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## Freedom and Responsibility: Discussion on Transmission Ethics From the Perspective of New Media

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### Abstract

New media represented by network and mobile phone is gradually changing the life of people. They have greatly satisfied with people's freedom of information and speech, broken through official information restriction, promoted their own transmission advantages and manifested the power of public discourse of the masses. However, the phenomenon of ethical misconduct is common in the transmission process of new media and freedom and responsibility are malposed due to various reasons. In view of this, how to guarantee transmission freedom and undertake ethical responsibility has become a focus of study on media ethics currently. This paper starts from the current phenomenon of ethical misconduct in new media transmission to explore its reasons and puts forward measures for standardizing new media transmission ethics on this basis in terms of legal construction, media self-discipline and supervision & control.

**Key words:** New media; Transmission ethics; Freedom of information; Transmission environment; Transmission process

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### INTRODUCTION

With social development and the progress of science and technology, new media with internet and digital technology as carriers is gradually changing the life, learning and working styles of people. A brand-new internet cyberspace has been built, thus greatly satisfying the freedom of speech and information of the masses. In the reality, while new media is bringing civilization and convenience to the modern society, the highly free transmission environment is testing the morality and responsibility of people. False information, junk information and pornographic and violent information in the transmission process of new media have become an "ecological crisis" in the development process of new media currently. Fundamentally, these problems are defects of new media in terms of transmission ethics. Engels said, "Each industry or profession has its own ethical requirements or specifications. Without such ethical requirements, the industry or professional will no longer exist." In this sense, only by undertaking the corresponding responsibilities and obligations while enjoying its freedom of discourse under the constraint of ethical morality can exert news transmission due functions to the greatest extent, realize its own value and meet social demands.

### 1. NEW MEDIA AND ITS TRANSMISSION ETHICS

#### 1.1 New Media

New media is a broad concept relative to old media, which refers to new media except traditional media such as newspaper, broadcast and television, i.e. communication patterns providing users with information and entertainment services with the use of digital technology and network technology through such channels as internet,

broadband LAN, wireless communication network and satellite and such terminals as computer, mobile phone and digital television (Xin, 2006). New media is a product of close integration and development of information science and technology and media industry in the modern society as well as the future development trend and direction of media transmission market. New media is characterized by the freedom of transmission. In terms of transmission subject, the evolution of aesthetic culture causes the equalization, spreading and virtualization of transmission subject and realizes free expression of transmission subject under the background of new media. In terms of transmission content, transmission contents of new media greatly expand the issue scope of traditional media, ranging from local place to the whole world, serious issues to tricks, rational constraint to perceptual unlimited emancipation and public space to private topics, based on advantages of internet and electronic information technology. All this greatly meets the freedom of speech of the masses.

## 1.2 Transmission Ethics

As the saying goes, as a country has its state laws, an industry also needs rules. Any industry or class must abide by its due rules. Rules here are not only limited to specific legal provisions and include minimum moral constraint of the industry or class. There is no exception for new media transmission. From ethical perspective, new media transmission ethics refers to code of conduct and specifications that must be followed by new media in the process of information transmission. It is formed based on the internal need of new media and workers – industry self-regulation and realized through high sense of responsibility and moral sense of new media personnel. New media transmission reflects the freedom of information of the masses and meanwhile needs to follow the most basic moral rule and be responsible for the society, others and itself. Under new media, everyone enjoys the freedom and right of free expression and is surrounded by massive information. While enjoying the convenience for life, they lose their contact with the inner world and become addicted to new media dependency formed based on internet platform. Therefore, ethical misconduct of new media in the transmission is caused. As some scholars said,

In China, network information technology was imagined as the power of saving for the purpose of separating from the inertia of economic collapse attached to the great vortex of politics. However, the hope was dashed soon. Excessive information did not make young people more sensible, but turned them into new blind followers. Rich global culture did not emerge with broadband, but contributed to the emergence of closed narcissism awareness. (Xu, 2009)

Therefore, strengthening ethical norms for new media in its transmission process has very important significance for promoting the development of new media industry,

protecting personal interests and establishing a harmonious society.

