

WEB-BASED POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: ENGAGEMENT, EMOTION, EXPRESSION, EFFICACY

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Introduction

To what extent and in what ways the web facilitates political participation continues to be researched and debated. The topic rose to prominence almost as soon as the Internet had become a societal phenomenon two decades ago, and continues today with all the technical developments of the web and the use of social media. Enthusiasts laud the democratic potential of social media (e.g. Castells 2010; 2012; Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013), while sceptics underscore the limitations of these media in furthering participation (e.g. Couldry 2014; Fuchs 2014; Hindman 2009). The deployment of digital media for anti-democratic measures is also strongly asserted by some authors (notably Morozov 2011). Others split the difference, underscoring how different circumstances can have varying impact in this regard (van Djick 2013; Gerbaudo 2012; Lievrouw 2011; Loader and Mercea 2012; see also special issue: social media and political change, *Journal of Communication* 2012).

In my view we should avoid all the glib optimism, especially the founded on techno-determinist thinking that ignores social and cultural contexts, and yet, we would be foolish to dismiss the unprecedented possibilities for democratic (as well as undemocratic) intervention these communication technologies offer for civic involvement in the political arena. The affordances of the web and the specific platforms of social media permit not only a wide array of practices, but also allow people to appropriate the technologies for ever new purposes and strategies, including political ones. However, to conceptually clarify what is going on, we have to be attentive not only to context, but also to what we mean by political participation, and the subjective dimensions that it encompasses.

In this presentation, I highlight subjective aspects of web-based political activity; my point of departure is a sense that much research and reflection in regard to political participation and the web is operating from a narrow understanding of participation – often delimited to ‘deliberation’ – and in particular a constricted

notion of subjectivity, with a resultant over-emphasis on rationality. I wish to argue for a more robust yet also problematic version of participation, as well as more multi-dimensional notion of the subject. In so doing, I think we take a few more conceptual steps towards capturing lived reality, while at the same time opening the door to new lines of inquiry.

In a somewhat prismatic way (and with a drift towards alliteration), I anchor the discussion around the themes of *engagement*, *emotion*, *expression*, and *efficacy*. Engagement is understood as a dispositional prerequisite for setting in motion participation and has to do with emotion, but emotion plays an even larger role in participation more generally. In democracy theory, reason and rationality are usually held up as the exclusive legitimate grounds for participation, with emotionality usually maligned as a threat. While emotionality is not unproblematic in this regard, I argue that we clearly cannot do without it and I further extend the notion of emotionality in terms of affect, which we can understand as the dynamic and collective aspects of emotion. Further, participation can take many forms and can involve many different modes of practice; I want to call attention to what we can call *the expressive mode of participation* and its implications. Lastly, I address what we might term the outcome of participation: efficacy. Does any given case of participation accomplish anything, and if so, what? Is it effective? Or, framed differently, what is required for effective politics?

My discussion is largely conceptual, augmented with some examples. In the next section I summarize two 'objective' sets of contingencies that impact on participation, often in ways that operate beyond our conscious awareness of them: the political economy and technical architecture of the web. These constitute a fundamental baseline in understanding the possibilities and limits of the web in regard to participation and democracy, while also serving as conceptual links to the subjective side of participation. In the section that follows, I look at the key concept of participation, underscoring its foundation in power relations, while also pointing to the subjective pre-requisite for participation, namely engagement.

From there follow the discussions of the key (e-)themes. These are augmented by a theoretic section that briefly maps the notion of the subject, and the role of discourse in its formation. The presentation concludes with a few comments on the paradoxes of web-based participation, where expressive and communicative participation are relative easy to accomplish, but the instrumental, effective mode is much more difficult to achieve.

