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Some Thoughts on Strengthening Media Journalism Ethics in the All-Media Era (Postprint)

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Abstract

With the advent of the omnimedia era and propelled by new technologies, news media have increasingly prioritized speed in dissemination while streamlining production workflows. In the scramble for “first” and “exclusive” coverage to capture audience attention, fake news has emerged with alarming frequency, thereby undermining media credibility. Consequently, both traditional and new media must emphasize the cultivation of journalistic ethics and cannot neglect the professional ethical baseline in pursuit of breaking news or sensationalist appeal. In this dazzling new media era where myriad distractions bewilder the eye, strengthening media journalistic ethics should become an industry-wide consensus and a principle of conscious adherence.

Full Text

Strengthening Media Ethics in the All-Media Era: A Preliminary Perspective

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Abstract: With the advent of the all-media era, new technologies have propelled news media to prioritize speed in dissemination and simplify production processes. In the race to secure “first” or “exclusive” reports and capture audience attention, false news emerges periodically, thereby undermining media credibility. Consequently, both traditional and new media must emphasize the construction of journalistic ethics and moral principles, refraining from sacrificing professional bottom lines in pursuit of scoops or sensational effects. In this dazzling new media age, strengthening media ethics should become a consensus and a consciously adhered-to principle within the industry.

Keywords: journalistic ethics; journalistic philosophy; professional bottom line; news order; all-media era

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In the Internet age, the daily deluge of information is overwhelming. To capture audience attention, both traditional and new media exhaust their creativity in producing compelling convergent news products. However, in this all-media era where everyone pursues speed and competes for viral content, some media outlets blindly chase novelty and speed, driven by commercial interests in their news dissemination activities, even violating basic professional ethics. This has led to repeated 乌龙 incidents and public opinion crises, casting doubt on media credibility.

In May 2021, China's hybrid rice expert Yuan Longping passed away suddenly. Ethics in journalism encompasses the value orientation, moral integrity, and daily behavioral norms of the news industry, media organizations, and practitioners throughout the news communication process [?]. The emergence of new Internet-based communication forms—including mobile livestreaming on platforms such as WeChat, client apps, Douyin, and Kuaishou, as well as audio-video and H5 products—has integrated television viewing, radio listening, and information browsing, transforming the media industry's original state and introducing new characteristics to the news communication field [?]. This was a deeply moving news event, yet certain media outlets, eager to break the exclusive story and disregarding official confirmation from family members, rushed to announce Yuan's death on new media platforms, causing a massive uproar. Subsequently, other media outlets investigated and clarified that Yuan was still undergoing emergency treatment, forcing the offending media to hastily apologize in an embarrassing retreat. Such reporting not only inflicted unwarranted emotional harm on the family but also prompted audiences to question the media's credibility—a truly losing proposition.

Statistics show that China's internet user population has exceeded one billion, with Internet penetration reaching 71.6%. People aptly describe cyberspace as a “second living environment.” Therefore, as technology advances rapidly, ideological control online must keep pace; otherwise, various problems will emerge. In this networked era, while media utilize cutting-edge Internet technology to produce better news products and deliver deeper news content to audiences, how can they avoid generating false information? How can they prevent journalistic accidents caused by inadequate gatekeeping? How can they fulfill their professional duty to “clarify fallacies” ? How can they balance social and economic benefits? These questions deserve in-depth research as important topics. The author believes that both traditional and new media must strengthen the ethical training of editorial staff, enhance public media literacy, foster reverence, maintain vigilance, uphold bottom lines, and consciously resist various erroneous trends, statements, and cognitions. Only then can they hold high the banner in the complex public opinion arena, sing the main melody, take the

initiative, and promote positive energy.