## 2. ETHICAL DILEMMA OF TRANSMISSION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NEW MEDIA AND ANALYSIS ON ITS REASONS

### 2.1 Ethical Dilemma of Transmission From the Perspective of New Media

#### 2.1.1 Disproportion of Freedom and Responsibility Undertaking in Information Transmission

As a main sign of modern culture, the freedom of speech and information transmission is a proper meaning of freedom as well as a basic principle of news transmission ethics. Due to features such as openness, anonymity and freedom, new media can not only make massive information gather on internet information platform, but also break through official information control and realize free communication and information interaction. Meanwhile, new media era is also an era of mass culture with extremely high degree of freedom of information transmission and its popularization among grassroots from the original privileged stratum. Extensive and random characters of its role have greatly realized the free expression of netizens and satisfied the freedom of speech of people. However, freedom is limited to not infringing others' freedom and damaging social public benefits. While enjoying freedom, people must undertake corresponding moral and legal responsibilities and obligations. Freedom without external limit is narrow. It is required to remember that transmission freedom is not a power pursuing for private interests, consider public interests and be subject to social morality and legal rules in the process of information transmission. In the reality, new media bears the mission of transmitting the free expression of the masses. It is immersed in its pleasure of freedom, but neglects ethical and moral responsibilities borne by it as transmission subject and even legal system, thus causing communication ethical misconduct, such as false information, junk information and violent and pornographic information, and even infringement act.

#### 2.1.2 Stalemate of Publicity and Self-Interest

Publicity is a main feature of modern social development. Under new media, publicity refers to practical logic of media serving the public interest as a public instrument in the society, which is formed in expression. It emphasizes how media serves public interest in the practical process as well as the fairness of platform open to the public with public service as object and its operation (Pan, 2008). In addition, the publicity of new media is also based on its property as public space. In the case of public events, the influence on the public society is realized through

the wide spread of new media. New media can provide a platform to discuss public affairs, occur as public spokesperson, attract the common people to participate in the discussion on public affairs and discuss topics closely related to interests and life of most people, thus making it become a social hot spot and raising the concern of the state and government. Moreover, compared to traditional media, new media can participate in content production and discussion comprehensively and realize public information transmission and free discussion. However, as a basic pattern of human social communication, transmission will inevitably involve various interest relationships. In the transmission process, new media must face various interest relationships, especially when the current society is in a transformation period and various interest relationships are complicated. Under the tide of market economy, some media hype news wantonly in order to pursue for private interests and attract the attention of the public. Various kinds of false, erotic, irritative, violent and pornographic news have emerged, thus causing ethical misconduct of new media.

### 2.1.3 Mutual Restriction of Pursuit for Truth and Infringement

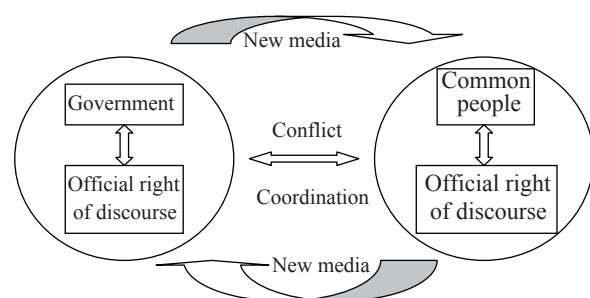
Fundamentally, media is responsible for pursuing for social truth, providing a platform and channel for the expression of public opinion, performing its right of supervision and impelling the government to serve the public. New media gradually digs the truth of events, recover all details and give the public a perfect explanation through various virtual network platforms. Under the background of new media, as the “mouthpiece” of the Party and people, various kinds of new media have made great contributions to public opinion guidance, promotion of social uprightness and pursuit for truth of events, especially in social hidden events involving corruption of government officials, food safety and medical market confusion. Relevant information is released through new media due to the disclosure of insiders and attracts the attention of the public, thus forming pressure from public opinion, impelling relevant departments to attach importance and intervene and promoting problem solving. In the era of new media, information transmission has changed greatly in terms of content, way and subject compared to traditional media. While satisfying the thirst of people for knowledge and allowing them to enjoy information sharing fully, new media makes people feel an infringement upon personal privacy. Chinese law specifically stipulates that each citizen enjoys the right to privacy; the private information and life of each single citizen are protected by law and any other citizen or organization shall have no right to open such information or disturb them. In traditional human rights theory, the right to privacy is mainly reflected in the protection of privacy of private space and the peace of private life and does not involve commercial interests basically. However,

