

Discourse Monopoly: The Communication Practice of Online Populism

CHEN Long^{[a],*}

^[a]Ph.D., Professor, Phoenix Communication College, Soochow University, Suzhou, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by 2012 National Social Science Fund project: Research on the Internet and other media's guidance on public opinion (No.12BXW043).

Received 1 November 2013; accepted 28 January 2014

Abstract

With different strategies such as labeling, spreading rumors, vituperating, misleading, human flesh searching and restraining free speech, discourse domination becomes a kind of communication practice of online populism to control the public opinion. As a kind of online populism, discourse domination is mainly caused by the non-transparency and unavailability of information and presently existing unfairness, all of which breed the online populism. Hence the discourse domination can be greatly suppressive in the mentioned non-transparency. The online populism seeks the pragmatic power through various rivals in the field of Internet to mislead the mass to criticize the opponents. With its growing harm to our society, discourse domination must be scientifically regulated according to the crisis response system of the government.

Key words: Discourse monopoly; Online populism; Communication strategy

CHEN Long (2014). Discourse Monopoly: The Communication Practice of Online Populism. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 10(1), 7-12. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020141001.3980>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020141001.3980>

INTRODUCTION

The new technologies bring with them the advantage of virtual activism and the possibility of grass roots

movements in a democratic and global way. Such developments also contain some anti-democratic tendencies (Margetts, 2001). How do we respond to technological progress? In some western societies of modern democracies, as the Germany great thinker Ralf Dahrendorf said, political parties tend to be professionalized media communication parties with the some features (2004), such as professional communication management; issues quickly adopted based on the criteria of media logic, via Twitter; oriented more to single issue than to a coherent programme; and so on. These are really good strategies which worth referencing. Nowadays some events presented on internet break the peace and turn into more and more important in our political life, we have to deal with them professionally.

In the current network environment for public opinion, it is noticeable that a tiny incident may lead to a network storm of public opinion, and sometimes even grows from virtual space to actual space, from virtual emotional disclosure to beating, smashing, robbing and even social instability in reality. This kind of network public opinion evolves with obvious characteristics of populism, which seems to be irrational, simplified, and threatening. Among all these features, Discourse Hegemony is formed with the evolution of public opinion, which is due to the strategy of discourse domination. Just like in a debating contest, people fight for speech dominance, while being passive means losing discourse domination. Discourse domination is referred as a strategy used by a particular force in the current hot issues to construct a certain kind of statement with thinking paradigms, radical comments and positions so as to lead to recognition with the public. It appears with no doubt and suppresses any other disagreements. Therefore, it is a kind of discourse hegemony. Discourse domination hardly survives in the legal context, but thrives along with populism to tempt people into law ignorance and free venting without sanity.

With development in recent years, the online populism discourse has formed a stereotyped pattern, which

explains every single event with a particular discourse structure and logics such as anti-corruption and anti-polarization. This pattern is getting so close to perfect that it almost becomes a master key for each door of specific event. And this kind of stereotyped discourse prototype can be regarded as the plan of populism activity.

Discourse exists in the public opinion, which is led by the drive of public opinion and ended up with the subsiding of public opinion. Populism gets involved not in the natural evolution of discourse pattern, but with specific purpose. It is increasingly hegemonic, and threaten the judicature, media and the government. Nowadays, how to deal with the new model of public opinion is getting more and more urgent for the government. This paper is going to make a rational analysis to explore the formation and general development of discourse domination of online populism.

