［投稿: 学会動向］

Media as Ontology and Epistemology

Rethinking Postman's Argument with Insights from China

本体論および認識論としてのメディア
中国からの知見によるポストマンの議論再考

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Abstract:

This paper examines the transformation of media in the new era. Taking into account Neil Postman's statement "media as epistemology," this paper analyzes the ontological nature of new media and argues that the prevalence of personal media in the new era has resulted in an amplification of large-scale ontological reconstruction of people. Using the examples from China, it suggests that the rapid growth of new media may cause many social problems at both individual and national levels, and scholars should pay attention to the more penetrable intrusiveness of new media.

本論文では、新時代におけるメディアの変遷について考察する。ニール・ポストマンの「メディアの認識論的側面」に関する主張を参照し、新たなメディアの存在論的特性を分析する。また、新時代におけるパーソナルメディアの普及が、人々の存在論的再構築を大規模に促進したことを論じる。さらに、中国を例として、新しいメディアの急速な普及が、個人および国家の両レベルでさまざまな社会問題を引き起こす可能性があることから、学者はその浸透しやすい侵襲性に対して十分な注意を払うべきであると主張する。

Keywords:

epistemology, media, ontology, self-consciousness, self-expression

認識論、メディア、存在論、自己意識、自己表現

1. Introduction

In the book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the author Neil Postman points out an intriguing argument, which is demonstrated by the title of the second chapter, "Media as Epistemology." In this chapter, Postman notes that "the concept of truth is intimately linked to the biases of forms of expression. Truth does not, and never has, come unadorned. It must appear in its proper clothing… every epistemology is the epistemology of stage of media development" (Postman, 2005, p.22-4), which means that the pervasive and intrusive media constantly affect human beings by shaping their epistemological senses. Indeed, the disparities existing in distinct views and perspectives, which often lead to antagonism and conflicts, originate in the epistemology constructed by the media they consume. According to Postman, oral expressions, which are considered truthful in oral culture, are seen as much less credible than written information in the era of print-based culture. Television-based culture also exhibits similar characteristics, and the rapid growth of TV consumption leads Postman to emphasize the concept of "media as epistemology." Nonetheless, due to the widespread adoption of the Internet and smartphones over the past decade, access to news among people has evolved into a complex network that effortlessly connects everyone. Eli Pariser introduces the "filter bubble" theory in relation to the highly algorithm-driven media of today, suggesting that Internet search engines deliver personalized information flows tailored to individual preferences, thereby creating an isolated and invisible "bubble" for each person that continuously influences their cognition (Pariser, 2011, p.7-11). A similar notion, known as the "Echo Chamber," suggests that individuals influenced by this characteristic of new media passively—or arguably spontaneously—hear the echoes of their own voices, which fosters group polarization and extremism (Sunstein, 2002). Indeed, as receivers of information provided by media, people's epistemology is readily shaped individually by the personalization features of new media; however, the identities of today's individuals are far more complex and multilayered. With the rapid development of media technology, people are currently not merely receivers of media, but have rather become media themselves. People now utilize new media technologies to express their own voices, and the accessibility of such voices is open to every individual. By examining cases in contemporary China, this paper argues that, rather than demonstrating a linear effect in which people, as receivers, are shaped by media in an epistemological sense, individuals construct and reconstruct

their ontological sense through the utilization of new media.

The transformation of media from epistemology to ontology, as demonstrated in this paper, does not render Postman's argument outdated. The epistemological nature of media has never been completely replaced by the ontological nature in the era of new media, often referred to as "personal media." It still plays a vital role in determining truth, but its role has become more complex compared to the epistemology of television-based media, which embeds the concept of "seeing is believing" in people's minds. The new techniques widely employed in new media, such as image compositing, raise questions about the credibility of information seen or heard in the new media. The focus of this paper is the ontological nature of media alongside the epistemological nature. Furthermore, this paper aims to demonstrate that the ontological nature has always existed and is not solely a result of new media. The era of new media merely amplifies the ontological nature, and scholars should take note of its historical significance, current characteristics, and potential future implications.

