

What is Possible about China's Internet Public Domain?

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ABSTRACT

Since the ideal type of "public domain" was proposed by Habermas, it has attracted the attention and research of many Chinese and foreign scholars. In the unique social structure of China. With the development of the Internet, the network public domain has become a new form of the real public domain. In the process of this development, can we keep an optimistic attitude towards the online public domain as in the previous academic research? However, from the actual situation, the performance of the network public domain is far from the theoretical expectation, and there are some alienation phenomena such as the change of the mode of information dissemination, the transformation of public subjects and the transfer of communication power. These become the difficulties that prevent the online public domain from becoming possible.

KEYWORDS

Public Domain Network; Public Domain Cyberspace; Internet.

1. THE CONNOTATION AND EXTENSION OF THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

The concept of "public domain" as a norm was first proposed by German-American scholar Hannah Arendt in *The Human Conditions*, and the ideas in this book had a profound influence on German scholar Jurgen Habermas. Under the influence of Arendt's "public sphere", Habermas officially published *Structural Transformation of the Public Domain* in 1962, including Kant, Hegel, Marx Weber, and discussed the theory in detail in this book. After Habermas, many Western scholars, including Charles Taylor and John Keane, have conducted many creative studies in the public domain, but overall, these studies have not jumped out of the research framework of Habermas.

Habermas's "public sphere" refers to where citizens participate in and criticize public affairs between the state and society, and between the private sphere and the domain of public power. It highlights the interaction of citizens in the political process. "From a sociological point of view, that is, as an institutional category, the public sphere, as a special field separated from the private sphere, does not exist in the feudal society of the Middle Ages." (Habermas, 1962:6) and Habermas will "bourgeois public domain" as the core concept, that the bourgeois public domain early mechanism originated from the court of the aristocratic society (Habermas, 1945:48), which he called the royal family, court, a set of "noble" behavior of the characteristics of "representative public domain".

Habermas thinks: "because the society is appeared as the opposite of the state, it on the one hand clearly defined a private domain is not under the jurisdiction of the public power, on the other hand in the process of life and across the limitations of individual family, focus on public affairs, therefore, the forever dominated by the contract will become a 'critical' field." (Habermas, 1962,23) This so-called "critical" field is known as the "public domain".

With the proposal of the concept of Habermas, this term has not only widely attracted the attention of Chinese and Western scholars and has become an important theoretical framework for the study of Chinese society. Although Habermas discussed the historical formation, structure, function and transformation of the public domain in his book "Structural Transformation of the Public Domain", he did not make a clear definition of the concept of "public domain". This will inevitably lead to a lot of debate when relevant scholars apply it to Chinese society. Because the domestic academic circles also have different views and questions about the localization interpretation of the public domain, so they put forward five questions to consult Habermas. Habermas in the questions about public domain in reply to, while China is transforming to the market economy, personal autonomy is increasing, but any more extensive, more informed and more active participation (we are still working in the west for the goal) as the goal of the reform, all rely on a sound public communication, "public domain", "can play the function of a sensitive filter, used to observe and explain" the needs of the people ".(Habermas, 1999) After analyzing the composition of the public domain and its occurrence and Development in China, Luo Guirong concluded that the production of the public domain should have three conditions: the participants should be rational public; should have sufficient communication space to meet the communication needs in modern political life; and have corresponding independence. The author believes that in the background of China's reform and opening up and social change, the public domain has quietly occurred and developed, but not yet finalized; it will be in constant adjustment with the change of China's social structure.(Luo Guirong, 2007) According to Han Sheng and Xie Liwei, the public domain is not only the historical reality in the development of Europe in the 17th and 18th century, but also an ideal model, and a tool used by Habermas for social criticism. So how to judge whether there is a "public sphere" in Chinese society? In his thesis, "Disputes on Issues in Civil Society and the Public Domain", Weichfeld argued that in contemporary Chinese society, " some kind of public opinion with temporary tolerance is far from the public domain theorized by the German sociologist Habermas."Huang Zongzhi proposed the existence of the third field on the basis of the binary opposition between the state and the society.(Deng Zhenglai, 2006) Liang Zhiping criticized the "third domain" proposed by Huang Zongzhi, who believed that Huang "did not further review the modern and western historical and cultural origins, nor examined them in different historical and cultural backgrounds. Instead, he basically limited himself within the framework of Habermas' public domain theory"; actually " to understand China with ideas abstracted from the western modern historical experience."(Zhang Jing, 1998).

