

Hierarchical Media Ethics in the Digital Age: An Analysis of the “Primary School Student Lost Homework in Paris” Incident

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In the digital age, traditional media ethics norms lack sufficient explanatory power and binding force in practice. This paper uses the “Primary School Student Lost Homework in Paris” incident as a case study to explore the ethical controversies surrounding the dissemination of this event. By adopting a hierarchical media ethics perspective, the paper dynamically examines the ethical conduct of various communicators, elucidates the ethical responsibilities of each party involved, and reveals the complexity of communication ethics in the digital age.

Keywords: media ethics, information dissemination, self-media ethics norms, “Primary School Student Lost Homework in Paris”

Introduction

The development of new media technologies has transformed the landscape of information dissemination, expanding the range of communicators from traditional media professionals to a diverse group of content creators. In the digital context, ethical norms designed to constrain traditional media, marked by professional exclusivity, regulatory rules, and universal standards, have shown insufficient explanatory power and binding force in practice. Focusing on the transformation of media ethics triggered by digital technologies, this paper uses the “Primary School Student Lost Homework in Paris” incident as a case study to explore the ethical controversies surrounding the dissemination of this event. By adopting a hierarchical media ethics perspective, the paper dynamically examines the ethical conduct of various communicators, including the social responsibility of self-media individuals, the gatekeeping responsibility of mainstream media, the supervisory responsibility of social media platforms, and the media literacy of users, in order to clarify the ethical responsibilities of each party involved in information dissemination.

Case Study: The “Primary School Student Lost Homework in Paris” Incident

During the Lunar New Year in February, a short video about a Chinese primary school student named Qin Lang who lost his winter vacation homework in Paris went viral on the Chinese internet. The video was posted by a popular internet influencer, @Thurman猫一杯, who has 40 million followers. In the video, she claimed to have found the first-grade student Qin Lang’s homework on the streets of Paris and hoped to find the owner and return the homework. This message quickly spread, topping trending lists on multiple platforms, and was widely reported by mainstream media. Although some netizens questioned the authenticity of the event, the influencer later released a statement saying that Qin Lang’s mother had contacted her and that the matter had been “perfectly

resolved”, calling for a reduction in the event’s hype. Two months later, the Hangzhou Public Security Bureau released a police report confirming that the incident was a fabricated stunt staged to attract online attention. The influencer and the involved company received administrative penalties, and the influencer’s accounts on multiple platforms were suspended.

Ethical Controversies: Who Violated the Principle of News Authenticity?

In response to this incident, there are divergent opinions. One viewpoint considers the content of @Thurman猫一杯’s video as fake news and fabrication. Mainstream media, such as CCTV.com, argue that the influencer violated public order and morals to gain popularity and views, compromising moral and legal boundaries for profit. They caution against the proliferation of such “New Yellow Journalism” and advocate for the pursuit of serious news to become the mainstream in public discourse (@CCTV.com, 2024). Conversely, another viewpoint holds that @Thurman猫一杯, as a self-media individual, should not be judged by the standards of news media. For instance, former CCTV reporter and current affairs YouTube influencer @wangzhian argues that elevating a humorous video to the level of social news reflects the failure of authoritative Chinese media to verify information before reporting and reposting it (@wangzhian, 2024).

These perspectives, while both advocating for the presentation of news with public value, differ in their focus on who violated the ethical standards of news authenticity. The former emphasizes the responsibility of influential self-media individuals to uphold public order and morals, insisting that they should not create fake news. This viewpoint overlooks the distinction between self-media individuals and professional journalists, as well as the boundaries of freedom of expression. The latter focuses on holding traditional media accountable, neglecting that self-media individuals should also shoulder certain responsibilities. Although the incident has been resolved through administrative penalties, there remains a need for further discussion from the perspective of communication ethics to delineate the ethical responsibilities of different participants in information dissemination.

Case Analysis: Ethical Responsibilities of Multiple Stakeholders

This incident transitioned from an entertainment video to a public event, involving multiple communication stakeholders and raising issues of news authenticity. This paper argues for the need to clarify the responsibilities of each party from a hierarchical media ethics perspective, dynamically distinguishing the ethical responsibilities of various communication actors throughout the dissemination process. Overall, the communicators involved in this incident include influencers, news media, media platforms, and users.

