3-2018

Facebook as a contemporary public sphere: political consciousness and agency

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Facebook as a Contemporary Public Sphere:

Political Consciousness and Agency

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

March, 2018

BY

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<center>**Introduction**</center>

My entanglement with the social media site began in 2008. My daughter joined Facebook when she was in college in 2006 but at that point, Facebook was only open to college students. I was an early adopter among those over thirty. I talked a few of my friends and family into joining too. It was a fun way to keep up with their activities. As usage grew, the site became ever more networked and transnational. In 2016, when Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, my usage of Facebook became more overtly political. The personal reflections that I share in this thesis demonstrate the role that Facebook played in my growing political consciousness during the first year of Trump's presidency. Moreover, the reflections yield to an analysis of the particular qualities of this interactive medium that make it well-suited to serve the role of a modern-day public sphere.

An Ideal Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas envisioned the public sphere as a physical gathering space where civic deliberation could take place among educated, landed men.[1] Ideally, within this public sphere, deliberations could take place outside the influence of powerful states and commercial interests. Originally written in 1962 (and first translated into English in 1989), this theoretical framework is based on the broadening of civic discourse that took place in eighteenth century Europe. It fails, however, to resonate in today's often polarized political environment where commercial interests

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[1] Habermas, Jürgen. *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT press, 1991.

are often intermingled with political interests and where technology, which facilitates a plurality of voices, can relocate power.

The Bourgeois Public Sphere, as Habermas understands it, emerged in the transition to capitalism when commercial relationships created a new class that was propertied and educated.[2] Within this emerging political and social order, "civil society came into existence as the corollary of a depersonalized state authority."[3] The transition to capitalism revealed frames through which we can examine the tension between public and private spaces. Power was no longer centrally located but could fluctuate between public and private spheres, between the state and civil society.

As private individuals came together to engage public authorities in debate over the rules governing relations in the area of commodity exchange and social labor. Tension existed between public and private interests the state and society became polarized. This polarization gave the bourgeoisie a greater awareness of their political role and function. Their role became further institutionalized through formal gatherings during the 18th century in coffeehouses, salons, and secret societies throughout Europe. Habermas identifies three shared characteristics that he claims form the core requirements of these gatherings:

      i.   social interaction that disregards status (and therefore is immune to the influence of the state and commercial interests);

     ii. discussion that problematizes areas previously unquestioned, and

    iii. inclusivity in principle.

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[2] Habermas, Jürgen. *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT press, 1991.
[3] Ibid. 19.

Even though these coffee houses, salons, and secret societies consisted of small groups, their members functioned as a larger 'public' and could direct their ideas to a broader audience. Thus, Habermas asserts, the "public sphere" was transformed.

This new, transformed, public sphere echoed the growing market-driven economies of the 18th century. The public sphere commoditized and reproduced cultural aspects of society as the press increasingly became an extension of this dialogue. This new public, comprised of middle and upper class individuals, was effectively reading and debating about itself, holding up a mirror to itself and society. This foreshadows, I think, the way that Facebook has become a space in the 21st century for a much broader public to engage in reflexive cultural criticism that leads to political consciousness. However, this model of civil society had a fundamental flaw; only a small number of people were able to function as participating citizens, as part of the reading public. Many classes of people were excluded including women, the illiterate, and the property-less.

According to Habermas, opinion crafted in the public sphere was far different from the everyday opinions of individuals. For, "unlike public opinion, opinion wasn't tied to preconditions of education (and property); for contributing to it, far from requiring participation in a process of critical debate, demanded nothing more than the simple uttering of precisely those 'habits' that later on public opinion would critically oppose as prejudices."[4] Popular opinions simply did not require critical debate and yet those opinions could often represent the will of the people more broadly. According to Habermas, this is an example of market-based economy's takeover of the public sphere. Popular opinions, spread through the proliferation of the press, "could hardly be understood any longer as embodying the reasonable consensus of publicly debating private

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[4] Ibid. 91-92.

persons. They corresponded more or less overtly to the compromise between competing private interests."[5] As a consequence, commercially-driven opinion gains dominance.

Countering Rousseau's enlightenment claim that the general will of the people is always right and that democracy is possible without public debate, Habermas argues that this logic leaves out the coercive nature of power, in particular power gained through commercial means.[6] Such popular opinions, according to Habermas, reflect a commodification of dominant voices, not the product of crucially debated opinions formed in the public sphere. He also asserts that the media becomes a market-based advertising arm for politics, no longer serving the role of providing information but now dominating the public sphere by inserting its own power with regard to editorial decisions, topic selection and 'spin'.[7] Next I examine Facebook as a contemporary form of media that can function as a public sphere.

