

The Study of the Influence of Social Media on Post-Truth Era

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ABSTRACT

With the development of network technology and information society, social media has become a popular platform that users in increasing numbers choose to use. As a new way of life, it changes the way people think and behave. Social media also continues to exert a greater influence. Therefore, this paper is based on the popularity and usage of social media in the current post-truth era, it aims to study the relationship between social media and the post-truth era, especially for news dissemination plus its impact on audiences. By discussing these questions to discover the problems of social media in the post-truth era, such as fake news, algorithmic influence and changes in audience psychology. Furthermore, proposing some optimization measures from three aspects of social media companies, traditional media and audiences, including technical measures, news production methods and user behaviors in order to create a more rational, professional and accurate information access platform for the audience.

Keywords: *Social media, Mews reality, Post-truth era, Optimization measures*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, social media is pervasive in people's lives. In recent years, 'post-truth' has become a key research concept in journalism and communication disciplines. Many scholars believe that the arrival of the post-truth era is closely related to the development of social media, which provides a platform for the occurrence of the post-truth phenomenon. How to face the phenomenon of post-truth and return to the truth has become a common problem faced by the whole society. This paper is based on a theoretical analysis category, it draws on the opinions of predecessors as arguments to analyze as well as come to research conclusions. What's more, it also summarizes the development of the current era, people can grasp the trend of the media and hope to guide readers in the direction by putting forward some suggestions. At the same time, it can provide scholars or researchers with ideas, inspiring them to conduct more in-depth research in the future.

2. INTRODUCTION TO THE POST-TRUTH ERA

The word "post-truth" has a long history, but it actually entered the public eye and began to attract widespread attention after it was selected as 'Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year' in 2016. It was defined as

resorting to emotions and personal beliefs that can influence public opinion more than objective facts[1].

According to the official statistics of Oxford Dictionaries, the use of "post-truth" in 2016 increased by about 2,000% compared with the previous year, which is closely related to two political events that occurred last year - the Brexit referendum and the US presidential election, they all imply the same logic: that is, after fact-checking at a later stage, it has been confirmed that there are completely or mostly false content, but the public has paid less attention to it. On the contrary, their understanding of political affairs is only based on their own feelings and judgment, the truth has far less influence on public opinion than the incited emotions. Then the outstanding performance of the truth is to put personal beliefs, emotions and positions before the truth. It is obvious that the public's emotional attention to the event exceeds the fact itself. As a result, the truth has clearly moved towards decline[2].

In short, post-truth was initially regarded as a political concept, mainly used in the political field of European and American countries. Later it gradually developed into the social field, especially in journalism with facts and truth as the fundamental principles, post-truth has begun to be associated with fake news, reverse news even online public opinion.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA

There are several versions of the definition of social media. Although they are expressed in different ways, they still share a common connotation. In fact, social media is not a completely new concept, it first appeared in an e-book called "What is Social Media" written by Anthony Mayfield in 2007. He defines social media as a new type of online media that gives users a great space for participation, with the characteristics of participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness[3].

With the development of new media technology, the forms and characteristics of social media will also change accordingly, so there will be a new understanding of the definition of social media. But no matter what, the biggest feature of social media is still giving everyone the ability to create and disseminate content[4]. On the one hand, it changes people's habits of contacting the media. On the other hand, it subverts the communication mode of traditional media.

3.1 The Current State of Social Media

There are two platforms called HootSuite and We Are Social. HootSuite is a social media management platform from Canada, which uses the algorithm developed by Klout to calculate the influence of the Internet to help companies classify their followers according to their influence on social networking sites so that companies and brands can have better communication with followers. The other one We Are Social is a global creative advertising agency driven by social media, it provides a full range of services based on unique insights into the online culture social, including marketing, creativity, media and technology.

They have released the Digital 2022: Another Year of Bumper Growth, which shows that the number of global social media users continues to grow at a faster rate than before the pandemic now, with nearly 13.5 new users per second. Driven by double-digit annual growth rates, there are 4.62 billion social media users around the world in January 2022. The current trends suggest this number will increase to 60% of the world's population in the coming months[5].

