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A STUDY ON THE COMMUNICATION MECHANISM FOR PUBLISHING AND PRODUCING NEWS ON MOBILE DEVICES

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ABSTRACT - This study explores the communication mechanism for publishing and producing news through analyzingmediums such as Microblog, WeChat and, in particular, the mobile app, TouTiao. The results of this study show that the status and practice of professional journalism and gatekeepers are being phased out of news production. Adversely, algorithms and technology are taking their place at the center of the circle of news production.
Key words: Microblog. WeChat and TouTiao. Gatekeeper. Professional Journalism. Hyper commercialism.

UM ESTUDO SOBRE O FORMATO DE COMUNICAÇÃO DA PUBLICAÇÃO E PRODUÇÃO DE NOTÍCIAS EM DISPOSITIVOS MÓVEIS

RESUMO - O estudo explora o formato de comunicação da publicação e produção de notícias a partir de uma análise do Microblog, do WeChat, e principalmente do APP para dispositivos móveis TouTiao. O resultado deste estudo mostra que os posicionamentos e práticas do profissionalismo jornalístico e dos "gatekeepers" estão ausentes dos processos de produção de notícias. Por outro lado, o algoritmo e a tecnologia se posicionam no centro do círculo de produção noticiosa.
Palavras-chave: Microblog. WeChat e Tou Tiao. Gatekeeper. Profissionalismo Jornalístico. Super Comercialização.

EL ESTUDIO SOBRE EL MECANISMO DE COMUNICACIÓN DE LA PUBLICACIÓN Y LA PRODUCCIÓN DE NOTICIAS EN MEDIOS MÓVILES

RESUMEN - El estudio explora el mecanismo de comunicación de la publicación y producción de noticias, analizando el Microblog, WeChat y especialmente, el APP Móvil TouTiao. El resultado ha mostrado que las posiciones y las prácticas del profesionalismo de periodismo y los "gatekeeper" han desaparecido en los procesos de la producción de noticias. En cambio, el algoritmo y tecnología se han movido al centro del círculo de la producción de noticias.
Palabras clave: Microblog. WeChat y Tou Tiao. Gatekeeper. Profesionalismo del Periodismo. Súper Comercialismo.

Just like the rapidly changing developments in technology, the journalism industry has been undergoing some rapid changes of its own. Basically, the communication industry is going through a significant reshaping process in which traditional media organizations are being threatened by new media models. In particular, it is the original one-way mode of sender-to-receiver or producing-to-broadcasting facing unprecedented challenges. This technological transformation within news production is a dramatic one, and its results have had a profound impact on media and the inter-relationship between society, media, and media literacy. As a result, the gatekeeper role has also experienced some changes as pertaining to the communication process, particularly for controlling the news in the social system. The conventional concept of professional journalism has not changed much in terms of the regulatory process involved in news production.

1. The "de-professionalization" of new media: algorithm analysis

The communication mode of MW&T (Microblog, WeChat and Toutiao)[1] is a growing concern in China. Microblog is a kind of social network, with a special communication mode that includes reposting, reviewing, replying, "private" messages, and an open communication mechanism; it is known as the 'public meeting house'. The mobile message app, WeChat, creates public accounts to push feeds to subscribers and gather information. WeChat has developed communication modes which are increasingly multi-faceted, including one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many. Compared to the weaker Microblog networks, WeChat relies on real world acquaintances and, therefore, the number of its subscribers is limited.

The 'T' in MW&T refers to Toutiao (*Today's Headlines*)[2]. This app gathers information from social networks and many websites, and then uses algorithms to generate the hot topics to users. The algorithm is the foundation of Toutiao. It first collects a vast amount of information. Data processing is used to select the newsworthy bits of information, according to user demand. Second, it performs a simultaneous analysis on user statistics such as skimming, collecting, reposting and reviewing, and on user models according to reading habits, time, location, and so on, all of which offer more quality news[3]. What makes Toutiao different from Microblog is that it feeds the users with the news they are searching for. In big data technology, credibility and objectiveness in producing news is free from any gatekeeper interference, and at the same time, the media loses some of its dominance in agenda setting. Thus, the traditional mode of communication becomes significantly altered.

Citizen journalism, as in the case of Microblog and WeChat, is seen as a great evolution. Toutiao shifts the center of journalism from the content producer to the audience, who obtain information

independently by putting citizens in the position of being the communicators. Thus, coupled with technology, an audience-centered theory of communication is possible.