1. CAUSE OF DISCOURSE DOMINATION OF ONLINE POPULISM

Populism discourse is obviously biased. The word “people” has become sensitive that cannot be criticized, because “people” is the benefit-impaired in the reform process and the only virtue-conservator in the moral-decayed society. Whenever social conflicts happen between rich and poor, no matter who makes sense, “the will of people” mainly made up by young students on network is overwhelmingly inclined to the vulnerable side. They criticize and spare little glance to the emphasis on rational discussion from intellectuals (Tang, 2008). Paul Taggart, a British Scholar, explains that who are the “people” and who are not, populist find it easier to determine the latter in practice. They set political opponents through demonization of social groups in particular with abomination against the elite, and this is exactly the important part to construct populism...More importantly, populists are likely to describe themselves on behalf of the opposite side of their own exclusive social groups, filling their speech with defames against alert intellectuals, bureaucrats, hacks, moneybags, robbery leaders, the Beatles and zaibatsu (Taggart, 2005, p.127). To fight against the abhorrent social groups on the ground of lower ranks shows the sense of competition in the discourse.

Discourse domination of online populism is mainly caused by the non-transparency and unavailability of information and presently existing unfairness in particular with “polarization”. Discourse domination can be suppressive to others, then why is this effect? Because they need a powerful voice for their appeal, then they can create a “magic bullet effect” to draw the attention of the crowd. Different opinions often lead to a pattern of discourse diversity, which fails to help realize their own appeal. Only by controlling voices to create “massive” atmosphere can they form a single and clear appealing.

In public opinion on every major event, the appealing of populism often resembles in the negative image rendering of the opposite side. When it comes to refer to the police, they exaggerate the negative image of the police; When it comes to refer to the officials, they exaggerate the negative image of the officials; When it comes to refer to the rich, they exaggerate the negative image of the rich; They replace images of all the officials, police, urban manager and the rich with these negative images of the minority. Here the words of “officials”, “police”, “the rich” and etc. are abstracted in the same way with “the people” they have been claimed. This abstraction approach, as a kind of figure of speech in discourse statement, swifts a specific case to common phenomenon. Therefore, they can blame the current politics and current system.

To maintain the discourse hegemony, the dominant discourse usually excludes disagreements by suppressing, blaming, abusing and even “human flesh search”. Discourse domination is a typical kind of discourse hegemony in nature, which only agrees with one opinion (that is, opinion of the “majority”) and tolerates no disagreement. If someone has a different opinion, then that person is an enemy. Online populism plays a great role in cultivating sensitive social groups and breeds morbid social emotions in cyberspace over time.

The discourse domination of online populism is formulated and influenced by the aspects as follows: the objective and intensified existence of social conflicts, the availability of the media use, boundless degree of free speech, blind faith among the internet users and etc.

First, online populism is socially based on the accumulation of people’s discontent to the ineffective solution to the social conflicts that have generated during the process of reform and opening up in China. It can be included in the appealing such as information transparency, social equality, and legal justice. The battle for discourse leadership in network public opinion on the truth exploring has always been intense and has been revealed as early as the event of “Tiger Zhou” during 2007 to 2009, which shows clear in the result of this dispute that it was the struggle of “truth” discourse rather than the personal prejudice against Zhou Zhenglong, a farmer of Shanxi province. The public opinion was initially developed in a relatively healthy state, but then it became media frenzy into a public trial because of the reluctance official investigation on this fraud case. To be objective, the overall benefits of populism in this case outweighed the cost. However, in many cases, it plays a negative role.

When treated unfairly in real life, people need a place to talk while the network provides a platform for them. But their opinion to appeal for legal justice is not expressed in a rational and calm way and is likely to become a flow of populism. With the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the increasingly intensified

conflicts (the government versus the public, the rich versus the poor) are reflected in the network as a fixed discourse pattern, regardless the reasons and nature of the event. Hence the grassroots movement triggered by certain case is getting normalized. Now it is common to seize the opportunities to win in the competition of network discourse right. It takes several measures to become powerful when the discourse is whipped and agitated, and the measure that populism prefers is to exaggerate the situation. Because they know that only something big can draw great attention. Some of them are conscious network promoters who are willing to play the part in populism.

