

Structure and Summoning of Ideographic Space: Semiotic Aspect of Public Opinion Research

Yigang Lu^{1,*}

¹Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

*Corresponding author. Email: 57233435@qq.com

ABSTRACT

The production and transmission of symbols in human society are constantly constructing people's world of meaning. The process of symbolic meaning expression and the process of interpreting symbolic meaning activate the thinking world of the social subject to different extents and may reflect the social subject's response to the living world, social world and material world in the ways of opinion expression. Opinion expression as a communication action is still essentially the subject's interactive expression of meaning by using symbol or a set of symbols. The interactive action formed between opinion expression and the revivification of public opinion phenomenon by the subject's opinion expression seems making it possible to connect the public opinion phenomenon with symbolic expression of meaning, namely the two parts are linked theoretically by opinion expression. From the perspective of semiology, opinion expression itself is an expression of meaning, rather than saying that meaning expression and opinion expression are different interpretations of ideographical expression in semiology and public opinion. But both the expression of meaning and the expression of opinion are the products of interaction within a certain range of space, ideographic space. Based on the understanding of this space, the paper explains the relationship between symbols and public opinion and makes clear the interpretation of some core issues in public opinion researches in aspect of semiology.

Keywords: ideographic space, symbol, text, public opinion

I. INTRODUCTION

Public opinion itself or the core of public opinion is a combination of beliefs, attitudes, emotions (the narrow sense of emotion here is mood) and values. This is an interesting combination, implying a clue from social individual to the entire society and then to social individual. This is because beliefs, attitudes, emotions and values can show both individuality and integrity. When getting in contact with the society, an individual will inevitably produce relevant cognition and attitudes toward its contactant. This is an individual and realistic reflection of thought. "Human thought itself is a symbol"¹, and is called "ideological symbol" by Pierce. People's interpretation of symbols condensed by objective things does not depend on individuals alone. In the process of pursuing interpretation of the meaning, people need to use or must enter interpersonal relationships, which makes the pursuit of symbol meaning embodied as a communicative relationship. "Every thought must have a dialogue with other thoughts ... Thoughts are developed in form of dialogue, so that the dialogue is essentially composed of

symbols"². Public opinion is not a closed body of opinion, but an open body of opinion. Its greatest value lies in that there are always new opinions constantly added in the process of its generation (each opinion represents an "ideological symbol"). The more "ideological symbols" you have, the closer the consensus opinion formed by public opinions will be to the "truth." With the help of communication and ideological collision, public opinion will eventually become a social factor that can affect the progress of public affairs. The significance of the impact also lies in that the public opinion at this time shows a strong consciousness of integrity, and is a condensed personal consciousness (but not a simple superposition of personal consciousness); and each subject of public opinion shows highly similar beliefs, attitudes, values or emotions with high resonance. Therefore, from the perspective of semiology, the core factor of public opinion is a "plural noun", and is the result of the "unity" of individual thoughts. From the decentralization of social individuals' ideological symbols to the centralization of entire ideological symbols of the public of public opinion, the publicity of

¹ Zhao Yiheng. "Funny Semiotics". Nanjing University Press, 2014, p132.

² Zhao Yiheng. "Funny Semiotics". Nanjing University Press, 2014, p158.

public opinion itself is once again strengthened, and the "fusion of truth" is completed by applying this public and holistic force on the object of public opinion. As a space created by the above publicity, ideographic space faces such problem as how to intervene and influence the formation of public opinion through its construction and topic setting; for ideographic space already formed also faces such problem as how to regulate and guide the transmission of public opinion by virtue of the textuality, interactivity and organizational nature generated by the transmission of symbols. The discussion of those problems not only perceives that the current network social form gives the formation and transmission of public opinion a new form, but also perceives that the foothold of transmission of public opinion as a perception to the social world always points to the concern for the truth regardless of the change in media technology. This is also the basic narrative framework of the paper.

