The Connotation and Development of Media Literacy Education in Taiwan Area

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Abstract. After the lifting of the ban on newspaper, the power of media control in Taiwan area was shifted from government regulation to commercial influence. Too much commercialization system brought about some problems to the media, such as the exaggerated and provocative reports, emphasis on opposition and conflict, more social news but less serious political news, educational news and community news. In order to solve these problems mentioned above, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions and local government had made every endeavor to promote media literacy education since the 1990s. Based on the theory and experience of media literacy education in western developed countries and added the critical pedagogy perspective, the core concepts of media literacy education are put forward and explained from two dimensions in Taiwan area. From the perspective of the cognition of media, it emphasizes the critical thinking, critical reading and critical understanding in the aspect of media texts, media reproduction, audiences, media organizations and media access. From the perspective of the action, it emphasizes liberating and empowerment to shape a healthy media community and culture environment in the long run.

Introduction

There are many different channels for the public to get and understand all kinds of information. Among them, the media coverage is one of the important cognitive channels. However, does the media content equate with the truth themselves? Walter Lippmann, a famous American political theorist, argued that what the mass media present to people were not the representation in the mirror but the symbolic “pseudo-environment” which were chosen, processed, reported and reconstructed by the mass media to a subjective, biased, and necessarily abridged mental image of the world. Then the vast majority of people would form the biased cognition by getting the information through those news agency, which would restrict people’s views and behaviors to some extent.

The media in Taiwan area are not objective on reporting the facts and always report the facts in stereotype way under the influence of the political tendency. Therefore, the reports are usually far from the real reality. Deviation of the reporting will not only make the public cannot understand the facts comprehensively and objectively, but also lead to prejudice because of false reporting in long-term. In order to change the media chaos, it is important and necessary to promote impartial reporting. However, it is not easy for the media in Taiwan area to realize the objective reporting through both the discipline of journalistic professionalism and the restriction of the press law in the atmosphere of over-commercialization and pan-politicization of media competition. So it is particularly important to improve and enhance the public’s media literacy education from the perspective of the audience.

As Lin Liangzhe, a journalist in Taiwan area, ever said, “Before broadcasting, we cannot help but ask some significant questions. Whose news it is? Whose truth it is? How the news are selected in the end behind broadcasting. How the truth are shaped? How the characters are packed and vilified in the news? All of these that the public do not know are the open secrets in the news organizations of
Taiwan area. Therefore, it is necessary for the public to figure out the process of news production and understand the power hidden in the structure of power relations to influence the news selection. [1]

The Connotation and the Capacity Demands of Media Literacy

Literacy means the ability to read and write that are usually related to people’s education and ability. When it is combined with media, media literacy means the knowledge, skills and abilities that are needed to use media and interpret media [2], which is defined by David Buckingham professor, a renowned media literacy expert in the University of London.

In the era of media convergence and information explosion, the mass media that are the tools as the extension of human beings have been transformed into a kind of power that affects the content choice, value orientation, and public’s understanding and judgment of information. In light of this, media literacy is the ability to interpret and create personal meaning from the hundreds, even thousands of verbal and visual symbols that we take through television, radio, computers, newspapers and magazines, and of course advertising every day. It’s the ability to choose and select, the ability to challenge and question, the ability to be conscious about what’s going on around you and not be passive and therefore vulnerable. [3] This is the definition made by the Center for Media Literacy of America, which puts forward higher requirements on the ability of media literacy.

In addition to the ability of question and rational response, in order to highlight the function of media transformation, Center for Media Literacy in Taiwan, founded by School of Communication in Chengchi University of Taiwan in 1999, defined the media literacy like that. The public can interpret the media, appreciate the media, and then access the media to sound in order to reconstruct the culture of community media and understand the rights and responsibilities of citizens. [4] The citizens have higher responsibility and initiative in this definition of media literacy above. They believe that the citizens could make good use of the media for public supervision and produce the information themselves to optimize the media environment after having a good understanding and practice of media literacy.

To sum up, we can understand the ability of media literacy from three aspects. Firstly, at the micro-level, media literacy reflects in the aspect of cognition on media content, including the ability to contact and select media to receive information, the ability to understand and question the media to assess information, and the ability to use and participate in the media to produce information. Secondly, at the meso-level, media literacy reflects in the aspect of the understanding of the media system in which how the information are collected, processed, produced and disseminated. Finally, at the macro level, media literacy reflects in the aspect of the interaction between the mass media and the social process in the broader political and economic context.

