



Research on the Influence of Publicness Theory on Social Media Development in the New Era

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Abstract: At present, technological development like the Internet and mobile devices has brought the traditional mass media model in human society into the era of interactive social media that is more in line with the original needs of human beings. Overall, how the theoretical basis of the publicness theory will guide the development of social media in the new era has become one of the main research topics. Amid digital era of new media, the complexity and diversity of information dissemination requires Marxist media theory to break through the boundaries of traditional disciplines, and enhance its adaptability through interdisciplinary cooperation. Interdisciplinary integration, particularly with information technology, sociology and psychology can equip Marxist media theory with new research methods and analytical tools.

Keywords: Publicness Theory; Historical Materialism; Social Media; Media Platform

I. Introduction

In the 21st century, social media platforms have supplanted many functions of traditional mass media, becoming central arenas for information exchange, public opinion formation, and collective mobilization. With more than half of the global population now connected to the internet, these platforms exert unprecedented influence on political discourse, cultural production, and patterns of social interaction ^[1]. Governments and media institutions worldwide have responded by investing heavily in digital media infrastructure, experimenting with new business models, and integrating emerging technologies into content creation and distribution.

However, the rise of platform capitalism—where a small number of private corporations control the infrastructure, algorithms, and monetization of online communication—has intensified tensions between commercial imperatives and the public interest. These platforms may appear “public” in terms of accessibility, but their governance is fundamentally private, shaping discourse through opaque recommendation systems, commodification of user data, and targeted advertising ^{[2], [4]}.

Against this backdrop, Marxist publicness theory offers a critical framework for rethinking platform governance. Publicness, in this theoretical sense, does not simply denote visibility or openness but refers to the collective ownership and democratic control of social resources and communicative spaces, enabling the free and comprehensive development of all members of society ^[3]. Sociality, by contrast, refers to the inherent cooperative and interdependent nature of human life, as opposed to “naturalness” or purely individual existence. Publicness represents a higher stage of sociality, where shared values and common ownership are internalized as individual values, making collective well-being inseparable from personal freedom ^[5].

For Marx, a community is more than a network of relationships—it is an enduring, cooperative, and self-sustaining formation rooted in shared ownership and mutual development. He identified three historical stages in the evolution of community ^[2]:

- Natural community — Early human groupings such as families or tribes, bound by necessity and limited in scope, with minimal productive capacity and small-scale social structures.
- Illusory community — The political state under class society, where “public” institutions claim to represent collective interests but in practice preserve ruling-class dominance. Participation is mediated through political and economic systems that obscure structural inequalities.
- True community — A social formation where collective ownership and democratic governance enable all individuals to achieve free and comprehensive development, representing the full realization of publicness.

Applied to today’s digital environment, social media platforms often operate as illusory communities: they give the impression of openness and participation, yet their structural design primarily serves the extraction of value from user activity through advertising, algorithmic control, and data commodification ^[4]. In contrast, a true community in the digital sphere would feature transparent governance, collective management of user data, and economic incentives aligned with public benefit rather than shareholder profit.

This parallel between Marx’s progression from the illusory to the true community and the transformation of contemporary platforms highlights the relevance of publicness theory in guiding digital policy. This study explores how publicness can be operationalized in the algorithmic, user-generated, and profit-driven environment of modern social media, with policy considerations including algorithmic transparency, collective data governance, and platform cooperatives, aiming to transform corporate-controlled networks into genuine digital commons.

II. Literature Review

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2.1 Historical Development of Social Media

The contemporary definition of social media is deeply rooted in the rapid advancements of Internet technology. In its modern form, social media refers to online platforms that enable users to create and share content, engage in real-time interaction, and participate in digital communities. By overcoming the limitations of time and space, it facilitates instantaneous communication and fosters stronger interpersonal connections ^[6]. However, the fundamental essence of social media stems from the innate human need to interact, exchange information, and build relationships, a trait that can be traced back to the earliest human societies.

2.1.1 Ancient Foundations of Social Media

From a biological perspective, the distinguishing feature of primates, including humans, lies in their neocortex—a brain region responsible for advanced cognitive functions such as spatial reasoning, sensory perception, and conscious thought. In humans, the neocortex constitutes approximately 80% of total brain volume, a proportion unmatched by other mammals. Anthropological research, most notably by Robin Dunbar in 1992, established a positive correlation between neocortex size and social group size. Dunbar's studies suggested that human cognitive evolution was driven by the need to navigate complex social relationships, supporting the "social brain hypothesis" ^[7]. This implies that the human brain evolved primarily as a tool for managing social interactions and maintaining relational networks.