Base-line contingencies

Political economy

Political economy addresses questions of ownership, control and the relations of power that derive from these factors. In a sense political economy signals the first important things to know about the web: it is not a neutral communicative space, but is thoroughly structured by power relations. In the mediated online digital world, ownership of major corporate entities is globally more concentrated than it ever was in the era of mass media communication (Fuchs 2011a, 2011b). A few large corporate actors such as Google, Microsoft, Facebook and YouTube dominate the web environment; all are commercial enterprises (only wikis are significant non-commercial actors in this regard). This raises many issues of power, from the often slave-like working conditions of those who produce the hardware to the social engineering via web usage (for current research on such themes, see Franklin 2013; Fuller and Goffey 2012; McChesney 2013; Wilkie 2011). From the standpoint of users, the role of Google, for example, in shaping how the web functions can hardly be exaggerated. This company has become the largest holder of information in world history, structuring not only how we search for information, but also what information is available, how we organize, store and use it. The overwhelming majority of all searches done on the web go via Google.

All this does not deny its truly impressive accomplishments; rather, the issue centres on the position it has attained, and the activities it pursues in relation to the ideals of democracy and accountability. Thus, for instance, with its search logic built on personal profiling – the filtering of results to ‘fit your known locality, interests, obsessions, fetishes, and points of view’ (Vaidhyanathan 2011: 183) – the answers that any two people will receive based on the same search words may well differ significantly. This can erode the notion of public knowledge: members of insular groups may well get their biases reinforced instead of challenged by this filtering process (Pariser 2011). In the long run this can potentially undermine the democratic culture of debate between differing points of view. Further, Google (like many major web actors) engages in surveillance and privacy intrusion of citizens in the gathering, analysis and sale of consumer-related data while at the same time denying transparency with regard to, for example, its PageRank algorithm and Google Scholar search process.

While we cooperate de facto with Google in providing personal information,

with Facebook we are very active in feeding such data into the system (van Dijck 2013). We should be cautious. With Facebook social networks, the spill-over from private to public can easily happen, resulting in embarrassment, entanglements, loss of employment and/or defamation. Data theft is also relatively easy and has been accomplished a number of times; hackers today are very clever, whether they are motivated by amusement, a political cause or simple nastiness. Digital storage systems are simply not fail-safe, as witnessed when hackers today have even entered high-security military databases. As with Google, the data gathered is for commercial purposes (Dwyer 2010; Turow 2011), but again changing social contexts can generate new uses and meanings of personal information. Much of this marketing is channelled through social media. We are decidedly not in the drivers' seat here, but rather at the receiving end of carefully planned corporate strategies.

This selling of personal information is done with our formal consent; yet, if we refuse, we effectively cut ourselves off from the web. As Goldberg (2010) suggests, all participation on the web, even the most radical political kind, feeds data into the commercial system that is its infrastructure. The more people spend time online, the more the economic power of the social media is enhanced. (Yet as we well know now, there is also systematic state surveillance, which I discuss below). What is ultimately required, as MacKinnon (2012) argues, is a global policy that can push regulation of the web such that it will be treated like a democratic, digital commons; we have a long way to go.

Technical architecture

The technical architecture of the web and social media is, of course, immensely complex; my key point here, however, is quite basic: at whatever level we look at, we find points of control – points where various actors/stakeholders are in a position to filter, edit, block or exclude what should be the democratic flow of communication for both individuals and social networks. Building in the work of several other researchers, Losey (2014) develops a simple model of five levels of technical architecture, each of which can be used as a locus of control. These five levels are: the overall technical network, the specific device being used, their concrete applications, the actual content being transferred or blocked, and social data (which include users' location, histories of their web usage, applications use, contact histories and so forth).

He presents a number of cases to illustrate his points. For example, Syria was

cut off from the global Internet in late 2012; this was done by the state-owned telecommunications operator Syria Communication. In the spring of 2014 the Turkish government closed down YouTube and Twitter. This was done by blocking the Domain Name System Protocol (DNS protocol), a protocol that facilitates web browsing by translating long numerical Internet addresses into text-style web addresses. Simply cutting off this mechanism engenders the blackout. In terms of devices, they can be constructed and/or programmed for general and extensive – or more restricted – compatibility with network systems, applications and other devices. Thus, the reach and the capacity for interconnection of, say, smart phones and tablets, can be designed in different ways. As we become more dependent upon into the increasing ‘Internet of things’ (Bunz 2014), with the links between all sorts of devices in our kitchens, cars, on our bodies, in remote offices and so, the capacity to predefine and delimit connection ability between devices (models, brands, etc.) becomes a position of power. Applications such as spy programmes and malware can gather information surreptitiously and/or wreak havoc on their victims.

