Book Reviews

Affective publics

Zizi Papacharissi

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In the past 15 years, Zizi Papacharissi's work has emerged as an original intervention on the uses of digital media and their implications for the formation of community and the practice of democratic publicity. What the nature of online communities is, how bonds of digital connectivity are established, how these bonds operate as social interventions, and, crucially, what happens to the public realm under the pressures of these digital connectivities—these are some of the key questions posed in her research.

In her earlier book, *The Private Sphere*, Papacharissi presents a sophisticated thesis about the contribution of digital technologies in shifting the locus of public intervention into the private sphere and thus transforming the deliberative practices of democracy. Her argument is that changes in communication technologies and, hence, in the social status of privacy have increasingly located civic engagement in the private sphere, where activism fuses the public presentation of private selves with the private commentary on public issues. However, rather than deploring this development as a corrosion of democratic deliberation, in the Habermasian spirit, Papacharissi urges us instead to reflexively embrace it: We should, she argues refreshingly, both engage with virtual citizenship and its participatory possibilities and simultaneously sustain our critical engagement with the virtual spaces of publicity—on the grounds of its continuing commercialization, inequality of access, and narcissism.

Her more recent book, *Affective Publics*, develops some of those ideas and gives them a new and unexpected twist. It foregrounds an implicit theme in *The Private Sphere*, the theme of affect, understood as "the energy that drives, neutralizes, or entraps networked publics," in order to explore the role that prediscursive and unarticulated "intensities" play in digital communication. Her analytical focus is on "public displays of affect *as political statements*" on Twitter and her analytical aim is to demonstrate how such decentralized yet often dense and powerful displays of affect participate in the production of political subjectivities and networked sociality. The dual contribution of this piece of research is that, on the one hand, it offers a powerful statement about the nature of public discourse and political activism today, and, on the other, it develops a nuanced language for analyzing emergent forms of individual agency, as they are variously configured through Twitter as a key ambient platform of social media.

The book is organized into five chapters, with the first introducing the theoretical premises of affect theory; the second to fourth engaging with the case studies; and the final one concluding with five claims on the nature of digital

affect and the trajectories of its publics. Evidently then, unlike Papacharissi's previous book, which mainly relied on theory, this one is heavily data-driven, grounding its arguments on substantial empirical material: the Egypt uprising (280,000 tweets), the Occupy movement (150,000 tweets), and a set of other, no-political Twitter-trending "story-tellings of the self" (2,800 tweets), all of which act as an index of people's private expressivity in the public domain. This sustained combination of empirical research with theory production enables Papacharissi to accomplish three things. First, it enables her to combine quantitative (CA) with qualitative (DA) textual methodologies, in innovative ways and to construct thick descriptions of the patterns, textures, and practices of Twitter use across contexts. Second, it facilitates the development of an analytical language on the communicative architecture of such digital movements in terms of both their "form and texture": how movements come together, act, and disperse, but importantly also, how they mean—a refreshing move, considering the exclusive preference of much relevant literature toward mediality and connectivity over meaning, discourse, and representation. And third, it allows her to develop fresh insights into the rising trajectories of protest movements, such as the Arab Spring, but also to gesture toward reasons for the failure of such movements to sustain their momentum in the face of political challenge and regime change.

The main thesis emerging from this triple contribution is that social movements sustained by the digital interactivity of Twitter should not be primarily defined by their political efficacy but by their affective intensities: the connective force they generate through the shared rhythms of their common storytelling. Similarly to *The Private Sphere*, Papacharissi's own normative position here is productively dialectic. This means that, unlike much polarizing literature, her position neither deplores the loss of the political nor celebrates the rise of a new radicalism. It urges us instead to treat these affective connectivities as contingent and self-oriented formations (theorized precisely as "connectivities" rather than "collectivities"), yet pregnant with radically open-ended potentialities. Both politically and analytically, then, what we need to do is focus on the contexts within which these connectivities emerge, for it is the historical specificity of such contexts that ultimately shapes whether and how such publics may end up as fleeting forms of activism or as powerful political interventions that can make a difference.

Of course, the fragility of the political in the context of "passions" has always been a fervently debated topic in critical social sciences. Papacharissi, however, goes beyond approaches that limit these debates in the contrast between reason and emotion. It enhances existing scholarship by introducing the work of affect theorists, including Deleuze & Guatarri and B. Massumi, in the study of digital politics. What this move achieves is to offer us a genuinely new approach that renders the reason/emotion distinction irrelevant in favor of focusing on how the articulation of various collective intensities comes to shape the patterns and textures of networked publics. From this perspective, the terms tonality, rhythm,

texture, and form do not simply describe but also retheorize the practices of digital connectivity on Twitter, along the lines of affect-driven forces. By the same token, the use of "play," "public dreaming," or "deliberate spontaneity" not only names but reclassifies networked participation, in ways that thematize the prediscursive intensities of digitally connected bodies. In my view, this capacity for mapping out and reconceptualizing the contribution of feeling-driven forces in Twitter politics is the greatest contribution of Papacharissi's book—a contribution not only in Internet Studies or the Media and Communications field but across the social sciences.

Given the analytical and diagnostic value of the book, it appears a bit of a lost opportunity for it not to engage more substantially with its theoretical resources. The Introductory chapter, for instance, could have reflected not only on the possibilities but also on the limitations of affect theory for the study of digital publics through their meaning-making practices on Twitter. It would have been particularly useful, here, to see a reflexive argument about the possibility of combining the study of pre-discursive, embodied intensities (affect being central in nonrepresentational epistemologies) with discourse-driven methods (content and discourse analysis constituting, par excellence, representational epistemologies). Nor does the Conclusion return to affect as a theoretical category to tell us whether or how the empirical field of digital networking may challenge or enhance its premises.

Raymond Williams' classic term "structures of feeling" is elaborated on here for the first time and, even though it is put to good use, its affinities to and differences from affect theory are not touched upon. This may be because the final chapter opts for a numbered-points format that summarizes the key findings of the book under five distinct claims. Again, while this is a neat and concise way to conclude, it is perhaps not optimal for the development of a more comprehensive argument that reflects on all aspects of knowledge production in the volume. These go beyond diagnostic claims (what kinds of publics Twitter connectivities are) and encompass, at least partly, theoretical claims (how is affect theory challenged and reshaped in the light of digital media research?) as well as empirical ones (what resources do we now have to "read" anew the histories of the Arab Spring movement and the conditions of possibility for political success or failure in other instances of digital protest)?

These absences notwithstanding, *Affective Publics* is not simply a fascinating new addition to the growing literature on social media and protest movements. It is a significant statement in its own right about the ontology of digital communication. The ways we think about digitality, affect, and politics in the early 21st century cannot from now on be divorced from the conceptual language introduced in the field by this groundbreaking volume.

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