

Audience Participation and Public Discourse Space: A Simple Article Review^{*}

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Recent years have seen an explosion of researches and studies into the public sphere and the deformation of it. At one extreme, general theoretical statement about public sphere is directly developed from Habermas's public sphere theory; they have elaborated and extended the theory and applied it to analyze the different situations in different countries. At the other, the so-called sphere has been extended, from the original cafe bar or some entity space like this to the virtual space, especially with the development of internet and the emerge of many kinds of social media; some scholars noted that the public sphere has appeared in the internet; some social media like blog, micro blog (in China as weibo), and so on have become the new form of public sphere, which is also called public discourse space. To some extent, public discourse space belongs to public sphere, but different from it. They have some similar characteristic, but they also have some difference within different time and space. For example, public discourse space is much closer to audience participation. And the audience participation is one of the important factors for the public discourse space created by media. We can say that both of the discourse space appears in the traditional media and the online media are emphasizing on the relationship between media and audience. So in this article, the author also does a simple review about public discourse space and its relationship with audience participation.

Keywords: public sphere, space, discourse practice, traditional media, new media, audience participation

Since the appearance of Habermas's public sphere theory, there have been so many researches and studies about it. Some scholars developed the theory of public sphere, and came out with the concept of public discourse space. There are many similarities between the two concepts of public discourse space and public sphere. In this article, the author would rather to use the concept of public discourse space instead of public sphere for the following two reasons. The first reason is to distinguish it with the public sphere concept which has been frequently used. Public discourse space is the development of public sphere, it more emphasizes on virtual space, and this kind of space generally appears in the media (traditional media like newspaper, television, and so on). With the appearance and rapid development of internet, scholars began to study the new network discourse space. And also we must be aware of the reality that in the context of China's new media environment, this kind of public space for dialogue is different from Habermas' public sphere. At the present stage, China is still not an

^{*} This paper is supported by the project No. SK2018A0411.

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ideal public sphere, although it has some features of it. The second reason is that the concept (public discourse space) highlights the “discourse”, which is an important aspect that the author wants to analysis. Public participation has been expanded, but the effective of dialogue is still not very high, largely due to the lack of equal effective interaction. Public discourse space is based on the theory of the public sphere and discourse theory, with the main form of public, fair, and free discussion and dialogue; it is a significance space which is made up by the presence of numerous subjects.

Some scholars pointed out that the appearance of new media has reconstructed the contemporary public discourse space. Public discourse space has gained unprecedented development. Others are wondering whether media provides such space, if it does, how wide is the space? Whether the audience is able to make the equal dialogue with media, government, and other citizens in this space? How to ensure the audience’s interest in the space? How to guarantee the long-term development of the space? These are the key problems that the scholars care about public discourse space. This essay will recap some of what we have learned from these researches and articles, make a simple review of them, and identify the development status of public discourse space.

The Study of Space

When we are talking about public discourse space, we should first come to the concept of “space”, as it is a very important aspect of public discourse space. The concept of space can generally be divided into physical space and social space. Physical space has the entity specific forms, such as buildings, places. Social space is usually considered to be the geographical area in which social groups live. But more scholars believe that the social space refer to people’s subjective feeling of space, or social relations in space. This can be regarded as the “spatial shift” in social and cultural theory. For example, Michel Foucault (1997) was one of the scholars who put the space-based issues into social theory. He noted that before the 19th centuries, the West has been entangled with the theme of time. People are widespread fascinated with history, concerned about the development, crisis, cycle, past, deaths, and other issues. But the 20th century heralded the arrival of a space age. More likely is that different space intertwined into a network. When refer to the reasons why space were neglected by scholars, Foucault pointed out two reasons, on the one hand, the space had been seen as a natural, which means that space is the established, basic conditions, which belongs to the natural geographical areas; on the other hand, due to the development of space physics and theoretical physics, along with the involvement of political practice and science as well as technology into the sphere of space issues, philosophers were forced to study the issue of time. Foucault is concerned with the history and current status of power and knowledge’s utilization in the field of space. This is a new perspective on the concept of space.

