

Based on the Public Sphere Theory, Analysis of Participatory Journalism Practices on Social Media

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Abstract. This paper analyzes the practice of participatory journalism on social media platforms based on the Public Sphere Theory. It explores the deficiencies of participatory journalism on social media platforms in conjunction with the connotations of the public sphere. The research concludes that the main types of participatory journalism on social media platforms include participatory news on sudden public events, event discovery-based participatory journalism, commentary-based participatory journalism, and participatory journalism on everyday events. The phenomenon of participatory journalism on social media platforms undoubtedly breaks the dominating control of professional media over the public sphere. However, the development of participatory journalism also faces many challenges, such as widening participation gaps, difficulty in controlling participation topics, and uncertainties among participants. In the new media ecosystem, how to construct a healthy media landscape and effectively leverage public power remains to be pondered.

Keywords: public sphere, participatory journalism, social media

1. Conceptual Elaboration

1.1. Public Sphere

Research on the public sphere originates from Hannah Arendt, as defined in her 1958 book *The Human Condition*, where she defines it as a domain for self-presentation, interaction, and collaborative activities through discourse and action. [1] Jürgen Habermas expanded on this idea in his work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, providing an initial definition of the bourgeois public sphere [2]. Two years later, he further elaborated on the concept in another article, stating that the public sphere refers to a domain of social life where matters similar to public opinion are formed. The public sphere is open to all citizens, where they can freely assemble, express, or publicly articulate their opinions. [3] Although the concept of the public sphere has bourgeois limitations, its most significant discussions cover various elements such as the state, society, and internal and external aspects of the public sphere, contributing greatly to sociology and history. Therefore, this paper primarily analyzes the concept of the “public sphere” based on Hannah Arendt and Habermas as a theoretical foundation.

The public sphere is mainly composed of three elements: participants, media, and consensus. Participants and media form the foundation, while consensus is the outcome. Through free communication and dialogue via media, participants reach consensus, thereby constructing the public sphere. [4]

1.2. Participatory Journalism

The concept of “participatory journalism” originated in the United States, simply referring to providing opportunities for participation and sharing. Here, we refer to the definition provided by Professor Zheng Baowei, stating that participatory journalism is “news published by ordinary people through network technology (especially Web 2.0 technology) actively participating in news communication activities.” [5] Specifically, in the processes of news gathering, writing, and dissemination, the subject of news production is no longer professional media workers but rather audiences as “communication subjects.” This new mode of news production not only rewrites the traditional news dissemination model but also disrupts the media ecosystem.

Participatory journalism often exhibits strong characteristics of non-professionalism and non-institutionalization, primarily relying on social media platforms characterized by sharing, openness, and interactivity. It involves real-time reporting, recording, sharing, and commenting on various events in society that may not be timely covered or neglected by professional media, allowing individuals to express their views and opinions anytime and anywhere on the internet. Participatory journalism is highly active on social media platforms, where netizens publish news information they independently acquire and explore, supplementing the coverage overlooked by professional media. These contents often concern public hot topics, sparking extensive discussions and aggregating public opinions, thus significantly influencing the formation of social public opinion. In this way, participatory journalism plays a significant role in promoting the resolution of social issues.

1.3. Participatory Journalism in Social Media

The concept of social media first appeared in 2007 in Antony Mayfield's e-book *What is Social Media*, where he defines it as a new type of online media that provides users with extensive participation space. Its defining characteristics include ambiguity in definition, rapid innovation, and the convergence of various technologies. [6] With the iterative development of media technology worldwide, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have deeply integrated into social interactions and political processes. In China, platforms like Weibo represent highly active public opinion spaces in the Web 2.0 era. Weibo, as a social media platform, facilitates citizens in openly and freely expressing their opinions and ideas, leading to explosive growth in participatory journalism. Scholars Zhu Jianhong and Xu Yuan found through surveys that Weibo, as a microblogging service social networking site, is widely popular among users. Weibo naturally serves as a tool for communication and media, with its openness enabling rapid information updates. [7]

As an emerging form of media, social media platforms empower internet users with significant rights of expression and communication. Here, the public demonstrates the open freedom of the entire internet space through the expression of free opinions, personal interest acquisition, and mutual interactions, providing ample development space for participatory journalism. The strong interactivity, continuity, and mesh-like structure of social media enable individuals to connect various resources, significantly enhancing the utilization of social resources. This effective use of resources promotes industry practices and further drives the development of participatory journalism.