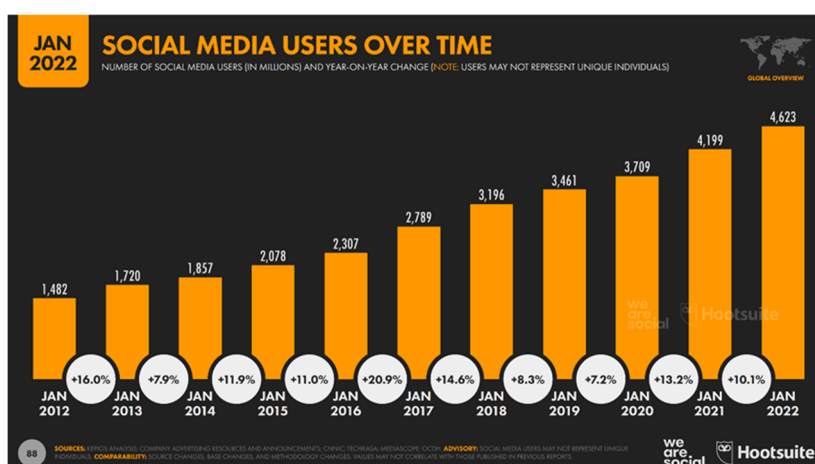


Figure 1 Social media users over time[5]

As can be seen from the data graph, the growth rate of users using social media continued to grow at a double-digit rate of 10.1% during the 12-month period from January 2021 to January 2022. Moreover, this growth rate is still at high levels before the pandemic. What's more, according to the latest data, 424 million users have started using social media in the past year, which is equivalent to

an average of more than 1 million new users per day, or an increase of approximately 13.5% per second.

Not only is social media used by a large number of users, but also social media accounts for the largest share of users' media time.

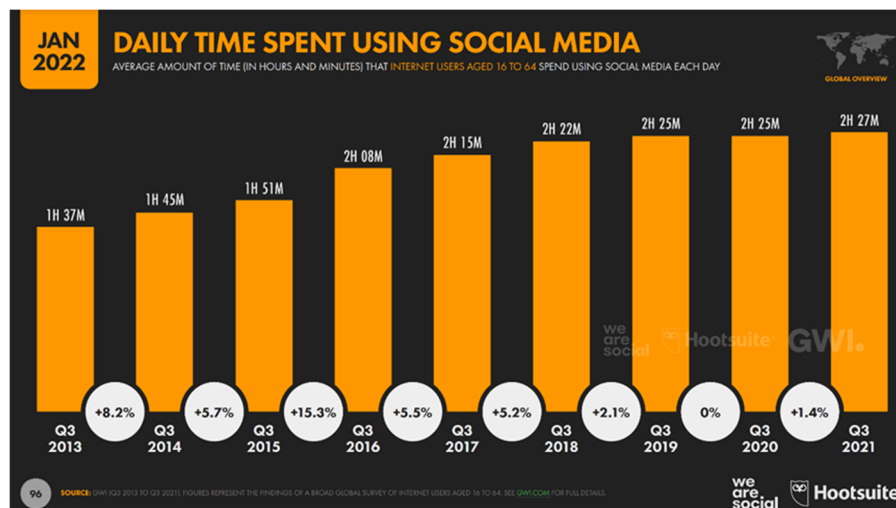


Figure 2 Daily time spent using social media[5]

According to the report, at an average of 2 hours and 27 minutes per day, social media accounts for the largest single share of our connected media time, at 35 percent of the total. There has also been a two-minute (+1.4 percent) increase in the number of time users spend on social media per day over the past year.

That is to say, there is little doubt that the age of social media has arrived.

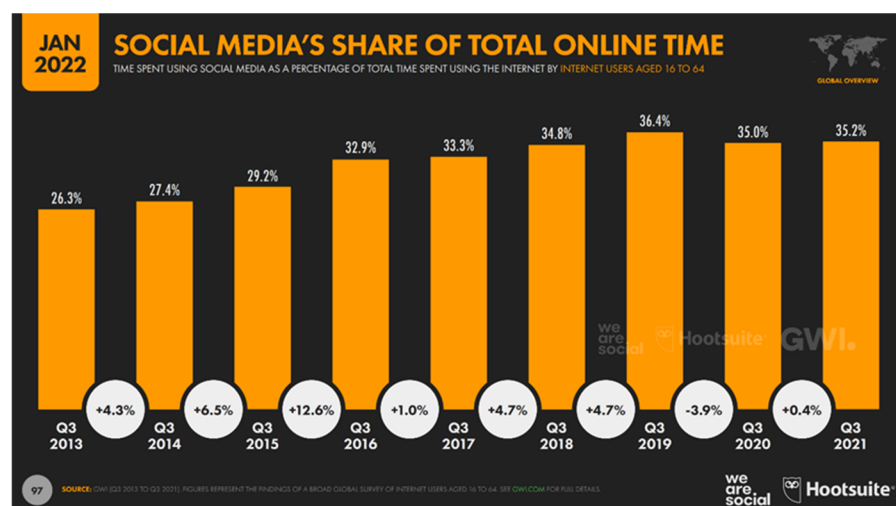


Figure 3 Social media's share of total online time[5]

3.2 The Impact of Social Media on Audiences

With the continuous development of Internet technology, from the era of print media to the era of electronic media, communication rights have been transferred, the network communication has also dispelled the traditional media-centered communication mode[6].

