Public Sphere Participation Online: the Ambiguities of Affect

Participation en ligne à la sphère publique : les ambiguïtés de l'affect

Participación en la esfera pública en línea: las ambigüedades de afecto

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Abstract

The point of departure of this essay is the growing attention to affect as an important aspect of political participation, particularly in the context of online media's role in democracy and public spheres. The approach pulls together a broad range of research on participation, public spheres and affect, with the aim of highlighting important gains as well as issues and ambiguities. In this cluster of interrelated concerns, we find not a cumulative body of unified knowledge, but rather strands from various traditions. The first section deals with the concept of participation, arguing for a robust view that sees it as an intervention, however small, into power relations. The second section pursues the notion of affect, framing it within the force-field of rationality and emotionality, a problematic motif in democracy theory. The third section focuses on the online environment, particularly social media, highlighting lingering ambivalences of online participation and their relevance for affect. The final section offers brief reflections on affect and populism, and on legitimate public pathways to knowledge.

Key words

Digital public spheres; affect and politics; political participation; online politics; civic engagement

Résumé

Cet article repose sur l'attention croissante prêtée à l'affectif comme élément important de la participation politique, particulièrement dans le cadre du rôle joué par les médias en ligne dans la démocratie et dans les ==sphères publiques==. Cette approche convoque un large échantillon de recherches sur la participation, les sphères publiques et l'affectif, afin d'en souligner les importants progrès ainsi que les problèmes et ambiguïtés qu'ils posent. Nous montrons que dans ce faisceau de préoccupations nous ne trouvons pas un noyau unifié autour d'une même cause, mais plutôt des mèches/franges/pistes émanant de traditions différentes. La première partie porte sur la participation et propose de la concevoir comme intervention, aussi petite soit-elle, dans les relations de pouvoir. La seconde partie approfondit la notion d'affectif, la cadrant à partir de la rationalité et des émotions, qui soulèvent des questions dans la théorie de la démocratie. La troisième partie se concentre sur l'environnement en ligne, particulièrement sur les réseaux socionumériques, et souligne les ambivalences persistantes de la participation en ligne et de leur pertinence au regard de l'affectif. Enfin, l'article ouvre sur des réflexions portant sur la relation entre l'affectif et le populisme et sur des voies d'accès légitimes et publiques à la connaissance.

Mots clés

==Sphères publiques numériques==, affect, participation politique, engagement citoyen.

Resumen

El punto de partida de este ensayo es la creciente atención al afecto como un aspecto importante de la participación política, particularmente en el contexto del papel de los medios en línea en la democracia y las esferas públicas. El enfoque reúne una amplia gama de investigaciones sobre la participación, las esferas públicas y el afecto, con el objetivo de resaltar los logros importantes, así como los problemas y las ambigüedades. En este grupo de preocupaciones interrelacionadas, no encontramos un cuerpo acumulativo de conocimiento unificado, sino más bien hebras de varias tradiciones. La primera sección trata del concepto de participación, argumentando a favor de una visión robusta que la ve como una intervención, aunque sea pequeña, en las relaciones de poder. La segunda sección persigue la noción de afecto, encuadrándola dentro del campo de fuerza de la racionalidad y la emotividad, un tema problemático en la teoría de la democracia. La tercera sección se centra en el entorno en línea, particularmente las redes sociales, destacando las persistentes ambivalencias de la participación en línea y su relevancia para el afecto. La sección final ofrece breves reflexiones sobre el afecto y el populismo, y sobre vías públicas legítimas para el conocimiento.

Palabras clave

Esferas públicas digitales; afecto y política; participación política; política en línea; compromiso civil

Setting the Scene

Debates about the internet's contributions to the public sphere and democracy took off almost as soon as going online was becoming a mass phenomenon in the mid-1990s. Today, more than two decades later, we are certainly not close to any consensus, but most would agree that the initial celebratory crescendos have dissipated. Skeptics such as Mozorov (2011) can find plenty of evidence

for not putting much hope in the internet's potential for saving or even enhancing democracy. At the same time, others still point enthusiastically to the circumstances where online political involvement clearly plays a positive role (Castells 2012). More recently, Margetts et al (2016) take a modestly positive view, but argue that social media, while facilitating collective action via countless 'tiny acts of participation', are also altering the dynamics of democracy, ushering in a new 'chaotic pluralism', whose consequences we cannot quite envision yet. We have come to understand that there is no singular, unequivocal 'effect': the use and consequences of the net for political – as well as for all – purposes are always contingent upon many factors. (I use the notion of 'internet' or 'net' very broadly here to include all the digital infrastructure, platforms, social media, stationary and mobile devices of the online world).