2. Advancement of the Public Sphere through Participatory Journalism on Social Media

2.1. Main Types of Participatory Journalism on Social Media Platforms

On social media platforms, participatory journalism is primarily initiated by ordinary citizens. Since people participate in the dissemination of news events mostly to satisfy personal needs, the content of participatory journalism tends to focus on social news. Public participation in the process of news dissemination manifests in several main types:

2.1.1. *Breaking Public Event Type of Participatory Journalism*

News reports on sudden public events are characterized by strong timeliness and contingency. These abrupt changes are closely related to people's production and life, attracting widespread attention and testing the response capabilities of major media platforms. Many false news and news reversals originate from sudden public events, often triggering significant waves of public opinion in a short period. In such situations, media reporters may not always arrive on the scene promptly, while ordinary citizens at the scene can record information firsthand as witnesses or participants. The information they acquire is timely and vivid, often becoming sources for professional media to quote and redistribute.

2.1.2. *Event Exploration Type of Participatory Journalism*

With the rapid development of information technology, public participation in news has deepened. People are no longer satisfied with understanding the facts of news events but also seek to further explore related information. Leveraging the convenience of social media platforms, netizens use various search methods to delve deeper into news, extracting parts that interest them from vast amounts of information. Through this method, netizens can combine the information they gather into new news stories, sometimes even supplementing professional media reports.

2.1.3. *Commentary Type of Participatory Journalism*

On social media platforms, netizens may repost, share, and comment on news information as a way to participate in news dissemination. This method allows internet users to form direct connections. Throughout the process of information dissemination, many netizens are willing to read others' comments and accept the viewpoints and opinions of online opinion leaders. This

interaction contributes to the spread and impact of news content, integrating netizens' contributions into news reporting. In recent years, more scholars have begun studying the interactive relationship between news reporting and text in comment sections.

2.1.4. Daily Life Event Type of Participatory Journalism

Much of participatory journalism involves fresh events that occur in the public's daily lives. In the era of social media, people are accustomed to sharing meaningful events worth documenting on platforms like Weibo. Due to the openness of social media platforms, events shared by individuals gain exposure to varying degrees among the public. Some media outlets may contact the individuals involved to refine and republish the events after additional processing, such as adding voiceovers or explanations, to attract more attention from a wider audience. For instance, Sichuan Observer's Weibo account often features videos uploaded by the public, which, under media guidance, undergo certain modifications like voiceovers before being published on media accounts to reach a broader audience.

2.2. Participatory Journalism on Social Media Platforms and the Public Sphere

As news discourse spaces gradually shift from the traditional model of one-way transmission by professional media to the multi-directional news "dialogue" on social media platforms, new media such as the internet have moved from the periphery to the mainstream. Public events have garnered more discussion on social media platforms, and in recent years, many public incidents have gained significant attention due to online dissemination.

On April 25, 2003, an article titled "The Death of Detainee Sun Zhigang" was published in the Southern Metropolis Daily, revealing the death of university student Sun Zhigang after being beaten at a detention station. Few other professional media outlets covered this incident. However, major social media websites represented by Sina Weibo subsequently reported and spread this event over the following days, sparking deep concern and intense discussion among a large number of netizens. This tragedy received widespread dissemination and discussion on Sina Weibo, effectively seeking justice for Sun Zhigang. More importantly, the uproar on social media platforms prompted the improvement of domestic laws and regulations. On June 22, 2003, the "Measures for the Relief and Management of Urban Homeless and Begging People" were issued, while the outdated "Measures for the Custody and Repatriation of Urban Homeless and Begging People" were abolished. The public domain provided by social media platforms perfectly showcases the influence of public opinion, demonstrating the significant impact of internet public domains and highlighting the power of participatory journalism on social media platforms.

