Politics and Emerging Media:

The Revenge of Publicity

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Abstract:

Emerging media technologies and applications have accompanied by an explosion of diverse means and practices for engaging in public life, raising the possibility of an invigorated and improved democratic politics. Investment in this possibility is premised on acceptance of the norms associated with publicity, specifically access to information and enhanced communication. Starting from the premise that democracy is a term whose defining attributes are best understood as the politicization of moral and ethical questions and equality (as opposed to a characteristic set of procedures and practices), the discussion in this paper investigates the potential for democratic participation via Web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook and other social networking sites. What emerges from this exercise is the recognition that within the contemporary context, information, communication and participation stand-in for motivation, judgment and action when it comes to democratic politics. This implies, in turn, that we may be settling for publicity in the place of the more the demanding democratic goods of politicization and equality. Somewhat more ominously, the popular embrace of these surrogates via emerging media technologies may actually undermine the prospect of a politics aimed at more radical outcomes.

Keywords: Information; Communication; Publicity; Technology; Democracy

Résumé:

L'émergence des technologies médiatiques et leurs applications ont mené à une explosion des divers moyens et façons de participer à la vie publique, ce qui augmente la possibilité d'une amélioration de la démocratie politique. Cette possibilité serait basée sur l'acceptation des normes associées à la publicité, en particulier l'accès à l'information et une communication améliorée. En se fondant sur la conception que la démocratie est un terme définit par ses attributs qualificatifs qui représentent une politisation des questions morales et éthiques de l'égalité (à la différence d'une série de procédures et de méthode), cet article examine la possibilité d'une participation démocratique via des vecteurs du Web 2.0 tels que Facebook et d'autres sites de réseautage social. Ce qui émerge de cet exercice est la reconnaissance que l'information, la communication et la participation sont remplacées par motivation, jugement et action dans le contexte contemporain de la démocratie politique. Ceci implique en retour que nous sommes en train de mettre de côté les biens démocratiques les plus exigeants qui sont la politisation et l'égalité. L'acceptation de ces substituts de mauvais prestige par l'émergence des technologies médiatiques peut diminuer la probabilité de la politique qui a des buts moraux radicaux.

Mots-clés: L'information; Communication; Publicité; Technologie; Démocratie

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Introduction

> The information communicated to us by mass culture constantly winks at us.
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> (Adorno, 1991: 83)

In his influential book *The Wealth of Networks*, American legal and media scholar Yochai Benkler (2006: 129) issues this declaration: "How society produces its information environment goes to the very core of freedom." In the light of this proclamation, the central question of politics becomes "Who gets to say what, to whom?" Here, in what is unquestionably an insightful and critical treatment of the political and legal economies of information and its various technologies, Benkler speaks a fundamental truth of the present age: that justice—styled here as a particularly liberal brand of freedom—is principally a matter of information and its communication. If justice, liberal or otherwise, happens to be your thing, it would seem to be a particularly happy, or at least convenient, time to be a student of communication.

To those with the good fortune to possess hammers, everything looks like a nail. Economists look at the world and see markets; anthropologists look at the world and see culture; media scholars look at the world and see information and communication. However, there is more going on here than the disciplinary conceit typical of academic fields in their adolescence. The construction of information and communication as goods-in-themselves, and their identification with the good of justice in liberal democratic contexts has a very long history. At

least since Aristotle's insistence on the separation of politics and philosophy, associating the former with persuasive speech and the latter with speechless contemplation, communication has been privileged in relation to the social achievement of good and just ends (Arendt, 2005: 5-39). The subsequent history of liberal democratic thought and institutions can be read, at least in part, as an affirmation of the centrality of communication and information to political life, at least in those places where liberal democratic forms of government have found footing. The unique position occupied by freedom of expression in the liberal imagination (Peters, 2005), and the dominant role of institutions such as legislatures, elections, courts, schools and mass media, together confirm that democratic justice—at least in the liberal view that equates it with opportunity rather than material outcomes—is unthinkable in the contemporary context without thinking about information and communication (Bimber, 2003).

This situation has prompted sustained attention, on the part of critical social theorists, communication scholars, and political activists alike, to the expansion and perfection of the means of communication and information in liberal democratic contexts. Whether it is post-Habermasians attempting to flesh out the exacting demands of discourse ethics and the sort of public spheres necessary to support deliberative practices, critical media scholars painstakingly documenting the pathologies of capitalist, patriarchal, and racialized political economies that condemn media systems to democratic failure, or the countless political actors who struggle daily to materialize something resembling fairness, diversity and integrity in the media environment, one thing is clear: the road to democratic justice is paved with more and better information and communication. A normative agenda of publicity—of increased and improved public access to information, communication and participation—so occupies our conception of what it is we are after that it is difficult today to find a critical media theorist, scholar or activist who would disagree with this agenda, or who would describe their aims in a significantly different manner.[1] The emergence in the late 20th century of an array of powerful computer and network technologies for mediating information and communication has injected this normative agenda with a renewed sense of hope and possibility (Barney, 2000). This is true among both those who cling to the belief that these technologies will themselves lay waste to hierarchy and privilege, and those who realize that the only prospect for democratic outcomes is a redoubled effort to seize the potentials of these technologies and turn them toward these ends (Boler, 2008). Still, even among those who understand technology to be a field of contingency and struggle, the goals of publicity and their essential identity with democracy itself are more or less taken for granted. The possibility of democratic ends that cannot be expressed in terms of publicity itself, and in relation to which publicity is, at best, an ambiguous ally, seldom is raised.

