

Affective publics

Margreth Lünenborg

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The concept of the public is a notion long associated with rational argument, discourse, and deliberation, following Jürgen Habermas' (1962/1991) formulation of "the public sphere." "The public," understood in the singular as one coherent entity, thus encompasses normative assumptions about public discourse as a primarily deliberative structure that legitimizes democratic forms of governance. Numerous critiques have been leveled at the concept of the public for its normative character and its dichotomy of the public and the private (Fraser, 1992; Benhabib, 1992). These critiques have shown the need for a new understanding of publicness to account for the increasingly convergent, networked, and mobile character of media technologies, and of the diversified modes of public communication they entail. This chapter proposes that affect is central to the constitution of publics – in the plural – and that an understanding of publics through affect focuses on their relational, processual, and performative character, thus being able to account for the complex mobile media environment constituting new networks of communication. Affective publics is a term introduced by Zizi Papacharissi in 2015 to describe the small, fragile, and fluid quality of these publics. In the analysis of political communication, the notion of affective publics emphasizes their "turbulent" and thus unstable character, which causes severe concerns as established structures, such as legacy media institutions, and actors, such as professional journalists, are losing relevance and influence (Margetts et al., 2016). A traditional understanding of current publics is based on clear distinctions between audiences and publics and between consumers and producers (→ *audience emotions*). However, the ubiquitous availability of digitally networked communication technologies in the everyday suggest that those traditional distinctions have failed to capture current processes of public communication. Terms like "networked public" (boyd, 2011) or "hybrid public spaces" (van Dijck & Poell, 2015) offer new understandings

of the complex and dynamic constellations of public articulation.¹ Yet these concepts mostly focus on the technology-based, but socially adapted structures of participation. The concept of affective publics thus adds a missing, specifically affective understanding of publics. Affect here, and elsewhere in this volume, is understood not as an antagonist to discourse, but rather as a part of it. Affect in this sense becomes a key term to capture the fluid dynamics between digital technologies and human behavior. Affective dynamics can help illuminate the temporal logics by which new publics emerge, for example, in moments of crisis and conflict or in search for solidarity or joint action. As an alternative to normative understandings, the performative character of publics (Warner, 2002) becomes obvious in the dynamic emergence of online as well as offline publics. Understanding publics as performative emphasizes that they are temporally and situationally sustained in the mediated and/or localized co-presence of actors (Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2018). Recent research on protest communication of social movements suggests an understanding of publics as affective due to the highly dynamic character of news distributed instantaneously, usually through social media, during an ongoing event. In this context, publics take part affectively in waves of solidarity within online and offline communities (Papacharissi, 2015). At the same time, mobilization strategies of right-wing extremists can rely on comparable dynamics, producing disgust and outrage. Thus, the ambivalent character and conflictive potential of affective publics becomes apparent.

From public sphere to fragile publics

The idea of “the bourgeois public sphere,” initially conceptualized by Habermas (1962/1991) as a historical analysis of the upcoming nation states in Europe, has since been applied to societies far beyond this particular historical period. In its Anglo-American reception, the conceptual legacy of this normatively grounded framework has been understood as a fundamental precondition of modern democracy. The very foundation for a joint public sphere in this understanding is deliberation, based on the mode of ongoing exchange of rational arguments that arose, for instance, in salon debates and literary

1 The concept of articulation follows Stuart Hall’s understanding outlined in an interview with Lawrence Grossberg (1986, p. 53):

Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects.

“Articulation” here is understood as the contingent form of speaking out in the variety of media texts within given unequal power constellations.

pamphlets in its beginnings. Habermas did already describe the professionalization and commercialization of journalism and the media as fundamental shifts enabling social engineering and as diminishing the quality of public discourse. Nevertheless, the ongoing success of his conceptual work praised the quality of the rational exchange of ideas as a public good.

