

Research on the Use of Social Media and the Cultivation of Values Among College Students in the Post Truth Era

LIU Shuhua, FAN Kaijin, QU Ying
Quanzhou Normal University, Quanzhou, China

With the rapid development of the Internet and the widespread popularity of We Media in the 21st century, news communication has entered the post truth era. In the post truth era, truth and logic are often marginalized in the process of information dissemination, while emotional agitation becomes an important force that dominates public opinion. College students, as the most active and influential online audience in contemporary social media usage, have a profound impact on guiding and promoting the information environment of the entire society through their online behavior and ideological shaping. This article aims to explore the role and identity transformation of college students' online audiences on social media in the context of the post truth era, as well as the value characteristics behind it. It also explores how to correctly guide college students to participate in the voice of social news, promote their physical and mental health development, and cultivate correct values.

Keywords: post truth era, social media, sense of worth, student group

The phenomenon of “post truth” on the Internet refers to the tendency of the public to be more susceptible to emotional and inflammatory information in an environment of information overload, while neglecting the deep pursuit of factual truth. This phenomenon not only challenges the traditional news dissemination model, but also has a profound impact on the formation of values among college students. Although traditional values education involves multiple aspects such as social transformation, input of Western values, school values education system, network informatization, and family education, these educational contents are not comprehensive and in-depth enough when facing the phenomenon of “post truth” on the Internet.

The Rise of the Post Truth Era

“Post Truth” and Its Essence

The history of the term “post truth” can be traced back to 1992, when Steve Tesekkur first mentioned it in an article in *Nation* magazine. Subsequently, Ralph Keyes deepened this concept in “The Post Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life”, revealing the ambiguous zone between truth and lies in information. In recent years, especially after the 2016 Brexit and US elections, the phenomenon of “post truth”

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LIU Shuhua, Ph.D., associate professor, School of Literature and Communication, Quanzhou Normal University, Quanzhou, China.
FAN Kaijin, 22nd grade graduate student, School of Literature and Communication, Quanzhou Normal University, Quanzhou, China.

QU Ying, 22nd grade graduate student, School of Literature and Communication, Quanzhou Normal University, Quanzhou, China.

has attracted widespread attention worldwide. Post truth describes a phenomenon where people tend to form their understanding of events based on their stance, emotions, and interests rather than factual truth. This has led to the proliferation of lies, rumors, and other false claims of “truth” in public opinion. In 2016, the *Oxford Dictionary* named “post truth” as the buzzword of the year, emphasizing the significant influence of personal emotions and beliefs on public opinion, while the influence of factual truth is relatively weakened.

The arrival of the post truth era is the result of the Internet entering an era of information overload. The time to distinguish between true and false information is too short. Behind the same specific fact, there are different pieces of information, including true, false, and one-sided. However, false and emotional information often touches the nerves of the general public, and even if they strive for the truth of the event, they are easily influenced by it. The causes of post truth are complex and diverse, including the differentiation of social value consensus, the evolution of technology and media, and the combined effects of diverse social ideologies. The fundamental reason for this is that “people’s judgment of authenticity is becoming increasingly narrow and vague” (Jin, 2022, p. 3). People define and interpret “truth” based on their own emotions, beliefs, and positions, which blurs the boundaries of truth, and emotional resonance and belief identification become key criteria for receiving and transmitting information.

The Dissemination Characteristics of Social Media in the Post Truth Era

Social media has become the main battlefield for information dissemination today, and its influence has had a profound impact on content production, dissemination methods, and media functions. The entertainment characteristics of social media make college students more likely to be attracted by vulgarized and joking information when browsing microblog, WeChat, Tiktok, and other platforms, thus reducing the attention to mainstream ideology. Its manifestations mainly include: diversification of information sources, rapid network fermentation and dissemination, diversification of information transmission channels, emotional expression of discourse, and fact bias in the field of public opinion. As McLuhan said, “media is information” and “media is an extension of people” have been fully reflected in the era of social media.

In the era of social media, the phenomenon of “post truth” on the Internet has become increasingly prominent, and the proliferation of fragmented information has to some extent weakened the authority of mainstream values education. These fragmented pieces of information not only make college students’ reading habits tend towards shallow reading, entertainment, and watching, but also bring many negative effects. The emotional communication characteristics not only affect individuals’ emotions, but also guide the direction of public opinion in time and space dimensions, showing obvious bias. Recent research has revealed two significant issues among college students in their use of the Internet. On the one hand, excessive and one-sided pursuit of entertainment content has become a habit for them; on the other hand, they maintain a bystander attitude towards online hotspots, fueled by the mentality of the mob. During the critical period of value formation, college students face the phenomenon of “post truth” on the Internet, which refers to cultural and industrial content that caters to the emotions and psychology of the audience, lacks rational judgment ability, is exploited by emotions, and poses potential harm to personal growth and social progress, thereby weakening the actual effectiveness of value education.

