

*Discursive Connection:
The Constructive Potential of the Digital Public Sphere*

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Abstract

This paper comprehensively investigates the communication landscape in the era of social media; and analyzes the public sphere as a shared space of framing and the power competition in it. Unequal capital distribution undermines the ideal public sphere's growth. In this online landscape, the public sphere has shifted from fragmented to scattered, intensifying elite stratification. New online news citizens emerge, gaining audiences. Network news citizens with large bases sway ordinary audiences, forming "discursive communities". These "discursive communities" show traits like "decentralization", "temporality", "fickleness", and "negotiability", aggregating digitally for negotiation and defense. Their boundaries are ambiguous, breaking communication hierarchy, weakening mainstream media and traditional elites, even fostering populism. Legal action and intellectual growth are barriers against chaotic power collusion and transfer. Accordingly, this paper explores the dynamic public participation patterns, new challenges, and proposes the digital public sphere potentials.

Keywords: Digital Public Sphere, Discursive Community, Hierarchy Mode, Public Participation, Cognition

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Introduction

Many classical theories in the field of political communication, such as agenda setting, framing theory, and indexing theory, are mostly based on a common assumption: they are in a political community with a country as the unit, and most citizens are in a common and consistent public sphere. Gamson (1988) noted the discourse struggle in the public sphere is a crucial component of people's everyday public life in a democratic society because the arrival rate of mass media information is extremely high (as cited in Pan, 2006, p. 161-174).^{1 2} This paper analyzes the public participation patterns, discourse contest, negotiation, and integration among different power levels in the public sphere. The significance of digital media for the construction of an ideal public sphere is an imaginative topic.

The Ideal Form of the Public Sphere and the Mode of Public Participation

The Ideal Form of the Public Sphere

Habermas's liberal public sphere model has normative ideas and points out what a public sphere should be in an ideal situation. It should be in a social welfare country, where everybody is part of the public. As a "network for exchanging information and opinions", the expansion of the public sphere and the development of media technology complement each other. A steady flow of mass media can bring people together in modern society. The space in the communication framework is the public sphere. Citizens are free to gather and unite to express their opinions; state power is "public power", which is legalized by the electorate, but the state and its power and practices are not part of the public sphere where opinions are formed (Calhoun, 1993, p. 613).³

However, modern democratic countries with developed industries lack this ideal public sphere and idealistic democratic model. That is mainly because of two reasons. First, the realm of rationality and universal politics, separated from the economy and government, has been destroyed by the same forces that originally formed it. The government and capitalists understand the power of the market and information and strengthen the control of mass media through power and capital. Different power relations and resource allocations suppress the identity of the public as citizens and their willingness to participate in civic discussions. For example, as consumers of media and videos, the public's status as participants in political and cultural discussions has been reduced. Second, the wide coverage of mass media has brought a crisis, that is, how to ensure the authenticity of extensive communication and achieve the "undistorted communication" emphasized by Habermas.

Habermas's definition of a public sphere is the first attempt to classify the formation of public opinion and the legalization of the state and democracy in western society. It is also the most basic trigger point. The change in social structure leads to a change in understanding of the public sphere. Therefore, researchers must understand what public opinions are and how they are most recently formed.

1 Pan, Z. (2006). Framing Analysis: Toward an Integrative Perspective. *The Chinese Journal of Communication and Society*, 1, 17-46.

2 Gamson, W.A. (1988). A Constructionist Approach to Mass Media and Public Opinion. *Symbolic Interaction*, 11, 161-174.

3 Calhoun, C. (1993). Habermas and the public sphere. *German Studies Review*, 17, 613.

Public Participation and Discourse Contest

The confrontation between a communication network and the internet is the confrontation of communication power. Lippman (1925) posits that: “the public exists merely as an illusion, myth, and inevitably a phantom, the influence of public opinion on politics is merely a device when one power in an interest group resists another power”.⁴ Discourse contest is a power contest. In digital media era, Different power levels rob cognition resources and reconstruct cognition structures in new ways.