Instead, Mr.Xu Jilin The use of Habermas concept of "public domain" is more flexible, has regarded it as an ideal type with extensive explanatory power "---" the key meaning of the public domain, is independent of the political construction of public communication and public opinion, they are critical to political power, and at the same time is the basis of political legitimacy.(Zhang Zhong, 2014) As long as such a structure appears in the whole social system, no matter what kind of cultural and historical background it has, we can judge that it is a public domain.(Deng Zhenglai, 2011) An important prerequisite for the existence of the public sphere --- Form a civil society with a flexible grasp. We should not stick to the specific historical conditions and special paths of the formation of civil society in western countries, but look at whether a country has civil society in the sense of universal elements in contemporary times, that is, we should not emphasize the particularity of civil society too much, but should focus on its commonality. In this sense, as the four elements of the formation of the public domain, it will become an important standard to analyze whether there is a public sphere in contemporary Chinese society.(Zhang Zhong, 2014) By drawing on Habermas' views, Xie Anmin believes that the public domain is based on the civil society, and the public domain is the operation of the civil society, and different civil societies form different public realms.(Xie Anmin, 2021).

From the perspective of relevant literature discussion, the academic research on the "public domain" gradually begins to pay attention to a new type of space domain- -the network public domain. From the newspapers, media and other media in the Habermas era to the current development of the Internet has revealed the rise and development of the Internet society. Some scholars have made five stages

of the development of China's network society, Since the first email was issued in 1987, Experience: Learning introduction stage (1987-1994); Internet users browse information online, release information to the society and the development stage of BBS (1994-2002); The stage of using SMS communication and releasing their views to the society through blogs (2002-2009); The stage of individuals conducting instant messaging through Weibo and wechat and forming a large number of network groups (2009-2014), This stage is also the development of the network society has reached an unprecedented vast, unprecedented active stage; Multi-dimensional development and comprehensive expansion stage of China's network society (from 2014 to now).(Liu Shaojie, 2022) What the author focuses on is not to investigate the development process of network social technology, but more importantly, to investigate the development prospect of China's network society from the generation, innovation and expansion of network communication practice. So the question that this paper wants to study is: is there a "public domain" in this network social space? Is China's "Internet public sector" expected to emerge? On this issue is roughly divided into two factions. CAI Simin believes that there are differences between the "public domain" and the development of China's real society. However, through the combing of the core concepts of Haszi theory, we can find that "openness" and "critical" are the core characteristics of the whole public domain. China's Internet public sector is more open, but it lacks rational criticism.(Cai Simin, 2014).

Zhang has a more positive attitude to this problem, the author believes that cyberspace has a certain scale with rational critical consciousness of the public, formed a certain degree of public opinion, and the network itself also has a powerful media function, but has not yet mature civil society, therefore, is not "cyberspace" as the real sense of "public domain", temporarily can be called "public domain".(Zhang zhong, 2014) Xiong Guangqing research from the perspective of discourse democratic operation China network the development of the public domain, he thinks, in the network public domain, rational, equality, open, broad communication field, interaction, free process, rich and diverse communication content provides important conditions for the discourse of democracy. With the development of the network public domain, discourse democracy can become more mature and become more active. At the same time, it is expected to become a new starting point for the development of democratic politics in many countries, and become an important supplement to the form of representative democracy.(Xiong Guangqing, 2014) Therefore, there is still a gap between China's online social space and the ideal public domain described by Habermas. So, what alienation has appeared in the network public domain in reality? Is it possible for us to solve these negative factors through the rule of law or other means? What should we expect from the online public sector?