Thus, at this point it is not so much a question of arriving at some ultimate judgement, but rather to continue to explore and analyze ongoing changes in society and politics in tandem with the continuing transformations of the media landscape. In regard to social media we should keep in mind that this term encompasses a broad array of different platforms and affordances that can be used for different purposes; in some contexts it is important to distinguish between them. Overall, the media-society interfaces are massively complex, but research is increasingly underscoring the profundity of how media are contributing to societal transformation. The notion of 'mediatization' has emerged in recent years to capture this view (see for example, Hepp 2013; Hjarvard 2013; Lundby 2014; theme issue of *Communication Theory 2013*; Lunt and Livinstone 2014). It is argued that the media's interplay with each specific sector of society and culture is in some way altering it, and by extension transforming society at large, even if this is far from a unidirectional or deterministic development. That the net today touches all phases of personal, organizational, and institutional life means that it has become a dominant force in the social construction of the late modern world (Couldry and Hepp 2016).

It is within this broad horizon that we must understand the significance of digital media for public spheres and political participation. We are 'doing' politics in different ways today, though there is no complete rupture with the past – broadcast television, for example, remains an important institution of the public sphere. The changing political practices and institutional structures that have emerged with the internet have modified the dynamics of democracy, yet we are still very much in the midst of it, lacking the luxury of hindsight. Moreover, our conceptual frames of reference and analytic tools continue to evolve. Thus, in recent years, affect has emerged as a focal point of discussions about politics and participation. This continues an ongoing turn over the past few decades towards probing deeper into the emotional side of politics, as witnessed in cultural studies (e.g. van Zoonen 2005) and political philosophy (Hall, 2005), but even in political communication and political science (e.g. Coleman 2014). Not least media studies has begun to seriously engage with affect and politics in regard to the internet (see for example, Papacharissi 2014).

In this discussion, I want to pursue this trajectory by conceptually addressing the notions of participation and affect. Further, I want to elucidate some key attributes of the familiar online world that we may at times take for granted, yet, that I argue, constitute important contingencies in shaping online experience, not least in regard to public spheres and the shaping of subjectivity and affect. Thus my approach in this essay is to pull together a broad range of research and analysis on participation, public spheres and affect. My aim is to highlight what I see to be important gains as well as issues and ambiguities to be dealt with, while at the same time giving expression to my own perspectives. In addressing this cluster of interrelated concerns, we do not find a cumulative body of unified knowledge, but rather strands from various traditions. While this may present some difficulties, at the same time it may serve to encourage us to reflect on our own premises and points of departure. Progress can be made even by specifying the issues and juxtaposing contrasting horizons.

The presentation is comprised of three main sections. I start with a discussion about participation, including what can be seen as its subjective pre-disposition, namely engagement. I underscore that participation at some point must embody an encounter with power relations. In the second section I take up affect, framing it within the force-field of rationality and emotionality that has been a traditional motif within democracy theory. The third section focuses on the online environment, in particular social media. I highlight some of the lingering ambivalences of online participation and their relevance for affect. I end with some brief reflections on affect and populism. These dilemmas include not least legitimate public pathways to knowledge.

The Particulars of Participation

Power and Parameters

The concept of participation derives from several different fields in the social sciences, and thus remains somewhat of a fluid notion, not least within media and communication studies (see Carpentier 2011 for an extensive treatment). A starting point for grasping the core of the concept of participation is found in the notion of the political. This refers to the ever-present potential for collective antagonisms and conflicts of interest in all social relations and settings (Mouffe 2013). This is a broader notion than that of politics, which most often refers to the more formalised institutional contexts. Thus, we can say that participation means involvement with the political, with power relations, regardless of however remote (or mediated). It always in some way involves contestation or struggle, even if only an argument. Certainly some instances of the political will be a part of electoral politics and involve decision-making and/or elections, but it is imperative that we keep in view this broader extra-parliamentarian sense of the political. Also, we need to distinguish, in media contexts, participation from simple access or mere interaction; these are often mistakenly heralded as participation. While necessary they are not sufficient, as Carpentier (2011) adamantly insists.

The political can thus arise discursively and appear in any domain of social and cultural activity, even within consumption and entertainment (and we can find innumerable examples of that on social media). For actual participation, the context is always significant: it makes a big difference if, in Western democracies, we are talking about, say, involvement in public sphere discussions, voting in elections, or confrontational street demonstrations. If we shift to settings where the resistance against authoritarian regimes takes place, people are facing serious dangers and potentially risking their lives, which gives participation yet another meaning. There is no generalized, universal notion of participation; it always takes place under specific circumstances, and is embodied in particular practices.

Power relations and structures refer not only to such obvious manifestations as the state, with its legal system, military, and police, or the corporate sector, with its political economic power, but also to cultural and discursive forms, i.e. control or influence over symbolic environments. Moreover – and very importantly – power involves both 'power to' (enabling) as well as 'power over', in the form of coercion, constraint, or influence. Thus, participation in itself is an expression of some degree of (enabled) power – however modest it may be.

Any concrete instance of participation in settings that are at least are nominally democratic can be analysed in terms of a number of obvious parameters. Without claiming to be exhaustive, such aspects can include: degree of difficulty i.e. is the participation 'easy' to achieve or does it face mechanisms of exclusion? Another parameter is the question whether the participation is embedded in some way in collective action, or if it is largely of an individual, isolated character – a distinction that has become all the more relevant in the digital age, as I discuss below.

