Research of Public News Headlines' Bias in the Context of New Media: Using "Weibo" Hot Search Headlines as a Case Study

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Abstract. In recent years, the criteria for creating popular search headlines on Weibo have made it a socially controversial source of information. Using content analysis as the primary research method, this study seeks to systematically dissect the presentation of news topics within Weibo's popular search headlines. Through a careful examination of news content, trends, and patterns, it aims to reveal the existence and dynamics of biases in news selection and presentation. Furthermore, this paper investigates the dissemination of public news and its complexity while exploring both internal and external factors contributing to deviations in the publication of public news headlines. It also strives to enrich our understanding of the significance of this platform and its potential impact on Chinese society. Insights gained from this research contribute to our understanding of the evolving patterns of news dissemination within the Chinese internet ecosystem. It underscores the importance of critically evaluating the role of digital platforms in shaping public discourse and information consumption, with a focus on bias issues and their broader societal implications.

1 Introduction

In the age of Web 4.0, where information dissemination is increasingly mobile-centric, the internet's ever-expanding landscape of information sources has reshaped how individuals' access and engage with news and content. Notably, Weibo, a prominent social media platform, has emerged as a central player in shaping the narrative and direction of news and information within the Chinese media landscape. Through trending topics and viral headlines, Weibo has demonstrated its capacity to shift the focus and direction of news events, often reconfiguring the cause-and-effect relationships surrounding these events. This phenomenon inadvertently sparks controversies and propels debates, thereby influencing public opinion and discourse.

In China, the 50th Statistical Report on the Development Status of the Internet in China, which was published by CNNIC, indicates that as of June 2022, China had 1.051 billion Internet users, 1.047 billion mobile phone users, 788 million users of online news, and 29.5 hours of per capita weekly Internet access. Because there are so many people using the Internet, the Internet news user group makes up approximately 75% of all Internet users. There are now 1.051 billion Internet users in China, released is the 50th Statistical Report on the Growth of the Internet in China. It's also important to discuss and conduct tests on the problem of content bias in digital and data-driven news distribution media behind algorithms and manual audits as the primary way of tweeting popular topics.

This study aims to explore and analyses the trends in Weibo headlines from the previous year, utilizing the lens of communication science. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of these trends, the study seeks to shed light on the ways in which Weibo shapes public news communication in China and reaffirms moral values within this new media landscape.

2 Current literature review

Ardévol-Abreu A remarks that social media can be a source for mainstream and citizen-created news, but also for hybrid information containing the attributes of both and also finds that the perception of media bias negatively impacts news consumption across all media platforms, leading individuals to seek less biased alternatives, but it acknowledges the complexity of trust development in the context of social media [1]. Entman R M stated that that media bias can affect political power dynamics by strengthening favoured officials and weakening others, and integrating concepts from media studies has the potential to yield empirical evidence and improve normative recommendations for enhancing media's contribution to democracy [2]. Toni G. L. A. Van der Meer, Michael Hameleers & Anne C. Kroon emphasize the alignment of negativity in news reporting with citizens' selection bias, driven by confirmation bias and congruence with their political beliefs, suggesting that ease of processing source cues is not the sole determinant of news exposure [3].

One discusses how social media serves as a source of diverse news types and its role in influencing individuals.
to seek less biased alternatives, emphasizing the challenge of trust development in the social media context and focuses on the political consequences of media bias and advocates for integrating media studies concepts to enhance the media's role in democracy. Someone highlights the alignment of negativity in news reporting with citizens' selection bias, driven by confirmation bias and political beliefs, challenging the idea that source cues alone determine news exposure. These viewpoints collectively highlight the complexity of media bias and its impact on news consumption and politics.

