

Sharing and Interaction of Communication: A Study of Internet Group Polarization from the Perspective of Cultural Studies

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Abstract: The decentralization and interactivity of Internet communication is the starting point for understanding the polarization of public opinion groups. The internet community is often hindered by various public opinions and disputes, which make rational discussion more challenging. The cultural theory of communication reveals that culture is the core to maintain the existence of a society, and communication is the foundation of culture. This paper examines the technical and interactive characteristics of Internet public opinion polarization from the perspective of cultural theory, and then focuses on the governance of Internet group polarization in a shared and interactive way from the perspective of cultural communication.

1. Introduction

As of June 2023, the number of Internet users in China has reached 1.079 billion (of which the number of mobile Internet users has reached 1.076 billion). An increase of 11.09 million people compared with December 2022, and the Internet penetration rate reached 76.4%, an increase of 0.8 percentage points compared with December 2022^[1]. In recent years, the technology of the Internet 3.0 era, which takes interaction as the basic logic, has been continuously innovated, and the communication law of the Internet space has been constantly reconstructed. In the content optimization made by major network communities or media platforms for customers, it not only echoes the advantages of demand, convenience and commercial value, but also correspondingly gives birth to the communication phenomenon of *Information Cocoon* and *Filter Bubbles* under the vision of communication science.

Looking back on the past, most communication scholars have shown optimism and a certain degree of expectation for the development of new technologies and the description of communication forms. In terms of technical features, Tim Berners-Lee, one of the developers of the World Wide Web, spoke ambitiously about the *New Freedoms* the Internet would bring. In his view, “all ideas, technologies and societies naturally form and develop under the characteristics of *decentralization* [...] In the future, everything will be connected. This vision will allow us to move

faster without the shackles of the previous hierarchical classification system”^[2].

To be sure, both William Gibson and McLuhan, as Stanley J. Baran described them, had “partially accurate” predictions about the Internet age. At the same time, however, we cannot agree that we are in the middle of Gibson's consumerist maelstrom today (which happens to be the one criticized by the political economy of communication) or that McLuhan's concept of a *global village* is being fully implemented. Because decentralized Internet communication seems to transmit estrangement, misunderstanding and circle clustering in another way. The problem that kept McLuhan out of his dreams — the “backbite” of such technological determinism — is one of the communication myths this article seeks to address. As Wei Long said, “The Internet has not achieved rational communication, inclusive negotiation space, but has amplified the real social tear. Netizens quickly gather into one network circle after another on social networks, [...] forming the phenomenon of group polarization”^[3].

One of the core characteristics of Internet communication is *interactivity*. As billions of independent individuals move through the Internet for information interaction, the development of Internet information dissemination is also self-evident. Levy defines such interactivity as “the active participation of a beneficiary in an information exchange”^[4]. Audiences in the age of traditional mass media have never been given such power — a spatio-temporal uncertainty about the roles of the sender and receiver of information. This is also the active audience Levy is concerned about: “In the communication process, no recipient of any message is just a passive recipient of information, but there is always continuous interaction with different degrees.” In practice, the intensification of interaction produces a variety of viewpoints, which in turn form public opinion. The polarization of public opinion is a phenomenon that has been present in traditional societies, such as *religious fanaticism, racial discrimination, extreme feminism, or environmentalism* inherent in human society since its inception. However, “with the advancement of intelligence and digitalization in the current media environment, various cutting-edge technologies are reshaping the composition of media ecology”. This complexity has led to “a more intricate homogeneity and stratification of concepts and behaviors compared to the pre-intelligent era”^[5].

As stated by Davis, “audiences do not passively accept information, but rather actively process and retain only the part that aligns with their cultural needs”^[6]. This cultural orientation of communication not only implies a strong speculative connotation regarding subjectivity determination, but also encompasses perspectives on the nature of *sharing* in cultural communication. Building upon the communication orientation of “sharing and interaction”, this paper does not deny the existence of *cultural leadership*^[7] in communication, but aims to explore how power can effectively fulfill its fundamental role in network communication characterized by sharing and interaction, thereby reconciling the phenomenon of group polarization within online public opinion circles. Consequently, a more targeted and efficient solution is sought for addressing issues arising from group polarization in network public opinion under the backdrop of online circles and groups.

2. Review of network circle and group polarization

With the increasing development of network technology, network circle groups that combine geography, interest, and industry have broken the physical boundaries. This new type of social aggregation characterized by collective life and collective online experience has also brought profound changes to the online public opinion environment.