Those with a taste for the anachronisms of critical theory might be persuaded to consider that publicity has been reified, converted from a social relationship or process into an object or thing; from a means into an end-in-itself. As constituent elements of the generalized norm of publicity, processes of information, communication and participation are elevated from the status of means to achieve goods that are beyond them, to ends that are sufficient unto themselves. In this construction, from a democratic point of view, if we just had more and better communication, more and better information, and more and better opportunities to participate, everything would be fine. This logic is confirmed in contemporary trends in popular culture, in which participation as customization, personalization, connectivity and interactivity has been normalized as the best way to be in the world (Siegel, 2008: 83-97). It is materialized in the proliferation and availability of technologies configured, at least partly, to provide access to these "goods" on a routine basis, and it is reproduced in contemporary critical media studies and

activism that ground their claims in the normative framework of publicity, under which more and better information, communication and participation are taken for granted as goods. However, the possibility looms that, under contemporary technological and political economic conditions, the normalization of information, communication and participation may bolster existing regimes of power, inequality and depoliticization rather than challenging them, in which case the normative framework of publicity is drained of its critical value, and converts from a democratic asset to a democratic liability. This is the possibility explored in this paper.

Democracy names not so much—or, at least, not only—a characteristic set of procedures and practices, as it does a particular condition whose defining attributes are the politicization of moral and ethical questions (questions of the good and the right) and equality. For liberal democrats, equality refers primarily to formal guarantees of equal treatment under the law, and equal opportunities to make good on the autonomy afforded by limits on state authority over the disposal of one's labor and property. For democrats inclined in more radical directions, equality refers to the distribution of power and resources. Here, equality is a material condition, the means to which are political engagement and struggle, which themselves require motivation, judgment and action. The relationship between motivation, judgment and political action is exceedingly complex, whether these are oriented to the democratic end of equality or to some other, competing end. I do not intend to approach this complexity here. Rather, I merely want to suggest that, in the contemporary context, information, communication and participation stand-in for motivation, judgment and action, and that we have come to settle for publicity in the place of the more demanding democratic goods of politicization and equality. Somewhat more ominously, the popular embrace of these surrogates via emerging media technologies may actually undermine the prospect of a politics aimed at more radical outcomes.

Information and Motivation

In an article entitled "Click Here for Democracy," Schudson (2003) argues that most accounts of the democratic potential of emerging media are premised on a conception of citizenship that places access to information at its center. Schudson argues that this is a historically specific idea, traceable in the United States to the Progressive Era of the 1910s and 1920s, an era in which access to education expanded, and the emerging medium of radio carried democratic hopes. It was an idea about democracy and citizenship in which access to information played a key role: "If information can be more complete, more widely disseminated, more easily tapped into by citizens at large, then democracy can flourish" (Schudson, 2003: 49). Schudson goes on to write that "This is all very well if information is at the heart of mass democracy. But it isn't." He traces a succession of several different regimes of citizenship in the United States: the first based on trust in elites; the second based on partisanship; the third based on information and a fourth based on individual rights. The residue of each of these remains in contemporary American political culture, and there are many other possible models of citizenships besides these, but somehow the imagination of what citizenship is or could be under the conditions of emerging media has been almost exclusively expressed in terms of only one model, the ideal of "the informed citizen." As Schudson puts it:

> to imagine that the potential of the computer age for democracy lies in the accessibility of information to individual citizens and voters who will be moved by the millions to petition and to vote more wisely than ever before is to imagine

what will not be—and it is to exercise a very narrow democratic imagination in
the first place.

