

Deconstruction and Reconstruction: Defining New Yellow Journalism in the New Media Era from the Perspective of News Elements

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Abstract. Since April 12, 2024, when People’s Daily published the article “The ‘Qin Lang Lost Homework’ Incident Is Fabricated, Influencer Apologizes! The Proliferation of New Yellow Journalism Is Dangerous” in response to the viral online topic “Qin Lang Losing Homework in Paris,” the term “new yellow journalism” has entered the public discourse. There is now a general consensus in academia regarding the definition of new yellow journalism, but discussions in the field of news elements remain incomplete. Most research focuses on the impact of news values on newsworthiness from a realistic perspective, and Western studies on new yellow journalism are limited to political aspects and do not delve into its effects on public life. This article, based on the perspective of news elements, distinguishes the term “new yellow journalism” from “yellow journalism” and “tabloid or sensational news,” analyzing its defining features and attempting to explain the characteristics of this journalistic phenomenon that emerged in a specific period.

Keywords: New Yellow Journalism, News Elements, New Media Era

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of online new media in the 21st century, there has been a significant shift in the way the public acquires social information. The popularity and optimization of the internet, mobile phones, and online media platforms have greatly catered to the public’s increasing demand for timely information. At the same time, factors such as delays in platform content review have led to a strong public attraction toward seemingly casual videos created and shared by citizens. These “accidental” videos, which capture everyday moments, are particularly popular due to their ease of creation, relatability, and high shareability. They are especially prone to garnering likes and views on short video and social media platforms. Professional self-media studios or internet companies, aiming to cater to market demand, have begun creating scripts to meet this trend. The context in which new yellow journalism emerges bears similarities to traditional yellow journalism in that, in the current era of short video platforms, the way people acquire information has undergone a marked change, and the efficiency with which they obtain information is far greater than in the past. Scholar Zhou Lijun has argued that phenomena such as clickbait headlines, vulgar content, plagiarism of original works, and false advertising are all manifestations of contemporary online yellow journalism [1].

As of now, research on new yellow journalism in China has largely focused on its disruption of journalistic values and its impact on the public trust system within Chinese internet users. Studies on the differences between new yellow journalism and traditional yellow journalism have mainly centered around their definitions. With the development of new media, the scope of new yellow journalism has gradually shifted, evolving from an alternative form of “tabloid journalism” into an independent variant of journalism. Therefore, this paper moves beyond political domains and news values, seeking to clarify the similarities and differences between new yellow journalism and traditional yellow journalism in the Chinese context from the perspective of news elements. By incorporating specific case studies, this article aims to define the forms and types of new yellow journalism and analyze the transmission characteristics of this phenomenon in the present day [2].

2. Similarities and Differences Between New Yellow Journalism and Traditional Yellow Journalism

Currently, there has been little in-depth research in Chinese academia on the similarities and differences between new yellow journalism and traditional yellow journalism from the perspective of news elements. Scholar Xu Xu, in his article “Basic Characteristics, Deep Logic, and Response Strategies of New Yellow Journalism,” points out that “new yellow journalism” refers to the resurgence of “yellow journalism” in the new media era through forms such as videos. Scholar Dong Shuwei, in her paper “Research on Strategies to Curb the Proliferation of New Yellow Journalism on Short Video Platforms,” mentions: “It is not difficult to observe that the new yellow journalism that has emerged on short video platforms today shares fundamental similarities with the American ‘yellow journalism,’ namely its purpose of attracting attention to gain more profit.” The author believes that comparing the similarities and differences between the new and old forms of yellow journalism should begin with an examination of their respective origins and definitions, followed by an analysis of their differences based on news elements.

Yellow journalism originated in the United States in the 19th century. In this social context, the news media industry faced significant technological advances and major social and economic changes. Urbanization and industrialization accelerated, and the accumulated social problems and economic drawbacks of the time led to a period of widespread sensationalism and fake news. American journalism professors Emery and his son provided a fairly accurate definition of yellow journalism: “At its worst, yellow journalism is a soulless form of new-style news” [3]. “Yellow journalism reporters, while claiming to care about the ‘people,’ fill the news channels through which ordinary people obtain information with shocking, flashy, and sensational stories, turning serious issues into cheap melodramas and transforming news into something best shouted by newsboys” [4].