under new media especially the wide application of e-commerce marketing means, the right to privacy possesses property interest and is a right of personality with property characteristics. In this case, new media will definitely cause infringement in the transmission process if it is not standardized and guided to a certain extent.

## 2.2 Analysis on Reasons for Ethical Dilemma of Transmission From the Perspective of New Media

### 2.2.1 Fight for the Right of Discourse

Foucault said, “Discourse is power.” In the opinion of Foucault, knowledge discourse reflects the competition of various forces in the process of social cultural life. Under new media, the control relationship caused by power in the real society is revealed incisively and vividly under virtual environment such as internet. The maximum utility of discourse is exerted fully. New media has broken through the previous monopoly of elite intellectuals upon cultural activities and formed challenges over the existing order of governance. Common people can air their opinions about some social problems freely and make a conversation with elites. The right of discourse is endowed by the public. Various different public opinion forces are collected through internet and new civil right of discourse is formed, which is at a stalemate with official right of discourse. In this stalemate process, the power of the state or government is gradually decentralized, while the power of the society or citizens is gradually expanded. Their power transition forms a game which is fundamentally the conflict and reconciliation between official discourse and civilian discourse. Such fight for the right of discourse causes ethical misconduct of new media in the transmission process, as shown in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1**  
Relationship Between Civilian Right of Discourse and Official Right of Discourse Under New Media

### 2.2.2 Conflicts Between Public and Private Spheres

The network society under new media has mixed public and private spheres and is both public and private. On the one hand, netizens have established interpersonal communication space and formed a platform for discussing public affairs based on internet; new media exists as public spokesman. On the other hand, internet has provided a private space for netizens. Due to the

lack of professional training and basic accomplishment, network users often make no distinction between public and private interests and ignore the boundary between public and private spheres. Some private information is often discussed publicly and some harmful public information invades into private space and causes disturbance to the public to different extents. The discussion of private information in public sphere easily causes a series of problems such as privacy disclosure and infringement. These conflicts between public and private spheres are caused by the lack of screening in the process of information transmission under new media and the constant role transformation between new media information spreaders and audiences.

### **2.2.3 Weak Consciousness of Responsibility of New Media Transmission Subject**

The transmission of various kinds of social media under new media is an interactive transmission pattern with user participation. A main feature is high overlap ratio of spreaders and audiences. It is possible to be transformed and expanded into mass communication in the process of interpersonal communication and it is easy to cause social acceptance and out-of-control transmission of extreme opinions (Shao, 2008). In virtual network, common people believe mistakenly that they get rid of social supervision and can do as they want without moral constraints of the real life based on such features as anonymity of network. They have a weak awareness of responsibility. Under the background of new media, all activities of transmission subject are semi-hidden due to network virtuality. Information release and transmission are maintained by personal moral and ethical accomplishment, thus causing frequent occurrence of various events of transmission ethical misconduct.

### **2.2.4 Dissimilation Caused by Media Technology**

New media technology is a double-edged sword. Besides providing a good platform for information transmission and giving people unlimited freedom of information, it easily causes ethical misconduct due to technological apathy and transmission features. Under the current new media, netizens have no threshold and barrier on the internet and lack the awareness of rules for the use of new media due to the lack of information screening by information gatekeeper. Therefore, a new moral rule of new media cannot be formed and they lack morality and responsibility and become slaves of new media, i.e. dissimilation caused by new media technology. As is known to all, as creator, people create new things according to their own purpose. These things created are tools and means for achieving certain purposes. However, people are enslaved and controlled by things in dissimilation phenomenon and the original active subject becomes the passive object controlled by things. Under new media, the common people are immersed in information stream and abandon their own judging power

and final control power, thus causing the phenomenon of ethical misconduct of new media transmission.

