

Collective Bias and Its Presentation on the Internet in China

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Abstract:

Bias has long been a problem in Chinese society, particularly in the context of new media. With the increasing ease of communication and the availability of new channels, discrimination has become more prevalent on the internet. As various groups in modern society are closely connected, it is inevitable that some disagreements and disputes arise. Therefore, reducing bias and discrimination between groups has become an important issue that needs to be addressed today. This article will start from the types, presentation patterns and the impact of prejudice, and analyze the main causes of bias comprehensively, and provide scientific solutions to fundamentally solve this social problem.

Keywords:

Bias, Discrimination, Social Identity, Cognitive Dissonance, Cognitive Bias

1. Introduction

Regional bias is not a recent phenomenon, it has existed for a long time. In ancient times, it existed in tribal conflicts, literary disputes, and courtly politics. Limited communication conditions hindered the spread of bias, so most of it was confined to a certain region without forming a large-scale impact. However, with the development of information technology and network technology, there are more channels for dissemination, and media forms have also undergone significant changes, including all digital media forms - new media. This has led to a fundamental change in the information dissemination environment, with the parallelism formed by new media breaking through the ideological limitations of traditional media and greatly influencing the dissemination of information. However, this has also made regional discrimination more serious in the era of new media, and it has spread from traditional media to multiple media platforms such as social media and mobile apps. New media, characterized by 'pros' and 'cons', presents a feature of 'pros' and 'cons' coexisting, and has a direct impact on the audience's value judgments and behavior preferences.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research on Group Bias

(1) Research in Different Countries

British philosopher Bacon was the first to propose the concept of 'bias', understanding it as a preconceived notion that hinders us from understanding the world. [1]

In 1920, Lippmann's 'Public Opinion' discussed media bias in the news production process early on and described media bias as 'prejudice'. [2] Lippmann observed that news reporters and editors are influenced by their own preconceptions, and 'A report is a mixture of what he has been told and what he imagines, the parts that he chooses to accept and the parts that he rejects', which is an important factor in the formation of media bias. [3]

Dennis Merrill analyzed two attitudes held by most scholars in his book 'Media Debates: 19 Major Issues in U.S. Policy in the Twenty-First Century', namely recognizing the inevitability of media bias and denying the existence of impartial news reporting, leading to the conclusion that news reports inevitably have a bias. [4].

In his book *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*, veteran CBS correspondent Bernard Goldberg pointed out in 2002 that the American news media and most journalists have political biases [5]. In 2003, the scholarly journal *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, widely recognized in the field of communication studies, featured a special issue on 'Studies of Credibility and Bias', which carried four empirical articles on media bias. Michael McDevitt identified typical news biases, such as over-reliance on official voices at the top, excessive focus on political or social elites, and marginalization or stigmatization of minority groups [6].

(2) China Research

In recent years, more research has been conducted on group bias, covering its origins, concepts, and ways of avoidance. 'The Social and Cultural Roots and Control of Media Bias' is a doctoral dissertation by Jing Chen from Zhejiang University, who treated media as a form of bias, exploring its influence and impact from political, economic, and cultural perspectives [7]. In 'Media Bias from the Perspectives of News Routines: Insights from McQuail's Production Study', Ying Yin attributed the phenomenon of 'news bias' to the presence of slanted news coverage [8]. In the article 'Media Personnel and Media Bias', Yantao Bi argued that 'group bias' refers to a particular group's bias held by producers of news, such as journalists and editors, which primarily manifests itself in selecting and reporting events [9]. In 'Media Literacy Education', Huiping Hu called for developing audience's cognitive abilities in understanding and critiquing the media [10].

2.2. A Study on the Online Presentation of Regional Bias

In 1996, Li Xiguang conducted a survey on foreign media coverage of China and found many negative news that damaged China's national image. Based on this, he put forward the concept of 'demonizing China' and published the book 'Behind the Demonization of China' [11]. Since then, although Western media coverage of China has increased significantly in both quantity and space, it is still mostly negative. On the Chinese Knowledge Network, under the topic of 'regional prejudice', we obtained 294 results, of which 22 were in the field of news communication. In the search for the term 'regional discrimination', we got 830 results, of which 44 were in the news and media circles. Through literature review, there is little research in the academic

community on the phenomenon of regional prejudice in the online presentation environment, and most of them are based on traditional media to analyze and demonstrate the existence, causes, and countermeasures of regional prejudice. So far, no academic paper has specifically studied the phenomenon of regional prejudice in relevant new media.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Purpose

Based on the above research background, this study will take the geographical bias generated in the online environment as a starting point to analyze the causes of geographical prejudice on the online platform, to better find ways to resolve this phenomenon. Based on this, the study will focus on the following three aspects for further exploration, which will be the research objectives:

- a. Classification of regional group prejudice phenomena in the online environment.
- b. New media expressions of geographical bias.
- c. How to resolve geographical bias.