The concept of the public sphere thus encompasses normative assumptions about public discourse as a primarily deliberative structure that legitimizes democratic norms of governance. Two elements of the public sphere are seen as essential within this normative perspective. The first element is the virtual and physical spheres, which are regarded as an institutional setting of communication among strangers. The second element is the public sphere's facilitation of reasoned public choice. This dualism of the idea of the public sphere has proven to be exceptionally popular and problematic at the same time. Almost coinciding with the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in English (Habermas, 1962/1991), a critical discourse about the alleged universalism of the public sphere took shape against the background of the end of the Cold War (Calhoun, 1992). Scholars pointed out that the public sphere is both a mechanism for debate and choice, and a space for solidarity and for building a sense of belonging. In particular, Nancy Fraser (1992) and Seyla Benhabib objected to the "unexamined normative dualisms" (Benhabib, 1992, p. 95) that had informed Habermas' conception of the public sphere. Fraser and others pointed out that a lack of attention to gendered categories, such as the distinction between an intimate private sphere and a political public, legitimized structures of inclusion and exclusion. Some scholars argued that the public sphere as a notion left unexamined the gendered divisions between men as public and women as private, and that this distinction is a crucial argument against the universality of the idea of the public sphere (Klaus, 2001). Criticizing the nation-based and thus unifying view of the public sphere, scholars have also highlighted that counter-publics and deliberately oppositional social formations need to be taken into account (Castells, 2007). Opposing the idea of a shared understanding by deliberation, scholars like Chantal Mouffe (2005) have argued for an "agonistic public" intensely relying on passion as a driving force, where conflicting positions are maintained rather than resolved. Another stream of critique has come from scholars in Islamic studies and postcolonial studies. Scholars in this line identified the idealization of rational discourse and deliberation as a core concept of a secularized, Western notion of the public sphere. They thus argue for a focus on the corporeal, ethical, and religious dimensions and practices in the constitution of publics outside the European-American context (e.g., Mahmood, 2012). With such a variety of critiques, it has become obvious that the normative assumption of a public sphere – though proclaiming openness and accessibility as its precondition – heavily relies on power structures, hierarchies, and mechanisms of exclusion.

These critiques of "the public sphere" have inspired alternative concepts, like Michael Warner's (2002) "counter publics" or Mouffe's (2005) "agonistic

public.” Additionally, some have suggested the pressing need for a systematic inclusion of emotions and modes of emotional communication in the constitution of publics. Chris Peters (2011) criticizes an “undertheorized” approach to emotion in journalism studies, suggesting an understanding of emotion as a constitutive part in journalism’s history. Peters (2011) moreover notes that in recent years “the diversity of emotional styles [...] and attempts to involve the audience have become more explicit” (p. 297). Likewise, Barry Richards (2010) has called for “placing emotion at the heart of our understanding of politics” (p. 304). He argues for establishing “a healthier emotional sphere” (Richards, 2010, p. 309) by taking into account the emotional patterns of news making and the strategies of emotionalization that are used in public communication to reach a broader audience. However, my argument for “affective publics” goes beyond such an addition. Instead, I regard affect as a dynamic, processual, and fluid capacity arising in the relational interaction between actors and artifacts in any kind of social practice, and embedded in a variety of temporal and spatial contexts (→ *affect*).

These contexts are not fixed. They have changed radically with the ubiquitous rise of accessible digital networked communication technologies. This shift calls for a new understanding of the emergence and establishment of public articulations. Traditional distinctions between audiences and publics, and between consumers and producers of media, are increasingly inadequate to capture processes of public communication that emerge through circulation rather than distribution and broadcasting, at a time when media technologies are increasingly networked, convergent, and mobile (Livingstone, 2005).

