

Analysis of the “Information Cocoon” Effect in WeChat Communication: Postprint

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Abstract

With the advent of the Internet era and the rapid development of new media technologies, WeChat, leveraging its characteristics such as digitization and interactivity, has become an indispensable network information platform in our public life. However, WeChat’s highly regarded features of information customization and acquisition autonomy also exhibit severely constricted information pathways, manifesting a trend toward “information cocoons.” Intervening in the “information cocoon” effect represents a new challenge posed by the new media era, and its exploration should continuously summarize experience through practice.

Full Text

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An Analysis of the “Information Cocoon” Effect in WeChat Communication

Abstract: With the advent of the internet era and rapid development of new media technologies, WeChat, with its digital and interactive features, has become an indispensable network information platform in public life. However, WeChat’s much-noted characteristics such as information customization and autonomous acquisition also present an extremely constricted information context, showing a trend toward an “information cocoon.” Intervening in the “information cocoon” effect is a new challenge brought by the new media era, and exploration of it should continuously summarize experience in practice.

Keywords: WeChat; information cocoon; communication; customized services; group polarization

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Unlike other social media platforms where personal content is public, WeChat, as one of the largest social tools, has transformed public life. It has evolved from a simple social tool into a platform for information exchange, becoming a way of life while driving the development of self-media and generating profit models. It has clearly become an indispensable network information platform in our public life. However, WeChat also presents an extremely constricted information context, showing a trend toward an “information cocoon.” This paper provides a brief analysis of the “information cocoon” effect present in WeChat communication.

1. The Emergence of WeChat “Information Cocoon”

1.1 Concept of “Information Cocoon”

Cass R. Sunstein, a professor at the University of Chicago, pointed out that although the internet can provide abundant information, it is not necessarily an infinitely open social platform but rather an enclosed space. In his work *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge*, he explicitly proposed the concept of “information cocoon”—because people’s information needs are often personalized rather than comprehensive, based on personal preferences in accessing media information, over time they will confine themselves within a “cocoon” like a silkworm’s cocoon.

1.2 Reasons for the Emergence of WeChat “Information Cocoon”

First, with the advancement of information communication technology, information source content is no longer produced solely by professional websites or specific groups. Various new types of online social media and platforms have emerged frequently, and the information production environment has become increasingly “decentralized,” laying the foundation for the formation of “information cocoons.”

Second, “birds of a feather flock together.” In an environment of information overload, people instinctively pay attention to their own interests, and netizens internally separate into numerous small groups. This is the internal driving force that intensifies the “information cocoon” effect.

Finally, the “information cocoon” effect is more pronounced in WeChat than in other media, with the most fundamental reason being that WeChat’s functional

design and information dissemination methods are more conducive to the generation and reinforcement of “information cocoons.” On one hand, WeChat users can customize information and services by following “Subscription Accounts.” On the other hand, information publishing and reading in Moments is more private and personalized, catering to a greater extent to the user trend of “birds of a feather flock together.”

2. Manifestations of the “Information Cocoon” Effect in WeChat Communication

2.1 “My Daily” Style Moments

WeChat provides users with a degree of freedom and choice different from traditional media, transforming audiences from passive recipients into active seekers. Users can completely control what they view and when they view it according to their content preferences and schedules. This makes the audience more akin to proactive, personalized information consumers.

However, while WeChat brings diverse conveniences to users, in “assisting” or even “forcing” users to “autonomously” select information sources, it precisely brings about the problem of single information types and restricted acquisition. As is well known, WeChat is a typical representative of “acquaintance social circles.” Within WeChat user groups, people naturally separate into numerous small groups of various kinds. Audiences can freely choose whom they want to establish “acquaintance” relationships with and the circles behind them based on their preferences. Everyone can tailor a “personal daily newspaper” for themselves through functions like Moments and Subscription Accounts. Sunstein explained that “living in an information cocoon, the public cannot consider issues comprehensively.” When individuals are confined within self-constructed information contexts, their lives inevitably become programmed.

2.2 Homogenization Tendency within Circles

From the perspective of human social psychology, the degree of recognition one receives from social objects in social interactions can determine social satisfaction. Based on differences in individual background, education level, interests, and other aspects, users tend to use the WeChat platform as a link to establish weak-tie interpersonal “spider webs” with like-minded “friends” through various small groups, official accounts, and Moments. Within their limited “Moments” circle, users weave a specific information domain world with considerable depth and breadth through forwarding and commenting on information.

