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Research on the Contradiction of Communicative Rationality in the Network Public Sphere

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Abstract: The network public sphere is an absence space under the background of the network society. Compared with the presence space, the absence space is a space where facial expressions, specific places, and specific environments are not presented. It is a virtual space with the connotation of information flow, symbol display, language exchange and meaning pursuit. The communicative action in the absence space is constructed with symbols as the core, and has new content compared to the previous presence space. Correspondingly, the communicative action in the network public sphere has also formed new characteristics: the cross-temporal and spatial nature of communicative symbols in the communication process, the perceptibility of attitude trends, the diversity of cultural backgrounds, and the low cost of interaction. This article focuses on the impact of the low cost of interaction on the communication action in the network public sphere. On the one hand, the low cost of interaction is an important factor that directly leads to the low degree of rationalization of communicative actions. On the other hand, this feature is also an important force to promote the rise of the network public sphere, because the low cost of interaction makes the discussion in the public sphere more adequate. As far as the current social situation is concerned, the rationality of communication in the network public sphere has not been fully established. Finally, combined with Habermas' theory of communicative action, this article believes that the core of establishing communicative rationality in the Internet age lies in the modernization of human.

1. Introduction

The advent of the network age has brought about the spatial differentiation of human society. The concepts of absence space and presence space also came into being. More and more people have poured into the cyberspace and constructed a new form of the public sphere discussed by Habermas—the cyber public sphere. Compared with the traditional public sphere, the network public sphere has a series of new characteristics as an absence space. And the action of public communication in the online public sphere has also shown a new form. In addition, the action of public communication in the online public sphere has also shown new forms, with new advantages as well as new contradictions. This article starts from the definition of the network public sphere, and analyzes the characteristics and problems of the communication action in this absence domain. This paper will first discuss the rise of the network public sphere as a absence space in the

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networked era. Secondly, the formation core and characteristics of communicative action and the content of communicative rationality in the absence space will be discussed. Finally, it is also the most important, combined with the characteristics of the previous summary of communication action, in-depth analysis of the contradictions of communication action in the network public domain.

2. The Rise of Public Sphere in Network Era

The concept of the public sphere originated in Europe. Jürgen Habermas can be said to be one of the leaders in the public sphere of contemporary research. As a product of the separation of a state and society, the public sphere mainly refers to a tension space between the public power sphere and the private sphere in Habermas's vision. Public sphere can first be understood as a public sphere composed of private individuals. However, the private immediately asked the public sphere controlled by the upper class to oppose the public authority itself, so as to discuss with the public authority on issues such as commodity exchange which is basically private but still has public nature and general exchange rules in the field of social labor.[1] The public sphere is based on the private meaning, but the interactive content of the communicators in the field is to discuss public affairs beyond the private category. Social citizens gather in a certain space to discuss a public event of concern, and finally reach a certain consensus to fight against state power.

Habermas made a clear classification and discussion of the public sphere from the ancient Greek period to the industrial capitalism period, and believed that the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere in the industrial period would make it disappear. However, the advent of the Internet era makes the public sphere rise again in cyberspace. Network public sphere is a new form of public sphere constructed by network technology. It is the reconstruction form of public sphere under the condition of communication technology from paper media, radio and television media to Internet media.

Network public sphere is undoubtedly a part of the network space, and the field is also a absence space. With the advent of the network age, human living space is divided into presence space and absence space. The former corresponds to people's traditional real social life, while the latter is a new product of the Internet era. The absence space is similar to 'flowing space'[2] of Manuel Castells and 'disembedding'[3] of Anthony Giddens, which are proposed under the background of network era. They all refer to the withdrawal of social subjects from the real environment. In the absence of space, people can break away from the real time and space constraints and interact instantly on the virtual platform through the exchange of network information.