This paper will explore the ontological nature of media at both individual and collective levels. It will use historical figures in China as examples to illustrate the historical significance of the ontological nature of media, and examine how their contemporary prevalence influences our understanding of media in the new era. Although China possesses a certain degree of uniqueness, examining its media transformation can provide a meaningful critical approach to further elaborating on Postman's argument and assessing media communication.

2. New Individuals

Individuals are now being shaped by omnipresent media, which holds the normalized power to gradually influence their values and self-consciousness. In the new era, the exponential growth of personal media has significantly bolstered the efficacy of this normalized power, in which the ontological consciousness of the essence of oneself could be constantly reconstructed during the process of speaking out through personal media. This new form of media has significantly reduced censorship, greatly increased accessibility, and allowed for unprecedented levels of vocalization compared to traditional media. Thus, from a Foucauldian perspective, which posits that the efficacy of power is proportional to its ability to conceal its mechanisms (Foucault, 1978, p.86), new media has fostered intrusiveness and the ability to reconstruct one's ontological consciousness, and it does so while concealing itself behind a mask of freedom.

An exemplary instance of constant ontological self-reconstruction can be seen in the use of beauty cameras. The widespread and intensive use of beauty cameras enables users to project an "ideal self" or a more appealing image on the Internet, often driven by aesthetic preferences and the pursuit of profitability within the context of capitalism. The online images of beauty camera users often differ significantly from their real-life appearances. Nevertheless, online activities, whether in terms of aesthetic praise for the modified images or profit generation, can gradually and significantly influence the self-ontological consciousness of beauty camera users. In the context of modified online images, the abundance of favorable online comments, often perceived as spontaneous expressions due to the perceived nature of freedom of new media, can readily trigger an ontological reconstruction of self-consciousness. In this process, users are highly likely to be influenced in reevaluating their real-life appearances and images, either positively or negatively. They may eventually evolve into entirely different selves, with their self-reconstructed consciousness shaped by new media, while their physical bodies remain unchanged.

Such a projection of "selfness" onto new media is how the "filters" and "echoes" noted by Pariser and Sunstein are formed. Thus, in addition to examining the epistemological construction by media, the constant projection of ourselves—through every click, post, like, and retweet—emerges as the key determinant of personalized information flows. Traditional media also exhibit such characteristics for individuals, where, even though the delivered information flows are fixed, each person's preference for receiving the information differs based on their preexisting filters. For instance, people who like sports tend to only read sports-related news and ignore other information written in the newspapers. For other information, human beings tend to believe things that "confirm what we already believe sooner than we do things that challenge our views" and "ignore information when acknowledging it would disadvantage us" (Mair, 2017). In the new era, this feature has been significantly amplified, as people have become both "traditional passive" receivers and "proactive" vocalizers. The information flows provided by search engines create the so-called "personalized" individuals based on the initial projection of ourselves that we present, suggesting that the observed epistemological construction by new media is, in fact, rooted in the ontological transformation of ourselves.

3. Collective Ontological Construction

Beyond its influence on individuals, new media also exerts ontological impacts on the collective consciousness. The diffusion of new media can foster collectivism and the so-called solidarity in people's minds. Furthermore, it has the potential to reconstruct the concept of collectivity and one's ontological consciousness of self-being within a specific group. Regarding collectivism, one ultimate form is nationalism. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson highlights the crucial role of print capitalism in shaping national identity, fostering nationalism, and disseminating official discourses to the public in the modern era (Anderson, 2006, p.39-42). However, print capitalism, based on the traditional media model, is now being replaced by new media. The efficacy of new media is significantly higher than that of traditional forms because it can circumvent resistance to collectivism from receivers, who have now become active participants and vocalizers themselves. In Foucault's view, it could be argued that new media is better equipped to create docile bodies, as it can readily transform the ontological consciousness of the relationship between individuals and collectives, leading individuals to willingly embed themselves in the collectives (Foucault, 1995, p.195-9).