2. IDEAL CYBERSPACE: AN EXTENSION OF THE REAL PUBLIC DOMAIN

2.1. Composition Conditions of the Public Domain

Due to the differences in research theories, perspectives and methods, the academic community is divided on whether there are opinions in the public domain in cyberspace. When studying the existence of the public domain in cyberspace, we should make overall and macro considerations and judgments according to the connotation and spirit of the concept, characteristic and function of the public domain, and consider the generation of the concept of the network public domain. In fact, Habermas has never made a specific definition of the concept of the "public domain", which leads to differences in the academic understanding of the "public domain". Jing Tiankui, a researcher at the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, sent a letter to Habermas on July 2, 1998, asking him five questions, one of which is "how to summarize and understand the basic characteristics of the 'bourgeois public sphere' ".(Habermas, 1999) According to Habermas's answer and his discussion in the Structural Transformation of the Public Domain, the composition conditions of the "public domain" are summarized as follows:

1) It must be public

Habermas discussed the word "public" in the issue of the initial origin of the bourgeois public domain. Habermas believes that the word "public" has many different meanings during its use. They originate at different historical stages, and become blurred when they are applied to civil relations based on the state of industrial progress and social welfare.

Habermas made a social and historical analysis to grasp the meaning of different historical stages. (Habermas, 1964,1) Open places to the public, where we call them "public", are in contrast to a closed society. While "public buildings" are never used for public communication, but mainly for the offices of state institutions, Habermas believes that in a sense, they are public. The state is the "organ of public power". It is public because it is responsible for the mission of seeking the happiness of all citizens. When it comes to "public reception", these occasions play a representative power, into the "public sphere" is the public recognition. Public nature-such as the openness in the court trial-mainly plays the function of judgment. When it comes to the mass media field, Habermas believes that the publicity itself is an independent field, that is, the public domain, and he is relative to the private field. Sometimes, the public sphere is, in the final analysis, the field of public opinion, which directly competes with the public authorities.

2) A critical public with a certain scale

In France in the 17th century the public served as the recipients, consumers and critics of literature and art; readers, audiences and listeners; court servants, parts of the city aristocracy in the box of the Paris theatre and parts of the bourgeois upper society. Therefore, the early public was inseparable from the court and the "city". The early public, formed by the mechanisms of salons, cafes and banquets, was an educated middle class between the aristocratic society and the civic class of intellectuals. In addition, through the mechanism of literary and art criticism, a relatively chaotic "big public" has been formed, whose inner core is the amateurs with the ability to judge. They regard themselves as the spokesmen and the educators of the public. (Habermas, 1999) The process of the transformation from the literary public domain to the bourgeois public domain and the political public domain, "critical" has always been the core content of the public domain. According to Habermas, the literary public domain, as a non-political form, is the predecessor of the public domain with political function, and it is the practice place of public criticism. In the period of literary public domain, intellectuals and aristocratic society discussed and criticized literary works and newspapers in coffee shops, salons and other places. The bourgeois public domain can be understood first as a domain of the public; but the private public immediately demands the controlled public domain against the public authority itself, so as to discuss with the public authority both the private exchange of goods and the general exchange rules in the field of social labour. This means of political discussion, namely public criticism, is indeed unprecedented and unprecedented. (Habermas, 1990,32) Compared with the civilian group in the society, the bourgeoisie is more independent and critical because of its superior property status and good educational background, which enables them to rationally think and discuss public affairs and speak for the public interest rather than private interests.

3) There must be places for forming public opinion

For the public, the criticism, regulation or even control of public power is realized through the use of rationality and the public opinion reached through public discussion. The formation process of public opinion is not only a process of free discussion and criticism, but also a process of open application of rationality. However, the formation of critical public opinion must rely on certain public media and public places, otherwise it will not be a public opinion, and it is difficult to form an influence, restrain and regulate the public power. Habermas described their historical representation. As a public place, in France, England, Germany, mainly salons, towns, cafes, banquet houses and literary societies, and as the traditional public media are mainly newspapers, periodicals, radio, television, etc. (Zhang Zhong, 2014).

2.2. The Ideal Type of the Network Public Domain

In the middle and late period of the 20th century, with the advent of the Internet era, the "many-to-many" of the Internet is different from traditional media.