(2003: 57)

The potential for improved access to increased volumes of better information to move greater numbers of people to more intensive and consistent political engagement has been routinely held out as one of the key democratic promises of emerging media technologies. In his detailed survey of the role played by information in the history of American democracy, Bimber (2003) affirms the importance of information to preference formation and representation, political behaviour, decision-making, accountability and legitimacy. "None of these elements of the democratic process" he writes, "can operate apart from the exchange and flow of information among citizens and their associations and organizations, among citizens and government, and within government itself" (Bimber, 2003: 11-12). This is no casual dismissal of the political significance of information. On the contrary, for Bimber, the structure of information (as opposed to its mere volume and availability) is a crucial variable influencing the character of liberal democracy in any given period. He outlines a succession of "information regimes" in which the prevailing properties of information in a given period present specific opportunities and constraints that condition the character of political organizations and governing structures (Bimber, 2003: 18-25). In Bimber's view, the proximate effects of successive information regimes are evident primarily at the level of political organizations and structures that must adapt to emerging environments in order to ensure their viability and competitive advantage. As he puts it, "processes of political intermediation, organizing, and mobilizing appear to be changing" (Bimber, 2003: 229). However, despite a clear reconfiguration of the structure of informational opportunities and demands for politically-motivated organizations and groups, the effect of information abundance on rates and intensity of political engagement at the level of individual American citizens appears to be minimal. Based on exhaustive and careful analysis of a broad range of qualitative and quantitative empirical data, Bimber (2003: 224) concludes that "The new information environment has not changed levels of political engagement in any substantial way."

Perhaps this conclusion was premature. Since 2000 (the year in which most of Bimber's data was generated), several developments have occurred that might recommend reconsideration of the so-called "reinforcement" thesis, whereby existing patterns of political engagement and disengagement are simply replicated in the context of emerging media (Norris, 2001). These include: the advent of so-called Web 2.0 applications that enable new forms of user-generated, multimedia content such as blogs, podcasting, wikis (Wikipedia), video and image-sharing sites (YouTube and Flickr) and social networking utilities (Facebook, MySpace and Twitter); the proliferation of an increasing variety of portable, networked and wireless devices with which to access, generate and consume such content; the escalating sophistication of the ways in which political organizations and campaigns apply these technologies; the progressive normalization of information transaction via emerging media across all demographics; and the coming-of-age of a new cohort of citizens for whom an incessantly dynamic, emergent media environment is the only reality they have ever known. It goes without saying that, as Bimber's model would predict, these and related developments have significantly influenced informational regimes and practices at the level of political organizations and governing structures. It may also be the case, however, that these developments challenge the reinforcement thesis, insofar as they might be mediating the political engagement of previously disengaged individuals.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project's report on the 2008 US presidential election suggests the growing importance of emerging media to everyday citizens' encounters with partisan and electoral politics (Smith & Rainey, 2008). Charting significant increases across the board, the study reports that 40 percent of Americans went online in 2008 to get news or information about the campaigns, 35 percent watched campaign-related videos online and 29 percent used the internet to access primary campaign materials (speeches, platforms, etc.). However, when it comes to less consumptive, more active forms of engagement, the numbers are less inspiring. The study reports that only 10 percent of Americans used much-ballyhooed social-networking sites to access political information (the most frequent activity being investigation of the political preferences of "friends"); 5 percent have posted their own political views or commentary to websites, blogs or newsgroups; and a mere 2% have used the internet to sign up for volunteer activities related to campaigns. Significant numbers of American citizens consume political information online, and this (along with the formidable information *gathering* and profiling utilities of digital media) has undoubtedly motivated political organizations to reconfigure their approaches to information management and mobilizing financial and electoral support. However, the paucity of evidence demonstrating that these same citizens do much *more* politically than simply *consume* information online suggests that proclamations of a democratic citizenry motivated to political action by information abundance remain premature. The 2008 Canadian general election unfolded in the midst of a media environment that featured unprecedented levels of access to massive volumes of high-quality political information. It also featured the lowest voter turnout—just 59 percent of eligible voters—in Canadian history (Elections Canada, 2008).

In any case, it is far from clear that participation in the demoralizing, technological spectacle of partisan and electoral competition actually qualifies as political engagement oriented toward democratic ends (Kellner, 2005). The case may be made that participation in these exercises serves primarily to take the edge off political appetites for justice, appetites whose satisfaction might otherwise demand more robust and meaningful forms of judgment and action, and to apply a veneer of legitimacy to governing practices that systematically oppose the more radically democratic ends of politicization and material equality. Following Agamben (1993), we might be careful to draw a distinction between "politics" understood as partisan competition for the offices of government and a more encompassing conception of the "political" as that which exposes the distribution and operation of power in its myriad forms and relationships, and that which opens spaces of judgment, difference and contest. In this view, depoliticization names processes and conditions whereby the distribution and operation of power are willfully concealed, obscured or effaced, and in which spaces for judgment, difference and contest are closed, rather than opened. As Barry (2001)argues, seen in this light a great deal of what goes for politics in contemporary liberal democracies can be regarded as effectively depoliticizing. In other words, "one of the key functions of established political institutions is to place limits on the possibilities for dissensus and restriction on the sites in which political contestation can occur. What we generally term politics thus always has something of an anti-political impulse" (Barry, 2001: 207).

