

# No Sense of Public Sphere: Impact of Politics, Business and Technique on Blogs

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**Abstract:** The weblogs are separated into two groups – the grassroots blogs and the elite blogs, under the impact of politics, business, and technique. The right to speak of the elite blogs increasingly strengthens while the grassroots blogs gradually disappear, which leads the public sphere to the blog constructs to be merely a utopia. As long as the weblog restrictions are not relaxed, the advertisers and the operators of the weblogs pursue business interests excessively, and the netizens cannot reasonably exercise the right to communicate on the weblogs, it will be difficult for the weblogs to play the role of constructing the public sphere. Therefore, it's necessary to promote the construction of the public sphere with reasonable measures.

**Keywords:** Grassroots Blogs; Elite Blogs; Public Sphere; The Right to Communicate.

## 1. Introduction

As a kind of new media widely used by netizens, blogs expand their discourse space, in which the public actively participates in news dissemination and records daily personal life. The blog breaks the old communication normality, deconstructing the monopoly right to speak in the traditional media and conventional sites. So, relating the blog to decentralization of power or decentration, someone believes the blog has played a role in constructing the public domain. But in fact, it is not the case. The reason is that they fail to separate the grass-roots and elite blogs when it comes to the construction of public domain by the blogs, thus inevitably leading to unclear referents in further discussion and not finding hidden problems in the blogs. In light of this, it is necessary to define the grassroots and elite blogs to clarify the meaning of the public domain.

How do we distinguish between grassroots blogs and elite blogs? Grassroots blogs refer to blogs set up by vulnerable groups opposite to mainstream elite culture and class; in other words, grassroots blogs are those set up by people with ordinary economic and political status. The grassroots blog records many private topics from the truth and achieves incisive arguments about significant current events, so they can only be a personal space for private discussions. Behind the elite blogs are the interest groups with considerable decision-making powers, whose political attitudes, words, and actions impact economic and political development. The elite often has multiple media channels for expressing their ideas, such as newspapers, magazines, broadcasts, televisions, the internet, and other media. However, to avoid strict censorship, they often set up blogs to express ideas that have not been fully described. The elite blog is no longer a place with a simple sense of personality but has become a self-media with the feature of a specific column.

Grassroots and elite blogs should constitute a space for dialogue on public issues. However, the grass-roots blogs are usually pushed to the edge of the blog discourse. Although the base number of grassroots has absolute predominance, their sound is often drowned by the elite blogs. The grassroots blogs gradually retreat into the private sphere, whereas the elite blogs become increasingly officialized. The private sphere refers explicitly to personal life based on face-to-face

interaction centered on a sense of identity, friendship, and kinship with non-utilitarian values. In the private sphere, the core substitution process in commercialization is the company's formation and citizenship in the public domain.[1] The two sides should construct the public sphere together, but it becomes a utopia. Why? The public domain ranges between the state and the society, a public space for discussing general issues. The constituent elements of the public sphere are the subjectivity of private individuals who engage in political discussions employing open and rational criticism. Without dialogue between grass-roots blogs and elite blogs, the public sphere will become a castle in the air.

We will explore why the blog fails to construct the public domain from the aspects of powers and economy, commercial interests, network technology, and the qualification of netizens. To sustain the hypothesis, we take the Sina microblog (weibo.com) as an example, mainly because the number of authors and readers traffic ranks first globally. Moreover, with convenient access to the internet, the degree of sustainability may be higher than the average level in Mainland China. Except for the specially identified cases, the blog cases described below are from the mainland version.

## 2. Power and economy lead differentiation between grassroots blogs and elite blogs

Charles Wright Mills held the opinion that power elites occupy the command posts of the social structure, where effective means of power, wealth, and prestige.[2] Elite blogs often consciously or unconsciously regarded themselves as historical writers intervening in discussing major national issues. These topics seem significant, but they are out of the reach of civilians and hardly associated with their interests directly. Grassroots blogs emphasize personal narratives and record a lot of chores of daily life in the state of recreating by themselves. Restrained by the content, the narrative style, and the strategy of site operators, the grass-roots blogs failed to obtain the opportunity to dialogue with the elite blogs in the public space. When the elite blogs participate in the discussion of significant issues, they forget their identity and are involved in the country's political life without being noticed. In contrast, the grassroots blogs lost the patience to

dialogue with them.

K. Mannheim thought that, with the development of industrialization, the reasonableness of function significantly deprived the general personnel of the ability to think and shoulder the responsibility and entrusted the activities to a small number of the leading elites. The gap between the masses and the elites is not narrowed but enlarged.[3] Media technology allows grassroots blogs to participate in the public discourse. In contrast, the elite blogs manipulate the mass with the new media, which leads to confrontation between the elite blogs and grassroots blogs.

As social machine parts, Grassroots bear jobs or services of "personalization" mechanically, with a sense of loss and inability before the enormous social system of elite control. They even generate passive resistance – indifferent to the political issues, and finally escape to the territory of blogs to entertain them. Some grassroots blogs use the blogs as network diaries, which are full of private chatters and whispers; some grassroots blogs are filled with vulgar and low-level content in an attempt to attract other people's attention, while the other grassroots blogs turned into network hatchet men for money, such as publishing promotion articles extensively for specific individuals or institutions, and involving in a large-scale, organized internet media warfare, etc.