In addition, Lefebvre (2006) believes that social space is not a static “container” of social relation evolution, but the product of social relations, thus space becomes the means of production, a kind of consumer object. Besides, Bourdieu’s (1990) field theory, Hall Baba’s (1990) third space theory, Harvey’s (1974) view about the space constitutes of contemporary capitalist relations, Desatu’s prospect of space as a tactical or strategic, Sawyer’s (2005) discussion about “post-modern geography”, in fact, are all concerns about the sociality and practicality of space. And these studies not only confined to the areas of physical space, but also turned towards to the significance space and concept space.

From physical space to significance space, and the research trends toward the sociality of space allowed

scholars to pay more attention to the relations between the space and media, as space is thought to be constructed by media, and space is some kind of media too.

Space and Media

In the communication field, a growing number of scholars and students have become interested in spatial issues such as urban planning and their relations with communications. As Vale (1995) argues, communications research on built environment (living space) can be classified into three contexts: communication by, about, and in built environment. In brief, communication by built environment refers to human's perception of place. Communication about built environment means media's portrayal of place. Communication in built environment deals with human interaction in place. These three contexts can be detailed and redefined into four dimensions: (a) intrapersonal communication with place; (b) face-to-face communication in place; (c) mass media-mediated communication about place; and (d) electronic media-mediated communication in place. Among these four dimensions, Yong Jun Shin (2009) intends to focus on only face-to-face communication in place, or social interaction shaped by spatial differentiation. And by developing a conceptual framework on spatial impact on social interaction, he initiated theoretical discussion on the intersection between communication and place; the conceptual framework is spatial media, which is defined as abstracted forms of objects exchanged in spatially differentiated social interactions. By this way, he has set up the relationship between space and media.

Li and Guan (2012) studied the space shift of media evolution, and they noted that media and space has reached an agreement in social relations framework, that is, space has medium property and medium has space property. Based on this angle, they investigate the historical track of media evolution and spatial development, and they found two trends, medialization of space and spatialization of media. These two kinds of trends, divided along the age of electronic media, represent the general rule of media evolution and spatial development.

Space and Discourse Space

Just as Lefebvre (1995) has pointed out that space is the production of social practice, people's social practice has created different kinds of social space. These practices not only reflect the relationship between man and nature, but also reflect the relationship between men themselves. Of course, this kind of practice is a general sense of practice, which contains the social practice activities as well as the discourse practice. People's discourse practice is an important way to produce meaning space. As a kind of meaning and concept space, public discourse space has an important influence on people's social practice. Allen and Harnett (1983) noted that social space is a complex extension of social relations, which meet and intersect with each other. That is to say, social space is the sum total of social relations, and different kinds of space is created in the process of mutual exchanges and dialogues between social actors. Massey (1995) noted that social space has following features: First, space depends on human activities. Second, through there activities, the relationship between human and environment is built; this kind of relationship is the context of human's activities. Third, the space is not a constant, but it is changing, and always opens for new space. As a result, discourse space is also created by people's activities and always waiting for change.

Form the studies and researches about space, we can come to the conclusion that discourse space has a very close connection with space and media. Media can produce space, and to some extent, space is a kind of media. In the following sections, the author will further introduce the articles about relationship between media and public

discourse space.

Public Sphere and Public Discourse Space

The Original of Public Sphere Theory

The theoretical origin of public discourse space is Hannah Arendt and Habermas' concept of "public sphere". Arendt noted that the public was first referred to the things which appear in public places for everyone to see and hear, which has a wide range of publicity. She also pointed out that as a kind of communitarian world, public spaces gather us together, and organize us to compete. But she did not explicitly put forward the concept of the public sphere. Jürgen Habermas' seminal *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* provided a basis for discussions of the public sphere in contemporary societies. Habermas (1974) argued that the public sphere emerged as a space in which private individuals came together as a public to use their own reasons to discuss the power of the state. The bourgeois public sphere thus came into existence as a result of struggle against despotic states. It first refers to areas of our social life. In this kind of areas, things like public opinion could be formed. The public sphere opens to all citizens in principle. Part of the public sphere constituted by a variety of dialogue, in these conversations, individuals come together to form the public. And the public space is an adjusted area "between the state and society". In this area, as a carrier, public opinion formed public. So in terms of a public sphere, it involves the principle of the public nature (Habermas, 1974). From the description of the concept of public sphere, we can see that an important factor in the formation of public sphere is equal dialogue mechanism. The discourse being formed by the dialogue constitutes the significance of space, which is another form of discourse space. Thus there is a big link between public sphere and public discourse space.