Ever more destructive for democracy is the now well-known government surveillance carried out on a global scale by the US National Security Agency, but also replicated on a smaller scale by other governments. Since this scandal became globally known in June 2013 following the Edward Snowden revelations, we understand that there is in essence no safe haven for privacy on the web left: all political activity (and much else) is accessible to government security agencies. Being aware of these structural contingencies is essential; however, I would not conclude that, given the corporate domination and governmental violations of privacy, the web has become useless as civic media to be used for democratic purposes. They can be, and are, continuously being appropriated for such uses, despite the anti-democratic activities of various stakeholders.

Participation, engagement, emotionality

Participation, power relations, and the political

The notion of participation derives from several different 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 found 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 (see Mouffe 2013). This is a broader notion than that of politics, which most often refers to the more formalised institutional contexts. Thus, we can say that participation means involvement with the political, regardless of the character or scope of the context. It therefore always in some way involves struggle. Certainly some instances of the political will be a part of electoral politics and involve decision-making and/or elections, but it is imperative that we keep in view this broader vista of the political as the terrain of political agency and participation. Also, we need to distinguish, in media contexts, participation from simple access or mere interaction; these are necessary but not sufficient for genuine participation, as Carpentier (2011) adamantly insists.

Participation is thus always a confrontation of some sort with power arrangements, and therefore is always pre-conditioned by such parameters. We should recall in reference to power arrangements that they refer not only to such obvious manifestations as the state's military and police, or the corporate sector, but also cultural and discursive forms, i.e. 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.

By extension, the cultural conditions that facilitate participation can be promoted or impeded, depending on circumstances and the forces at play. I conceptualize these conditions as civic cultures (Dahlgren 2009); they can be seen as discursive resources that involve such dimensions as relevant knowledge, democratic values, minimal degrees of trust, communicative spaces (not least in digital form) and practices with some degree of efficacy. Practices both derive from and extend modes of participation, thus maintaining and further developing the enabling character of civic cultures. 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 political contestation in themselves (e.g. access to knowledge, conflicting values). Without the anchoring, without access to the resources of civic cultures, citizen's involvement with the political becomes deflected, indeed, depoliticized, especially in regard to economic issues (see Straume 2011), and participation is eroded.

Of course in the real world of Western democracies we are mostly dealing with situations of more-or-less and uneven forms of civic cultures rather than their total absence. Even under authoritarian regimes one can at times find repressed and submerged traces of such civic cultures – which can serve to nourish resistance, as

we have seen in a number of cases in recent history. In sum, the point here is that political participation never begins with a *tabula rasa* – it is always conditioned by existing circumstances that have major cultural elements, and the availability of and access to such resources – including media – has to do with power. Participation can be made more inclusive or more exclusive via measures from power elite that impact on civic cultures – and such measures can in turn be contested via civic practices.

The political is something that arises, discursively and dynamically, and can appear in any sphere of social and cultural activities, even consumption and entertainment (and we can find innumerable examples of that on social media). What is decisive is not the particular terrain as such, but the character of the involvement: it always has to do in some way, however remote (or mediated), with power relations. However, for actual participation, the character of the context is highly significant: it makes a big difference if, in Western democracies, we are talking about 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 are facing serious dangers and potentially risking their lives, which gives participation yet another meaning. There is no generalized, universal notion of participation; it always takes place under specific circumstances.

The classic dichotomy: rationality and emotionality

Yet, we are still left with a basic question at the level of the individual actor: what actually facilitates participation? How is it that people indeed take the step to in some way act in relation to the political? It is here that I argue for the concept of engagement. To be engaged in something signals not just cognitive attention and some normative stance, but also a subjective involvement, an investment of the self. There is inexorably an emotional charge here; one feels strongly about the issue at hand. The intensity can vary considerably; when it is strong, we can speak of passion. The subjective disposition behind participation can thus never be a purely rational or cognitive matter.