In addition, social media developed based on media technology breaks the temporal and spatial barriers between people. Besides, it provides convenient conditions for interaction between different times and spaces. Its appearance also changes the production,

acquisition and consumption of news information.

According to a survey report released by the Pew Research Center, which is an independent, non-advocacy polling organization in the United States. The Center provides information on issues, attitudes and trends that affect the United States even the world. Their report shows that social media and the official website of news organizations are almost tied as the most important way for people to obtain online news. Especially after the outbreak of the epidemic in 2020, the stickiness of social media users has further increased[7]. Take the development of social media in China as an example, from BBS forums to portal websites, to Weibo, WeChat, etc. These social media are constantly changing people's

social interaction behavior, producing and disseminating information content based on users' social relationships, which has brought a huge impact on traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television. Unlike the original way of receiving information, social media has become the primary source of news for many people.

4. RESEARCH ON THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POST-TRUTH PHENOMENON

4.1 The Unique Algorithmic Mechanisms of Social Media Exacerbated the Proliferation of Post-Truth

The algorithmic recommendation mechanisms that social platforms rely on have exacerbated the proliferation of post-truth. To enhance user stickiness, many Internet companies have adopted algorithmic recommendation mechanisms on their social media platforms, but the mechanism itself is being increasingly questioned. The so-called news pushed by the artificial intelligence system to the audience is selected based on what criteria and value judgments are selected. However, the public does not know the process, as well as the internal working mechanism of these systems is not transparent[8].

Although the technology company it belongs to has repeatedly claimed that this algorithmic mechanism is fair and impartial, it has always refused to disclose its operation process on the grounds of protecting trade secrets. In this way, the audience cannot know for sure whether these companies are affiliated with certain interest groups, the news that users can see through the platform is only part of the 'truth' that interest groups want them to see.

Under the recommendation of the algorithm mechanism, while continuously meeting the individual needs of the audience, the information cocoon is also constantly solidifying the audience's existing cognition, which can easily lead to the audience's cognitive bias and even irrationality. To be specific, information cocoons refer to the phenomenon that people's information field is habitually guided by their own interests, thus shackles their lives in a "cocoon room" like a silkworm cocoon[9]. While enhancing the efficiency of communication within the community, some people may escape from various contradictions in society then become isolated from the world. Consequently, communication between communities may not necessarily be smoother and more effective.

Besides, the audience is still in the "online community" formed by the Internet. They have been in a closed community for a long time either to accept information similar to their own views and positions or avoid contact with information that contradicts their own

views, resulting in a backfire effect. Over time, it is easy to bring about group polarization: the audience will be more attracted to exciting, emotional, subversive and dramatic events, but the truth gradually loses their attention[10].

4.2 Information Producers Who Are Not Responsible for Real News

First of all, the information producers of social media use Internet technology to capture what kind of information or news users browse every day and produce content that users are interested in. In the past, the traditional media has always created a media environment in which the viewpoints of all parties are balanced, it can put different viewpoints and positions in front of the public, thus establishing the objectivity of news information. Comparatively speaking, almost only one voice can be spread in the community.

Secondly, information producers use emotional expressions to attract audiences to read by stimulating the cerebral cortex of information receivers. Emotional expressions can not only trigger feedback from audiences but also be more easily spread on the Internet. Individuals or groups with the same opinions will hold a tight group and engage in 'scolding wars' with individuals or groups holding different or opposite opinions on social platforms such as Weibo. It can be seen that the public will be guided by emotions and then will not pay attention to the truth of events.

Finally, the platform needs to maintain its own operation through profit, but the audience's attention has become a scarce resource. Inevitably, the platform can only cater to the needs of the audience, produce information and news that the audience is interested in, even fabricate news facts to create fake news because every forwarding and reading can make them to gain economic benefits.

4.3 Users Who Become Emotional and Less Care about the Truth

Post-truth is not a change in the truth itself, but a change in the public's attitude towards the truth.

When a hot issue occurs, the public faces the problem of a lack of facts before the truth of the matter is fully revealed, personal subjective views take the first place. A community of public opinion is formed in emotional appeals, then it occurs after new facts appear turning. The excavation of the truth of the matter no longer attracts attention, the public continuously deduces and produces opinions on the basis of the only original information of the incident, even subjectively 'head canon' the truth of the matter, forming the transcendence of personal views. The phenomenon of the truth of the matter has led to the emergence of 'reverse news' and 'public opinion turning'.