Two more parameters to note here are what I call its horizon and time frame. Horizon has to do with whether people are participating largely 'in the media' or in a larger societal domain 'via the

media' (Carpentier, 2011). The former is mostly associated with entertainment and popular culture, while the latter is typical of news and public affairs. Yet fiction can trigger political participation, and journalism or political debate may be experienced as mere (enjoyable) 'spectacle'. Time frame refers to the duration of participation; is it sustained or short-term? This can be of crucial importance. Sometimes a quick intervention is strategically suitable, but observers note that all too often attention wanders and/or participation loses its momentum and dissipates, e.g. an initial protest fails to achieve continued political involvement. Finally, while not strictly a parameter, we would want to consider the outcome, the consequences of participation: what has it accomplished? These parameters, or simply, aspects, are useful to keep in mind when looking at participation, and I will return to some of them below.

Civic Prerequisites

Beyond these external parameters, it is also important to consider the resources and preparedness of citizens; there are in a sense civic 'pre-requisites' for participation, that can move people from a 'politics of being' to 'being political', as Fenton (2016) phrases it. Dahlgren (2009) makes the argument that if participation is the embodiment of some form of political communication or action, engagement can be seen as the necessary subjective disposition that precedes participation, priming and preparing it, as it were. Political engagement is dependent on what he terms civic cultures. These are cultural resources that can promote or impede engagement (and by extension, participation), depending on circumstances and the forces at play.

Civic cultures involve such dimensions as relevant knowledge, democratic values, minimal degrees of trust among citizens, communicative spaces (not least in digital form) and practices with some degree of efficacy. These together can enhance a sense of civic identity, the self-perception that one is an empowered political actor. However, those with 'power over' civic cultures can do much to weaken and block them; the fate of these cultural resources can therefore often become politically contested in themselves (e.g. access to knowledge can be blocked by censorship). Without such access to the resources of civic cultures, citizen's involvement with the political becomes weakened.

In sum, the point here is that political participation never begins with a tabula rasa - it is always conditioned by both existing external circumstances as well as citizens' resources. All these factors are shaped by power relations in various ways. Not least in regard to the media we can examine how they promote or impede civic cultures and engagement. As should be clear, I am asserting a rather robust definition of participation, while also emphasizing its contingencies, especially in regard to the pre-requisites of subjective engagement and the resources of civic cultures. This significance of subjectivity leads us easily to the notion of affect.

Affect, Subjects, Politics

The Subject of Affect

In recent years the notion of 'affect' has gained prominence; there has emerged an 'affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences, inspired by Spinoza, among others (see for example Massumi 2002; Gregg and Seigworth 2010). In media studies, Papacharissi (2014) has recently incorporated and mobilized the term for analyses of social media. She suggests that the term helps us to analyse modes of political engagement that hover beyond formalized expressions of opinion. Moreover, it indicates how unformed and spontaneous political sentiment may accumulate, moving from the latent to the manifest, giving new shape to engagement and participation. In simple terms, if emotion is a 'state' one is in, affect has to do with the dynamics of how one got there. Moreover, as to be discussed, affect can refer even to collective states of subjectivity.

This recent attention to affect can be situated as part of a larger intellectual vista in which theorizing about the idea of the subject has become more expansive. In the English language literature, we

witnessed a steep rise in such concerns during the 1970s and 1980s within the expansive phase of British cultural studies (Turner 2002 for an overview). There was a lot of borrowing from 'French theory', including the (very diverse) works of Lacan's linguistic interpretation of Freud, Foucault's post-structural theories of discourse, Derrida's de-centring of meaning, Barthes' semiotics, and Kristeva's blend of psychoanalysis and feminism. In the 1980s, postmodern visions were airing a situated, reflexive, and composite sense of selfhood. All these currents contributed to challenging the (masculine) model of the universal self.

Today, such contexts as globalisation, multiculturalism, and post-colonialism, also leave their mark of how we think about the subject. Parallel with this, and at times intertwined with it, we have seen the concept of identity receive much attention in a variety of disciplines. Indeed, identity has no doubt become the more familiar theme in the last few decades. Conceptual usage can vary among different traditions, but for most scholars today identity is seen as socially constructed, an ongoing process where the interface of people, their circumstances, and their experiences give shape to their sense of who they are, both to themselves and to others. The subject, on the other hand, is an analytic construct that tends to signify a more fundamental layer of the self, the basic 'who' behind identity work. Yet, even the core of the subject is seen as a social product within some traditions.

Some of these more ambitious theoretical currents began to make their way into media studies, while the 'mainstream' of this field continued with psychological models derived from traditional social sciences, where individuals are usually rendered in more common-sense terms – and at times retaining behaviouristic dimensions. The literature theorising on the subject is vast and spans many disciplines; even a cursory inventory would be far beyond the scope of this presentation (a brief, introductory effort of this kind is found in Elliott, 2008). From the horizon of media studies, Dahlgren (2013) provides a thematic synthesis of some of the traditions, resulting in four themes, rather than a long and difficult to manage inventory of traditions. These themes may blur into each other; they are not always distinctly separable, but, expressed in varying conceptual language, they account for much of what distinguishes different traditions from each other.