In contemporary democratic theory, there is a strong emphasis on rational deliberation as a normative ideal for participation. Such a communicative mode is of course indispensable, especially as formal decision-making draws near. However, to insist on this as the overall model of participatory practices can become constrictive of expression and feelings, which are so central to politics. Such a stance can even

become excluding in its consequences: demanding a certain genre of communication that may not be the most natural for all groups. Also, genuine deliberation assumes a degree of power equality that is often absent – and not likely to be attained merely by deliberation (I address this in more detail in Dahlgren 2009).

The traditional liberal view that sets rationality against emotion is analytically counter-productive, as many have argued (see Hall 2005). It is important to see the interconnectedness of reason and passion; in simple terms: passions always have *reasons*: there is some object or vision that is valued, cherished. Political passion is not blind, it involves a conception of the good, something to be attained, something to strive for, and often also involves some notion as to how to achieve this good. The strong feeling towards the desired vision that we are passionate about may have derived from careful, rational analysis or from an unreflective assumption, yet there is always a rational element involved. In this sense, reasons incorporate emotions: we find that values, arguments, ideologies, and so on are often very strongly held. Thus, in the same way that a passion for something suggests a reason for valuing it, a reason for choosing it over something else implies at least some passion for the choice. Likewise, undesirable behaviour such as violence and aggression are never exclusively the result of ‘pure’ passion – there always reasons as well.

Yet, in analytically opening the door to the storeroom of emotions in understanding political engagement, we of course also get a whole basket of problematic goods that we cannot ignore. There is an understandable fear among democracy theorists of ‘the irrational’ – so many crisis areas in the world today seemingly manifest its negative consequences, and history is replete with dreadful examples. Fear, anger, pleasure, denial, hate, revenge, and so on are emotional valences, often lurking in the unconscious, that can spur engagement and lead to participation. And when they are combined with ‘rational’ political conceptions of the xenophobic, racist, or fascist kind, certainly yield a volatile brew. Yet ultimately politics – and subjectivity itself – straddles the rational-emotional distinction, without safety nets, and participation builds upon of the interplay of both of these aspects of our mental dynamics (Dahlgren 2009). Trying to deny one side or the other merely hinders our understanding of human action.

Affect: emotion in motion

There are two further aspects to emotionality, captured in the term ‘affect’. First of all, we can think of affect as the actual subjective experience of emotionality, a

sort of reflexive awareness. The concept derives from Spinoza, but has been picked up and developed in recent decade; there has emerged an 'affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences in recent years (see for example Massumi 2002; Gregg and Seigworth 2010). 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 analyse 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.

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 collective social experience. Thus, the second aspect of affect brings in the collective side of emotions, and derives from the work of several authors, as Papacharissi describes. One source is the work of Raymond Williams and his notion of 'structures of feeling'. For Williams, structures of feeling give expression to the prevailing cultural currents and moods of a given historical moment, which we may somewhat metaphorically think of as the kinetic energy of collective affect in a specific context. We can think of structures of feeling as implicit and inchoate, yet still impacting on people's political horizons. Relatedly, Ferguson (2012) sees 'democratic affect' as deriving from imaginaries of commonality, where we can take 'responsibility for our part in generating relationships of trust and solidarity... a politics of self-conscious democratic world-building' (Ferguson 2012: 92). Unfortunately, of course, affective structures of feeling are far from only being progressive: they can manifest racism xenophobia and other unsavoury sentiments as well (I take up populism in this regard below).

The final conceptual link to affect can be found in the classic book by Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience* (in English 1993), which they wrote as a critical reply to Habermas' 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), a premise that would make this space more amenable for intervention by those at the receiving end of prevailing power structures. On the other hand, this is precisely the point

of departure for many activists, who, based on their experiences, generate and participate in political online alternative public spheres and confront prevailing power relations. Affect, in sum, can be understood as dynamic, collective emotionality that connects with people's shared social experiences; more metaphorically, affect gives civic cultures their relevance, animates engagement, and motivates participation.

Yet, we might ask: given this, how are we to understand what is actually going on in people's hearts and minds? To respond to that, we need some foundational notions about 'the subject', to which I now turn.