What goes for the institutions of liberal democratic politics might also be said of its characteristic technologies, including emerging information technologies. As Barry observes:

> Technologies change all the time, but this does not mean that technical change is always inventive. Technical changes can be conservative in their implications,

maintaining or rigidifying existing arrangements between persons, activities, devices, and habits of thought; they my restrict and displace the possibility of alternative developments. Seen in these terms, rapid technical change is not necessarily inventive, nor is it necessarily revolutionary in its implications. It may indeed be a way of enforcing or sustaining a kind of socio-cultural or socio-technical stasis… The rapidity of the growth of information and technique may, in some circumstances, be anti-inventive.

<div align="right">(2001: 213)</div>

The key phrase here is "in some circumstances." Given the highly "inventive" and politicized uses to which a broad range of new social movement have put emerging information technologies, it would be a gross error to characterize these technologies as universally depoliticizing (van de Donk, Loader & Rucht, 2004; Bennett, 2003). However, beyond the specific circumstances of social movements whose adherents are already deeply motivated to engage in robust forms of political judgment and action, many of which can be supported, advanced and amplified by the affordances of emerging information technologies, the question remains as to whether this is representative of the everyday citizen's encounter with these same technologies. In *these* circumstances, does enhanced access to information tend to reveal or obscure the organization and distribution of material resources and power? Does it open or close the spaces available for political judgment, difference and contest? Does the information abundance afforded by emerging technologies motivate significant numbers of everyday citizens to engage in forms of political judgment and action that exceed routine complicity with the depoliticizing spectacle of politics as usual?

These are tough questions. If the end of democracy is an as-yet-unrealized condition of politicization and equality, then its achievement requires, at a minimum, that people be motivated to risk its pursuit in judgment and action. The normative framework of publicity encourages us to believe that information moves people and that, therefore, enhanced access to more, better information is a substantial political good. In the light of this expectation, we might consider the following:

The individual reads accounts of issues and problems and may even discuss alternative lines of action. But this rather intellectualized, rather remote connection with organized social action is not activated. The interested and informed citizen can congratulate himself on his lofty state of interest and information and neglect to see that he has abstained from decision and action. In short, he takes his secondary contact with the world of political reality, his reading and listening and thinking, as a vicarious performance. He comes to mistake knowing about problems of the day for doing something about them. His social conscience remains spotlessly clean. He *is* concerned. He *is* informed. And he has all sorts of ideas as to what should be done. But after he has gotten through his dinner and after he has listened to his favorite podcast, and after he has read his second blog of the day, it is really time for bed. In this respect, emerging media may be included among the most respectable and efficient social narcotics. They may be so fully effective as to keep the addict from recognizing his own malady.

Careful readers will have recognized the untruths in that passage: it is not about digital technology at all; I added the words "podcast," "blog" and "emerging media." When they originally wrote that passage in 1948, describing what they called the "narcotizing dysfunction" of mass (not emerging) media, Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (1971: 565) were talking about radio (not podcasts) and newspapers (not blogs). Still, these liberties aside, it is difficult not to notice how closely this characterization would seem to correspond to the lingering problem of political disengagement in the age of embarrassing information riches. For Lazarsfeld and Merton, the narcotizing dysfunction of information and communication was not necessarily a bad thing. Rather it offered comfort to those who worried that mass media might act as catalysts for the worst excesses and irrationalities of democracy. In relation to the goal of stability in the face of democracy's potential volatility—its susceptibility to wild outbreaks of popular political judgment and action—the tendency of information not to move people but, rather, to immobilize them, is actually *functional*.

It is important to keep in mind that, in this formulation, people are not immobilized because they are taken in by centrally-distributed ideologies that conceal from them the facts about power, or because they are distracted by confectionary entertainments. They are immobilized precisely *because they are informed*, and thereby relieved of the need to judge and to act. In this way, information, one of the key principles of publicity, becomes simultaneously a principle of depoliticization. How else to explain a situation whereby millions of readers of a mainstream, national newspaper remain unmoved when informed that "public gang rape," visited upon thousands of women, has become the "signature tactic" in a Congolese war wherein armed groups fight for control over mining territories rich with coltan, the mineral used to manufacture cell phones, laptop computers, and Sony Playstations (Nolen, 2008: A10)? Detailed, high-quality information about the connection between coltan mining, electronics production, ecological collapse and the systematic rape and murder of women in the Congo has been easily available on the internet, in great volumes, for years. One might surmise from this that being informed is not simply insufficient motivation to judge and to act. For most people, most of the time, it also is a convenient substitute for these more demanding practices. As the same newspaper informs, in a separate and more prominently placed article in the same edition, despite an unprecedented crisis in world financial markets that has initiated cascading recessions in the advanced capitalist economies, Apple's iPhone remains a "hot seller," informed consumers having determined that "The iPhone is practical. It is not a useless luxury" (Agrell & Peritz, 2008: A3).

