

A Preliminary Analysis of the Subject Consciousness of WeChat Official Accounts and Their Micro-information Dissemination Characteristics (Postprint)

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Abstract

Habermas' s public sphere theory constitutes one of the foundational theories in public communication studies. With the continuous development of network technology, the theoretical system of the public sphere has undergone numerous changes in recent years, one of which is that the public continuously utilizes application software to create topics, lead discussions, or establish spaces for topic discussion. WeChat Official Accounts exemplify such a topic discussion space composed of individual publics. Their existence demonstrates that the public sphere has evolved from the traditional Habermasian model into fine-grained, fragmented, and mutable public spaces. In other words, the traditional public sphere has been divided into a series of micro public spaces, and the public is no longer mass-based but has developed into micro-publics founded upon individual publics.

Full Text

A Brief Analysis of the Subject Consciousness of WeChat Public Accounts and the Characteristics of Micro-Information Dissemination

Abstract: Jürgen Habermas' s public sphere theory is one of the foundational theories of public communication studies. With the continuous development of network technology, the public sphere theoretical system has undergone many changes in recent years. One such change is that the public increasingly uses application software to create themes and topics to lead discussions, or to create spaces for topic discussion. WeChat public accounts represent one such discussion space composed of individual publics. Their existence demonstrates

that the public sphere has evolved from the traditional Habermasian model into small, fragmented, and mutable public spaces. That is, the traditional public sphere has been divided into a series of micro-public spaces, and the public is no longer a mass public but rather micro-publics developed on the basis of individual publics.

Keywords: Habermas; public sphere; public space; micro-public; WeChat public account

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The concept of the public sphere was proposed by Jürgen Habermas in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (translated in 1989). This concept has served as an enlightenment for scholars seeking to understand media operations, particularly in political communication. Habermas described Germany's structural transformation of media operations: from the coffee houses and civil society of the eighteenth century as spaces for rational-critical debate to the mass-circulation newspapers and increasingly popular broadcasting of the early twentieth century as the public sphere. Although politicians, journalists, business elites, and others continued to speak on behalf of the public, they disseminated political and social commentary through the media (Habermas, 2006: 416).

Traditional media may reminisce about the public sphere of the pre-digital era, when limited information resources and geographical constraints allowed broadcast or print media to control their content. The shift from having needs satisfied to actively seeking information represents a transformation in how the public chooses its public sphere. Moreover, operating without geographical or national boundaries has unsurprisingly led to declining subscriptions for traditional media, as the Internet has increasingly become the pillar upon which online media relies for survival, giving this networked public sphere broader reach and greater development potential.

This paper takes WeChat public accounts as an example to analyze the structure of today's public sphere under the extended concept of the public. As a continuously developing social media platform with numerous users, WeChat represents a new type of public space.

1. Structural Changes in the Public Sphere from the Perspective of Online Media

A re-evaluation of the public sphere concept is necessary. Habermas's original theory indicated that the structural transformation of the public sphere was premised on connecting government and the public; he never expected this

public sphere to be a stable, static, or unchanging system. If the emergence of network media has revealed a more diverse and broader public sphere, then this transformation, as John Hartley and Joshua Green (2006) point out, may lead to a new yet temporarily balanced model. How should we understand such a public sphere characterized by both temporariness and equilibrium?

The answer requires consideration of three factors. First is “the Public.” In media and communication studies, research on the public sphere has, to some extent, departed from Habermas’ s original theory. That is, the concept of “public sphere” has become broader and more variable, much like common terms such as “Society,” “Culture,” and “Community,” which have different models in different realities or states. While this diversity was not absent in Habermas’ s theory, there is actually little commonality when it comes to the concept of “the Public” itself. With continuous changes in media channels and audience distribution, especially lifestyle transformations brought about by digital technology, traditional media have experienced an irreversible loss of audience. The increase in news sources and the coexistence of multiple media channels may lead to competition for audience quantity, but audience strata are not unified; rather, they are variable or overlapping.

Second, as media studies has become independent from political science, sociology, or cultural studies, scholars have focused more on the delineation of independent public spheres. The interactive mode of communication has broken the narrow space of mainstream media agenda-setting and attracted participation from disadvantaged groups. The network public sphere model is considered to have broader reach not only due to the diversification of story sources but also the diversification of domains. The network public sphere embodies the structural characteristics of interactive communication, where both mainstream and non-mainstream media can be heard offering different voices on the same event. Manuel Castells (2011: 773) refers to those who emit such voices as “masses of spontaneous communication,” who may gain influence equal to that of professional journalists.