### **2.2.5 Lack of Moral and Legal Restraints**

Ethical dilemma of new media transmission is related to both inadequate self-discipline of transmission subject and the lack of heteronomy of legal norms. Morality and law are necessary means for standardizing behaviors of people in the development of human society, which cannot be separated just like two wings of a bird and two wheels of a vehicle. Law is rigid and its implementation is guaranteed by coercive force of the state. Morality is flexible and is realized through social public opinion, condemnation and inner ideas of people. They can bring out the best in each other. In real space, a whole set of code of conduct and moral rules generally accepted and followed by people has formed due to social practice and cultural accumulation of people over thousands of years. However, in the era of new media represented by mobile phone and internet, traditional moral outlook and view of the law have been overturned due to the rapidness, freedom, openness and information sharing in information transmission. It is difficult to maintain the existing order with original moral rules and legal guidelines and ethical problems of information transmission incurred by various kinds of new media have emerged endlessly. Therefore, the society is badly in need of a set of new moral norms system and new legal guidelines based on traditional moral system in the era of new media so as to maintain the order of virtual space such as internet and restrain behaviors of people.

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## **3. MEASURES FOR ESTABLISHING HARMONIOUS TRANSMISSION ETHICS**

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In the era of new media, the establishment of a harmonious network information environment for preventing ethical misconduct of new media transmission not only requires new media subject to improve its inner moral cultivation and media literacy, but also requires the state to improve rules in technology and legal system.

### **3.1 Improve Legal Protection System for Media Information Transmission**

Though China has started to establish and issue relevant laws on network information successively since late 1980s, such as Information Security Protection Regulations of the People's Republic of China and Management Methods for International Networking Safety of Computer Information Network. However, such rules belong to departmental rules in terms of efficacy. Their implementation has a low efficacy. It is difficult to exert their due functions in the real process. In addition, many new problems and situations have emerged with the transition of the current society and the development of computer information technology and internet technology, which have produced great impact on existing policies and



regulations. On the whole, the current legal construction of China is unadapted to information network development under the background of new media. Therefore, under the current background of new media, it is necessary to accelerate legislation in information network security, improve legal level and efficacy in information security, constantly improve relevant existing laws and regulations, specify the freedom, responsibility, rights and obligations of network subject in legal form, define illegal network behaviors scientifically in detail, strengthen punishment on illegal network behaviors and effectively restrict bad and illegal network behaviors. Second, law enforcement in network information transmission under new media should be strict. Network legal system requires strong law enforcement behaviors as guarantee. It is necessary to restrain and hit network ethical misconduct and create a good network transmission environment with joint efforts of the state, relevant law-enforcing departments, network media and the common people. Finally, it is required to strengthen law observance education for new media subjects and allow them to set up the awareness of master and protection of rights and interests, standardize their internet behaviors and be responsible for their words and deeds through law-enforcing education for participants of network transmission.

### **3.2 Strengthen Moral Self-Discipline of New Media Subject**

Internet is a double-edged sword. With good use, it can benefit thousands of people; without good use, it will leave a legacy of trouble to the common people. Whether new media is good or not consists in its use subjects rather than itself. The moral level of new media transmission subject determines the quality of its transmission environment. In the process of network transmission activities, any organization and individuals must have certain moral level and abilities. Netizens are the master of virtual network world. A good transmission environment can be created only when they are responsible for their behaviors. Therefore, netizens under new media should restrain themselves and participate in network information transmission consciously with a standard of "caution". In the virtual network world, the anonymity and complexity of network make each netizen in a relatively hidden space where people easily ignore moral requirements and legal rules in the reality and make things determined by their nature. Any organization and individual cannot impair others' interests and social public interests for private interests. This requires new media subjects to improve their moral cultivation and internalize various social morality and legal norms consciously.