Classical theories on the direction of communication include agenda setting, multilevel communication, and framing theory. Nowadays, the internet has developed into the Web 3.0 era. The development of digital media has brought about significant changes in the social background and media environment. Several scholars, such as Bimber (2020) claimed that the technologies of the digital media era make public spheres most vulnerable to epistemic threats. These have examined destabilization, incoherence, fragmentation, disruption, dissonance, commercialization, mediatization, and others (p. 700-715).⁵ At the same time, some scholars suggested that no matter whether digital media is making cognitive problems in the public domain move in a better or more problematic direction, in the face of changes, how should the public sphere spawned by digital media overcome the new problems (Hong& Kim, 2018, p. 388-399).⁶ My research question is: in the era of digital media, is the connection and dialogue between strong and weak power in the public sphere strengthened? Under this question, we can try to understand: Can the public resist unequal political power? Are the traditional boundaries among different groups broken? Can the public generate common ground and consensus through opinion exchange? This paper looks at discourse struggle and power hierarchy in the digital public sphere, and examines the key factors in the exercise of public power in the public sphere in the era of digital media. The contact and the gap between the ideal public sphere are also discussed here.

Hierarchical “Connection” in the Digital Public Sphere

In the era of digital media, the morphological characteristics of the public sphere have further changed. The public sphere of political communication and whether “distorted communication” has improved are concerns of scholars.

This paper holds that, the development of digital media has increased the connection and dialogue between strong and weak powers. This phenomenon is a resistance to bureaucracy and the inequality of political power. It realizes the potential of the public sphere, that is, it produces common ground and consensus through the selfless exchange of views and weakens the traditional boundaries between groups. In digital media, the goal is to restore a complete and undistorted communication and to reconstruct a connected framework in the public sphere.

4 Lippmann, W. (1925). *The Phantom Public*. Transaction Publishers.

5 Bimber, B., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2020). The unedited public sphere. *New Media & Society*, 22, 700-715.

6 Hong, S., & Kim, N. (2018). Will the internet promote democracy? Search engines, concentration of online news readership, and e-democracy. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 15, 388-399.

Integration of Dual Consciousness: “Undistorted” Communication

First, in the digital media environment, the boundary between private and public “double consciousness” in the public sphere is further blurred.

Second, the knowledge background map of participants in the public sphere has grown rapidly in the context of digital media. It has opened ideological and cultural significance ranges that were previously more unified and narrower.

In the public sphere are professionals and the public at large. To maintain the integrity of the public sphere, rationalizing the dissemination mode of public information and the rationality of the public is necessary. The operation of public reason is essentially a process of public reasoning or public debate on many subjects. Having a space to accommodate and bear is essential for the operation of public affairs. This situation allows citizens to freely discuss public affairs and participate in politics, which is a basic condition of democratic politics.

The questions are as follows: First, do the interlocutors in the public sphere have enough in common in terms of values, expression norms, and persuasion agreements, so that their conversation has the quality of deliberation aimed at reaching an agreement by providing reasons? This question is an empirical problem and not a conceptual one. Second, public discourse needs the support of a knowledge base. However, what everyone can understand within the scope of consciousness is limited, which remarkably restricts the accessible scope of the public domain. In the past, scholars pinned the formation of public opinion for political criticism on an “educated middle class” between aristocratic society and citizen-class intellectuals. This middle class undertakes all political functions in the context of civil society's political liberation from the control of mercantilism and even absolutism.

With the development of digital media, things that can be understood through personal consciousness are infinitely magnified. Meaning, touching, and judging fields that they are not proficient at and cannot understand are easy for people. This scenario is somewhat a kind of extreme confrontation between publicity and authority and political liberation that breaks through their own knowledge barriers. Only when the abstract communication of information to any place in society is established can the public sphere exist. A digital media platform provides a more comprehensive platform where different and infinite public members can have a dialogue across cultural boundaries. This ability enables the public from different regions to communicate as if they were in the same geographical location. Apart from providing opinions and information, it provides a sense of trust and affinity like that of close friends.

Right to Know and Express of the Weak Power

Expression and debate help people uncover the truth and pursue it. The pursuit of truth can be traced back to ancient civilization, and social constructivism originated from the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates: Absolute truth is the same for all people. Therefore, it has nothing to do with human existence, is independent of everyone, and does not exist for human beings. It is imperative that human beings express their opinions honestly, see the truth in their opinions, and speak to reveal the truth in their opinions (Arendt, 1990, p. 73-74).⁷ Since the articulation of Socrates' thought, philosophers have been exploring what

⁷ Arendt, H. (1990). Philosophy and Politics. *Social Research*, 57, 73–103.

truth is and how to obtain it and believe that politics is not based on absolute truth or an attempt to achieve a consensus but on expressing diverse opinions.

