Book Reviews

A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age

Zizi A. Papacharissi

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This book is not an easy one to read because it covers numerous historical, philosophical, and political theoretical aspects of digital democracy and new media. It also raises many issues about how we conceptualize democracy, citizenship, and political participation. This is quite a departure from the one-shot survey analysis that tells us that some form of political participation is significantly correlated with some form of online communication. To its credit, the book is not another installment of narratives about the glories or failures of the new media and how they democratize life or politics. Instead, it is an insightful book of issues that must be pondered in order to make useful arguments about new media convergence, the ever-present democratic potential of new media, and new forms of social structuration and identity made possible with new media networking.

Older and newer conceptualizations of democracy are presented. Civic engagement and political engagement are discussed in ways that are not reduced to simplistic notions of flash mobs, wisdom of the crowds, "Arab spring" Twitter "revolutions," and other common stories found in the news and some academic writings. Papacharissi develops an alternative to Habermas's concept of the public sphere and presents it as something akin to Benkler's concept of the networked public sphere. She links the latter concept to technological convergence and changing practices of citizenship.

Despite this progress, citizenship and participation in democracy remain problematic in this new approach to engagement. One might wonder if citizens are simply being asked to adapt to a new model of political life in which there is a new normal of citizen as consumer rather than citizenship being something kept free from consumership. One might hope for a commitment to a model of democracy in this book that would make it possible to evaluate the political trajectories and ethics issues of new media networking. However, the author skillfully argues that democracy is an abstract concept that becomes material in varying ways in different times and cultural contexts. This leads her to argue that the digital side of political communication is as fluid as the variance in what we call democracies. She correctly notes that failure of nostalgic views of digital democracy to account for the elitist and exclusionary nature of past spheres of influence like salons, coffee houses, town hall meetings, etc. Once we get past nostalgia, we can examine the specific and current traits of new media usage that affect politics.

Against a backdrop of findings that indicate widespread elitism and cynicism of citizens in contemporary democracy systems, Papacharissi argues that new

media interactions can open up new social spaces for political deliberation. By countering the powerlessness of traditional spaces with alternative ones, she argues that citizens can be empowered. Clearly, there are two possible reactions to her argument. One is that this is nonsense and attempts to use a continuous redefinition of power to find empowerment where there is none. A second, and more compelling, reaction is that Papacharissi is pointing out that powerlessness is not simply about traditional forms of participation such as voting, but also about networking and that the new media enable newer forms of networking that involve power. The author argues that citizenship is changing along with how citizens negotiate their democracy and what is known as political. Political activities, it is argued, now include blogging, posting opinions, joining online petitions, and uploading videos to websites like YouTube.

A strong challenge is launched in this book to the concept of public sphere. It is possible to challenge the book's acceptance of the consumerization or monetizing of political communication as a gateway to new forms of participation, but it is more difficult to reject its claim that many political activities today are done in private spaces. Papacharissi does recognize that some of the online activities in the privatized political spheres are trivial in nature and impact. Research is needed regarding the importance or triviality or specific forms of private actions in relationship to power and political decision making. Perhaps what is finally being argued in this book is more about personal empowerment than a system of governance we call

democracy. Papacharissi observes that public deliberation is important for democracy, but also that the concept of a public sphere is an abstraction used to discuss political deliberation.

Papachrissi's work reminds us that not only is the world overall changing along with its economic, political, and cultural systems and networking, but also that individual life is changing. This is not determinism (saying that communication technologies cause the social changes). It is enablement, affordances, and changes in how humans organize their lives by taking advantages of the doorways and capabilities offered by network technologies. With this book and others like it, simplistic notions of determinism can be cleared from the air by realizing that communication technologies are used in creative ways that affect how we communicate and those new ways of communicating have larger social effects. We should be able to observe a mutually causal relationship between social interaction and new media usage.

Papacharissi discusses our identities as somewhat distinct, somewhat fluid, and subject to changes because of networked places of living and interacting with other people. Thus, sites where we do communication involve identity construction as well as many other activities. Social media provide means for increasing social connection and also for self-presentation and identity construction. Social circles are part of social media. Identities are not only built but also confirmed by others in one's social media networks. Personal and social identities are involved in social media. All of this is now applied to

political identity as well. The author helps us to recognize that communication today is no longer neatly divided into a public or private sphere. Instead, social and political practices are partially done with actions taken in private spaces.

It appears ironic, but true, that people online today are able to increase their networking while increasing the privacy of their communication practices. In these spaces, the technologies can increase their sense of control and autonomy. The freedom to join or retreat from participation might increase the willingness of one to participate. Empirical study is needed to test such hypotheses. In addition to more data, it will be useful to sort out what kinds of relationships there are among variables related to online activities and variables related to various forms of political action. A continuous question might concern whether communication activities are necessary and sufficient or necessary but not sufficient conditions for actual political empowerment.