Subjectivity, expression, efficacy

Framing the subject

Let us pause for a moment and consider the theoretic contours of 'the 'subject'', the actor we are concerned with as a political participant. It could well be that the ongoing digitalization of the world is engendering historically new modes of subjectivity, as some scholars argue (e.g. Savat 2013), but to keep the discussion on a manageable track let us stay with a fairly mainstream notion of the subject. Most fundamentally, I would emphasize its constructionist and contextual character, which can shift with circumstances (this could perhaps be seen as a 'post-structuralist-lite' perspective). Whether or not we have an inner essence is not an issue that we need to deal with here. I do, however, insist on some notion of the unconscious i.e. that we are never fully transparent to ourselves. This becomes important as we look at emotionality and affect, aspects I discussed above. The unconscious operates, as it were, behind our back; our agency is shaped to some extent by factors which lie beyond our awareness. This is a generalized version of the unconscious, and need not be orthodox Freudian or Lacanian.

The subjective space of the self is a region in which society and culture are inscribed in us, rendering us not only human, but also according us specific influences. The net result for a person at any moment is of course always some synthesis of external impact with internal (subjective) will (and no doubt hereditary features, but that lies beyond this presentation). Further, given the social constructionist premises of subjectivity, it is thus also characterized by tensions and fissures deriving from the social world. And lastly, subjectivity is never merely a 'private' reality, even if it will always comprise individual, personal elements; it always has a collective side

– which of course becomes particularly relevant in the context of politics.

A methodological approach to elucidating subjectivity is to examine discourses, that is, structured patterns of communication use and representation (language, images, sounds, and practices), with the meanings they embody. The foundations of this perspective are found in the traditions of critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough 2010) and post-Marxian discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Discourses – with all their diverse modes of representation and expression – operate in and define specific social contexts, which makes them the carriers of the meanings that are in circulation in society. Discourses shape us, yet it is crucial to emphasize that they also function as enabling resources: we also make use of discourses. For example, the knowledge, values, practices, and identities of civic cultures are all in some way anchored in discourses. While the entanglements with power relations are such that discourses often ‘nudge’ us strongly, there is no determinism in regard to subjectivity: it always remains to some degree open and unpredictable.

Some discourses, in relation to others, have hegemonic positions, that is, they offer meanings that are preferred or dominant meanings; their nudge is powerful. Here we have the pivotal point of politics: prevailing discourses can be challenged by alternative ones, in the context of concrete societal circumstances. Since meaning is always to some extent shifting and contested, even hegemonic discourses can never be fully secure – even if discourses and society in general are characterised by large degrees of inertia. Thus subjectivity is always to some degree a process, not a static stasis. Discourses interpellate (i.e. address) us as subjects, providing us with subject positions, not least in relation to political issues. In the context of public spheres and politics, subject positions can be understood as political identities made available by pertinent discourses – again, usually aided by collective emotional dynamics, i.e. affect. As we in turn make active use of discursive patterns, they tend to solidify our political identities – which may well link up with our identities in ostensibly non-political contexts. Except in the most authoritarian societies there will always be some degree of contra-hegemonic discourses in circulation, though often restricted to specific societal sectors, communities, groups, or movements.

Given the often contradictory, contested and generally disorderly state of discourses in circulation, it is often the case that we as subjects are not fully at home in any one discourse, but are pulled in different directions and put into different positions by competing discourses. Political identities can thus readily

become fragmented or decentred to some degree ('overdetermined', to use the precise term). It should also be mentioned that prevailing discourses – especially manifested via the web – can readily position us as consumers and spectators of an almost endless universe of entertainment, celebrity gossip, gaming, shopping, hobbies, social networking and so on. There is nothing intrinsically negative about any of these realms on their own, but in the context of online public culture they of course offer massive and mostly more enticing alternatives to engagement with the political.

Further, as Dean (2010) and Papacharissi (2010) argue, the problem is not simply one of people opting for consumption or popular culture instead of politics. Rather, the web environment and media culture generally are engendering a transformation of political practices and social relations whereby the political becomes engulfed and altered and precisely by the practices and discourses of privatised consumption. Many scholars suggest that the boundaries between the political and popular culture/consumption have become more porous, and they argue that it can be positive and democratizing that the popular is able to thus colour the political. However, there is also a risk for erosion or deflection of the political, an undermining of the vitality of democratic political agency. The political becomes framed as merely another leisure option.