The era of “post-truth”, in which information is complicated, is characterized by a power of expression that can equally affect all sections of society. This paper holds that, the blessing of expression outweighs the harm caused by the undermining of the right to know.

According to the observation and research of Stanley Deetz, attention to election politics makes arranging legal conflicts a process of making resolutions. It is achieved by endowing them with the legitimacy of choice and repression, making certain choices possible, and suppressing others. However, repression is not the same as stifling and eliminating conflicting statements. On the contrary, the power difference in creating meaning, identifying, and obtaining information is considered significant than power itself. Stanley Deetz (1992) claimed that way of thinking about communication can be developed as a focus on communication as a constitutive process rather than an informational one.⁸ Politicians use public opinion as a battlefield to decide whether a tax rate should be lowered, and the simplest breaking force is a direct message from the people: we expect a lower/more reasonable tax rate. As Ralph Emerson stated, “The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression” (Goodman, 2008).⁹ This paper argues that the right to expression can be classified into information transmission, opinion expression, public debate, and active mobilization.

The media gives the public the right to express themselves in various ways and empowers them to participate in civic affairs in complicated daily life. This scenario is also an idealized institutional background that scholars have been looking for, allowing all citizens to enjoy equal opportunities and rights to speak. Such atmosphere not only supports the development of public opinion but also limits bureaucratic and political control. Gaining the right to speak is a constant priority to trigger consultations and debates. We can establish and maintain a unique democratic communication framework based on citizens so that the latter can break through the constraints of socio-economic conditions and practice their own power of communication, political participation, and national governance. Digital media largely embodies Rousseau’s spirit of “general will” and stimulates the imagination of political activists and scholars affected by the participatory democracy revival.

Discursive Community in the Digital Public Sphere

Discursive Community From Representative System to Discursive Discussion

The paper argues that, in the early classification and description of the public domain, the word “discursive” combined communication with a more appropriate connotation. In the discussion of the public sphere of modern democracy, public sphere theory is often divided into four models, namely “representative liberal”, “participatory liberal”, “discursive” and “constructionist” (as cited in Ferree et al., 2002, p. 289-324).¹⁰ It is not easy to draw a clear line between “participation freestyle” and “discursive”. Both models advocate equal acceptance of the public into the public sphere. In contrast, “discursive” emphasizes that

8 Deetz, S.A. (1992). *Democracy in an Age of Corporate Colonization: Developments in Communication and the Politics of Everyday Life*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

9 Goodman, R. (2008). *Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

10 Ferree, M.M., Gamson, W.A., Gerhards, J., & Rucht, D. (2002). Four models of the public sphere in modern democracies. *Theory and Society*, 31, 289-324.

daily decisions should be accepted only after extensive public discussion, and independent actors communicate in different ways and respect different views. Therefore, it is found that “discursive” emphasizes the characteristics of “discussion and negotiation” and “argument and struggle”.

When Pan and Kosicki (2001) described the communication competition process, he pointed out that all social members participated in the framework process of public discourse integration. The framework defined boundaries for topics. He used “discursive” to describe the collective sharing these conventions and rules within the border.¹¹ In framing an issue, each social aggregate “acts out” its discursive as well as sociological binding.

This paper agrees that “discursive” expresses a unit that is not closely linked in a limited geographical area, but a temporary and discursive set, which can take collective action in deliberative politics through “discussion, consultation and defense”.

This paper argues that, In the digital media era, the boundary of the “discursive community” is vague and changeable, the elite is constantly divided into more segments. The emerging online news citizens rise and gain wider audiences, generalizing new opinion leaders. The voice of the mass and the public is amplified. In this process, the forces of mainstream media and traditional political elites are divided, media frames are reconstructed, a “framing cascade spiral” force is formed.

However, as the scholars of the opposition to online democracy put forward, people are challenged by fragmented information, and online forums are more akin to “echo rooms”. People are more willing to look for people with the same ideas, thus strengthening their views rather than challenging themselves by choosing different views. Moreover, the populist riot crisis escalates.