The Identity and Role of Internet Users in the Post Truth Era

Identity Transformation of News Audience

With the increasing influence of online platforms, the importance of social media discourse power has become increasingly prominent, playing a more critical role in the formation of public opinion (Zhou, 2022).

Traditionally, news audiences mainly play the role of “listeners” and passively receive news information. However, in the current digital age, audiences can not only actively obtain news, but also comment and share news events on social media and other platforms, thus becoming active participants in news dissemination. In the post truth era, the boundary between the disseminators and receivers of news has become increasingly blurred, and the public participates in the discussion of news events as a “public jury”, judging and interpreting news events. This participatory nature has a profound impact on the influence of news events, the opinions and attitudes of audiences, and the inclination of positions.

Matthew DeAncona, a columnist for *The Guardian*, believes that in the post truth era, anyone can become an editor and disseminator of information, which requires the public to have the ability to distinguish between true and false information when faced with massive amounts of information. The public needs to learn to question information, verify and compare it from multiple sources, in order to understand the full picture and truth of news events.

Decoders Under Cognitive Limitations

In the process of exploring the authenticity of news reporting and audience interpretation, the cognitive limitations of the audience are a key issue. Taking the “West Lake High Price Mobile Phone Fishing” incident as an example, even if news reports strictly follow the principle of truth at the symbolic level, audiences may still have misunderstandings or biases due to cognitive limitations. Multiple media outlets reported on a paid mobile phone salvage service by a man in Chenzhou, Hunan, near West Lake, but later revealed that it was actually a self-directed and staged farce. Surprisingly, even when the truth is revealed, some viewers still acknowledge this behavior, highlighting the cognitive limitations of the audience in interpreting news.

The cognitive limitations of the audience stem from their upbringing environment, learning experience, social experience, and so on. In the Internet, everyone is an independent decoder, whose interpretation is often subjective and one-sided, and vulnerable to emotions, prejudices, and stereotypes. As Plato described in “The Republic” as a philosopher king, there is no one who can comprehensively and objectively understand the world. Therefore, the audience cannot completely escape the influence of cognitive limitations when interpreting news events. It is necessary to improve media literacy, strengthen news education, and other methods to help the audience improve their decoding ability, reduce cognitive bias, and view news events more rationally.

Network Presentation of Values Among College Students

Values are like the roots of plants; they are the source of absorbing and condensing nutrients, providing solid support for plant growth. The values formed during the university stage profoundly influence their way of thinking and behavior patterns, and set the tone for their future development. Subsequently, the phenomenon of truth became increasingly severe, and its impact on college students cannot be ignored. The post truth attracts college students in a vulgar and sensational way, squeezing the space for education on realistic values (Zhu, 2021). As the main force of online public opinion, college students have limited social experience and often lack depth and objectivity in their comments. They are easily influenced by emotions and tend to deviate from correct moral cognition in chaotic public opinion, leading to weakened moral judgments, weakened sense of responsibility, and decreased sensitivity (Liu, 2020).

In the Internet, college students crave to express their opinions, but often exhibit blindness and extremism. Although they can promote social progress, they are easily stimulated by labeled news, which can lead to a

reversal of public opinion. For example, a girl born in 1995 who was a fan of the Internet was subjected to online bullying for posting photos of her being admitted to graduate school, which reflects the drawbacks of emotional comments among college students. After the victim of online violence commits suicide, public opinion turns to the perpetrator, and online violence seamlessly connects to the original perpetrator, causing negative impacts on the victim, social moral cognition, and public opinion environment.

The Potential Threat of the “Post Truth” Phenomenon in the Internet to the Values of College Students

Confuse College Students’ Understanding of Value Standards

The Internet has become the main channel for young college students to obtain information, catering to their pursuit of novelty and excitement. However, in the complex online environment, college students’ understanding of value standards has become blurred. The subculture of the Internet, vulgar information, and consumer industry culture not only stimulate the consumption desire of college students, but also transmit a wrong or even distorted set of values and signals, which have a negative impact on the value standards of college students.

Deconstruct the Emotions of College Students Towards Political Identity

The diversity, openness, and interactivity of online platforms make information dissemination more convenient, but they also provide a fertile ground for the spread of rumors and false news. Some false information weakens the political identity of college students and the effectiveness of political education, leading to their subjective and neglectful attitude towards politics. Some people even use online platforms to spoof heroic deeds and revolutionary martyrs, distort historical facts, distort values, reduce college students’ interest and attention to political theory, and thus shake political judgment and recognition.

Shake the Rational Foundation of College Students’ Consensus on Values

In the era of social media, college students are prone to superficial and superficial information, making it difficult for them to think deeply and make accurate judgments. The mixture of factual information and value judgment information in cyberspace has led to the interweaving of “truth” and “post truth”, with emotions and feelings replacing justice and rational value judgments. In this environment, rumors, lies, and biases are more likely to spread and exaggerate in cyberspace, making it difficult for college students to discern the truth of events.

