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Causes and Countermeasures of Demonization of Teachers' Media Image

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Abstract

In today's media-dominated era, any individual's words or actions can be amplified and rapidly spread, potentially causing negative impacts. In recent years, the demonization of teachers in media coverage has become increasingly prominent. This phenomenon not only affects teachers' mental health and teaching motivation but also creates obstacles to effective instruction. Drawing from the Bellamy's Law framework, this paper analyzes the root causes of this issue through three dimensions: problematic teachers as the source, media amplification, and societal stereotypes. It proposes practical strategies to improve teachers' media image.

Keywords: teacher, media image, demonization

1. Introduction

Throughout history, teaching has been a sacred profession. From the ancient saying "those who teach impart knowledge and resolve doubts" to the modern adage "a nation's rise depends on its teachers," we can see the vital role educators play in personal development and national progress. However, recent years have seen a surge in negative media portrayals of teachers. These reports have significantly diminished public trust in educators, leading to a growing trend of "demonization" — a distorted perception that exaggerates issues beyond their actual severity, creating unnecessary psychological burdens despite the reality being easily addressed (Shu Ailing, 2011). Media outlets often sensationalize these stories to boost traffic, distorting facts and amplifying narratives that severely damage the teaching profession's reputation. While educating students is teachers' fundamental duty, the widespread demonization of educators has eroded public and student confidence in the profession. Research indicates that reduced teacher credibility negatively impacts academic performance (Li Chunying, Lu Peijie & Shang Yuandong, 2020). Such biased reporting not only affects educators' mental well-being and hinders professional development, but also risks diminishing media credibility by targeting individual cases of unethical conduct to gain attention. According to the broken windows theory, failing to address this media demonization will lead to more similar negative incidents. This study aims to analyze the root causes of media's distorted portrayal of teachers and propose countermeasures.

2. The Transformation of Teachers' Media Image to "Demonization"

Due to the discrepancy between the traditional "sacred" image of teachers and their actual circumstances, the public experiences a significant psychological gap, demanding almost harsh standards from teachers, which imposes a heavy moral burden on them. The flaws in teachers' own conduct are infinitely magnified, leading to the labeling of them as "demonized." Throughout history, teachers have been portrayed as "supreme sages and mentors." In primitive societies, teachers were described as "among the many evils of humanity, there are sages who establish and then teach them the way of mutual growth, becoming their rulers and teachers." Later, during the Western Zhou Dynasty, the system of "learning in government institutions, with officials and teachers combined" was implemented, elevating teachers to a highly prestigious social status and placing them in a dominant position within society. Confucianism later posited that "heaven protects the people, making them rulers and teachers." In modern society, teachers are hailed as gardeners and red candles. Notable figures like Zhang Lili, the most beautiful teacher featured in the program "Touching China," and Zhang Guimei, the role model for dedicating herself to impoverished mountainous areas, exemplify this ideal. Social media has sparked a wave of admiration and deification of teachers, gradually embedding in people's minds the image of teachers as selfless devotees who sacrifice personal interests. However, behind this public sentiment lies a hidden reality of "over-praising," where teachers' human nature is quietly stripped away. Teachers are also ordinary individuals with emotions, families, and personal lives. In the context of a market economy, they must also hustle for survival, inevitably perceived as secularized by the public—a portrayal that conflicts with the sacred image of teachers. Coupled with recent media reports of violent teaching, sexual abuse, and bribery incidents involving teachers, they have suddenly become the focus of public scrutiny. First, the stark contrast with traditional sage-teacher ideals creates a psychological divide in public perception, fueling intense criticism of educators. Second, driven by profit motives, some media outlets fabricate or distort facts to generate buzz, leaving teachers in an extremely awkward position. Finally, influenced by the halo effect, some students vent their negative feelings toward specific teachers online, recklessly criticizing and defaming the entire teaching profession. This has led to the emergence of a demonized image of teachers.

3. The Phenomenon of "Demonization" of Teachers' Media Image and Its Influence

First, the demonization of teachers' media image restricts their professional autonomy, diminishes their sense of professional identity, and undermines their teaching motivation. This negative portrayal predominantly depicts educators as corporal punishment enforcers, money-grabbing profiteers, or sexual predators. The former are seen as verbally abusing or physically assaulting students due to improper teaching methods; the latter as accepting bribes or charging exorbitant fees for unethical tutoring, while the latter are portrayed as sexually harassing or assaulting students. However, some of these depictions are fabricated or exaggerated, with certain media outlets maliciously distorting, fabricating, or amplifying such narratives. Teachers, hailed as "engineers of human souls" and the most sacred profession under the sun, face significant constraints when their image is demonized. They hesitate to innovate in teaching, avoid being the first to break new ground, refrain from criticizing students for fear of being caught with corporal punishment "slips of the tongue," and avoid interacting with students of the opposite sex to prevent being labeled as sexual predators. These anxieties lead to stagnant teaching practices, fostering a "Buddhist-style" teaching mentality characterized by apathy, lack of initiative, and neglect. In severe cases, this results in professional anxiety, skepticism toward the teaching profession, weakened recognition of its nobility and sanctity (Ban Jianwu, 2007), diminished teaching motivation, and ultimately career exit tendencies. As the renowned futurist Alvin Toffler described in *The Third Wave*: "Mass media acts like an information bomb, rapidly transforming how each of us perceives and acts, and fundamentally altering our psychology" (Cui Qi'en & Zhang Xiaoxia, 2010).

