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THE ESCALATION OF INTER-CIVIC CONFLICTS IN SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract. This article examines the escalation of inter-civic conflicts in social networks and its impact upon the transformation of social consciousness. The study proceeds from a structural distinction: conflict conducted in speech is dyadic, whereas conflict conducted in a network is triadic, since every utterance is addressed to an audience as well as to an opponent. From this change in the pragmatics of address three mechanisms are derived: the conversion of concession into visible defeat, the sedimentation of conflict in a searchable record, and the divergence between the rates of escalation and settlement. Social consciousness is shown to be transformed in three determinate respects rather than in general: the threshold of admissible intensity rises, the neutral register in which groups may be mentioned without partisanship disappears, and estimates of the typical adversary are formed from the least typical. The controversy between C. Sunstein and A. Bruns concerning polarisation and exposure is subjected to critical examination.

Keywords: inter-civic conflict, escalation, social networks, social consciousness, triadic communication, imagined audience, group polarisation, sedimentation of conflict, civic mediation, admissible register, social philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

Disagreement among citizens over the terms of their common life is not a disorder of civic existence but one of its constituents, and no society has been without it. What distinguishes the present situation is therefore not the presence of inter-civic conflict but its medium. The prevailing assumption is that this medium is neutral, transmitting a disagreement that exists independently of it and contributing only velocity. The present article proceeds from the contrary assumption. A medium that alters who is present at an exchange alters what the exchange is for, and that in turn alters the dispositions of those who conduct it. Escalation in networks is accordingly not an accident of tone but a structural consequence, and its cumulative effect is a transformation of social consciousness itself. The structural difference may be stated precisely. A dispute conducted in speech between two citizens, neighbours over a boundary or colleagues over a decision, is dyadic. It has two parties, and such audience as it possesses is incidental, transient and without a record. Its pragmatics are governed by a single consideration: the parties will continue to live beside one another, so the exchange must issue in something both can inhabit. Settlement is its purpose, and mutual concession its instrument. A dispute conducted in a network is triadic. Alongside the two parties stands a third, neither incidental nor transient: an audience permanent, enumerated, partly unknown and capable of responding.

The presence of this third party displaces the addressee. The opponent, who in the dyadic case was the person one sought to persuade, becomes the occasion of an utterance whose real recipient is one's own side. What appears as argument is in its pragmatic function a demonstration of fidelity legible to those who already agree. From this follows the proposition upon which the analysis turns. In

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a dyadic exchange concession is cheap, costing little beyond the point conceded. Before an audience it is dear, being received as an admission that the position was untenable, so that the loss falls not upon the point but upon standing. The participant who hardens therefore acts in accordance with his interest, not against it. Escalation is the equilibrium of a game whose payoffs the audience has altered. A second mechanism operates upon time. Oral conflict dissipates, because speech is not kept and the parties retain of a quarrel only what memory preserves. Networked conflict is inscribed: dated, searchable, detachable from its occasion and available to persons not present at its origin. A dispute therefore does not end when its energy is spent but subsides into a record from which it may be revived at any later moment, often by a third party with an unrelated purpose. Inter-civic relations accordingly acquire a sediment of retrievable grievance which lies beyond the reach of reconciliation, since those who might reconcile are not the custodians of the record. A third mechanism concerns rates. Escalation is inexpensive and rapid: a single sentence suffices, and the architecture rewards it with attention. De-escalation is expensive and slow, requiring qualification, restored context, the acknowledgement of error and the concurrence of parties who gain nothing by concurring. A system in which movement in one direction is cheap and in the other dear drifts in the cheap direction irrespective of its members' dispositions, and the drift is mistaken by those within it for a deterioration of character.

The dependent variable requires specification, since social consciousness is more often invoked than defined. It is understood here as the shared stock of what may be said, in which register and concerning whom: the practical sense of the admissible that precedes any particular utterance. Its transformation may be identified in three determinate respects. The threshold of admissible intensity rises, since attention is secured by exceeding the prevailing level, which is therefore continuously displaced upward. The neutral register disappears: a group can no longer be mentioned without the mention being received as a position, so that the alternative to partisanship becomes silence. And the typical adversary is inferred from the least typical, because what is visible is what was extreme enough to be distributed. The significance of this for a society in transition lies not in any special prevalence of networks but in a mismatch of capacities. The institutions through which inter-civic conflict has been mediated, the mahalla assembly, the workplace collective, the council of elders, were constituted for face-to-face settlement, and their authority rests upon the co-presence of the parties and the absence of a record. They possess no counterpart in the networked arena. A society may therefore retain a high capacity for settling conflicts of the traditional kind while possessing almost none for those its new medium generates, and the deficit presents itself misleadingly as a decline of civic culture. The aim of the article is accordingly to establish the mechanisms by which escalation in social networks transforms social consciousness, and to distinguish what in this process is novel from what is accelerated. Its contribution is a relocation of the problem. The existing literature treats networked division predominantly as a matter of exposure, of who sees which opinions, and proposes remedies enlarging the diversity of what is seen. The analysis offered here locates the problem in the pragmatics of address: not in what is seen, but before whom one speaks. This relocation accounts for the otherwise anomalous finding that enlarging exposure to opposing views may deepen rather than soften division.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Uzbek scholarship has approached the problem from two directions. F. Muminov, working in the theory of journalism and mass communication, established that public opinion is not an aggregate of