This book challenges facile assumptions about boundaries separating public and private life and communication. It also challenges notions that communication of any sort produces power. It looks at governance from both sides of input; both the private and the public and how the public and private sides of life blend into each other. It accounts for the fact that new forms of political participation continue to emerge with emerging new media. Of course, new forms of participation and even increased participation are not necessarily equivalent to an increase in either democracy or empowerment. By zigzagging through potentials and barriers, this book brings us to some realistic hunches about how new media networking, participation, and governance may be interrelated.

While people have always had their feet in both private and public spheres, Papasharissi appears to be arguing the two kinds of spheres are increasingly blended with new media and online communication. She points out how the new media architectures provide affordances for both public and private actions. More importantly, we see that the convergence of the new media technologies encourages convergences of the spheres and the formations of networks. This suggests that boundaries in politics are less clearly defined—those such as citizens vs. consumers, and viewers vs. producers.

The author acknowledges the problems that accompany making various forms and platforms of political communication new commodities that can be bought and sold. She is fully aware of the monitorial nature of new media enterprises. Still, she does not forfeit the democratic potential of new media in the face of such exploitation.

If one is going to talk about democratizing, as this book does, it is imperative to define what is getting democratized and how. It is affordances of new media for micro level user behavior alone or does it involve affordances and practices that somehow increase both digital and offline processes and structures of democracy? This needs clarification in this book. Papacharissi does make the important observation that there are micro, meso, and macro level changes that need to be explained in discussion of new media and power. This is a point missed by most communication researchers who discuss the role of digital media in political communication. At the micro level,

the author discusses the extension of personal neworks and weak ties. At the micro level, she talks about citizens being able to produce communication content and making material that goes from bottom-up rather than top-down. The liberation here appears to increase user control, individualization, personalized affordance and features, and enhanced convergence of technologies and uses of those technologies. Collectively producing with others leads to what Papacharissi describes as participatory culture. Macro level effects might occur as such collective producing affects mass media and new media powerhouses.

A main thesis in this book is that experienced and skilled new media users are able to construct spaces for self-expression and social interaction in forms of architecture that vary in functions. For example, one might use MySpace (still alive) for cultural affinity, social networking sites for personal association and status, YouTube videos for distributing ideas or art, and Second Life for experimentation. While the political empowerment effects might seem elusive to such activities, there may be mediating processes that have yet to be explained in relation to empowerment – such as social identity formation, status formation, group affiliations, cultural sharing, and personalized social and political spaces.

According to Papacharissi, the new private spaces of interaction help individuals link what is political to what are everyday forms of concerns and actions. Still, this may be an empirical issue that needs data to support the claim.

A central challenge of self-presentation in social media is the presence of many audiences vs. a small number or one audience. Papacharissi argues the boundaries between private and public are lessened with social media participation. A better case would be made if more empirical data were included in the book to support this claim as it is a main thesis in the book.

The last chapter of the book has an interesting list of five new "habits" of engagement. This list, like the rest of the book, is useful for stimulating critical thought about where we have been and where we are headed with arguments and narratives about digital democracy, new media and government, and how new media and politics are related. Papacharissi argues that political engagement can now occur in many spheres, not only the clearly political ones. There is a dubious claim about multi-tasking built into this argument. Just as some people confuse task shifting with doing more than one task at the same time, the author of this book does not prove that signing a political petition, while watching TV, while chatting with someone about local events, etc., amounts to significant political participation. Nor does my comment about this prove that it is insignificant. Again, we are facing claims that need empirical testing and the book is short on data to support some of its main theses.

Heuristically, the book is arguing that time spent making political comments in private spaces is not wasted time in contrast to political behavior conducted in public spaces. This forces us to think about how private and public spaces are networked today. It also suggests that we spend more time studying the structuration of political spaces in micro levels of

social interaction as well as more collective meso levels. An additional value of this book is that it suggests a view of private spaces that challenges assumptions of those spaces as inherently apolitical. The idea of private is about them being self-constructed and revealed to the extent that the individual decides to reveal them.

Papcharissi helps us to think about the potentiality of online social interaction providing linkages to political actions. Forgetting the problems with the term "multitasking," there is a strong argument here about networked communication platforms. These networked platforms allow the tightening of strong tie and weak tie associations, the formation of identities (including political ones), the formation of social capital, and the emergence of public profiles. All of this can be partially accomplished by individuals using private-space technologies of engagement and expression. These private spaces are high in user control, autonomy, and potential for self-expression but allow the user to move beyond entertainment or consumerism into new forms of civic and political engagement.

Is anything guaranteed in this book? Never. And what a joy it is that this book provides no guarantees or overstated promises. Papacharissi acknowledges, for example, that new media actions like blogging are only significant if messages are disseminated and content is networked (as with a video going viral). The author also acknowledges Digital Divide gaps in the skills, software, and experience levels necessary to fully engage new media as private spheres of digital democracy.

Moreover, Papacharissi notes that new media technology can be very liberating for individual citizens but fairly weak in terms of larger societal communication and political changes. She is not denying bottom-up changes, but rather is realistically noting that democratizing at the level of user control is not the same as democratizing at the level of a political system.

As we enter another year of new media research and debates about how communication technologies and political behavior are related, it is important to sort out our conceptual commitments. This book is a useful aid for doing this.

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