An Analysis of the Dilemma of Developing Media Literacy Education in China

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Abstract: Though media literacy education appeared as an independent discipline in some developed countries in the 20th century, it has only just begun in China in the 21st century. Nowadays, with the advancement of the Internet and science and technology, media literacy education has emerged as a prominent issue of global concern. As such, the rapid economic and scientific development of China, the largest developing country, has led to increasing demands for media literacy. Therefore, the paper presents an analysis of pertinent studies on efficacious media literacy education programs in developed countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, and compares the current situation of media literacy education in China in terms of educational policies, schools, and social practices. In addition, it also points out the dilemmas facing the development of media literacy education in China, including the rapid updating of technology and platforms, the lack of selection and evaluation of media content, social inequality, and the digital divide. China should actively learn from the international advanced cases of media literacy education, so as to make China's media education better adapt to the information age of the 21st century, strive to solve the current media problems as soon as possible, and explore a localized road of media literacy education.

Keywords: Media Literacy Education, Educational Dilemma, Media Environment, Digital Literacy.

1. Introduction

In consequence of the accelerated development of the Internet and science, the media has become an indispensable component of the lives of the Chinese people. As of December 2023, the number of Chinese Internet users reached 1.092 billion, representing an Internet penetration rate of 77.5% [1]. China's media development capacity is widely recognized, yet its corresponding media literacy capacity remains a subject of concern. In recent years, media problems caused by citizens, media practitioners, information publishers and other subjects have reminded China to start emphasizing media literacy education. Media literacy education, an emerging discipline, is a much-discussed cross-discipline in the 21st century. Some developed countries have already made it an independent discipline in their own countries and developed it steadily, while the educational research on related aspects in China has just started, which is relatively backward. Due to the differences in national conditions and institutions, China needs to learn from international advanced cases of media literacy education and explore a road of media literacy education with Chinese characteristics. This paper explores relevant literature on media literacy education in developed countries such as the United

States and the current state of media literacy education in China, hence comparing the gap between China's current media literacy education and international advanced media literacy education, as well as the problems that need to be solved urgently, including the rapid updating of technology and platforms, the selection and evaluation of media content, social inequality, and the digital divide. In addition, the paper addresses the prospective trajectory of media literacy education in China, aiming to facilitate the advancement of media literacy education in China to align with the pace of leading countries in international media literacy education in a timely manner, so as to increase the cultural soft power for China's early entry into the ranks of developed countries. Consequently, it may help to provide relevant insights to strengthen national literacy while developing economic hard power and traditional cultural soft power to cope with the rapid development of science and technology.

2. Overview of Media Literacy Education

In 1933, the book *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* was published in England, which became the origin of media literacy education in the world. The UK was the first country in the world to incorporate media literacy education into its curriculum, and by the end of 1997, more than half of the schools in the UK had offered media literacy courses. Meanwhile, in higher education, more targeted media literacy courses are offered in undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral programs. The United States recognized media literacy education in the 1970s, but did not establish it as a separate course. By 1994, media literacy education in the U.S. still relied on the content of arts-related subjects. With the development of information technology, the United States gradually found the relevance of media literacy. Most districts in the U.S. now have separate media literacy programs in their students' classrooms [2]. In 1992, the Center for Media Literacy Research in the U.S. defined media literacy as people's ability to select, understand, question, evaluate, create, produce, think and react to media messages. In 1997, Bu Wei, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, published an article titled *Research on the Meaning, Content and Methods of Media Education*, which marked the beginning of media literacy education research in China [3]. After Hong Kong's handover to China in 1997, comprehensive education reforms were carried out there, which accelerated the development of media literacy education. The media literacy program became an important part of the general education curriculum in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. The use of private organizations to promote media literacy education has become a regional characteristic of Hong Kong. In 2002, Taiwan released the first White Paper on Media Literacy Education Policies in Asia, recommending that media literacy education be incorporated into primary and secondary school curricula, so that media literacy education could become a form of universal and lifelong education [2]. In 2013, the concept of media and information literacy proposed by UNESCO contains a broader range of content, and scholars in China have enriched and developed its definition. Specifically, in 2014, Wang Tiande proposed that media literacy is the knowledge, ability, level, skill and humanism that citizens need to distinguish, use, control, convert and reprocess different qualities of information through certain communication platforms and carriers [3]. In short, media literacy is the ability to understand the media correctly, to recognize media messages and to use the media appropriately, and media literacy education teaches people the ability to acquire information, select and analyze information, question and criticize information, and produce and distribute information [4].