The ethical conduct of influencers needs to be analyzed in stages. The influencer @Thurman猫一杯, with 40 million followers on multiple social media platforms, wields significant influence online but is not a professional journalist. To maintain her popularity and attract user attention is part of her daily work requirements. Therefore, it is unrealistic to demand that she adhere to professional media ethics norms. However, once the incident evolved into a public event, she should not have violated Everyday Ethics. Everyday Ethics refer to the principles and behavior norms people follow in daily interactions, guiding individuals in making moral decisions and actions in life situations. The massive unfollowing by her fans after the truth was revealed indicates that they felt deceived and not treated sincerely. When the video became a news hotspot, its nature shifted from mere entertainment to a public event, making the authenticity of the information crucial and closely tied to social trust.

Especially in the Chinese context, people tend to have higher social responsibility expectations for those with significant influence.

However, a key aspect of this entertainment video turning into a news event was the reposting and distribution by news media. Initially, the video's content was an entertainment piece created by a self-media influencer. It entered the realm of "news" only when mainstream media reported and disseminated it, turning it into a news hotspot. When news media organizations forwarded and reported this video without verification, they blurred the lines between information and news. The act of disseminating unverified information as news violated the principles of authenticity and accuracy. Particularly when the event's authenticity had not been confirmed, many media organizations failed to adhere to the principle of transparency, neither clarifying the source and dissemination process of the information to the public nor fully considering the social impact of their reposting behavior. By endorsing this video with their credibility, media organizations misled the public into believing the event was real, damaging both media credibility and social trust.

Simultaneously, the promotion by media platforms contributed to the video's spread and its emergence as a news hotspot. While platform administrators took subsequent actions such as account suspension, video platforms, as invisible intermediaries in information dissemination, need to strictly supervise and review their algorithms and recommendation mechanisms during the process. This information trended on multiple video platforms, further intensifying the event's heat. Platform algorithms typically prioritize high-traffic videos to increase user interaction and platform traffic. However, when a video becomes a social news hotspot and sparks public debate about its authenticity, platform administrators need to balance trending traffic and social attention, being cautious about their dissemination behavior. Media platforms should proactively consider the social consequences of video dissemination and assess whether promoting such videos would occupy the space for public discourse on important events.

As information receivers and consumers, users also need to enhance their media literacy. In daily life, short videos have become a significant entertainment channel. Faced with the vast array of online information, especially regarding social hotspots, users should maintain a skeptical attitude and avoid blindly believing and spreading unverified information. Users should clearly understand different types of content and decide whether to trust and disseminate it based on its nature. Particularly for sensitive and controversial content, users should evaluate whether their secondary dissemination behavior aligns with social ethics and legal norms. For instance, when the authenticity of the video is uncertain, users should consider whether the behavior of publicizing a search for someone is appropriate, as rashly sharing such information without sufficient evidence could cause distress and harm to the individuals involved. In the digital age, if the vast number of users can assume more social responsibility in the dissemination process, it will contribute to establishing a healthy information dissemination environment.

Conclusion

This paper uses the "Primary School Student Lost Homework in Paris" incident as a case study to conduct an ethical analysis of multiple communicators from a hierarchical media ethics perspective. As an influencer enjoying freedom of speech, @Thurman猫一杯 also needs to consider the social responsibility she bears; her freedom of speech is limited when it involves public events in China. In an era where public attention is constantly attracted by fragmented information, mainstream media editors in the digital age, acting as gatekeepers, must use strict review mechanisms and standards to select truly public-interest news from the vast ocean of information.

At the same time, social media platforms play a critical role in information dissemination, and platform administrators should bear greater supervisory responsibility for the authenticity and ethical responsibility of public event information. Additionally, users need to cultivate critical thinking in the digital age, carefully evaluating the authenticity of information to avoid adverse consequences from reckless dissemination. Therefore, future incidents can be approached from a dynamic hierarchical media ethics perspective to holistically assess the potential ethical responsibilities and improper ethical behaviors of all parties involved, rather than merely penalizing information producers and creators. In conclusion, information dissemination in the digital age is not just a technical issue but a complex ethical problem. All stakeholders should work together to establish a healthier, more orderly online information dissemination environment to maintain public interest and trust in society.

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