Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.19495

The Integration of Public and Private Spheres in Cyberspace from the Perspective of Women

—Take Red Book Platform as an Example

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Abstract: With the rapid development of network technology, cyberspace has become a new territory for citizens to freely discuss public affairs and participate in political activities. At the same time, private space has gradually penetrated into the public domain, forming a unique landscape with blurred boundaries between public and private domains. This article focuses on the integration of the public sphere and the private sphere in cyberspace from the perspective of women, and takes the Red Book platform as a specific case for in-depth discussion. This paper explores traditional definitions of the public and private spheres and their evolution in cyberspace, emphasizing the characteristics of a virtual, interactive, and accessible public domain. As online media advances, private spaces increasingly adopt public traits. The analysis is framed through three dimensions: the rise of social media platforms, the fluidity of user engagement, and the anonymity of online interactions, which together clarify the factors driving the convergence of public and private realms. Additionally, the paper assesses the implications of this integration, considering both its positive and negative effects on openness, diversity of perspectives, recognition of positive values, and the realization of individual value.

Keywords: Cyberspace, Public sphere, Social media, Women's perspective.

1. Introduction

The public sphere, also known as "public space", is "the activity space for citizens to freely discuss public affairs and participate in politics, which is the basic condition of politics, besides political power" [1]. It is relative to the private sphere, and the essential feature of the public sphere is its openness and publicity. The private sphere is defined as "the domain for personal activities and private interactions that stem from the autonomous identity of individuals." [2]. The essential characteristics of private sphere lie in the independence, freedom, self-discipline and uncontrolled nature of private activities.

Earlier academic research on public space and private space in the network mostly focused on treating them as independent individuals, that is, studying the structure of public space in the network and the protection of private space. Liang asserts that the network public domain represents an innovative iteration of public domain established through network technology, serving as a

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.19495

reconfiguration of public domain in the context of the evolution of communication technology from print media and broadcast media to digital media. [3] Xiong Guangqing pointed out that on the basis of being an extension of traditional public space, network public space also has some unique characteristics: virtuality, interactivity and openness. These characteristics make the relationship between network public space and private space no longer the same as that under the traditional physical space conditions. Xu Wenjie highlighted that cyberspace, particularly social media platforms, facilitates the simultaneous existence of public and private spaces. This allows private subjects to seamlessly transition into public discourse, resulting in an increasingly indistinct boundary between these two realms.[3] The above three scholars all define online public space as an extension of traditional public space. On this basis, Liu Liang focuses on the media forms on which online public space depends, Xiong Guangqing focuses on the distinctive characteristics of online public space, and Xu Wenjie mainly studies how public and private spaces are integrated. The integration of the three perspectivesIt has jointly shaped the process of the emergence, development, characteristics and integration of network public space with private space. In summary, research has investigated the intersection of public and private realms in cyberspace, yet these studies often lack depth and a nuanced perspective. This article, influenced by feminism, adopts a female-centric lens and uses the Red Book, rich in female symbolism, as a case study. This approach seeks to refine the theoretical framework and deepen understanding of the dynamics between public and private spheres in online social media.

2. The Integration of the Public Sphere and the Private Sphere in Cyberspace

2.1. Section 1 Performance of Public-Private Integration in Cyberspace

The integration of public sphere and private sphere in cyberspace is mainly reflected in the privatization of public sphere and the publicity of private sphere.

The public sphere represents a form of communal space where societal members engage through diverse media, encompassing print materials, electronic technologies, and in-person interactions. This environment facilitates discussions on shared interests, ultimately aiming to achieve a consensus on pertinent issues. [4] However, todays public sphere presents a trend of privatization, that is, the content of discussion is not public issues related to common interests, but topics full of a lot of private information.

The Red Book platform hosts a wealth of provocative private content, particularly narratives from women about emotional experiences like love, marriage, infidelity, breakups, and divorce. These topics often spark significant engagement due to their unusual or relatable nature. For instance, an article detailing a husband's infatuation with illegal practitioners after a decade of marriage garnered 34,000 likes, 4,252 saves, and 1,309 comments. Discussions in the comments primarily revolve around criticizing the husband, offering support to the author, sharing similar experiences, speculating on the event's aftermath, and expressing emotional reactions. Previously, such topics circulated only among acquaintances, but now they proliferate in the online public sphere, contributing to a trend of privatization within this domain. However, misinformation is prevalent in these popular narratives. A notable example is the 2023 "fat cat" incident, where the deceased's sister accused his girlfriend of deceit and chaotic behavior, indirectly leading to his death and inciting widespread outrage online. Many netizens condemned the girlfriend, resulting in cyberbullying. Subsequent police investigations revealed that the sister's claims were exaggerated and fabricated, aimed at generating traffic for monetization and undermining public trust.

The dissemination of private networks pertains to the transformation of private domains into public domains as a result of heightened public and media scrutiny, leading to the evolution of private occurrences into public spectacles due to their visibility.[5] The network private domain, unlike the

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public domain, should primarily encompass private information and activities. However, it is increasingly becoming public, leading to an overlap between the two. A notable example of this publicity within the private sphere is cyber violence, where content that contradicts public and moral values sparks intense debate and outrage. Some individuals resort to illegal means to uncover personal information about those involved, such as their name, age, occupation, and address, a practice colloquially referred to as "opening the box." Despite the transformation of private events into public spectacles, their core nature remains rooted in privacy.

