

The Construction of the Public Sphere by News Client Applications: A Case Study of Qilu Yidian (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose] News client applications, as a new media form emerging in the Internet era, provide an excellent platform for constructing the public sphere in cyberspace through their communication models and modes.

[Method] This article takes the socially-transformed Qilu Yidian client as its research object. Under the theoretical framework of the public sphere, and using the structural elements of the public sphere concept as a benchmark, it further explores the possibility of the Qilu Yidian client constructing a public sphere in the Internet age.

[Result] Although the media environment has undergone transformation, the inherent mode of existence of the public sphere will not change.

[Conclusion] Finally, it points out the practical significance of the social transformation of news clients from the perspective of the public sphere for three aspects: individual citizens, media, and government.

Full Text

The Construction of the Public Sphere by News Apps: A Case Study of Qilu Yidian

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Abstract

As a new media form emerging in the Internet era, news apps provide an excellent platform for constructing the public sphere in cyberspace through their

communication models and methods. This study examines the social transformation of the Qilu Yidian app, using the structural elements of the public sphere concept as a benchmark under the theoretical framework of public sphere theory to explore the app's potential for constructing a public sphere in the digital age. Although the media environment has undergone significant changes, the inherent mode of existence of the public sphere remains unchanged. Finally, the paper highlights the practical significance of news apps' social transformation from the perspective of public sphere theory for three key stakeholders: individual citizens, media organizations, and the government.

Keywords: public sphere; news app; Internet; communication model; social transformation

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Origins of the Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere was initially proposed by German political theorist Hannah Arendt and was subsequently enriched and refined by philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas conceptualized the public sphere as an operational space for mass media, particularly viewing “the press as the most typical institution of the public sphere.” In essence, public opinion emerges through mass media and is closely related to public discourse expression [1]. As technology continues to mature and new media flourishes, traditional media have gradually declined. Faced with this transformed media landscape, traditional media have pursued three major transformation pathways: mobilization, socialization, and intellectualization [2]. In the Internet age, news apps have become a new frontier for traditional media to guide public opinion, carrying the hopes of transformation and development.

In its early development stages, news apps functioned merely as linear information transmission platforms centered on news topics, lacking adequate space for dialogue. In recent years, however, the expansion of social features in news apps has further broadened communication between users, news media, and government departments. This enables people to more autonomously express opinions on public affairs and government decision-making, thereby establishing a new public discourse space. This study therefore selects the Qilu Yidian app as its research object, using the structural elements of the public sphere concept as a benchmark to explore whether this news app can construct a public sphere in the network era.

Reflecting on how to reconstruct Habermas' s model of the public sphere after its dissolution, Canadian political scientist Charles Taylor introduced Benedict Anderson' s concept of “social imaginary,” arguing that the public no longer needs to be a community that gathers through face-to-face communication. Instead, it is an “imagined community of public opinion” assembled by mass media. Modern mass media aggregates participants in the public sphere beyond spatial

and temporal constraints, integrating strangers scattered around the world into a modern public through shared topics [3]. Therefore, this public sphere is not a physical space in the traditional sense. In this respect, Taylor expands and redefines the public sphere on the basis of Habermas' s theory, while simultaneously viewing modern mass media as a foundational condition for the formation of the public sphere.

2.2 Construction of the Public Sphere

There are two general approaches to constructing the public sphere: top-down, where government departments take the lead in overall planning; and bottom-up, where the public actively participates in national and social affairs through the public sphere. The latter requires the formation of civic civilization centered on critical spirit and the development of public rationality.

Research on this topic can be divided into two main categories. On one hand, a technologically optimistic tendency leads some scholars to believe that, in the current context, the Internet represents a new ideal public sphere. Xiong Guangqing argues that the widespread use of the Internet has brought important opportunities for the reconstruction of the public sphere [4]. Chen Xiao, examining aspects such as “source expansion,” the counterbalancing relationship between the public sphere and public power, rational criticism, and netizens' independent personality, concludes that “the Internet will certainly become the most ideal communication medium for the public sphere to date, and the network public sphere will certainly gradually mature” [5].