Competition With New Rules: Dynamic Dimension and Overlapping Space

With “discursive communities”, the speed and scope of its alliance can break traditional communication barriers. On the other hand, the discursive public sphere leads to a divided perception of reality. After adapting to the online environment, elite and mainstream media can enhance framework construction to capture audience preferences. In discourse competition in the digital media era, discourse builders are more diverse, but also more discordant.

Some scholars are on the opposition to online democracy. In 2018, Entman and Nikki (2018) revised the cascading network activation model of frame activation and spread, developed before digital media’s rise. They consider five important, new, digitally enabled “pump-valves” in the flow of socio-political information and frames: platforms, analytics, algorithms, ideological media, and rogue actors (p. 298-308).¹² They argued that the public will accept the upper-level frame setting more easily, rather than improving the public’s framing ability.

11 Pan, Z., & Kosicki, G.M. (2001). *Framing as a Strategic Action in Public Deliberation*. Political Science.

12 Entman, R.M., & Usher, N. (2018). Framing in a Fractured Democracy: Impacts of Digital Technology on Ideology, Power and Cascading Network Activation. *Journal of Communication*, 68, 298-308.

Some scholars have challenged the previous vertical framing network mode. They think that the frame-level link mode has shifted from vertical to horizontal and has had a significant impact on the competitive advantages and disadvantages of the communication level. Yuan Xiao (2016) believes that in the digital age, the power of vertical media gradually shifts to horizontal media (p. 67-78).¹³ Bennett et al. (2018) believed that: “Emerging ideological preferences on the left for direct or deliberative democracy create organizational preferences for horizontal models of democratic linkage that run counter to the models typically offered by parties” (p. 1655-1680).¹⁴

This paper holds that, from the perspective of framing competition, the vertical transmission mode is symbiotic with the horizontal transmission mode. The vertical and horizontal overlap triggers different power levels to rob cognitive resources and reconstruct cognitive structure in new ways.

First, the competition landscape is changed. On the one hand, digital platforms lack traditional organizational control and unified boundaries, which help horizontal transmission. This fact has opened the imagination of scholars affected by the participatory democratic revival. On the other hand, the horizontal mode may also cooperate with the vertical mode to strengthen the power competition. For example, the strong level of framing can predict the frame effect and construct vague discourse in the open media field, so that the content can be edited later. In addition, the strong level can take full advantage of opinion surveys, content collection, and emotional stimulation. To conclude, different construction modes can be adopted in a discursive digital media environment to engage all possible and dynamic dimensions of framing competition in the context of discursive digital media.

Second, the situation of public power is changed. It is controversial whether digital media magnifies the power of the elite or the power of the public. This paper proposes that the multi-partisan nature of election culture makes public opinion so critical, significantly improving public expression power in the digital age. In the post-truth society, the right of self-expression is even more critical than the right to know, and it promotes public rights restoration. Opinion surveys, content collection or emotional incitement are not brand-new things. In terms of society's complexity and intellectual status, the elite cannot completely control human emotions. Emotional agitation resistance of people growing up in the digital age increases simultaneously. Many researches support this propose. For example, Uitermark et al. (2016) developed a network method to identify groups forming through discursive contentious interactions as well as relational measures of polarization, leadership, solidarity, and various aspects of discursive power. They found a recurrent pattern: a small yet cohesive group of challengers with strong discursive leaders forces their framing of integration issues upon other participants. They suggest that the pattern may exemplify a more universal network pattern behind discursive contention (p. 107-115).¹⁵

13 Yuan X. (2016). Evolution and Innovation of the ‘Agenda-Setting’ Theory in the Digital Age: Interview with Professor Donald Shaw, one of the co-founders of the ‘Agenda-Setting’ Theory. *Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication*, 38(4), 67-78.

14 Bennett, W.L., Segerberg, A., Knüpfer, C.B., & Kennedy, J.F. (2017). The democratic interface: technology, political organization, and diverging patterns of electoral representation. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21, 1655-1680.

15 Uitermark, J., Traag, V.A., & Bruggeman, J. (2016). Dissecting discursive contention: A relational analysis of the Dutch debate on minority integration, *Social Networks*, 47, 107-115.

Cognition Improvement and Legal Protection of Framing Sharing

The paper argues that digital media attempts to touch the ideal public sphere on moral and legal levels. At different hierarchy levels and dimension, the result of wrestling is not absolute.

