Public Sphere Participation Online:
The Ambiguities of Affect

Commentary

PETER DAHLGREN
Lund University, Sweden

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.

Keywords: digital public spheres, affect and politics, political participation, online politics, civic engagement

Setting the Scene

Debates about the Internet's contributions to the public sphere and democracy took off almost as soon as this new technology had become widespread 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 celebrations 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 circumstances where online political involvement clearly plays a positive role (Castells, 2012). More recently, Margetts, John, Hale, and Yasseri (2016) take a modestly positive view, but argue that social media, while facilitating collective action via countless "tiny acts of participation," (Margetts et al., p. 199) are also altering the dynamics of democracy, ushering in a new "chaotic pluralism" (Margetts et al., p. 198) whose consequences we cannot quite envision yet. We have come to understand that there

Peter Dahlgren: peter.dahlgren@kom.lu.se

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* and *Net* very broadly here to include all the digital infrastructure, platforms, social media, and stationary and mobile devices of the online world.)

Thus, at this point it is not so much a question of arriving at some ultimate judgment, but rather to continue to explore and analyze ongoing changes in society and politics in tandem with the continuing transformations of the media landscape. We should keep in mind that the term *social media* encompasses a broad array of 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, e.g., Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2013; Lundby, 2014; Lunt & Livingstone, 2016). It is argued that the media's interplay with each specific sector of society and culture is in some way altering 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 & Hepp, 2016).

It is within this broad horizon that we must understand the significance of digital media for the public sphere and political participation. We are doing politics differently 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 toward 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, e.g., 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 the public sphere 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, the public sphere, 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, I do not find a cumulative body of unified knowledge, but rather strands from various traditions. This may present some difficulties, but it may also 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 comprises three main sections. I start with a discussion about participation, including what can be seen as its subjective predisposition, 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, particularly 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 fields in the social sciences and thus remains somewhat fluid, 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 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 formalized institutional contexts. Thus, we can say that participation means involvement with the political, with power relations, 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 part of electoral politics and involve decision making or elections, but it is imperative that we keep in view this broader extraparliamentarian 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. Although 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 face serious dangers and are potentially risking their lives, giving 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, that is, 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 nominally democratic can be analyzed in terms of obvious parameters. Without claiming to be exhaustive, such aspects can include degree of difficulty, that is, is the participation "easy" to achieve or does it face mechanisms of exclusion? Another parameter is the question of 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, and 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 or participation loses its momentum and dissipates, for example, 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 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 prerequisites 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 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, citizens' 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 and 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 prerequisites 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, e.g., Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Massumi, 2002). 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 analyze 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 (see 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 poststructural theories of discourse, Derrida's decentering of meaning, Barthes's 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 globalization, multiculturalism, and postcolonialism also leave their mark on how we think about the subject. In 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 traditions, but for most scholars today, identity is seen as socially constructed, an ongoing process in which 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, which usually render individuals in more commonsense terms—at times retaining behavioristic dimensions. The literature theorizing 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 part 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 a different meaning and function within each tradition that differs 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, and the question of transparency—the view of an operative unconscious—also looms 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 they are 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.

The traditional liberal view that sets rationality against emotion is analytically counterproductive, 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 behavior such as violence and aggression are never exclusively the result of pure passion—these always have reasons too (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 behavior.

The lack of full self-transparency is, of course, the fundamental premise of psychoanalysis and its view of the unconscious. Several versions of the unconscious have been proposed, 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 self-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 sometimes difficult dynamics between reason and emotion. We need not be trained psychoanalysts to find evidence of this interplay; my view is that a simple, commonsense view of an active unconscious is sufficient. Ultimately politics—and subjectivity itself—straddles the rational–emotional distinction, without a safety net, 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 authors, as Papacharissi (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 unsavory 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 (1993), *Public Sphere and Experience*, which they wrote as a critical reply to Habermas's (1989) 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 to 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 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, to the commercial, and 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 crisscrossed 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 that echoes many of the debates from previous decades, especially that of the effects of television. Some authors emphasize the powerful impact that digital media have on how we live, think, and interact with others and how we experience the world and ourselves—and that this impact is quite problematic. Aiken (2017), 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 10 respondents in one survey said that "they slept with their mobile phone turned on under their pillow—or on a nightstand next to the bed" and that "more than half described feeling 'uncomfortable' when they forget their mobile phone at home" (pp. 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 digital media in some way. He articulates the concern that many have about "using vs. losing" some of our most fundamental human capacities. Although 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 identity. Thus, when people put on their Facebook page that they have been taking their kids to a lot of activities or 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. But that they post such acts on Facebook turns the acts into public performances, parts of the digital presentation of self, acts that will hopefully elicit likes.

Bakardjieva (2015), who has traced the evolution of online sociality, 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, that is, robotized online functions that masquerade as "friends" online. You are invited to friend somebody, but often that invitation derives not from a person but from an algorithmic conclusion the platform has arrived at. How do such developments impact 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 underscores the power of users to shape media affordances for their own purposes. She highlights the freedom gained, especially for our social relations. 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 contributions 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 to serve as vital infrastructure for the public sphere.