2.1. Review of network circle

The concept of network circles first appeared in China in 2015. In the early stages of research,

expressions such as *network community*, *network circle & dimension*, and *circleization* appeared in the academic community, and the differences between them were not clearly defined. In recent years, the research results on the network circle are highlighted in the paper *Research Review on the Phenomenon of Network Circle Group*. It believes that the main body of the network circle and the environment in which the network circle is located are two key factors from different perspectives^[8]. By reviewing relevant literature, this article argues that network circles are: network aggregation spaces based on modern network technology, using platforms as carriers, and established for a specific reason or in combination with individual real-life social circles.

The research on online community in the field of communication mainly focuses on its formal characteristics, as well as the derivation and governance of public opinion. In terms of characteristics, domestic scholars generally propose that online communities are characterized by their exclusionary and relatively closed nature in their intuitive structure^[9]. Behind the tight *barriers to entry*, the circle group constantly shapes the interactive scene of coexistence of strong *agenda setting* and *spiral of silence*^[10].

In terms of governance, Western scholars generally believe that ensuring the heterogeneity of cyberspace is the best way to govern public opinion^[11]. China's countermeasures for the governance of network public opinion mainly focus on the negative impact on real society^[12].

2.2. Review of group polarization

In recent years, there has been a wealth of active research on “group polarization” in China. According to data from the China Academic Network (CNKI), it focuses on the concept, influencing factors, and improvement strategies of public opinion polarization.

In terms of concept, relevant research on group polarization in network public opinion often summarizes it as *public opinion polarization*, but there is no unified conclusion on its interpretation. Group polarization refers to the fact that group members have certain biases from the beginning, and after deliberation, people continue to move in the direction of bias, eventually forming extreme views^[13]. This paper argues that “polarization” is the key to understanding the concept of group polarization in network public opinion.

Concerning amelioration strategies, there are primarily two viewpoints: one advocates for stringent measures on laws and other aspects, whereas the other promotes moderate approaches to steer *inappropriate speech*^[14].

2.3. Outstanding issues

Research into network circles has produced some promising findings, but scholars often overlook the phenomenon of resonance in online community public opinion, which offers an alternative disciplinary perspective (Wang Shiyong, Yu Jiaqi, 2022). Scholars have yet to thoroughly examine the interplay between China's political system and the Internet, a critical aspect that offers valuable insights into our understanding of online community groups. Future studies should put more emphasis on empathy, interaction, and sharing, as well as the dismantling of online populism, with the aim of proposing more effective solutions and potentially beneficial research areas.

In China, studies on group polarization in network public opinion are still in their infancy, with researchers utilizing primarily qualitative methodologies. Research into specific phenomena, their scope, degree, and formation speed remains elusive, with few studies conducted examining the characteristics of the groups, topics, and subject interactions involved. When examining scholars' strategies, it is clear that their proposed solutions to problems are heavily subjective. Specific strategies and effectiveness analyses are often based on an impressionistic governance perspective,

lacking a more objective empirical foundation.

In terms of content, most studies only demonstrate solutions such as public opinion guidance and policy regulation for converged media under *Grand Theories*, but rarely clarify the phenomenon of “network circle groups” and “group polarization” and corresponding solutions from the perspective of classical communication theory.

This topic attempts to focus on the level of cultural theory of communication, and to explain the regularity of the phenomenon of group polarization caused by online community public opinion. The way and effect of media communication has undergone great changes since the decentralization characteristics of the Internet became prominent. The traditional linear, one-to-many, atomized characteristics of mass communication have been repeatedly dispelled, and replaced by the communication of value, sharing, and interaction in the field of cultural research. How to find an effective communication model in such a practical context has become extremely important for policy makers, and it is also an important way to address the negative impact of online community groups and even group polarization.

3. Internet Public Opinion from the Perspective of Sharing and Interaction

In the realm of humanities and social sciences, culture is customarily portrayed as a lifestyle and civilizational tradition that is designed to fulfill the social needs of its members. Moreover, it stands as a model of practical significance expressed in a *symbolic structure* and is also regarded as a form of historical heritage. As James Carey defined *communication* on the cultural approach, “communication is a symbolic process in which reality is created, maintained, repaired and changed”.^[15] The influence of communication in our everyday lives is undeniable. Through the dissemination of information and communication, we are better able to understand the world around us and construct our own personal worldview. The discourse of sharing and interaction proposed by Liu Hailong encapsulates this perspective in the context of the cultural theory of communication. “Communication is a ritual, a call to the subject [...] a reproduction and construction of reality”^[16]. This idea aims to make it clear that the purpose of communication is not to obtain some content to reduce uncertainty — the *Information*, but more importantly, we establish an internal relationship with others through the interaction of information under the common cultural background, and then obtain *identity* in the interpretation of objective reality.