Secondly, the excessive negative portrayal of teachers in media can create unfavorable impressions among inexperienced students, undermining their credibility and hindering effective teaching. As stated in *The Analects*: "A

teacher's integrity sets the standard—when they are upright, students follow without commands; when they are not, commands go unheeded." This reveals how distorted teacher images obstruct educational practices. Students, as the primary demographic of internet users, rely heavily on online media for information. When confronted with media's exaggerated and distorted depictions of teachers, they tend to equate these portrayals with the teacher profession as a whole, mistaking isolated incidents for systemic issues. They unconsciously align these demonized characteristics with their own teachers, gradually eroding their trust in educators. This not only weakens teachers' role as role models but also negatively impacts students' academic performance (Li Chunying, Lu Peijie & Shang Yuandong, 2020).

Ultimately, the media's excessive vilification of teachers' public image negatively impacts parents' attitudes toward educators, creating barriers to effective home-school collaboration. The media's persistent exposure of misconduct within the teaching profession has amplified public scrutiny, leading to widespread condemnation of educators' ethical lapses and declining professional credibility. When children face criticism from teachers, parents often overinterpret these incidents, mistakenly believing excessive discipline harms children's mental health. This pattern of scapegoating parents while ignoring their own parenting challenges creates communication barriers. Furthermore, teachers' authority diminishes in parents' eyes. While parents previously actively engaged teachers to address academic issues, they now tend to avoid communication. The media's demonization of teachers has exacerbated this perception, with parents mistakenly viewing teachers' homework supervision as effortless and irresponsible, ultimately eroding public trust in the teaching profession.

4. Reflection on the Reasons for the "Demonization" of Teachers' Media Image

This paper primarily examines the reasons behind the "demonization" of teachers' media image through the Bellamy model (also known as the S-M-C-R model). The Bellamy model illustrates that the communication process consists of four components: information source, information, channel, and receiver, with the final communication effect determined by their collective interaction. This reveals that the "demonized" image of teachers in online media is jointly constructed by teachers with misconduct records, online media platforms, and the general public as information receivers.

4.1 Teachers with Misconduct Become the Source of Media Demonization of Teachers' Image

"Education is the foundation of a century-long plan." As educators who play a vital role in the education sector, teachers should clarify their professional positioning, take teaching and nurturing students as their guiding goal, and uphold the ethical standards of "being a teacher through knowledge and a role model through integrity." However, in reality, some teachers prioritize personal gain and hedonism, tainted by the stench of money and extravagant lifestyles, tarnishing the professional image of the teaching community. Firstly, this manifests as academic dishonesty—some fabricate false student grades for awards and honors, while others engage in academic fraud for promotions. Secondly, it shows through greed for wealth, accepting bribes through student seating arrangements and tutoring arrangements to amass illicit gains. These unethical teachers have become parasites and dregs within the profession, providing material for the demonization of teachers' media image and serving as the root cause of such vilification.

4.2 Online Media Acts as a Catalyst for the Demonization of Teachers' Media Image

4.2.1 Distorting and Exaggerating Facts for Their Own Interests

Media exposure indeed facilitates oversight of educators, but such supervision must remain grounded in reality without exaggeration. The current "demonization" of teachers' media image largely stems from media-driven profit motives. This mirrors how entertainment industries amplify sensationalism for attention, often compromising content authenticity. Such demonization leads to herd mentality—people parrot unverified claims, offering self-satisfied critiques without verifying facts, unaware that such rhetoric backfires. If online violence exists, its root lies in media outlets distorting facts to protect corporate interests. Such profit-driven reporting perpetuates public misunderstanding about teachers' image. As the proverb goes, "A kind word can warm the coldest winter." As the backbone of national supervision, media should prioritize factual accuracy over personal gain,

guiding public judgment with credible content.

