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Distracted by technologies and captured by the public sphere

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Abstract

This chapter offers a critique of the ways in which we approach the study of civil society, and digital technologies through the notion of public sphere theory. In it, I question whether public sphere theory is up to the job of dealing with a democratic deficit so large that it challenges the notion that liberal democracy should always be our 'go to' democratic frame. Classical public sphere theory begins and ends with liberal democracy as its overarching premise and ultimate political institutional arrangement. But what if we start from a different position where we acknowledge that liberal democracy has been so dismantled that it is now eviscerated and unrecognizable to many in civil society? Can a concept so undone really offer a critical perspective suggestive of democratic futures or is it rather holding us back, capturing us in the comfort zones of liberalism that threaten ultimately to erode democracy yet further?

Introduction: Captured by the Public sphere

Any discussion of digital media and communication and their roles in enhancing democracy and political participation frequently falls back on Habermas' concept of the public sphere (1989). This is understandable as it is one of the few prominent theoretical frameworks that link the media and its practices directly to the exercise of democracy. This conceptual framing has increased in recent years (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013) with the internet in particular lending itself to discussions around whether or not the space now available online for mass use constitutes a fully functioning public sphere - a space where all debates can be

aired and issues discussed in a deliberative and rational manner. There are many problems with this approach but perhaps the most obvious is that by foregrounding the media (in all its many forms) there is a tendency to reproduce the discourse of technological innovation as automatic democratic gain. This is a discourse that has many fault-lines, and in this chapter I focus on three of them:

1. Liberal democracy undone: The notion that liberal democracy is an adequate endpoint that should form our ethical horizon and be the focus of critical theory.
2. Civil society empowered: The myth that civil society is afforded more agency through digital communications.
3. Public sphere expanded: The assumption that the public sphere is expanded in the age of the internet.

1: Liberal democracy undone

Public sphere theory is premised on the concept of liberal democracy: a system of governance that delegates power to elected representatives who will duly do the bidding of those who voted for them. It presupposes a crucial stage in the democratic process: that voters will be fully informed via the means of publicity available to them and through processes of deliberation will reach a rational understanding of all relevant issues. These processes of deliberation will then form a consensus view that is responded to by policy makers and, hey presto, liberal democracy is seen to be done.

Of course, actually existing democracy often falls far short of this ideal with societies characterized more by political disaffection (Streeck, 2014) than a citizenry satisfied that they understand all of the issues they are voting on and when they do vote their views are taken heed of by their elected representatives. As Raymond Williams argued in ‘Democracy and Parliament’, all too frequently we find ourselves confronted with, ‘the coexistence of political

representation and participation with an economic system which admits no such rights, procedures or claims' (1982: 19).

Crouch has famously termed our current democratic decay as a continuing process of dissolution towards 'post-democracy', a state where 'the forms of democracy remain fully in place', yet 'politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times' (2004: 6). If we accept this analysis, it raises the question whether interpretations of public sphere theory are captured by a liberal democratic frame to the extent that they cannot imagine a world beyond the forms and structures of a liberal democratic system? And if so, can public sphere theory any longer claim its status as critical theory where the purpose of critical theory is understood as seeking human emancipation (Fenton, 2016)?

What both Crouch and Williams remind us is that how we experience liberal democracy is bound up with political economic configurations and institutional/organizational formations and structures that have developed in articulation with media technologies. Specific configurations are likely to lead to different types of knowledge production. Furthermore, we cannot understand one without the others. So for example, in the UK 2017 General Election the turnout was 68.7%, the highest in 25 years. Moreover, an estimated 57-72% of 18-24 year olds voted compared to only 43% in 2015¹. The massive increase in young people voting was largely ascribed to social media and claimed as a sign of a fully functioning public sphere underpinning democracy in action. And it is true that many young people now get their news and information via social media (Newman, 2017). But what this response failed frequently to mention is that young people have also experienced an unprecedented attack on their socioeconomic conditions; state support has been withdrawn and left many young people in

¹ Precise data on the ages of voters was not available at the time of writing. The range of 57-72% offered here is based on a variety of estimates from different polling agencies.

poverty; employment is precarious, homeownership is increasingly an unrealizable dream for many and wages are low (Corlett, 2017). It is highly likely, that these socioeconomic conditions played a large part in encouraging young people to vote alongside a Labour party manifesto that spoke explicitly to these concerns and indeed social media campaigns encouraging people to register and to vote.