On the other hand, some scholars argue that the “public sphere” is essentially a utopian concept, and that the network public sphere is far from a true public sphere in the genuine sense. Liu Zixiao illustrates the practical dilemmas of the public sphere from the perspective of Weibo, such as the absence of rationality and the prevalence of cyber violence, as well as the erosion of commercial interests and the invasion of public power [6]. Wang Zhenzhen, Wang Xiangfei, and others, using sports communication during the COVID-19 pandemic as an entry point, propose that sports health discourse is dominated by elite culture, that the public's rational consciousness and critical capacity are insufficient, and that media also falls short in stimulating public attention [7]. Based on the current research landscape, many studies either simply deny the practical applicability of public sphere theory to Chinese media development or are blindly optimistic about the technological advantages of emerging media in constructing social publicity.

3. Platform Ecology of the Qilu Yidian App

In 2014, *Qilu Evening News*, the newspaper with the largest circulation and greatest influence in Shandong Province, launched its own news app “Qilu Yidian” [8]. Throughout its transformation and development, Qilu Yidian has not only achieved superficial integration of information platforms but has also

realized the social development of news apps, creating numerous platform-level products that substantially enhance user stickiness.

3.1 Information Aggregation Platform

Qilu Yidian positions itself as “a well-known domestic media platform, regional social platform, and comprehensive service platform.” Through social and platform-based operations, it grafts various resources, provides diversified services, builds ecological circles, and connects with a broad user base. To enhance the social dynamics of content dissemination, Qilu Yidian continuously expands the capacity and breadth of its news app [9]. The platform has evolved from primarily original content to gradually opening up its media platform and attracting diverse media forces, creating an aggregated media platform. Given the complexity of information, Qilu Yidian organizes its content sections into several major channels: current affairs, education, economy, culture and tourism, technology, and public opinion. Users can enter corresponding channels and leave comments on topics of interest, promoting user clustering and facilitating group interaction and communication.

3.2 Social Interaction Platform

Qilu Yidian constructs a network public space by creating a “Topic Square,” providing users with a venue to share, exchange, and discuss issues of public value and public interest. In the upper right corner of the “Intelligence Station” page, Qilu Yidian features “Selected Topics.” In terms of topic selection, some topics are set unilaterally by the media for the public, while others are listed based on public feedback. On one hand, Qilu Yidian sets topics according to holidays, seasonal changes, and hot social events. For example, the topic *#Collection! Our Ten Years#* invites users to share their personal experiences to reflect Shandong’s social development and changes over the past decade, thereby warming up reporting plans for the 20th Party Congress and making users participants in thematic reporting. On the other hand, topic selection is also based on the level of public attention and engagement. Qilu Yidian packages content that users highly focus on and are willing to share into topics, such as the “Beautiful Shandong” series. In summary, unlike the unidirectional nature of past agenda-setting, Qilu Yidian’s topic selection is more interactive and bidirectional.

3.3 Socialized Content Production

Qilu Yidian integrates users into its content production system and achieves social transformation through user-generated content. Its established “Intelligence Station” serves as both an information sharing post and a platform for constructing social public opinion. On this platform, users can record their lives, share experiences, and provide news clues from their surroundings to advance event reporting and resolution. Others can directly leave comments and likes below these posts [10]. If the Intelligence Station lowers the threshold for user content

production, then “Yidianhao” represents Qilu Yidian’ s advanced user production system. Yidianhao has gathered numerous domestic and Shandong-based self-media influencers and experts in various fields such as culture, parenting, health, and finance, who publish high-quality professional information [11]. By this point, Qilu Yidian has basically formed a content ecology driven by the dual engines of journalist production and user production.

4. Qilu Yidian’ s Construction of the Public Sphere

Habermas’ s concept of the public sphere emerged in the context of early capitalism, and its applicability to new media requires reflection. Nevertheless, it remains a theoretical foundation that helps us understand the development and evolution of media public discourse spaces. Public participation, public discourse space, and public opinion are the three structural elements of public sphere theory, constituting three supporting pillars for its construction and representing its essential characteristics. Although today’ s media environment has changed, it has not dissolved the theoretical significance of the public sphere. The following analysis therefore examines the inherent mode of existence of the public sphere constructed by the Qilu Yidian news app based on these three structural elements.

