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## How Internet Technology Makes Post-Print Public Topic Discussion Possible

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**Date:** 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

### Abstract

“Public topics” are ubiquitous in our daily lives. In the Web 2.0 era, internet users have transformed their traditional role as passive recipients of information. By leveraging increasingly sophisticated internet technologies and utilizing social networking and self-media platforms, they have become vocal participants in public affairs. This paper takes the public discussion space that has emerged under the impetus of internet technology in the Web 2.0 era as its backdrop, analyzes how public topics are discussed in people’s lives through internet technology, and proposes recommendations for improving the current discussion environment.

### Full Text

#### How Internet Technology Enables Public Discourse on Public Issues

**Abstract:** Public issues are ubiquitous in daily life. In the Web 2.0 era, internet users have transcended their traditional role as passive information recipients. Leveraging increasingly sophisticated internet technologies and utilizing social networks and self-media platforms, they have become vocal participants in public events. This paper examines the public discussion space that has emerged under the impetus of internet technology in the Web 2.0 era, analyzing how public issues are discussed in people’s lives through these technologies and offering recommendations for improving the current discursive environment.

**Keywords:** internet technology; Web 2.0 era; public issues; public discussion space

Since its inception, the internet has continuously integrated with traditional media, forming a “public discussion space” that approximates Jürgen Habermas’ s concept of the “public sphere.” Driven by information technology, Web 2.0 provides a vast stage for this public discussion space, with self-media and

social networks playing pivotal roles in its formation. Self-media—media that empowers individuals—achieves low-barrier dissemination through social media platforms. Today’s three largest social media platforms—Weibo, WeChat, and Toutiao—represent powerful combinations of social networks and self-media, as well as contemporary products of internet-media convergence. In 2018, these platforms had 337 million, 1 billion, and 140 million users respectively, collectively reaching over 1.5 billion users. This massive user base and easy-to-use interface have provided robust support for the flourishing of public discussion space.

## 2. What Constitutes a Public Issue

Public issues typically connect to events that affect group interests or have profound social impacts. While not a term we encounter daily, we are familiar with its manifestations: the “explosive,” “trending,” and “viral” tags on Weibo, frequent shares in WeChat Moments, or top entries on Toutiao’s hot search list. However, not all trending topics qualify as public issues. Academic definitions have remained ambiguous. Does it require continuous 刷屏 on social networks? Sustained attention and widespread discussion? Or must it concern public interests across social, political, and cultural dimensions? While a precise definition remains elusive, entertainment topics that frequently top Weibo’s trending list are typically excluded. Although entertainment issues generate extensive discussion, their impact on group interests and society is considered limited.

### 1. How Public Discourse Space Becomes Possible

Before the Web 1.0 era—when internet technology first merged with traditional media—people typically encountered public issues passively. When public events occurred, traditional media like television and newspapers would report and publish information to attract attention, while major portals offered commentary and reposts. What ultimately reached audiences was heavily processed information. Although people actively sought information, their position in public discourse remained peripheral; they consumed whatever media published. Thus, despite conscious efforts to obtain information, the content itself was received passively.

However, the interactive nature of Web 2.0, coupled with mature internet technology, increased bandwidth, and the rapid rise of social media, has diversified information channels and reduced acquisition costs, fundamentally transforming the media-audience relationship. People are no longer passive recipients but have become media themselves—self-media—actively producing information and creating content online. Under the UGC (user-generated content) model, everyone is self-media, granting individuals discursive power over social events. As platform access barriers continuously lower and technological support matures, the public discussion space expands and improves. Technological advancement enhances users’ online discursive power, which, while not unlimited, is backed

by real identities despite the virtual nature of the space. “Real-name verification” serves as a minimum threshold that guarantees freedom of speech while imposing moral and legal constraints, erecting a natural warning sign: “The internet is not a lawless zone.”

From an environmental perspective, German sociologist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s “spiral of silence” theory remains highly relevant in today’s public discussion space. Regarding social hot-button issues, people form opinions and assess whether their views represent the “majority.” When aligned with the majority, they tend to express support through reposts, comments, and likes. When holding “minority” views, they often remain silent to avoid isolation. Consequently, the “majority” grows louder while the “minority” becomes quieter, intensifying the spiral of silence effect. The same dynamic shapes public opinion on public issues, as repeated expression of majority views produces mainstream discourse.

From a subject perspective, although everyone possesses discursive power in the Web 2.0 era, the diversity and professional nature of public issues have given rise to “key opinion leaders” (KOLs) across various vertical fields. With the popularization of national education, people increasingly prefer professional, rational analysis over meaningless emotional venting. Consequently, KOLs attract followers through their expertise, and their viewpoints often gain substantial support upon publication. In this sense, self-media has amplified the discursive power of opinion leaders.

The integration of internet technology into social agendas has also created challenges for managing public discussion space. Nevertheless, discussion drives progress. Through discourse, people recognize their discursive power over public issues, gradually forming their own logical frameworks and developing public consciousness. However, China’s current online ecological environment reveals generally low public discourse literacy. For a long time, China has not included training on how to voice opinions in public discussion spaces, participate in public discourse, or construct public issues as part of civic education. Consequently, when discussing public issues, many netizens are easily swayed by specious arguments and rhetoric that incite emotions, leading to misjudgment of public issues and even hijacking public opinion. Since public events involve different fields, people often struggle to make correct judgments based solely on their own learning, life, and experiences. Their logical thinking and rational judgment regarding public events require improvement. Yet this should not prevent us from critically examining public events and tirelessly pursuing truth.

We must also recognize that the internet is not a lawless zone, and we should take responsibility for the information we forward, comment on, and disseminate. While we seek recognition for our expressed views, we should simultaneously respect others’ perspectives. We may reference opinion leaders but must not follow them blindly. When public events unfold, we should maintain intellectual vigilance, avoid partial listening and belief, and stay rational.

#### 4. How to Participate in Public Discourse More Effectively

As we marvel at technological progress today, we must also recognize the hidden concerns behind it. With the deepening development of internet technology, the discursive power of opinion leaders continues to amplify.

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*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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