

The Differences of Media's Attitudes Towards "996 Working System"

Tianyi Shen*

Insight Academy of Canada, Toronto, M2N 1M4, Canada

**Corresponding author. Email: guanghua.ren@gecacademy.cn*

ABSTRACT

"996" working system has sparked discussion in Chinese society. This paper focuses on the attitudes of different media towards this abnormal labor system and the reasons for it. It adopts a vertical reading method to trace the changing attitudes of media and compares them with each other. It demonstrates that national official media, represented by the *People's Daily* have opposed to this system from the very beginning while provincial media have offered an opener perspective, involving more voice into discussion. The differences are caused by their positions as well as the change of labor law explanation. This study provides a new perspective to view the "996" system.

Keywords: "996" labor system, Attitudes, Media, Labor law.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the development of the Internet industry, most of the Internet companies practiced the 996 working hour system. This system has aroused hot discussion since the event of "996. ICU" occurred. This research questions what are the differences of the attitudes of media towards "996" and whether there are some relations between media's types and their attitudes.

With the occurrence of an increasingly popular working mode named "996" in Internet industry two years ago, increasingly more scholars have begun to analyze this mode. Those initial studies mentioned the working mode of less than 6 hours every day and expressed an appeal of shifting working system and dissatisfaction [1-2]. Later the same worries were also shown about the "996 working system" [3]. Some scholars clearly disagreed about "996" [4], while others illustrated the causes of "996" and proposed possible solutions to it [5].

This paper applies a vertical reading method to analyze some representative newspapers, namely the *People's Daily*, *Liberation Army Daily* and the *Southern Weekly*. It traces the presentation of the "996" working system over time in these newspapers to figure out the discontinuity of their attitudes.

This research argues that national official media have questioned the legitimacy of this working mode from the very beginning while alternative media have taken more

factors and actors into discussion. Their differences result from their positions.

2. THE ATTITUDES OF OFFICIAL MEDIA

2.1 *People's Daily*

People's Daily is one typical official media, under the leadership of the central government. It is regarded as the representative of government and the whole country. The reports about the working system of "996" published on *People's Daily* was opposed to "996" from beginning to end.

In the report on April 11, 2019, named "Forced overtime should not be a corporate culture," its initial attitude was shown directly and strictly [6]. It disagreed with the system which was detrimental to people's physical health completely. It took it as another way of moral kidnapping. There was a comment included in this report. It said, "To protect the legal rights and interests of workers, the relevant government regulatory departments should take the initiative to exercise their authority in accordance with the law." The attitude of *People's Daily* towards the working system had been sure initially. Its attitude was just the representation of the attitude of government. After that, there were not any relevant reports about this working system in *People's Daily*.

2.2 Liberation Army Daily

In addition, *Liberation Army Daily* is also a good example of official media. *Liberation Army Daily*, which is organ newspaper of the Central Military Commission, has prominent influences on all different newspapers.

In the report on April 17, 2019, named “Working hard should be advocated, 996 should exit,” it expressed two main messages directly [7]. First, the spirit of “working hard” should be advocated. It is known to all that “Working Hard Culture” in those Internet companies which implemented the working system of “996” was highly praised by the public with the development of this working mode. However, “Working Hard Culture” means that if workers want to show that they are hard-working, positive and struggling, the only way is to work overtime. However, most of these programmers are unwilling to accomplish any extra work. The stunt of “Working Hard Culture” is another method for bosses or leaders to squeeze and exploit labors. Second, the working system of “996” should be abandoned.

In addition, in the report on May, 22, 2019, named “How many overtime lights are for the leaders?” [8] also mentioned several words which expressed the similar meaning of “Working Hard Culture” mentioned in other reports. There are these words in this article that “In the workplace ecology, there is a common occurrence of overtime, which makes people feel tiring: ‘Only time-only’, ‘Sit work and do nothing’, ‘Leaders do not go, I do not go’ and other formalism overtime phenomena”, which illustrated that workers’ overtime working was not aiming at truly working hard for either more salary or good reputation. These staffs who were at the bottom position were extremely unwilling to working under the mode of “996”, but they had to do in a willing expression in order to get leaders’ preferences and opportunities for promotion and salary increase. From the article’s content, it was clear that working hard was not truly working hard, “Working Hard Culture” at that time was also a fake “Working Hard Culture”. All their willingness of working hard under the working mode was just to cater to the world’s trend.

Furthermore, the latest report in *Liberation Army Daily* was on January 2, 2020, named “The key to overcome ‘chaos’ lies in managing ‘chaos’” [9]. It argued that “‘Busy’ is a normal work. Although the ‘996 working system’ which is widely spread in society is not commendable, it also reflects the reality of many young people working with high workload from one side.”

The reports in *Liberation Army Daily*, illustrated clearly that official media represented the attitude of government, who opposed to this working system. Moreover, *Liberation Army Daily* has persisted this idea over time and later demonstrated that government managed to make some suggestions and take some efficient actions to make working system suitable.

What’s more, the increasingly popular “Working Hard Culture” whose nature was a serious of fake performances shown by programmers and workers was also objected by governments. At last, the truly suppose of governments and country towards this phenomena mainly in Internet companies should be improved to a positive direction.

McLuhan, theory of medium, shows that media themselves are to spread message. Official media were also messages. These reports had strong influence on their audiences. They spread the attitudes of the government, and these attitudes and information were messages, which can spread between people and tell them what governments considered about this working mode.

3. THE ATTITUDES OF OTHER TYPES OF MEDIA

For other types of media, it is obvious that they have more opinions in comparison with official media. Their reports have freer expressions and several personal views. They show various attitudes towards the “996” working system.