Any adequate understanding of publics needs to take into account its fluid, unstable, fragile, and dynamic character. This is especially so at a time when publics can forge transnational avenues of protest via networked communication constituted via hashtags (e.g., #MeToo, #TimesUp, #BlackLivesMatter) and through the coordination of online and offline activities, for example as flashmobs or as forms of “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The ongoing pluralization of media formats and technologies challenges the established hierarchy of communicative actors. The normative concept of deliberation relies on a regulated system of privileged actors, in which journalism is an institution that delivers information of prioritized social relevance. However, today’s dynamic and often chaotic constellation of speakers and observers does not rely on such a given hierarchical structure. In hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013), the coexistence of traditional media institutions with personalized, networked media establishes conflicting settings of articulation where the tone, modality, volume, and dominance of speakers in a given public is part of an ongoing struggle. The concept of affective publics proposed here does not argue for a technology driven understanding of new communication settings. Rather, it provides an analytic approach to describe and understand

ongoing turbulences and new opportunities in public articulations. Affect theory seeks to capture these seminal shifts based on dynamic forms of interaction between (media) technology and human actors. It does so by providing a theoretical framework for researchers to re-conceptualize the relation between individual actors and institutions, as well as between technology and (human) agency. Based on a relational understanding of affect (Slaby & Röttger-Rössler, 2018), I consider publics as performative, processual, and thus affective. We will show how such an understanding goes beyond the inclusion of emotional aspects of public communication.

Understanding publics and counter-publics: the performative character of publics

Decentering the association of publics with deliberation urges us to acknowledge that a public is not an institution. Publics cannot be reduced to particular organizations such as the media, or to particular “spheres.” Publics come into existence through modalities of communication between very different kinds of actors, networks, and groups in societies. Warner (2002) regards publics as performative as they emerge through a “dependence on the co-presence of strangers” who pay attention to individual articulations (p. 76). His argument about the necessary co-presence of articulation and attention becomes even more salient in today’s context of social media and its public articulations. Individual articulations can originate from a personal context, but are simultaneously accessible to others. Articulation and attention are necessary components of publics, or in Warner’s words, “publics are only realized through active uptake” (Warner, 2002, p. 87). Such a performative understanding emphasizes the “doing” of publics instead of its normative character addressed by deliberation. “Doing publics” can be understood as part of a social analysis based on practice theory interested in an “open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media” (Couldry, 2004, p. 117). By analyzing routinized and iterative practices with media, patterns of emerging performative publics can be identified. Understanding publics as performative emphasizes that they are temporally and situationally sustained in the mediated and localized co-presence of actors. This emphasis on the spatiality and temporality of publics nowadays becomes even more relevant as aggregation, searchability, and live feeds create their own temporalities and networks of followers. Co-presence can be physically localized or might become mediated and thus translocal, though quite often both modes coexist and mutually reinforce each other. Thus, co-presence implies an evolving and changeable social relation between actors and spectators, wherein differing levels of agency, social hierarchies, and gendered speaker positions become apparent and can be challenged. Like the performativity of gender, the performativity of publics is based on a “stylized repetition of acts” that constitute “social temporality [...] through sustained social performances” (Butler, 1990,

pp. 140–141). In the iteration of gendered communicative acts, the concept of performativity allows for the analysis of negotiations over the terms that regulate social hierarchies. Performativity here describes “that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Thus, a public must be brought into being through practices and actions.

Conceiving of publics as performative, I highlight that the co-constitution of actors and spectators creates alternating positions, rather than exclusive ones. This reflexivity of speaker and audience positions captures the particular modalities of public articulation that are embedded in quotidian practices of digital networked communication. Online communication is then inherently performative, because it demands of actors to negotiate predefined features of media platforms within their specific social environments.

Based on such a performative understanding, the temporal dynamics through which publics arise or vanish are of specific relevance, and should be considered in detail. Current networked communication has generated new temporalities and spatialities for public participation. These are beginning to alter the constitution of publics, as users of social networks switch between personal and public modes of communication, and contribute to the spontaneous emergence (and often quick dissolution) of publics (Sheller, 2004). Digital modes of mediated communication, such as mobile telephones and social networking sites, have been incorporated into quotidian user practices. Thus, mediated publicness is becoming a default mode of online communication that further complicates the empirical basis of identifying publics. A multitude of communicative actors are now connected as “networked publics” with high frequency, dynamism, and intensity (boyd, 2011). This context requires analytic approaches that account for the mutual influence of each actor on the other. These “networked publics” describe “a space constructed through networked technologies” and “the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (boyd, 2011, p. 39). It is important to stress that networked publics are spaces and communities at the same time. These forms of connecting, gathering and constructing sociality are established in their own temporal dynamics, becoming visible as “shit storms” as well as waves of solidarity, and forging intensities and dynamics that can best be described as “affective flows” (→ *social collectives*). In such a way, temporality becomes constitutive of publics themselves. The agency inherent in these kinds of publics is no longer located in individual actors or in technology itself, but lies beyond human capacity in the interactive relation between media technology and a network of actors. This is exactly where affect comes into play.