Such a public domain means that the public does not need to attend a particular occasion, nor need to arrange a specific time, anytime and anywhere on the network to discuss a public affairs. In the process of gradual integration of state and society in the late industrial society, the traditional bourgeois public sphere is gradually dying out. In Habermas' words, it is 'the refeudalization of the public sphere' [1]. However, the trend of separation between state and society reemerges in the network society, and the public sphere has obtained unprecedented development in cyberspace. As a result, various groups around the world have launched a large number of network movements, and people around the world are conducting interaction across time and space through network ties. The new global collective identity is based on this. All kinds of public discussions, social movements and collective protests in cyberspace at all times reflect the vigorous development of the public sphere in cyberspace.

Like the core content of the traditional public sphere described by Habermas, the core content of the network public sphere is also based on fair and rational discussion of public affairs and communication action as the basis for discussion. However, under the influence of new environmental factors, the communication action in the network public sphere will present new

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forms and characteristics different from those in the traditional presence space. Moreover, the formation logic of communication action in the absence space is different from that in the presence space.

3. Communicative Action Endogenous in the Absence Space

3.1. The Construction Core of Interaction in Absence Space

Compared with the presence space, the absence space is a space where facial expressions, specific places, and specific environments are not presented. It is a virtual space with the connotation of information flow, symbol display, language exchange and the pursuit of meaning [4]. The rapid development of the Internet has given birth to a networked society, and the absence space has also been constructed. The interactive environment of interpersonal communication changed from "presence" to "absence". In this transition process, the medium of interpersonal communication has undergone tremendous changes.

In the past presence space, there were various ways of expressing interpersonal communication, including "body movements", "speaking", "expressions", "common social activities" and so on. In cyberspace, all communication takes place through a network medium. Although we can observe that the form of online communication is constantly approaching the communication in the real society. The goal is to achieve a "perfect simulation" of reality. Take a Chinese interpersonal communication software named "QQ" as an example. Its interpersonal communication function has several stages of text sending, picture transmission, spatial interaction, joint games, voice communication and video call. And almost all interpersonal communication software in the world will have similar functions and development stages.

As mentioned above, the way of communication in cyberspace is actually moving closer to real life. The public sphere of the Internet is only a part of the cyberspace. At present, the communication methods in the online public sphere are mainly text, images, and videos as objective phenomena. Such a medium of communication can be classified into the category of "symbols". The public speaks and communicates by exchanging "symbol" in the online public sphere. In Ferdinand de Saussure's view, "symbol" has a dual structure relationship of "signifie" and "signifiant", and the two are connected by "signification". "Signification" is a process that connects two different orientations to create the original meaning of the symbol. This process enables the public to understand the symbol [5]. The generation of symbols has important functions, namely cognition and communication [4]. On the one hand, it allows us to transcend the limitations of the senses, to represent abstract things, to think rationally, and to grasp the essence of things. On the other hand, as a carrier of information, it realizes the exchange of thoughts and emotions between groups under the premise of agreement.

The symbols in the absence space can be divided into two main categories, namely written symbols and non-written symbols [4]. Written symbols exist as a substitute for face-to-face communication. All parties communicate through the exchange of textual information on the Internet. Non-written symbols are a supplement to the communicative action in the real society, mainly including pictures, videos, expressions and so on. These two types of symbols are not expressed separately in practical applications, and a phenomenon can be fully described only when the two complement each other and combine.

Undoubtedly, in the network public sphere, non-face-to-face communication in absence space inevitably and only be constructed with "symbols" as the core. And the symbol form in the absence space is different from that in the presence space. The content of symbols becomes richer and more diverse. The intercalability of absence space makes it involved in more groups and actions in this space, and the ideological convergence of different groups provides rich material for symbol

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construction. Many actions in the presence space are compiled into diverse forms such as words, graphics, and characters, which are shelved in a new space for transmission and interpretation. Because of this, the absence space and the presence space are connected by symbols. They are not opposite areas, but complement each other in the process of symbol flow. And this conclusion is not contradictory to the phenomenon that more and more people pour into the absent space, because there is no substantive connection between whether the absent space is opposite to the present space and what kind of communication mode the public prefers.