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private judgements but a formation produced through communicative institutions, so that a change in those institutions is a change in opinion itself rather than in its expression. S. Otamurotov, examining globalisation in its relation to national and spiritual security, demonstrated that informational influence operates not through the imposition of propositions but through the gradual reshaping of the criteria by which they are assessed, and made the capacity of a community to withstand such reshaping a distinct object of analysis. Together these supply the premise that consciousness is alterable through the form of communication and not only its content. The value and institutional dimensions of the question are illuminated by contemporary research: S. Ergashbaev demonstrates that stable orientations are formed through sustained continuous education rather than isolated influences, and in a further study singles out independent critical reflection as a central educational outcome, while M.M. Mirzaolimjon og‘li and E. Shohbozbek disclose the institutional context of educational reform. Several international traditions bear upon the problem. J. Habermas reconstructed the public sphere as a domain in which claims are redeemed by argument before an audience of equals, furnishing the standard against which networked discussion is ordinarily measured and found wanting. C. Sunstein argued that self-selected communication produces enclave deliberation, in which like-minded exchange moves a group toward a more extreme version of its initial inclination. A. Bruns opposed this family of claims upon empirical grounds, contending that users of social platforms encounter a wider range of sources than non-users and that the echo chamber is a metaphor unsupported by measurement. A. Marwick and d. boyd identified context collapse, the compression of distinct audiences into one, and introduced the imagined audience as the entity to which networked utterance is in fact addressed. C. Bail and his colleagues reported experimentally that sustained exposure to opposing views increased rather than diminished the ideological extremity of participants. What remains unaddressed is the pragmatic structure of networked dispute. The exposure literature asks what a participant sees, the polarisation literature how a group moves; neither asks what the participant is doing when he speaks, or to whom. The gap addressed here is the absence of an account that treats networked conflict as a triadic performance and derives escalation from the cost an audience imposes upon concession.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following methods were used in this article. Structural-functional analysis was applied in order to distinguish the dyadic from the triadic form of civic dispute and to establish which functions of settlement are withdrawn in the second. The comparative method set the oral and the networked conduct of the same disagreement side by side, holding its content constant so that differences attributable to the medium might be isolated from those attributable to the subject. The method of ascent from the abstract to the concrete was employed in the central argument: the general proposition that an audience alters the cost of concession was first established, and the mechanisms of hardening, sedimentation and rate divergence were then derived from it rather than collected inductively. Conceptual analysis was applied to the term social consciousness, decomposed into the admissible register, the threshold of intensity and the inferred image of the adversary, so that its transformation might be stated as a determinate change in specifiable components rather than a general deterioration. The hermeneutic method was used in interpreting the sources, with attention to the difference between what an author asserts and the question his assertion answers, since the controversy examined below rests upon a divergence of questions rather than findings. The method of the ideal type permitted construction of the limiting cases of the purely dyadic and the wholly performed dispute, against which actual cases are located as intermediate. The method of the unity of the historical and the

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logical served to separate what is genuinely new in networked conflict from the acceleration of a long-standing pattern, the written and reactivatable record belonging to the first category and the hardening of positions before onlookers to the second. The systematic method related the three derived mechanisms to one another as components of a single process rather than independent causes. Terminological analysis was applied to the distinction between a conflict and a contradiction, the first denoting an episode and the second a standing relation, since the escalation examined here consists in the conversion of episodes into a relation. Critical examination of the literature was applied to the opposition between the polarisation and the exposure positions, and secondary analysis of published findings was used in its assessment, the experiment of C. Bail and his colleagues serving as the decisive case. The principle of objectivity was observed throughout, above all in the refusal to attribute escalation to a defect of the participants where a structural explanation is available, and the principle of historical concreteness governed the treatment of the mediating institutions discussed.