The first theme is *rationalism*, which raises the issue of to what extent our subjectivity and our actions are steered by reason vs. emotion. Next is *reflexivity*, a concept that points to the ways that we monitor and adjust our actions in social contexts and the consequences this has. Reflexivity is central to the tradition of social constructionism. The third theme is *transparency,* or rather, the lack of it. Here the decisive analytic element is the unconscious: the Freudian tradition and its various offshoots argue that we do not have full access to our own subjectivity; we cannot fully understand ourselves. Denial, repression, displaced anger, unacknowledged fear, and so forth are inexorably a part of our inner reality. The fourth theme is *contingency*, the issue of to what extent we as subjects are shaped by our contexts and circumstances. This intellectual current is mostly associated with various ideas about how discourse shapes us and positions as subjects. It does not require a great analytic leap to understand that 'affect' may have different a meaning and function within traditions that differ thematically in the above ways.

The Classic Dichotomy: Rationality and Emotionality

The theme of rationalism offers us a handy entry point into a discussion of affect, while the the question of transparency – the view of an operative unconscious – also looms very relevant. In considering participation in public spheres, we often arrive at very basic questions: what actually facilitates it, and how are we to understand such agency? How is it that people indeed take the step to act in relation to the political? To become engaged in something implies not just cognitive attention and perhaps a normative stance, but also a subjective involvement, an investment of the self. There is an emotional charge here; one feels strongly about the issue at hand; this is engagement, and it can never be reduced to the purely rational. The intensity and the commitment can vary considerably; when it is strong, we can speak of passion – whose origins and power may reside to some extent beyond the grasp of our conscious mind.

In contemporary democratic theory, there is a strong emphasis on rationality as a normative ideal for participation and deliberation. Such a communicative mode is of course indispensable at times, especially as formal decision-making draws near, as Habermasian theorists have claimed. However, to insist on this as the overall model of participatory practices can become constrictive for subjectivity and its expression, which are so central to politics (Dahlberg 2014). Such a stance can even become excluding in its consequences: demanding a certain genre of formalized communication that may not be the most natural form of expression for all social groups and can serve to marginalize and disempower them.

The traditional liberal view that sets rationality against emotion is analytically counter-productive, as many have argued (see Hall 2005). We must grasp the interconnectedness of reason and emotion. At bottom, political passions always have *reasons*, even if they are not always immediately accessible to us; there is some goal or object that is valued. Thus, political passion, even if it may be partly anchored in the unconscious, is not blind, it involves some sense of the good, something worth striving for, and often also involves some notion as to how to achieve it (even if the goals and methods can always be contested). Reasons, in turn, incorporate emotions; in the same way that a passion for something suggests there is a reason for valuing it, a reason for choosing it implies at least some emotionality for the choice. Likewise, even undesirable behaviour such as violence and aggression are never exclusively the result of 'pure' passion – there always reasons as well (even if they are normatively unsustainable ones).

Yet, in analytically opening the door to emotions in understanding political engagement, we of course also allow a set of problems to enter that we cannot ignore. There is an understandable fear among democracy theorists of 'the irrational' – history is replete with dreadful examples. Fear, anger, denial, hate, revenge, and so on are emotional valences that can spur engagement and lead to destructive political behaviour.

The lack of full self-transparency is of course the fundamental premise of psychoanalysis and its view of the unconscious. There are several versions of the unconscious but the Freudian model, with its various revisions and offshoots, has incontestably become the dominant one (even if there is much dispute among the various schools). That there can be opaque regions within our psyche tends to subvert the ideal of self-mastery and -control, which of course rank high in the rational worldview. However, our understanding and our analyses become richer to the extent that we acknowledge the at times difficult dynamics between reason and emotion. We need not be trained psychoanalysts in order to find evidence of this interplay; my view is that a simple, common-sense view of an active unconscious is sufficient. Ultimately politics – and subjectivity itself – straddles the rational-emotional distinction, without safety nets, and participation is predicated in part on the tensions between them.

Affect: Collective Configurations

The vocabulary of emotions and feelings is slippery and problematic, as Frosh (2011), a psychologist well-versed in social theory, underscores. Yet the significance of affect can be understood if we think of participation as shaped by something more powerful than just ideas inside the heads of individuals, namely shared social experience. Thus, affect brings in the collective side of emotionality, and derives from the work of several specific authors, as Papcharissi (2014) describes. One source that she emphasizes is Raymond Williams and his notion of 'structures of feeling'. For Williams, structures of feeling give expression to prevailing cultural currents and moods of a given historical moment; they are implicit and inchoate, yet can still impact on people's political horizons. Their political character can of course vary greatly; they can unfortunately even manifest unsavoury sentiments (as I take up in regard to populism below).