The earliest identifiable communication systems emerged long before the digital era. Although the precise appearance of spoken language remains uncertain, the invention of writing marked a transformative leap in information sharing. By 2600 BC, advanced writing systems such as cuneiform in Mesopotamia and Egyptian hieroglyphics had enabled humans to transmit ideas via durable physical media, such as papyrus letters ^[8].

The concept of an organized "social media ecosystem" first appeared during the Roman Republic in the first century BC. Roman elites exchanged short-form letters on wax tablets using metal styluses, a medium that bears some functional resemblance to today's digital tablets. Julius Caesar's establishment of the *Acta Diurna* (Daily Chronicle) was an early example of state-led public information distribution, arguably laying the foundation for the news industry ^[9]. The walls of Pompeii, adorned with over 11,000 graffiti inscriptions, also serve as archaeological evidence of humans' enduring need to communicate messages publicly—mirroring the user-generated content found in modern digital networks.

2.1.2 Rapid Growth in the Modern Era

The Industrial Revolution dramatically accelerated the development of mass communication. Technological advancements, such as the steam-powered printing press adopted by *The Times* of London, allowed newspapers to be produced at unprecedented speed and volume. In 1833, Benjamin Day's *The Sun* in New York pioneered a low-cost, high-circulation business model, reshaping the newspaper industry into a mass-market medium ^[10].

The introduction of the electric telegraph by Samuel Morse in 1843 marked another leap forward, enabling real-time long-distance communication for the first time in history. This not only transformed the news industry but also diminished geographical barriers to information exchange. By the early 20th century, the emergence of radio broadcasting—sparked by music transmissions in 1919–1920—triggered the so-called "1922 craze," as stations proliferated across cities. The invention of television in 1928, followed by rapid adoption in subsequent decades, positioned it as the dominant medium of the 20th century ^[11].

However, this period also saw a shift toward centralized, one-way mass media, reducing opportunities for ordinary individuals to actively participate in content creation or distribution. This centralization represented a departure from earlier, more interactive forms of communication, creating an environment where audiences were largely passive recipients of information.

2.1.3 The "Renaissance" in the Digital Age

The late 20th century brought a dramatic reversal in this trend with the advent of the Internet. From the first ARPANET email to the emergence of personal blogs in the 1990s, and from early search engines like Ask.com to Facebook surpassing 900 million users, the Internet redefined the social communication landscape ^[12]. As Vinton Cerf famously remarked, "the Internet has become the most powerful loudspeaker invented by human beings. It provides a microphone for ordinary people who were once ignored to speak to the world" ^[13].

Where traditional mass media prioritized centralized broadcasting, the Internet facilitated a return to decentralized, person-to-person interaction. Social networking platforms, blogging services, and video-sharing websites provided unprecedented opportunities for user-generated content, enabling individuals to bypass traditional gatekeepers of information.

This "digital renaissance" reestablished interactive media models centered on sharing, collaboration, and personalization. Social media platforms now enable instantaneous information dissemination and empower individuals to participate equally in public discourse. Nevertheless, these benefits are accompanied by significant challenges, including the spread of misinformation, data privacy concerns, and ethical dilemmas in digital communication ^[14].

The historical progression of social media thus reflects a continuous interplay between technological innovation and human social needs. From prehistoric communication to Roman graffiti, from the printing press to Facebook, the trajectory underscores a central truth: human beings are inherently social, and the tools we develop invariably reflect our drive to connect, share, and engage with others.

II. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a sequential exploratory design with three stages. First, a theoretical analysis reviews Marxist literature on publicness theory and its relevance to digital media. Second, empirical analysis collects quantitative and qualitative

data to examine how publicness principles operate within contemporary social media. Third, an interpretive synthesis integrates findings to develop a conceptual framework explaining how publicness theory shapes social media trends in China and globally. This approach balances theoretical rigor with empirical grounding.

3.2 Research Questions

The study addresses three key questions: How do Marxist publicness concepts apply to social media's structural and functional evolution? How do Chinese platforms reflect, adapt, or deviate from publicness principles in governance and content strategies? What links exist between publicness-driven governance and social media's roles in social cohesion, ideological security, and global influence? These questions guide data collection and analysis.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data come from three sources. First, a systematic literature review covers Marx and Engels' works on community and media, Chinese scholarly interpretations of publicness in the digital age, government policies, and international studies, using databases like CNKI, Web of Science, and JSTOR. Second, quantitative data include an online survey of Chinese social media users assessing perceptions of publicness, trust, engagement, and content regulation. Platform metrics (user size, interaction rates, public-interest vs. commercial content) and policy changes over five years will be analyzed via descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression. Third, qualitative data comprise case studies of three Chinese platforms—WeChat (state governance), Douyin (user-generated content), and TikTok (international expansion)—examining governance, content, and participation mechanisms. Thematic content analysis of posts and discussions will assess public discourse and collective identity aligned with publicness.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Given ideological sensitivities, the study ensures informed consent, anonymizes personal data, and secures data with encryption and access controls. Triangulation and researcher reflexivity will minimize bias and ensure balanced interpretation.