Affective publics: dynamics of protest and outrage

In social movement research, the role of social media is critically addressed with regard to different tasks such as mobilization of followers, organization

of actions, and the articulation of joint demands. Examples like *Occupy Wallstreet* (#ows) have also shown that a multiplicity of roles and functions become available as actors perceive each other as joining around a common interest (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Social movement research has begun to investigate how political subjectivity is negotiated in digital media environments, and under what conditions unstable associations of actors come to establish structures of contestation. Yet, the focus remains indebted to the political nature of participation. Forms of protest have changed due to social networked media and institutional preconditions have lost their relevance. In such a context, individual articulations – which cannot always sharply be distinguished as either private or public – can become starting points of joint action. Particular sites (understood both as physical locations and as communication platforms) serve as catalysts of communality and contestation. Personal networks of individuals here are crucial for mobilization and the organization of protest. There is a marked shift from researching institutionalized movement structures to researching individualized media practices of ordinary citizens. This shift in research objectives acknowledges a certain de-institutionalization of political activism while investigating new modalities of public articulation and contestation that emerge from networks of actors, quotidian practices of communication, and the circulation of common symbolic repertoires (Cammaerts, Mattoni, & McCurdy, 2013). W. Lance Bennett's and Alexandra Segerberg's (2012) notion of a shift from "collective action" to "connective action" captures this point.

In addition to this established work on social movements, recent research on hashtag activism has shown how public protest becomes effective with almost no institutional structures and backing, even if many such protests rely on pre-digital social networks as well. So-called "ad hoc publics" do not rely on formal prerequisites, but mostly on those digital devices that are part of everyday life. Online activism against everyday forms of sexual harassment, for example, is increasingly becoming a focus of research. Even before the ongoing and global attention to #MeToo, diverse forms of digital feminist activism like *Hollaback!*, #BeenRapedNeverReported, or #aufschrei (German for "outcry") relied on translocal publics that emerged and grew dynamically in a limited period of time mostly without any formal hierarchical structure. The performative character of such activism is indicated by its affective flows. As I have argued, affective flows characterize the temporal dynamics that are central to this form of digital mobilization (cf. Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2018, pp. 26–28, including further examples).

These different types of protest show how mediatized modes of articulation and participation form publics, however small, fragile, or short-lived such publics turn out to be. Grounded in routinized daily practices with digital media, public forms of articulation and participation continue to diversify and increase. Such affective practices include producing and circulating a meme, posting a message, liking and sharing, as well as commenting on

others' posts. Embedded in networked technologies, these affective practices enable users to shift gradually from personal to public communication and become part of affective publics. The affective character of such publics becomes apparent in the blurring of established dichotomies that were previously understood to characterize the public sphere. Indeed, participants in communication processes navigate a continuum between personal and public communication, combine formal and informal modes of speaking, and switch constantly between producing and consuming information. Crisscrossing historically distinct spheres, roles, and modes of articulation, these digital communicative arrangements allow for a more diverse participation of speakers and users who may simultaneously be involved as individuals, citizens, activists, parents, professionals, or politically engaged actors. As these media practices rise, affective dynamics move to the forefront while established forms of regulation and self-regulation – in terms of access, modes of speaking, and the forms of addressing – have lost their assertiveness. Twentieth-century journalism was convincingly described as the “most important signifying system of modernity” (Hartley, 1996, p. 36). As a form of organized gate-keeping, journalism offered a professional procedure of selecting, priming, and framing information. Nowadays, however, digital networked and convergent communication works without any gate. As a multiplicity of speakers with diverse forms of articulation become publicly visible and audible, they give rise to a number of unprecedented and contingent dynamics that can be described as affective formations. These affective formations are not opposed to discursive structures. Instead, they entail an ongoing interrelation between arguments and emotions and between technological affordances and social appropriation.