In the economic realm, austerity, unemployment, high personal debt, extreme poverty and inequality feature heavily across many liberal democracies. In the UK, the impact of these crises is particularly marked for working class and minority communities as well as for young people - whose experiences are also inflected by the 'war on terror', student fees, housing inflation, urban riots, and youth unemployment. An important question for liberal democratic theory is whether social stability and consensus politics can prosper where poverty and inequality are apparent across so many intersecting fault-lines: young and old, black and white, religious and secular. Prominent reports in the UK have observed, '[t]he need for change; the need to seek the voice of marginalised and disadvantaged people in decision-making processes is of undeniable and acute local, national and global relevance' (RSA, 2017).

The response in the UK to the 2008 global banking crisis was austerity politics designed to reduce national debt. In England between June 2010 and March 2016 welfare reforms enacted reductions of £26 billion in UK social security and tax credits spending, with 'deficit reduction' being the primary goal of government (Tinson et al., 2016). Young adults (16-24) were particularly hard hit with 'rapidly falling real wages, incomes and wealth' (Hills et al, 2013:3). Poverty is also strongly linked with disability and ethnicity, with people from black and minority ethnic communities experiencing multiple forms of socio-economic disadvantage (Hills et al., 2015).

Austerity politics has meant that local authorities in England are dealing with a scheduled 40% cut in core funding from central government. And so councils and other public agencies have sought further to outsource and share services as a means of reducing costs and improving performance (Whitfield, 2014). An emphasis on out-sourcing has detached these services from democracy, depoliticizing decisions about public welfare and the public good. Citizens are recast as consumers as collective decisions are transformed into questions of individual need and choice (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001, Lister, 2001). If, as media scholars, we insist on seeing liberal democracy primarily through a communicative lens, we miss noticing how crucial democratic processes have been eviscerated in the face of austerity and neoliberal practices.

A liberal democracy depends on citizen participation in systems of representation. Such aspirations and norms have been challenged (e.g. Mair, 2013) as political elites remodel themselves as a professional class, as non-democratic agencies and practices proliferate and as inequality increases. In the UK almost all of the wealthiest people use the internet, but this falls to 58% among the lowest income group (those earning less than £12,500) (Dutton et al, 2013). The picture is similar in the US, with 93% of those in the income bracket of \$100,000 plus using the internet compared to only 48% of those earning less than \$25,000 (File and Ryan, 2014). Just as patterns of inequality are replicated in access to health care and educational attainment (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), so they map onto access to technology (Pew Research Center, 2015). The digital divide is still a reality: internet users are in general younger, more highly educated and richer than non-users, are more likely to be men than women, and are more likely to live in cities (Blank, Graham and Calvino, 2017). Blank and Groselj (2014) point out that usage of the internet is similar for all of us except when it comes to news and information when there are clear correlations to educational attainment and

social class. Maybe it should come as no surprise then that in the UK 2017 general election the Labour Party saw the largest increase in vote share since 1945 with an increased turnout of 18-24 year olds many of whom access their news and information via social media; that most people with a degree voted Labour, and these votes were also concentrated in urban areas. But we should not be duped into thinking that this then means democracy is well served.

Tilly (2007) developed an international comparative account of the macro-conditions associated, over the past centuries, with democratization. Defining democracy as process (2007: 13) as ‘the extent to which the state behaves in conformity to the expressed demands of its citizens’ – to be judged by the ‘breadth’ and ‘equality’ of the democratic process, its ‘protection’ from arbitrary state interference, and its basis in ‘mutually binding consultation’, he isolated three macro-conditions:

1. The integration of trust networks into public politics;
2. The insulation of public politics from categorical inequality, and
3. The reduction of major non-state power centres’ autonomy from public politics (2007: 23).

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2017), between October 2016 and January 2017 trust in government fell from 36% to 26%; in business from 45% to 33% and in the media from 32% to 24%. Britain also has a significant ‘trust gap’ of 19% between ‘informed publics’ (‘in the upper income quartile, university educated and with a declared interest in politics and the media’) and those with an income of less than £15,000. Moreover both groups have less trust in government this year than they did last year. Amongst the least affluent it has hit a new low of just 20%, but it has also fallen significantly amongst the wealthiest, from 54% in 2016 to 38% in 2017. Disenchantment with the political system is

not new. The Hansard Society's 2016 Audit, undertaken before the Brexit referendum, found formal political participation had increased overall - with voter turnout in the 2015 general election at 65%, the highest since 2001, and more people claiming to be strong supporters of a political party (41%) than at any time since 2003 – but inequality had also increased: 'there is now a 37 percentage point difference between the certainty to vote levels of those in social classes AB and DE, an increase of six points in 12 months' (Hansard Society, 2016, p.6).