An intriguing example in society is the military training of college students in China. Undoubtedly, forced military training organized by the state government has faced extensive resistance and resentment among students for decades. However, due to the prevalence of personal media that allows students to appeal their military training activities online, such resistance is gradually being weakened. Opposition from students to state-arranged military training has evolved into an ontological consciousness in their minds, where they genuinely feel part of these collectives. Consequently, the ontological consciousness created by new media can further reinforce collectivism at different levels, ultimately reaching the national level. Therefore, this transformation led by new media contributes significantly to the formation of the prevalence of nationalism, militarism, and extreme collective behaviors in contemporary China.

4. Historical Figures

As demonstrated above, media as ontology is not a product of the personal media era. Each form of media possesses an ontological nature. On the one hand, the ontological nature of media can prevent individuals from passively receiving information from traditional media. A prototypical example of science communication, stating that people choose to access real-time research outcomes rather than merely receiving pre-filtered knowledge (Bucchi, 2019), can further illustrate this. Similar to the practices of many informative popular science personal media, these ontological natures can filter the knowledge people come across and subsequently share selected information on the Internet. On the other hand, media fuses people in a community constructed by the Internet, and each individual gains self-identification in this community through self-expression. Like the military training case discussed above, although students can avoid indoctrination by expressing dissatisfaction, they are being fused in new collectives through these self-expressions. Furthermore, the military training case reveals an underlying layer of meaning, highlighting the significant role that the ontological nature of media plays in history. Such collective identity, in this case, expressed by students through slogans, was ubiquitous in the oral-based media era, and in the ancient era when the concept of nationalism was not formed, the solidarity and collectivity of soldiers were constructed through slogans in training. For instance, during the Yellow Turban Rebellion, the slogan "The blue sky is already dead; the yellow sky shall rise (*CangTianYiSi, HuangTianDangLi*)" was used to cohere the Yellow Turban Army.

Apart from specific slogans, languages were also important in the oral-based media era. Holcombe, the author of *The Genesis of East Asia*, slightly disagrees with the concept of imagined communities. By stating that "humanity really does divide up into many different groups, for many different reasons. These groups all have their own distinctive characteristics" (Holcombe, 2001, p.49), and he suggests that ethnicity is not a concept of nominalism. Furthermore, he argues that "East Asia exists... in large part because of the universal application throughout the region—and only this region—of the Chinese writing system" (Holcombe, p.61), in which the concept of ethnicity does not sufficiently create a community, but the same language, or the features of media contribute significantly to cohere individuals to collectives. Besides the obvious impacts of Chinese characters on East Asia in the form of print-based media, the emphasis on dialects in the oral-based media era (e. g., government officials in China were required to speak the same dialect with the court) also corroborates such impacts on ethnical identification.

5. Conclusion

Building on Postman's notion, this paper examines the ontological nature of media and its constructive impact on self-

identity and collective identity through an analysis of cases in China, whose distinct sociohistorical context nonetheless offers a lens for extending Postman's argument and refining our broader understanding of media communication. It has demonstrated that a new theoretical framework is needed to analyze media and its social influences in the new era due to the exponential growth of personal media. People can be reconstructed readily through engagements with new media, which can lead them to either overestimate or underestimate themselves in real life. Therefore, the emergence of social problems, including psychological illness and identity crises, is caused and constantly exacerbated by the ontological reconstruction of new media. Regarding the collective level, new media has integrated all elements of collective identification, including languages and print texts, into a more accessible and "freer" form. Consequently, due to the much more penetrable intrusiveness of new media, the formation of ultranationalism becomes easier and more spontaneous, and it is a phenomenon that scholars should pay attention to.

Acknowledgement

Notes

This paper was presented at the 25th World Congress of Philosophy in Rome, Italy, on August 2nd, 2024.

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