In Ernst Cassirer's view, humans are symbolic animals, culture is the form of symbols, and human activities are essentially symbols or symbolic activities. In this process, humans establish the subjectivity of human beings and form a life world full of symbols [6]. Therefore, it can be said that the exchange of signs is the essence of the communicative action in the absence space, and the flow of signs reflects the characteristics of the communicative action in the absence space. And symbols in the new communication space have different interpretations and characteristics from those in the previous real space.

3.2. The Characteristics of Interaction in Absence Space—Take'Sina Weibo' As An Example

If we want to find specific references to the network public sphere, the major public social platforms in the world are in line with the basic elements of building a public sphere to some extent. This paper takes Sina Weibo, China ' s largest public social networking platform, as the main research object to analyze the form and characteristics of public communication in the network public sphere. Weibo(microblog) is an open social platform where users can share real-time information by following. It has a huge public base. As of March 2020, Sina Weibo has nearly 400 million active users. Users can deliver information to the public by posting text, pictures, and videos on topics of interest. And this information covers all aspects of people's social life such as current affairs news, entertainment and daily life. As a network communication space, Weibo undoubtedly has the possibility of constructing a public sphere.

According to Habermas' definition of public sphere, we can extract several prerequisites that public sphere must have. These elements can be divided into: public, public affairs, communication action and communication place. The analysis of these four elements can start from the methodology of dual structure. First of all, from the perspective of constituent subjects, there must be private individuals with equal status in the public sphere, namely the public. In Habermas' discourse, all private individuals have equal status as property owners and thus form the public. In cyberspace, in addition to the title of property owners, everyone has a 'netizen' such a new positioning. This is because the public is subject to the normative constraints of the network platform, thus creating an equality in the process. Secondly, from the perspective of constituent objects, the public is gathered to discuss a public matter. The discussion of public affairs is the core content of the public sphere. Therefore, whether in the presence or absence of space, the existence of public affairs is a prerequisite for defining the public sphere. Taking the early Internet ecology in China as an example, the Internet at that time tends to criticize the policies of the Chinese government. It can be seen that microblog fully conforms to this factor. Finally, communication action and communication places constitute the media for the public to reach consensus from both internal and external aspects. Obviously, the symbolic interaction of Internet users in cyberspace is communication action. A specific social platform is a place of communication. As an network public sphere, Sina Weibo's operating form can be summarized as follows: an individual from a public authority, a company, or the public narrates a public event on the platform, which then arouses public discussion.

In summary, communicative action exists in the public sphere as a medium of action, and the nature of the public sphere will appear based on the communicative action. Therefore, it is

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particularly important to study the characteristics of communicative action in cyberspace. As mentioned in the previous article, the network society is an absent space, and the most important feature of communicative action is undoubtedly the ‘absence’. The purpose of this part of the article is to decompose the feature of‘absence’.

In cyberspace, we can clearly see the cross-temporal and spatial nature of communicative symbols in the propagation process. With the continuous progress of society, especially the rapid development of information technology represented by the Internet, the concept of mass media has already broken through the scope of traditional media such as books, newspapers, and magazines described by Habermas, and has expanded to the new media era. In particular, the emergence of a new generation of social media represented by Weibo has transformed the ‘one-to-many’ communication mode of the past media into a ‘many-to-many’ ‘dialogue’ [7]. Every individual in the cyberspace can be a participant in the public sphere, and has a high degree of autonomy in the process of discourse expression. In Weibo, the cross-temporal and spatial nature of symbol communication is mainly reflected in the instantaneous expansion of topic discussion. We can often see the "hot topics" on the first page of the list within a very short time after an event occurs. This feature can be understood from two aspects: On the one hand, it embodies the spread of symbols as social facts across time and space, because people on the entire network can easily see it. On the other hand, it also reflects the cross-temporal and spatial dissemination of symbols as the content of discussion, and the opinions expressed by each individual on the Internet can also be discovered and responded to in the first time by others.