II. THE FORMATION OF IDEOGRAPHIC SPACE: SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND EVOLUTION OF INDIVIDUAL OPINION

Certain number of publics can be gathered to form "topic concern" and produce many heterogeneous opinions at the early stage of formation of public opinion. The reason is that from some perspective, it is right because the language or event symbols that people concern haven't form clear or convincing meaning of interpretation (in this case, there may be signs, without meaning), people are eager to obtain satisfaction after interpretation through communication. At this stage, a large number of symbol sets marked by language or events are transmitted. In "Public Opinion Transmission", Liu Jianming pointed out that what public opinion transmits at early stage is a message with unknown meaning, and a high degree of attention and transmission of the message itself constitutes a kind of public opinion.³ It is clear that the message is a set of symbols in essence (e.g., time is a message, place is a message, and character is a message). The reason for the rise of public's "concern" at this stage is precisely an inevitable demand when lacking the meaning of interpretation. What people need more is a common meaning interpretation. That is to say, a single, individual interpretation only belongs to an individual's self-perception of a topic. As for the correctness and reasonability of this perception, it is needed to be verified and corrected in the extensive connection with others. Otherwise, the explanation based on individual experience alone, as proved by experiences, will not be expressed more at public level, but most at implicit state. The above situation shows that according to the opinion of "there must be a symbol or meaning" in the

³ Liu Jianming. "Public Opinion Transmission". Tsinghua University Press, 2003. p68.

semiology, the early situation formed by public opinion at this stage is a typical "there is no meaning but symbol". The theory of public opinion also holds that making comment is only a subordinate form of public opinion.

III. THE DYNAMIC FACTOR OF IDEOGRAPHIC SPACE: THE EXISTENCE FORM OF SYMBOLS AND THE ACTIVATION OF PUBLIC OPINION

It is true that what public opinion needs trigger is not only the concern of a certain community or the attention of a certain class. In a society, only when public opinion has the ability to transcend classes can it form a force that affects the process of social development and become "our social skin"⁴ as Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann said. Therefore, after the initial formation of public opinion, more ways and means are needed to produce a diffusive effect. In the specific operating paradigms of these ways and means, a large number of mutualistic symbiosis of iconic symbol, indicator symbol and statute symbol, and the combination of the meaning linkage means of the three symbols' objects, can reveal the texture and path of the diffusion of public opinion.

A. Activation of public opinion and use of iconic symbols

When defining the expression form of public opinion, Chen Lidan called the means of public opinion communication formed by literature and art "literature and art form of public opinion". For example, "March of the Volunteers" inspired Chinese public opinion behavior from the old democratic revolution to the new democratic revolution; "Marseillaise" inspired the French Revolution's vigorous public opinion action; "In the Name of People" caused the public's resonance to the public opinion of "anti-corruption"; "The Red Guard Dance" expresses the public's emotions in the public opinion boom. Here, musical symbols, pictorial symbols, and dance symbols are all a kind of iconic expression of their objects, used for conveying meaning. As⁵ "iconicity can be in any sense and sometimes is non-image", the explanations it provides are often suggestive. In communication psychology, hinting the transmitted signal (signal is also a symbol) is often more "fascinating" than being "explicit". It seems conveys not only the meaning of "thing", but also is accompanied with an emotional meaning that needs to be interpreted, and these two meanings are combined in a specific iconic symbol and widely circulated in the "mass". In Gustave Le Bon's book "The Mass", the

⁴ [Germany] Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. "Public Opinion: Our Social Skin". Translated by Dong Qi. Peking University Press, 2013, p6.

⁵ Zhao Yiheng. SEMIOTICS: Principles & Problems. Nanjing University Press. 2016, p77.

"emotional contagion theory" used vividly illustrates that the reason why the suggestive meaning existing in iconic symbol can activate more social people is right because "symbol is only a reproduction of some character of an object which sometime is hardly to make clear"⁶. This kind of iconic symbol with some "mysterious" taste has obvious function in public opinion especially when the diffusion of public opinion needs to "infect" a large number of surrounding people.