2. The gatekeeper transformation: from critical thinking to technological dependence

The gatekeeping theory was first defined by American communication scholar, Kurt Lewin. His student, David White, further introduced the theory into the study of communication in order to examine how a 'gatekeeper' examines his or her 'gate' within a channel of mass communication. As one of the founding theories in communication studies, gatekeeping is widely applicable throughout journalism. The emergence of MW&T in China changed the structure of gatekeeping from manual selection to automatic selection. Additionally, the strength of visible gatekeeping (by us) is decreasing. Through structural transformation, the current communication model has integrated such a change as part of the current communication paradigm.

2.1. Traditional gatekeeping

Gatekeepers have a role in almost every aspect of journalism's traditional producing and disseminating process. Some stories are private; they exclude outsiders from knowing what has happened. Once a story has been selected for professional news production, the source will be private and testimonial. According to the regulations of journalism, the source is the key to judging the credibility and objectivity of a report. There are always subtle differences between the news and the facts. Even though sources may have experienced the whole event, the news could be presented differently according to various beliefs, values and mindsets these sources might hold. They reconstruct the stories from memory, and relate these memories to journalists. The information is produced by transferring their memories to signals, which are actually reflections of reality. Even with all their professional tools, journalists can't completely avoid selecting information and portraying the message without considering the source's personal expectation and attitude. Editors, working in the final stage of news production, are the ones who decide what the audience will or will not read. Therefore, the facts are repeatedly given and selected through every step of the production process. Editorial decisions are made in every one of these steps to exclude some messages; decisions which may be influenced by culture, ideology, professionalism, government policies, and the regulation of media organizations. It is difficult to trace the selecting pattern as the criteria for selection may vary for different journalists. It is for this reason that 'what really happened' and 'what is shown as news' becomes a complex phenomenon of gatekeeping (see Model 1).

Model 1- The dotted rectangles represent the 'gatekeeping box' in the news production process
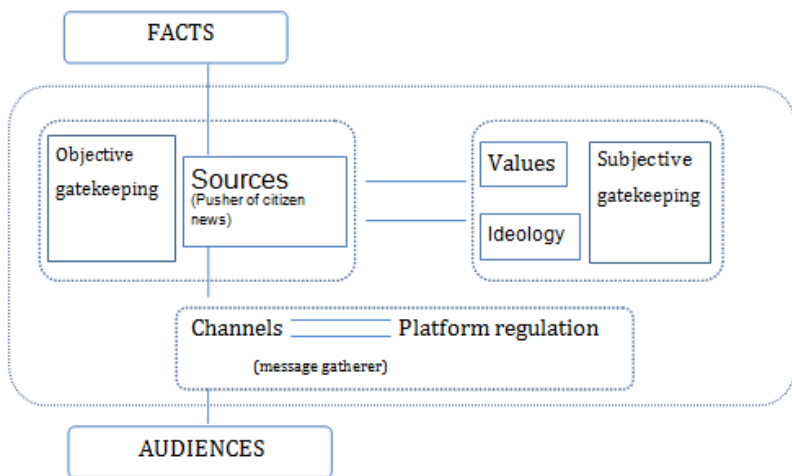

2.2. Gatekeeping in Audience-Involved News

Citizen journalism has dramatically changed not only the production of news, but also gatekeeping. Microblog's popularity is a symbol of the growth of citizen journalism, and the widespread use of WeChat is a milestone in the improvement of public opinion. Citizen news involves a complete cycle of news production and it also plays an important role in conventional news production. Microblog, on the other hand, gets some of its messages from sources which are collected by news gatherers. Those messages might then become the ideas for a story or topics to cover. Furthermore, a large number of individuals are able to reproduce their opinions and regenerate some of the topics as a new agenda, the same way that journalism does in society.

In an age where everyone can be a reporter, there are no restrictions on how information is delivered. Sources post 'raw messages' on the Internet and target audiences read the news without traditional gatekeeping. The newsworthy stories are therefore dependent on the source, meaning this becomes the only standard for gatekeeping. The self-regulation of social networks or apps on the Internet is another kind of gatekeeper. However, regulation is primarily for maintaining the order of the platform and assuring profits. Obviously, gatekeeping has shifted from content to channel, where the news gate is guided by the particular culture and ideology of an audience and professional journalism and media regulations become a secondary consideration (as in Model 2). Microblog is an example of this model.