Expression, efficacy, irony

With our schematic view of participation and of the political as a discursively emergent reality, access to and interaction with media obviously becomes not only helpful but also often absolutely necessary: people become communicatively linked to political ideas and sentiments and to each other. Access to social media per se usually will not turn people into engaged citizens, yet, to the extent that the political can discursively arise, the web and social media take on an important function in discussion (not least on Facebook) and in mobilizing and facilitating participation. If we now connect our notion of the subject, shaped by contingencies and the unconscious, to the themes of engagement and participation, we see some new conceptual doors opening up. We tend to think of the subjective state of engagement as well as the 'objective' acts of participation as meditated, conscious choice, with political goals in mind. Often they indeed are, but we can now see that there are also alternative possibilities.

Thus, we can make a conceptual distinction between two forms of participation:

‘instrumental’ and ‘expressive’. This is a dichotomy that emerged within traditional political science in studying the motivation of voters (see, for example, Brennan and Lomasky 1984). With instrumental politics, citizens are seen as interested in actual political outcomes and their consequences, while with expressive politics, the benefit is seen as residing in the act itself. That is, there is no anticipation or demand that the act will have consequences beyond the satisfaction of it affords the citizen; it ‘feels good’, it ‘gets something off one’s chest’, and so on. Expressive participation can well be important for the long-term processes of building collective identities, mobilizing opinion around issues, and so forth.

Even in the political science literature this dichotomy soon became somewhat problematic as one zeroed in on concrete examples. And generally, it can be argued that the formation of public opinion builds to a great extent on the expression of views – which in the long run is intended to have some political impact. Yet the distinction remains a useful heuristic device, especially in the age of web-mediated participation, where expression seemingly is a lot easier to enact than effective, instrumental interventions into the political realm. In simple terms, it’s easier to express something than to actually get something done. Much of the literature on political participation and the web ignores this distinction, with the result that expressive participation often takes on a position of equal significance to that of the instrumental mode, downplaying concern with the actual efficacy of the participation.

Svensson (2009) adds a third category, ‘communicative’, and if we think of these three types as discursive modes, we get a typology of participation that can at times be quite revealing. Marchal (2013) examined 250 politically oriented Facebook groups and found that very few of them encouraged any further action in any way, though I would suggest that perhaps some of them had a ‘communicative’ intent. One would certainly define these posts as manifesting engagement and constituting participation, but it was largely in the expressive or communicative discursive mode, not the instrumental. Marchal rightly argues that this form of participation should not be dismissed or denigrated; it plays an important role in shaping identities and anchoring politics in a meaningful way within everyday life. At the same time, I would argue that from the standpoint of efficacy, such online participation is quite weak. While the expressive and communicative discursive modes may help build up political potential and a sense of empowerment, if the steps required for instrumental participation are systematically avoided, the confrontation with power relations –

the 'bottom line' of participation – remains largely unfulfilled.

This links up with what a number of observers have noted about online participation: it can readily become a privatized habitus (Papacharissi 2010) with the consumerist stance. The often very loose or non-existent bonds with other active citizens serve to generate a cosy comfort zone, a 'solo sphere' (Dahlgren 2013) characterized by 'slacktivism' and 'clicktivism', yielding situations where actors feel that engaging with the political remains a free-choice option among other leisure pursuits. Expressive and communicative participation is easy, no doubt at times even 'fun', while instrumental participation, effective politics, requires a lot more 'work'.

I would just add a note to this in regard to the expression of irony in political circumstances. It has often been said that we live in 'unutopian' times. Grand ideologies, big visions – seem foolish, and unrealistic, while mainstream politics and corporate media appear planned, staged, scripted, and groomed. To many citizens, expressing earnestness in regard to positive political ideals seems naïve. Coupled with a sense of powerlessness, irony becomes an understandable style of expression, it offers relief. Political comedy such as *The Daily Show* reflects this mood. Irony can be a strategy for creating political community – it is 'we' who get the jokes – and can be a form of intellectual empowerment and may even help at times to turn laughter into political passion. Yet in the long run, irony as a discursive mode of participation lacks efficacy. It tends to create distance and mobilizes skepticism and cynicism. It is difficult to launch something new, pro-active, and passionate, via irony.