From Public Sphere to Public Discourse Space

Dijk (2005) thinks that three conditions of what we know about the public sphere in the time of 20th Century had vanished in the new media environment. That is: (1) The public domain no longer associated with a particular place or region. (2) A single public sphere which originally assumed became mixed with a plurality of public domain. (3) The distinction between public and private becomes blur. The public discourse space is the development of public sphere, as it is better to take into account the element of the new media. Liu (2013) pointed out that in new media environment, the public discourse space is different from Habermas' public sphere. The public sphere is a kind of entity exist, however, the public discourse space is the connection between public and media; it is an imaginable exist in which public can communicate with the media about the public issues. It appeared with the emergences of the media, especially the online media. Some scholars defined the relationship between the public sphere and public discourse space as follows: Public sphere is based on the individual concepts which are gathered together in a shared space, and they make face to face dialogue equally, whose essence is to provide people with the discourse interactive communication platform freely and openly, which is public discourse space (Chen, 2007). This public space is separated from the poles of the state and society, and becomes the total third-party power of a citizen's class, which provides a platform for the exchange of public affairs from private discourse. On this platform, the citizens can make comments equally, discuss about public affairs, and enjoy the discourse power, by no force dominated (Ren & Bian, 2006).

We can see from the trajectory of the public sphere theory that it originally refers to the social public places in which citizens can discuss about political issues; it is the space between citizen society and state level. It refers

to material exist like cafe bar and some places like this, but later scholars found that the public sphere theory can also be applied to the media; they argued that public sphere also exists in the media where people can express their opinion on the issues which they concern about. And with the appearance of internet, this kind of public discourse space is attracting more attention. Therefore the following section will be the relationship between public discourse space and media.

Public Discourse Space and Media

Luo and Yao (2012) pointed out that the China's media has experienced a huge shift before and after the reform and opening-up policy. Before the policy, for quite a long time, media was completely passive and was considered as single political tool. Its subject status was weakened and ignored, and its role and function was also distorted. After the reform and opening-up policy, the introduction of market mechanisms provided a key protection for media role transformation: Along with the reform of media marketization, market began to become the basic logic and important force (beside the state) which impacted the media's role and function. Firstly, after introducing the commercial operation mode and the market competition system, media increasingly created a variety of media products according to the different needs of the audience. As a result, media, under the system of traditional country/propaganda discourse, opened a possible express channel for the public to form the multiple media discourse space. Secondly, the market provided dynamic for the media attention, present the interests of the public demands, constructing the public discourse space, and servicing public interest. Finally, the media's market-oriented reform has constructed a multiple social subject identity, and shaped pluralistic discourse subject. Therefore we can come to the conclusion that under the role of the market mechanism, the media began to respond to the interests of society demands, and by the means of discourse practice strategies, social discourse can be expressed equally, and public space could be constructed.

Mass-media plays an essential role in democratic societies, focuses civil action and political decisions, and mediates political games and the interventions of actors in the public space. For that reason, the most important role is determined through the selection of the themes imposed on the public agenda and their debate. The public space today is becoming the media public space (Dominique Wolton, 2004).

Public Discourse Space and Traditional Media

Habermas's discussion about the public sphere is also connected with traditional media. Schlachter (2009) explores how feature film documentaries about corporate citizenship are becoming critical in defining the public interest and encouraging action as well as discourse among scholars and practitioners. And she pointed out that traditional television media has created a kind of public sphere for people to participate in. Donna L. King and Christopher Mele (1999, p. 85) also considered television as the public discourse space, "Most media activists envision public access channels as electronic public spaces where issues and concerns central to local communities are brought to the fore and democratically resolved through discussion and dissemination". James Carey (1989) noted that electronic public sphere appeared along with the technical development, central to the mythos of the electronic revolution, is to accord to "electrical technology", the potential to "overcome historical forces and political obstacles that prevented previous Utopias". These prospects are heightened with the advent of communication advances, such as the internet and public access television, which reconfigure the role of individuals from passive viewers to active producers. Community public access television holds promise not only

as critique of the hegemonic tendencies of contemporary media but also as opportunity to resurrect a pluralistic form of the public discourse space (Aufderheide, 1992). Public access to television as an important way to the public sphere, was highly enlightened by some scholars, as Devine (1992) noted, public access looms as “the last best hope for a public sphere and for an active and enlightened polity”.