3. Impact of “Information Cocoon”

The “information cocoon” is an inevitable issue when communication “personalization” develops to a certain degree. Professor Wei Wuhui from Shanghai Jiao

Tong University believes that “information narrowing” is an imperceptible yet real threat to the internet.

3.1 Information Imbalance and Distortion

Because users are immersed in their personal circles of interest for extended periods while using WeChat, the imbalance in personal knowledge or information structure is the most direct impact of the “information cocoon” transformation in WeChat communication on users. Taking WeChat Official Accounts as an example, their follow mechanism caters to people’s need to autonomously select information sources and categories. For users, even though the daily pushes from Official Accounts are so numerous and complex, the categories of information received not only fail to expand, but users often only engage in commentary and exchange within familiar domains. Within these domains, identical and similar viewpoints become increasingly convergent, while dissenting and contradictory opinions are ignored, blocked, and eventually disappear completely, further exacerbating the already imbalanced knowledge and information structure of users.

3.2 Emergence of Group “Echo Chamber” Leading to Group Polarization

Sunstein proposed the concept of “echo chamber” at the beginning of *Infotopia*, stating: “People will place themselves in echo chambers of their own design—deliberating groups composed of like-minded people who amplify and reinforce the same opinions or information, achieving the result of exclusion or intensifying extreme statements, thereby producing group polarization.”

WeChat users are differentiated into small groups across different fields and interest areas, with unified opinions within these small groups. Because of the “echo chamber” effect, individuals within the group form convergent styles and are unwilling to accept information outside the “information cocoon,” forming characteristics of information homogeneity within groups and heterogeneity between groups. Moreover, due to the closed nature of the “information cocoon,” the interactive communication methods within small groups amplify convergent opinions and viewpoints, making group polarization easily generated through internal exchanges. External opinions will not be accepted within this group. If the group opinion formed is relatively radical or extreme, then after fermentation and diffusion in the “echo chamber,” it will form “groupthink,” accompanied by ubiquitous online violence.

4. How to Avoid the Negative Effects of “Information Cocoon”

4.1 Constructing the “Sidewalk” Model for Engineered Information Encounters

Sunstein once proposed the internet’s “sidewalk” model to address the “echo chamber” tendency caused by the “information cocoon.” He believed: “Whether physical spaces like streets and parks, or mass media like newspapers, radio, and television, all belong to the public domain and should function like ‘sidewalks’ where one might encounter various unplanned and unwanted scenarios, allowing different groups to experience fresh situations; those circumstances encountered without prior screening can trigger people’s verbal and behavioral interactions.”

First, public information domains can be constructed to break the closed nature of personal information spaces. For example, public hot-topic information can be pushed to the third or fourth position after refreshing personal Moments, opening a “window” in users’ Moments to form a “portal” that allows users to timely understand external dynamics. Functions like “refresh again to hide dynamic bar” can be set up to give users autonomy in receiving public information without being disturbed.

Second, based on the ranking of WeChat Official Accounts by follow and forwarding rates, highly followed Official Accounts can be recommended to users’ subscription account homepages, thereby breaking the limitations of users’ personal interests and attention domains.

Finally, with information flooding and rumors rampant on WeChat, ordinary users find it difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood. Traditional news media institutions and credible new media institutions still occupy the main discourse-guiding power in the WeChat circle. Therefore, striving to find an appropriate balance between mainstream consciousness and multiculturalism is a responsibility and obligation that all media should have. They should actively avoid the narrowing of horizons caused by the “information cocoon” and return online public opinion to rationality and constructiveness.

4.2 Users Need to Consciously Develop a Cognitive “Wide Angle”

As the saying goes, “the one who ties the bell must untie it.” The decisive factor causing the “information cocoon” phenomenon still lies in users’ own autonomous choices. Therefore, to fundamentally avoid the emergence of the “information cocoon” phenomenon, in addition to objective technical efforts and breakthroughs, it is even more necessary for user subjects to actively exert subjective initiative, open up the consciously or unconsciously caused closure of horizons, receive voices from different media channels, and actively expand the scope of information acquisition.

In fact, the “information cocoon” effect is not a phenomenon unique to WeChat in the internet era. It is also manifested in previously popular platforms like

Weibo, blogs, Renren, Kaixin, Tieba, Tianya, and current platforms like Zhihu—all network platforms with information and social interaction as their main purposes. Therefore, intervention in the “information cocoon” effect is a new challenge brought by the new media era, and exploration of it should continuously summarize experience in practice. New media technology is a double-edged sword, and its development and progress bring more severe challenges that we must actively address.

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

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