New yellow journalism, as a new video creation mode, has formed a trend that sweeps through the current short video environment. Many video creators deceive their audiences by producing content that is partially true and partially fabricated, presenting the unusual events they experience from the perspective of an “on-the-scene” witness. In summary, there is a general consensus in both academic and social circles regarding the basic characteristics of “new yellow journalism”: first, the absence of key news elements; second, the use of sensational and exaggerated techniques; and third, the content is shallow and vulgar. Some scholars have also pointed out that new yellow journalism short videos often use large, bold yellow titles and exaggerated fonts. However, these stylistic choices are influenced by factors such as video editing software and the limitations of vertical and horizontal video formats. Many mainstream media outlets also adopt similar formats when publishing serious news on online platforms. Therefore, the key to determining whether content qualifies as “new yellow journalism” still lies in its treatment of news elements, news values, and journalistic methods.

2.1. Diverging Paths in the Midst of Change: The Shared Choice Faced by New and Old Yellow Journalism in the Face of Changes in Communication Methods

Both new and old yellow journalism emerged during periods of transformation in communication methods. In the late 19th century, the news media industry faced significant technological advancements and major social and economic changes. Urbanization and industrialization accelerated, and the accumulated social problems and economic drawbacks exploded, leading to a period of widespread sensationalism and fake news. Against this backdrop, the competition between William Randolph Hearst’s New York Journal and Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World, particularly their rivalry over the humorous comic strip “The Hogan’s Alley” featuring a character known as the “Yellow Kid,” led to the popularization of the term “yellow journalism.” According to Baidu Baike’s etymology entry, the term “new yellow journalism” first appeared in the article “Algorithms Are Killing News, But a Billion Chinese Netizens Are Celebrating” by the author “Chaiping.” It is characterized by low-resolution images, a strong cyber-patina aesthetic, highly uniform formatting, and covers with yellow backgrounds and black text or hollow red slogans, resembling small ads painted on walls. Content-wise, these articles are often short and empty, lacking meaning or substance, with some even presenting disorienting or reversed timelines, leaving readers confused. A distinctive feature of such news is that the creators often mockingly state, “I thought it was interesting at the time, so I just shot it casually, never expecting it to go viral.” The widespread appearance of new yellow journalism came to the public’s attention with the numerous reports published by official media outlets such as People’s Daily around April 12, 2024, concerning the incident of “Qin Lang Losing Homework in Paris.” The reports clearly warned against the proliferation of this type of new yellow journalism. Since then, its popularity on major search engines and social media platforms has skyrocketed, making it a hot topic in the field of research on the changing reporting methods in the development of new media.

According to data from QuestMobile, in March 2024, the number of active mobile internet users in China reached 1.232 billion, a year-on-year increase of over 20 million; meanwhile, traffic for mini-programs on platforms such as WeChat, Alipay, Baidu, and Douyin reached 945 million, 648 million, 389 million, and 232 million, respectively [5]. It is clear that with the popularization of mobile internet and the development of social media platform apps, both new and old yellow journalism have emerged in an era of significant changes in communication methods, with a growing audience and increasing competitive pressure. In this context, both forms of yellow journalism have attempted to break free from the homogeneous and highly competitive environment by sacrificing authenticity—through stylized storytelling or altering the content of reports—to stand out.

2.2. Diversified Communication: The Mass Participation Short Video Communication Model

The news industry has gradually evolved from its early days of printed street tabloids with fragmented forms of communication to the current mass media era, where everyone can raise their voice in front of the same electronic screen. What was once the domain of official authoritative media has shifted to a time when people from all walks of life can pick up their phones and act as broadcasters. Public focus has gradually shifted from high-level institutions to more everyday, lifestyle-oriented content, with the influence of political news increasingly being replaced by more relatable reporting.

