Women's Discourse Dilemma from the Perspective of Social Media: Taking Reports and Comments on Social Events on Weibo as an Example

Yuxin Wu[1,a,*]

[1]Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, 610066, China
a. wendyy123123@outlook.com
*corresponding author

Abstract: The emergence of the new media period has transformed social media into a public forum for the dissemination of public information, and the enhancement of user voice and demand has given feminism a new context and given women a free platform to express themselves. However, the ability of women to talk freely still faces significant restrictions as a result of the long-lasting effects of history and culture as well as the bias of the news media system. This essay attempts to explain the current situation of the absence of women's voices on the platform by using Weibo, the dominant force of Chinese social platforms, as the research object. The research method of case analysis is used to broaden the analysis based on the facts and material already available. The research results emphasize the plight of women's lack of voice in society, and put forward some relevant countermeasures from three different perspectives: media, women themselves, and social culture, to encourage the growth of women's voice on social platforms and ultimately achieve gender equality.

Keywords: the right to speak, gender equality, Weibo, social media, feminism

1. Introduction

In *The Order of Discourse*, French philosopher Michel Foucault made the case that discourse is power and showed the power dynamics that underlie discourse from the standpoint of human social connections [1]. Since the introduction of feminist theory to China a century ago, the significance of women's discourse power has come to the fore in people's understanding. The evolution of network technology and the accessibility of social media have made it simple for many more women to engage in public discourse online. Social media discussions about gender issues have progressively come to dominate the public's attention in recent years, allowing women to speak up and partially challenging gender stereotypes. However, the traditional patriarchal structure and the social reality of increasing women's power have made the ideological confrontation always exist, and the patriarchal ideology continues to prevail. As a result, the absence of women's freedom of speech has not much improved, and stigmatizing comments about women on Weibo are also becoming more common. The study of women's influence on social media is still in its early stages, although many academics have noted the value of women's freedom of speech in the setting of new media. In The Development Of Chinese Feminism On Weibo, Liu, M. focused on the word "leftover

women" with its discriminatory connotations and rape culture to study the patriarchal information concealed beneath the Weibo platform, underlining the need for social platforms for women's voices [2]. Wang Huiying analyzed the reading volume and proportion statistics of men and women in several issue areas of Weibo, such as finance, health, and education, in her article "Analysis of Women's Discourse Power in New Media Communication Paths — Taking Sina Weibo as an Example." It is thought that women pay more attention to topics related to the outside world than to political economy and public events, and this theory is used to analyze the proportion of women's discourse on social platforms [3]. However, the two studies mentioned above don't go far enough to underline the issue of women's lack of discourse power on Weibo and how to address it, as well as the absence of investigation into the issues with the media as a whole. To demonstrate how women's speech is contested on Weibo and how feminism is performed on Weibo, this essay will use media reports and comments on the "Tangshan Beating Incident" as an example. This conversation aims to support the advancement of gender equality and to argue for the formation of a more positive public opinion environment for women.

2. Current Situation

2.1. Speaking Rights for Women

All positions of authority are reserved for men in the social arena that has long been dominated by masculine ideology, whether it is in politics, economics, the law, the educational system, or the media industry. Patriarchy rules over all facets of society like a pair of unseen hands. Women's discourse has been diminished or completely absent from traditional media. The setting women who are oppressed and in subordinate roles are firmly imprisoned in the masculine discourse structure. Women must undermine and deconstruct the power of male discourse to develop their discourse power if they are to truly free themselves from the constraints of patriarchal mentality. Social media platforms like Weibo and We-chat have shattered the unidirectional nature of traditional mass media, immediately empowered every public to speak out, as well as given women a broad perspective, and produced a reasonably free dialogue, all thanks to the ongoing development of media technology. Women's knowledge of gender equality has increased, and the feminist movement's followers are always growing, yet as Simone Beauvoir once observed, women are the second sex, the "other" excluded from men [4]. The development of contemporary media, however, only partially facilitates closing the gender gap in technical fields. Women continue to be the second sex and are still the target of prejudice and scrutiny. The stereotyping of women has gotten worse thanks to the new media's empowerment. Women's freedom of speech is still an issue that needs to be defended and discussed frequently in the age of new media.

2.2. Taking Women's Discourse Dilemma from the Perspective of Social Media as an Example

The Internet provides an interactive and distributed flow field where people can receive information and publish content anytime and anywhere. The transformation of the transmission-receiving relationship has brought "discourse equality" and provided rich and colorful opportunities for women who were originally in disadvantaged positions. The communication platform, especially Weibo, which has a large audience, is real-time and convenient, making it the main position for feminist voices. As long as there are social hot spots related to gender on Weibo, it will become a topic of endless debate among the public.