Discourse domination of populism makes use of the complicate process of the public opinion formation. With the theory of so-called "broken windows effect" in communication, they draw the attention and control the public opinion by revelation, frantic speech, misleading information and fraud cases. As long as the event is related to social conflicts, it will then become a great issue that draws massive attention and will eventually become a significant affair that causes social unrest. The essential point of network opinion is to draw attention to get resonance from onlookers. What's more, the concealment of discourse manipulators allows them to spread the network news without any risk or liability. It's inspired by the "broken windows effect" that any kind of bad social phenomenon will cause the endless spreading and vicious cycle of malicious information, which has strong implication and misleading to the audience.

Second, the threshold for the society is lowered because of the arrival of new media, the use of medium is more accessible, Everyone is spreader, discourse authority is overthrown, new media has created a new age of negating discourse center and discourse authority, and at the same time, also welcomed the age of spreading activity in anarchy along with the decentralizing of the content of communication. On one hand, content of communication also inevitably appeared liberalization characteristic because of the fragmentation of time and arbitrary of form based on mobile terminal; on the other hand, the user's speech in the blog, microblog (such as twitter), and network BBS, chat rooms often have personal subjective intention and emotion, resulting in the fight of discourse power. The fight become fierce day by day, and agenda setting often crosses borders. Ultra speech and false information become more and more common. They act in a foolhardy manner because of low costs for false agenda setting. In these cases, the populist come on the stage under the banner of right reason.

Again, the opinion online often follow others blindly, that is the highly symbolic reaction to the facts. Public opinion almost present a one-sided negative evaluation as long as it's related to the powerful groups such as officials, the rich merchant, police, urban management and experts. With the growth of the right of civilians,

the expression of speech become unfettered, and justice and legality of orders is being strongly questioned. This populist tendency do no good to improve the institution, instead it results in violent resistance for the order in reality, manifesting the dangerous anarchism tendency and radical violent appeal. Yang Jia received 80% of the support of the Internet users in Yang Jia's cop-killing case. There is no right and wrong in network space, and people take no rational thinking in the legal respect. This kind of "blindly following" is not a simple following without thinking, but a kind of following with strong emotion and tendency, which is more dangerous. For example, network users expressed strong mistrust to the police investigation conclusion of Hubei "11 knife suicide". This desire for breaking current order is not limited to public power field; on the contrary, it's almost involved in all the field of society in which exist inequality.

2. NETWORK POPULIST'S STRATEGY OF DISCOURSE DOMINATION

Populism has specific slogan and appeal, but they do not have a complete and systematic system of thought, however, it does not mean that they do not pay attention to the strategy. The strategy of network populist discourse is to strengthen its ideological discourse slogan and tag, fighting with the official and the rich become keywords of political discourse. In the process making labels, people and the enemy are quickly and simply classified.

In the view of populists, officials and civilians are the same abstract concepts. However, in the complicated social relationships, the abstract concepts about a certain group are often halo effected. There are no difference between people and city dwellers in the eyes of populists, it's often that abstract concept stands for specific people and things. For example, people stand for justice, they are all simple and kind, as a result, in specific cases, a citizen also represents people and stands for justice and kind; the wrong ones are just the opposite of people: officials. In populists' discourse practice, an official are also abstract concept, there's no someone specific, so we cannot differ good from bad, abstract official concepts are all negative in social criticism, that's to say, officials are local bullies in populists' discourse practice. They reverse the right and wrong, bully the people, they are corruptive, they are hostile classes and hated by everyone. There are already fixed discourse modes which are against corruption, against officials, against the wealthy in internet opinion. It often forms public opinion and using this kind of discourse modes in all the similar cases. Invincibility, fighting against officials or against the wealthy can be used as the slogan for gathering attention. These kinds of languages are very popular and widely used in the grassroots' level. It has inherited advantage in fierce debate. In 2010, in the process of Yao Jiaxin's case, the

plaintiff lawyer made up a lot of false information such as “the second generation of officials” and so on, thus triggering fierce opinion flood, which influenced the trial of this case directly. In September 2011, a rich young man in Wenzhou disputed with a shopkeeper, when the witness said he was “the second generation of officials” and made up that he once said “my father is the city mayor”, resulting in this young man’s Mercedes was smashed.