4.2.2 Seize the Curiosity of the Information Receiver

In today's society, people are constantly juggling daily routines and overwhelmed by trivial matters, having lost interest in conventional online news and even developed a kind of digital immunity. They now gravitate toward sensational stories that defy logic—like teachers being portrayed as moral failures or demonized figures. Seizing this curiosity, some online media outlets sensationalize educators by using shockingly vivid terms like "beastly teachers" or "devilish educators" in headlines to boost clickbait. As these clickbait articles skyrocket in popularity, the demonized image of teachers has expanded from isolated cases to become a generalized perception of the entire teaching profession, further cementing the toxic narrative surrounding educators.

4.2.3 The Diversification of Media Forms Leads to Uneven Quality of Communication Content

With the continuous development of Internet technology, the media environment has undergone rapid changes. Self-media software has emerged in an endless stream, and the quality of reporting content is uneven, which is mainly reflected in two aspects:

First, the control of authoritative and mainstream media over the public opinion environment has gradually weakened. In the era of monolithic media forms, the government could control the pace and influence of news reporting, establishing a positive image of teachers for the public and spreading positive energy. However, with the development of internet technology, media forms have become increasingly diverse. Self-media platforms like TikTok and Kuaishou have flourished, allowing everyone to express their opinions and works. This inevitably leads to uneven quality of content, where individuals vent their dissatisfaction and hatred towards teachers in the media environment, recklessly defaming and vilifying them. Over time, a large amount of negative information will challenge the control and influence of authoritative media, making demonization a label for the entire teaching profession.

Second, the content presentation in mass media has shifted from factual and positive to entertainment-oriented and personalized approaches. As netizens increasingly crave entertaining and personalized information, their reporting standards no longer prioritize truthfulness or ethics to satisfy the public's "gossip" and "snooping" mentality. Instead, they measure success by audience numbers, views, and click-through rates. The refined or vulgar aspects of teachers' images have become irrelevant. From an entertainment-driven and personalized perspective, negative portrayals of teachers are exaggerated, exhibiting "hyper-realistic" characteristics. The demonization of teachers' images is gradually becoming more prominent.

4.3 The Public's "Demonization" of Teachers' Media Image

4.3.1 The Effect of Halo

The halo effect refers to the phenomenon in social cognition where people's judgments are primarily based on personal preferences, which can obscure other qualities of the object of cognition (Shang Yuandong, Mao Xin & Wang Xue, 2019). Parents in China all have the mentality of "hoping their sons will become dragons and their daughters become phoenixes," placing great emphasis on the upbringing of their offspring and investing a high proportion of their time and resources in their education, such as giving gifts to teachers for favors or enrolling children in remedial classes. However, sometimes the effort does not yield proportional returns, as parents' substantial educational investments fail to translate into their children's outstanding academic performance (Duan Chaoxia & Wang Jianjun, 2013). In such cases, some parents do not look for reasons within themselves or their students but instead blame teachers, accusing them of accepting gifts without doing favors or casually handling remedial classes. This amplifies the negative impression of teachers to the entire teaching profession, allowing parents to vent and comment on the media's "demonization" of teachers, thereby accelerating the stereotyping of teachers in the media.

4.3.2 The "Kidnapping" of the Moral High Ground

Moral coercion refers to individuals imposing their views on others, even demanding that others refrain from actions that displease them, thereby constraining others with their own objectives. While morality serves as a value standard to regulate personal conduct, excessive moral constraints can deviate from the original

intent, transforming morality into a weapon of intimidation. Teachers have long been perceived as "saints" in public perception, but the declining image of educators has made many resistant to this perception, leading to widespread criticism of teachers' misconduct through freedom of speech. Teachers are ordinary individuals with their own lives, joys, and sorrows. Criticizing the entire teaching profession based solely on the tarnished image of individual educators is like "missing the forest for the trees." Imposing nearly draconian standards on teachers in every aspect constitutes moral coercion, which has accelerated the demonization of teachers' media image.

4.3.3 Backlash

The reverse effect phenomenon occurs when individuals, influenced by pre-existing beliefs or mental frameworks, develop opposing psychological tendencies toward information. In China's context, mainstream media's persistent portrayal of teachers as positive and sacred figures has led to viewer fatigue among netizens, fueling intense expectations for demonized images and negative life events involving educators. This psychological dynamic not only drives malicious media to fabricate and distort teachers' negative portrayals, but also amplifies the circulation of such narratives, thereby expanding the influence of these demonized depictions.