3.6 Limitations

Limitations include a China-centric focus, limiting generalizability; possible social desirability bias in self-reported data; and the rapidly changing nature of social media, meaning findings reflect a snapshot requiring future updates.

IV. The Modern Pattern of Chinese Social Media Platforms

Driven by rapid digital transformation and intelligent technology advancements in China, social media has become the dominant medium for information dissemination, significantly altering communication methods and social behaviors both domestically and internationally. Platforms enable users to actively participate in content sharing through comments, likes, reposts, and other interactive features, fostering strong community engagement and network effects ^[6]. This evolving dissemination landscape has also catalyzed transformations across various industries. Amid China's strategic drive toward modernization and building a powerful nation with Chinese characteristics, the government has increasingly prioritized guiding industrial development through policy and regulation ^[15].

4.1 Development Status of Major Domestic Social Media Platforms

By mid-2025, China's Internet user base exceeded 1.108 billion, with over 96.7% engaging in social media use. Leading platforms like WeChat, Douyin (China's TikTok), Kuaishou, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu (RedNotes) continue to grow both in user numbers and influence. Average daily user time across these platforms reached approximately 3.2 hours. WeChat functions as a super app encompassing social networking, payment services, mini-programs, official accounts, and video channels, boasting over 1.24 billion monthly active users. Douyin dominates short-video content with 820 million daily active users and extends its scope through live streaming, e-commerce, and local service integrations. Weibo remains a key arena for public discourse, with 570 million monthly active users, although growth has slowed. Xiaohongshu, characterized by its predominantly female user base and focus on recommendation-driven community content, supports brand marketing and consumer decision-making with over 200 million active users monthly. Bilibili, popular among Generation Z, has expanded from anime-centric content to a broader lifestyle and knowledge-sharing platform, maintaining strong community loyalty ^[16].

Technological innovation and content formats on these platforms cluster into three key areas: short-video and live streaming services, AI-driven content generation and distribution, and interest-based social e-commerce. Platforms like TikTok and Kuaishou promote rapid, concise video consumption, with live-streaming e-commerce fueling growth. Artificial intelligence (AI), especially AI-Generated Content (AIGC), enhances content creation and recommendation, lowering entry barriers and introducing virtual anchors and digital avatars. Meanwhile, social e-commerce models on Xiaohongshu and TikTok leverage private domain traffic and interest communities to reshape consumer behavior ^[17]. The competitive landscape features dominant leaders supported by multiple strong niche platforms, with a shift from expanding user traffic to deeper operational strategies emphasizing vertical specialization, technological breakthroughs, and ecosystem development ^[18].

4.2 Country-Led Development Momentum of Diversity

In the context of intense platform competition, the Chinese government has implemented rigorous oversight to protect public interests and promote fair competition. Since 2020, regulations on Variable Interest Entity (VIE) structured firms, the 2021 Antitrust Guidelines for the Platform Economy, and the 2025 revisions to the Anti-Unfair Competition Law represent efforts to curb monopolistic tendencies and safeguard user rights and property ^[19]. The regulatory approach blends proactive ex-ante reviews with reactive ex-post penalties, aiming to balance market dynamism with public welfare. Strategic collaborations between state media and major platforms have deepened, exemplified by China International Television Corporation (CITVC) acquiring shares in TikTok and Beijing Cultural Investment Group investing in Kuaishou.

These state stakes include veto powers over content moderation, reinforcing content governance without undermining operational independence. This structure seeks to harmonize market operations with ideological security. The government's multi-layered policy framework spans content governance targeting misinformation, stringent cybersecurity and data security laws mandating algorithmic oversight, industry support for innovation in digital cultural production, and promotion of 5G and AI technologies ^[15]. Internationally, China actively fosters global platform expansion and engages in digital governance rule-making, contributing to international standards and cross-border cooperation ^[20].

4.3 The Important Role of Chinese Social Media Platforms in Globalization

Chinese social media platforms have become integral to global social interactions, shaping how information is produced, disseminated, and consumed worldwide. This integration has fostered discursive practices centered on nation-states and played a key role in shaping national image and cultural soft power. Under government guidance, the internationalization of Chinese platforms aligns with strategic national objectives. The Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Comprehensively Deepening Reform emphasizes enhancing the international communication system as a crucial means to elevate China's cultural influence and create a favorable environment for reform and modernization ^[15].

Initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the "Going Global" strategy provide strategic windows for cultural globalization. These efforts are supported by the "Five-Sphere Integrated Plan," which coordinates economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological progress ^[21]. Increasingly, overseas audiences engage with authentic Chinese realities via content from independent creators on domestic platforms. TikTok, with over 4.92 billion downloads globally and more than 2 billion monthly active users, ranks among the world's top social apps. China's global social media presence is not driven by isolated platforms but by a coordinated multi-brand ecosystem. Platforms differentiate themselves by technological specialization and user demographics, avoiding homogeneity and fostering synergistic growth. Under state orchestration, these platforms leverage shared infrastructure and cross-platform content circulation to enhance China's digital economy and global influence ^[22].

V. New Evolution of Social Media Led by Publicness Theory

5.1 The Practical Significance of Marxist Theory

Marxist theory views media as a critical tool for ideological dissemination and a key arena for class struggle. With the rapid rise of diverse social media platforms, ideological competition has intensified significantly. Marxist theory helps the public critically understand the class perspectives and ideological biases behind media content, promoting more objective information evaluation and ideological analysis. This awareness supports media responsibility and encourages creators and audiences on social media to engage around core values such as social justice and cultural diversity, ultimately advancing societal and individual development ^[23].

However, traditional Marxist analytical frameworks face challenges in adapting to the digital media environment. Unlike traditional media's holistic models, social media disseminates fragmented and personalized information, requiring more flexible and nuanced methodologies. To remain relevant, Marxist theory must incorporate adaptive research approaches grounded in publicness theory and public interest goals to better decode the complexities of digital media ^[24].

5.2 Main Challenges in Rapid Social Media Development

Social media platforms have transformed how people access information and intersect with industries like e-commerce and traditional media, significantly influencing economic growth. Yet, this rapid evolution also introduces critical issues. Information overload and authenticity problems complicate decision-making and have fueled frequent telecommunications fraud. Privacy and security concerns are acute, as personal and business data exposure can lead to economic losses and social unrest. Moreover, regional and demographic disparities in information access risk widening the digital divide, exacerbating social inequality intensified by digitization ^[25].

5.3 Guiding Development Through Theoretical Foundations

First, development should prioritize the comprehensive and free growth of individuals and society, leveraging socialism with Chinese characteristics and investing in broad digital infrastructure to ensure balanced regional progress. Government support should encourage private sector participation and financial investment to expand digital access ^[26].

Second, guided by Marxist journalism perspectives, state media's involvement in social media markets should steer public opinion towards positive values. Examples include state-owned enterprises such as CCTV and Beijing Radio & Television Administration investing in platforms like TikTok and Kuaishou, facilitating traditional media's digital transformation via technical and market support. Concurrently, enhancing information literacy through education and public campaigns will empower citizens to critically evaluate information, fostering a healthier public discourse environment ^[27].

Finally, integrating disciplines such as information technology, sociology, and psychology provides Marxist theory with new tools for analyzing media phenomena. IT enables detailed studies of media habits across social groups; sociology uncovers social development patterns; psychology explores audience behavior changes. This interdisciplinary approach enhances publicness theory's capacity to address modern issues like information overload, echo chambers, and misinformation, promoting social responsibility among creators and users and achieving theoretical and practical advancement ^[23], ^[24].

VI. Conclusion

Ideological work is an extremely important task in China, where ideological recognition serves as the goal, ideological construction functions as prerequisite, and ideological dissemination operates as the crucial mechanism. Without universal and effective dissemination, no matter how good the ideological construction and core value system are, it is impossible

for the people to gain the widespread recognition. Therefore, from the perspective of media sociology, the macro social effects generated by the lively public expression on social media confirm the subject status of the people, which is the equalization pattern endowed by new media technology. On the other hand, it has promoted social integration and the construction of a Chinese public sphere through strong social mobilization capabilities. We must sustain the “stage” that belongs to the people, and be always ready to shoulder the mission of the ultimate goal of publicness theory.

At the macro level, the construction of a consultative democracy mechanism within the socialist political system should be promoted to provide a platform for different social entities to conduct equal consultations on public affairs. We should establish legal and open network rules and promote effective network management on the premise of recognizing the people’s right to express themselves, to further the concept and methods of social governance. At the micro level, efforts are made to cultivate and enhance individual qualities in cultural education and individual shaping, in order to cultivate a cultural consciousness that combines freedom of expression and social responsibility. Only with such development can public expression become healthier and more rational and positively promote social progress, achieving comprehensive and free development of the people and society.

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