Book Review: A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age (Zizi A. Papacharissi)

John Stowell, The University of Melbourne, Australia

Far from following the popular narrative of bemoaning low levels of civic engagement, Papacharissi presents an accessible and persuasive case for the establishment of a new civic vernacular through new technologies. The author contends that online communication has allowed contemporary society to significantly alter civic habits, though not necessarily to its detriment. She evaluates these through the dichotomy of public and private spheres of activity. According to the author, this framing makes it abundantly clear that citizens are engaging in the political in an manner unfathomable prior the introduction of the internet and social media.

Drawing heavily on Jurgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere -widely believed to be a central tenet for democracies in determining public opinion -the author contends that for any 'public' debate, there exists a dichotomous partner working in the 'private' sphere. Traditionally, the two have been mutually exclusive, the 'public' serving the *public good* and operating in the realm of the state, and the 'private' remaining under private ownership, relating directly to the *self* and often under unofficial pretense. Traditionally, issues that emerged in political debate were those of 'public' concerns, whereas the 'private' remained separate from mainstream discussion.

The author reflects that under these conditions it appears that civic engagement is at an all-time low. There is palpable nostalgia for past forms of political engagement and growing cynicism in regards to public debate. Judging by the old public framework, contemporary democracies look anemic at best. Papacharissi suggests that this perceived political malaise is due to the commodification of public spaces, but also due to the recent trend to treat domestic or private spaces as political subjects (à la feminist Carol Hanisch (1969), the personal is political) and for citizens to discuss these issues in a social environment.

According to Papacharissi, these trends have collapsed the divide between public and private spheres. The line is now blurred on what is to be discussed politically, where it will be discussed, and in what capacity. This coincides with technologies converging, which further adds to the communication overlap. A contemporary example may be found in recent speculation over how online chatter may influence court proceedings regarding the murder of ABC journalist Jill Meagher in September 2012 (ABC, 2012). Premier Ted Baillieu

reflected "It (online discussions) has moved from indefinable gossip into almost resourced gossip, and it does have an impact." There is now total confusion surrounding what constitutes public and private debate as these spheres, as well as the mediums that facilitate them, now overlap and are projected through new technologies.

It is here that Papacharissi's book takes an interesting turn. Instead of resigning democracy to the fate of non-commercialised public spaces, she contends that, aided by convergent technologies and spaces, citizens are beginning to reinterpret their roles and adjust their civic habits accordingly. Citizens are now able to actively monitor and comment on international events, aggregate and filter news, and add their viewpoints in the form of blogging and uploading Youtube videos. Papacharissi believes this withdrawal from public debate to private reflection is a form of political protest from citizens who feel alienated from mainstream discussions. She borrows Roger Silverstone's term of the 'mediapolis' to convey that citizens now execute civic habits, not in a physical environment as in the past, but in a virtual environment that remediates the world.

While acknowledging that new technologies are presenting unprecedented opportunities and spaces for democratic activity, the author also reminds us that current engagement does not necessarily facilitate pluralistic discussions. She cautions the reader that online spaces are also susceptible to commercialism, inequitable access to information, and lack of communicative reciprocity, and therefore falls short of replacing the public sphere. Indeed, one can feel politically empowered when blogging or tweeting, and this mode of communication does have the capacity to reach a broader audience than ever conceptualised in human history. However, that is not to say that the blogger's arguments will be subject to the rigorous scrutiny once afforded by public spaces. It is here that Papacharissi warns us that it is possible for technology to be *democratic* without being *democratising.*

Despite outlining obvious strengths and weaknesses of new civic habits, Papacharissi eschews valuing the influence of new technologies on democracy in facilitating these new habits. Like with television and the print media, she believes the new civic habits afforded to the citizen by new technologies often encourage commentators to haphazardly label new technologies as inherently 'good' or 'bad' for society, evoking visions of utopian or dystopian futures. Papacharissi courageously sticks to her thesis that the current nature of civic behaviour is a result of social developments, such as our willingness to treat the private sphere as a political landscape, rather than being solely due to developments in technology. In this sense *A Private Sphere* is thought provoking in the true sense of the word. The reader is encouraged to reflect on contemporary (online) civic habits, not in a technologically deterministic mindset, but as a response to broader social trends which encourage citizens to use the internet in a particularly narcissistic manner.

One criticism of the text may be that Papacharissi uses real-life examples to support her claims sparingly, and relies more heavily on generalities surrounding Youtube and the blogosphere. This not to deny that, Papacharissi makes rigorous use of numerous communication theorists to mount her argument, making *The Private Sphere* an excellent text for scholars eager to deepen their knowledge of citizenship or broader communication theories.

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