Communication and Judgment

Political judgment has long been counted among the central practices of citizenship, especially under democratic constitutions where the right to participate in political judgment is extended, at least formally, to all citizens (Beiner & Nedelsky, 2001).[2] In his comprehensive treatment of the question of political judgment, Beiner (1983: 8) observes that "judgment is a natural capacity of human beings that can, potentially, be shared by all." For Arendt (1958: 175-181), reasoned speech in public settings among a plurality of other citizens was the definitive mode of engagement in political judgment. "Speech in this sense," writes Arendt (2005: 125), "is a form of action." Beiner draws heavily from Arendt in specifying the necessarily communicative character of political judgment. "Political experience" he writes, "as a specific mode of being in the world, is constituted by speech, by the capacity of human beings to humanize their world through communication, discourse and talk about what is shared and thus available for

intersubjective judgment" (Beiner, 1983: xiv). This identification of intersubjective communication, and particularly speech, as the core of political judgment connects the republican tradition to contemporary theories of the democratic public sphere, communicative action, discourse ethics, and deliberative democracy. According to Beiner, the thread running through the fabric of,

> what Arendt and Habermas call a public realm or a public space, what Charles Taylor has called a deliberative culture, and what in the traditional vocabulary goes by the name of a republic [is the view that] it is through rational dialogue, and especially through political dialogue, that we clarify, even to ourselves, who we are and what we want... it is through speech and deliberation that man finds the location of his proper humanity, between beast and god, in the life of the citizen.
>
> (1983: 152)

Whether we are talking about Habermas's (1984; 1996) intersubjective, action-coordinating public dialogue, Arendt's agonistic coming-forward into public appearance through speech *as* action, or any number of other possible modes of making claims about what is right or good, political judgment is necessarily communicative. However, communication is not necessarily political. For Arendt, the crucial precondition of political judgment is not communication *per se*, but rather human plurality, and a world in which it might appear—a world "without which those who are both concerned and political would not find life worth living" (Arendt, 2005: 106). For Arendt, political action as engagement in public judgment in and about the world is an end in itself that requires speech for its completion and it is the character of political judgment that lends speech its particular substance. Outside of this context, there is nothing special about it. Accordingly, "[i]n all other performances speech plays a subordinate role, as a means of communication or a mere accompaniment to something that could be achieved in silence" (Arendt, 1958: 179). Communication is not an intrinsic good that lends its virtue to the determinations that arise from it. It is, rather, a means whose value is drawn from the good ends to which it is put. In this case, the value of communication is contingent upon its mobilization in service of the virtues of political judgment and action. Detached from these substantive goods, communication is but one among several means that may or may not be appropriate for accomplishing a range of purposes.

Like information, communication—and, in particular, dialogue—has been reified in contemporary western popular culture and social criticism, but there are good reasons to question the virtue that often is attributed to it. In his history of the idea of communication, Peters (1999: 1) casts doubt upon "the dream of communication as the mutual communion of souls." As he tells it, the history of the idea of communication is the history of an idea about the perfect transmission of meaning—about understanding, unity, community, identity, coordination, the reconciliation of self and other. In his words, "'Communication' is a registry of modern longings. The term evokes a utopia where nothing is misunderstood, hearts are open, and expression is uninhibited... It is a sink into which most of our hopes and fears seem to be poured" (Peters, 1999: 2). One afternoon spent watching television is enough to demonstrate that he is correct. We tend to believe that the solution to most every problem, public or private, is more, better "communication," to be achieved by the removal of the various barriers (e.g., personality, difference, irrationality, distortion, disagreement.) standing in its way. In this

context, miscommunication and silence are problems to be solved. For Peters, however, our inability to recognize that communication is actually made of gaps, silences and missed connections, represents a serious ethical failure. As he puts it, the problem of communication is fundamentally intractable.

> "Communication," whatever it might mean, is not a matter of improved writing or freer self-disclosure but involves a permanent kink in the human condition…That we can never communicate like the angels is a tragic fact, but also a blessed one. A sounder vision is of the felicitous impossibility of contact…In renouncing the dream of 'communication' I am not saying the urge to connect is bad; rather I mean that the dream itself inhibits the hard work of connection…Too often, 'communication, misleads us from the task of building worlds together. It invites us into a world of unions without politics, understandings without language, and souls without bodies, only to make politics, language and bodies reappear as obstacles rather than blessings.
>
> (Ibid: 29-31)

The possibility raised here is that the idea of communication as a desirable end-in-itself has a depoliticizing tendency built into its very foundation.