3. The Root Causes of Public-Private Integration in Cyberspace

3.1. Social Media Platforms Provide Opportunities for Individuals to become the Focus of Public Events

The emergence of social media platforms has significantly transformed the mechanisms and velocity of information distribution. These platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of personal viewpoints, experiences, and even fragments of daily life to a broad audience through user-generated content and instantaneous sharing features. This unparalleled communicative authority allows individuals to swiftly become the focal point of public discourse under specific circumstances. Leveraging its formidable agenda-setting capacity, social media elevates certain events, initially private in nature, into the public domain, thereby inciting extensive dialogue and scrutiny. This agenda-setting phenomenon is not solely governed by traditional media outlets but is also shaped by user behaviors and preferences, resulting in a distinctive online public opinion ecosystem.

In the Jiangge case, a private tragedy in Japan gained public attention due to Jiangge's mother leveraging social media to seek help. Her efforts transformed a personal experience into a public issue, sparking discussions on the safety and justice for international students. Ultimately, public pressure led to the defendant being ordered to compensate Jiangge's mother over 696,000 yuan for economic losses. This case illustrates how social media empowers individuals to bring private matters into the public sphere, facilitating widespread discourse. The attention garnered has prompted others to use social media for resolving personal issues, such as the aforementioned fat cat incident, though this can strain public resources.

3.2. Free Switching of Subjects in Cyberspace

The concept of unrestricted subject switching in cyberspace denotes a condition where entities can seamlessly transition between various digital environments based on their individual requirements. This phenomenon allows for the simultaneous existence of multiple spaces, resulting in a dynamic and fluid state for the subjects involved.[6] Cyberspace breaks the centralized control of traditional media and realizes the diversified dissemination of information. This decentralized feature makes the public space and private space in cyberspace no longer have obvious boundaries, and subjects can shuttle more freely between different spaces. This ability to switch freely further promotes the convergence of public and private spheres. Synchronic existence is one of the unique characteristics of cyberspace. It allows subjects to exist in multiple different cyberspaces at the same time, and interact and exchange information across spaces. For example, netizens can not only make comments, but also become the central figure of a focus topic. The phrase "eating melons eats themselves" reflects how individuals often become central figures in public discourse unintentionally. In June 2023, a street photographer in Chengdu inadvertently captured a leader and his mistress shopping together, leading to their rapid identification and viral spread online. This incident illustrates how individuals can unexpectedly become the focus of public events, highlighting the dynamic interplay between public and private spheres in cyberspace, where subjects can assume multiple roles and engage across various domains.

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3.3. Anonymity of the Network

The anonymity afforded by the internet creates a relatively liberated and secure environment for users to express themselves. With the shield of anonymity, individuals are more inclined to share their perspectives and experiences, even delving into sensitive or contentious subjects. This anonymity not only fosters a diversity of information but also facilitates the emergence of individuals as focal points in public discourse. However, anonymity also brings a series of problems, such as extreme speech and rumor spread, which to some extent aggravate the complexity of public-private integration in cyberspace. For example, a star was anonymously revealed that his private life was indiscreet. Although it was unconfirmed, this information quickly spread on the Internet, causing widespread concern and discussion. This shows that under the premise that anonymous rumors have no criminal cost, unconfirmed information will spread rapidly because of peoples curiosity and gossip nature, and anonymity increases the difficulty and complexity of finding rumors.

4. Positive Effects of Public-Private Convergence in Cyberspace

4.1. Promoting Positive Value Recognition

Value identification is a process whereby value subjects realign and recalibrate their values or value frameworks through the transformation of relationships, including dialogue, communication, and ambiguity. It can be interpreted and implemented as a specific concept and theoretical framework, and at times, it may be expressed as particular behaviors and practical decisions that align with certain value-driven activities.[7] With the explosion of private information in public space, all kinds of viewpoints have entered the public field of vision, and as social animals, human values will be influenced in social activities. Under the impetus of opinion leaders, positive and positive values are more understood and accepted, while negative and negative values will be abandoned, thus promoting positive value recognition and conducive to social harmony and stability.

In traditional societies, women were often dependent on men due to a social division of labor, characterized by their lower status and reliance on male financial support. However, with evolving labor dynamics, women can now achieve intellectual independence and excel in the workplace without depending on men. Consequently, many female users discuss economic issues in modern gender relationships that challenge traditional norms, such as whether men should pay for meals or the expectations surrounding bride prices. Historically, bride prices symbolized women's roles as childbearers and homemakers, but contemporary discussions reflect a shift in perspective. New ideas emerging in comments on bride price topics emphasize that it should not be viewed as a purchase of women, but rather as a means of financial support for a new family, advocating for equality between bride price and dowry, and asserting that bride prices should not be appropriated by parents. The prevalence of these views and their popularity indicate a growing recognition of positive values that support feminism and gender equality.