B. Activation of public opinion and use of indicator symbols

For indicator symbol, "it is physically connected with the object, forming an organic pair, but the mind of the interpreter does not need to care about this connection, but only notice it after the formation of this connection."⁷ In the process of diffusion of public opinion, some clear indicator symbols are also often applied to guide the public to enter the corresponding public opinion field. The most typical one of this situation is the way in which online public opinion leads the public to express opinions. For example, in Tencent News, there is a section called "Views" after each news, and then there will be a "pen" symbol at the bottom of the page and the text "say something", meanwhile the number of peppers and the specific numbers behind them indicate the number of people who have participated in making the comments. This practice drives the public to participate in making comments, and the public's participation in making the comments is not because of their concern about this series of icons but because of the linkage established between themselves and the news text and opinion comments. In the current Internet context, the role it plays is individualized for each reader, but when it continues to accumulate and superimpose, it is difficult to say that the guidance of this indicator symbol is not a technical factor that activates online public opinion.

C. Activation of public opinion and use of statute symbols

The diffusion of public opinion is not only an increase in the amount of its communication and distribution, but also concerns the efficiency of the distribution and the quality of public opinion. In the public opinion communication ecology, the effect of public opinion communication is closely related to the existence of public opinion field. In the public opinion field, the public perceive in a conventional way, and also understand the relationship between symbols and meanings in accordance with the conventional way. In an event of public opinion, whether the information

symbol that activates public awareness is provided by social communication or the mass media is based on a certain social convention. The identity of symbol recognition determines whether the public can smoothly carry out the following exchange of opinions. There is a co-existence cognition of group convention. The benefits of using conventional symbols in a public opinion field can reduce the presence of "noise" in the interpretation of symbols, and at the same time increase the efficiency of the group's meaning expression by symbols.

D. Superposition of the effect public opinion activation: combination of the meaning linkage means of the three symbols

The essence of public opinion communication is opinion communication, but not all opinion communications are public opinion communication; and the essence of opinion communication is information communication (the opinion is materialized and transmitted in the form of information), but not all information communications are opinion communication; the carrier of information communication is information text. Text is composed of some symbols being organized into a symbol combination which "can be interpreted by interpreter as having a unified time and meaning dimensions"⁸. Therefore, the communication of public opinion can be regarded as group communication behavior of information text composed of certain symbols to express the same or similar opinions and having many supporters. Compared with the definition made by Liu Jianming "public opinion communication lies in that a certain number of people hold the same opinion and communicate it"⁹, the interpretation of public opinion communication in the semiotic sense can better reveal the essential characteristics and operating rules of public opinion communication, because the abstraction of the law of public opinion communication can be embodied in the interpretation of symbolic text.

IV. THE TOPIC TENDENCY IN IDEOGRAPHIC SPACE: ONE-SIDEDNESS OF SYMBOLS AND DIVERSITY OF PUBLIC OPINIONS

The "one-sidedness" in semiotics is not simplification. Here it is necessary to explain that Davidson's "simplified overview of the topic" should be understood as "the amplification of the topic after one-sided perception" whether interpreted from perspective of semiotics or public opinion. The construction of consciousness level of public opinion based on social phenomena is not "global", but a partial reproduction or

⁶ Zhao Yiheng. SEMIOTICS: Principles & Problems. Nanjing University Press. 2016, p78.

⁷ Zhao Yiheng. SEMIOTICS: Principles & Problems. Nanjing University Press. 2016, p80.

⁸ Zhao Yiheng. SEMIOTICS: Principles & Problems. Nanjing University Press. 2016, p88.