Ours is an age in which it is certain that to be *incommunicado* is to be lost, dysfunctional and potentially dangerous. Far from being the philosophical culmination of a person's wonder at the world, speechlessness is considered to be a pathology that can and should be cured. More often than not, we seek to correct the dysfunction of miscommunication by the enforcement of improved techniques or technologies. Emerging media technologies have certainly proliferated under this therapeutic sign, the sign of the dream of perfected communication. We are inclined to believe that it is through communication that we make worlds together, and engage in politics. However, as suggested in the passage quoted above, when we identify the good of communication with perfect transmission, open to realization by enhanced technological means, it becomes a barrier to world-making, and to politics. According to Arendt (2005: 106), "wherever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them, and it is in this in-between space that all human affairs are conducted." Arendt's greatest concern was that the in-between space that is the world might be drained of politics altogether. The danger she saw was that we might "confuse politics with what would put and end to politics," and that "politics may vanish entirely from the world" (Arendt, 2005: 96-97).

Arendt herself does not advance this argument, but I would suggest that, undertaken as an end that can be realized technologically, communication participates in the evacuation of politics from the world, by taking the place of political judgment. Those who inhabit contexts saturated with emerging media technologies communicate incessantly. It is only rarely that, in so doing, they engage in acts of political judgment in which they do something more than simply exchange information, register a previously established opinion, coordinate activity, or agree to disagree. It bears keeping in mind that ours is a culture in which judgment ("who are we to judge?") and politics ("oh, that's just politics") are words to which most people typically attach considerable scorn. Political judgment—an unpredictable encounter with radical difference on questions of what is right and good that can be resolved only with great risk and commitment, and which alters the condition of those who engage in it—is onerous and fraught with challenges. This is perhaps why so many of us are so careful to avoid it, preferring forms of communication whose

primary virtue appears to be endless deferral of the burden of judgment. As Dean (2006: xxi) has written, "Politics involves division, saying 'yes' to some options and 'no' to others. A willingness to accept this division and take responsibility for it seems to have been lost, or relegated to small, local struggles." Is it possible that emerging media technologies, purportedly technologies of an invigorated publicity, responsive to the moral imperative to communicate, are simultaneously technologies by which responsibility for political judgment is abdicated?

Participation and action

Being political culminates in action. In the face of the world we share with others, we are constantly confronted by differences—not just differences of opinion, but differences of condition, and differences between what we believe the world to be and what it actually is—that raise questions about what is good and what is just. In a world that makes a home for politics, we are moved by difference to assume the burden of judgment and, finally, to act. In the Arendtian framework discussed above, judgment and speech are themselves held up as quintessential forms of political action, but common experience suggests that this category actually encompasses a much broader range of types of action (Connolly, 1995). To limit the conception of politics to the sort of public speech valorized by Arendt or, for that matter, to the rational, deliberative dialogue highlighted by Habermas and his followers as constitutive of communicative action in the public sphere, is to prejudicially exclude many forms of democratically vital political action. Civil disobedience, enactment of unconventional social practices, subtle acts of refusal: all of these, and any action that explicitly or implicitly entails a claim about what is good or right, constitute actions whose political character equals, and maybe even exceeds, that of arguments made publicly in speech.

Still, not all action is political. In *The Parallax View*, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek observes that:

> The threat today is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge "to be active," to "participate," to mask the nothingness of what goes on… the truly difficult thing is to stay back, to withdraw from all this. Those in power often prefer even a 'critical' participation, a dialogue, to silence…

> (2006: 334)

In characteristically provocative fashion, Žižek draws attention to the fact that, in liberal democracies, political action by citizens is effectively limited to "participation" in established institutions and processes that embody and secure prevailing distributions of power and resources, rather than opening these to political judgment and contest. In this context, participation is nothing like what it has been imagined to be in the work of theorists of participatory democracy, namely, a practice by which citizens exercise their equality and autonomy vis-à-vis political and economic authority (Pateman, 1970; Macpherson, 1985). Instead, participation becomes the form of compliance with, and legitimation of, undemocratic authority and discipline. Under undemocratic conditions, mere participation, like information and communication, converts to a principle of depoliticization, the very opposite of political action.

This possibility arises at the very moment emerging media technologies are sponsoring a massive expansion and generalization of participatory culture (Siegel, 2008: 113-124). In the

emerging media environment, an ever-blossoming range of applications present countless opportunities to vote, rank, comment, mash-up, produce, present, mark-up, post, tag, choose, share, customize, network, link, navigate, discuss, play, provide feedback and collaborate via an equally diverse array of devices. Such opportunities are not restricted to the online world. Conventional media, including especially television, increasingly integrate opportunities for participation by broadcast audiences into their programming. Traditional cultural sites such as museums and galleries have enthusiastically embraced technologies aimed at enhancing the participatory experience of their visitors. Emerging technologies of spatial augmented reality are transforming urban space into a matrix of opportunities for network-mediated information transaction, commercial and otherwise. Even governments have started to capitalize on digital networks to enable citizen participation in policy consultations.