RESULTS

The investigation yielded the following results. It was established that escalation in social networks is not a contingent effect of tone but a structural consequence of the triadic form of networked exchange, in which every utterance is addressed to an opponent and to an audience at once and the second address predominates. It was demonstrated that the principal mechanism is the inversion of the cost of concession: in dyadic exchange concession is the inexpensive instrument of settlement, whereas before a permanent audience it is received as an admission of untenability, so that the loss falls upon standing rather than the point, and hardening becomes rational. It was shown that the opponent ceases to be the addressee and functions as the occasion of a demonstration of fidelity, from which it follows that the measures ordinarily proposed for improving networked discussion are directed at a purpose the exchange does not have. It was established that networked conflict sediments rather than dissipates, being inscribed, dated and searchable, and that this places the record beyond reconciliation, since those competent to reconcile are not the custodians of what may later be retrieved. It was found that escalation and settlement proceed at structurally different rates, the first requiring a single sentence and rewarded with attention, the second qualification, restored context and concurrence, so that such a system drifts toward conflict independently of its members' dispositions. It was determined that the transformation of social consciousness may be specified in three respects: the threshold of admissible intensity rises; the neutral register in which a group may be mentioned without partisanship is lost, so that the alternative becomes silence rather than impartiality; and the image of the typical adversary is formed from the least typical member of the opposing group, because visibility is conferred by extremity. It was shown further that escalation possesses a threshold character, in that beyond a certain accumulation of record the parties cease to treat a new dispute as an occasion in its own right and treat it as a further instalment of a standing antagonism, after which each exchange begins where the previous one ended. Finally, the relocation of the problem from exposure to the pragmatics of address was shown to account for the experimental finding that enlarged exposure to opposing views may deepen division, since exposure delivered in the position of adversary before an audience activates the performative rather than the deliberative mode.

DISCUSSION

The results require examination against a controversy that has divided the field for two decades. C. Sunstein maintained that communication among the like-minded produces enclave deliberation, in which the exchange of mutually confirming reasons moves a group toward a more extreme version of

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its initial position, and inferred that architectures permitting self-selection endanger the conditions of democratic reasoning. A. Bruns opposed this contention at its empirical root. Surveying the evidence on media repertoires, he argued that users of social platforms are exposed to a wider range of sources than non-users, that incidental encounter with opposing material is routine rather than exceptional, and that the filter bubble and the echo chamber are metaphors unsupported by measurement. The dispute cannot be settled by preferring one position, since each is correct in what it measures. Bruns is right that the diversity of what is seen has not contracted, and the thesis of informational enclosure in its strong form is not sustainable. Sunstein is right that positions harden and that this is associated with networked participation; it too is repeatedly measured. The appearance of contradiction arises because both assume that hardening must be produced by a restriction of exposure, so that evidence against the restriction counts as evidence against the hardening. The experiment of C. Bail and his colleagues breaks this assumption: participants deliberately exposed over an extended period to the views of the opposing side became, on the measures employed, more rather than less extreme in their own. If exposure were the mechanism, the result is unintelligible.

The analysis advanced here renders it intelligible. What the experiment increased was not exposure in general but exposure in a determinate pragmatic position: the participant met opposing views as an identified adversary, in an arena where his own side could observe his reaction. In that position the material arrives not as information to be weighed but as a challenge to be answered, and the answer is addressed to onlookers. Exposure therefore activates the performative rather than the deliberative mode. It follows that the two parties have answered different questions, Bruns what reaches the participant and Sunstein what he then does, and that the second is the question upon which escalation depends. A practical consequence follows which runs against the prevailing policy intuition. If division were a deficit of exposure its remedy would be contact; if it is a product of performance before an audience, contact without a change in the conditions of address will intensify it. The appropriate intervention is directed at the audience rather than the information, and consists in restoring arenas in which a citizen may revise a position without witnesses. This also qualifies the Habermasian standard, since the public sphere requires not only that claims be redeemed before an audience but that they first be formed somewhere else.

CONCLUSION

First, escalation in social networks was shown to follow from the triadic structure of networked exchange rather than the character of its participants, the decisive mechanism being the inversion of the cost of concession before a permanent audience, which makes hardening rational and renders the opponent a prop in a performance addressed to one's own side. Second, two further mechanisms were identified: the sedimentation of conflict in a written, searchable and reactivatable record, which places grievance beyond the reach of the parties competent to settle it; and the divergence between the rates of escalation and de-escalation, which imparts to the system a drift toward conflict independent of individual disposition. Third, the transformation of social consciousness was specified as a determinate change in three components rather than a general decline: the rising threshold of admissible intensity, the loss of the neutral register in which groups may be mentioned without partisanship, and the formation of the adversary's image from his least typical representative. The institutional consequence is a mismatch between a society's inherited capacity for dyadic settlement and the conflict-generating capacity of its medium. Fourth, the examination of the controversy between the polarisation and the exposure positions established that the two address different

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questions, and that increased extremity under increased exposure becomes explicable once the problem is relocated from what is seen to the position from which one speaks. The practical conclusion is that measures enlarging contact without altering the conditions of address will intensify rather than reduce division. Further research might establish the conditions under which an arena of bounded audience can be sustained within an architecture of general visibility.

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