In the current era, the two-way communication mechanism of participation, freedom, and equal opportunity is evolving into a more sophisticated mode. As Terry flew, he used 20 keywords to explain this “new” change in his overall description of new media. Among them, we believe that there are such inspiring and macro-descriptive concepts in Internet public opinion: *collective intelligence, convergence, virtual reality, mobile media, participation, remediation, user-created content*, etc.^[17]. The value of these contents lies in that they clearly reflect the important aspect of Internet communication — a new field of decentralized communication and interaction.

The polarization of Internet public opinion groups in the context of network circles is precisely a phenomenon generated by users and media in the process of interaction. It is a fundamental way to build common cultural understanding and maintain social identity through continuous sharing and interaction between senders and recipients. The group polarization of the network circle group is a divergent problem arising from interaction, which erodes the development of culture and undermines the establishment of social identity. However, such a tortuous path is precisely the driving force for us to see the sun through the clouds and promote understanding from a larger perspective. Because the development and construction of culture is not static, but constantly adapts to changes in social and environmental structure. Then, continuous exchange of information in communication, such as blood flowing through the social texture, provides continuous nourishment

for the construction of the whole culture.

3.1. Dimension of information acquisition

With the rapid advancement of multimedia technology and big data algorithms, media is directly affecting the acquisition of audience content through changes in form. This has necessitated a re-examination of Marshall McLuhan's concept of “media as information” after 60 years^[18]. Neil Postman has even gone as far as to describe media as metaphors and epistemology^[19]. These perspectives unequivocally position the medium as the origin of meaning — the *meta-discourse* of a certain meaning.

In this era of content dissemination where individuals directly participate and construct content on a large scale, media technology has created a series of realities for users in terms of information flow and continues to “create” them. In 2006, Sunstein first proposed the concept of *Information Cocoons*^[20]. However, technology has not stopped developing. If the “cocoon” in Sunstein's words is a conscious self-construction of users in the form of “information customization”, then the convergence of network communication content towards individuals today is achieved under the technological domination of big data and AI. This reveals the passive and unconscious state of users.

Therefore, the information cocoon is deepened to the field of *filter bubble* effect at the level of algorithm technology. The decentralized mode of receiving and transmitting information on the Internet enables information acquisition, as well as views and value judgments (negotiated during the interactive process). The *echo chamber* effect explains this phenomenon: individuals who practice network interaction are exposed to homogenized crowd opinions and information, so individuals tend to regard the above as truth, and ultimately unconsciously move toward narrow understanding and paranoid polarization.

The open and diverse information characteristics of the Internet are constantly shaping a narrow and one-sided image of information for users in the meta-discourse of technology. The root cause of this paradox is the *Overload* of information on the Internet. If massive information content cannot find a way to be applied by individuals through some Darwinian-style changes, then this field will inevitably be abandoned due to its inoperability. However, these technological methods are also constantly creating cognitive biases and extreme views among users.

3.2. Dimension of interaction

As mentioned above, the problem of information overload at the level of information acquisition is addressed by Internet technology. However, at the level of interaction, there is still a need to solve the problem of information overload. From the perspective of cultural theory, whether it is *Symbolic Interactionism*, the actual society it constructs, or the *Cultivation* of media content, a media field that hosts a huge amount of information cannot establish effective information transmission to help continuously build a stable and developing society.

The central feature of decentralization of the Internet is the liberalization and anonymization of information receiving and sending. This makes the Internet full of information that is “mixed with facts, emotions, and opinions” (Yang Guang, 2022). First of all, the interactive nature of the Internet inevitably results in “emotional expression” by users. There is a *disinhibiting effect* on the *imitation* of media content in real society. In terms of network public opinion, imitated content is emotional interaction.

Emotional Interaction is the most significant representation of online interaction, and it is also the primary factor that undermines rational interaction and the dissemination of cultural construction. In the process of emotional interaction, the origin of the issue — the fact — is weakened. Personalized account characteristics such as anonymity have amplified the emotional

interaction of the interaction, and group psychology has gradually been established. More importantly, the process of shaping the polarization of public opinion itself includes the withdrawal of facts. During this period, loss of control of group emotions is an important factor^[21]. Within the boundaries of the circle group, the extreme identity of public opinion communication is constructed. What follows naturally is the cultural identity of the circle group. However, this cultural identity is neither open, inclusive, nor holistic and social. They are established and maintained by a centralized specific core issue or opinion leader.