Abundance, speed, and short-term engagement

Above I discussed briefly how the basic technical architecture of the web becomes entwined with the power relations that shape it. There are other technical attributes of the web that can impact on its use and the subjectivity of its users, even if they do not directly define power relations. Two such attributes are largely taken for granted by now and not discussed much anymore – they have merely become features that define the web's character: the abundance of information it makes available and the speed at which information is accessible – and which it is replaced by new information. These by now mundane facts have nonetheless bearing on the subjectivity of participation; they may also have something to do with the fact that engagement on particular political issues on the web is for the most part fleeting.

The output on the web is, from the practical horizons of any user, seemingly

infinite. Of course each of us has his/her own areas of interest, networks and sites that we follow, and thereby wall off most of what is 'out there' as not relevant to our purposes. We all develop personal strategies for navigating the daily tsunami of information, 'infoglut' as Andrejevic (2013) calls it. Yet, as he argues, even as we zero in on just those topics that interest us, we are often still confronted by a vast output, and moreover, in the realms of society, culture, and politics, there are many different perspectives, premises, and conclusions. And even while we tend to adhere to the groupings whose world views we share, doubt can set in. And the consequences are on the individual, group, and societal levels. Cognitive certainty is dislodged by informational abundance; moreover, as citizens become all the more 'media hip' and understand the constructed character of mediated representation, suspicion of sources grows. So, to avoid such dissonance, we wall off those whom we mistrust the most, yet become anxious about what we might be missing. Climates of popular debunking emerge, coloured by cynicism. We see affective leaps – structures of feeling – where 'truthiness', the semblance of the real – can take on validity (for instance, Fox News). Coupled with weak sense of efficacy, it is easy for citizens' assumptions to be psychologically stronger than the real; here emotionality can open the door to problematic and even dangerous post-rational trajectories. Affect can lead people to find emotionally satisfying short-cuts to deal with the massive amounts of information and their at times overall ambivalence. This becomes debilitating for the individual, it fosters cognitive closure of groups, and erodes the character of public discussion.,

The danger of the web's speed are related. Finding and extracting relevant information that one can trust can be difficult in a fast-moving informational environment, but still more challenging is to develop 'knowledge', in the sense of resources for civic cultures. Knowledge emerges through the critical integration of new information with existing frames of reference, and may involve the modification of these frames. This takes time and effort, both of which become easily marginalized in the digital milieu of the 'the ever new': the present becomes devalued as attention turns to whatever will come next. Decision-making requires reflection, which in turn also demands time. The overall 'speed up' of (late) modern culture is a theme found in a number of writers, including and Harvey (1991) and Virilio (2002).

Abundance and speed increases the competition for attention, and as the media environment becomes denser, the odds of getting and holding attention to any message generally decreases. This, as Couldry (2013) recently proposed, 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. He notes that even the most rigorous analysis of how digital networks facilitate political participation, e.g. Bennett and Segerberg (2013), do not show the web supporting long-term engagement that can result in major political transformations. The results have been short-term participation and loyalties, of which the Occupy movement is a leading example.

Couldry (2013) wisely raises the question of where we should look for explanations: it could well be that it is the absence of connections to stable political institutions (on the left) that accounts for this sporadic behavior, rather than the characteristics of the web itself. Yet, in either case, it is clear that we find no solution to short-term engagement in the social connectivity offered by web. While short-term victories are to be celebrated, it appears that the expressive and communicative modes of participation that the web facilitates mostly fails to generate the long-term instrumental mode, thereby yielding low efficacy. Or, viewed from the standpoint of our theory of the subject, the web's discursive environment tends to interpellate citizens in ways that promotes fleeting subject positions in relation to specific issues, and more generally deflects engagement with long-term contra-hegemonic participation. I would underscore that this largely a de facto 'by-product' of the web's features, not a conscious manifestation of power relations – and that all such tendencies are never fully fixed but remain ever open to some degree.