In fact, whether the network public sphere or other domains of public sphere, all are merely extensions of Habermas’ s public sphere theoretical system. The formal content displayed by media—news, commentary, videos, images—has not changed significantly. The many-to-many communication mode is also an expansion and support of the traditional mass communication structure. As Habermas (2006: 415) argued, the public sphere is rooted in the network, still serving to expand or accelerate message dissemination.

2. The Communication Process and Function of WeChat Public Accounts as Micro-Public Spaces

This paper uses the example of WeChat public accounts to illustrate the possibility of the traditional public sphere being divided into a series of micro-public spaces. This possibility manifests in that the public is a variable factor in the

structural transformation of the public sphere that cannot be ignored. Mass communication can continue in cyberspace because the public, following their own habits and methods, choose social media platforms they can afford to voice their opinions and interests. Social media and mainstream media practices differ because they have different publics—whether individual publics or distribution publics—who, regardless of holding similar or opposing views, always have the potential to become prominent or active participants.

Participation preserves both the individual' s pathway for media selection and the communication modes of the traditional public sphere, serving as a bridge connecting the macro public sphere (the network) and micro public spaces (WeChat). Furthermore, based on the WeChat public accounts cited in this paper, a notable phenomenon is that the emergence of social media has caused political topics to be fragmented into extensions of other issues, becoming foci of mass debate. Since new media technologies are ultimately adapted and applied by ordinary people, the commentary advantages of traditional opinion leaders (including journalists, social elites, and politicians) in the Habermasian public sphere have been weakened by new media communication methods. However, even as social media spaces (mass participation) challenge the concept of the traditional public sphere (elite participation), the two major characteristics of political communication and public commentary have been retained and continue to develop through the transition from the public sphere to public space.

First, at the center of the public account platform are individual WeChat users. These individual public networks form circles based on minimal units of familiar friends or those with common backgrounds, attitudes, or interests. For example, Xia Ke Dao, operated by *People' s Daily* (Overseas Edition), is renowned for its skillful interpretation of major current affairs. When news commentary is published on Xia Ke Dao, all its subscribers can see it. Similar micro-networks composed of individual publics emerge continuously, and their discussions also appear on different individuals' WeChat or Weibo. These overlapping public networks, much like Moments (WeChat' s social feed), serve to some extent as micro-public spaces. The public that initiates thematic discussions becomes the “prioritized” issue public (the Issue Public), organizing friends with common interests to discuss and publish topics of mutual interest within the circle. Over time and through the accumulation of topics, these may form increasingly larger and more stable circles. When common friends in different individual public networks overlap to a certain degree, they constitute a micro-public circle (Micro-public Space).

Second, the topics appearing in WeChat public accounts do not differ substantially from those in online media, covering politics, sports, society, culture, entertainment, technology, family, and children. However, unlike online media agenda-setting, these topics are more personalized, small-scale, and centered on individual hobbies, interests, and rights. For instance, UK Know-it-All is dedicated to sharing useful information about UK news, social culture, education, technology, food, and entertainment. Although issue publics are sometimes un-

stable and the information they post is not heavily filtered, because the topics of this public account are closer to the daily interests of international students, it can easily gather and attract their subscriptions and participation. In this sense, the issue public of UK Know-it-All becomes a bridge connecting the micro-public circle (international students) and the public space (WeChat).

Third, a single individual public or issue public can hardly become part of the public sphere, which is determined by the structure of the public sphere itself. However, within WeChat public accounts, dominant individual publics develop into issue publics because issue publics habitually set different themes in their public accounts to attract participation and interaction. Such WeChat public accounts can be considered a continuation and development of the public sphere, or a micro-public space formed by the decline of the “hegemonic” status of mass media and the emergence of social media.

3. WeChat Public Accounts: A Transformation from Self-Communication to Public Space

The emergence of social media platforms and multi-channel communication has created today’s media ecology model and serves as the premise for the extension and structural transformation of the Habermasian public sphere concept: the public can represent different topics, and communication methods are highly variable. Taking WeChat public accounts as an example, individual publics choose different topics due to differences in their social circles and knowledge levels. However, even when topics are highly fragmented, the continuation of opinion exchange and the retention of commentary and critical characteristics in network society, facilitated by multiple public modes, have enabled the possibility of individual publics developing into issue publics, and this development need not be constrained by media system limitations to a certain extent.

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

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