Secondly, as can be seen from the above, the *two-step flow of communication* theory^[22] has been typified in the dissemination of Internet public opinion. In the process of network interaction, the path of gradual polarization of opinions is not only emotional expression, but most importantly, alienation of the facts of the issue. This highlights a phase contradiction in the demand for information acquisition and interaction. Information based on facts is gradually *re-interpreted* in a large number of interactions, which is why the *post-truth era* is named after it. We have mentioned many times that Internet communication is a decentralized form. In such a field, although individual views have been temporarily liberated, due to various psychological orientation reasons, they must find the fulcrum of views, positions, and attitudes. In fact, although individuals are completely free in the initial state of facing Internet information, in the process of continuous interaction, with the increase of information acquisition opportunities, the *Selective Contact* mechanism will play a role. Many empirical studies on Internet interaction have found that the more types of information there are, the more significant users' behavior in screening views based on pre-established positions is^[23].

The interpretation of Internet information is very much in line with the perspective of critical groups in cultural theory, namely *cultural studies*. Jacques Derrida believes that there is nothing outside the text^[24]. This *Linguistic Turn* towards *Objective Reality* is similar to what Ferdinand de Saussure^[25], a pioneer of semiotics, said, that all representations of social reality are dependent on the shared linguistic categories of the members of society. Objective reality may exist, but if it does not interact through a common framework of understanding, it can not be understood. People's grasp of the rationality and credibility of facts lies in the interpretation of objective reality. Such interpretation depends on the encoding system of the information receiver^[26]. It can be seen that from the point of view of cultural theory, the most direct way to avoid the polarization of public opinion is to adopt a social culture of identity for understanding.

4. Sharing and interaction: breaking the communication deadlock of group polarization

Group polarization in online communities and public opinion are mutually prerequisite and causally linked. Therefore, the resolution of group polarization and the dissolution and guidance of online communities are *synchronic*. The interactive communication of individuals on the Internet is based on a decentralized information dissemination model, developed through the expression of personal opinions and the re-elaboration of facts, and formed by the gathering of groups with distinct boundaries. Surprisingly, the Internet, which in McLuhan's view created a field of *implosion* type difference elimination, has not become a *re-tribalized* era. Instead, the formation of scattered *tribes* in the online community has caused the overall decline of this era into a “de-tribalized” situation. Due to technological development, “difference” has simultaneously reached the greatest scale of bridging and its opposite. The former is the bridging of the Internet *meta-media* style, while the latter is the polarization of the Internet public opinion group. The medium extends the body, eliminating the gap between the print era and the electrical era, but cannot escape the extreme fluidity of *post-modernism*. Faced with the spread and construction rules of social culture, if people cannot effectively rely on the sharing and interaction of advanced media technology, and social culture cannot be effectively precipitated and carried forward.

4.1. The Instrumentality of Recentralization

We discussed in the previous article that the technological development of online information acquisition has led to the leap of big data and artificial intelligence algorithms. This technological reality demonstrates the propagation law of the information cocoon and echo chamber effects. From the point of view of sharing and interaction, this is an inevitable result of information overload. Individuals spontaneously avoid the intrusion of excessive information through technological means. The concept of information itself is neutral, and its value judgment is cultural behavior. The interactive identity of the circle group makes polarized public opinion take the group as the main body. At this time, group opinion becomes the key. In the long-term research on network public opinion, academia often focuses on its decentralized reality and views it as a challenge. What we need to understand is that, on the one hand, the cultural identity of the online community has achieved idealized sharing and interaction. Then we should try to make it a practice in a larger social and cultural context. Therefore, Zheng Wenfeng mentioned the importance of *media literacy education* in the circleization of communication: first, we should use the cultivation of critical literacy to break down circle barriers, popularize technical literacy to correct information imbalance; and enhance digital literacy to improve the quality of information in the circle^[27]. On the other hand, the recentralization of the Internet allows us to transcend the individual level and regain a foothold in governance, thus guiding individuals towards healthy and upward public discussion. The core is that the “centre” of recentralization must be a *gatekeeper* with a spirit of sharing and interaction. It is an open, inclusive, rational and civilized center. Occupation of this position is the key to the spread and development of mainstream culture.

