media alone. Therefore, injecting inspirational core values into grassroots culture is essential.

### (2) Strengthening the Sense of Social Responsibility in Mass Media

Mass media possesses dual nature, with both facilitating and hindering effects. Its important function and social responsibility is to guide correct public opinion and social core values, and to correct unhealthy social trends through its dissemination power. However, many current talent shows, due to their extensive grassroots content and bottom-level material, have led to rapid format updates that increase watchability and affinity in the short term. Over time, television program formats have become increasingly similar with repetitive content. To boost ratings and popularity, production teams resort to unscrupulous means, adding sensational and vulgar content segments that dilute mass media's social responsibility. Under such circumstances, grassroots culture programs not only fail to fulfill their proper role and value but also cause young audiences to lose their moral bottom line and basic values in the carnival of grassroots culture and vulgar culture. Therefore, promoting the healthy development of grassroots culture requires strengthening mass media's sense of social responsibility.

### (3) Correctly Viewing the Impact of Grassroots Culture on Media

Beyond its entertainment function, mass media also serves supervision, coordination, and cultural inheritance roles. As a component of popular culture, grassroots culture must also disseminate positive power to avoid negative factors such as vulgarity and mediocrity arising from grassroots cultural spirit, thereby maximizing strengths and minimizing weaknesses. Since grassroots culture entered mass media, the ratings of such programs have significantly increased. While this has greatly impacted mass media, the diversified development and multi-dimensional interaction of grassroots culture programs have enabled ordinary audiences not only to appear on television but also to deeply participate in and

disseminate grassroots culture, demonstrating cultural connotations of equality and self-expression support. Therefore, television producers and audiences should correctly view the impact of grassroots culture on media, extracting the essence and discarding the dregs to enable excellent values to spread through mass media power while appropriately disseminating the relaxed entertainment aspect of grassroots culture.

*The Voice of China* is a variety show launched by Zhejiang Satellite TV to help grassroots individuals realize their musical dreams. This type of variety show undoubtedly showcases the entertainment function of mass media incisively and vividly, presenting the public with the relaxed and entertaining side of mass media through the affinity of grassroots auditions and by granting voting rights to audiences. While the original intention of grassroots talent shows was good—to select elites—they rapidly rose to prominence within a few short years, exerting serious influence on society. Due to ratings challenges and commercial temptations, mass media, which should serve as a platform for opinion guidance, has lost its proper responsibilities. Major stations compete fiercely, employing all possible means to push this “entertainment spectacle” to its peak and popular pinnacle. Mass media should emphasize benign public opinion guidance while developing its entertainment function. For grassroots entertainment culture, we must extract the essence and discard the dregs, enabling excellent values to spread through mass media power while appropriately disseminating the relaxed entertainment aspect of grassroots culture.

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