Facebook's Resemblance to a Public Sphere

Habermas argues that there are two politically relevant forms of communication. One, consists of informal, everyday interactions that involve personal, non-public opinions. Informal communication consisted of verbalization of things culturally taken-for-granted, the rarely discussed basic experiences of one's own biography, and the often discussed topics generated as self-evident by the culture industry, basically 'small talk' under the influence of the mass media. The other form of communication is more formal and institutionalized, normally generated through government or corporate bureaucracies.[8] These levels of communication can be compared to Facebook. 'Small talk' under the influence of the mass media forms the bulk of communication

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[5] Ibid. 132.
[6] Ibid. 133.
[7] Ibid. 182.
[8] Ibid. 245-247.

across Facebook today, but not the totality. The critical question is whether or not a social media landscape such as Facebook, awash in banal neo-liberal media driven content can also provide the conditions of possibility for a public sphere that lives up to Habermas' original goal of inclusive, status-free, debate of the issues of the day.

A public sphere cannot exist outside the influence of society. Whether it is the overt exercise of power by a state, or the insidious influence of a market economy, these instruments of political power exist and need not eradicate the conditions of possibility for a public sphere to be present. Instead, a more inclusive set of voices engaged in the complex political struggles of daily life is necessary to the formation of a public sphere. The fact that Facebook also serves as a platform for sharing 'small talk' of every kind does not diminish its potential to function as a public sphere. In fact, Facebook is well suited to meet Habermas' three core requirements for a public sphere: social interaction that disregards status, discussion that problematizes areas previously unquestioned, and inclusivity in principle. The public sphere afforded by Facebook is inclusive (if imperfectly so), transnational, fragmented, and encompassing a highly dynamic melding of both public and private spheres of interest.[9] Its ability to influence the political landscape can be, in my experience, persistent, episodic, and often disruptive to existing power structures.

State power has thus far, not had a meaningful influence on Facebook. This is, ironically, largely thanks to its status as a commercial entity. Nevertheless, there have been governmental pressures on the margin in the U.S. and more overtly overseas aimed at regulating Facebook should the company fail to meet what are framed as societal constraints on content.[10] To date, Facebook

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[9] Social Media is imperfectly inclusive because many individuals lack access to the Internet through lack of resources or through state control of media.

[10] Jacobs, Ben. "DC eyes tighter regulations on Facebook and Google as concern grows." *The Guardian*, September 17, 2017.

has sought to severely limit its responsibility for content on the site. Facebook claims that it functions simply as a conduit and does not bear responsibility for editorial oversight.[11] This assertion belies the company's business model, however, which depends on advertising and is clearly that of a media company and not that of a public service. In order to avoid governmental oversight and remain a space for open debate, Facebook will be to set limits that constrain hate speech and violence without limiting its ability to function as a location for largely unfettered public discourse. The international legal framework that emerges around these issues will also inform the nature and extent of governmental regulation of social media.

In an ideal Habermasian public sphere, commercial interests would have no influence on deliberations. On Facebook, more and more content has commercial ties. This is particularly true when it comes to news sites, which increasingly use Facebook as a major outlet for their editorial content. This content is often "shared" and becomes part of the "conversation" in Facebook-based deliberations. Arguably, even in 18th century coffee houses, men participating in public sphere debates were armed with newspapers and hearsay. Nevertheless, commercialism on Facebook has become ubiquitous. That does not, however, mean that Facebook cannot exist as a public sphere. In fact, on January 11, 2018, Facebook announced its plan to dramatically retool the algorithm that decides what content users see most often. In short, Facebook will prioritize posts from family and friends and less public content from businesses. The company expects that people will spend less time on the site but that the time they do spend will be focused on content that is less commercial.[12]

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[11] Seetharaman, Deepa. "Facebook Leaders Call It a Tech Company, Not a Media Company." *The Wall Street Journal*, October 25, 2016.
[12] Mosseri, Adam. "News Feed FYI: Bringing People Closer Together." Facebook. https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/01/news-feed-fyi-bringing-people-closer-together/.

Approach and Chapter Outline

Since Habermas wrote <u>The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere</u>, there has been much academic debate regarding the nature of the public sphere, its place in modern civic discourse, the legitimacy of its formation of public opinion and its right to influence the state. Particularly in an era of mass communication and globalization, many scholars have sought to examine the contemporary relevance of Habermas' theory of the public sphere today.[13] This thesis considers the concept of the public sphere in both a bourgeois Habermasian sense and also a more

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[13] Dahlberg, Lincoln. "The Habermasian Public Sphere and Exclusion: An Engagement with Poststructuralist-Influenced Critics." *Communication Theory* 24, no. 1 (2014): 21-41; Nancy, Fraser. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (1992): 109-42; Halpern, Daniel, and Jennifer Gibbs. "Social media as a catalyst for online deliberation? Exploring the affordances of Facebook and YouTube for political expression." *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, no. 3 (2013): 1159-1168; Hauser, Gerard A., "Vernacular Discourse and the Epistemic Dimension of Public Opinion." *Communication Theory* 17 (2007): 333-339; Hauser, Gerard A. *Vernacular voices: The rhetoric of publics and public spheres*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999; Ingram, David, and Asaf Bar-Tura. "The Public Sphere as Site of Emancipation and Enlightenment: A Discourse Theoretic Critique of Digital Communication." In *Re-Imagining Public Space*, pp. 65-85. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014; Kellner, Douglas. "Habermas, the public sphere, and democracy." In *Re-Imagining Public Space*, pp. 19-43. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014; Papacharissi, Zizi. *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity, 2010.

contemporary context, alongside social media as a space for online deliberation, in light of these interventions.