The name customarily given to these participatory opportunities is "interactivity," a term that has nearly replaced participation itself in the normative vocabulary of contemporary publicity. To describe interactivity as the availability of "opportunities" to participate is somewhat misleading. As Barry (2001) has argued in his work on the migration of participatory features into science museums, interactivity has become an important mode by which emerging technologies have been brought to bear in the production of subjects adapted to the demands of citizenship in post-Fordist, neo-liberal political economies. Under these conditions, interactivity is compulsory, not optional. In his view,

> Active, responsible and informed citizens have to be made… Today, interactivity
> has come to be a dominant model of how objects can be used to produce subjects.
> In an interactive model, subjects are not disciplined, they are *allowed*".
>
> (Barry, 2001: 129; *emphasis is in original*)

The ideal subject of advanced liberal capitalism is informed, flexible, 'empowered,' experimental, self-inventing and self-responsible (Rose, 1999). The neo-liberal subject does not so much participate democratically in government as she governs herself by participation. "Seen in this context," Barry (2001: 135) observes that, "interactive devices [have] a function, for they might foster agency, experimentation and enterprise, thus enhancing the self-governing capacities of the citizen." In this respect, interactivity is "a model for the exercise of political power" (Barry, 2001: 151), a model in which the distribution and exercise of power is authorized and legitimated not by political judgment and action but, rather, by an excess of participatory activity that provides an alibi for their effective absence.

With the degeneration of action into interactivity, the collapse of the normative framework of publicity under the auspices of emerging technologies of information, communication and participation appears complete. The implications of this collapse for the possibility of politics have been explored most thoroughly by Dean (2007; 2006; 2005; 2002; 2001). For her, the political significance of emerging media cannot be understood apart from their essential role in materializing "communicative capitalism," that massive portion of the neo-liberal, transnational economy that relies heavily on the transaction of information and communication commodities via a variety of networked technologies. Communicative capitalism is a political-economic formation in which power, financial wealth, and material security are intensely concentrated, and in which depoliticization is a chronic condition (Dean, 2007: 227; 2005: 55; 2002: 3-4). In the light of the materialist and political conception of democracy suggested above, one could say that communicative capitalism is a highly undemocratic and anti-

democratic order. Dean's provocative insight is that, despite this, communicative capitalism is actually bolstered, not threatened, by the normative framework of publicity.

Under the auspices of communicative capitalism, emerging technologies are fetishized, and assigned fantastic, magical qualities vis-à-vis the political. The fantasy of information abundance, for example, condenses a broad and complex range of political antagonisms into a straightforward problem of information. According to Dean,

> The complexities of politics—of organization, struggle, duration, decisiveness, division, representation, etc—are condensed into one thing, one problem to be solved and one technological solution. So the problem of democracy is that people aren't informed; they don't have the information they need to participate effectively.
>
> (2005: 63)

People may indeed need information in order to act, and producing and circulating information may be one way to do so politically. However, constructing the problem of politics as primarily a problem of inadequate access to information opens it to a technological solution that can be easily (and profitably) achieved in ways that leave major structures of inequality and depoliticization not only intact, but even reinforced.

Closely related is what Dean labels the "fantasy of participation." Citing Žižek's (1997) account of "interpassivity," she describes a condition in which technologically-enabled interactivity gratifies popular appetites for judgment and action without actually satisfying them politically. As Dean (2005: 60) says of the myriad ways we daily add to the circulation of information in digital networks, "[o]ne believes that it matters, that it contributes, that it means something… They believe that they are active, maybe even that they are making a difference simply by clicking on a button, adding their name to a petition or commenting in a blog." The political status of these forms of participation is ambiguous at best. Expounding on this notion, Dean (2005: 57) points out that, "specific or singular acts of resistance, statements of opinion or instances of transgression are not political in and of themselves; rather, they have to be politicized, that is articulated together with other struggles, resistances and ideals in the course or context of opposition to a shared enemy or opponent."

As many new social movements have demonstrated, these sorts of articulations, antagonisms and oppositions can certainly be mediated by emerging technologies, but it would take a considerable leap of faith to believe that this sort of robust politicization is characteristic of the experience of most of those who "interact" and "contribute" online. For these, online participation stands in relation to the demands of politics as a convenient technique of foreclosure (Dean, 2005: 65-66). The myriad opportunities for interaction afforded by communicative capitalism are culturally coded, in advance, as political, thus eliminating any motivation (or obligation) to take on heavier burdens of judgment and action. In these circumstances, the prospects of politics suffer not because people lack an appetite for politics, but rather because this appetite is too easily gratified by a range of technological surrogates. As Dean (2005: 61) observes, "the circulation of communication is depoliticizing, not because people don't care or don't want to be involved, but because we do."