Privatized Public Sphere, 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, and Facebook. This political economy (Dijck, 2013; Franklin, 2013; Fuchs, 2014) renders the Net commercial to the core (with only wikis and a few other cooperative endeavors being the exception). This basic reality of the Internet and its social media platforms does not preclude civic uses, but from the standpoint of users,

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 (Dahlgren, 2013; Papacharissi, 2010). The often very loose or nonexistent bonds with other active citizens can engender a cozy 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 takes precedence over the 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 the experience of solidarity.

Others have made this argument 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 that social movements require. 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: 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 the idea that online participation, while rendered easy to accomplish, may well have reduced outcome. Moreover, the social and cultural frames of such settings, that is, 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 one's online 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, a heuristic dichotomy emerged within traditional political science in studying the motivation of voters (see, for example, Brennan & Lomasky, 1984) that 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, whereas 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 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 be important for long-term instrumental goals by building collective identities, mobilizing opinion around issues, and so forth (or, in antidemocratic ways, by generating 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 is easier to express something than to actually get something done, which connects the parameter of participation with degree of difficulty. Much of the literature on the public sphere, 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 concerns about its 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 almost all were 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

Some attributes of the Net environment are hardly commented upon anymore, as 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 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 provide a sense of 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, which is the blend of images, sounds, genres, hybrids, music, and text that we attend to and distinguish largely via emotional regulation; and the *novelty* on offer, which 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 the qualities defining 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, including entertainment, popular culture, hobbies), we are still confronted with a dizzying array of material. There is content from 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 nonjournalism, between the political and the nonpolitical.

Of course, we all have our own areas of interest, networks, and sites that we follow, thereby walling 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 (2005). 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 microinvolvement. 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 as the participation parameter of the time frame becomes short. He notes that even the most rigorous analyses of how digital networks facilitate political participation, such as that of 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 and more aggressive, not least when the topics take on the character of "culture wars" and the clash over values (Nagle, 2017). While there is much humor, satire, and playful mischief, we see increasing hate speech toward groups, 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 place but also a dangerous place, potentially silencing voices in the public sphere (Phillips & 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 toward illiberalism (Hungary, Poland), authoritarianism (Russia), and even dictatorship (Turkey). Across the board, neoliberal capitalism continues to shift real power away from citizens and democratic institutions and put 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 noted a decline in civic participation in political processes in Western democracies 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, and that the political class is, if not corrupt, at least indifferent to citizen voices (among a large body of literature, see, for example, Hay, 2007). This has eroded political parties as centers for political engagement and participation, as many observers have noted (Mair, 2013). Yet these negative developments do not go unchallenged, as illustrated by several major movements in recent years, including Occupy and antiausterity 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 a slippery concept, though it seems that the definitions are beginning to stabilize (for a classic treatment, see Canovan, 1981; more recent contributions include Mudde & Kalhausser, 2017; Müller 2016; Wodak, KhosraviNik, & Mral, 2013; for a link to media research, see Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016). Most commonly, "the people" are discursively constructed as a virtuous unity confronted by evil or incompetent elites and undesirable or threatening "others," including, variously, racial and religious minorities, intellectuals, journalists, and government. The status of large corporations often remains ambiguous. The affective appeal is for "the people" (of course, a category that excludes selected groups) to take back what is being lost. At times, calls for enhanced citizen participation can readily advocate bypassing constitutional procedures in the name of "government by the people." In the United States, the Trump presidential campaign, his presidency, and his supporters offer an elaborate example.

These are highly problematic developments because they derive from a genuine shortcoming within liberal democracy itself—its unfulfilled promises. "Populist practices 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, p. 9). Various groups feel excluded socially, politically, and culturally; they sense a lack of recognition and feel resentment. Right-wing populism today can range ideologically from almost mainstream center-right to the extremes of xenophobia, militant nationalism, and racism and protofascism (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 counterpublic spheres, "echo chambers" walled off from divergent views, and cultivate their group discourses without 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. Their often extensive resources, 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, Breese, & Luengo, 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, on the courts, and on experts generally (e.g., in climate change denial), in some cases clinging to theological discourse 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 of 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 to ascertain what is true: what we feel, what we are told, what we are able to figure out, and what we empirically observe. All four coexist in various relationships at any point in history. Today, in the viral world of online information, use of the first option—what we feel—is clearly on the rise. Truth becomes reconfigured as an inner subjective reality with an affective leap and thus becomes the foundation for validity claims about reality. Rational argument becomes all the more incommensurable as a mode of discourse.

This is, of course, an extreme rendering, but it captures a strong current trend. Coupled with a 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 shortcuts 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 a pathway to knowledge. In the long run, this becomes debilitating for the individual, as it fosters cognitive closure of groups and ultimately damages the critical role of the public sphere.

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 strong us-versus-them ingredients, including scapegoating. Mainstream political speech and journalism may avoid the societal polarization of genuine populism, yet they can still slip into postrational modes of discourse, 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 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 a much support.

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