A focus on the affective formation of publics enables a new understanding of actors mostly perceived as citizens and thus widens the common understanding of citizenship (→ *affective citizenship*). Most of the research in this field is driven by the normative idea that more inclusive publics offer diverse citizens the opportunity to articulate their interests and thus feed their perspectives into ongoing discourse, especially in moments of political change. In this vein, Papacharissi (2015) established the notion of affective publics in her analysis of the Egyptian uprising in 2011. Studying the Twitter feed, she points out: “The affective rhythms of news storytelling on #egypt reproduced and reinforced feelings of community for an existing public of indignant citizens who had had enough” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 62). Her reference to rhythms draws our attention to the temporal structure of affective publics, in which a single articulation becomes part of a flow produced by retweets and mentions. The intensity of such repetitions, modifications, and re-articulations does not serve the interest of information, but rather contributes to an affective stage of togetherness, solidarity, and belonging. Such an “affective flow” produces its own intensity and temporality, sometimes referred to as “contagious” (Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 18–21). However, such a recourse to

biological terminology, which draws on an ontological understanding of affect following Brian Massumi (2002), has its risks. The risk is to place affect outside of agency. Unlike that approach, we have argued here for an understanding of agency that emerges in the interaction between human actors and (digital) technology itself.

Of course, affective publics are by no means solely devoted to the production of solidarity and empathy. A comparable type of intensity can be observed in “networks of outrage” (Puschmann et al., 2016). Within such networks, for instance, Islamophobic groups on Twitter perform a close network of sources that produce mutual affective attunement. Claudia Alvares and Peter Dahlgren (2016, p. 54) raise their concern as well when they discuss right-wing populism and its relation to media. Opposing traditional normative perceptions, “publics can espouse anti-democratic values while nevertheless remaining ‘publics’. Such publics constitute a risk for democracy due to the possibility of mobilization and ‘self-education’ through violent actions.”

Final remarks

Critical considerations of publics in contexts of right-wing populism remind us that a number of normative implications are still relevant for a proper understanding of publics. The concept of affective publics elaborated here acknowledges and builds on its ambivalent character. Publics are diverse, agonistic, and fragile, and they continually emerge and disappear. The affective character of such publics highlights the dynamic and processual mode of public articulation itself. We must acknowledge that affect is constituted relationally, through the interaction between humans and non-human artifacts like media technology and public space. Further research about how publics are constituted should consider the affordances and capacities that go beyond human intentionality. This conceptual proposition mostly sheds light on affective publics in political discourse. However, the concept also opens paths for a more inclusive understanding of publics and their contemporary relevance in digital media environments. By overcoming dichotomies between public and private and between the political and the personal, an analysis of affective publics enables us to describe affective articulations from an individual standpoint. Affective articulations thus come to encompass personal participation in domains where cultural forms of inclusion and exclusion are performed, such as viewers commenting on media coverage on social TV and debates surrounding topics of public interest that need not be explicitly political. Such articulations might manifest in diverse ways, from forms of hate speech to expressions of collective empathy.

I have argued here for an affective understanding of publics that goes beyond the mere insertion of emotions into public discourse. Nevertheless, future research should be directed toward furthering our understanding of the specific implications and relevance of emotions in the constitution of publics.

Communication studies offers one promising avenue for doing so. In particular, the field can help analyze rising rates of emotional communication in the context of increasingly personalized politics, as well as the strategic uses of emotions in communication about crisis and risk, and in contexts relating to terrorism and insecurity. Indeed, these are concerns that straddle traditional mass media as well as digital communication. In sum, further analysis is needed about the interrelation between emotions and affective dynamics in the constitution of publics.

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