4.1 User Participation Shaping a Rational Public

Regarding equality, Habermas, in his discussion of 18th-century coffee houses and salons, stated: “This social interaction did not take equality of social status as a precondition; one might say it completely disregarded social status. By equality, we mean equality ‘simply as human beings’ ”[1]. The discourse structure of public discourse space in the network era has changed, giving everyone equal freedom to post and speak on platforms and to independently participate in public discussions.

Within the Qilu Yidian app, public subjects are characterized by breadth and equality. As Shandong’ s largest user-generated content (UGC) news platform, users can upload various fresh events, positive energy stories, or requests for help in real-time through the “Intelligence Station,” and can directly message online journalists. As of June 2023, Qilu Yidian had more than 790 journalists. Content posted by users is presented in the Intelligence Station after verification, and if deemed highly newsworthy, editors and journalists contact users for interviews and further processing before publishing on broader platforms [11]. By 2022, the number of “intelligence correspondents” had exceeded 200,000, distributed across all industries and regions throughout the province. The Intelligence Station and Yidianhao give everyone, regardless of complex and diverse identities, equal discourse power. The Internet is changing the traditional communication landscape, deconstructing centralized discourse structures and breaking past information monopolies. Netizens can express their views anytime and anywhere through the Internet.

Within a public space with diversified participants, the app also includes the “Shandong Market Supervision Online” website and the *Ask Yidian* column (comprising 17 sub-columns such as *Yidian Medical Consultation*, *Yidian Education Consultation*, and *Yidian Legal Consultation*). Users can not only expose and consult on public interest issues such as food safety and consumer rights but also communicate with relevant department heads and experts on public issues in law, education, healthcare, and other fields to seek assistance, thereby enhancing users’ rights protection and subject consciousness and improving their participation.

4.2 Platform Construction Expanding Public Space

The distinctive features of news app platforms are openness and equality. In the mobile Internet era, the threshold for public participation in the network public sphere is low. By connecting a mobile phone to the network, downloading the app, and completing registration and login, users can participate in topic discussions. The network extends the right to participate fairly to all citizens; social class or status hardly constrains netizens. The network has broken past geographical restrictions on the public sphere, allowing various viewpoints to collide and communicate in public space. Clearly, the public sphere has expanded from the theaters, coffee houses, and tea rooms mentioned by Habermas to today’ s news apps.

Furthermore, Qilu Yidian’ s platform construction emphasizes the integration of virtual and reality—that is, the connection between network public space and real-world activities. Qilu Yidian regularly organizes online and offline lecture activities, inviting experts in specific fields to give lectures that include discussions on topics of public interest as well as exchanges on social hot topics and daily life content.

4.3 Selected Topics Forming Public Opinion

Public opinion emerges from public interaction and dialogue, thereby extending the public sphere. This is manifested in two aspects: first, the expansion of topic content to social dimensions with all-encompassing content; second, the development of critical capacity. Qilu Yidian’ s internal topics are quite rich. As some scholars have pointed out, when individual depictions of personal dilemmas gradually accumulate, “small-self” discourse gradually builds into “big-self” discourse. Individual attention to and reflection on social issues evolve into collective common demands [13]. For example, in the selected topic *#Movie Tickets Being Non-Refundable and Non-Changeable Constitutes Unfair Terms—What’ s Your Opinion?#*, users expressed the unreasonableness of this regulation based on their own movie-watching experiences, urging improvements to laws and regulations to protect consumer rights. Similarly, under the topic *#Pizza Hut’ s Use of Expired Ingredients with Relabeling—Will You Still Eat There?#*, users expressed concerns about food safety issues in the catering industry and urged relevant departments to intensify investigations. If such discourse

accumulates, it forms mass expression and public opinion, prompting relevant stakeholders to respond.

Through extensive discussion and commentary on important issues related to public interest, public opinion achieves the function of critical supervision through the power of public discourse. This aligns perfectly with Habermas' s core concepts of "rationality" and "criticism" in the public sphere. Undoubtedly, this constitutes a new type of public sphere constructed in the network era under the vision of public opinion.