At the same time, overall confidence in the system, and especially in people's ability to influence decisions, is low:

'Only a third of the public think the system by which Britain is governed works well (33%) with those living furthest from Westminster most likely to be dissatisfied. Just 35% believe that when people like themselves get involved in politics they can change the way the country is run. Only 13% feel they have some influence over decision-making nationally although 41% would like to be involved in decision-making. More people (46%) would like to be involved in local decisions but just 25% currently feel they have some influence at the local level.'

(Hansard Society, 2016, p.6)

This is the backdrop against which the EU referendum turnout of over 72% took place, bringing to the surface deep divisions of class as well as generation that 'cannot be divided from the economic dislocation that has taken place since the 1980s' (Dorling et al 2016). Studies by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Goodwin and Heath, 2016) and the Resolution Foundation (Clarke, 2016) both found that low skilled and working class voters in the most deprived regions were more likely to vote Brexit. The outcome of the referendum for the UK to leave the European Union came as a shock to many people – including those who voted

for it, but it spoke to great swathes of society who felt abandoned by globalization and forgotten by a ruling elite all too willing to see their communities decimated and their social infrastructures weakened. At the same time, little attempt has been made to understand or address underlying structural inequalities. Instead globalization has tended 'to be treated as an immutable economic fact rather than something that can be shaped politically' (Lister, 2001:431). As Unwin argued, 'people in the overlooked and too often ignored parts of the country ... voted leave because they weren't satisfied with what they have. And they didn't feel able to change things' (2016:4).

In the referendum campaign the mainstream media were accused of spreading anti-immigration discourses of hate and lies about the European Union - democracy was felt to be in dire disrepair. Fast forward a mere 12 months to the snap general election in 2017 and the likes of Michael Gove (a Conservative MP and key architect of the Leave Campaign) and Jeremy Corbyn (the leader of the Labour Party) both claimed that the power of the mainstream media had been evaporated by the veracity of social media and suddenly democracy was once more in the running. A convenient truth for both parties: for the Conservatives it is a response that removes the public gaze from their relations of intimacy with the mainstream media (MRC, 2016): if plurality is thriving online then we no longer need to be concerned about the concentration of ownership and lack of plurality in legacy media that can then be enabled and sustained by deregulation². For Labour, it offers the prospect of hope without having to attend to the reproduction of inequalities online. Surely, a better response is to question what kinds of communities can act in what kinds of ways; and

² The Conservative Manifesto pledged to repeal Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act, a crucial element of the Royal Charter framework brought in after the Leveson Inquiry into phone hacking and not to go ahead with the second part of Leveson into the media and police corruption.

then to ask who (if any) are ascribed legitimacy by the mechanisms and practices of communication, and are listened to by those who govern?

I give this extended conjunctural analysis because if we then turn to technologies as the answer to our democratic futures we must do so with a deep understanding of what this means. Publics do not come into being simply through the public sphere. Particularly when access to that public sphere is limited. Where should democratic theory go instead? It would do well to focus not on technologies but on people.

2: Civil society empowered through digital communications?

Many liberal democracies have witnessed a revival in collective social protest in recent years, reflecting an international resurgence in mobilisation responding to the great political and economic crises of the early 21st century. Waves of collective action are not isolated, spontaneous events, but rather speak to long histories of dissent and specific contextual changes in opportunities and resources – from the Anti-Globalization movement to the Indignados in Spain, to the Occupy Movement scattered across the globe, Black Lives Matter and Climate Change Camps, amongst myriad others. As socio-political circumstances move and change so citizen responses to them adapt. One example is the emerging shift towards the unionising of the precariat. In the UK this is manifest in traditional city bicycle couriers alongside Uber and Deliveroo food delivery couriers campaigns to gain the London Living Wage. In a largely decreasing trade union movement the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) has emerged, working creatively and on a small scale for workers' rights. Its members are predominantly low paid migrant workers in London. In contrast to these emerging movements of protest and resistance, a turn has also been noticed towards new forms of 'survival tactics' and social organization based on solidarity and collective self-empowerment, such as neighbourhood food banks, solidarity economy initiatives, co-

operative community ventures, alternative currency networks, new alternative media initiatives (Patten et al., 2017). Initiatives that have come out of a civil society response to a liberal democracy that they perceive as largely irrelevant to their lives.

Further afield we can see what David Harvey (2012) called the rebel cities – Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia, A Coruna, Zaragoza, Naples, Grenoble and many others – seeing a return to citizens direct participation in decision making processes, investing more resource in welfare, initiating housing that supports low income residents, changing the rules of local tenders and procurements – trying to reinvent democratic practices from the grassroots. Places that understand the multiple forms of exclusion that a representative liberal democracy has fallen foul of. Here too, the wider social, political and economic context impacts not only on local areas, but also on people’s ability to participate and their power to influence the wider determinants of poverty and disadvantage that affect their lives and the life of their community. More people in more affluent communities have the time, skills resources and connections to engage in this way.

