
Zizi Papacharissi

Affective Publics. Sentiment, Technology and Politics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
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If you are looking for a rich and subtle vocabulary with which to fashion an evocative description of the role of Twitter in cohering social and political movements, Zizi Papacharissi's book is what you need. At its heart is the idea of "digitally afforded affect" (p. 8) and the argument that "online media facilitate political formations of

affect” (p. 9). Twitter, similar to other networked platforms, supports the emergence of networked publics around “structures of feeling” (Raymond Williams’ term is brought into the world of social media and put to good use there). How does it do this? It enables individual citizens to “feel their place into a developing story” (p. 131), by sharing opinions, facts, feelings, and “performances” of the self. As “producers” they can contribute to news story-telling streams that “blend opinion, fact and emotions.” Papacharissi is helpfully clear that this does not amount to a debasement by emotion of the pure currency of reason; her readers should be in no doubt that feeling and thought are intrinsically deeply interwoven. The flow of “affective news” (p. 80) that results is always on, a constant “electronic elsewhere” (pp. 67ff.) in which people can find commonality with others while making very personalized contributions to an inclusive narrative.

Her much nuanced analysis of Twitter is derived from work on some formidable data sets. There are three case studies: the Egyptian uprising of early 2011, the Occupy movement of 2011–2012, and some randomly chosen non-political trending topics. There was a corpus of 150,000 tweets collected from #egypt, 1 of 280,000 from #ows (Occupy Wall Street), and 2,800 from twenty-five trending tags over six months. Using the concepts of networked gatekeeping and networked framing, Papacharissi describes the processes by which opinion leaders and dominant frames emerge, all characterized by plurality and hybridity. Thus, in Egypt, for example, the dominant frame that developed as an “ambient chorus” (p. 59) was of “revolution.”

There is a very different quality to this type of participation and mobilization from that of pre-digital eras. The author captures this in terms of the distinction between connective and collective action. The “connective polysemy” (pp. 87ff.), which is one of the key “affordances” of Twitter, enables people to join in without having to buy into an ideological package. They can make declarative contributions, while avoiding deliberative work and strategic decision making, as well as ideological negotiation and bloc membership. The thinness or weakness of collective identities in the social-media context is regretted by some researchers of online politics. Is the connective mode so well illustrated in Papacharissi’s account of Twitter a regrettable shortcoming, or a necessary adaptation of politics to an era of individuality and fluidity, a way of precipitating involvement that would otherwise remain latent?

Although the discourse of #egypt apparently remained fairly homogeneous, within the very broad tent of “revolution,” that of #ows came to include dissenting voices critical of the Occupy movement, a difference attributable to the obvious difference in context between a widely opposed dictatorship and the liberal democracies in which the Occupy movement predominantly flourished. How off-platform divisions of opinion structure the Twittersphere, and with what consequences, is an interesting question.

This book offers plenty of food for thought about that and many other questions. The chapters on Egypt and Occupy could perhaps have had more examples than they do, but they still convey a strong sense of what was happening on Twitter. For this reviewer, the only detraction from the book’s merits lies in two chunks of theory at each end of it. First, the “affect theory” presented early on is somewhat esoteric and abstract. Fortunately, although the author does refer back to it on occasions, and it

informs her use of the term “affective attunement,” this particular concept of affect does not vitally underpin the subsequent analyses of the emotional nature of the material she studies. Second, the theoretical summary in the final chapter appears to suggest that not all publics are affective. This might make sense in terms of the specific definition of “affective” adopted earlier in the book, but might mislead or confuse some readers because it does not square with the principle of the necessary interpenetration of reason and emotion, captured so well throughout the book.

As a more fitting summary note, we might end on Papacharissi’s comparison of Twitter with music, in terms of the role played in social and political movements. Just as music can “allow publics and crowds to feel, with greater intensity, the meaning of the movement for themselves” (p. 93), connective communities on Twitter can capture some of the calls, cries, and murmurs that music represents and tie them to a cause. This book explores or raises a number of important issues in our understanding of the emotional public sphere and points to a need for further study of how Twitter and other virtual platforms shape the nature and consequences of *interruptions* to the music, “Antagonistic content injections . . . creating an effect similar to that of noise interrupting a song” (p. 93).