Some blogs are set up randomly, and others will not keep updating, so not all bloggers are "journalists." Namely, the scale of grass-roots movements and sustainability are overestimated. Grassroots blogs have more attributes of weeds, for many blogs have not been updated for a long time in the barren state. Although there is a growing proportion of grassroots blogs in the elite bloggers, they have been excluded from elite discourses. The marginalized grass-roots blogs and the centralized elite blogs leave the space of public discourse in two opposite directions and stand in different positions, distorting the public domain and disappointedly falling into a pseudo-public sphere.

### **3. Commercial interests strengthen the right to speak for elite blogs while weakening that of grassroots blogs**

The right to communicate by blog belongs to the citizens' right to speak, which is one of the fundamental rights of the members of society. As community members are the subject of social practice and social life, they can record their own experiences, ideas, perspectives, and cognition in the blogs through speech, creative writing, and other activities. They have the right to distribute through the self-media legally. However, the blog site's excessive chasing of commercial interests led to the right of communication of the blog being seriously eroded.

Take the home page of the Sina blog as an example; it is occupied by the recommendations of hot topics written by celebrities and stars, while the hot blogs so entirely sheltered some grassroots blogs reflecting social problems that they would not be put on the home page, which causes the grassroots blogs have few readers. These grassroots blogs can only be read by themselves and a few friends, equal to soliloquize. The grassroots lose the opportunity to participate in constructing the public domain, leaving the minority of elite blogs to play a monodrama. Sina blog's home page is a concentrated display of this business orientation.

Moreover, after opening a blog post, the sidebar will

automatically launch the "relevant blogs" and "recommended blogs," so whether the audience surfs the elite or grassroots blogs, they will be led to these blogs. The elite blog has brought a significant click rate, which means popularity means commercial interests for the blog operators. Media buyers only buy an information carrier according to cost-efficiency based on the price. From this perspective, the blog site is interested in the elite blog's popularity, which aims to attract readers' interest and consequently excludes the grassroots blogs from the home page.

The reason is very simple. Whether the website can recommend the blog is determined by the commercial interests of the site operators. Driven by commercial interests, the blogs in line with the commercial interests of the operator of the blog site are often artificially recommended to the blog's home page. In contrast, elite blogs have often sheltered blogs with little commercial value. The commercial sites focus on the blog's click rate and page views rather than fundamental knowledge and deep insight. As American futurist Alvin Toffler said, modern technical experts generally have myopia because they only consider immediate benefits and results. [4]

The home page of the Sina blog sets a column for the grassroots blog named "grassroots elite blogs" and has a recommendation area for the grassroots on the home page. However, we must understand that "grassroots elite blogs" mean cozying up to the backbone of the grassroots and laying the ordinary grassroots aside, which alienates and marginalizes the grassroots blogs. The Sina blog home page is mainly the runway for elite blog articles. Even some household chores the celebrity writes will be put in conspicuous places. In contrast, exciting posts written by ordinary grassroots activists are scarcely highlighted on the blog site's home page. The ecological imbalance between the elite blog and grassroots blog fails to promote the harmonious development of society and culture.

### **4. The network technology control leads to some outstanding grassroots blogs suffering aphonia**

McLuhan believed that any medium (namely, any extension of humans) impacts individuals, and a new scale causes society, and any extension (or any new technology) should introduce a new scale in our affairs. [5] In the media society, the significant and valuable "message" is not the content disseminated by media but the nature and potential possibility of the communication tools used in this era and the social reform accordingly.

McLuhan says blogs play an unbelievable role in constructing the public domain. Blogs, a new form of media, provide new possibilities for the public domain. Since technology can find a place for elite and grassroots bloggers to express their opinions, it can also prevent them from expressing their views. New media technologies can highlight the public sphere the blog is devoted to constructing, while new media technologies can distort it.

Even the excellent grass-roots blog is not recommended on the home page. For example, the blog "Lonely Labor" is owned by the labor poetess Zheng Xiaoqiong. Li Ping, the judge of the People's Literature Prize, commented like this, "Her language and poem are full of desire (to advocate the right of the labors in the sweating factory)..." [6] Before she became well known, Zheng Xiaoqiong has always insisted on

working in a factory in Guangdong, where she described the sweets and bitters of the working class with a clear-cut stand on what to love and what to hate. However, she has seldom been recommended to the site's home page and is constantly submerged in several blogs. In this case, new media technologies do not act as a talent scout but a blind man instead.

Although the blog has the freedom to some degree, it is controlled by the laws and regulations of the nation. Regarding network technology, it can be monitored with the following measures: screening words, deleting posts, canceling the account, banning corresponding IPs to prohibit registering once more, etc. These are very easy to implement technically. Since technology can give birth to new media, it can also hold back new media; as the ancient Chinese proverb goes, "What makes you succeed may also make you fail."