Weaken the Effectiveness of Values Education for College Students

Social media has a significant impact on the ideological and political education activities of college students. The phenomenon of “post truth” on the Internet not only challenges the dominant position of Marxist values and the authority of values education. In addition, the discourse style of “post truth” on the Internet conflicts with the discourse style of mainstream values education, diluting the influence of values education. This makes college students feel confused when faced with a large amount of information, making it difficult to effectively educate them on values.

The Cultivation of Correct Values Among Contemporary College Students in the Use of Social Media

In the era of information explosion on the Internet, with the widespread application of new media platforms such as mobile phones and the Internet, the public’s awareness of participation is also becoming stronger. The

“three micro” information such as Weibo, WeChat, and Weishi is overwhelming, gradually forming a powerful “public opinion field”. In the process of information dissemination, both social media and traditional mainstream media hope to retain users’ attention to the maximum extent possible. However, it cannot be ignored that short videos will provide a process of “stimulation addiction” (Wang, 2019).

During this process, college students are often easily guided by online video content, leading to behaviors that do not conform to their own habits, and some negative guidance content has extremely detrimental effects on the physical and mental health of college students. So, we need to start from the aspects of schools, platforms, and the social experiences of college students, so that they can cultivate correct values through the use of social media, and make real life and online life complement each other.

Build a Value Education System that Resists “Post Truth”

In the post truth era, the use of social media is one of the important sources for the formation of college students’ values, and online platforms are a double-edged sword. Mainstream media use online platforms to promote socialist core values, especially the national level values of “civilization” and “harmony”, as well as the social level values of “equality” and “justice”, in order to combat the phenomenon of “post truth”. Through Weibo, Tiktok, and other APPs, the core values are publicized in a way that college students like, and social contradictions are explained and explained to enhance college students’ sense of social identity. Universities should strengthen the cultivation of correct values among college students and guide them to form clear concepts of right and wrong through ideological education. For students with emotional fluctuations, timely psychological counseling should be provided to solve their doubts and problems encountered in learning and life. In addition, schools should encourage students to participate in social practice and enhance their ability to judge online information through personal experience. Students should also pay attention to knowledge of healthy living, form independent value judgments, and resist the temptation of negative information.

Improve Social Media Regulations and Content Optimization

The loose network environment, coexistence of good and bad information, and the existence of concealment have led to frequent occurrences of “post truth” phenomena. In the process of information dissemination, both new media and traditional mainstream media have an obligation to objectively choose the content of the information to be released. This objective and effective choice, on the one hand, must ensure that the rights and interests of the Party, the state, and the people are not harmed; on the other hand, comprehensive consideration should also be given to meet the basic right to information of the public and avoid secondary public opinion disasters. Social media platforms need to strengthen the monitoring and review of video releases, effectively curbing the space for rumors to spread from the perspective of promoting public and social stability, and facilitating proper handling of events. This will prevent the emergence of irrational and intentionally harmful disharmonious noise that harms public and national interests, and purify the social public opinion environment. At the same time, the platform should prioritize promoting video content with positive educational significance and authoritative publication, and guide college students to form correct values through a combination of online and offline methods.

Enhance College Students’ Immunity and Information Literacy to the “Post Truth” of the Internet

Facing the phenomenon of “post truth” on the Internet, college students need to enhance their immunity to it and improve their information literacy, in order to correctly identify and respond to fragmented and spliced information on the Internet, and avoid value judgment errors. The dissemination of mainstream ideology should

play an important role in enhancing the value judgment ability of college students. By exposing the capital logic and technological principles in online communication, it helps college students see the interests and dissemination mechanisms behind information, and avoid being dominated by algorithms and trapped in information cocoons. At the same time, college students should also be encouraged to actively create and disseminate real, healthy, and positive information, and enhance their ability to express themselves and disseminate information, while accepting moral and legal constraints.

Conclusion

The group of college students receiving higher education carries the future and hope of the country and the nation. However, in the era of information explosion, the phenomenon of “post truth” on the Internet is becoming increasingly prominent, with its fragmented and emotional characteristics affecting the cognition and behavior of college students. Social media is filled with a large amount of information and content expressing personal emotions, which not only damages the order of the online space, but also has a profound impact on the values of college students. Therefore, it is necessary to respond from multiple levels. Firstly, society should strengthen network supervision, formulate and enforce stricter laws and regulations to maintain order and fairness in cyberspace. Secondly, as an important platform for values education, schools should strengthen the education of college students’ online literacy. By offering relevant courses, hosting lectures and practical activities, etc., schools guide students to establish correct concepts of Internet usage. Finally, college students need to enhance their media literacy, not blindly follow or follow the trend, and rationally view various information on the Internet. They should actively participate in the construction and maintenance of cyberspace, and contribute their own strength to creating a healthy and harmonious online environment.

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