1. Strengthening Journalistic Ethics Requires Firmly Establishing a Marxist Journalistic Philosophy and Consolidating Ideological Bottom Lines

Every profession has its own ethical standards and bottom lines, and journalism is no exception. It can be said that the rise of new media has significantly increased the vibrancy of news communication but has also introduced new variables to the orderly development of the media industry. Propelled by new technologies, news communication emphasizes speed and simplified production processes, sometimes leading to cutthroat competition and disorderly news dissemination in the race for exclusives, thereby affecting media credibility. As a profession responsible for public opinion, the media industry must rely on both strict industry regulations and enhanced penalties for external management, and on the constraints of journalistic ethics to enable practitioners to exercise internal self-control, elevate their awareness of the industry's importance, and consolidate professional bottom lines at the root to prevent disorderly and anomalous news dissemination.

Whether new media or traditional media, as news media under Party leadership, the first step in strengthening journalistic ethics is to establish a correct journalistic philosophy and arm minds with Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. Party media bear the Party's surname; Party journalists should adhere to the Marxist journalistic philosophy. Especially in the all-media era, although the ways journalists report have changed significantly, fundamental education in journalistic philosophy cannot be neglected or ignored—it must be strengthened [?]. Any mainstream media organization must provide “Party lessons” when personnel first join. Systematic Party journalism theory and professional training should be conducted for practitioners in different positions to firmly establish Marxist journalistic philosophy among editorial, reporting, and broadcasting staff and instill the concept of “serving the people wholeheartedly,” laying a solid ideological foundation for guiding the entire process of editorial, reporting, and broadcasting. Particularly for mainstream media as the Party's primary public opinion front, they should consciously guide practitioners to prioritize Party spirit principles and correct political direction, making the promotion of the Party's propositions the primary task at all times. Simultaneously, they should unify Party spirit and people's nature, transforming the Party's theoretical lines and policies into the conscious actions of the people, and reflecting the most vivid grassroots deeds and typical experiences to cheer for economic and social development in the new era [?].

2. Strengthening Journalistic Ethics Requires Adhering to the Principle of “Facts First, News Second”

Media love to chase what’s new; novelty is a characteristic of news, and rapid reporting is the media’s responsibility. Particularly in the new media era, picking up a phone allows one to shoot a news story, edit, publish, and disseminate it from the scene. When encountering breaking events, media accelerate dissemination speed and even engage in self-hype. From a journalism studies perspective, this “speed” deviates from the fundamental concept of “facts first, news second.” In the rush for speed and scoops, some fail to verify information authenticity, leading to biased reporting that inevitably damages media image and credibility [?]. In the Internet age, media highly value interaction with audiences, and sometimes individual editorial staff add emotional commentary, resulting in many inappropriate statements online and even triggering unnecessary public opinion incidents.

In the all-media era, media reporting forms can be diverse, but respecting objective facts remains the lifeline of the journalistic profession. Online and offline consistency must be maintained, managed with a single standard. Each news dissemination both demonstrates media credibility and tests the communicator’s awareness of journalistic ethics [?]. Therefore, whether online or offline, media must verify and gatekeep news sources and facts at multiple levels before disseminating with rational judgment. Had media done so, the rushed reporting of Yuan Longping’s death mentioned at the beginning would not have escalated.

The new media era features increasingly complex public opinion fields with rapidly evolving situations, imposing stricter requirements on news propaganda work. Beyond following news communication laws, journalists must also adhere to professional ethics. The renowned journalist and scholar Shao Piaoping attached great importance to news authenticity, always “visiting the scene and observing meticulously” during interviews. He stated: “Everything must strive for the truth of the facts,” and always upheld “investigating facts without deceiving readers” as the primary principle of news reporting. Every journalist should learn from the professional spirit of veteran journalists, strengthen journalistic ethics construction, treat authenticity as the lifeline of news, carefully verify every piece of information—even a number, a quotation, a background material—avoid hearsay, imagination, inference, and embellishment, conduct interviews objectively and impartially, and communicate equally with every interviewee. Doing so would eliminate false news and prevent work errors. On the journey toward the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, as recorders and communicators of the “Chinese Dream,” journalists should even more strictly abide by journalistic ethics, resolutely resist various undesirable phenomena, and firmly grasp the main channels and positions of public opinion.