With the communication characteristics, many scholars began to think about the situation of the public domain in cyberspace. However, the existing research on the fate of the public domain in cyberspace has serious divided, even completely research.

Investigate the picture. Some scholars argue that cyberspace is reviving the public sphere, They believe that cyberspace provides an ideal platform for the public's rational criticism (CRANG, 2000), Public opinion increases the government's response to citizens' demands (LEI Y W, 2015), And thus, with the optimism that "technology changes politics", Treat cyberspace and online public opinion as "catalysts for social and political transformation" (XIAO Q 2011); Some scholars see this view as a "utopian" fantasy, They saw the chaos of information distortion and verbal violence in cyberspace (HAFEZ K, 2009), The absence of continuity, depth and rationality in the network discussion (MACKINNON, 2011), And "increasingly more government on social media" (SULLIVAN J, 2013) all makes them pessimistic.

Considering the above three components of the public sector, there is indeed reason to believe that the emergence and development of the Internet has brought great opportunities for the revival of the public sector. First of all, the development of Internet technology is a necessary prerequisite for the formation of the network public domain. In recent years, the mobile Internet has been widely popularized, and the scale of Internet users has been expanding. According to the 43rd Statistical Report on The Development of Internet in China released by China Internet Network Information Center, " As of December 2018, the number of Internet users in China reached 829 million, with the penetration rate reaching 59.6%, 3.8 percentage points higher than the end of 2017, with an increase of 56.53 million Internet users in the whole year. Mobile Internet users of 817 million, Internet users through the Internet access is as high as 98.6%, the new mobile Internet users 64.33 million ", the Internet scale and growing directly with the growth of the growth of the network social main body, a large number of individuals out of the private life, join the network social software as the carrier of public life, for the solid foundation of the formation of the network public domain, some scholars will call this phenomenon is" the expansion of sources " [28]. Secondly, the network public domain provides a more open and broad communication field for discourse democracy. The ideal public sphere is open to all, and in form all can enter freely, and everyone has the right to express his opinion, express his opinion, and can be respected accordingly. In the network age, the communication between people quite part to virtual space, human public communication space got greatly extension, this for the critical spirit and the generation of public opinion provides a new important space and environment, to shape a new public domain form --- network public domain created opportunities [13]. Finally, cyberspace provides a more equal and free communication subject. Differences in social status, economic income, educational background, lifestyle and values in the real world all seem to do not exist in cyberspace. The public domain is a relatively independent public space created under the premise of the separation of the state and the society. The network enables everyone to actively participate in the discussion and debate of public affairs, and each communication subject accepts information, communicates communication and expresses its will voluntarily. According to habermas' theoretical model, the researchers predict and describe the potential political function and social significance of the network public domain. According to these conditions, cyberspace is moving towards the road of the network public domain, which some scholars call "quasi-public domain [12]".

3. REAL CYBERSPACE: THE ALIENATION OF THE NETWORK PUBLIC DOMAIN

3.1. The Shift in the Way of Information Dissemination

With the development of the Internet, the traditional one-to-many communication mode has changed into a many-to-many communication mode. In the virtual space-time environment of the Internet, Internet users can have access to a wide variety of network information, and any information may become a hot topic of public discussion. If the lack of information release and supervision lacks institutional norms, the public will be at a loss in the face of such "flood" massive information, and it is difficult to make an effective judgment on the authenticity and interests of information (Gao Yu, 2023). First of all, the influx of excessive information will inevitably overwhelm the participants in the network public domain, and have no time to carry out deep thinking and research on it. At the same time, scattered information dissemination is also easy to cause the fragmentation of public reading, and fragmented reading will inevitably make it difficult to form an effective and profound understanding of the relevant content, and fail to understand the essence of the problem. Secondly, the spread of information weakens the public's critical reflection on the wrong trend of thought and marginalizes the spread of the mainstream ideology. Purless browsing state, curious reading does not need careful thinking and in-depth research, only care about the psychological experience and temporary feelings of the reading process. At the same time, it is also a kind of non-critical reading, without critical reflection on the reading content, it will only passively accept its conclusion.