According to the Sina Weibo Data Center's 2023 Weibo User Development Report, as of the third quarter of 2023, Weibo's monthly active users reached 605 million, with users aged 16 to 22 accounting for more than 130 million. Most of Weibo's users are young people, with terms such as "college entrance exam," "Zibo barbecue," and "special forces college students"—topics closely related to daily life—attracting high levels of attention, likes, and views. Due to the immediacy and low entry barriers of emerging new media platforms like Weibo and Douyin, many social hotspot events are rapidly disseminated and further amplified on these platforms, sparking wide discussions among netizens. In this youth-dominated environment, topics related to campus life, local trends, and everyday occurrences have gone viral across major social media platforms, with various video creators establishing themselves in these subject areas and gaining substantial audience followings.

The cost of information dissemination and access has drastically decreased. In this context, some within the new media industry have realized that the public is fascinated by a creative form that is "rooted in life but distinct from life." These videos often target specific groups, presenting rare real-life events through dramatized portrayals to attract massive attention, creating a "viral" phenomenon. The sensational nature of "yellow journalism" caters to the tastes of many readers, bringing enormous profits to newspapers. Against this backdrop, major newspapers began to imitate each other, competing for readers with increasingly exaggerated headlines and provocative content. "In the past, the power and technology of information dissemination were controlled by professional media. Therefore, the process of selecting topics, interviewing, editing, and distributing news required a certain production cycle, along with professional equipment and skilled personnel. Today, in the internet era, a single mobile phone can complete the entire information dissemination chain. With the help of user-friendly editing software and a variety of video effects, everyone can now quickly create short videos, taking control of both the initiative in information dissemination and the ability to choose what information they receive. Everyone can become a publisher and spreader of information." Additionally, we can observe that the subject of new yellow journalism has undergone a transformation. What was once a one-way dissemination process has now shifted to a diversified, interactive communication model. The young "Generation Z" has picked up their phones and actively participated in mass communication, delivering a profound impact on the traditional media industry.

3. The Characteristics of New Yellow Journalism in the Context of New Media Compared to Scandalous News

Scholars Zhou Guangming and Yao Jinnan, in their article "The Introduction and Evolution of the Concept of Yellow Journalism," make a conceptual distinction between yellow journalism, scandalous news, and tabloid journalism. The article points out that both yellow journalism and tabloid journalism contain certain obscene and sensational content. Due to differences in the context of dissemination, the meaning of "yellow" in Chinese yellow journalism differs from the American "yellow news." As an imported term, yellow journalism in China has developed connotations related to pornography. In the current new media environment, the concepts of new yellow journalism, tabloid journalism, and scandalous news have become increasingly blurred. This paper will begin by analyzing the differences between new yellow journalism and the other two from the perspective of news elements, further explaining the current development of new yellow journalism in the context of new media.

3.1. Fictional Reality: The Breakthrough Path of New Yellow Journalism

The greatest difference between new yellow journalism and tabloid or scandalous news is that tabloid and scandalous news focus on the strange or lesser-known stories of celebrities, aiming to expose private or bizarre events involving well-known public figures. The definition of scandalous news in the Chinese National Dictionary of Chinese Studies refers to news about romantic relationships or illicit sexual affairs between men and women. Unlike the 2008 sensational "Photo Scandal," where a famous celebrity was the central figure, new yellow journalism does not feature high-profile celebrities. Instead, it shifts the focus to ordinary people with acting talent, who are typically non-professionals or "amateurs." New yellow journalism creates fabricated news elements to elicit heightened sensitivity from its audience, blurring the boundaries between real-life reporting and cinematic creation. It attracts attention by presenting stories in a semi-fictitious manner, blending truth and fiction. In terms of time, the concept of time is deliberately vague, with no specific time references, often using terms like "recently" or "a few days ago," which appeal to human tendencies to remember events unclearly. Spatially, it relies on edited clips or materials pieced together from various sources, using similar or re-enacted video footage to describe the creator's "strange personal experiences."