Digital technology can help, ostensibly facilitating opportunities for individuals to participate. But research also tells us that this on-line presence is most effective when linked to off-line activities and opportunities to build solidarity: connective ties supporting collective action (Cammaerts, 2015). Civil society power is not increased through digital communications if the opportunities to be a democratic citizen are not open to you.

Furthermore, when a growth in popular mobilizations appears to loom large, pleas for the legitimacy of established systems of governance has been the bidding of bourgeois democracy throughout history: look how democratic we are with the multiplicity of groups in the public sphere online contesting established political ideologies! Not only does this infer that democracy can be done better through an online system that is organized by and run for

massive corporate monopolies in the form of Google and Facebook whose online architecture is designed to maximize profit; but it also conveniently forgets to mention that we still exist in a world with huge issues of digital exclusion.

In the week after the 2017 general election in the UK, Grenfell Tower (a large local authority owned residential tower block in London) caught fire and killed over 80 people³. Grenfell Tower is a charred scar that reminds us of the damage that 40 years of neoliberalism has wrought. Occupied by the poor, ignored by the rich, discarded by democracy. The tenants association had campaigned about fire safety to the local council but had not been listened to. Local papers had long since disappeared and the internet simply wasn't up to the job of holding power to account because the people who lived in the tower were not those in networks where influence can be claimed.

Rather than focus on digital communications as the means to democratic gain we would do well to turn to developing people's capacity to be and do (Sen, 2010, Nussbaum, 2003). For Sen 'the capability approach focuses on human life', shifting attention from 'the means of living to the actual opportunities of living' (2009:233). This is useful because it focuses on people's needs and aspirations to be engaged citizens and how these are shaped and constrained by 'often unjust background conditions' (Nussbaum, 2003:34), enabling us to ask different questions about how to promote human flourishing and the kind of society we want to live in. This might mean challenging the idea that economic growth is the ultimate goal for societies, that market mechanisms are the most effective way of determining human affairs, that an adequate public sphere is the route to better democracy, and turn our gaze instead towards increasing the space for, and autonomy of civil society and citizen action.

3: The internet as expanded public sphere?

³ The precise number of deaths was not known at the time of writing.

A key aspect of Habermas' understanding of democracy is the right of citizens to engage freely in debate and come to their own rational, critical interpretation. The extension of this act of deliberation in a democracy is that the views of citizens are taken into account in political governance. The principle is that participation in public debate leads to deliberation by a citizenry that can impact upon political decision-making. In public sphere theory, the means of public communication enables this practice and is seen as the route to democracy.

Loader and Mercea (2012) give an overview of this debate in relation to digital communication and argue that social media offers increasing opportunities for political communication and enables democratic capacities for political discussion within the virtual public sphere. In other words, citizens can challenge governments and corporations' political and economic power. Additionally, new forms of political participation and information sources for the users emerge with the Internet that can be utilised in online campaigns. They also point out that social media's dominant uses are entertainment, consumerism, and content sharing among friends.

Scholars such as Castells (2009) and Benkler (2006) advance rather different versions of an ultimately similar proposition wherein the promise of plurality that the internet presents is fore-grounded as the means to communicative and democratic freedom. In Benkler's (2006) analysis, the internet has the potential to change the practice of democracy radically because of its participatory and interactive attributes that engender a more pluralistic public sphere and better civic engagement. Increased capacities to access the internet, and to produce and disseminate media content within expanding and thickening networks is argued to transform the relations of producer and audience, and enable all citizens to alter their relationship to the public sphere, to become creators and primary subjects engaged in social production. In Benkler's words, 'the high capital costs that were a prerequisite to gathering, working, and communicating information, knowledge, and culture have now been widely distributed in the

society...[such that]...we have an opportunity to change the way we create and exchange information, knowledge and culture' (2006: 473). In other words, citizens gain communicative freedom and the more they gain the more the public sphere expands.

Similarly, Castells (2009) argues that social movements that engage in oppositional politics – “the process aiming at political change (institutional change) in discontinuity with the logic embedded in political institutions” (2009:300) – are now able to enter public space from multiple sources and positions raising the possibility for major social and political change: By using both horizontal communication networks and mainstream media to convey their images and messages, social movements increase their chances of enacting social and political change – “even if they start from a subordinate position in institutional power, financial resources, or symbolic legitimacy” (Castells, 2009: 302). Once again, information pluralism and communicative freedom work in tandem and in ever expanding circles; the more freedom one has the more plurality is produced, the more plurality there is, the more freedom one has. While it is undoubtedly true that social media can mobilize and spread messages at speed, it is also true that the context of such activity is paramount and that simply spreading messages does not necessarily lead to power gained or to social change. There is a substantive chasm between feeding the democratic impulse and establishing shifts in political culture.

