

Analysis of the Strong Transmissibility of Sensationalism and Its Impact in Modern Media

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Abstract: In today's society, the media plays a crucial role in disseminating information and shaping public consciousness. However, sensationalism, characterized by sensational headlines and an excessive focus on vulgar content to attract readers' attention, is controversial due to its powerful transmissibility. This study aims to explore the reasons behind the strong transmissibility of sensationalism by analyzing the psychological, sociological, and communication mechanisms behind it, and to reveal its role and impact in the modern media environment. The findings suggest that sensationalism spreads rapidly mainly because it can stimulate people's curiosity and emotional responses, and the algorithm optimization of social media platforms makes it more likely to be promoted. Moreover, a general lack of media literacy in society also provides fertile ground for the spread of sensationalism. Although sensationalism may temporarily increase click-through and viewership rates, its long-term negative impact on social morality, public trust, and media image cannot be ignored. Therefore, enhancing public media literacy, strengthening the professional ethics education of journalists, and optimizing social media algorithms to reduce the promotion of sensationalism are crucial for building a healthy media environment.

Keywords: Sensationalism, Media Literacy, Social Media Algorithms, Public Sentiment, Journalism Ethics

1. Introduction

In the age of information explosion, media is not only a channel for information transfer but also a significant force in shaping public cognition and social concepts. In recent years, sensationalism, with its sensational content and headlines, has attracted a large number of readers and viewers, leading to widespread social attention and academic discussion. Although the transmission effects and social impact of this type of news have been preliminarily explored, research on the deep-seated reasons behind its strong transmissibility, the psychological and sociological mechanisms, and its manifestations across different cultural and social backgrounds is still insufficient. Particularly, existing research rarely involves how social media platform algorithms exacerbate the spread of sensationalism, as well as changes in public attitudes and reactions to such news.

This study aims to fill this research gap by delving into the reasons behind the strong transmissibility of sensationalism and its impact on social culture, public psychology, and the media ecosystem. Specifically, this paper will explore the characteristics and types of sensationalism, the

influence of social media platform algorithms on the spread of sensationalism, and changes in public attitudes and acceptance towards sensationalism.

2. Definition of Sensationalism

In media and communication studies, sensationalism typically refers to news reporting that relies excessively on provocative headlines, exaggerated reports, and an undue emphasis on vulgar topics such as sex, crime, or scandals to attract the attention of readers or viewers. This type of journalism often lacks in-depth investigation and factual basis, relying more on stimulating public curiosity and pandering to low-grade tastes than on providing valuable or constructive information. According to Dou Fengchang and Sun Meng, this new form of sensationalized journalism is often produced by various online media through short videos, typically characterized by elaborate packaging and design, in which bland and uninteresting news events or life trivia are tagged with vivid labels or words and set to compelling music, so as to attract widespread public interest and discussion [1]. Characteristics of sensational journalism include but are not limited to using exaggerated or misleading headlines to draw attention, overly dramatizing minor incidents [1], focusing on negative events such as scandals, crimes, and sexual content while often ignoring more valuable or positive news [2]; such journalism often remains superficial, lacking in-depth analysis of the background, causes, and impacts of events; it is not difficult to observe that most such news employs thrilling language and descriptions aimed at provoking a strong emotional response from readers or viewers. The production of this type of news is often linked to media strategies to boost sales, viewership, or click rates and sometimes reflects the public's broad interest in certain topics. However, it is often criticized for vulgarizing the media environment and damaging public trust in the media as a source of societal information.

3. Current Development

The current development of sensational journalism shows several common trends and characteristics worldwide, influenced by changes in the digital media environment and sociocultural factors. The rise of digital media and social platforms has greatly facilitated the spread of sensational journalism. These platforms' algorithms often favor content that can trigger strong emotional responses from users, thus making sensational headlines and content more likely to achieve high click rates and widespread dissemination. Social media enables individuals and small media organizations to publish content at low cost, leading to an increase in sensational journalism and inaccurate information. Although the public generally holds a critical view of sensational journalism, considering it vulgar and damaging to the credibility of the news media, such news still attracts a large audience, indicating that it meets some viewers' needs for light entertainment or curiosity. As media literacy education spreads and public awareness increases, more people are beginning to recognize and resist sensational journalism, opting for more reliable and in-depth news sources. Facing the negative impacts of sensational journalism, some countries and regions' media industries have begun implementing stricter self-regulation measures, such as establishing journalism ethics codes, enhancing journalist training, and promoting quality news production. Moreover, an increasing number of news organizations are adopting fact-checking procedures to improve the accuracy and credibility of their reporting. Various countries have enacted a series of legal measures against sensational journalism and fake news, including implementing stricter media regulation policies, establishing fact-checking institutions, and strengthening oversight of online content. However, these measures also spark debates about free speech and government censorship, especially in balancing the public's right to information against protecting them from misleading information. Overall, despite the persistence of sensational journalism, criticism of it, improvements in public media literacy, industry self-regulation, and legal policy adjustments are collectively contributing to efforts to enhance news quality and

combat the spread of low-quality news. These efforts are gradually changing the development status of sensational journalism, pushing news media towards more responsible and valuable reporting.