In addition, new media subjects should strengthen and improve their media literacy. Under the background of new media, except professional news workers, most subjects of new media have never received professional training of news transmission theory and business

knowledge. Therefore, the information produced or transmitted by them has a poor quality. Improving their media literacy can not only improve their ability of screening and understanding as information receivers, but also improve their ability of selection and judgment as information spreaders and easily create a good network environment.

### **3.3 Establish and Improve Ethical Norms of New Media**

Faced with increasingly severe ethical misconduct of new media transmission, traditional social ethics and morals seem powerless. Therefore, it is required to establish and improve new moral norms for media transmission and specify specifications that must be followed by new media subjects in the process of information transmission under the background of new media, thus guaranteeing ideological understanding of information transmission behaviors of transmission subjects. First, moral principles for new media transmission should be established. To solve transmission ethical problems under new media, it is required to establish a set of systematic ethical and moral principles appropriate to new media. Therefore, China can use excellent experience of western countries for reference, adhere to such principles as respect, no-injury, equality and balance of interests and promote the harmonious development of new media transmission. Second, moral norms system of new media transmission should be improved. For new media transmission, it is far from enough to standardize various behaviors in the virtual world only with basic ethical and moral principles. It is required to establish and improve specific moral norms and legal provisions of network information transmission according to these principles. Only with these specific specifications can be the operability in actual standardization process improved and can the common people conduct correct moral evaluation and selection for their behaviors, thus standardizing new media transmission behaviors. Therefore, when moral norms system of new media transmission is established and improved, it is required to adhere to the principle of combination of integrity and civilization and privacy respect, fully satisfy the right of the common people to free expression and meanwhile protect rights of others and themselves, which is a win-win result.

### **3.4 Enhance Government Regulation Over Each Link of New Media Transmission**

With the development of internet and information technology, new media transmission is no longer an event in a certain field or of individuals. It has become an issue of the whole society. Therefore, it is very necessary to supervise new media transmission, impel the common people to treat network transmission rationally and create a good network transmission environment. This paper believes that the government should start from the

management over the production of media information. On the one hand, network real-name system should be improved. As is known to all, information transmission under new media is implemented based on the virtual environment of internet and network virtuality leaves false and covert space to network information spreaders. This inevitably causes immoral and even illegal behaviors in network transmission. Network real-name system is an effective approach to create a good network environment. On the other hand, access system should be implemented for website construction. Driven by market economic interests, many illegal websites and pornographic websites have caused great damage to network information transmission and the whole network environment.

Therefore, first, the government can manage websites by means of examination, approval and filing, publish some bad websites and illegal websites periodically and gradually lead network spreaders to the right track. Second, the government can supervise the release and circulation of network information. The release of network transmission information should have its boundary, including ethical boundary and legal boundary. Strengthening and training the sense of responsibility and legal awareness of network spreaders can effectively prevent ethical misconduct in the transmission process of network information. Third, the government can strengthen its supervision over the acceptance and application of network information etc. Once network information is released, an information sharing resource will form on the internet. When the common people are accepting network transmission information, it is required to completely eradicate illegal obtainment of website information and information about others' privacy. Finally, the government can strengthen the supervision over network transmission technology control. Fundamentally, network information transmission ethics is a challenge over ethics raised by information technology. For technical behavior anomie under the background of new media, its possibility can be completely eradicated only by technical power. Therefore, the government must conduct supervision with information control technology, e.g. install passwords with control technology on website or

server to improve the safety factor of firewall and prevent virus invasion and theft of user data.

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## CONCLUSION

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The development of network information transmission under new media is faced with many problems. To solve ethical misconduct problems with its transmission, it is required to start from both the state and netizens. The government should establish and improve legal norms for network information transmission according to the current development status of new media and strengthen the supervision over each link of network information transmission. As new media transmission subject, the common people should improve their own moral level and media literacy, create a healthy network environment jointly and promote good transmission of information.

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