The digital cognition in this paper is not equal to education or culture but refers to the wisdom and cognitive ability to rationally treat emotional incitement, morally treat different opinions, and grasp and cherish the right of self-representation and speech in the digital age. Moreover, studying how digital media affects and allow “persuasion” is necessary. Persuasive speeches allow the public to make meaningful critical choices.

From a legal point of view, the protection and shaping of the public sphere and public opinion by law have also undergone changes from the traditional media era to the digital media era, and the intensity and mode of operation of power and capital have changed.

When we look into America, the First Amendment to the Constitution safeguards the freedom of the press. In the famous Pentagon document case, Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black stood on the side of the majority and eloquently explained the special and constitutionally protected role of the media: “The press is protected. It can expose government secrets and inform the public that the press is serving the public” (Baughman & Rudenstine, 1997, p. 1263).¹⁶ Over the next few years, many defenses were made by media companies, the Communications Commission, the Federal Court, and the Supreme Court to balance the Constitution with social concerns. These defenses formed a basic legal form in the era of traditional media. Generally, freedom of the press is certainly a relative term.

In the “post-truth” era, the President of the United States and other politicians have transferred most of their communication with the public to the Internet by using digital media. There is widespread debate about whether the First Amendment should extend to government actors’ social media pages and how politicians should structure their approach to online presence (Briggs, 2018, p. 1).¹⁷ In the era of digital media, some restrictive rules applied to traditional media, such as speech screening, providing information sources, and high libel fines, are meaningless. The construction of digital media law is also a development field, including criminal and civil aspects.

In short, whether the legal system protects the idea public sphere can be summarized as follows: 1. If the law allows digital media companies to supervise and control speeches of politicians and the government; 2. If the legislation controls the behavior of digital media companies in participating in government actions or being influenced by them; 3. If the public comments on social networking sites are not malicious rumors, will their criticisms, doubts, inquiries, and statements to public figures are protected by law, even if the authenticity of the comments has not been verified. By providing similar legal provisions, the public can build a framework of communication, break down barriers, create links at different levels, and realize the “cascade spiral”.

16 Baughman, J.L., & Rudenstine, D. (1997). The day the presses stopped: a history of the Pentagon papers case. *American Journal of Legal History*, 102, 1263.

17 Briggs, S. (2018). The Freedom of Tweets: The Intersection of Government Use of Social Media and Public Forum Doctrine. *Columbia Journal of Law and Social Problems*, 52, 1.

Research Conclusion and Prospect

“The magic of digital time makes people, media and society regroup in communication” (Du, 2021, p. 79-87+94).¹⁸ The self-breathing ability, fertility, monitoring power and ecological dimension of network information dissemination are all causing the transformation of overall media power, which leads to the redistribution of cognitive resources and structure and the transformation of cognitive construction subjects. Digital technology can reverse traditional relationship dimensions and reshape space-time dimension.

A major feature of the online world is its rich resources. Nowadays, the whole media system is like an ecosystem with rapidly expanding biodiversity. In this ecosystem, all levels have been endowed with new advantages and potentials while having also created new traps and crises. Unlike the actual ecological environment, human beings are hunted for their consciousness and support, but they never give up the fight. Media ecology is collapsing and reconstructing.

In the discursive media environment, the media framework is constantly modified, restated, and spread at different levels, and the vertical transmission mode is more and more symbiotic with the horizontal transmission mode, which triggers multiple power levels to rob cognitive resources and reconstruct cognitive structure in a new way, which is dynamic and overlapping.

On the one hand, the public can switch between private and public spaces at will, with the speed, width, and flexibility of online group alliances, traditional communication hierarchies can be broken down, and public discourse is more likely to constrain top-level framework construction. Political elites need to adjust their rationality. On the other hand, in the discourse competition in the digital media era, discourse builders are more diverse, but also more discordant.

Media development is a creative process. How to form a multi-link and cooperative media communication spectrum, how to compete at all communication levels, how to realize the natural balance, and how to cultivate a moderate and diverse public, researchers should strike a balance between positive optimism and recognition of political, economic, and cultural inequalities.

¹⁸ Du, J. (2021). Digital-Association-Theory (1): A Future-Oriented Communication Theory. *Journalism and Mass Communication*, 12, 79-87+94.

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