The sudden beating incident in a barbecue restaurant in Tangshan City, Hebei Province this year is taken as an example. The cause was that a netizen posted a surveillance video on Weibo. It can be clearly seen in the surveillance video that a man is harassing a woman who is having a meal, and

the man keeps touching the woman's back. After the woman refused, the man began to beat her because he was dissatisfied with the woman's attitude. He even dragged the woman out of the door with many people in the same company and beat her with wine bottles and chairs. Once the video was released, it quickly sparked heated discussions among netizens. It immediately received 3.64 million likes and 342,000 comments, forming a "popcorn"-style growth of internet public opinion and occupying Weibo hot searches. In this incident, because the woman was innocently injured, it inevitably aroused the emotions of a large number of female users. Most of the women stood from the perspective of the victim, fearing that such incidents would happen to themselves, "She is the one who died, I am She survived", "This is a great fear for us girls, this fear is our life", from some comments, we can see the lack of social security and anxiety that women lack. This kind of emotion is not formed through one or two incidents.

The Tangshan beating incident is like a fuse, reawakening the memories of past harassment and sexual assault incidents. The appeal has not received a positive response for a long time, and what has been magnified is the discipline of women again and again: "Girls must learn to protect themselves," "Girls should not go out to drink at night, do not wear revealing clothes, do not..." This seemingly well-intentioned discipline is undoubtedly a deprivation of women's rights. The media, influencer, and other opinion leaders on the Internet have obvious tendencies when reporting the content of the incident: "a woman in Tangshan was beaten by many villains in a barbecue restaurant," "a woman in Tangshan was violently beaten in full view." The wording about women is often amplified, emphasizing the situation of the female victim, weakening the existence of the perpetrator, and causing secondary harm to women. Users who provoked gender antagonism under the banner of feminism also took the opportunity to speak out, and some comments were published in the event report: "Men are disgusting, and beating people can reflect their masculinity." "The existence of men is a waste of air." Such extreme discourse caused dissatisfaction among netizens, and emotions began to override the facts, elevating the remarks of a small number of extreme groups to overall feminism, making feminists the target of an attack. Feminist stigmatization terms such as "female dog" are not uncommon. Women's struggle for rights has been misinterpreted as hating men and has been given too much negative meaning [5]. Weibo has given women a voice, but it can't guarantee that their words will be heard. A small group of influential individuals and business people control the right to talk on Weibo, which is used by the platform to monitor popular sentiment.

3. Existing Problems

3.1. Lack of Opinion Leaders

The reason why women's voices are not taken seriously in social media is that there is a lack of opinion leaders related to social public topics. Elihu Katz believes that opinion leaders must be expressers of valuable information, possess professional capabilities, and be at the center of social media at the same time [6]. Opinion leaders on Weibo have a strong influence and class divisions, and specialization characteristics are very obvious. Its importance is self-evident. Almost all of the opinion leaders who cover political economy and public issues are men. The importance of public opinion and discourse on social media cannot be overstated. Female opinion leaders tend to focus on more entertaining private issues such as beauty, fashion, food, and home. Therefore, some women are not interested in participating in public discourse. Some women are in a state of being bystanders after the incident, and they easily change their original opinions due to the content published by others. Of course, there are also opinion leaders with strong female awareness in social media, but because of the small number, once a woman makes a statement that is contrary to

the patriarchal consciousness, she will be labeled as an extreme feminist and will be attacked and resisted, which leads to the phenomenon of a lack of discourse.

3.2. The Marginalization of Feminism

In the era of new media, feminism in China is developing based on social media. Unlike traditional women's ideological emancipation, the convenience and openness of social platforms has promoted the spread of feminist ideas, and the right to speak of women has also been reshaped in social media. However, in recent years, some feminists have made extreme remarks, which have caused feminism to be stigmatized. This kind of unilateral and self-interested feminism is called "Chinese pastoral feminism" by netizens, who believe that it is under the banner of feminism [7]. Realizing their own goals is a group that purposefully incites disagreements on gender issues, whereas true feminists are rational, fair, and eager to achieve equality and freedom of choice for men and women. However, the huge and complex debates on social platforms have gradually blurred the boundaries between feminism and pastoral feminism [8]. While filtering extreme feminism, people have habitually taken feminists as objects of accusation and exclusion because there are only a small number of people who understand feminism, and the public's understanding of feminism is limited. If women want to have the right to speak, the participation of feminists is indispensable. An image that is too upright makes it easy for the public to ignore its demands and difficulties, and feminism cannot escape the fate of being marginalized.

3.3. Media Discourse Hegemony

Gramsci's "cultural hegemony" is the beginning of media discourse hegemony [9]. He believes that only those with political, economic, and cultural power can control the lifeblood of social production institutions. In the new media era, the pattern of public opinion has changed. Traditional media has also changed from direct public opinion control to public opinion participation mode in the past, seeking for greater living space. However, this does not mean that the discourse hegemony of media will disappear in the Internet field, nor does it mean that digital technology can eliminate the discourse hegemony of media. The media on social platforms try to guide public opinion with hidden discourse hegemony. Social media is just out of the boundaries of time and space. It connects all kinds of real world, so the media in the digital world is still dominated by the power holders in reality, and most of the power holders are men, so agenda setting is often carried out by male values. Women's issues in today's social media are immature, full of chaotic and disorderly media discourse, and it is difficult for individual woman's discourse space to affect the entire platform, lacking a complete discourse system, so male-dominated media discourse is easy. It controls the direction of public opinion, stifles the voices of resistance, and causes deviations in the construction of women's discourse. This kind of unconscious control has forced many women to obey and keep silent in the space of public opinion, hindering the development of women's right to speak.