The strategy of Populist discourse dominance is to make things sensational, and the method is to fabricate the agenda to make it easier to stick simple labels. Then it will be easier to make a clear distinction between people and enemy. In order to achieve this goal, the common methodology is as follows:

a. Stick labels on others

The so-called “stick labels on others” means to stick a negative hat such as “the second generation of the official”, “the second generation of the rich”, “corrupted official”, “murderer” and so on. It is a survival from the “cultural revolution”; they can make those who cannot make accurate judgment have a judgment soon in this way. The technique of the so-called “stick labels on others” is to label people at will, though some problems are not so serious to some degree as they appears. “A hit-and-run Hebei university case”, for those who think “my father is Li Gang” is equal to “take advantage of one’s power to bully people” and “suppress the people”. Therefore, Li Gang was radically transformed into a real bad person. When the news that Li Gang exacted confession by means of torture was reported, commentators all wrote to ask Li Gang to explain. The typical title is “how to save Li Gang?” “The proceeding story of Li Gang is more eye-catching than Li Gang’s story”. Li Gang was portrayed as a bully image in the storm of fighting against the official.

b. Lies

It is to spread false information to cause resentment. In the period of second world war, the German Nazi propaganda minister Goebbels have a famous saying called “lies repeated one thousand times namely be truth”, it also reflects in the network space. Leaking false information can quickly cause onlookers and will make big events. In the “hit-and-run Hebei university case”, the father of the troublemaker Li Gang was said to have 5 sets of extraordinary luxurious mansions, and tortur a robbery suspect. Mr. Su in the case of “the son of Li Shuangjiang beats person” is said to be the son of the head of Shanxi Province. However, the results of the investigation shows those pieces of news were groundless. Lang Xianping interviewed Guo Meimei in a TV show, then someone slandered that Lang received 2 million Yuan from Guo, causing a lot of onlookers online.

c. Abuse

Abuse can arouse irrational mood in the irrational state of public opinion. Hurl insults may target the parties of the event or to the people who hold a different view. It can suppress the people who hold different views and make

the speaker feel weak. Mr. Kong, a professor of Peking University, describes himself as a speaker of the civilians, taunts CCTV hosts and its guest speaker who objectively analysis the case. His comments stir up similar comments among many internet users.

d. Embellishing

Embellishing is a kind method of strengthening the emotion, and usually stimulates rage. “My dad is Li Gang” is said by Li Qiming who was involved in a hit-and-run from Hebei University; the true scenario of this remark is unable to find out. But when it becomes a dramatic slang on the internet, internet users in the BBS use “my father is Li Gang” to construct sentence to achieve the irony effect. All kinds of “Li Gang” sentences express a rage to the officials. Embellishing utilized the public’s hatred and sensitiveness to government officials and the wealthy class.

e. Limit of different voice

After the rise the storm of populist, internet opinions fall into an irrational state, limiting the rational multiple voice has become one of the most common phenomenon. It kills different opinions with no tolerance. In the case of Yao Jiaxing, network public opinion was dissatisfied with “news 1+1” of CCTV. What is more, internet users cannot accept the psychological analysis from crime and psychology experts Li Meijin from the public security university, and particularly they cannot tolerate sympathizing for the child. They do not agree with the “external factors” conclusion concluded by Professor Li, and even use the way of abuse to attack Li (Li, 2011). Populist discourse system do not tolerate different sound, alienating the different opinions is its common method. We can see the anger of the young people and also the help from elderly intellectuals in the extreme network remarks.

Of course, the most extreme strategy of populist is to use “human flesh search” in the fight of discourse, beating the opposite party by using the so-called true information, Human flesh search is a kind of extreme network violence, and also the most powerful weapon of discourse suppression.