Despite these influential cases, does the public domain on social media platforms truly achieve its goal? Clearly, the answer is no. The public domain space provided by social media platforms still has limitations.

3. Current Issues in Participatory Journalism Practice on Social Media Platforms

3.1. Widening Participation Gap

Due to its openness, interactivity, and participatory nature, social media is often seen as a new type of communication tool that can provide equal access to everyone. Edwin B. Parker and Donald A. Dunn once suggested, "The greatest potential of public information may lie in its ability to significantly reduce educational costs and provide lifelong open and equal learning opportunities for all members of our society." [8] However, in practice, the reality seems to contradict this view. In 1999, the U.S. National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) published a report titled "Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide," which introduced the concept of the "digital divide." [9] This divide primarily manifests in four areas related to the use of new digital media represented by the internet, summarized as "ABCD":

A (Access) refers to the physical access to the internet and related technologies, including the availability of devices and network connections.

B (Basic skills) refers to the basic skills and knowledge required to use the internet and digital technologies.

C (Content) refers to the quality and diversity of digital content accessible and usable, tailored to different user preferences.

D (Desire) refers to the individual or group's willingness and motivation to use the internet and digital technologies.

For participants in news production, although communication technology provides nearly equal opportunities for participation, differences in access to social resources, levels of cognitive ability, and learning capabilities mean that not everyone participates on equal terms.

The practice of participatory journalism on social media platforms often deviates from the original intention of the public domain. In practice, those who are more capable of attracting participation in news topics, organizing and planning agenda items tend to be individuals or groups with more power or resources. These resources and power play a significant role throughout the entire process of news participation, making it easier for them to achieve the desired dissemination effects. This implies that information provided by powerful groups is more likely to receive attention, highlighting their benefits, while voices from marginalized groups are often overlooked. This further widens the participation gap in news production, contradicting the principles of the public domain.

3.2. Difficulty in Controlling the Direction of Participatory Issues

In the process of participatory journalism production, controlling news topics and public opinion proves significantly more challenging than traditional media production by professional outlets. On social media platforms, information chosen and popularized by netizens often caters to personal interests, driven by curiosity and entertainment. However, public resources and personal attention are limited. When light-hearted and entertaining information dominates the channels, the seriousness of public issues gradually diminishes. Moreover, an excess of diverse channels for public expression may not necessarily be beneficial. Once public opinion starts to brew, attempts to forcibly control it can backfire, exacerbating emotions and making steering public discourse increasingly difficult. These factors exert substantial counterforces against controlling the agenda of news events and hinder the formation of societal consensus, rendering the notion of a “public domain” moot.

3.3. Uncertainty Among Participants

Everyone in society has the potential to become a producer of participatory journalism. This means the stability of participatory journalism quality largely depends on the level of commitment from participants themselves. Since participatory journalism production typically lacks the formal accreditation processes of traditional news institutions, it also lacks checkpoints. Therefore, participatory journalism exhibits high instability in both production and dissemination dimensions. The uncertainty among participants not only affects the quality of news content but also tends to push discussions towards emotional trends. Due to the anonymity of the internet and phenomena like entertainment consumption in cyberspace, discussions on topics can be disrupted by individuals who do not uphold social responsibility, leading to diminished effectiveness in rational discourse. These uncertainties imply that the “public domain” on social media platforms is inherently uncertain.

4. Conclusion

In the era of social media, the development of participatory journalism signifies the rise of civic consciousness. The traditional model of one-to-many, unidirectional communication has long been replaced by a diverse landscape of communication actors in the online public sphere. In this context, professional media often find themselves unable to resist the formidable power of the public. This undoubtedly shatters the dominant control that professional media once exerted over the public discourse, reshaping to some extent the social public domain and media ecology. However, the development of participatory journalism also brings forth numerous challenges, and its advancement does not necessarily imply closer proximity to a true public domain. In this entirely new media ecosystem, how to construct a healthy media landscape that allows effective leverage of public power remains a subject of ongoing consideration.

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