The problem of 'populism'

A very current trajectory today in regard to the emotional character of engagement and expression is of course 'populism'. I initially here use quote marks around the term to signal its problematic conceptual character, since there seems to be little consensus on its definition, and just about all major works about begin by referring to this difficulty (for a classic treatment, see Cardovan 1981; more recently see Wodak 2013; for a current research overview, see Alavares and Dahlgren, forthcoming 2015). This is not the place for an ambitious discussion of this major topic, but I just want to connect a few key points of the discussion above to some strands of writing about populism.

Populism can be and today is in many cases a worrisome phenomenon – its pejorative character is largely justified – in the context in which it emerges, namely representative democracies. Much of the focus on populism accentuates its playing

to the emotions of citizens – and the success it can have in mobilizing them. This is certainly accurate, but we should keep in mind that all politics (including the most traditional party politics), as I have argued above, require a dimension of emotion and affect to motivate participation. Indeed all democratic politics, I would argue, must to some degree be ‘popular’ in the sense that they attract support; the popular can tip over into populism, though the criteria have varied across time and place. Thus, we always have a problem in regard to where to draw the line.

Today our concern in Europe is that populism is strongly an extreme right phenomenon, yet we also have left-wing parties with clearly populist traits, for example, Spain (Podemos) and Greece (Syriza). And historically such has been the case, which is why many authors argue that the essence of populism is not found in the political content, but in the style. Rather, we can better understand populism as an expression of difficulties within democracy itself. The real danger is found in these contemporary shortcomings – i.e. its unfulfilled and even ‘undemocratic’ dimensions. These include not only the general power arrangement of neoliberalism, mechanisms of exclusion and so on, but also, more specifically, an unwillingness and/or inability of many mainstream parties to politically engage successfully with key questions that are of concern for many citizens, e.g. immigration, EU austerity measures, and social crises. Populism is in a sense a response to these failures; the symptom must be addressed, the deeper causes of the malaise must be dealt with. Thus, the truly ominous aspect of the response to these dilemmas is less the populism per se, and more the actual right-wing politics: xenophobia, militant nationalism, racism, and even fascism. These involve attacks on the values and processes of democracy itself. Populism, of course, can set in motion anti-democratic affect and expression, but we should see this as a response, rather than the origin of the difficulties.

Final reflections

The web by itself will not save democracy; however, despite all the difficult contingencies discussed above, it is absolutely essential for political participation in the modern world. History shows us that the boundaries between public and private spheres are always to some extent being reconfigured; today this is very apparent with the web and social media. The online environment for participation

– which we can treat as a new habitus – is a hybrid setting that realigns these boundaries, as a number of authors argue (Dahlgren 2013; Papacharissi 2010). That political involvement is increasingly enacted via the web should not be surprising, given how so much of society's overall interactive life now takes place via digital media. Clearly the on- and offline world today are highly integrated, and we should be careful about introducing any essentialisms into the way we theorize them. Yet a case can still be made for sociologically noting differences between them: they are not identical in their forms, affordances, and experiences.

As I have indicated in the discussion above, the web in various ways shapes subjectivity; its parameters constitute contingencies for engagement and emotions, affect and expression. The prevailing discourses lead quickly to entanglements with consumption and leisure, deflecting the long-term and work-oriented demands of politics. Web-based public sphere offer opportunities for participation, but these lean strongly towards the communicative and expressive, rather than the instrumental. Participation in the long run becomes less efficacious than desired. It is hoped that this analysis will be useful for future analysis of political participation via the web, that these subjective dimensions – their weaknesses and strengths – can be better illuminated. In the meantime, we should not conclude that the web as a technology for participation is to be abandoned; that would be ridiculous. Rather, it would seem that for the sake of political subjectivity, identity, and efficacy, online political activity needs to be complemented by more of the old-fashioned face to face connectivity that it has increasingly replaced.

Effler (2010) cites several authors to make the point that live interactive 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 required to social movements. The experience of dealing with other citizens face-to-face in meetings, sharing the work of organizing and mobilizing, laughing together at the humour of some political expression, talking about what happened to them during the march, consoling each other after defeats – all such experience strengthens the bonds between activists and generates something which is absolutely essential for efficacious political agency, namely solidarity. Nurturing and expanding solidarity, engaging in effective politics, requires more than clicking on the 'Like' button.

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