Populists do not work at first. They will make a difference only when the agenda is constructed, especially when the issue such as “people” “justice” is constructed. When an event occurs, the frame of discourse works. It directly leads the nature of the event to a fixed mode or framework of the expression, so the discourse pointing to fighting against the rich and against officials will stand out, and the low class intellectuals who have a strong populist tendency will choose strategy for the agenda setting. High housing prices, high commodity prices, official corruption and social injustice are all the raw materials for agenda setting. When events are involved in the specific expression framework, “one-sided” discourse monopolizing begins to form. But if they do not obtain the advantage, populist will go for all sorts of means.

Overall, the most fundamental point of the network populist discourse is not to treat people as they are in a legal environment, without rationally following the rule of law to judge the case, but to replace it on a way of mass movement.

3. CYBER FIELD AND THE “CONVENTION” OF POPULIST DISCOURSE

As the application of network technology, especially the use of Web2.0, mobile terminal enable the network public opinion form faster, and the fight for the discourse dominance becomes more intense day by day. The populist discourse in communication practice has become more frequent. It is necessary to explain this problem from field theory and the pragmatic perspective. The French scholar Pierre Bourdieu explains the issue of the symbol of power from the perspectives of cultural sociology. In his opinion, field is a kind of social space, is the relationship that differentiate people. Everything exists according to the differentiated relationships, whether it is a private or groups. In other words, this is a kind of relationship space made by many relative positions, although this relationship is difficult to be directly observed in reality and to show by specific way, he thinks it is the most authentic truth. According to the his understanding, social science constructs not class but social space....” When I describe the whole social space as a field, I mean it is not only the field of strength, but also a fighting field. According to the position in power field structure, they have different methods and goals, and thus contribute to maintain or change the structure of field, “he said (Bourdieu, 1998, p.22).

Pierre Bourdieu regards field as a field of struggle, the structure of field supports and guides the holder of position to take strategy to defend or improve their position, or set the level principle for their favorite products. Field is like a competition market, in which people use and arrange various capitals, such as cultural capital, social capital, symbolic capital to realize the maximization of interests. Bourdieu points out there is not only one kind of interest in society, but many interests, which are different by space and time, so the field is almost unlimited. They are activity area composed of history; they have their special systems and unique operation rules. It’s related between this specialized and relatively independent field and special interests, in other words, the interest is the condition for the field to operate. It is the reason that makes people move forward, also the reason that encourages people to gather, compete and fight, and a product of the operation of the field (Bourdieu, 1998, p.88). Bourdieu argued that the fighting of symbolic power causes symbolic violence inevitably, he focus on the point that symbolic violence is a kind of

violence which comes from a conspiracy between the executors and sufferers. Usually they are all even unaware of violence inflicting or being victims (Bourdieu, 2000).

This phenomenon appears in the traditional media, but radically changed in the network communication stage: the boundaries become clear between the violence enabler and the holder, the holder became vulnerable groups because they are weak in this kind of field. When the opinion of a particular event stirs up, a new field forms in network space. Discourse dominance becomes discourse monopoly. Discourse activists are fearless with sensational discourse while victims are so weak that unable to fight back. Rules of this specific field gradually formed, similar to the mass movement during the Cultural Revolution period.

Compared with traditional media, the field formed by network interactive, such as Twitter, has more openness and freedom. Compared with other field, this network is more like a square; the rules of square are slowly formed in the fight of discourse domination. Everyone can express their point of view, find friends, and may also meet opponent. Consensus is reached in the exchange of ideas; however, when a specific event occurs, this open and free field will no longer be the same. In this particular period it tore down the veil of mildness and become manic. Populists make network space no longer calm. Once you get into this field, you have to act according to the so called “rules” of the field. First, the rules reflect the square-carnival nature of populist, because populists built a illusion for people to forgot the law and morals, and set up a discourse framework which represents the “people”, and anyone speaks must act according to this framework. Second, everyone is actively looking for “force of discourse” in this field. According to the linguist Austin’s statement, force of discourse hides behind the speaker’s words, it can produce a specific understanding, attention and response in the recipient (Dahrendorf, 2003). Each participant considers the intensity of their speech; however, the effect and result of their speech will not fully comply with the subjective intention of the speakers. Sticking labels on others, lies, abuse, embellish in this field are classified as positive strategy, all expression discourse serves for “action discourse”, strengthening the pragmatic force no matter whether the information itself is true and false in order to achieve the best effects. Third, when discourse monopoly forms, words are controlled by the populist. Therefore, every participant becomes a winner in the square of populist, the revelry expands when participants and onlookers increases in the square. The words of the populist and cynics is filled with the smell of gunpowder of action. Under this background, the judicial, government, media become incredible, while only sentencing at “people’s will” can be accepted. In the network field, “straight away death penalty” is the orientation of the discourse, which well represents the will of the people in this field.