When the Internet became popular in China with inadequate technological control, Chen Lidan had foreseen the situation: "Internet has a challenge to the organization of power in that it temporarily weakens the control force; nonetheless, rigid technological control will achieve the same effect in the long run. Technical freedom and technical supervision are the two sides of a coin." [7]

## 5. Abuse of the right to communication of blogs ruins public sphere construction

The right to transmit the blog, belonging to citizens' freedom of communication, guarantees the citizens to spread their experience, learning, ideas, thoughts, and cognition to the public through their own or other individual blogs. However, when netizens use it to slander, frame, molest, and provoke riots rather than having honest and necessary criticism, it can be considered as abusing the right to transmit a blog to ruin the interests of another individual, group, or nation. Such abuse of rights is to destroy the public sphere.

Peng Lan believes that through blogs, personal voice can be spread into the social space, and personal behavior can be changed into social behavior. Without the traditional mass media intermediary, ordinary individuals can make their voices heard in the public discourse, which may sometimes compete against several media voices. [8] The blog does have a powerful discourse energy – When we take an equal and open manner to have rational dialogue, we can maintain the public discourse space; when we take non-rational discourse violence through it, we may ruin the public discourse space.

Then, what kind of impact does the blog have on constructing the public domain? Currently, there are still many people in China who can not access the internet. Most civilians with poor educational backgrounds and legal awareness will not use blogs to express their views. In this sense, grassroots blogs failed to represent the general public's views at this stage, so their blogs have no public nature. Liu Wenfu believes that "People who can use the network, the advanced information tool, are mainly the youth with a higher level of knowledge and relatively handsome income. They may not have a deep understanding of the history and national conditions while having extreme resistance to cultural traditions. The more they have unchecked political participation, the more they likely go beyond reality and cause disaster to the political system." [9]

The news "*Hong Kong High-speed Rail Enrages Generation After 80s*", published in the online edition of the

newspaper *Southern Weekend* on January 18, 2010, confirms the situation: To build the high-speed rail ranging Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong, the Hong Kong SAR Government planned to demolish a small village. Still, the grassroots blogs set off an influential mass protest movement. The government "has done a lot of publicity work in the mainstream media, but it regrettably ignored using network tools, which results in the opponents concentrating their strength through online social groups and blogs without cost. They severely criticized the government's program and advocated organizing a series of mass movements surrounding the Legislative Council to protest, which greatly impacted the government." [10] Since the high-speed rail would benefit Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and the Pearl River Delta area, the grassroots blogs could rationally dialogue with the elite blogs. Still, the blogs had become an arena of non-rational discourse unexpectedly.

## 6. Conclusion: Path to constructing public sphere between elite blogs and grassroots blogs

Vincent Moskow thought that both sociological theories and communication research regarded public life as a form of resisting commodification and alternative social practice. The universal expansion of commercialized mass media, consumerism, and bureaucracy is the root cause of the decline of the public sphere. [11]

According to the social network analysis, if an actor in a social network has a direct relationship with others, he will be in the center position and have more power. Similarly, the elite blog occupies the center of discourse power. On the one hand, the elite blog pays lip service to the grand themes instead of having a dialogue with grassroots blogs; on the other hand, as some critical voice of the grassroots blogs is alien to the points of the elite blogs, the former will "be immersed," hence, they have to talk about some trivial things in their circle indifferent to the dialogue with the elite blogs. Because of the alienation between the two sides, the blog falls into the pseudo-public sphere overall; in other words, it will not contribute to establishing the public sphere.

The blog became a utopia; the public sphere is fading away.

The standard to judge whether a blog site has a sense of responsibility lies in whether it can treat the alienated elite grassroots blogs seriously and take practical action to protect the publishing freedom of the grassroots blogs. Since expressing viewpoints consistent with individuals and agencies is more complex than putting forward ideas destined to change people's minds, the new standpoints may invite resistance. Promulgators should be under the protection (of legitimate institutions, groups, organizations, and government, the author notes). [12] Only when the elite and grassroots blogs are treated equally can the blogs be restored to construct the public domain. The government should give more preferential policies rather than rigidly restricting the blog website from developing because the public is poor in cultural quality; for the blog website, it should restrain the excessive pursuit of commercial interests to protect the right to speak of the grassroots blog. Thus, the social responsibility the blog site should shoulder will be recovered.

In short, if the policy fails to benefit the grassroots blogs or/and the website operators' excessive pursuit of commercial interests, the blogs would fail to construct the public sphere normally and become a pseudo-public sphere. Therefore, it is

recommended that the government set up blog monitoring bodies with the assistance of non-governmental organizations to develop particular policies and plans such as normalized policy control, economic restrictions, technological checks, and organizing activities between the elite blogs and the grassroots blogs. It will enrich the content of the grassroots blogs and increase the show rate of grassroots blogs while it will restrain the elite blogs to encroach more discourse space. Hence, it will promote dialogue on public domain issues on both sides to recover the function of constructing a public sphere instead of a utopia.

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