
Feeling One's Way into Politics: Theorizing the Political and Affective Affordances of Social Media

Zizi Papacharissi: *Affective Publics. Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 160 pp. ISBN 978-0199999743.

We are nearly all *there* now, for varying purposes – but how exactly do we communicate, present ourselves, network, and act while “presencing” there, and how do we *feel* doing so? It is by now unquestionable that *social media* technologies and communications constitute central arenas and influences in society, but social scientific research continues to struggle with how to examine, interpret, and explain their meanings, considering especially the strikingly fluid and contingent nature of the newer digitalized media.

Zizi Papacharissi, Professor and Head of Communication at the University of Illinois, has written an important, methodically accurate, and theoretically sophisticated treatment of the social, cultural, technological, and political affordances of social media, focusing especially on the use of Twitter for civic

mobilization. The book reports on three case studies, analyzing and theorizing through combined quantitative, network, and discursive analyses nearly two million tweets related to the 2011–2012 Arab Spring movements, the global Occupy manifestations, and to everyday political expressions around trending Twitter topics.

The Arab Spring, the Occupy, and the Spanish Indignados movements have received a great deal of attention among scholars interested in understanding the role of social media in civic protest. Some have concluded that social media enhance citizens' democratic – or perhaps *protodemocratic* – aspirations and may even lead to transformative political change (e.g. Castells 2012 in *Networks of outrage and hope*; Gerbaudo 2012 in *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*), while others have emphasized the limitations of commercial social media platforms and warned of their tendency to boost slacktivism rather than civic activism (Fuchs 2014 in *Media, Culture & Society* 36:1; Morozov 2009 in *Foreign Policy*). Papacharissi's fourth book *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* is an interesting and welcome contribution to this debate, one that opens a whole new territory in the field of so-

cial media studies. Papacharissi is not interested in whether social media enhance civic activism or what is their role in social networks driving protest movements. Rather, she wants to illuminate the importance of social media as *energizing* and *imagination inducing* arenas and technologies for contemporary news storytelling, framing, and gatekeeping.

More specifically, the central point and argument of the book relates to the *affectivity* of the way publics on Twitter are formed and thrive. Affective publics are defined as “networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (p. 125). Papacharissi asks, what happens to (often temporal and episodic) publics when they materialize affectively through the discursive mediality of Twitter, what is their texture like, and what are the tendencies and tensions that characterize them? Her argument is that it is especially the storytelling infrastructure of platforms like Facebook or Twitter that invites observers to tune into and participate in events from which they are physically removed, by imagining what people experiencing them directly may *feel like*. We may not know much about the actual backgrounds and historical circumstances

of what is going on, in, say, the Egyptian protests against Hosni Mubarak, but we nevertheless respond affectively to events we encounter through social media, invest our emotion to stories around them, and contribute to the narratives through our own responses.

As the author points out, while technologies network us, it is the narratives that *connect* us to each other, making us feel closer to some people, events, and locations, and distanced from others (see also Bennett & Segerberg 2012 in *The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics.*; cf. Juris 2012 in *American Ethnologist* 39:2). On social media platforms, citizens' affects easily become political statements *per se*. Thus, social media's ability to facilitate affective feelings of belonging provides the first step on the way to political engagement. While the newer media in themselves do not make or break revolutions, or guarantee that digital publics turn into *collective* action, they do lend the emerging, storytelling publics their own means of "feeling their way into" the evolving event, frequently making the participants themselves a central part of the story (p. 25). It is this process of affective attunement and investment for publics networked digitally but

connected discursively that *Affective Publics* carefully and rather ingeniously explores. Papacharissi's book is a seminal work in social science literature as it regards affect as an important and relevant aspect in the role of social media for politics, political engagement, protest mobilization, and personalization of political activity. On the potentially negative side, however, the author's propensity to run through a breathtaking variety of disciplines, ideas, and concepts (ranging from networking, connectivity, storytelling, and news values to affect, emotion, structure of feeling, performance of self, and liminality – to name just a few) while developing her theoretical interpretation of Twitter as affective publicness, may at some points go over the top. Readers not versed in such multidisciplinary knowledge have quite a mountain to climb in this volume. Moreover, as is characteristic of much of social media research, Papacharissi, too, by and large, avoids explicit discussion on the more dystopic side of social media. The book would have been a more balanced treatment on the subject had she delved also into how tweeters narrate publics of *hate* as well as of hope and discussed what this Janus-faced actuality of social media means for its political and democratic potential. Yet, while *Affective*

Publics certainly challenges its readers with the breadth of its theoretical ideascape, and occasional complexities of its methodology, it is worthwhile the ride.

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