3. Strengthening Journalistic Ethics Requires Upholding a People-Centered Philosophy and Emphasizing Professional Ethics

One day several years ago, on a highway in Yingshang County, Anhui Province, a multi-vehicle pileup occurred due to heavy fog. This major traffic accident killed 18 people and injured 21 others that day. A journalist from Yingshang County Radio and Television Station rushed to the scene. While this was heartbreaking news, after completing the reporting task, instead of providing humane follow-up attention to the incident, the journalist actually posed for photos at the horrific accident site with a press card hanging around her neck, making a V-sign gesture, and posted it on Weibo to show off. Once this inappropriate behavior spread online, it quickly triggered public attention and heated discussion.

This malignant traffic accident caused by fog claimed multiple lives, bringing sudden disaster and grief to numerous families. Countless people surely viewed this news with heavy hearts. Whatever the journalist's mindset, she should not have used the accident scene as a backdrop for a smiling selfie with a victory gesture. Netizens felt angry and shocked, denouncing the journalist's behavior and questioning her journalistic ethics and social responsibility.

Journalistic ethics, derived from the "ethical guidelines" of the journalism profession, requires media practitioners to possess a strong moral sense and sense of responsibility, representing the concepts and public opinion constraints of what media "should do" in news activities [?]. Although she was a newcomer to journalism, smiling for selfies against a car crash backdrop while wearing a press card clearly exceeded public tolerance and violated the basic professional ethics of a journalist. After all, a journalist is not an ordinary person; the role involves serious topics of public communication. For audiences, failing to respect life or disregarding the dignity of life constitutes the most fundamental loss of journalistic ethics, let alone professional ethics.

On November 7, 2019, the Journalists Association revised the *Professional Ethics Code for Chinese Journalists*, which states: "Enhance social responsibility, strictly abide by moral and ethical bottom lines, and resolutely resist vulgar, mediocre, and pandering content." Journalistic ethics serve not only as an "action guide" for media practitioners but also as their "source of motivation" and "evaluation standard" in practice. With correct journalistic ethics rooted in their minds, media practitioners will not exhibit inappropriate behavior in public view; they will conduct interviews earnestly according to news communication laws, taking responsibility for every word they speak, every character they write, and every video they shoot; they will adhere to a people-centered work orientation, focusing more 篇幅 and camera lenses on the vibrant lives of ordinary people with warmth, paying attention to "beauty" rather than spreading "ugliness."

4. Strengthening Journalistic Ethics Requires Rationally Pursuing Click Rates and Enhancing News Quality

With the development of new Internet technologies, self-media has unconsciously become a massive industry, exploiting management blind spots to attract attention with false information, vulgar content, and private information that caters to audience curiosity, achieving considerable click rates in the short term but violating social morals and corrupting online culture. Over time, this will affect content productivity and creativity, ultimately losing influence and reputation among audiences.

Additionally, in actual news reporting, journalists face this phenomenon: their carefully produced news, recognized by industry peers, receives pitifully few clicks on new media platforms, while so-called “trivial matters” in people’s livelihood news get multiplied click rates. This creates a false impression that thematic reporting is too didactic and unpopular, and no amount of effort can generate clicks. To promote media convergence, some traditional media have even made click rates an important reference in evaluating editorial staff. Shallow interviews yield high income, while reports taking months to produce receive little online attention and become thankless tasks. This creates a vicious cycle where some editorial staff focus not on improving professional competence but on whether their work can generate clicks as the sole criterion for quality news.

In both scenarios, journalists fail to reflect on their professional standards, innovation capabilities, and story-mining abilities, leading to lifeless reporting or misguided directions that diminish influence. In fact, in recent years, many mainstream media have actively transformed news production models through new technologies. What remains unchanged is the pursuit of excellence in content production, consistently innovating to produce news products that satisfy both the Party and the people around the needs of the Party and the people. In today’s era of pan-entertainment, these media have held their ground, achieved innovation while maintaining integrity, served the overall situation, become a clear stream, and established a good media image.