Model 2- The dotted rectangle is the 'gatekeeping box' in the news production process
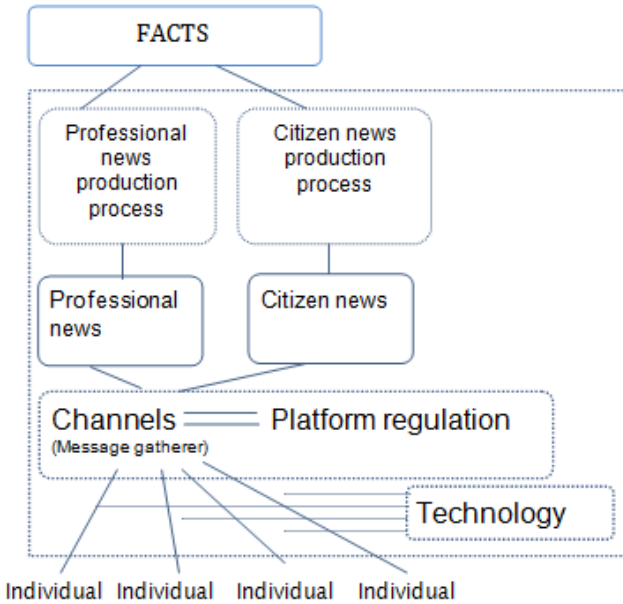

2.3. Gatekeeping for personalized tech-based news

Personalized tech-based news is not a part of the news production process, but rather an evolution of the communication mode. It is produced by a set of complex computer algorithms that detect user reading patterns. A data bank is created for the user reading patterns and is then used to push personalized news to an individual reader. "The algorithm contains millions of dimensions similar to an x and y axis in the recommendation model, including invisible and visible topics and labels. More often, factors such as popularity, content, nature, location, time and previous reading are taken into consideration" (ZHENG, 2014, p. A8). Toutiao is a pioneer in the Chinese communication model. It is a personalized news app which is appealing to many Chinese application companies, such as Baidu news and Souhu news, which have already adopted the model. Personalized tech-based apps are super news gatherers that have a stronger demand for information than Microblog and WeChat.

Regarded as a revolution, the personalized tech-based news apps pay more attention to individual users and the dynamic of supply and demand rather than procedures specifically set by certain content producers. In terms of news production, both traditional news and citizen news use the personalized apps, so that data gathered by apps are produced after divergence of gatekeeping. Since it is the individual user rather than the professional journalist, who sets the standard of gatekeeping in news reporting, the apps are primarily tailored toward user preference. The personalized content approach predicts user reading patterns by comparing them to previous reading records. This pattern allows for tailor-made news to be pushed to a particular group of users who might be interested in those messages (see model 3).

Model 3

When compared to the traditional 'one-to-many' communication model, the new model forms a two-pronged flow of information. The 'divide-combine-divide' stage optimizes efficient communication and information integration. The free market economy requires resources to be distributed according to the market's forces of supply and demand. Thus, a two-pronged information flow coincides with the news product under market principles. Different from the traditional model, personalized tech-based news reports have become a product of commercialism. Both contents and technologies are used for the primary goal of gaining profits. To a certain extent, the growth of commercialism has helped towards the decline of conventional professional journalism.
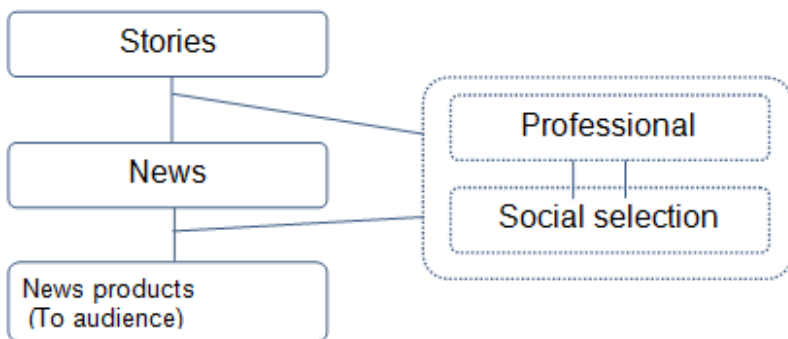
3. The decline of traditional professional journalism

What is professional journalism? There are a considerable number of academic studies on the subject. However, its definition in different contexts is still a bit ambiguous. Lu and Pan (2002) state that the salient aspect of professional Western journalism is based on the basic principle that the media should serve the public, and not economic and political interests. Journalists should be observers of social reality instead of working for some economic or political groups. Journalists are gatekeepers who represent the ideas of the mainstream middle class, and don't take any given ideology for granted. They use their professional criteria to make judgments that