The Rise and Promotion of Media Literacy Education in Taiwan Area

There were four stages of development of media literacy since it was proposed firstly in the United Kingdom. In the 1930s, in order to protect the audience, it was empathized to reject the mass media as the lower culture. In the 1960s, people changed to accept the media culture and put more emphasis on enhancing the ability of selection of media content. In the 1980s, it was empathized to focus on the critical interpretation of the media texts in detail. Moreover, in the 1990s, advocated to make use of the media to participate the community actions. [5] After declaring to end the martial law in 1987, media literacy education was introduced and promoted to develop in Taiwan area. The reasons are mainly as follows.

For one thing, before the ending of martial law, the local government controlled nearly all of the media agencies and regulated the media content rigorously. In July 15, 1987, the local government declared to end the martial law that had been taken into effect for nearly 38 years in Taiwan area. In January 1, 1988, the local government announced to end the ban that did not allow people and organization to establish newspaper freely. In 1993, the local government even freed the restriction on operating the broadcasting channel and cable television. All of a sudden, all kinds of newspapers,
magazines, radio, television and other media developed, which brought about the richness of media content. However, it did not mean the real freedom of the media. As a matter of fact, the power to control the mass media had been transformed from the local government restriction to the commercialization influence. Nowadays, in order to increase circulation of newspaper and enhance ratings of television of the commercial media, there are some problems emerged in media reporting in Taiwan area. In the aspect of political news, it strengthens the opposition and conflict and reports the fuzzy facts. In the aspect of social news, it pays too much attention to negative news and gossip without reporting in depth. There are more superficial social news but less serious and necessary news about culture, education and community. Besides, there are some content full of violence, pornography and bloody. All these problems mentioned above have led the mass media to a deeper capitalist system in Taiwan area.

For another, with the advent of television, nearly every family has one to get information and entertainment in daily life. Television not only has a great influence on adults, but also has a greater impact on children and adolescents who have not been fully mature. Watching TV for a long time will also affect children’s language development, creativity, reading time, interpersonal relationships and form the incorrect values or consumer behavior. Faced with this situation, it is better to teach children how to watch TV correctly rather than turn off the TV passively. [6]

Based on the two reasons mainly above, in order to reduce the dependence on television and avoid the negative impact of the media content for the public, especially children and adolescents, various organizations have taken the initiative to advocate and promote media literacy education. They have made great effort to purify the media ecology, and enhance the public’s ability to access and understand media critically in term of media texts, media production and media system.

Firstly, all sorts of non-governmental organizations (NGO) have always been doing great efforts to promote media literacy education in order to construct a healthier media community in civil society till now. In 1990, Fubon Cultural & Educational Foundation (hereinafter referred to as FCEF) was established. FCEF has been deeply concerned about and active in youth-related issues because they hope to give the younger generation a helping hand. The concept of media literacy, which they introduce to people, has been developed into specialized courses in media literacy and related topics in schools from kindergarten to college in Taiwan area. Moreover, the next step for them is to help the youth find their own voice using media, not be spoon-fed by nor exploited by the media. [7] In 1992, in view of the important impact of television on children’s cognitive development and interpersonal relationship, as well as the lack of education on children’s media reading, Foundation of Television Culture Research was established. It has done every endeavor to analyze the various phenomena of television culture and put forward suggestions to reconstruct better television environment. In 2000, Foundation of Television Culture Research was renamed as Foundation of Media Literacy Education, among which there is the Center of Media Literacy Promotion. This center has done many endeavors related media literacy to accumulate the related resources about children’s media literacy education to enhance children’s ability of media literacy.

Secondly, academic institutions have done great efforts to promote media literacy as well as foundations of NGO mentioned above. In 1999, Center for Media Literacy was founded by School of Communication in Chengehi University of Taiwan. Because the contemporary media have great impact on the individual and the overall society, this institution tries its best to promote the media to serve the public interest better, develop the personal media literacy in the information society, and promote the dissemination of citizenship in the way of research, teaching, curriculum development, media observation and extensive outreach. Besides, in September of 1999, Prof. De-feng He from the Department of Law at Taiwan University worked with more than 10 leading figures from academia and from the media industry, established Taiwan Media Watch officially that was the first non-profit media watch in Taiwan area. Bearing the responsibilities of maintaining press freedom, carrying out media justice, promoting media self-regulation, and protecting the public’s right to know, they watch and monitor messaging in various forms of media and evaluate TV programs. [8]