3.2. The Shift in the Main Public Force

According to the survey, the majority of Chinese netizens are young people, of which 37.9 percent are middle school students from junior high schools, and 25 percent are students from senior secondary schools, technical secondary schools and similar schools. Compared with the traditional public domain, the public subject in cyberspace is mainly the youth. The so-called public is to discuss a certain public issue in the public domain with rational and critical standards, and form public opinion, so as to restrain the political power and institutional norms. With -- TikTok, Weibo, Xiaohongshu and Zhihu on the market, 70% of the top 10 topics are entertainment topics, and the remaining 30% belong to public issues. When entertainment information and entertainment motivation dominate online life for a long time, the network public domain will inevitably deviate from its critical position of public nature, which not only easily leads to the decline of the public's rational critical ability to major public issues.(Zhou Heng, 2022) Some scholars refer to the excessive attention to entertainment information as "eating melon" (Liu Binzhi, Qin Hongju, 2023). "melon" mostly refers to negative events of gossip from all walks of life, which is divided into "private melon" and "public melon", such as scandals of public figures, ordinary personal affairs and social news. As of May 2023, the topic titled "Eating melon disclosure" has received 1.72 billion views, reflecting netizens' love for "eating melons". This "eating melon" behavior is very different from Habermas's criticism of the public domain. First of all, although "eating melon" shows the positive attitude of young people to participate in social and public life, in this era of "eating melon", we must pay close attention to the possible harm of irrational "eating melon". In the virtual network society, the introduction of massive debris information "diffuse irrigation", might as well some marketing teams to gain the dividends brought by traffic, deliberately distort, exaggerate the facts, constantly refresh the moral understanding of netizens, reduce the moral bottom line. Network culture has the characteristics of virtual, derivative, open, extreme, difficult to control and so on. Netizens are trapped in the vortex of massive fragments of information, which causes some "melon-eating" groups with low moral quality to make extreme and aggressive remarks and join the ranks of "network violence". Secondly, according to Habermas, the ideal public domain never belongs to a single person, let alone a power group or capital force. It is always associated with "rational words", "publicity", "consensus" and "non-violence"; therefore, when facing the "irrational" tendency in the public domain, Habermas

also emphasizes "the rational factors that should save the public domain" (Habermas, 1999). In other words, Habermas's ideal "public sphere" is "de-ideological". Any participating subject belongs to a certain social class, they should focus on the social public interests, but the attribute of their "real people" is always difficult to be separated from the social relations. At the same time, the information age of the new form of the development of public -- public network, the threshold of the public participation is not the degree of education and wealth, the choice of issues and topic set beyond the traditional media public the limits of political power and capital group, these strengthen the participation subject discourse expression of irrational, and further enhance the non-mainstream ideology spread possible and opportunities.

3.3. The Transformation from Traditional Media to Platform Media

More than 30 years ago, the rise of multinational media groups and social media had a huge impact on the journalism industry. Now, the advent of the era of big data and the development of intelligent algorithms have made the Internet into a new round of revolution, and social media has gradually expanded into "platform media". Jonathan Grick (Jonathan Glick) first proposed "Platform Media" (Platisher) in his article "The Rise of Platform Media" in 2014.

The concept of. Platform-based media has the right of media editors and the channel space of the platform, and the power of the master person to formulate platform standards and shape their own platform ecology. This kind of platform media has been widely recognized by various media in China. For example, the traditional People's Daily also registers accounts on major platforms to spread news and open a comment function, which each netizen can comment and supervise according to their own opinions. The daily press conference held by the central channel will also be reprinted to the major platforms for people to watch and supervise. This not only expands the dissemination channels of state information, but also stimulates the enthusiasm of citizens to participate in state affairs. For example, with the report of the "Japanese nuclear contaminated water into the ocean", it has aroused many public discussion and attention. This is about the general interests of social groups and the safety of the entire global environment. Therefore, the public is not only concerned about how the country responds to this event concerning the common destiny of all mankind, but also concerned about how the international community responds to this event. Some scholars believe that the platform has become the carrier of the network public space ecosystem, and the platform economy has replaced the multinational monopoly companies at the end of the 20th century, and become the "power holder" in the development of the world.(Zhang Xiangning, 2023).