3.2. Research Methodology

This study mainly adopts the qualitative research method of online field investigation. Firstly, a literature review method is used for theoretical research, which involves searching, reading, analyzing, and summarizing relevant literature. Through websites such as CNKI, VIP, Wanfang (domestic) and Google Scholar (foreign), many literatures, academic journals, and news comments are searched and read, and a theoretical analysis and exploration of geographical prejudice in public communication is conducted. Based on the theoretical research, an online field investigation is conducted. From April 2023 to June 2023, a three-month online field observation is carried out to record and extract information related to geographical prejudice from news, social media comments, and hot topics on the Internet. After all relevant information is collected, the content is summarized and analyzed.

4. Types of presentation of group territorial bias

4.1. Bias towards specific regions

Firstly, prejudice towards specific regions is often found in negative news reports. When reporting negative news, if the individuals involved are from a certain province or region, their place of birth is generally not mentioned in the news headline. However, if someone from a specific, discriminated against region is involved, their place of birth is often added to the headline. Henan province is often used as an object of regional discrimination, and negative impressions of people from Henan have become deeply ingrained. When searching 'Henan people' on Baidu, the first suggested topics include 'Why are Henan people not welcome?' and 'Did Henan people steal sewer covers?'. However, few people know that in the 1960s, a sociology professor at the University of California, Berkeley, Albert E. Haynes, conducted a survey of traditional impressions of China's various provinces. The research found that the traditional image of Henan people differs greatly from the current negative impressions of them. They were considered honest, straightforward, and rule-abiding,

and were widely welcomed. This research result is closely related to the current situation and social structure of Henan province.

4.2. Prejudice against economically backward regions

Before the 1990s, the Northeast region, also known as the eldest son of the country, had an economic development level on par with that of China, and was also an important heavy industrial base of the country. However, in recent years, the development of the Northeast region has faced a transformation. In 2003, the government proposed the strategy of revitalizing the old industrial base in Northeast China. With the support of the government, the Northeast region has become the focus of attention, and people's attention and discussion of the region have increased. In this process, there are indeed some sincere and rational voices that want to revitalize the Northeast. However, some people attribute the economic backwardness to the regional culture and character of the Northeast, and interpret the excellent qualities of Northeastern people, such as generosity and righteousness, as only barbarism and banditry without intelligence. The media plays an important role in correctly interpreting national policies, but some media 'exploit the situation' and exacerbate the existence of this regional prejudice.

4.3. Prejudice within regions

In addition, prejudice within regions also exists. Not only are there discriminations between provinces, but there is also mutual contempt within provinces for various reasons. Taking Jiangsu Province as an example, although it is one of the largest provinces on the southeast coast and one of the most developed provinces in the country, its own economic development is not balanced, especially with a large gap between the north and the south. Cities south of the Yangtze River are much richer than those in the north. The Suzhou-Nantong area is very proud of its status, but it looks down on the Suqian-Xuzhou area. Over time, Suzhou and Nantong have become the biggest competitors in Jiangsu, and Jiangsu has also been called the 'fighting province'. At the same time, there is also discrimination between locals and outsiders within each city. For example, the view of Shanghai people towards outsiders is that everyone outside of Shanghai is an outsider. This is why Shanghai people have extreme hostility towards outsiders.

In the context of new media, the expression of regional bias has become more diversified. Information spreads quickly and tends to be public and diverse. However, this fast and fragmented way of communication exacerbates the sharp contradictions of regional prejudice. Some media plays an important role in regional prejudice. These media often treat people from different regions unfairly in their reporting, and they differentiate people from different regions in various ways. Labeling, generalization, and discriminatory language are common types of regional discrimination in news reports. 'Follow-up reporting' is also a way of expression. (Sun & Shi, 2009) [12]. The media are pursuing novel perspectives in their reporting, but overly subjective reporting will neglect the overall reality, especially in negative news reports, focusing too much on one aspect of the incident, which will affect the true judgment of the event. Therefore, it is important to choose an appropriate perspective in reporting and avoid overemphasizing subjective viewpoints, presenting a comprehensive and objective picture of reality.