On this basis, the communication action in cyberspace also has potential perceptibility. In other words, we can see public opinion trends intuitively in the comments section of microblog. The network platform not only promotes the dissemination of major social facts, but also pushes comments with great influence. In Weibo, people can not only express their views independently, but also support or oppose existing comments. The influential reviews can stand out among thousands of reviews and be placed in the top position. Therefore, in a topic, people can generally know the public' s response and attitude to the topic by observing some of the top-ranking views.

Compared with the real society, symbols in cyberspace have strong operability. For all events and discussions on the network, the publishing process can be said to be a 'organizational process'. Its 'organization' is reflected in the combination process of writing symbols and non-writing symbols. On the other hand, it is reflected in the ‘modifiability’ of non-written symbols themselves. Specifically, individuals who publish information can combine text, pictures, or videos into a full message in the way they want. This combination process can be changed at will. In microblog, a large number of marketing accounts in order to get attention, choose a picture combined with their director's story, created a social event. There are also many social individuals, using Photoshop, editing and other methods to reprocess images or videos posted on the platform. This is the manifestation of the operability of the symbols of action in cyberspace.

Symbols are the expression tools of human beings, and the cornerstone is the culture that exists as consciousness. Therefore, communication symbols have distinct cultural diversity in cyberspace. In the public sphere of the past real society, interpersonal communication is limited by regional, and its communication symbols are mainly based on the regional culture. In Habermas words, the premise foundation of communicative action is identical [8]. Due to the participants out of regional restrictions, the cultural background of communication symbols in the network public sphere has become a collection of multiple regions and nations. In microblogs, some people have created to speak Chinese in English intonation to cultivate English language sense; Some people have also created new online vocabulary combined with local dialects. Therefore, it is worth noting that the cultural basis of the information that is abundant in cyberspace is not from one of the various

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groups, but the innovative results of the cultural combination and complementarity of multiple groups.

Finally, the most important feature of communication action in cyberspace is the low cost of interaction. This is also a feature directly related to absence. It is mainly reflected in the public sphere participation subject public communication action. It is mainly reflected in the communicative action of participants in the public sphere. In the past, the discussion of public affairs in the real public sphere inevitably requires the presence of the participants, which means that everyone carries his personal information (appearance, name, identity, etc.) in the field and interacts face to face with other discussion subjects. Interpersonal interaction has obvious situational, site, time, atmosphere and other factors will affect interpersonal action. There is an obvious cost of interaction between people. This interaction cost can be reflected not only in the necessary cost of economy, energy and time involved in interaction, but also in the potential cost of conflicts caused by interest relations and other reasons. This also means that the interactive space in the traditional public sphere is risky and reserved, especially in confrontational discourse. In the network public sphere, participants can hide their personal information and interact indirectly with other participants in various regions through network information transmission. The risk is weakened due to the network media. This is also reflected in Weibo. All individuals can edit their own data at will, and others cannot know the identity of a certain Internet user in the real society. This hidden personal information and non-face-to-face online interaction means that the potential cost of interpersonal interaction is greatly reduced, and the subject of interaction does not have to worry about whether others will act excessively because of the conflict of interest in the content of the discourse. Although there are occasional incidents of ‘human flesh search’, which cause the interactive subjects to suffer online violence, it is still a very small part of the public participating in online interactions.

The above characteristics of these communication action are analyzed by comparing the presence space. On the one hand, they can bring development advantages to the communication action in the absence space. But on the other hand, it will also lead to some new problems in communication action. This topic will continue to be discussed in the next part of this article.

4. The Contradiction of Communicative Action in Network Public Sphere

4.1. Communicative Rationality in Public Sphere

The core content of the public sphere is to discuss and reach consensus on public affairs. Since the ultimate goal is to reach consensus, the discussion process must have certain conditions, such as equality and rationality. The communicative action is directly linked to the discussion process. From a micro perspective, if a more detailed study of the public sphere is needed, then the discussion of communicative action is inevitable. It is in this research logic that Habermas changed his research perspective after writing The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. In the context of the gradual disappearance of the public sphere, he attempts to reconstruct the public sphere from the perspective of social action rationality. In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, we can see Habermas ' efforts in demonstrating the relationship between communicative action and consensus. In this process of rebuilding the public sphere, the status of communication action is particularly important. In order to ensure the positive role of communicative action in the public sphere, Habermas put forward the conclusion of establishing 'communicative rationality'.