Another conceptual link to affect can be found in the classic book by Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience* (in English 1993), which they wrote as a critical reply to Habermas' famous book on the public sphere. For Negt and Kluge, the public sphere should be grounded in and give expression

to the collective horizons of people's lived experiences (rather than just formal deliberation). This is a premise that would define this space in ways more amenable for those at the lower societal echelons. And this is precisely the point of departure for many progressive activists, who, based on their experiences, generate and participate in online alternative public spheres to confront hegemonic power relations. Affect, in sum, can be seen as dynamic collective emotionality that connects with people's shared social experiences. Affect animates engagement and helps motivates participation. To connect experience and affect to empirical reality of course requires analysis of social contexts – and the communicative milieu that people find themselves in is a major feature of this social context, an observation that now ushers us over to the media.

The Ambivalence of the Online Environment

Online Affect, Sociality, Friendship

Social media platforms are intricately interlaced in our everyday lives, and are used for an array of purposes. Our experiences range from the mundane administrative to the intimately personal, to the social, the commercial, to various forms of pleasure and excitement; games and the thrill of erotic encounters may well take us into the realm of the ecstatic. Our online lived realities are criss-crossed with affect, as Highfield (2016) demonstrates. Not least, from the standpoint of participation, social networking and the emotional dimension of social bonds can play a central role. The links between the personal and the social on the one hand, and the political on the other hand, are more easily facilitated. Also, people's skills in using these platforms have become quite developed (though there are of course patterns of social variability) and can thus help the generation and maintenance of online public spheres.

Further, the very communicative capacity of social media keeps open the possibility for the political to emerge in talk (of whatever form). With our schematic view of the political as a discursively emergent reality, access to and interaction with media obviously become not only helpful but also often necessary for participation: people become communicatively linked to political ideas and sentiments, as well as to each other. Access to social media per se usually does not turn people into engaged citizens; yet, to the extent that the political can discursively arise, the internet and social media take on an important public sphere function of discussion, not least on Facebook. And with regard to real-time coordination of political activities, the brief format of Twitter has become invaluable, as research has underscored (Gerbaudo 2012). Social media, in short, are an invaluable civic resource for engagement and participation.

However this positive view becomes cloudy as we explore various features of the online environment. One theme that has emerged in the more traditional psychologically-oriented literature (that nonetheless has relevance for the public sphere) is where the locus of control lies: with the technology or with the users. We find an analytic tension in the literature, which echoes many of the debates from previous decades, especially concerning the 'effects of television'. Some authors emphasize the powerful impact that digital media have on how we live, think, interact with others, and how we experience the world and ourselves – and that this impact is quite problematic. Aiken (2015), who describes herself as a 'cyberpsychologist', detects attributes in digital media that foster dependence, even what she calls 'compulsion' and 'addiction'. She cites research showing that six of ten respondents in one survey said they 'they slept with their mobile phone turned on under their pillow—or on a nightstand next to the bed', and that '(m)ore than half described feeling "uncomfortable" when they forget their mobile phone at home...'. (Aiken 2017: p.61-62).

Turkle (2011) argues that our instant digital connections all too often lead to emotional loneliness; we believe we can attain genuine close relations without the having to deal with their demands and responsibilities. More speculative, popular philosophical laments about the internet are widespread; Harris (2014) regrets the 'end of absence' and the 'loss of lack' that follows from it – that is, that we

are rarely left to our own devices to think, meditate, and reflect, without the assistance of the digital media in some way. He articulates the concern that many have about 'using vs. losing' some of our most fundamental human capacities. While the evidence is inconclusive, it is too early to merely dismiss such disquieting thoughts about our civilization.

On a somewhat more concrete level, the ideal of friendship is also a cause for concern among some researchers, who see its evolution online as problematic. Previously, friends were largely a personal, private matter. On social media, they become in a sense public, and serve as 'a public' for our manifestations of our identity. Thus, when people put on their Facebook page that they have been taking their kids to a lot of activities, when they post the greetings they sent to their mom on Mother's Day, something happens. On the one hand, that they do these private things is splendid. That they post such acts on Facebook turns the acts into public performances, a part of the digital presentation of self; an act that will hopefully elicit 'likes'.

Bakardieva (2015) has traced the evolution of online sociality; she sees a process of technical rationalization of 'friendship' – sociality becomes an object of computation and takes on increasingly standardized and trivialized forms and gestures. This has now culminated with the rise of socialbots, i.e. robotized online functions that masquerade as 'friends' online – you are invited to 'friend' somebody – but often that invitation derives not from the person but from the algorithmic conclusion the platform has arrived at. How do such developments impact on friendship – and affect – in the digital era?

Counterpoints to such pessimistic views can be found in the work of authors such as Baym (2015), who underscore the power of the users to shape the media affordances for their own purposes. She highlights the freedom gained, especially for our social relations. Obviously hardly anyone today makes a one-sided deterministic argument, it is more of a question of which tendencies they see as dominant. Yet there is enough evidence to suggest that social media generally, and their contribution to affect specifically, are not without their dilemmas. These perspectives may seem a bit remote from concerns about the public sphere and participation, but we should keep in mind that political involvement is predicated on social relations, identity, and subjective empowerment. Understanding how these are evolving in online environments will inform our analysis of the potential for digital media to facilitate democratic participation and serve a vital infrastructure for public spheres.