The complementarity of communicative capitalism and the normative framework of publicity thus sets a trap for those committed to the democratic ends of radical politicization and egalitarianism. The normative framework of publicity valorizes access to information,

communication and participation. Communicative capitalism is nourished and sustained by the transaction of information, communication, and interactive participation. In a formulation that resonates with similar claims made by Agamben (2000), Žižek (1999), and Hardt and Negri (2000), Dean (2005: 56) notes that "communicative exchanges, rather than being fundamental to democratic politics, are the basic elements of capitalist production." Norms of publicity are materialized in emerging media technologies that are instrumental to the extension and intensification of a political-economic order whose relationship to democratic outcomes is, at best, ambiguous and, at worst, pernicious. It is not just that informing, communicating and participating in the forms afforded by emerging media technologies are inadequate relative to demanding conceptions of the political. It is that, in so doing, well-intentioned citizens simultaneously reinforce and legitimize a political-economic order that is arrayed systematically against the democratic ends they at least believe themselves to hold.

As Dean writes in her book *Publicity's Secret*:

> The ideal of the public materializes an economy of transnational telecommunications corporations, media conglomerates, computer hardware, software and infrastructure developers, and content providers. Democratic potentials are thereby collapsed into increases in access and information. Democracy becomes indistinguishable from intensifications and extensions in the circulation of information. Our deepest commitments—to inclusion, equality and participation within a public—bind us into the practices whereby we submit to global capital.
>
> (2002: 151)

Here, it is not just that emerging technologies are enlisted to ends that are other than democratic, it is that the principles of publicity themselves—participation, information and communication—offer us no way to distinguish democratic politics from enrollment in the prevailing rhythms and modes of a global economy structured in opposition to the ends of those politics. In this sense, publicity has become "the ideology of technoculture… a model of political life that would work just as well as a motto for Microsoft or AT&T" (Ibid: 4, 14). The ideals of publicity have conditioned us to desire and expect exactly what emerging technologies deliver: more information; more communication; more participation. Who could ask for more? Cruelly, even the practices of deeply politicized social movements, in making highly-effective use of these technologies for purposes of publicization, organization and mobilization, implicitly confirm the edifice they explicitly challenge. Put simply, "[i]n effect, changing the system—organizing against and challenging communicative capitalism—seems to require strengthening the system...Democracy demands publicity" (Ibid: 4).

Conclusion

When information, communication and participation substitute for motivation, political judgment and action, the normative framework of publicity ceases to be critical, and becomes conservative in the most straightforward sense of the term. This is what becomes of publicity under the material conditions of emerging media technologies. Under the combination of proliferating networks and advanced liberal capitalism, "our deepest commitments—to inclusion, equality and participation within a public—bind us into practices whereby we submit to global capital" (Ibid:

151). The ideal of the informed, communicative, participating citizen may have had radical potential under conditions where opportunities to be informed, to communicate and to participate were scarce or denied but, thanks to emerging media technologies, these conditions no longer pertain. Instead, the common experience of liberal democratic citizens is one of an excess of such opportunities and, despite its depoliticizing character, it is upon this very excess that the legitimacy of contemporary technological capitalism is built. For Dean, this means it is time "to acknowledge that the public is an ideal whose materialization undermines its very aspirations" (Ibid: 165). She concludes: "For the sake of democracy, it is time to abandon the public" (Ibid: 175).

The question is whether democracy, as a critical principle, can withstand the collapse of publicity. In her more recent work, Dean takes up Žižek's denouncement of "democratic fundamentalism" (Dean, 2006: 101-105) and expresses considerable doubt about the program of radical democracy (Dean, 2007). Still, even these doubts arise from a commitment to ideals of politicization and an egalitarian distribution of power and resources which, I would argue, are definitive of the radical substance of democracy, even if contemporary liberal democratic ideology and institutions have devolved into a barrier to its realization. It is only because this radical democratic standard retains its critical integrity that we can even measure the distance between it and the now diminished goods of publicity. Calling it "democracy" may present semantic liabilities in a discursive context where many would lay claim to that name whose material interests are directly opposed to its substance. It may also present considerable strategic advantages in contexts where socialism dare not speak its name. Democracy remains a substantive good for which one might still consider going to the wall theoretically, critically and politically. The same cannot be said for publicity, the gutting of which by the very technologies advertised as delivering it is now more or less complete. The question today is not how to increase or improve information, communication and participation for their own sake—the global giants of networked capitalism have this well in hand—but rather whether and how emerging media technologies might be extricated from the grip of publicity and turned instead in more substantively democratic directions.

Notes

1   It should be noted that, for the most part, I would include my own previous work in this category.

2   For a more extensive account of the relationship between judgment and democratic citizenship under technological circumstances see Barney (2007).

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