⁹ Liu Jianming. "Public Opinion Transmission". Tsinghua University Press, 2003, p72.

reconstruction of social consciousness taking the time, space and event as the profiles. From the philosophical point of view of the whole and the part, the unified opinions and views that the public opinions finally focus on and form are part of the society, and are a "one-sided" reflection of the whole society. The superficial consciousness of society displayed by public opinion is only a reflection of certain aspect of social steady-state consciousness and solid-state consciousness. It has a clear indication rather than a vague and general substitution. For example, the consciousness of public opinion in the "vaccine incident" reflects the public's awareness of public safety concerns from a linear perspective of consciousness. To be more precise, public opinion is the reproduction of certain kinds of consciousness that it activates, and these kinds of consciousness must be connected; but even so, it still cannot be regarded as the care for the overall social consciousness.

From the figurative perspective, the public's cognitive state produced by public opinion is often determined by the cognitive material provided by the sender. Especially after entering the modern media society, the symbolic information provided by the mass media constructs the public's cognition, but there is a gap between the "mimetic environment" and "copied world" and the real environment and the real world in this construction. Walter Lippmann believes that when we increasingly accept the awareness of the mimic environment provided by the media, the chances of "lead casting" and "stereotype image" are greatly increased¹⁰. This further illustrates that in modern society, when we cannot get rid of the "one-sided" cognitive environment provided by the mass media, "one-sided" attitude and even behavior generated by this kind of cognition will inevitably occur. The information symbols provided by the mass media and the textual meanings established by them are based on the basis of "things" but not a comprehensive display and understanding of "things", but they also carry meanings which are "magnified" and transmitted by the media, erode the public's self-awareness, and at the same time, are incorporated into an established opinion generation system by using "resonant" perception. This symbol forms "shorthand" for the "things" in the objective world on the basis of "one-sided" feeling, shaping the communication pattern of the "media agenda" influencing the "public agenda" with the help of "mimetic environment". Precisely because of this, through the guidance of media, public opinions form a rapid condensation, and produce an assimilation assessment on a certain social phenomenon in a way with clear direction and following the one-sided principle, and this process occurs back and forth in the

whole society. Just as Hegel said, "public opinions come and go, like the conversion of seasons."¹¹

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the evolution of media promoted by media technology is actually meeting the needs of constantly approaching the truth. And the media, especially the mass media, further connects many social members in a "synchronized" state through information symbols, forming a "exploratory community" for having the common needs of pursuing the truth. The information symbol introduced by medium, as a selective "representation" of the objective world, clearly presents the object it refers to in the form of symbolic text. Community, a collection of individuals who interpret symbolic interpretation items, experiences the diversification and chaos of direct interpretations, the shift and change of dynamic interpretations, and the characteristics of the final interpretation items show a high degree of identity in opinion and attitude. This relatively stable mental state guides the collective behavior of members of the community (an important aspect of this behavior is that it tries to expand the identity of the community to a broader scope and attract more people to join the community to gain growth in momentum). The cohesion of the community forms and makes it possess the capital to enter and game in the public opinion field. Many people hold the same opinion. This capital is non-individualized and plural. The formation of consensus opinions in the community is not just for the purpose of expressing identity, but still serve the overall goal of seeking truth.

References

- [1] Chen Lidan. "Public Opinion: Research on Public Opinion Guidance". Huaxia Publishing House, 2002 edition. (in Chinese)
- [2] [US] WalterLippmann. "Public Opinion", translated by Lin Shanshan. Huaxia Publishing House, 2008. (in Chinese)
- [3] [Germany] Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. "Public Opinion: Our Social Skin". translated by Dong Qi. Peking University Press, 2013. (in Chinese)
- [4] Liu Jianming. "Public Opinion Transmission". Tsinghua University Press, 2003. (in Chinese)
- [5] Zhao Yiheng. SEMIOTICS: Principles & Problems. Nanjing University Press. 2016. (in Chinese)
- [6] Lin Yutang. "A History of the Press and Public Opinion in China". Renmin University Press. 2015. (in Chinese)

¹⁰ [US] Walter Lippmann. "Public Opinion", translated by Lin Shanshan. Huaxia Publishing House, 2008, p38.

¹¹ Chen Lidan. "Public Opinion: Research on Public Opinion Guidance". Huaxia Publishing House, 2002, p72.