4. Countermeasures

4.1. Media Perspective

The German philosopher Kittler explored the impact of the discourse network based on media technology on human civilization and believed that "the network of technology and institutions enables a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data [10]." Therefore, on the road to advocating women's equality, we must make good use of media technology, improve media literacy, and establish women's discourse mechanisms. In 1996, China established a women's media

monitoring network organized by non-governmental organizations. It has played an important role in promoting gender equality by monitoring discrimination against women in the media and conducting critical education. However, this monitoring mechanism is still immature and needs to be passed. Various forces in the united society are constantly improving, providing women with a good space for public opinion and gradually integrating the gender equality consciousness on the Internet into real life so as to better improve the position of women's voice.

4.2. Female Perspective

Women must first increase their individual and collective knowledge of their right to talk, as well as work together to create a favorable public opinion environment, if they want to succeed in gaining the ability to speak in the patriarchal social system. Use the public opinion on the social platform to master the communication skills of social media, produce high-quality content, cultivate opinion leaders in all walks of life, encourage more women to work in the media on current topics, help them break the glass ceiling, analyze and report media events from a more equal female perspective, change the way of narration from a male perspective, give full play to their guiding potential, and establish a discourse space dedicated to women [11].

4.3. Social and Cultural Perspective

There have long been social stereotypes about gender, both male and female, so blind demands for a greater female voice can easily exacerbate gender antagonism between men and women. The female group is not the only one working to increase the voices of women. To effectively advance women's social position, it is also important to concentrate on the idea of gender equality and raise the general public's awareness of equal rights. For instance, gender equality issues are set up with the aid of Internet media, with a focus on youth development, playing an educational role, and gradually bringing gender awareness into the mainstream of social development through long-term acculturation to realize the desire for gender equality. It will greatly enhance the discursive power of women.

5. Conclusion

This article explores the status quo of women's discourse rights and feminism on Weibo, a social media platform, to understand the situation of women's lack of discourse rights. Through research, we can see that social media has given women a platform to release their emotions, but the discourse power is still male-centered, and there are still certain difficulties in getting rid of the patriarchal discourse mechanism. Some extreme feminists expressed in radical and extreme language, which aroused the disgust of users, resulting in negative connotations for all feminists, attracting stigma and attacks. When reporting on public social events, the media always emphasizes the gender position and magnifies the words of women, instead of only focusing on the event itself to report, which intensifies the stereotype of women invisibly. These are the reasons for the lack of women's discourse power. Based on these problems, this paper gives some relevant countermeasures, arguing that women's discourse is a long-term struggle. It is necessary to make good use of media technology, improve some immature female media platforms, let all women consciously participate in the discussion of public topics, and enhance the public's awareness of equal rights. Only through concerted efforts from all parties can we achieve true gender equality and win the right to speak for women. The shortcoming of this article is that there is not enough data support for the event analysis on the Weibo platform. The author hopes that future research will concentrate on digital feminism and delve deeper into the feminist discourse.

Acknowledgment

References

[1]   Foucault, M. Orders of discourse. Social science information, 10(2), 7-30. (1971).

[2]   Liu, M. The development of Chinese feminism on weibo. (2016).

[3]   Wang Huiying. Analysis of women's discourse in new media communication paths: the case of Sina Weibo [J]. New Media Research, ,5(22):83-86+89. (2019).

[4]   De Beauvoir, S. The second sex. In Classic and Contemporary Readings in Sociology (pp. 118-123). Routledge. (2014).

[5]   Wu Jing. An investigation of the mass media stigmatization of female college students [D]. Hunan Normal University, 2012.

[6]   Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications. Routledge. (2017).

[7]   Wang Jiayuan. Feminist discourse dilemma in the social media arena [D]. Shanghai Normal University, 2022. DOI:10.27312/d.cnki.gshsu.2022.001233.

[8]   Yu Jiajin. A Study of Gender Discussion Communities in Social Media [D]. Huazhong Normal University, 2021. DOI:10.27159/d.cnki.ghzsu.2021.002630.

[9]   Gramsci, A. Selections from the prison notebooks. In The applied theatre reader (pp. 141-142). Routledge. (2020).

[10]   Kittler, F. A. Discourse Networks 1800/1900. Stanford University Press. (1990).

[11]   Deng Fengfeng. Study on the media image construction and communication of "leftover women" under social media [D]. Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, 2019.