Social media platforms are also argued to work on the basis of ‘people like you’. They function in an affective viral culture that is largely enclosed within ideological comfort zones or what Pariser (2011) has called the ‘filter bubble’ effect where people connect mostly with people who think like them. Latest research by Ofcom (2017) also notes that most news consumers in 2016 relied on 2 or fewer wholesale sources, less than they did in 2011.

Although the extent of closure is contested (Newman, 2017) it is still hard to argue that the

notion of a public sphere whose chief force is fostering critical rationality and better argument is well served on social media organized on the basis of a personal ecosystem.

Furthermore, Facebook curates content engineered to maximize consumer spend and serve corporate interest. The algorithms at work operate within a business model devised on the basis of extracting value from individuals through selling commodities and data – hardly the best premise for ensuring full and free debate. McChesney (2014) points out how the global power of new digital distributors have created the greatest monopolies in economic history with new digital industries moving from competitive to oligopolistic to monopolistic at a furious pace until the internet has rested in the hands of a very few giant global corporations. McChesney argues that the hyper commercialism, advertising and monopoly markets we now find online enhance rather than disrupt the contours of capitalism and lead to rampant depoliticization and undemocratic, commercial media policy as the point of government regulation pivots on helping corporate media maximize their profits rather than advancing the public interest

A closer consideration of who is communicating what to whom on social media also reveals that the majority of content is posted by a minority of users dominated by celebrities and mainstream media corporations which is then shared by the rest of us (Bruner, 2013). The notion of social media as an expanded public sphere is further sullied by the increase of bots (fake accounts operated by automated software) with some estimates putting them at one in 20 active accounts. Social bots are hard to spot. They are programmed to tweet and retweet; they have social quirks and create their own online histories; they can infiltrate popular discussions and generate content; they operate on sleep-wake patterns to make them more convincing (Ferrara et al. 2015). These robots inflate followers, influence the stock market and sway political discourse as well as massively enhance marketing campaigns.

Astroturfing is also common practice on social networks. Just like artificial grass made to appear real, astroturfing online uses software to disguise the sponsors of messages to make it seem as if they have come from the general public and so give the impression of widespread support for a particular idea or product. It would seem then, that identifying *who* is communicating on social media is not as simple as it first seems with social media traffic weighted heavily in the favour of corporate players and commercial agendas.

Of course it is always possible to point to a flowering of alternative news websites that have emerged online. The problem is that counter publicity is less likely to be heard and taken account of by political elites and still comes way down the Google hierarchy. So while we may have more counter publicity than we ever thought possible on the internet, so we have more inequality (Piketty, 2013) in society, more surveillance (Morozov, 2011) and more centralisation of power than ever before (Jones, 2014). The explosion of counter publicity in a digital age does not necessarily translate into better democracy if the point at which “[t]he balance of power between civil society and the political systems [then] shifts” (Habermas, 1996: 379) is never reached. If we focus on the enhancement of the process and quality of deliberation, but the deliberation under question has little or no impact on the political administrative complex then the public sphere is once more simply hollowed out (Fenton and Titley, 2015).

New claims of a greatly enhanced public sphere in the internet age can only be evaluated when integrated into an assessment of intersecting forms of social, political and economic inequalities, the development of capitalism and the dramatic consequences of all of these dimensions for representative democratic systems. When such contexts are elaborated upon it is clear that any *critical* examination of the democratic potential of new distributions of communicative power must address the material consequences of increasing inequalities in societies and their insidious relationship to vastly impoverished democracies.

Conclusion: Distracted by technology

The premise of public sphere theory rests on the notion of liberal democracy. The basic tenet of liberal democracy is adequate political representation for all citizens within the sovereignty of the nation state. Any focus on the citizenry and civil society must ask questions relating to social capacity that brings with it an emphasis on equality and inclusivity, and will require a systemic critique of power and not just be distracted by technology. Any democratic theory that is unable to do this is lacking and will not be able to provide the tools by which we can understand our current democratic deficit, and a series of public issue crises: an economic crisis, an environmental crisis, a refugee crisis, and health and housing crises that actually existing liberal democracies have been unfit to deal with. Critical theory has a responsibility to reinvent our democratic futures not recreate political arrangements and institutional formations and structures that have served the very few so very well.

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