According to Zhu Hongjun and Zhou Kui, the term "neutrality" is frequently used by new media platforms as an excuse to avoid their social obligations to the media. These platforms' dubious content, lack of verification, commercial-type algorithmic tendencies, and ethical responsibility for the use of technology are all signs of their "pseudo-neutrality"[4]. "It contradicts the value of the new media platform (Weibo) itself to disseminate the amount of value by attributing all of the public opinion issues brought on by the names of Weibo hot search titles to the calculation and pushing of big data algorithms while ignoring the positioning of people as the "gatekeepers," externalizing social responsibility, and attributing all of the issues to technology [4]. Zhang Yunfeng identifies two primary traits in the creation of news headlines: the urge to get readers to click and share, or to make information more readable by using colloquial language and the frequent appearance of "headline parties" which frequently grab readers' attention by using exaggerated language. Readership and conversation are typically sparked by contentious headlines, and editors' subjective consciousness is preoccupied with the headlines' ability to influence public opinion [5]. In response to the overwhelming volume of information on Weibo, Yang Ning believes that most users lack the time and energy to actively choose and can only passively choose to learn about recently occurred events by perusing the popular subjects in the Weibo hot search list. Weibo headlines are the primary source of the public's grip the way of propagating ideas as a result, and they are extremely susceptible to the effect of relevant algorithms and artificial gatekeepers in the fragmented time when users collect news information [6]. The stereotypes are aggravated by violent symbolic attacks on the "stigmatization" of women, which are primarily distinguished by the target of the attacks being mainly women and the content of the attacks being mainly sexualized slander and degradation, according to Chen Qi [7]. Hou Yufei writes in his article "A glimpse of the "one-sided" phenomenon of gender issues on microblogging platforms" that media platforms (microblogs) have recognized that gender issues are quite topical and have increased the proportion of gender issues in the selection of news events such as hot searches, and that the publication of such social events is strongly correlated with the setting of the platform's intervention agenda [8]. More frequently than "a man," "a woman" is the subject of headlines that deflect attention and present contrasting arguments to elicit debate. According to Song Mengyuan, prejudiced discourse structures are the root of regional stigma because of cognitive differences and under-expression, which causes all verbal views of a place to be transformed into rumors, prejudices, etc. Big data crawling or individual access to information frequently defaults to a quantity-based strategy, often resulting in the broadcast of pertinent false information that is both verifiable and challenging to test [9].

The discussion delves into the critical issue of content bias within digital news distribution, raising questions about the concept of "pseudo-neutrality" employed by new media platforms. These articles also further examine the pivotal role of headlines in news consumption, emphasizing their use of colloquial and exaggerated language to capture readers' attention. Gender-related stereotypes in news coverage and regional stigma stemming from prejudiced discourse structures should be solved as well. Likewise, it notes the challenges posed by big data strategies, often leading to the dissemination of false information, highlighting the complexities of today's digital media landscape. Overall, this paragraph offers a comprehensive overview of the intricate interplay between technology, media, and societal dynamics in the digital age.

3 News headlines' biased textual analysis

Fragmented semantic concepts that emerge more frequently and are more consistently in nature are distilled into categories with implications to broaden the scope and dimensionality of the study perspective. A total of 204 contentious hot search titles that appeared on the "Weibo Hot Search List" from October 2021 to October 2022 were chosen as the sample for analysis to pursue the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the textual content. These hot search titles were manually categorized and refined to create a coding system that reflected the "Weibo Hot Search List" in October.