4.2. Conducive to the Realization of Personal Value

Users can obtain traffic by sharing private information, and then obtain commercial benefits. Su Xiaobo, a psychologist, said, "As long as the personality is not mature, people will be keen to spy on other peoples privacy; As long as there are people whose desires are deeply suppressed, some people will try their best to expose the privacy of others and vent their desires through the privacy of others. As long as human nature retains this inherent flaw, the inclination to invade personal privacy will persist indefinitely. [8] On Red Book, many bloggers who share their emotional experiences and life content have gained a high number of fans, and a commercial advertisement can reach six-figure income. Therefore, to a certain extent, the integration of public and private online can enable bloggers

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.19495

to realize their personal value and gain economic benefits in a special way. At the same time, on the other hand, it promotes the development of online celebrity economy and has a positive impact on the social economy.

In addition, users can gain the recognition and approval of others by sharing their knowledge and opinions, so as to realize their self-worth. In Maslow's five-tiered hierarchy of needs, self-actualization represents the pinnacle of human requirements, encompassing the fulfillment of individual aspirations and ambitions, as well as the optimal utilization of one's capabilities [9] There are many female emotional bloggers on Red Book, who extract their emotional experiences and post them on their accounts to answer questions for those in need, and have received a lot of praise. This allows bloggers to show their own abilities and help others in addition to reaping commercial benefits. For example, the controversial emotional blogger, Ququ Da Woman, promotes class migration for women through intimate relationships, offering emotional and marriage guidance via live broadcasts and consultations. While many criticize this perspective as overly utilitarian, others argue that her content genuinely aids women in emotional and workplace situations, fostering independence and clarity to optimize their interests.

5. The Negative Impact of Public-Private Integration in Cyberspace

5.1. Illegal Infringement of Private Space and Interests

Sandra Petronio put forward in "Communication Privacy Management Theory" that there is a "boundary" between the public sphere and the private sphere, and the setting of the "boundary" is mainly based on the proximity of interpersonal relationships. Outside established limits, individuals tend to withhold personal information during their interactions; however, within those limits, they may disclose certain private details. When individuals share their personal information with others, they collectively establish a boundary surrounding that information. [10] However, on todays social media platforms, many people share their private information, which blurs this boundary. Other users can arbitrarily comment on bloggers private information in the comment area. If there are negative words, it will make the parties feel uncomfortable and offended, and even some users will search and harass the parties, which seriously affects the normal life of the parties.Red Book frequently features young, attractive women flaunting affluent lifestyles, often attracting numerous comments questioning the legality of their wealth and the authenticity of their appearances, which are suspected to be enhanced through cosmetic procedures. Additionally, some low-quality netizens resort to abusive language, inflicting psychological harm on the individuals involved. In July 2022, Zheng Linghua, a college student recently recommended to East China Normal University, faced online harassment after sharing a photo with pink hair on social media.Netizens labeled her as a "hostess" and "hair salon girl", and even questioned her and her grandfathers improper relationship. Finally, in January 2023, Zheng Linghua couldnt bear the humiliation and chose to commit suicide. Zheng Linghuas beauty and talent aroused jealousy and suspicion on social media. The attack on her by the evil roots of human nature caused her to suffer this unreasonable disaster, and finally regretted leaving

5.2. Dissemination of Negative Values

The mimic environment theory posits that individuals in contemporary society primarily assess and respond to environmental adaptations based on mass media information. Consequently, these actions influence the actual environment, increasingly aligning it with the characteristics of the mimic environment. With the development of social media, a large number of private information is displayed in public spaces, some of which contain one-sided and negative values. When users browse a certain amount of this type of information, they may think that these negative values are normal in real life, especially for minors whose minds are not fully developed, and they will be misled. In the

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.19495

prevalent Aauto Quicker culture, many minors are engaging in pregnancy photo trends, negatively influencing their values in areas with inadequate education. This leads them to perceive the online portrayal of reality as accurate, fostering a sense of pride in underage pregnancies. Consequently, the trend has contributed to a rise in actual underage pregnancies, creating a detrimental cycle.

6. Conclusion

Despite the numerous drawbacks associated with the convergence of public and private sectors in cyberspace, social media platforms possess the potential to enhance the media literacy of users. This can be achieved through the implementation of robust oversight and constructive guidance, enabling individuals to effectively navigate the processes of information acquisition and dissemination, thereby mitigating the proliferation of misinformation. From the perspective of women, this paper makes a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the integration of public sphere and private sphere in cyberspace. Through practical cases, it shows the concrete manifestation of public-private integration in cyberspace and its multiple influences. The article points out that the integration of public and private fields not only promotes the openness and diversification of views, the recognition of positive values and the realization of personal values, but also brings negative effects such as illegal infringement of private space and interests and the spread of negative values.This paper concurrently presents certain limitations, particularly in its insufficient data analysis. Future academic discourse may increasingly emphasize the effects of the convergence between public and private sectors on individuals, as well as the development of more robust strategies to mitigate any adverse consequences. In the future, a deeper integration of public and private sectors, which may influence netizens' understanding of these domains. However, with effective government oversight and regulation, this integration is likely to exhibit a more structured and beneficial trend.

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