

The Role of TikTok (Douyin) in Shaping Private and Public Spheres and Youth Political Voice

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the impact of TikTok (known as Douyin in China) on the relationship between the private and public spheres in the digital era. Drawing on Habermas's public sphere theory and other relevant academic perspectives, it argues that while Douyin has redefined the interaction between the private and public spheres by enabling users to share private lives publicly and blurring the boundaries, there are significant limitations when it comes to its suitability as an ideal public sphere for young people to voice political views in China. The platform's entertainment content, recommendation algorithm, strict censorship, and emotional nature of discussions lead to fragmented, superficial, and restricted political conversations. Although young people find creative ways to express political ideas, real in-depth and diverse political discussions are hindered. Overall, Douyin has blurred the boundaries between the private and public spheres to an extent but has many constraints as a platform for political discussion.

KEYWORDS

TikTok (Douyin); Digital Communication; Private and Public Sphere; Political Expression; Social Media Influence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Habermas's public sphere theory emphasises that, in traditional societies, there is a clear distinction between the private sphere and the public sphere [6]. The former is the space of individuals and families. In this sphere, individuals have the right that not to be interfered with by the state or other public forces. The latter is a place for citizens to communicate and discuss with each other to form public opinions. This space allows citizens to supervise public power. However, with the development of today's digital age and the expansion and development of new social media represented by TikTok (Douyin), the originally clear boundaries between private and public spheres are gradually blurring. On this platform, users can share their personal lives and opinions through short videos, publish daily life, and participate in public discussions. In China, as Lagerkvist [7] suggests, this phenomenon is particularly obvious. This article will argue that although TikTok (Douyin) has redefined the interaction between the private and public spheres to a certain extent, there are still many limitations to its suitability as an ideal public sphere for young people to express their political views. This phenomenon is more significant in China. For this reason, this article will use China as the scope of discussion. The name of TikTok (Douyin) in China is Douyin, which Douyin will replace in the following.

2. DIGITAL IMPACT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPHERES

Habermas [6] believes that in traditional society, the boundaries between the private and public spheres are clear, and personal life and family affairs are not open to the public, while the public area is where citizens use rational debates to participate in discussions on society and politics. Moreover, the functions of these two spaces are different. The former is used to meet personal needs, while the latter is used to emphasise social consensus and policies. However, with the advancement of digital technology and the vigorous development of social media, Manuel Castells [2] pointed out that the public sphere in the network society has undergone major changes, and the boundaries between the private and public spheres have become more blurred. Individuals can publish private life in the public sphere. Papacharissi [9] said that the public can quickly spread and discuss these contents on social media. This interaction makes the originally private life public. Similarly, these theories have also been proposed by Warner [12] in his book “Publics and Counter publics”. He believes that the public is a social entity, and the boundaries between the private and public spheres are gradually blurred in the modern social environment.

Through the Douyin platform, many people have “personalised” and “made public” their private lives, and the private sphere has gradually become public. Warner [12] discusses how discourse interaction forms the public, and this is evident on Douyin, where private lives become part of the public domain through video content. This aligns with Castells' [3] assertion that digital platforms significantly reshape public discourse and governance. The viewing, forwarding, and commenting on the Douyin platform are not subject to personal restrictions and may appear in anyone’s recommended videos. In China, the platform allows users to publish private works in the form of videos of personal daily life, travel, food, sports, entertainment activities, and intimate relationships. After users put these contents on the platform, they quickly transformed from private sphere to public consumer goods, making private space public. This lifestyle change is in line with the concept of “network privacy” discussed by Papacharissi [8] in her book. She emphasised that the development of the digital age has made digital platforms an object where people voluntarily turn their private lives into public consumption. This phenomenon is particularly evident on the Douyin platform. In addition, because of the growing development of the Douyin platform, the commercial nature of the platform has gradually become obvious. Bloggers with more fans can earn high commissions through live selling, inserting advertisements in videos, and having product advertising links in the homepage window. Therefore, the job of “bloggers” has become a dream career for many young people. Many young people have begun to “personalise” their accounts, shape their IP and personality by publishing strongly labelled videos, attract fans’ attention, and gradually become bloggers. Behind this kind of publicising of private life is the transformation of the private sphere into a part of the public economy and the transformation of sharing of personal life into content that can generate commercial value in the public sphere. This behaviour has led to the gradual integration of the private sphere into the public sphere. Warner [12] also proposed that discourse interaction forms the public, as demonstrated by various hot spots, tags, and topic discussions on the Douyin platform. However, the users who participate in these use the content that originally belonged to their own “private sphere”, which further proves that the current Douyin platform has broken the boundary between the private sphere and the public sphere to a certain extent.