Privatized Public Spheres, Expressive Participation

To engage politically via the internet is to enter into a communicative environment that is structured by a small number of very large corporate actors such as Google, Microsoft, Facebook and YouTube. This political economy (Franklin 2013; Fuchs 2014; van Dijck 2013) renders the net thoroughly commercial to the core (with only wikis and a few other cooperative endeavours being the exception). This basic reality of the internet and its social media platforms does not preclude civic uses, but from the standpoint of the user, even if our intentions are civic or political, we are still addressed by and embedded in dominant online consumerist discourses. These discourses offer us subject positions mostly as consumers, rarely as citizens. There is an almost infinite accessible universe of consumption, entertainment, gaming, sports, hobbies, and erotic pleasures. There is nothing intrinsically negative about any of these realms on their own, but in the context of public sphere – and the eternal competition for attention – politics remains a marginal and subordinate domain of use on the internet.

Further, online political participation can quite readily become a privatized habitus with a consumerist stance (Papacharissi 2010; Dahlgren 2013). The often very loose or non-existent bonds with other active citizens can engender a cosy comfort zone, characterized by 'slacktivism' and 'clicktivism'. Engaging with the political becomes implicitly a free-choice option among other leisure pursuits. Such engagement can be quite pleasurable – and may seductively blind us to the sustained (rational) 'work' required for serious political participation. Recalling the parameters of participation

mentioned above, the individual mode thus take precedence over collective one, and the horizon of engagement with society *via* the media risks becoming undercut by engagement *in* the media. Certainly social media platforms and other technologies are necessary for political participation in today's world, but if participation becomes reduced to merely a private screen activity, much is lost in terms of the experience of solidarity.

Others have made this argument very explicitly. Effler (2010) cites several authors to make the point that live interactive political participation – including rituals – is emotionally energizing and can generate and strengthen collective identity. The 'weak bonds' of networks are an integral part of participatory politics, but stronger ones are also necessary for effective political activity. Gladwell (2010) also observes that Facebook does not generate the kind of strong bonds required to social movements. The experience of dealing with other citizens face-to-face in meetings, sharing the work of organizing and mobilizing, laughing together, consoling each other – all such experience strengthens the bonds between activists and generates something essential for efficacious political agency, namely solidarity. The world of IRL – 'in real life' – remains an essential arena and source of affect.

From the standpoint of the parameters of participation mentioned earlier, we could say that the danger here lies in that online participation, while rendered easy to accomplish, may well have reduced outcome. Moreover, the social and cultural frames of such settings, i.e. the norms and codes of interaction on various platforms, may inhibit the emergence of the political. The identity that one wants to put across to ones 'friends', and the congruent affect required, may not mesh with what is required for political engagement (Storsul 2014). Culturally coded contexts can well inhibit political talk, as Eliasoph (1998) has demonstrated.

Political affect in itself is thus no guarantee of political efficacy. In fact, it is generally easier to express one's affect than to follow it through via action. In regard to participation there is a heuristic dichotomy that emerged within traditional political science in studying the motivation of voters (see, for example, Brennan and Lomasky 1984) which has relevance for the discussion at hand: it has to do with 'instrumental' and 'expressive' forms. With instrumental politics, citizens are involved with actual political struggles and their outcomes, while with expressive politics, the benefit is seen as residing in the act of voicing one's views. That is, there is no anticipation or demand that the act will have consequences beyond the satisfaction of it affords the citizen; it 'feels good', it 'gets something off one's chest', and so on. This is noted all the more in the growing uncivil and even baleful character of online political expression: anger and hate account for much of the affect. Expressive motivation can of course well be important for the long-term instrumental goals by building collective identities, mobilizing opinion around issues, and so forth (or in anti-democratic ways, generate fear and intimidation) yet the distinction remains of heuristic value.

In the age of net-mediated participation, expression is most often easier to enact than effective, instrumental interventions into the political realm. In simple terms, it's easier to express something than to actually get something done, which connects us with the parameter of participation having to do with the degree of difficulty. Much of the literature on public spheres, politics, and the internet ignores this distinction, with the result that expressive participation often takes on a position of significance equal to that of the instrumental forms, downplaying concern with the actual efficacy. One exception is Marichal (2013), who examined 250 politically oriented Facebook groups and found that very few of them encouraged any further action in any way. These posts certainly manifested engagement and constituted forms of participation but were almost all in the expressive mode. If the steps required for instrumental participation are systematically avoided, the confrontation with power relations is undercut, again actualizing the risks of online participation becoming a cozy privatized experience.