The percentage of 35 headlines that dealt with "relationship between men and women" among them reached 17.2%. For instance, "Man driving drunk during internship insists he is a woman," "Woman told she has a boyfriend, not recruited," "A boy in Shanghai builds a family amusement park for his girlfriend," and more. Only three of these headlines, usually concerning criminal instances that jeopardize social security, clearly demonstrate a bias in favour of positive reporting. The analysis found that 28.6% of the headlines were based on the victim's side of the event, with only one male and the rest female, and that they frequently used terms like "was" and "were" to emphasize how vulnerable women were in the incident and spark conversation, for example, "The headline "Woman burned, scarred and amputated by boyfriend" skillfully employs a sequential relationship to distract the public's attention and generate a conversation on "what did the woman do to deserve the petrol? ", emphasizing what the woman experienced rather than what the guy did. This is an ingenious use of the sequential relationship to draw attention away from
the debate about "what the woman did to deserve the petrol" and focus it on "why the man threw petrol." Many news headlines, or 25 out of the 71.4%, did not use passive subjects, although they were nonetheless narrative in nature. Examples include "Drunk man beats up female neighbor in lift" and "30-year-old female master's degree student cheated out of $580,000 for online dating in a pig killing dish." The headlines accurately and succinctly describe what happened, and they identify a particular group of people with the qualifiers "drunk" and "female master," attaining the goal of objective assertions without sacrificing the discussion of the subject. Weibo's topological angle about male-female relationships is still primarily negative news-based now, with the intention of challenging male-female relationships while exposing social difficulties. There is no shortage of headlines that are meant to draw attention or purposefully obfuscate active and passive relationships, even though mainstream newspapers often convey facts objectively in a "subject-verb-object" style.

The comparison of geographical regions and the corresponding preconceptions is the major issue with the headlines of "geographical" hotspots. For instance, the headlines "No chicken can escape Guangdong" and "No sheep can leave Gansu alive" automatically give the idea that all residents in Gansu enjoy eating chicken and sheep, respectively. With such regional headlines, which are obviously subjective, accounting for 11.1% of Weibo's coverage of local events, such extreme emotions tend to reinforce preconceptions of a particular region and are not favourable to cultural understanding and integration between regions. With more than 200,000 talks, the percentage of such headlines was 78.6%. The headlines were frequently brief, easy to muddle with behavioural relationships, and not obviously biased. Although the headlines are usually brief and opaque behavioural relationships without any clear reporting bias, they tend to trigger public debate and big-topic debates between various geographic areas at the first level. Positive values frequently shift when headlines like "eye-catching" and "curiosity hunting" appear. Hot searches for "Boss promises programmer 15 days of annual leave after getting off" and "Bride throws bouquet, 7 bridesmaids scream and dodge" totalled 23, or 11.8% of the total, and reported information that threatens social security in the form of hilarious jokes, for instance. He's in love, "Bride throws bouquet, 7 bridesmaids scream and dodge," and "The bride throws bouquet, 7 bridesmaids scream and dodge" are just a few examples of the subjective search headlines. Several male pals were drugged and knocked out by a drug dealer to commit molestation.

Big data algorithms and people play two "gatekeeper" roles in the creation of Weibo hot searches in the current setting of the new media era of big data. According to the findings of the textual analysis of Weibo headlines, hot search headlines that objectively state news events are still the mainstream drafting direction, while factors that primarily affect public psychology and the scope of public opinion are not the main targets. This is because the central government and the General Administration of Radio, Film, and Television have a strict control over online public opinion. Unavoidably, some headlines do need to be altered in terms of formulation. To start, they should stop using the victim as the main subject and switch to using the vulnerable as the angle of traffic attraction. This would draw more public attention to the headlines. According to the definition of symbolic violence, it was French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who first put forth the concept. Bourdieu claimed that symbolic violence is distinct from other types of violence because it is a "gentle, undetectable form of violence... that is not so much forced as it is coerced." It is more freely chosen than it is accepted. To give the audience another option, new media platforms like Weibo first screen publicly available news material once, compile it, and create catchy headlines. This study examines whether media groups generate headlines based on "objective statements" or on the bias of information diffusion between primary and secondary screening, both automatically and manually. In summary, the trend of information distribution and communication is being driven by the flow of new media, and high levels of debate and retweets have emerged as one of the standards for determining if information is reliable. From the standpoint of symbolic violence, audiences actively choose contentious and unusual news stories as a useful entry point into the public discourse, which to some extent also results in the platforms themselves using their position as "gatekeepers" to meet social needs and other requirements by "embellishing" news content that would otherwise seem commonplace and ordinary. This has, to some extent, resulted in the active use of its function as a "gatekeeper" within the platforms to "embellish" news material that appears routine and every day, as opposed to the active use of "symbolic violence."