In China, the researches about public discourse space were first discussed on the publicity of traditional media. Professor Wang (2006) noted that if there is no real political debate, no game playing between different groups and their values, we can never value the public nature of the media. The public nature of media first manifested as to whether it can provide a non-discriminatory, freedom space for political debate. Media is in the triangular structure of media, government, and public relationship. As an independent social organization, media has the nature of publicity, and it advocated the establishment of a reasonable structure which is co-constructed by national media, public media, and commercial media (Zhang & Lee, 2007). As a result, media has the responsibility to create a kind of public space for people to discuss public issues which is called public discourse space. Some scholars noted that public discourse is a kind of meaning space, which is related with public sphere but at the same time different from it. Liu pointed that public discourse space is based on the Habermas’s public sphere theory and discourse theory; it has the manifestations of open, fair, and free dialogue and discussion. It is a meaning space consisted of universal public interest which is making up by the presence of different subject (Zhang & Lee, 2007). Zhao (2011) indicated that the commercialization of newspapers has opened up some discourse space, so that the newspaper has achieved the organizational autonomy at some level, and gives readers a limited autonomy too. In this sense, it helps the development of press industry and the democratization of social communication.

Public Discourse Space and New Media

Recently, most of the researches begin to pay attention to the relationship between public discourse space and new media. These articles noted that the network transmission brings the rise of the public discourse space. Yochai Benkler (2006, p. 117) stresses the emergence of a networked public space: “The easy possibility of communicating effectively into the public space allows individuals to reorient themselves from passive readers and listeners to potential speakers and participants in a conversation”. The network allows all citizens to change their relationship to the public space. They no longer need be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the internet democratizes (Benkler, 2006). Manuel Castells (2009, p. 25) stresses the novelty of this space: “The construction of the new public space in the network society proceeds by building protocols of communication between different communication processes”.

The studies about public discourse space in new media focus more on the “discourse”. Along with the rise of new media, network events appear constantly, which has caused a series of social change. Scholars have gradually awarded that the media in China had a profound influence on the construction of public discourse space; they began to pay more attention to the public discourse space on new media, and started the “public discourse” in the field of media studies. Wu and Chen (2007) mankind into the era of new media; they noted that the internet provides an active platform for the expression of public opinion, and they analyze the forms of online public opinion expression, its characteristics, and evolution trend. Zhao (2010) considered that with the development of new media technology, the new media has provided a broad platform for public discourse, and through this

platform to promote the solution of public problem, maintenance the public interest, which may be the real meaning of the media. Lee and He (2009) studied the “network administration”; they thought that network has become the public sphere which connects the individual citizens and government affairs management in the form of discourse. Many scholars have noted that the development of new media provides a platform for the public to express their voice, and realizes the negotiation and communication between the government and public.

Several studies argued that the internet might serve to democratize the public discourse space, although doubts remained about the extent to which these new forms of participation lead to a fruitful public debate or whether they actually offer more opportunities to citizens to question and challenge the power holders (Stephen & Blumler, 2009).

Although the internet has created new “discourse spaces” where issues of common concern can be discussed, serving to democratize the public sphere. However, some scholars express doubts about the quality of the debates that occur in the online environment, pointing out the fragmentation, the incivility, or even the anonymity as major problems that may undermine the expansion of the online public sphere.

Some scholars did case study on special event to examine the online public discourse space. For example, by analyzing the readers’ comments in the news about the Brazilian presidential campaign (September November 2010) in the online versions of two Portuguese newspapers, Silva (2013) intends to assess the quality of audience participation in online news sites. And he came to the conclusion that readers’ comments constitute a discursive space that might not meet the rational-critical deliberation criteria exposed by Habermas and other scholars. As a result, he noted that online public discourse space is not as rational as the traditional public sphere which provided by the newspaper, television, and some other mainstream media. But it represents a new mode of public sphere.

Also, Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) draws upon Habermas’ normative conditions of the public sphere to question whether online discourse is in fact extending the public sphere of rational-critical deliberation; his answer is negative.

Audience Participation in Public Discourse Space

Public Access and the Public Discourse Space

Audience participation has been valued by scholars of media studies. The study on audience participation sometimes can equate to the study about public access. Before the emergence of the new media, most scholars paid their attention to the traditional media like newspaper and television, especially the television; they focus on the public access television, and see it as a kind of public discourse space.