Habermas believes that the concept of communicative rationality must be analyzed by language understanding. The concept of language understanding is a reasonable consensus among participants, which can be measured by the validity claims of critical tests [8]. Around the rationality of communicative action, Habermas puts forward the basic conditions of rational

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communicative action from three aspects : 'truth', 'rightness' and 'truthfulness'. Truth is the requirement established around the proposition, and the social facts reflected by the proposition must be true. Rightness is the requirement established around norms, and communication content and methods must be consistent with the current interpersonal norms. Finally, truthfulness is the requirement set up around attitude, communication action must come from the heart of the actor. These three basic requirements are integrated by Habermas and become the 'validity claims' of communication [8]. On the one hand, the concept of communicative rationality involves different forms of fulfilling validity claims with discourse. On the other hand, it relates to the links established between the communicative actors and the world by making validity clams on their expressions. The rationality of an expression can be restored through criticism and argumentation. Only when the communicative action meets the validity claims, people can prove their expressions or append or falsify the expressions of others under appropriate circumstances. Therefore, to some extent, the act of communication is essentially an act of communicative argumentation. On the premise of meeting the validity claims, someone puts forward a view and proves that the listener agrees or opposes it and makes the same argument based on it. In the process of repeated discussions, the two reach a consensus.

4.2. Lack of Communication Rationality in Network Public Sphere

Compared with the traditional media public sphere, the network public sphere does have qualitative changes and has many advantages, but this does not mean that it is a perfect public sphere. Whether in the internal or external environment of the network public sphere, it is full of uncertainty and risk. The characteristics of communication action in the absence space mentioned above not only bring new impetus to the development of the public sphere, but also cultivate potential threats. Technically, the Internet does not have any restrictions on free communication, which opens up a new world for the public sphere. However, the alienation of the network public sphere has become a social problem that must attract our attention. If the process of public discussion in the public sphere conforms to communicative rationality, we can say that such a public sphere can develop healthily. However, in the absence space in the network era, the rationality of communication action in the network public sphere is actually unsatisfactory. The lack of communicative rationality in the absence space has essentially led to the crisis in the network public sphere.

The problems of communication action in network public sphere are closely related to the characteristics of communication action. The operability of symbols directly leads to the emergence of false information and spread across time and space to the network, which brings great difficulties to the control of rumors. All kinds of information in cyberspace is mixed and public trust in social events will decline. The perception of main trends in attitudes also lead to a large number of crowd behavior of dependence. People tend to agree with the view that has been attached by more people, which results in the reduction of people' s rational thinking ability. The cultural diversity contained in communication action also increases the possibility of conflicts. People of different cultures are more likely to have different contexts in the process of communication, so it will be more difficult for people to understanding communication.

If what characteristics lead to the most profound problem of network communication action, it is low cost. This is also a feature discussed in this paper, because the above problems related to other characteristics are also related to the low cost of communication action, and it is a direct cause of the lack of communicative rationality. Absence space provides an almost cost-free area of interaction that allows the public to take what it needs and speak what it wants, but it is precisely because of low-cost interaction that some of the public cannot spontaneously maintain rational discourse thinking. Habermas believes that rationality is a quality of the subject with language