5. The Significance of News Apps' Social Transformation from the Perspective of Public Sphere Theory

The concept of the public sphere, which gradually disappeared in the mass media era, has gained new vitality on the Internet. Through its social transformation, the Qilu Yidian app constructs a new type of public sphere in the new media environment. This has practical significance for the development of public sphere theory and holds real-world implications for three aspects: individual citizens, media organizations, and the government.

5.1 Network Empowerment Promoting Social Democracy

Regarding the public sphere, citizens' democratic consciousness and attention to public issue discussions are fundamental to its formation. The substantive issues reflected behind discourse forms and discourse power, and the resulting series of behavioral changes, have very practical significance. The arrival of the Internet era has brought tremendous changes to traditional news media, whose living space has been continuously squeezed. Traditional media have pursued transformation and development, but most news apps remain constrained by traditional linear thinking, limited merely to news push and release. For news apps to achieve healthy operation, they must break through this inherent model. Qilu Yidian' s social transformation, seizing the opportunity of the Internet era, enables citizens to clearly feel that they can intervene in discussions on public events and policies through network channels. These discussions are highly significant for enhancing civic consciousness and promoting democratic participation, and can effectively strengthen citizens' awareness of political participation.

5.2 Promoting Media Transformation and Driving Converged Media Matrix Layout

When traditional media develop converged media matrix layouts, social transformation cannot be ignored in addition to the principle of "content is king." Traditional media need to conduct in-depth exploration and utilization based on their own characteristics, taking user needs as the starting point to build an ecological platform between media and users rather than simply serving as a channel for news push. This requires transforming thinking patterns, shifting

from linear communication to multi-level group communication. Currently, the network ecology is trending toward complexity, and media transformation requires the implementation of Internet thinking. Social transformation reflects Internet thinking and user thinking, making it an important component of converged media matrix construction. Qilu Yidian is an information platform that has transformed by seizing the opportunity of socialization. Its ecological characteristics are evident, aiming to enhance the media's own hard power, create a complete media ecology, and attempt to stand out in the network media environment to reshape media development.

5.3 Building Media Discourse Fields and Improving Local Government Inquiry Systems

The official discourse field and the public discourse field do not always exist in opposition and contradiction; they can mutually integrate and accommodate each other. The official discourse field focuses on macro-level regulation, while the public discourse field emphasizes public positions and the expression of public opinion. Compared to network media driven by market interests, the responsibility of bridging these two discourse fields cannot be accomplished without the government and transforming traditional media.

Therefore, the significance of social transformation in news apps lies in using the extensibility of social functions to expand communication space between the public and media, creating a public sphere for discussing public interest issues. In the field of government inquiry, Qilu Yidian emphasizes not only vertical linear communication but also flat group communication. The backend actively sets and packages topics based on high-discussion issues in the Intelligence Station, bringing the public together in the media field to discuss major issues concerning public interest.

Furthermore, past focus on public opinion often led to unequal discourse power, obscuring some smaller discourse fields. For example, public opinion events exposed on Weibo often attract national attention, but due to the changeability of attention in the network era and real-time updates on trending lists, certain public opinion events often end up unresolved (“fizzling out”) as more breaking news emerges. Qilu Yidian's *Yidian Bangban* column, as a key user-interactive and service-oriented news video program, builds an effective communication channel between users and relevant departments—from receiving user tip-offs, to follow-up by assisting journalists, to later-stage editing and all-network distribution—helping citizens solve difficult issues in housing, transportation, education, healthcare, and other fields. Cases such as “After purchasing Clinique butter on Vipshop, face swelled ‘like a pig’ s head”; *Yidian Bangban* helps user obtain timely compensation” and “Zaozhuang residents encounter difficulties installing electric vehicle charging piles; *Yidian Bangban* helps solve the problem” demonstrate the importance of improving media layout and conducting online government inquiries for local issues.

In summary, by building applications such as “Intelligence Station,” “Topic Square,” and “Ask Yidian,” the Qilu Yidian app constructs a network-era public discourse space among users, media, and government, improving the linear relationship between media and users. This holds significance for social democracy, media convergence, and bridging the two discourse fields.

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