



With Examples and Reference to Current Studies Critically Evaluate the Reality and Hopes for a Mediated "Global Public Sphere"

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Abstract. Media ecology has been closely associated with media education for a long time in western society. In today's age of increasing globalization and media convergence, the concept of mediated global public sphere may have a far more influential effect on global public affairs and political actions. This article examines the development of global public sphere, especially under the impact of mass media on public awareness, and points out possible influences.

Keywords: Public Sphere, Globalization, integrated media.

1 Introduction

The public sphere is a space for citizens to express freely their personal opinions on topics of public interests, which will have an impact on the decision-making process of social actions. From cafés, libraries to forums and social media, citizens gather together to discuss about public issues and comment on them. Freedom of speech seems to be the basic element of the public sphere.

With the process of globalization, the public sphere has changed gradually and a new term named "global public sphere" has emerged, which shows a transformation of discussion from a national level to an international level. Furthermore, Internet technology and digital media have also developed dramatically, which have influenced the form of the global public sphere by providing various channels for citizens to show their personal opinions. Because of the globalization and media convergence, the ongoing process of the mediated global public sphere may have a far more influential effect on global public affairs and political actions. However, the reality of the global public sphere is that it is still facing several limitations and defects.

By combining recent academic literatures and specific cases, this essay will critically evaluate the reality and prospective hope of a mediated global public sphere. In the first part of the essay, the definition of public sphere will be covered, followed by a brief explanation of the development of global public sphere under the process of globalization and media convergence. Then the essay will discuss the possible features and influence of the global public sphere and also focus on its realistic problems.

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2 The Definition of Public Sphere

Hannah Arendt first introduces the term of public realm as a "space of action" which arose from citizens' needs and desires to communicate with each other equally and take part in the political activities. Based on it, Habermas defines the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed"^[1]. With the freedom of expressing their opinions, citizens have the ability to behave like a part of the society and help to form a public body. In 1989, Habermas made a complement and described it further as "a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens.....citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion"^[2]. The core of public sphere discusses by Habermas is called "the bourgeois public sphere" which "may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public"^[3]. Habermas emphasizes the significance of the bourgeois to take part in "the public's rational-critical debate of political matters". Hauser later defined the public sphere as "a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them"^[4].

Although there are many definitions of the public sphere, one essential element can be concluded is that in such sphere, citizens have the freedom to show individual opinions of public issues, which may lead to the formation of shared interests and the public opinion.

3 Development Under Globalization and Media Convergence

The public sphere is not a constant term and has been changing as a result of the process of globalization and media convergence. As Habermas argues the changing societies, together with the mass media have changed the public sphere.^[5]

Based on McLuhan's hypothesis of a "global village", a host of scholars have explored various definitions of globalization. While several scholars emphasize the economic aspects, especially the integration of market and capital, others focus on the culture and ideology changes. After studying diverse definitions of globalization, Al-Rodhan proposes that globalization is "a process that encompasses the causes, course, and consequences of transnational and transcultural integration of human and non-human activities"^[6], which includes activities such as news distribution and public debate. Globalization has expanded the communication space and provided citizens with more chances to express their views on not only national issues, but also global affairs^[7]. Since news of international issues can be conveyed worldwide, it increases the possibilities for citizens to receive diverse reports for different interests and a larger range of discussion. As Castells (2008, p.78) mentions, due to globalization, the public opinion and debate had shifted from the domestic level to the global level^[8].

Another factor that has influenced the public sphere is the process of media convergence, which is defined as "an ongoing process, occurring at various intersections of media technologies, industries, content and audiences"^[9]. Dahlgren points out that the

new media has contributed to the formation of relationship between citizens and the "power holders of society"^[10]. With the development of the Internet and digital technologies, the convergence has offered citizens various platforms, such as online news websites, blogs and microblogs to show individual opinions instantly. Volkmer concludes that the Internet can be recognized as the symbol of a mediated global sphere and will eventually accelerate the pace of the development^[11]. In this case, each individual in the society have the ability to communicate with each other about their own interests via different media platforms and help to form the public opinion which shows the limitation of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere has broken up. In addition, citizens also gain access to take part in the transmission and production of news content by using their own digital devices to record and create texts. This kind of user-generated content shows the freedom for citizens to build shared interests.

4 Prospects of Global Public Sphere

The process of globalization and media convergence has improved the development of the mediated global public sphere. Therefore, such a public sphere may have several new features which can impact on both citizens and global public affairs.