Southern Weekly is a good example of these types of media. It is a provincial journal and also under the leadership of the central government. However, its attitudes had apparent difference compared with official media. This was due to the fact that it was equipped with a freer circumstance to report.

3.1 Initial Attitude

In 2019, when the event “996.ICU” and the working system “996” occurred, the attitude of *Southern Weekly* was not clear in their reports. The first report was named “‘Manong’ 996 and general worker 996, who is worse” published on April 5, 2019 [10]. “Manong,” literally “code farmers,” mainly refer to the grassroots programmers in an ironic tone. This report demonstrated that most of the programmers were not satisfied with this working pattern because they have no time to have an enough rest, which will make them so tired and even fell ill. However, for the normal workers, they may think that those programmers are so dissatisfied because sometimes they had to work for as the same long time as programmers need, but they just get much lower salaries than programmers. Besides, the illustration in this report shows that programmers are working in the face of computers and underneath bright lights when other labors are staying at home with enjoyable life. The strong contrast between light inside and darkness outside seemed to be the most appropriate description of programmers’ life of overtime working. There was not a definite attitudes shown in this report. The author just introduced an increasingly popular working system and a social phenomenon that partial workers had to accomplish extra work.

3.2 The Transform of Attitude

Southern Weekly showed again its vague attitudes in a later report on April 12, 2019. The title proposed another question, “996, is it luck or pain?” [11]. It indicated the controversial opinions about this system. It was with no doubt that most of the programmers still kept their original thought that this working system of “996” was a pain for them. However, for the small part of programmers who have car loan and house loan, they believed that this working system was not such a terrible thing even though it will make them tired. This was due to the fact that they could earn more money to relieve their living pressure by overtime working.

At the same time, the senior leaders in Internet companies held the same attitude with those tiny proportion of programmers. For them, this working mode was a good tool to manage the labors more efficiently and create more benefits. They were able to use labors’ value to the maximum. For instance, Jack Ma, the boss of Alibaba, had said, “Personally, I think it’s a great blessing to be able to do 996. Many companies and people don’t have a chance to do 996. If you didn’t follow 996 when you were young, when would you do 996? You haven’t had 996 in your life. Do you think you’re very proud?” [12]. Moreover, the words “overload working” in the illustration, were negative expression, the author did not support the system in Internet companies. The attitude shift in different periods was on a positive transformation because people could reflect this system with different points of view. They began to question whether the mode was positive or not, whether it would cause pain to programmers.

After that, subsequent reports have apparent negative attitudes towards “996.” The report named ““996. ICU’ young people rely on coffee to survive. If one cup doesn’t work, let’s have two” on April 17, 2019, gives more space to individual views. It said, “For literary youth, coffee continues to be an inspiration.” while for programmers “Coffee is a materialized psychological hint to force yourself to be fresh. It gives strength to yourself when inspiration dries up. It is a kind of psychological hint. In an Internet user’s words, ‘I couldn’t touch a mouthful of coffee before, but now I live on coffee’ ...Coffee is not used to prolong life. Sleep and rest are” [13]. These two feelings from different working classes demonstrate that coffee had been a drink to let people “survive.” Increasing coffee consumption is only a reflection of the popularity of “996” mode in Internet companies. Behind this phenomenon is helpless and despair. Programmers can do nothing, but depend on drinking many cups coffee to motivate themselves.

In 2020, the majority of opinions in *Southern Weekly* were still negative. They are mostly personal comments on the working system of “996”. However, in 2021, the developing trend of attitudes and opinions became

similar to the ones official media kept. Taking the article “Make it clear that ‘996’ is illegal, and the Labor Law supports workers” for example [14], the ministry of human resources and social security and the supreme law jointly issued a number of typical cases of overtime labor and personnel disputes and made it clear that this behavior of overtime work broke the law. A picture shows that a gavel is lying beside a wood with the sign of “996.” It was a symbolism that “996” was not allowed by Chinese laws, and there would be strict punishment if the company implement this working system.

4. THE MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ATTITUDES OF OFFICIAL MEDIA AND OTHER TYPES OF MEDIA

Overall, there were two main differences between the attitudes of these two distinct media, namely official media and other types of media.

First, the contents on official media were stricter and sharper. They often pointed out the shortages directly without any feeling of hesitation. Besides, these contents all conformed to Chinese laws and the position of Chinese government strictly. This characteristic is related to the position of official media – the representative of government and country.

However, for other types of media, even though they also under the leadership of central government, their suggestions are partial to personal views and have more space to express some freer opinions. There are more feedbacks which were fit our own feeling about the working system of “996.” Although sometimes these more personal opinions are a little bit aggressive, they still exist on these media.

Second, reports on both official media and other types of media are possibly to shift their opinions with the development of time and mainstream thoughts. However, the transformation of the attitudes of official media are more based on the fairest judgments of social facts about “996.” For other types of media, in addition to the judgment, public opinions have strong effects on their attitudes. They might consider many different factors such as the views that the public keep and the benefits or disadvantages this working system causes, instead of just depending on the strict judging criteria, which can distinguish whether it is a right thing or not. Moreover, their readerships are different. The determinant audiences of official media are mostly party members while the audiences of other types of media are the public, which means that the reports will be easier to understand, and plain language will be more used to deepen the understanding.

5. CONCLUSION

In sum, the analysis of periodic reports witnessed the

transformation of social and public attitudes toward the “996” working mode. Whether it is an item or one thing, the opinion and attitude will often change with its development until the final result or most suitable judgment occurs in the world. Each group, class and people can keep their own opinions and attitudes but just be a follower to believe the leaders. It is a process of reconsideration and review. Just like the attitudes towards “996,” the attitudes experience suspicion, support, double-sides and opposition at the end.

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