Finally, in October 24, 2002, Policy White Paper on Media Literacy Education was issued by the department of education in Taiwan area that is the first region in Asia to announce policies to promote
media literacy education officially. It is emphasized that media literacy should be integrated into formal education in primary and secondary school, high and vocational school, college and university, and adult education at all different levels. Concrete measures include three aspects. Firstly, integrate media literacy education into the curriculum and interdisciplinary instruction of the nine-year curriculum in elementary school. Secondly, design and integrate instructional material and curriculum in high school and university education. Thirdly, encourage and fund media literacy education campaigns in schools at all levels. [9]

The Core Concepts of Media Literacy Education in Taiwan Area

The mass media provide all kinds of news and entertainment for the public in daily life. As a result of various factors, the content of media reporting are produced in the process of selection and construction and therefore far from the reality in a way. According to Policy White Paper on Media Literacy Education, there are five important elements that are not easy to be perceived when the public receive the information provided by the media. Firstly, information of the media does not necessarily reflect the world in a truthful manner. Secondly, information of the media is a product of complex screening, selection, combination and packaging. Thirdly, the presentation of information may be influenced by journalists, editors, media department staff, organizational leaders, or even governments, political parties or conglomerates. Fourthly, the technology of media communications has shaped media’s unique presence and influence. Fifthly, the audience of the various media is a market commodity produced by the media industry and thus has become a prime target for advertisers to reach. [10]

In order to enable the public to understand and discover the essences hidden behind the media and take action to reconstruct the media for establishing healthy community, some scholars in Taiwan area put forward the core concepts of media literacy education from two dimensions after introducing the western media literacy theory and adding the perspective of critical pedagogy.

For one thing, from the perspective of media cognition, it emphasizes the critical thinking, critical reading and critical understanding in the aspect of media texts, media reproduction, audiences, media organizations and media access. [11] Firstly, in terms of media texts, understand the types of media, the ways of reporting narration and the meaning of texts that are constructed subjectively. Secondly, in terms of media representation, identify the differences between the actual situations, people, and incidents in social reality and the reported situations, people, and incidents in media content, and decipher the underlying ideology and values behind media representations. Thirdly, in terms of audience, understand the negotiation of meaning between an individual and media content, reflect the passive position of the audience in the commercial media industry. Fourthly, identity the distinction between public media and commercial media, understand the mechanism of media gatekeeper, recognize the media ownership and the impact of privatization on media content. Fifthly, in terms of media access, understand the significance of media citizen right and differentiate between passive media consumers and active media audience. It should be stressed that criticism is not the negative thinking, but the principled skepticism out of reason, evidence and rationality. Besides, criticism also attaches importance to self-criticism, self-reflection, and emphasizes thinking and judging from the perspective of others, which lead to be more tolerant and more understanding in different ways. [12]

For another, from the perspective of media action, it emphasizes liberating and empowerment. “Liberating” refers to the freedom that allows the mind of an individual to roam free amid the information maze and obstacles constructed by the media. When free from manipulation by the media, an individual can become an active player in society and know how to express his/her own interest in public affairs through the media, which eventually enhances the sense of citizenship. “Empowerment” means encouraging an individual to differentiate, select, and assess a medium and its content independently, and through rational thinking and constructive dialogue, to influence and monitor the media for better content, which would result in the establishment of a community standard with innovative, beneficial and educational information, and ultimately improve the quality of culture within society. [13]
In fact, the ability of liberating and empowerment are reflected in the establishment and development of citizen journalism and independent media. The local government lifted the ban on press in Taiwan area in 1988 and opened broadcasting channel and cable television in 1993. Faced with tendency of over-commercialization of the media, the media reform movement in Taiwan area not only criticized the content and system of the media, but also tried to create a better media environment by promoting the development of public television. PeoPo as one of the citizen journalism website, established by Taiwan Broadcasting System, began to run in April 30, 2007. PeoPo is the abbreviation of Post People. It means that everyone has the right to voice and encourage individuals to publish works on the Internet. As an open platform, PeoPo is welcoming and providing assistance to all participating citizens. As a sharing platform, PeoPo is encouraging communication and sharing in addition to fostering people power. As an active platform, PeoPo is promoting societal progress through assertive action. [14] In addition to the platform of citizen journalism like PeoPo, there are some new independent media emerged, such as NewTalk, the News Lens, News & Market and so on. They are established and operated by some professional journalists, civil journalists and social groups who are concerned more about the progress of community and society. They try to report the news in objective way, going beyond the tendency of politicization and commercialization.

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