First of all, the global public sphere may improve the audience participation and ensure individuals around the world a chance to take part in the global debate thoroughly. As Dahlgren points out that the Internet helps to provide citizens with thousands of websites to create a new political realm where they can obtain access to both national and global affairs^[12]. On the one hand, citizens can receive news about global issues through different kinds of media, especially international broadcasting operations such as BBC and CNN, which provide worldwide news with citizens instantly. CNN News Report, which was launched in 1987 is a globally news programme. Volkmer argues the new format of its "World Report" is a "microcosm of the global public sphere" which tries to advocate various voices from all around the world^[13]. As a result, "new political perspectives and new 'players' entered the global sphere", for example citizens from Asia and the Middle East have the chance to take part into the global affairs now^[14].

On the other hand, with those global media, audiences can choose what they're interested in and communicate with others on news websites, Twitters or other Internet platforms. By sharing own stories and emotions with thousands of audiences through the Internet, individuals build up global citizenship and help to raise public debates which are more related to themselves. The Habermas' ideal of the public sphere has been improved due to more and more chances for ordinary individuals to take part in public issues^[15].

Secondly, the mediated global public sphere may promote the development of citizen journalism and user-generated content, which may help to form the public opinion. As the product of digital technologies, citizen journalism is a new way to "provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires"^[16]. Using own digital devices, citizens can record everything around them and upload to the Internet to share with other audiences around the world. In June 2015,

YouTube, the most popular and global video-sharing website set up a new channel called "YouTube Newswire". After sifting valuable sources from the Internet users by editors, this channel will "provide journalists with an invaluable resource to discover news video around major events, and to highlight eyewitness video that offers new perspectives on important news stories". Since then, social media has extended public sphere to include multiple opinions and perspectives^[17]. In the mediated global public sphere, citizens have the chance to create news content and spread it all over the world. Citizens will resonate with each other easier and will form public opinion quicker than before due to those contents which are closely related to their daily lives.

Finally, the global public sphere may help to establish global interests and solve global issues effectively. Global issues, such as climate change, financial crisis, illness and refugees, "need cooperation among nations"^[18]. Ebola, one of the most horrible virus was first identified in 1976. Between 1976 and 2013, 24 outbreaks of Ebola were reported by the World Health Organization (WHO), involving 1716 cases. In March 2014, a major Ebola outbreak was reported in Africa, which has been "the largest and most complex Ebola outbreak since the Ebola virus was first discovered" and 2 months later WHO declared that this epidemic had been an international public health emergency and encouraged all nations to provide aid with the affected countries and regions. In the mediated global public sphere, Ebola crisis, as a case of global issues, has been reported in a large number and has attracted worldwide attention. Taking BBC Online as an example, there is a column called "Ebola outbreak" which contains the backgrounds, features and analysis of Ebola virus. In addition, a host of reports which titles all start with "Ebola crisis" are also available on BBC website so far. As a result of the global communication, Ebola crisis has become a global affair for all the nations and citizens. In order to improve the situation, Doctors Without Borders were organized and have offered medical treatments in affected areas. It shows that in a global public sphere, global issues and crises may attract more public attention and receive international aid and solutions more easily.

5 Reality of the Global Public Sphere

Although the global public sphere may have new features and may influence on global issues, the reality is that it is still an ongoing process with several obvious defects and limitations.

First, as Tuchman describes news as socially constructed and is "a social resource whose construction limits an analytic understanding of contemporary life"^[19], it reveals that news, as a product of society, is constructed by reporters and editors in news agencies. They can not only sift news, but also "create and control controversy". Although the emergence of citizen journalism has provided a new way of newsgathering, citizens actually have no power of decision in journalistic practice. Berger et al conclude that: "citizens cannot perform key journalistic activities,, and citizens never have any control over their contributions or the outcome of the news-making process"^[20]. In that case, professional journalism still takes the control of the global public sphere and provides audiences with news constructed by their own media routines and procedures,

which may be biased and subjective. It may be hard and impossible for citizens to know the truth of news and form proper public opinion.

Then, the predominance of professional journalism has led to the media dominance which undermines the diversity of global news. The present global public sphere, which is described as a mediated one, relies on the mass media which has offered a broad platform for citizens to participate in the public debate and form the public opinion^[21]. However, as McChesney points out that "rich media" produce "poor democracy" and leave less space for citizens to join into the public sphere^[22]. On the one hand, media may only reflect the opinions from the government. After studying media coverage of Iraq War in different international media, Hafez finds that the mainstream media "co-parties of their governments" by national military involvement^[23]. It shows that with the intention of the government, media is able to form the particularly public opinion and convey it to the audiences. Citizens, as passive receivers, could only acquire such defined opinion. Albrow and Glasius argue governments have the power to restrict the access to the global public sphere^[24]. In China, the government takes control of nearly all media industries, which means that each piece of news should obey the regulations and policies of the government. Unsuitable news will be deleted and sensitive contents, such as violence and demagogism will be blocked, the latter happen on the Internet frequently. Sullivan points out that the Chinese government use microblogging, represented by Weibo for its own advantage and purpose^[25]. Hence, Chinese citizens receive news which are mostly edited and selected by journalistic workers and they have limited right to exchange individual opinions randomly.