3. Current Development of Media Literacy Education in China

3.1. Education Policy

Like many countries, media literacy education in China is a bottom-up movement that today relies mostly on dedicated media educators and organizations, with fewer education policy initiatives or

specifically funded programs [5]. Nevertheless, the government does not resist the advancement of media education, and instead, there have been significant macro measures implemented in recent years. In November 2021, the Outline for the Enhancement of Digital Literacy and Action Ability of the Whole Population issued by the Central Committee for Network Security and Informatization puts forward that by 2025, the digital adaptability, digital competence, and digital creativity of the whole population will be significantly improved, and the digital literacy and digital skills of the whole population will reach the level of developed countries [6]. It can be seen that at present, media literacy education in China cannot reach the level of independent courses like many developed countries, but with the help of some national policies, it is developing in a more perfect direction.

3.2. School and Social Practice

The majority of media literacy courses in China focus on the introduction of basic media knowledge and ethical guidance in the use of media. In schools, teachers of media literacy courses are not professional enough, and the courses are in a single format with no uniform version of teaching materials. In addition, classroom teaching is teacher-centered and students are participants [4]. Despite China's efforts to transition from an exam-oriented education system to one that prioritizes quality education, the current media literacy curriculum fails to integrate the theoretical knowledge of media literacy into students' daily lives. As a result, students' understanding of media literacy remains at the theoretical level, and they are ill-prepared to apply this knowledge in practical situations. Furthermore, media literacy education programs require the joint efforts of the whole society, but most of the parents and teachers still recognize media as entertainment and think that talking too much about media may impede children's learning processes. There is a lack of social recognition of media literacy education and a lack of social practice opportunities for media literacy education [4].

4. Dilemmas and Challenges in the Development of Media Literacy Education in China

4.1. Rapid Technology and Platform Updates

Developing science and technology has always been the center of gravity for China's development, a concept that has brought about continuous upgrades and innovations in Internet technology. From relying on imported products, the Chinese people are now satisfied and amazed by the advanced technology of national brands. Huawei, Xiaomi, TikTok, REDnote, etc. have become main ways for Chinese people to use the medium. People are constantly adapting and challenging faster, newer, and more convenient technologies and platforms, without caring whether they are using the media correctly and civilized. At the same time, China's media literacy education has been lagging behind China's media updates, which has led to a situation where people are unwilling to learn and learning is useless. For example, intellectual property rights (IPR) have received relatively little attention in China, and the protection of originality in online platforms has received even less attention. It was only when plagiarism became widespread in the online media and some people's interests were infringed upon that online creators began to pay attention to intellectual property rights and safeguard their own rights and interests. Media platforms, media managers, and media educators began to study relevant issues and suggest relevant measures after the incident, while new media practices and issues are still being created. The media literacy education and the rapid updating of technology have not been matched and synchronized.

4.2. Media content selection and evaluation

In recent years, China's new media platforms have grown rapidly, the audience and creators in the media are increasing, and the quality of media content varies. Chinese educational authorities have very strict control over the curriculum system and content, and there are few courses on critical thinking [5]. Consequently, the media audience is highly open to the agenda established by the authors, so contributing to the current post-truth paradigm in China. The quantification of attention and traffic acquired by information producers in the media is intricately connected to their financial gains, thereby giving rise to the proliferation of media content that transgresses ethical and legal limits. With the growing wealth of Internet knowledge and expertise among netizens, certain individuals who have been misled by incorrect information, substandard products, and unethical creators have deliberately developed a critical attitude towards media. The increasing demands of public opinion for the enhancement of the media environment have prompted China's media management authorities to progressively focus on this matter. Over the past few years, the State Internet Information Office (SIIO) has consistently implemented a range of targeted measures to address persistent issues in network ecology, including self-media disorder, online hostility, online army, online rumors, live broadcasting, and short videos. These actions have effectively addressed non-compliant platforms and accounts, yielding notable initial outcomes. Nevertheless, depending on internet users to deliberately develop critical thinking skills and the state's initial efforts to address this issue are insufficient. The auditing and evaluation system of new media platforms must be enhanced. Therefore, media literacy education should be a crucial factor in the decision-making process before and during the public's selection and assessment of media.