Given the near total corporate control of mass media, critical analysts concur that commercial television programming is remiss in the production and dissemination of diverse and alternative programming. From this standpoint, media activists and scholars have considered the possibilities for public access television to redress the increasing monopolistic grip over what is produced and circulated in the culture (Kellner, 1990; Devine, 1991; 1992; Engelman, 1996). Public access is predisposed technologically to deliver alternative, non-commercial information to a substantial (albeit local) audience. As a result, the information from the television is easier to access to audience, at the same time, audience is also easier to access to media.

Donna L. King and Christopher Mele (1999) analyzed the critical potential of public access from the content

of its programming to the participation of local citizens in the production of community television. They noted that “As a specific site of public discourse, however ridiculous or sublime, potential for personal and social transformation exists when people produce public access television”.

Core to a liberal model of an effective electronic public sphere is the demand that public access content be not only different from commercial television but fundamentally more representative of community needs. Public access is viewed as a resource that, when used properly, will provide voice to the otherwise muted social realm of shared and cooperative community interests. The free expression of issues of pertinence to the community defines the purpose of the public sphere and determines who participates in its creation (Habermas, 1989). Within this liberal discourse, the utility of public access programs is ostensible: to help “build social relationships within which such speech would be meaningful—constructing that marketplace of ideas” (Aufderheide, 1992, p. 205). Within this liberal construction of the public sphere, producers of public access television are to act as responsible civic custodians. Their chief responsibility is not to assure that anyone who chooses to speak may do so freely, but to require that those who speak do so responsibly. From this perspective, legitimate public discourse pertains solely to issues deemed pertinent to the reproduction of an ill-defined but nonetheless centrist notion of community. Thus individuals who represent issues perceived as on the outer limits of communal concerns will be denied legitimacy and the moral authority to speak publicly (Rodriguez, 1996).

Public Discourse Space and Different Types of Audience Participation

Kammer (2013) studied the audience participation in the production of online news, and he indicated that the potential of audience participation constitutes a most important characteristic of digital journalism. Approximately there are four types of audience participation: They are information, collaboration, conversation, and meta-communication. Different types of audience participation have different contact with public discourse space. The first type of audience participation is a relatively traditional role as sources, that is, as “The people supply journalists with ideas and general information (and often quotes)” (Hamer, 2005, p. 219). This kind of audience participation is not a real sense of public participation in media, because only a few people can get involved. More important reason for it could not be regarded as the source of public discourse space is that, it only provides information, but does not provide advice and opinion. Or the view they offer will not be accepted by the media. They only provide services for the media, but cannot make equal dialogue with the media. As a result, this kind of audience participation is not the source of public discourse space. The second type of audience participation is collaboration. Here, audiences participate more actively in the actual news production and under-take journalistic tasks, so that the news production process becomes a collaborative one. Unlike the first type, the participator can make comments this time, and through this kind of comments, audiences who happen to be in the right place at the right time transcend their role as eye witnesses and become some kind of amateur journalists who participate in blurring the distinction between audiences and journalists. And this time, the audience will have the initiative in the process of news production; they can discuss with editors on some specific issues. And by this way, they can produce limited public discourse space. The third type of audience participation is conversation of a more sociable nature. As Hjarvard (2005, p. 75) writes that “very often, the communication is the end in itself. Or to put it another way: it has the purpose of creating gatherings between people and making it pleasant, comfortable, and entertaining—in short, sociable”. This type of audience participation is an important

source of public discourse, as it embodies the essence of public discourse space: equal opportunity for dialogue. Social practice creates social space, as discourse practices belong to social practice, as a result, discourse practices also create discourse space, as conversation is the most important discourse practice, so it is naturally an important way of producing public discourse space. The conversation not only occurs between the audience and editors, but also between audiences themselves. Finally, the fourth type of audience participation is meta-communication; that is, communication about the very communication which the news constituted. Jensen (2010) describes meta-communication as the communication that takes place “above and beyond the exchange of literal information”. That is what goes on here: Through exchanges about the very coverage, the premises and processes behind the news production are made visible, so that audiences can both follow the covered event and gain insight into a level “above and beyond” the coverage of the event. This type makes public discourse space possible. It is also an important source of public discourse space.

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