Because of the entertainment content and recommendation algorithm of the Douyin platform, public issues on the platform are gradually becoming entertainment, fragmented, and private. Bauman’s “liquid modernity” theory proposes that public discussions in modern society are increasingly fragmented, and fast-consumed entertainment content [1] replaces deep thinking and serious discussions. On Douyin, to increase user retention and completion rates, the platform induces users to design and push a steady stream of fresh short videos for them to watch to take advantage of their short-term attention span. Users also like to use short videos to discuss and share political and public

issues in a relaxed, entertaining way, which greatly reduces the cost of video production for users. Creators habitually use exaggerated emotional expressions and fast rhythms to grab the attention of viewers. This emotional and visual content makes users more inclined to emotional reactions rather than rational thinking, further strengthening shallow discussions. Serious political-related long videos with in-depth analysis will not receive much attention. Content creators split and simplify these views into short videos, thus losing the opportunity for in-depth discussion. Because of the control of public discussions by the state and the platform, the opportunities for young people to discuss politics and public issues in depth on the platform are strictly controlled and restricted. Therefore, whether from the perspective of platform restrictions or from the user's habit of capturing more entertaining and fragmented content, it will push the public issues on the Douyin platform to gradually lose the opportunity to be discussed in depth and gradually move towards private entertainment.

As one of the largest social media platforms in China, the Douyin platform has sophisticated algorithm-driven content filtering, which prevents users from discussing the same topic in a diversified manner. The algorithm recommendation system is a platform that continuously collects user behaviour data during use, including interaction data, viewing habits such as length of stay, search behaviour, and user personal information attributes, which are collectively referred to as digital portraits; the platform will use natural language processing technology to analyse and label the content, audio text, etc. of each video, and finally recommend the content that matches the label with the digital portrait to the user. The result is that users will always see videos of speech and content that they are interested in and have always supported, gradually strengthening their preferred political speech and not being able to see different voices fairly. In addition, the power of the recommendation algorithm lies because it is a self-reinforcing feedback system. The behavioural data shown by users shows that the more they support and appreciate something, the more they will recommend it. The more times users use the platform, the better the platform's algorithm understands the user. Although this algorithm allows users to quickly access content that interests them, they will also be trapped in a single perspective and circle and trapped by Eli Pariser's viewpoint in his book "Filter Bubble" as an 'information cocoon' [10]. That is, how Internet algorithms filter and recommend information based on user interests and behaviours, causing users to only be exposed to information that matches their interests and opinions, trapping them in the so-called 'information cocoon'. They find it difficult to access information and opinions that differ from their own, and their interests will gradually become single, exacerbating user bias. Especially when it comes to sensitive topics such as politics and society, they will be subject to the narrowness and solidification of information reception, making it even more difficult to make comprehensive and diversified judgments.

3. NEW ROLE IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Despite the strict censorship restrictions on the platform, young people also use more obscure ways to discuss politics. They create various super symbols, pop culture elements, code words, etc., to replace certain political speeches and use humorous short videos to satirise, talk about, and symbolise politics. However, as Gladwell [5] points out, social media often fosters weak connections that may not support the sustained activism needed for real political change. While Douyin allows for creative expression, it may not encourage the deep engagement required for meaningful discussions. Zizi Papacharissi pointed out in her research that political expressions on online platforms are often emotional and metaphorical [9]. In this way, they establish their own channels of expression and resonate with people. This method allows a certain degree of social criticism and discussion to occur, but often only cultural symbols, consumerism, obscure political positions and indirect expressions of policies are output, without direct political dialogue. When the platform detects that users have made extreme political speeches, they will give warnings, delete videos, or even permanently ban their accounts. The strict censorship system and entertainment positioning of the platform put real political discussions on the margins. This also reflects what Warner calls the "counterpublic" - a group that is excluded or marginalised by mainstream public discourse [1]. Since the video length of Douyin is