4. Reasons for Strong Transmission

Sensational journalism's strong transmission capability is due to its touching on various aspects of human psychology, sociocultural characteristics, and media operational mechanisms. The root cause is humanity's innate curiosity about taboos, sex, scandals, and crime [3]. These topics often provoke strong emotional responses, such as surprise, anger, or curiosity, thereby attracting people's attention. Sensational journalism meets people's curiosity and gossip needs by providing information on these non-daily events. A psychological effect known as the "Rubberneck Effect" [4] is similar to the phenomenon where people unconsciously slow down to watch traffic accidents, and a similar irresistible attraction occurs with the scandalous and criminal stories in sensational journalism. This psychological effect causes people to be drawn to these informations despite moral and rational constraints, and they may further spread it.

Of course, with the rapid development of media in a highly competitive market, news organizations face significant economic pressures and need to rely on advertising revenue and click rates to sustain operations. Therefore, they may prefer to publish sensational journalism that can quickly attract public attention. Sensational journalism often has high click rates and rapid transmission speeds, bringing significant economic benefits in a short time. Moreover, social media platforms' recommendation algorithms tend to favor content that triggers strong user interactions (such as likes, comments, and shares). Since sensational journalism easily triggers such interactions, it is more likely to be promoted by algorithms, achieving broader dissemination. The structure of social networks enables information to spread quickly among users, especially when the content evokes emotional resonance.

An often-overlooked important factor is the lack of media literacy among the general public [5], making it difficult for many to distinguish between high-quality news and low-quality or sensational journalism. This deficiency makes people more susceptible to accepting and spreading such news. A lack of critical thinking skills means people might believe and disseminate this type of news without verification.

Therefore, the strong transmission of sensational journalism is the result of a combination of factors. To effectively reduce the spread of such news, efforts must be made to enhance public media literacy, strengthen journalism ethics education and media self-regulation, and optimize social media algorithms.

5. Measures to Mitigate Negative Impacts

The strong transmission of sensational journalism has impacted culture in many ways, both negatively and positively by prompting social reflection. Long regarded as the "fourth estate" of society, the news media bears the responsibility of overseeing and providing accurate information. However, the proliferation of sensational journalism has damaged the overall credibility of the media, causing the public to doubt the truthfulness and objectivity of news reporting. By continuously amplifying negative, vulgar, and violent content, sensational journalism can erode societal moral standards and values, particularly affecting teenagers and susceptible groups. Excessive reporting on crimes, disasters, and scandals can lead to public overconcern about safety and stability[6], thereby increasing social anxiety and panic. In pursuit of sensational news content, some media outlets do not hesitate to invade personal privacy, violating journalism ethics and harming the rights and interests of victims and their families.

To reduce the negative impacts of sensational journalism, appropriate measures can be taken. As a major source of power in society, the government can strengthen media content regulation through legislation, prohibiting the spread of baseless rumors, invasions of privacy, personal attacks, and overly sensational reporting of violence and sexual content. Within the industry or media organizations, it is possible to enhance the professional ethics and skills training of news gathering and editing personnel, encouraging media institutions to adhere to journalistic ethics and responsibly report news based on facts, respecting the audience. Establishing and improving internal self-regulation mechanisms, through self-monitoring and peer review, can suppress undesirable reporting behaviors.

At the citizen level, by educating the public to distinguish between true and false news and enhancing critical thinking skills, people can understand and identify the tactics and intentions of sensational journalism. Maintaining independent thinking is particularly important. As the era progresses, more forms of media are emerging before the public, and the development of new media provides people with multiple channels for news sources, breaking the information monopoly of a few media, giving the public more choices. Through these measures, it is possible to some extent to curb the proliferation of sensational journalism, promoting the news media's return to its essential roles of oversight and information provider, while helping the public develop healthy critical skills towards media content.

6. Conclusion

This study has delved deeply into the strong transmissibility of sensational journalism in the contemporary media environment and its underlying reasons, revealing its multifaceted impacts on society and public psychology. Through a comprehensive analysis of the characteristics of sensational journalism, the amplifying role of social media, public attitudes and responses, and its sociocultural impacts, this research has found that although sensational journalism can quickly attract public attention, its long-term damage to media credibility, erosion of societal morals, and potential negative impact on public psychological health cannot be overlooked.

The strong transmissibility of sensational journalism is mainly due to its ability to stimulate people's curiosity and emotional responses, and the optimization of social media platform algorithms, which allows such news to spread rapidly online. However, public attitudes towards this type of news are complex and varied, with short-term interest and attention but long-term concerns about media quality and ethical standards. This reminds us that although sensational journalism may bring traffic and revenue to media in the short term, its negative impact on society far outweighs these short-term benefits.

Therefore, this study emphasizes that efforts by media practitioners, policymakers, and the public itself are needed to build a healthy information environment and enhance public media literacy. Media organizations should strengthen training and enforcement of journalism ethics to ensure content authenticity and responsible reporting; policymakers should consider how to appropriately regulate and guide the content distribution mechanisms of social media platforms without infringing on free speech; and the public needs to enhance their own media literacy, learning to identify and resist low-quality news, promoting a healthier, more rational public discussion space.

In summary, this study not only provides deep insights into the strong transmissibility of sensational journalism but also offers valuable suggestions for improving the current media environment, enhancing news quality, and raising public media literacy. Future research can further explore how to effectively implement these recommendations and their long-term effects on improving the media ecology and enhancing the overall cultural level of society.

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