4.3. Social inequality and the digital divide

Media literacy instruction was initially implemented in China in 1994. Since 2000, several conferences on media literacy have taken place in high-developed Chinese cities including Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou. Additionally, there has been occasional and impromptu media instruction in certain primary and secondary schools. The formal establishment of the Media Literacy Education Research Centre of the Communication University of China (CUC) in 2002 marked the rise in popularity of media literacy education [7]. It can be seen that the history of media literacy education in China is relatively short, the areas of research and development are concentrated in developed cities, and media literacy education shows inequality in society. With the advent and swift adoption of new information technologies like tablet computers, smartphones, and mobile Internet in 2010, the worldwide research landscape for media literacy education has undergone significant transformation. Concurrent studies on digital learning in primary school have also been carried out in mainland China [7]. However, due to China's vast size and population, by 2020, China has already achieved full poverty eradication. It will take time for media products and platforms to be popularized in areas that have just been lifted out of poverty, and media literacy education will be popularized even further in the future. China has been aging since the year 2000, and at the same time has been experiencing an economic boom, with a widening generational gap in society. Like many other countries with well-developed media literacy education, media literacy education in China has been researched and practiced with young people. It has long remained an experiment for children in developed regions, and as a result, the digital divide in China has grown wider and wider, posing a significant obstacle for the future dissemination of media literacy instruction.

5. Future Developments and Recommendations

The development of media literacy education in China has just begun, and there is much room for future development. China needs to recognize the difficulties of media literacy education in time and

find countermeasures to accelerate the pace of catching up with the international advanced media literacy education. There are numerous examples of successful media literacy education initiatives around the globe, and China has the opportunity to learn from these experiences. One approach could be to integrate media literacy education with other academic disciplines or to establish it as a standalone field of study. Scholars and experts must move beyond the stage of analysis and experimentation and actively localize their practices in order to narrow the inequality and digital divide in media literacy education in China. Therefore, China must continue to promote quality education in its educational strategies, which will enable students to improve their critical thinking skills in the digital age and thus develop a competitive knowledge-based workforce. In addition, educators in China's media literacy sector must endeavor to gain a full understanding of specialized media knowledge and refine their capacity to integrate both theoretical and practical approaches in their pedagogical practices. As China's media technologies and platforms continue to develop at a rapid pace, they should consider their social responsibilities. While profitability and innovation remain important considerations, it is also crucial to assess the social impact of media development and to guide audiences in the responsible and civilized use of media. It is imperative that China's media censorship and evaluation mechanisms be enhanced. Furthermore, it is of utmost importance to educate and regulate citizens who are deficient in media literacy so that China's media environment can flourish in a healthy manner.

6. Conclusion

The comparison reveals that weak government support for media literacy education and the backwardness of practical education in media literacy education are the main factors that make it difficult to form a well-developed discipline of media literacy education in China. In addition, China's own unique national conditions and developmental status also show that media literacy education in China is faced with urgent dilemmas that need to be solved. The rapid development of media technology and platforms in China requires media literacy education to keep pace with the times and find practical teaching programs that meet the current media standards. Quality education and critical thinking have long been neglected in Chinese education, which need to be emphasized and applied in today's era of almost total media coverage. Based on the fact that the economic foundation determines the superstructure, it also shows that China needs to continue to push for equality in education and economic help, so that media literacy education can be popularized to all Chinese, rather than being a privilege for a few. However, this paper fails to examine the actual situation of media literacy education in other countries, and relies on the reading of relevant literature and personal experience as a generation growing up with electronic products and the Internet in 21st century China to analyze the gaps and current dilemmas between China's media literacy education and that of the international community. Future research should propose more detailed and professional plans and programs for the formation of a sound and independent system of media literacy education in China.

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