On the other hand, media is influenced by the concentration of media ownership. Several large media enterprises such as CBS Corporation, Time Warner, 21st Century Fox, own a number of media industries. In UK, for instance, The Sun and The Times belong to Rupert Murdoch; Trinity Mirror takes control of five major national titles; Richard Desmond owns OK! magazine, the Daily Express and the Daily Star. The media consolidation reveals that in spite of the increasing number of media industries, the global media is actually under the control of few international companies. Consequently, citizens do have the right to choose different media sources, but they could receive nearly monotonous news sifted by the same criterion.

In addition, citizens do not have the equal opportunities of entering the global public sphere. While Habermas predicts that "access is guaranteed to all citizens" in the ideal public sphere, in reality, citizens, especially from developing countries and rural areas usually be kept out of the public debate. Castells argues several segments of economies, the Internet technology and societies and proposed the rise of "Fourth World" which consists areas such as Sub-Saharan Africa and rural regions of Latin America and Asia^[26]. Since citizens living in those less computerized area are nearly no digitally connected, they can hardly express individual opinions with others and participate in global debate and have been excluded from the global public sphere.

Furthermore, the present global public sphere may more like a global dominance based on nation-state interests. As Castells explores that governments intend to maximize their own nation-state interests via the global public sphere. Thus, international news reports are primarily based on the own national interests. On the one hand, diverse kinds of global news will be chosen to report. On 13th Nov,2015, a series of terrorist

attacks happened in Paris. A host of up-to-date news can be seen on various media such as BBC, CNN and have raised public attention and sympathy all around the world. However, one days ago a pair of suicide bombings hit the Lebanese capital Beirut but the news coverage of it is far more less than Paris attack, especially in Western media. Citizens have not paid much attention to Beirut bombings until the horrible Paris attack happened. On the other hand, global news coverage still has a smaller percentage than domestic news. Hafez points out that in order to serve for audiences who hold national interests, news and information may mainly be domesticated^[27]. This can be seen from any newspaper where the coverage of national news is far more than international news. It reveals that although citizens are living in a global world, news which related to nation-state interests, especially domestic news is still in the majority of media coverage.

6 Building Global Public Sphere

Twenty-five years ago, Fraser concluded that the public sphere had not realized in reality but the idea was not only a "utopian ideal"^[28]. Although facing diverse limits, the global public sphere is still an ongoing process relying on continuous development of globalization and digital technologies. The global public sphere will keep improving and the new technologies of media will provide "the basis for a public sphere that approximates to Habermas' proposal"^[29]. The rise of citizens' desire to participate in journalistic practice and the technologies of digital media will improve the citizen journalism, which will broaden the channel for individuals to receive global news, take part in public debate and form public opinion eventually. In addition, the Internet will also break the "identity boundaries" and enable citizens to communicate freely, which will help to enhance the democracy and dialogue^[30].

7 Conclusion

The public sphere, a realm for citizens to express and exchange individual opinions have been improved with the process of globalization and media convergence and shifted from a national level to a global level. This essay argues the prospects of the global public sphere and concludes three possible influences created by it. The first impact is that global public sphere may improve the audience participation by providing diverse channels, such as online news websites and 24/7 live broadcasts for citizens to gain access to the global affairs instantly. In addition, citizens have the right to express personal comments on public topic and share with each other, which ensure a more active audience participation of global issues. The second impact is that the global public sphere may help to create the citizen journalism and user-generated content, which will be benefit the formation the public opinion. By participating in journalistic work to create and report news related to own affairs and interests, citizens will respond to certain topics and form public opinion easily. The third major influence is that in the global public sphere, global issues will be better solved.

In contrast, the mediated global public sphere still has several limitations and defects which can be mainly classified into three aspects. First, due to the fact that the news is

socially constructed, citizens receive news and information constructed by media procedures. Then, media dominance plays an important role in the global public sphere. On the one hand, it is obvious that governments have the power to control media content and restrict access to the public sphere. On the other hand, concentrated media ownership undermines the diversity of news reports. The last but not least, global public sphere is actually a global dominance linked to own national interests.

The process of globalization and media convergence provide chances, together with challenges for the formation of a global public sphere. While those limitations and defects may seem to reduce the possibility of a global public sphere, the ongoing process of global public sphere still has a hopeful prospect and will be better improved.

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