4 The Role of Symbolic Violence in Media Headlines

According to the content analysis, the concept of "symbolic violence," as initially articulated by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, carries profound implications when applied to the analysis of media headlines [10]. Bourdieu posited that symbolic violence differs from other forms of violence as it operates subtly, almost imperceptibly, coercing rather than forcing individuals. It is a form of violence more freely chosen than accepted, making it particularly insidious [10]. In the context of contemporary new media platforms like Weibo, the process of headline creation serves as an illuminating example of symbolic violence at play. These platforms function as gatekeepers of information, holding significant sway over the narratives that permeate the public sphere. They possess the authority to curate, synthesize, and frame headlines, thereby shaping what captures the public's attention, instigates debates, and fuels discourse.

As revealed by the 204 textual analysis of Weibo headlines, the prevailing trend still leans toward objective reporting of news events. However, the dynamics at play extend beyond mere factual
dissemination. The headlines crafted often play with the positioning of subjects, subtly shifting the focus from the perpetrator to the victim or the vulnerable. This strategic choice influences the public's perception of events and serves as a form of symbolic violence. Crucially, this manipulation of headlines does not occur in a vacuum. Audiences actively participate in this complex ecosystem by selecting contentious or unusual news stories as entry points into public discourse. They are drawn to narratives that spark controversy or intrigue, thereby reinforcing the gatekeeping role of these platforms. It is a symbiotic relationship where social demands and media influence converge, resulting in the embellishment and amplification of seemingly mundane news content.

In summary, the study of symbolic violence in media headlines is an ongoing journey, one that continues to reveal the intricacies of power and influence in our information-saturated age. The evolving landscape of information distribution and communication, driven by new media platforms, underscores the significance of headlines as gatekeepers of public discourse. The active use of symbolic violence, where narratives are subtly shaped and perspectives are influenced, has become an inherent part of media headline creation. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms at play in the digital age, where news headlines are not just conveyors of facts but powerful tools for shaping public opinion and discourse.

5 Prospects and conclusion

According to the meticulous analysis of the texts under scrutiny, news headlines continue to adhere steadfastly to the indispensable standards mandated for information dissemination in China. Firstly, the confirmation that news headlines in China align with the established standards of impartiality. In an era where misinformation and biased reporting have garnered significant attention globally, this reaffirmation of journalistic integrity in China serves as a model worth emulating. Moreover, the emphasis on objectivity and effectiveness within the communication industry raises questions about the potential global applicability of these practices. Could the principles observed in China's news headline creation serve as a blueprint for journalism practices worldwide? This sparks a dialogue about the cross-cultural exchange of ideas and best practices in the field of journalism, an avenue ripe for further exploration and collaboration.

Understanding whether editorial choices can indeed shape the agenda of public conversations will not only deepen our comprehension of media's role but also offer insights into the mechanisms of information dissemination in the digital age. However, as we delve into this complex web of influence, it raises pertinent ethical and societal questions. What are the responsibilities and obligations of these gatekeepers in an era where information is a potent tool? How do these manipulations affect our collective values and beliefs? It is incumbent upon us to scrutinize the impact of symbolic violence in media headlines and to reflect on the evolving dynamics of information dissemination in our increasingly interconnected and digitized world.

In conclusion, according to the analysis of the texts used in this study, news headlines are still created in accordance with the necessary standards for information dissemination in China, which include being impartial, fair, true, and credible and not actively biased in favor of one side or the other. The communication industry has a positive side because it is objective and effective at spreading comprehensive and highly accurate information. Future analysis and research will examine the connection between the editors' choice of hot headlines ”which does not reflect their subjective consciousness” and the volume of discussion and buzz they produce.

References

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