Flowing with the Social Media Timeline

There are some attributes of the net environment that are hardly commented upon anymore; they have become taken for granted as aspects of its beneficial affordances. Gilroy-Ware (2017) depicts some of these salient qualities that define and shape much of our experience on social media. He construes this as the flow of an affective 'timeline', the largely chronological, linear array of the different sites, tweets, posts, feeds that each of us passes through during our online activities. This timeline includes the *familiar sources* that we each use in our daily navigation, which provides a sense security and control; the *abundance* of materials available, which is seemingly infinite and provides sustained interest and pleasure; the *mixture* of different items that comprise the timeline – the blend of images, sounds, genres, hybrids, music, text – that we attend to and distinguish largely via emotional regulation; and the *novelty* on offer, that provides ceaseless unpredictability and excitement of the ever-new. I would also add *speed* as an essential quality: the actual velocity of visual-audio-textual movement on the net is one of its definitive qualities shaping online experience. The present becomes implicitly devalued as our emotional energy becomes set for anticipation of whatever might come next.

The abundance of content on the net is, from the practical horizons of any user, seemingly infinite. Even if we try to limit our attention to that which may be relevant for involvement with the public sphere (and thus discount most consumption, entertainment, popular culture, hobbies, etc.), one still is confronted with a dizzying array of material. There are the many variants of journalism, political actors of all kinds, parties, corporations and other vested interests, but also massive amounts from other citizens, both as individuals and civic groups on websites and social media who offer information, commentary, opinion, debates, gossip, nonsense, misinformation, the insightful, the deceptive, the playful, the poetic, and much, much more, all mixed together, scrambling the traditional boundaries between journalism and non-journalism, between the political and the non-political.

Of course we all have our own areas of interest, networks and sites that we follow, and thereby wall off most of what is 'out there' as not relevant. We develop personal strategies for navigating the daily tsunami of information, the 'infoglut' as Andrejevic (2013) calls it. Yet, as he argues, even as we zero in on just those topics and perspectives that interest us and adhere to the groupings whose world views we share, we are often still confronted by this vast output with all its conflicting discursive vectors. Doubt can therefore set in, as I discuss in the next section.

Novelty and speed are key themes of (late) modern culture that a number of writers have addressed, including and Harvey (1991) and Virilio (2002). Finding and extracting relevant information that one can trust can be difficult in a fast-moving informational environment, yet still more challenging is to develop 'knowledge'. This takes time and effort, both of which become easily marginalized in the high velocity milieu of social media. Decision-making requires reflection, which in turn demands time (Carr 2014 pursues these themes in depth). Positive affect becomes linked to speed and to keeping up with the new, risking deflection of the demands of rational involvement.

Abundance and speed increase the competition for attention, and as media environments becomes denser, the odds of getting and holding attention to any message generally decreases. Pettman (2016) argues that it becomes almost meaningless to talk about distraction when attention becomes so fragmented: we move to a situation characterized by serial micro-involvement. This, as Couldry (2014) proposes, in turn suggests that people are less likely to engage for longer periods with any given political issue, let alone long range policy horizons.

Political attention becomes more event-oriented, the participation parameter of the time frame becomes short. He notes that even the most rigorous analyses of how digital networks facilitate political participation, e.g. Bennett and Segerberg (2013), do not show the web supporting long-term engagement that can result in major political transformations. The results have been at best intensive short-term protest, of which the Occupy movement of 2011 is a leading example.

From a different angle, other changes have grown over the past decade that also transform social media as participatory spaces. Discussion and debate in some sectors has become less civil, more aggressive, not least when the topics take on the character of 'culture wars' and the clash over values (Nagel 2017). While there is much humour and satire, playful mischief and pranks, we see increasing hate speech towards groups, and harassment of individuals, especially sexual abuse of women, and even death threats, that serve to silence citizens, journalists, public figures, and office holders. This has made the net at times not only an unpleasant but also a dangerous place, which can silence voices in the public sphere Phillips and Milner 2017). This malevolent development adds intimidation to the discursive obstacles one can encounter, and for most citizens, mobilizes fear and precaution at the expense of the affect nourishing participation.

I have argued here that the internet and social media more specifically offer many opportunities for democratic participation, but that we need to be alert as to how attributes of the digital environment can impede such participation, not least in the kinds of affect it implicitly promotes. I will round off the discussion by situating these observations in the context of a particular challenge facing democracy today, namely populism.

Over the Brink: Populism and Excess Affect

The dilemmas facing democracy are many and profound. In several newer democracies we see drifts towards illiberalism (Hungary, Poland), authoritarianism (Russia), and even dictatorship (Turkey). Across the board, neoliberal capitalism continues to shifts real power away from citizens and democratic institutions and puts it in the hands of politically unaccountable corporate actors thereby eroding democracy (Brown 2015) and its institutions and culture (McGuigan 2016; Phelan 2014). Moreover, observers have note in Western democracies the declines in civic participation in political processes over the past quarter century. There are unfortunately some understandable reasons for this: many citizens feel the system is unresponsive, that private wealth buys public policies, that the political class is, if not corrupt, at least indifferent to citizen voices (among a large literature, see for example, Hay 2007). This has eroded political parties as centres for political engagement and participation, as many observers have noted (Mair 2013). Yet these negative developments do not go unchallenged, as illustrated by a number of major movements in recent years, including Occupy and anti-austerity activism (Castells 2012). However, in the last decade, Western democracies have been experiencing a response of another kind, mainly from the right wing: populism.