For instance, in recent years, around the themes of “Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” and “Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of China,” many media conducted in-depth excavation. People’s Daily Online launched “70 Years, 70 Questions,” using ordinary people’s language to arouse audience interest, with video views reaching 230 million. Xinhua News Agency launched the 100-episode convergent media series “Red Treasures, Centennial Struggle,” showcasing the Party’s century-long journey, with total online readership reaching 5 billion, triggering continuous attention from many netizens.

This demonstrates that pursuing click rates should not be the root problem. Media practitioners should aim to achieve click rates reasonably, using this as motivation to continuously create more valuable news. “Reasonable” means, first, meeting the needs of the era by refining and enlivening thematic reporting

to resonate with audiences and encourage them to “follow the series.” Second, it means regularly going to the grassroots and the most vibrant front lines for interviews and training, personally experiencing different lives and events—only what moves oneself can move others. Third, it means writing news soaked with one’s own sweat and the hardworking sweat of ordinary people, using uniquely authentic and vivid stories to deeply move audiences into actively forwarding and disseminating the content.

5. Strengthening Journalistic Ethics Requires Prioritizing Social Benefits and Maintaining a Standardized News Order

The industry recognizes that news works possess commodity attributes reflected in their market information value. Historically, media have achieved commercial value by providing truthful, accurate, and independently-minded news products that generate influence, then seeking commercial market returns [?]. With the arrival of the all-media era, some new media have amplified the commodity attributes of news infinitely, chasing maximum commercial value for their platforms. Such behavior inevitably leads to vulgarization, monetization, and transactionalism, using commercial interests as the sole measurement standard while disregarding media’s social benefits. Whether traditional or new media, social benefits must always rank first; economic interests must never be pursued at the expense of social benefits.

An example may illustrate the necessity of emphasizing news social benefits. In late May 2021, a county in Gansu Province hosted the fourth Yellow River Stone Forest Mountain Marathon 100-kilometer cross-country race. About four hours into the race, extreme weather struck suddenly, killing 21 participants. The incident quickly fermented online, with countless people concerned about the cause and aftermath. The next day, relevant departments held a press conference where officials apologized to the public and victims’ families. However, that very evening, a television station actually rebroadcast footage from the opening ceremony showing many participants eager to compete, with peaceful and festive scenes. How could victims’ families and audiences feel about such images? Could their emotions withstand such footage? Netizens commented on the video link: “After the tragedy, you’re still broadcasting the opening? Is that appropriate?” “This is secondary harm to the families.” Subsequently, relevant departments responded that the TV station’s action was indeed inappropriate, but specific circumstances required further understanding with the station. The TV station claimed it was an automatic setting from the previous day that had been forgotten.

Regardless of explanations from relevant departments and the TV station, such dissemination is truly baffling. Media must not disseminate without bottom lines for commercial interests. Prioritizing economic benefits leads to amplifying news facts indiscriminately and spreading unnecessary facts, inevitably

affecting industry order and triggering public outrage. In other words, media practitioners must 严守职业伦理 regarding what should and should not be done or said in news communication, prioritize social benefits, and consciously maintain communication order.

The current media public opinion environment differs greatly from the past, highlighting the importance of journalistic ethics construction as a required course for media practitioners. Building a standardized journalistic ethics order represents the direction of effort for both media and practitioners. Currently, new media enjoys a “highlight moment,” but it is not a lawless area. Its freedom, randomness, and difficulty to control demonstrate the urgent need to strengthen and standardize journalistic ethics order construction in China’ s all-media era. Of course, constructing and implementing journalistic ethics order is not merely about establishing ethical norms for journalists; more importantly, it further clarifies media’ s social positioning [?].

In the Internet age, mainstream media are no longer the sole channel for news release, with many platforms capable of voicing opinions. Passersby at the scene can pull out their phones and become self-media. Therefore, being the first to release information is no longer media’ s primary responsibility. In this information-rich, rapidly disseminating all-media era, media must more strictly abide by journalistic ethics, avoid absurd incidents caused by competing with peers for time or with self-media for traffic, observe rules and maintain bottom lines, and speak out timely and effectively while promptly and accurately releasing authentic, authoritative information. They must consciously maintain news order and produce quality news content.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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