should not be entangled with political and economic powers. They should not be forced to represent those who are above the law and those professional communities which are immune from the control of authorities. (YE&LU, 2002). In practice, the principles of news, including credibility, objectivity, proximity, timeliness and meaning, are the criteria for professional journalism that take it from a theory and make it into a practice.
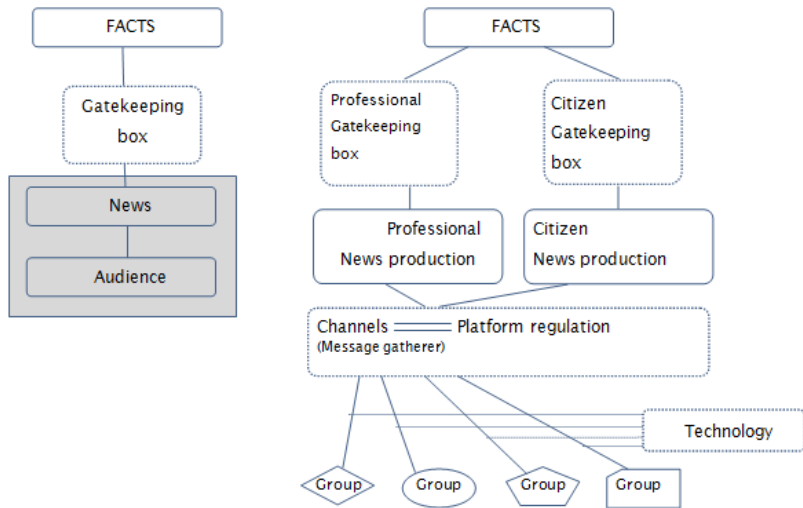
The criteria itself is derived from commercialism. For newspapers, it is the elite class that dominates the media's agenda. In print and electronic media, the content is limited, so the ruling class uses their political and commercial power to control the media. Those controllable channels, as a constant of news production, had been representative of Chinese journalism for a long time. Economic and political powers play an important role in forming the founding principles of professional journalism today. Professional selection (regulation of the principle of news) and social control selection (culture and ideology) make up the information selection process, which manifests the dominance of the elite class in professional journalism. (see Model 4).

Model 4- gatekeeping in traditional professional journalism

The widespread and rapid development of technology has removed the restrictions attached to communication channels and, as a result, the discourse power of the dominant elite class is threatened. At the same time, the criteria of professional journalism have also been affected. Consequently, channels have become an integral factor in forming a new model of journalism. The principles of traditional professional journalism are quickly disappearing in the context of uneven channels. The socialization of media technology is the outcome of modern commercialism. Advances in technology reflect the continual growth of efficient production, even though its prime purpose is not to empower citizens with rights. The new principle is set in more of a grassroots medium. It is also an alternative version of discourse power coupled with modern commercialism. The technology gatekeeper is temporarily controlled by the power of the market, by hyper commercialism.

Traditional professional journalism interferes somewhat with the development of the public sphere. The gatekeeper naturally shifts from organizations to individuals in such a way that it noticeably disappears from the public sphere. Traditional mainstream media lose their dominance in agenda setting. Consequently, the agenda setting is commercialized in traditional media organizations so as to survive in the free market. MW&T provide a platform for the public sphere, where a wide range of voices can be supported due to the low barrier of entry. However, the public sphere requires collaborative works from both public subjectivity and public agenda setting. As a personalized tech-based application, Toutiao gives the public the power, whose browsing histories remain on the Internet. The impact of technology, the knowledge acquired, values and ideology are all determining parameters that designate agenda setting to audiences, audiences that would gain more political power through citizen agenda. Accordingly, this technological public sphere excludes audiences who are not concerned with the reporting topics. (Model 5-1 and Model 5-2).

Model 5-1: the grey rectangle is the traditional public sphere

Model 5-2: the different geometric shapes represent different classification groups

CONCLUSION

Looking back we can see that economic and political powers are influential in the shaping of current professional journalism. Tech-based commercialism is without a doubt the determining parameter for the MW&T model in China. The globalization era means the emergence of a Toutiao-style communication model is foreseeable. However, in a Chinese context, public opinions are curbed because the public is not capable of thinking critically about some issues, and the external forces of forming a rational public sphere is not adequate for them to do so. What is even more important is that most of the voices are mere expressions of anger. Is the public really capable of setting the media agenda the way they would like it to be? To what extent does tracking internet browsing histories reflect the de facto mentality of the public? By taking all of these questions into consideration, it is unlikely to justify the agenda setting under the Chinese context. Nowadays, journalism supported by commercialism is challenging the field of academic discussions. It deserves future exploration.

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NOTES

1   MW&T is the abbreviation for the Sina Microblog, Tencent WeChat and Toutiao app, which forms a new communication mode/group in China, MW stands for Microblog, WeChat, and T stands for Toutiao.

2   Toutiao is a recommendation app created by Zhang Yiming in March 2012. As of March 2015, it has over 2,400 million total users, and over 20 million daily users. The above data is based on the introduction on the Toutiao website. Sep 18, 2015

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