Problematic Populism

Populism is as slippery concept, though it seems that the definitions are beginning to stabilize (for a classic treatment, see Cardovan 1981; more recent contributions include Müller 2016; Mudde and Kalhausser 2017; Wodak 2013; for a link to media research, see Alavares and Dahlgren, 2016). Most commonly, 'the people' are discursively constructed as a virtuous unity, confronted by evil and/or incompetent elites and undesirable and/or threatening 'others', including, variously, racial and religious minorities, intellectuals, journalists, and government. The status of large corporations remains often ambiguous. The affective appeal is for 'the people' (of course a category that excludes selected groups) to take back what is being lost. Calls for enhanced participation of citizens can readily at times advocate bypassing constitutional procedures in the name of 'government by the people'. In the US, the Trump presidential campaign, his presidency, and his supporters offer an elaborate example.

These are highly problematic developments since they derive from genuine shortcomings within liberal democracy itself – i.e. its unfulfilled promises. 'Populist practice emerge out of the failure of existing social and political institutions to confine and regulate political subjects into a relatively stable social order' (Panizza, 2005:9). Various groups feel excluded, socially, politically, culturally; they

sense a lack of recognition and feel resentment. Right-wing populism today can range ideologically from almost mainstream centre-right to the extremes of xenophobia, militant nationalism, and racism and proto-fascism. (Neo-Nazis at present are too marginal for populist appeal). Politicians' refusal to listen and their inability to bring about change, turns engaged citizens into enraged ones; affect is often intense.

Indeed, anger and often, at bottom, fear, are the fuel of populism. Increasingly, in the contemporary media landscape, groups can hover in their own counter-public spheres, 'echo chambers' walled off from divergent views and cultivate their group discourses, not having to engage in reasoned argument (Sunstein, 2017). Many populist groups and parties in the West have carried this to the extreme. In these discursive enclaves, they can affectively create a sense of purpose and collective identity. The often extensive resources available, organizational efforts, and strong leadership can contribute to long-term participation.

In these enclaves it is not just emotionality about political views that is mobilized; increasingly, alternative versions of reality begin to take hold. Shared society-wide knowledge about the world begins to unravel; we enter the era of 'post-truth' (which the Oxford English Dictionary chose as its word of the year for 2016). The assault is in part on mainstream journalism – already a weakened institution in the production of knowledge, with growing uncertainties about its position and role (see, for example Alexander et al, 2016). Charges of 'fake news', together with slanted accounts, disinformation, and so on have become part of the mix. The assault continues also on science, on universities, the courts, and 'experts' generally (e.g. in climate change denial). In some many cases clinging to theological discourses as a counterpoint to empirical evidence. Opinion takes on a position on par with fact-based knowledge.

What is significant here is not just the disregard of the importance ascertaining truth, but also the role of affect in this epistemological context. Fernández-Armesto (2010) suggests that historically there are four basic methods or procedures, that we use in ascertaining what is true: what we feel, what we are told, what we are able to figure out, and what we empirically observe. All four co-exist in various relationships at any point in history. Today, in the viral world of online information, the first option – that which we feel – is clearly on the rise. Truth becomes reconfigured as an inner subjective reality, an affective leap, and thus becomes the foundation for validity claims about reality. Rational argument becomes all the more an incommensurable as a mode of discourse.

This is of course an extreme rendering, but it captures a strong current trend. Coupled with weak sense of efficacy, it is easy for citizens' prevailing assumptions to be psychologically stronger than their critical reasoning. Affect can lead people to find short-cuts to deal with the massive amounts of information that confronts them at great speed. Cognitive dissonance is replaced with cognitive comfort, via emotion. Moreover, the gravitational pull of group identity reduces societal insecurity and promotes affective group bonds to reinforce such pathway to knowledge. In the long run this becomes debilitating for the individual, it fosters cognitive closure of groups, and ultimately damages the critical role of public spheres.

Much of the focus on populism justifiably accentuates its playing to the emotions of citizens and the success it can have in mobilizing them. However, we should keep in mind, as I noted above, that all politics (including the most traditional party politics), require a dimension of individual emotion and collective affect to motivate participation. Indeed, all democratic politics, I would contend, must to some degree be 'popular' in the sense that they attract support though affective involvement. The popular can potentially tip over into populism, though the criteria have varied across time and place. Thus, we may at times have difficulty in drawing the line – though 'hard core' populism usually has the strong 'us vs. them' ingredients including scapegoating. Mainstream political speech and journalism may avoid the societal polarization of genuine populism, yet they can still slip into post-rational modes of discourses, promoting opinion over factual analysis, especially in the more tabloid

genres. 'Infotainment' has been with us a long time. The fruitful balance between reason and emotion is precarious; it is easily undone.

Ultimately, as democratic citizens, we are must struggle not only for those causes and issues in which we believe – and invest with affect – but also for the character of democracy itself. At present it seems to be in need of much support.

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