CONCLUSION

From discourse domination to discourse monopoly, this discourse movement model is what the grassroots are willing to accept and participate in in the communication practice. The grassroots' discourse, once acquired monopoly position, can often inspire and stimulate the enthusiasm to participate. This communication practice under the framework of the populist expression of the anti-officials, the anti-authority, the anti-elite, contains the danger of anarchism tendency and radical violent appeal. In almost all the public events involving government, public security, court, and urban management, public opinion in the network space always connects them to corrupt officials, to misuse of authority, or to the government sacrificing the public interests. So people in network space denounce the officials in these events without any thinking. This anti-official populist response makes the network space filled with hostility, hatred and violence emotional languages, and hurts the innocent with violence discourse. Discourse monopoly will inevitably lead to autocratic discourse. The original "democracy" slogan of populism changes into "autocratic", which is a very serious network problem worthy of people's ponder.

To solve the populist's discourse violence, people must first eradicate its breeding soil. Information openness and transparency is the foundation for social stability. Populist movement in China's modern contemporary history has different symptoms in each stage, often with strong interest demands and certain democratic color. "Doctrine in mouth, business in mind" was reflected typically in the modern history of the Sichuan "protects the road movement (happened in 1911)". It is normal for everyone to have his own interest, but the terrible point lies in that populists fully arouse the "the masses without knowing the truth" "for their own interest by using the excuses of "democracy" and "people's livelihood". This can lead to out of control of the social situation. It is obvious that the network discourse hegemony will do much harm to the institutionalized construction of the country.

It is a difficult task to make people observe order in the inequitable environment, but it is also a task inevitable. If the order is overthrown by angry emotions, everyone will be victims, and the civilians will suffer the most. With social contradictions intensifying day by day, sooner or later populism will become popular; and social structure of discourse power will change. It is a sign of contemporary social change, and is bound to increase new problems on social management. We need to pay enough attention on it. On the other hand, as the mainstream media and discourse have already lost their powerful impact on agenda setting, the government's crisis response system which is still based on traditional thinking should adjust accordingly as soon as possible.

REFERENCES

- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words* (p.120). Cambridge: Massachusetts.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Practical reason: Acting theory*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Sur la television*. J. Xu (Trans.). Shenyang: Liaoning Educational Press. (In Chinese).
- Dahrendorf, R. (2003). Acht Anmerkungen zum. *Transit Europa'sche Revue*, 25, 156-163.
- Li, Y. (2011, April 15) *Wipe out "Everyone is equal" and come back to hierarchy*. Retrieved from <http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/view/201104/227460.html>
- Margetts, H. (2001). The cyber party. Paper presented to ECPR Joint Sessions. London. Retrieved from http://www.governmentontheweb.org/sites/governmentontheweb.org/files/Cyber_party_paper.pdf
- Taggart, P. (2005). *The populism*. M. X. Yuan (Trans.). Changchun: Jilin People's Press. (In Chinese).
- Tang, X. B. (2008). *The populism of underclass and intellectual*. Retrieved from Xue Yong's blog "Cynical Intellectual": http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_45f00ef401008yrz.html. (In Chinese).