5. Countermeasures to Improve the Media Image of Teachers as Demons

5.1 Teachers Should Strengthen Their Professional Ethics, Set an Example, and Constantly Improve Themselves

As the saying goes, "No wind, no waves." The moral lapses of certain teachers have become the primary catalyst for the demonization of educators' public image in media, providing abundant negative material for online platforms and creating opportunities to disparage and smear teachers' reputations. To address this root cause, teachers must first strengthen their professional ethics. While professional knowledge demonstrates a teacher's competence, ethical development determines their moral stature. The purpose of ethical cultivation is to establish professional standards that align teachers' words and actions with moral norms. In today's media-dominated era, even minor inappropriate remarks by teachers are amplified and sensationalized by the media,

often resulting in unbearable negative portrayals or even demonization. Therefore, teachers must prioritize moral self-discipline and take responsibility for their conduct. Secondly, teachers should cultivate exemplary awareness. They are not only role models for students but also societal benchmarks. They need to adapt their roles across different environments and groups—demonstrating educational excellence and behavioral standards in schools while courageously fulfilling social responsibilities and obligations in society. Finally, while improving personal conduct, teachers should also enhance their media literacy. By studying media operation theories like the American Experience School's approach, they can psychologically avoid being negatively affected by media portrayals and better navigate potential pitfalls in their professional conduct.

5.2 Improve the Media Environment and Guide the Correct Public Opinion

As the main platform to report the image of teachers, the media plays a role of carrying forward and bridging the past and the future. It not only carries forward the real situation of teachers, but also presents it to the public through the report. Its importance is self-evident. Therefore, the improvement of the media environment is an important measure to change the demonized image of teachers.

5.2.1 Journalists Should Improve Their Professional Quality and Stick to Their Original Purpose

Journalists are the "conscience of society," which places high demands on their professional conduct. To strengthen their career development, two key aspects require attention. First, professional competence: Media practitioners must ensure factual accuracy in reporting, avoid ambiguity, and demonstrate discernment in handling educational news—making sound judgments and steering clear of fact-based propaganda or misleading content. Second, ethical standards: Authenticity remains the cornerstone of journalism. Journalists must abstain from personal bias in reporting (Sun Yushuang & Sun Yao, 2011), refrain from creating sensationalized narratives to attract attention, and faithfully portray educators' professional image without generalizations or partial portrayals. Insufficient professional competence often leads to distorted perceptions of teachers' moral standing.

Therefore, enhancing journalists' ethical standards serves as a crucial measure to counteract the demonization of educators in media narratives.

5.2.2 Adhere to the Bottom Line of Morality and Do a Good Job in Public Opinion Supervision

The advancement of internet technology has empowered every citizen to voice their opinions freely. When news reports carry ideological bias, public sentiment becomes easily manipulated. News platforms must verify information authenticity before pursuing traffic, as public opinion supervision shouldn't trivialize citizens but should uphold ethical standards. It's unacceptable to sensationalize teachers by mixing them with vulgar language for clickbait profits, which distorts their image and creates psychological stereotypes that shape public attitudes toward educators. Furthermore, establishing dedicated oversight committees should review articles' authenticity, objectivity, and linguistic accuracy before publication, preventing misinformation through proactive prevention and firmly rejecting false reporting.

5.3 The Public Should Overcome Negative Psychological Effects and View Teachers Rationally

For the general public, first, we must resist blindly endorsing online media's portrayal of teachers as negative figures, which fuels their tendency to smear educators. When addressing reports about individual misconduct cases, we should avoid a "one-size-fits-all" approach that unfairly targets the entire teaching profession. Instead, we need to strengthen our moral judgment, uphold proper values, and learn to rationally evaluate the demonized images of teachers presented in media reports. Second, we must overcome harmful psychological effects. Firstly, we should counteract the halo effect by not judging others based on personal preferences. Don't condemn teachers to "death" over minor misconduct while overlooking their commendable qualities. Secondly, avoid moral coercion by treating teachers as ordinary individuals. Teachers are not perfect beings; they too make mistakes and have flaws. We should lower our almost excessive demands and adopt a more tolerant attitude. Thirdly, we must overcome the backlash effect. Rather than browsing or liking malicious reports about teachers out of fatigue with positive portrayals, we should cultivate a sense of responsibility to prevent creating unnecessary negative impressions about educators.

5.4 Government Departments Should Fully Establish a Public Opinion Mechanism to Purify the Media Discourse Space

In today's era of relatively free speech, controlling public opinion orientation has become crucial. Therefore, based on socialist core values, government departments should fully leverage their regulatory functions, establish public opinion mechanisms, improve laws and regulations, and provide robust institutional safeguards to protect teachers' image and eliminate online stigma (Hong Jiazhen, 2018). First, they should closely monitor media trends and actively guide public discourse to counteract the negative impacts of demonization of teachers' media image. Second, while ensuring freedom of speech, they must prohibit the reckless dissemination of harmful content, prevent rumor-mongering, and penalize users violating regulations. Finally, media outlets should be instructed to expose misconduct for spreading positive social energy rather than chasing traffic or profit. They must not fabricate or distort teachers' images, and should create a clear media discourse space to restore teachers' authentic image. Only through legal governance and the use of legal means to restore public opinion order can we promote positive social energy and rebuild teachers' image.

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