As of the end of June 2023, 11 of the self-owned APP products with a cumulative download volume of more than 100 million were owned by 8 major Chinese central-level media. They have produced 27,000 popular articles in total. At the same time, it has more than 1,000 active accounts on third-party channels, including more than 440 head and shoulder accounts (with more than 1 million followers or quarterly reading volume) and a matrix^[28].

In such a new form of Internet communication, mainstream voices continue to occupy the position of two-step flow of communication, and generally become the *Gatekeepers* of recentralized public opinion. And their network information dissemination based on sharing and interaction will achieve greater stickiness and stronger cultural and social recognition.

4.2. Negotiation from a Sharing Perspective

Our culture helps us understand the objective nature around us. However, our *Representation* of objective nature depends on the effective negotiation between each Internet participant in information sharing and interaction. We cannot exclude marginalized groups, whether radical or conservative, but we cannot allow them to occupy *cultural leadership*. In cultural theory, Gramsci (1992)’s interpretation of *Hegemony* abandoned Althusser’s eternal framework for the establishment of *Ideology*, pointing out that civil society is a *public sphere* that disseminates the ideas of the ruling class, and is the sum of various ideologies and cultural relationships. The domination of civil society must be based on “culture”. This hegemony (cultural leadership) is based on the origin of civil society — common sense and the consent of citizens. As a result, the lead group reached agreement with the rules through a certain degree of concession and compromise. It can be seen that hegemony or cultural leadership in their words is essentially ideological leadership.

Gramsci’s discourse linking social culture and ideology remains influential to this day. Luo Gang and Liu Xiangyu believe that in the field of cultural studies, the term *Ideology* is one of the top concepts. As James Carey said, “British cultural studies can easily, and perhaps more accurately, be described as ideological studies, because they attribute culture to ideology in various complex

ways”^[29]. At the same time, the perspective of cultural studies emphasizes the need for full sharing and interaction of information flow as a foundation for cultural construction, which is an important connotation of “negotiation”. Therefore, by examining the context of cultural theory, we recognize “symbolic behavior caused by the sharing of meaning and value to varying degrees among participants”^[30] under the theoretical support of symbolic interaction. Meanwhile, we are constantly involved in the practice of cultural construction.

From this perspective, mainstream culture should be actively integrated into network interaction in an appropriate manner. It should not only adhere to the value orientation of avoiding *Tabloidization*, but also be confident and positive. Wang Shiyong and Yu Jiaqi (2022) believe that mainstream culture and circle culture are a process of shifting from confrontation to dialogue, or from struggle to contention. The metaphysical, formalized and monotonous mainstream narrative is difficult to integrate into the highly guarded domain of network circles. We should have advanced media concepts, literacy, and clever expression methods. From a cultural perspective, the “Internet language” required for sharing and interaction can be seen as a form of “subcultural discourse” rhetoric. Its effect on communication cannot be ignored. The key concept of the new rhetoric is identity. Liu Hailong (2008) pointed out that “rhetoric is cognitive, that is, objective truth does not exist, and we obtain consensus and share different subjective experiences through rhetoric and communication with others”. If mainstream culture is to participate in Internet communication and generate positive sharing and interaction, it must conform to the rhetorical forms of expression of Internet culture.

Some scholars have pointed out that *People's Daily's fan-base propaganda strategy*^[31] is essentially an active approach to Internet discourse (or subculture discourse) to achieve effective sharing and interaction. Its activities should be supported by imitating the login, control of comments, ranking and other fan management methods of “fan-base”, which can effectively promote the resonance of “stratospheric” public opinion.

5. Conclusions

Of course, the governance of group polarization in network circles is more of a matter of practice. The laws revealed from the perspective of cultural theory also require operational governance practices to help shape a controllable and unified cultural space. In fact, public opinion in the circle and its gatekeepers often have the role and ability of “strong agenda setting”. The control of the circle can play a better role in resolving the polarization of public opinion.

The process of mainstreaming culture’s intervention into the Internet is not going to be straightforward or easy, but it is sure to be subtle and continuous. It's through the sharing and interaction of cultural knowledge that internet communication takes place. Through the process of information flow, the internet is constantly shaping and enriching our culture. Based on this mutual understanding, the potential for polarized voices to persist is diminishing. In the era of television, scholars like Gerbner G. used the *Ice-age Analogy* method to illustrate how media shapes culture. It's subtle and not just a straightforward repetition of a limited effect theory, but rather, it's more like the idea of “the persistence of relatively weak but penetrating influence”^[32]. We believe that this is still applicable to internet information dissemination. The internet has created a world for us, and we're constantly interacting and sharing to understand and transform that world, while staying in sync with our maternal — objective reality.

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