5. The Dangers and Governance of Group Bias

5.1. Dangers

Firstly, group bias can lead to cognitive biases among audiences. Due to economic and cultural factors, regional differences are inevitable. From regional differences to regional biases, it is a process of forming stereotyped impressions of a region. Social stereotypes refer to a fixed, generalized, and often negative viewpoint that people form about a certain person or thing, which they subjectively consider applicable to all these individuals. Under the influence of biased reports in the media and unfair public information on the internet, viewers who do not understand the situation often have a biased understanding of regions, forming preconceived prejudices and losing their subjectivity. At the same time, viewers' desire for the truth will also make them pay extra attention to certain major events. In a restless social hot spot and a noisy internet space, the truth needs to be precipitated for a period, and viewers are inevitably affected by distorted or biased information, resulting in misunderstandings.

Secondly, group bias can weaken the credibility of the media. Media credibility refers to the inherent ability of the media to gain public trust, which plays a crucial role in media communication. Marx once said, 'The existence of newspapers depends on people's trust in them, and it will be completely lost without vitality'. This is also true in the era of new media, where the media gradually establishes its trust through its reputation and professional authority, but prejudice can cause this trust to be lost. In the new media environment, the speed of information dissemination is extremely fast, which is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Many messages are immediately spread online without further verification during the collection and publication process. When the truth of the matter is revealed, and the initial 'truth' is proven to be false, the credibility of the media will take a big hit.

In addition, regions receiving bias will receive unfair treatment. Song Qinghui, a famous economist, believes that regional discrimination is very harmful. In some cases, regional discrimination may completely deprive some people of their right to survival. Regional bias has a significant impact on local people going out to work, which directly leads to a lag in the region's economic development. Employment, education, marriage, and social interaction will also face serious social prejudice. In summary, regional bias deprives people of their right to equal access to information, knowledge, and even wealth, plunging them into a vicious cycle of material poverty, information poverty, and even greater material poverty.

5.2. Governance

To address regional bias, the first step is to strengthen the linkage between mainstream media and new media. In the age of the internet, open platforms enable everyone to participate in information production, and are superior to mainstream media in terms of timeliness and interactivity. However, this also brings disadvantages as online platforms become a breeding ground for regional bias and lack the authority and credibility of mainstream media. In the face of competition, mainstream media and new media are often seen as opposing forces that cannot be replaced by each other. However they complement each other greatly, and mutual benefits can be achieved by complementing each other's strengths and weaknesses. Hu Zhengrong, the former Vice President of the China University of Communication, pointed out at a forum on new media that only linkage and integration can truly

construct a new environment for public opinion. The immediacy, massiveness, and interactivity of new media are the shortcomings of mainstream media, while authority and depth are lacking in new media. Linking the two can greatly enhance the authority and influence of information dissemination.

Secondly, helping audiences establish a critical media literacy can reduce the problem of regional bias. In the development of mass communication, the role of the audience has undergone significant changes, and they increasingly participate in discussions on public affairs and hot topics, to some extent also assuming the role of opinion leaders. However, in this process, audiences are inevitably influenced by external factors and their inherent impressions, resulting in regional bias. Therefore, in a complex media environment, audiences should maintain an attitude of independent thinking, improve their ability of rational analysis, eliminate their own biases, and establish a critical media literacy.

(1) Enhancing the audience's ability to think critically about information

In this era of information explosion, fragmented information is overwhelming and difficult to distinguish between true and false. Many people tend to draw conclusions based only on their initial impressions, rather than taking the time to think. Rational thinking is the scarcest resource in this era. Therefore, an ordered public opinion ecology must be based on high-quality audience members, and the ability of audiences to think and criticize information has an important impact on the angle and depth of media coverage. Therefore, improving the media literacy of audiences is conducive to the stability of public opinion.

(2) Cultivating the audience's attitude of respecting differences

The promotion of a harmonious society inherently includes the idea of respecting differences, which emphasizes inclusiveness. However, inclusiveness does not refer to the indulgence of negative speech or behavior, which allows for the proliferation of regional bias. Here, inclusiveness refers more to the recognition of different cultures and ways of life in different regions.

6. Conclusions

'It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.' This famous quote by Dickens one hundred years ago accurately describes the impact of new media on traditional media today. While new media allows for deep interaction between media and audiences, it also provides a rapidly visible platform for regional bias. As network media develops, many non-professional citizen journalists have joined the ranks of new media information dissemination. Factors such as insufficient media literacy and the lower threshold for public opinion expression make it easy for regional bias to form amidst the fragmented spread of new media. In addition to preconceived, ingrained or hearsay prejudices, regional bias also appears in different categories on new media platforms and is damaging. The phenomenon of group bias has existed since ancient times and will not disappear in the short term. Resolving this phenomenon remains a long and difficult task.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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