limited to 15 seconds to 1 minute, this structure determines that the content of short videos cannot be profound and is more suitable for fast consumption to capture the user's attention. Over time, users on the platform have been worn in by such videos that quickly attract attention and gradually cannot calm down to watch content that requires deep thinking, thus forming a cycle, causing the platform to gradually go against political content. Therefore, it is very difficult to capture users' comprehensive views and in-depth thinking on a certain political stance or social issue on this platform. Although young people can express their views on certain social issues in an entertaining and life-like way on Douyin, these views often cannot rise to the level of serious public discussion. Therefore, the Douyin platform has great limitations as a platform for political discussion.

When expressing their opinions on such an entertaining platform, users usually have very strong emotions, which is in sharp contrast to the traditional public domain. In the discussion of social issues, users not only express their own positions through debates but also use strong emotional factors to arouse the emotional resonance of the audience, show their personal positions, and incite fans' emotions to explore opinions from an emotional perspective. Dahlgren [4] notes that online platforms often prioritize emotional engagement over rational debate, weakening the quality of public discourse and turning political expression into emotional resonance rather than meaningful discussion. This emotional discussion will greatly reduce the seriousness and fairness of political discussions to a certain extent. The trend is dominated by emotions, making political expressions like personal narratives and even confusing the audience so that they cannot see that they are accepting the input of political ideas and accepting them imperceptibly. As discussed by Wahl-Jorgensen [11], the importance of emotions in public political communication is often underestimated, but it plays a very important role. The existence of social media as a public announcement field has brought about certain changes in emotional expression and political expression. The advantage is that this method allows more people to no longer resist the discussion of boring political issues, but it also makes rational political expression difficult. This is the duality of social media, that is, it promotes public participation but at the same time reduces the quality of the content of the discussion, making the discussion content only superficial and difficult to communicate in depth. These reflect the tension between Habermas' theory and modern social media platforms [6]. Habermas' theory emphasises that the public domain should be separated from the private domain [6]. When discussing social and political issues, personal emotions and private interests should be excluded as much as possible to ensure that discussions in the public domain are rational and equal. However, the nature of the Douyin platform determines that it is more suitable as an entertainment platform for users to publish their daily lives, discuss fashion trends, capture entertainment news, etc., which further shows that it is not suitable as a public area for Chinese young people to freely and openly discuss political and social issues.

4. CONCLUSION

In China, the emergence of Douyin, a new social media, has brought new social experiences to young people. By sharing their personal content and opinions, they gradually open the boundaries of the private sphere to the public sphere, breaking through the traditional boundaries between the private and public spheres. The publicisation of the private sphere and the fragmentation of the private sphere in the public sphere are the main reasons for the blurring of boundaries. Personal life sharing, which originally belonged to the private sphere, has entered the public sphere for public dissemination. Discussions in the public sphere are no longer limited to rational and in-depth political topics but have become more fragmented and entertaining. Many users even only participate in superficial interactions instead of in-depth thinking and discussion. At the same time, due to the algorithm-driven system of the Douyin platform, although users of the platform can gain more recommended content, a serious "information cocoon" has emerged, and users find it difficult to access multiple perspectives different from themselves to view a political issue. The platform also has a strict monitoring and review system, which makes it difficult to insert very directly expressed extreme political views into

the original fragmented content and, to a certain extent, limits the free space for users to participate in political discussions. The entertainment nature allows users to be led by emotions. Although the participation rate has increased, they essentially only participate in superficial discussions. Therefore, to sum up, the Douyin platform has blurred the boundaries between the private and public spheres to a certain extent and changed traditional concepts, but as a political discussion platform, it has many limitations and restrictions, making it difficult to truly become an open and diversified public sphere.

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