3.2. The Victory of the Common People: Real-Life Scenes from the Lives of the Masses

Compared to the earlier tabloid and scandalous news in places like Hong Kong, where the focus was on celebrities, new yellow journalism has shifted to ordinary people who are more commonly seen in everyday life. What was once the exposure of hidden secrets of the upper class has now expanded to cover various aspects of life across the country, involving people from different social backgrounds and at different times. From ordinary bank clerks to beauty influencers, from college students to signed actors, the features of today's short video platforms provide a channel for most people to showcase their talents, enabling more people to participate in the process of social communication. In this context, most content creators who started by sharing strange and amusing personal stories find it difficult to maintain a high-frequency, fast-paced production mode. For example, "Mao Yi Bei," a short video blogger known for the "Qin Lang Lost Homework in Paris" incident, initially focused on documenting her life as an international student, exploring the cultural differences she encountered. However, as the individual or studio's creative ideas began to run dry, many creators took the risk of using scripted content to replace authentic life records. This shift ultimately led to the public relations storm sparked by the "Qin Lang Lost Homework in Paris" incident.

4. Analysis of the Characteristics of the Current New Yellow Journalism Wave and Suggested Countermeasures

From the perspective of news elements, new yellow journalism can be divided into two categories based on the content: (1) Real events that occur but are reported with a biased perspective: In this case, the cause-and-effect relationships are hidden, or important news elements are ignored, making the narrative seem bizarre. This type of new yellow journalism is typically reported from a third-person perspective, where several clips are selected and accompanied by text to create the complete news story. The main dissemination channels for this type of reporting are television programs and major official media outlets. (2) Completely fabricated news events created by video bloggers: In this category, new media accounts are operated by studios or companies, regularly posting videos on short video platforms. These videos often present scripted stories that appear to be real news, and the perspective is mostly first-person, with the events narrated from the point of view of "I," making them more deceptive and credible. These videos are mostly published on new media video platforms and social media. Both types of videos have become popular on online media platforms because they are difficult to verify. With advancements in information technology, platform moderation has become constrained by time pressure, often leading to a dilemma. Many video review platforms adopt the approach of airing content first and issuing corrections later, which indirectly promotes the proliferation of new yellow journalism.

To curb the spread of new yellow journalism, the following two approaches should be considered: (1) Clarify the distinction between dramatization and real news in the creation of videos or written works: It is undeniable that the spread of new yellow journalism reflects, to some extent, public concerns and the issues people care about. Compared to film and television productions, new yellow journalism is more direct, closer to everyday life, and more widespread, effectively attracting public attention and strengthening the supervision of public opinion. Therefore, during the creation process in studios or new media companies, if the report is based on imagination rather than real events, it should be clearly stated in the video that the content is a dramatized version, in order to mitigate the negative impact of misleading information and encourage the audience to exercise their own judgment about the news. (2) For user-generated life-related new yellow journalism, the source of information should be specified, and a system of accountability should be strengthened: In cases where new yellow journalism causes varying degrees of harm, responsibility should be assigned, and the legal framework for new media publications should be improved. The system for verifying personal information should be strengthened to protect China's online information security and uphold citizens' demands for a reliable and trustworthy internet environment.

5. Conclusion

The ultimate dilemma of new yellow journalism lies in the fundamental issue of its own journalistic value: the denial of news authenticity. The democratization of video creation has led to a disparity in video quality, with creators lacking a strong sense of journalistic values. The obsessive pursuit of traffic and popularity has clouded their conscience, with creators sacrificing the credibility of their accounts for benefits and views in pursuit of viral success. From the perspective of news value, the chaotic state of creation in the new media era is evident. A typical example of this is the "Mao Yi Bei, Qin Lang Lost Homework in Paris" incident in the new yellow journalism events. From the video creator's perspective, the author used a chance occurrence in real life to create the video, adding attention-grabbing symbols like "toilet" and "cross-national" to make the incident stand out from other 20-30 second new yellow news stories. The response from "Qin Lang's Uncle" in the comment section further enhanced the believability of the event. From the standpoint of news value, new yellow journalism represents the most fundamental issue that the news industry, journalists, and even today's video creators and multimedia journalists have faced since the birth of the press: which is more important, the reach or the authenticity of the news?

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