In cyberspace, emotional expressions based on jokes and carnivals have increasingly become the way of discourse for most netizens, this non-serious language expression has brought irrational emotions to a certain extent. With the lack of rationality, the wanton words of netizens not only continue to fuel the fermentation of public opinion but promote the transformation and escalation of public opinion events. At the same time, the media ignores the truth of the incident and amplifies the emotional conflict, making the truth give way to the public's 'carnival', in the post-truth era, 'joking carnival' has gradually become a normalized manifestation of social public opinion.

The public seems to be more receptive to false information but has a flatter attitude towards the truth. They do not care what is the truth or what is false, but are more concerned about the emotional factors contained in the claims behind the information. Much more interesting, they are willing to be caught in the carnival of changing and restless emotions or positions. After the emotions that they want to express and vent are released, they no longer take into account the subsequent development of public opinion events. In the end, they leave the public opinion field one after another. The truth is no longer important to the users, the information that has the value of forwarding is more important. This means that truth is no longer just what people need, those few words that are mixed and sensationalized on the Internet can also meet their needs for sharing or commenting on social media[11].

5. OPTIMIZATION MEASURES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA

5.1 Social Media Companies that Are More Socially Responsible

The low threshold of social platforms is one of the reasons for the arrival of the post-truth era. Therefore, social platforms should not only pay attention to economic benefits, but also take into account social benefits, actively undertake social responsibilities, do not blindly cater to the bad demands of the market. Meanwhile, the platform can use high-end artificial intelligence technology to verify the authenticity of the news and prevent the spread of false news in time.

For instance, at the end of 2016, Facebook, which has repeatedly insisted that it is a technology company rather than a media, began to recruit a 'news director' under the pressure of public opinion, taking a crucial step towards dealing with post-truth. During the election, new media organizations such as Facebook and Google, which had an ambiguous attitude towards the proliferation of fake news, also launched a series of powerful measures, strengthening the verification of news authenticity by

improving algorithm design and strengthening manual monitoring[12]. The push of news has also injected the power of content production into traditional mainstream media.

5.2 More Involvement of Traditional Media with Fact-Checking

In today's emotional, fragmented and fast-food demand for information, traditional media should be more aware of the importance of professional in-depth reporting and investigative reporting[13].

From a technical point of view, new technologies such as mobile Internet, big data and cloud computing have been popularized in all aspects of traditional media news production. Intelligence has enhanced traditional media news reports, giving them a new meaning and connotation. The production brought many revolutionary changes, especially in the "post-truth" pervasive media environment, when some self-media fabricated and exaggerated all kinds of facts without limit, then spread them widely through new communication technologies. If traditional media can make full use of new technologies such as artificial intelligence writing, human-machine cooperation and human-machine symbiosis for news reporting, then not only the efficiency of news production will be greatly improved, but also the reliability of news will gradually increase.

Moreover, introducing factual reports into the professional news production process, collecting rich and detailed background information, carrying out effective data capture, in-depth on-the-spot investigations or interviews, writing faithfully to the facts, strict checks as well as news verification. Traditional media consistently sticking to these seemingly routine but easily discarded traditional professional news production models can greatly enhance the weight of facts.

5.3 Audiences with More Independent Thinking Ability

With the rapid development of new media, great changes have taken place in the media environment, but the audience has not yet acquired the survival ability to adapt to this complex information environment. The complexity of the media environment requires the audience to continuously improve the corresponding media judgment and enhance the media culture[14]. However, there is always a lack of educational mechanisms to equip the audience with corresponding media literacy in society. The audience itself lacks media literacy, lacks the ability to think rationally about events, and needs to improve the ability to critically understand information.

In conclusion, the audience should be more careful, cautious and critical. When they want to spread

information on social media, being a communicator should be rational and responsible, particularly when confronted with unverified news.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper mainly studies the impact of social media on the post-truth era by reviewing social media in the post-truth era, such as changes in where and how audiences get information, also their attitudes towards truth. Additionally, it can conclude the development of social media has exacerbated the phenomenon of the post-truth from the aspects of technology, communicators and audiences. More importantly, a number of optimization measures have been proposed for this situation in this paper. For example, improving algorithm design, sticking to the traditional news reporting mode, enhancing media literacy etc.

However, due to space control plus many circumstances involved, the paper still has room for refinement and improvement. What is written in the paper can sort out the influence of social media and news in the current post-truth era, then put forward some future optimization measures for better functioning of social media. It provides a reference value for future research. Researchers could focus more on the dissemination mechanisms of disinformation or fake news on social media in the post-truth era.

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