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ability and action ability, which is manifested in the action that can always be fully proved [8]. In the contemporary network society, communicative rationality is embodied in the reasonable way to participate in interpersonal interaction. The discourse in the public domain should be put forward through the processing of rational thinking, which is neither a negative attitude of adaptation nor an unthinking opposition to everything. However, in reality, people can speak on anyone and things very easily, and many people have lost their ability to think rationally in cyberspace without interactive costs. They have lost the spirit of argumentation in the world of one-click speech, and the rationality of communication action has also been shaken. As far as the current communication action of Weibo is concerned, impetuous behavior is widespread, which makes it difficult for us to be optimistic about the communicative rationality in the absence space. The impetuous performance of microblog communication can be seen everywhere: information is rampant, true and false are difficult to distinguish, privacy is exposed, gossip is exposed or even rumors are spread, defamation and extreme speech are rampant and it is difficult to locate and blame, advertising penetration is excessive, self- hype is prevalent, serious justice is dissolved by entertainment, catharsis and language violence, and anarchism or even anti-governmentism is rising. Although more and more people can have more voice and sense of participation in public affairs through the Internet, there are also more and more online texts that have become dross in the public sphere. The public has lost its way in the anti-rational culture by venting emotions and paralysing themselves by simply and rudely evaluating social things online. The openness of the network has lowered the access threshold of interpersonal interaction, but the irrational interactive discourse makes cyberspace tainted, which also seriously deviates from the significance of public sphere.

Habermas believes that the inclusive rationality of real communicative action should come from its interactivity, namely intersubjectivity [8]. Our appreciation and expectation of the network public sphere is precisely because of its potential. It is possible to construct a rational mode of communication between subject and subject, realize the rational communication centered on subject, do not taboo differences and disputes, do not resort to authority and strength, advocate the understanding and learning between subjects, so as to make up for the defects of the subjectivity of our traditional subject philosophy. This potential makes the construction of social consensus have a possible realistic relationship foundation. Unfortunately, the construction of the network public sphere is not perfect, at least for communicative rationality, an important aspect of the operation of the public sphere has not be established.

5. Conclusion

For today's online public sphere, the rationalization of communicative action directly affects the functions that the field can play. This paper argues that the core of the construction of communicative action in the absence space is symbols. Compared with the real society, the characteristics of symbols in network communication also have new significance. On this basis, this paper takes microblog as an example to sort out the characteristics of communicative action in the network public sphere. Among them, the low cost of interaction is an important factor that directly leads to the low rationalization of communicative action. However, on the other hand, this feature is also an important force to promote the rise of the network public sphere, because the low cost of interaction makes the discussion in the public sphere more sufficient. In such a public sphere, sufficiency and rationality have become a set of contradictions. At least in the current social context, When the interaction cost is reduced, the adequacy of interaction will increase, but the degree of rationality is uneven. When the cost of interaction increases, the rationality of communicative action will also increase, but it will weaken the adequacy of discussion.

Public sphere exists between public power and private interests, which is a space full of tension. This tension essentially represents a process of mutual game between private and public authority.

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The high degree of public participation in the network public sphere often accompanied by the phenomenon of low rationality of interaction, which makes the network space unable to fully reflect the core of publicity. Increasing the degree of supervision of the network public sphere will be accompanied by insufficient network speech, which will also harm the publicity of cyberspace. These two problems are the unity of opposites in the network public sphere, and also the structural contradictions in the network space. Under such historical background, Habermas' communicative rationality emphasizes the independent dialectical thinking ability of participants. The openness of the network requires individuals to express their opinions on social and public affairs through rigorous brain processing rather than simply passive adaptation or subconscious confrontation. The establishment process of communicative rationality is not simply dependent on the management level through the control of network information can be achieved, need to break through the surface of the phenomenon, so that rationality rooted in the participants themselves.

Reasonable communication action must first have participants with certain rationality and reflection ability. Secondly, it needs to have complete and clear verbal expression. Finally, the consensus formed by the communicators must be based on the living world and reality. In network communication, participants' rational and reflective ability depends on their ability to use knowledge. As the most emerging and rapidly updated science and technology, Internet technology developers and users must have certain knowledge ability. This knowledge ability is reflected in the network communication through reason and reflection. Although the process of network space at the level of science and technology has never stopped, the development of network technology as a tool cannot directly solve the problem of communicative action. The main body of the network public sphere is the broad masses as a private category, not the techonology. Therefore, the core of the modern structural transformation of the network public sphere is the modernization of the participants. Furthermore, human modernization is the key to solving the contradiction of network communication action. This means that people's communication mode, interactive psychology, communication discourse and even social cognition in cyberspace need to be evolved.

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