As the new "gatekeeper" and "agenda setter", the platform media's program algorithm has partially replaced the professional journalists and editors as the "soft weapon" to determine the news value and public agenda. At the same time, the core technology of platform-based media has also become a decisive force to control the public life and the media ecology. With the development of social media, the differences and interaction between individuals in the audience are enhanced, and it is difficult for the public agenda influenced by the traditional mainstream media to become a social consensus, while the agenda setting at the individual level becomes an important part of the media agenda setting.(Ren Jinghua, 2017) In this "individual agenda setting", there is a huge power space for various Internet platforms. Traditional media need to exert influence on the audience through third-party platforms, and platforms on the platform have the ability to have a significant impact on users because they master the technology of user analysis and accurate push. As a master of user resources and information release channels, the platform may become a "privileged master" on which the capital and the media depend together.(Zhang Xiangning, 2023) "the public sphere" means that the public discusses and reaches consensus on issues of their own universal interests. The emergence of this new "platform capitalism" leads to the increasingly serious problem of "re-feudalization" of technology. These rights undeniably subvert the nature of the traditional public domain, and also lead to the alienation of the "network public domain".

Compared with the real public domain, the ways of information dissemination in cyberspace are more diversified, and the types of information are more diversified. Netizens receive more passive information, as if traveling in an ocean of information. A variety of fragmented topics come on the face, leading to netizens focus on the dissemination and discussion of information, but lack of rational criticism of the topic. In reality, all classes in the public domain can freely enter the public domain for discussion and criticism. As the main force in cyberspace, the public class is limited to the youth group. In the face of many non-political issues, young people discuss more with the mentality of "eating melon". These "non-public issues" have nothing to do with the general interests of the public itself, leading to the alienation of the network public domain. The emergence of platform media can be said to share the rights of traditional media. The platform has mastered the technology of user analysis and accurate push, and has the ability to have a significant impact on users. As a master of user resources and information release channels, the platform may become a "privileged master" on which capital and media depend, and eventually return to the road of "refudalization" in the public domain.

4. REPOSITIONING OF THE NETWORK PUBLIC DOMAIN

Some scholars regard the network public domain as an extension of the real public domain, and hold a relatively optimistic attitude about the existence and development of the network public domain, and expect that the network public domain can undertake the task of cultivating rational consensus and providing legal supply. However, from the actual situation, the performance of the network public domain is far from the theoretical expectation, and there is the phenomenon of alienation. First of all, it is difficult to form an effective and profound understanding of the problem, and then the information spread weakens the critical reflection on the wrong trend of thought and marginthe spread of mainstream ideology. Purless browsing state, curious reading is also a kind of non-critical reading, missing critical reflection on the reading content. Moreover, the emotional and extreme expression of network expression damage the communication environment of rational debate. Secondly, the public in cyberspace, and the types of issues they pay attention to have also changed. The attention to public issues is gradually replaced by entertainment information, and the flood of entertainment information leads to the lack of public issues. According to Habermas, criticism constitutes the value basis and social psychology basis for the existence and development of the public domain, and its main function is to test public affairs on behalf of the private collective and properly handle the tension between public management and private autonomy.(Habermas, 1999) This determines that not all topics are not suitable for discussion in the public sphere. Only those relatively rational and serious public issues can highlight the public value of the public domain as the space of public discourse. But in reality, the opposite is true. The young man discussed it with a "eat melon" mentality. Finally, the real cyberspace is dominated by the platform-based media. As the new "gatekeeper" and "agenda setter", the platform-based media has mastered the technology of user analysis and accurate push, and has the ability to have a significant impact on users. As a master of user resources and information release channels, the platform may become a "privileged master" on which the capital and the media depend together.

When we know the alienation of cyberspace, is there still possible in the network public domain? Can we still be optimistic about the development of the Internet public sector? Is the theoretical expectation of the network public domain a kind of preset goal, or a too beautiful utopia? The author believes that if the above problem of alienation can be solved and the cause of alienation can be found, the network public domain can be further developed.

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