

How Should We Practice Humanism in Legal News Coverage?

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Abstract: In legal news, the conflict between humane care and the law is mainly manifested in “medium Justice”, reports full of irrational, over-emotional and insulting words, journalists lack professionalism, the disclosure of the privacy of parties concerned to pander to audiences’ interests, and other aspects. There are various reasons for this phenomenon. Therefore, adequate measures must be taken to resolve this contradiction and practice humanism in legal news. For instance, via finding an integrating point for both Humanism and Legal publicity and exploring people’s inner world from the civilian perspective, legal news could truly guide the public to establish the correct morals and values, and ultimately promote the harmonious development of the entire society.

Keywords: Humanism; Legal news; Medium justice

1. Introduction

During our courses, we have been discussed about the importance of humanism in journalism, particularly in social, entertainment, sports and disaster news. This commentary adopts these techniques to analyze the current problems in legal news coverage and also summarizes the measures to practice journalism’s humanization.

Humanism is a philosophical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism and empiricism) over the acceptance of dogma or superstition (Walter, 2010). Humanism, as a recognition of the dignity of man and concern for his moral and physical welfare, naturally turns its attention to the law, to crime and legal news (Osler, 2001)^[1].

While legal news, as a critical genre of journalism, they inherently aim at upholding justice, promoting integrity, combating evils, concerning people’s suffering and practicing public scrutiny. Even it is a convention to construct some visually stunning crime shots, and emphasize a binary opposition between the good (e.g. the police, the victims) vs the evil (e.g. the suspect, the criminal) in the coverage. Legal news is still supposed to contain more human spirits and show more care for humans. News’ objectivity, depth and educational significance must be maintained. Journalists should still treat all parties involved with respects for their dignity, human rights as well as setting up the correct value orientation. For instance, from the humanistic point of view, criminals’ physical, psychological, behavioural motives and victims’ families’ emotional demands needed to be explored to shape versatile and real characters.

2. However, in our common legal news reports, there are still many shortcomings in terms of “people-oriented” and humanistic care awareness.

2.1 Representations of lacking legal humanism in the legal news report

Legal news is easily failed into the trap of sensationalism. This style of news report encourages biased impressions of events rather than neutrality and may cause a manipulation to the truth of a story. Some reports carry preconceived notions in the name of goodwill. Using over-emotional language to render the tragic atmosphere, and initially projected the subjective “sympathy” factor towards “disadvantaged groups”, and thus lost the benchmark of the report - comprehensive, objective and balanced.

We often accuse the mass media do not put the people at the bottom as an essential position. Indeed, the mass media, as the carrier of human civilization, always should reflect humanity care (especially of the disadvantaged social groups) while being objective and fair, and have its kindness orientation. Simultaneously, “goodwill” and “humanistic care” should not be distorted and abused to write biased reports with emotional words. Media outlets need to provide comprehensive and accurate information, adhere to the correct moral position and legal framework. Only in this way can the rights of the audience and the parties be truly protected^[2].

2.2 Countermeasures to strengthen the humanism in the legal news report

2.2.1 Topic selection: Find an integrating point for both Humanism and Legal publicity

The first step to reflect humanistic care in legal news is to achieve the best combination of both “humanism” and “legal publicity” in the topic selection process. If the topic is not appropriately chosen, this reported story may be biased.

Some legal news topics highlight the legal publicity, aiming at strengthening readers’ consciousness of law or promote legal knowledge. In these reports, cases are full of twists, turns, and vivid description, the legal commentary is full of reasonable argument and in-depth analysis. However, the images of relevant parties of the cases, the law enforcers are pale and powerless, without any

personality and characteristics. Readers could only read the “case” but could not realize the existence of “human beings”. Some news even does not have a specific reporting target and character. Such legal news is unsuccessful^[3].

For instance, some report topics are guided by the case story. Reporters take the development order of the cases as a clue and focus on covering the court trial. They use a lot of legal terms and show the lengthy judgment, but ignore the portrayal of the characters. One good example is “Zhaoyu” case reported by Beijing News. Zhao Yu had physical clashes with the perpetrators in order to prevent the female neighbor from being beaten, but was later sentenced to prison for “intentional injury”. Beijing News’ report is titled “Zhao Yu would not be prosecuted: the law should not constrain others to do things that are beyond his power, let alone those who take up the cudgels for a just cause.” The reporter takes the form of a dialogue, through questions and answers, let Zhao restore the scene of the incident, and showed his experience in the form of video^[4].

Legal reports should highlight human subjectivity and promote the humanistic spirit. When reporting this case, the reporter should grasp these key points with rich humanistic connotations and social concerns, then dig deeper, and spread out all kinds of factual information he learned in the interview around these critical points, to reveal people’s deep thoughts and ambivalence. Only by finding the right combination of “legal publicity” and “humanism” in the topic selection, can the legal news be unique, wonderful and full of human feelings, and embody more humanistic care.

2.2.2 Report angle: Explore people’s inner world from the civilian perspective

To get an in-depth and unique report, the reporter must first adjust his position and play his role. Reporters should start from the perspective of ordinary people, observing and examining the interviewees, talking to them with the peace of mind. Only in this way, reporters could shorten the distance with interviewees, and their report news could explore all the characters’ inner world^[5].

The Interviewees of legal reports are often a special group. For those who are reported, whether they are police officers, law enforcement officers, criminals, suspects, victims or their relatives, the most important thing is to respect and protect all their basic rights as ordinary citizens without being deprived. They are in a completely equal position with the media. Their words, deeds, thoughts and needs directly affect and determine the quality of legal news. Therefore, when interviewing different subjects, journalists should never be arrogant, succumbing to stereotypes and adopting the same pattern to create characters, let alone treat some criminals as “outliers”.

Take the reports about criminal suspects as a case in point. Some media have played the role of judicial trials, leading the public to attack and morally condemn criminals personally. However, the essence of this “Medium Justice” is to intervene in the judiciary independence because of press freedom, that is, judiciary justice is replaced with morality justice. This reporting angle and public opinion orientation are contrary to the requirements of socialist core values^[6].

The significance of media reporting criminals’ stories lies in that: Firstly, to summarize the law so that all parties in the society can find out the signs of crime earlier and eliminate the hidden dangers that may lead people to the path of crime. Secondly, to see the big picture and discover more universal social issues which are of value for discussions. By contrast, neither simply satisfying readers’ curiosity nor masking crimes should be the real purpose of media coverage. Instead, the media try to respect the values of civilians and protect their lives truly. Therefore, a responsible media should adopt such criteria to determine the reporting angles of legal news: if these stories help to improve society’s understanding of similar crime mechanisms and prevent future crimes, then these stories are worth reporting; Stories allow us to discover more social issues worth paying attention to are also worth reporting.

3. Conclusion

Practicing humanism in legal news coverage is the media’s social responsibilities, is an essential symbol of media civilization and maturity, and the ultimate goal pursued by all types of media. Legal reports need to focus on people’s livelihood and pay attention to the living conditions and spiritual emotions of ordinary people. It not only reflects the attention to the whole society but also reflects the spiritual connotation of humanism.

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