The literature on which this thesis depends presents me with four themes that resonate with my experience. They are:

i.   The notion of public sphere;

ii.   New forms of engagement;

iii. Social media context;

iv.   And inclusivity (interlocutor topics)

The chapters that follow tackle each of these themes in turn. I engage with and analyze my own entanglements with Facebook as a public space through the use of short vignettes which have been written by taking ethnographic field notes of my own experiences with Facebook over the course of one year November 2016-2017.[14] I explore questions such as: Is political consciousness enhanced through Facebook's power to generate a space for deliberation? Can Facebook constitute a space not just for idle conversation but for deliberative dialogue about civic issues? How does presence on Facebook represent a new form of human agency, particularly as it fosters a sense of belonging and connectedness? And, if political consciousness can take shape on Facebook, how might this knowledge help us 'make sense' of contemporary challenges to authority? Using this self-reflective approach, I hope to connect my own experience (albeit that of a particular person, in a particular place, and at a particular moment in time) to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. By relating a number of stories that reflect my personal experience

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[14] Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.

with Facebook as a vehicle for the emergence of my political consciousness, I use these stories as sense-making device in exploring the broader cultural impact of Facebook and its potential as a contemporary public sphere.

In Chapter One, I explore the ways that Facebook can be conceptualized as a contemporary Habermasian public sphere which affords its users a platform for civic debate. Alongside this exploration, I begin to trace my own growing political consciousness and the role that Facebook played in facilitating that development. In Chapter Two, I examine the differences between social media and traditional media. By focusing on new ways of being social through Facebook, I look at the platform's potential for engaging and connecting individuals versus isolating them. Through my personal experiences I investigate my own growing sense of political engagement and agency as I learned about and participated in the Women's March through Facebook and there also witnessed the growth of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. In Chapter Three, I consider Facebook's power to advance the development of political consciousness through personal, yet global discourse. I analyze my use of Facebook to gain first-hand knowledge of global political events and go on to describe how, through Facebook, I became involved with an organization that would galvanize me and awaken my own sense of political purpose. In Chapter Four, I discuss the social challenges of navigating Facebook against the benefits of such an expansive, globally networked space. Rather than one public sphere, Facebook offers the possibility of varying and overlapping public spheres that can accelerate the development of agency among various publics. I describe my own challenges as I navigate social relationships on Facebook but then go on to explore my experience with a relative who uses Facebook to amplify his strongly held minority political views and has found a community of like-minded individuals whose sense of agency is enhanced by sharing a common cause. I conclude that Facebook functions not only as a

contemporary version of Habermas' idealized public sphere, but also as a vehicle for the

development of political subjectivity, heightened agency, and shared empowerment.

Chapter 1: Facebook as a Public Sphere

This chapter examines the construction and development of the Facebook self as a vehicle for communication across networked, complex, and often interconnected relationships. Within this framework, I claim that there is a contemporaneous blending of civic and social dialogue that broadens participation and diffuses hegemonic power. By doing so, I theorize that Facebook is an extension of Habermas' idealized public sphere in a more contemporary and realistic form which creates the conditions of possibility for deliberative democracy. This form of political decision-making allows citizens to form opinions through a process of reasoned debate and the application of competing arguments.

Specifically, Facebook's structure as a broad social network affords ordinary citizens the ability to rapidly respond to others' ideas without mediation and to freely shape and reframe debates. On Facebook these debates often take place alongside more commonplace forms of sociality. This more commonplace sociality serves to bolster users' sense of familiarity and rapport with each other which encourages further idea exchange and knowledge production.

Facebook Architecture

As a networked, transnational technology, social media allows for deliberation in ways that traditional media cannot. On Facebook, an individual might have 200 "friends". This pool of "friends" may be made up of close family members of all ages, close social friends, long-lost friends, acquaintances, even "friends of friends" who have been introduced virtually through the medium of Facebook. Collectively, these 200 friends provide connections to all of their friends and so on, creating a vast network of audience members for a person's Facebook "Posts". By posting comments to one's "Wall", a person on Facebook can communicate a broad variety of

opinions and feelings through words, pictures, memes, or forwarded articles. This same individual with 200 Facebook friends can also join interest group pages on Facebook in order to interact episodically with subgroups of people who are not their Facebook friends but who may share a common concern or interest. Posts on these interest group pages can be "Shared" back to that individual's own set of 200 Facebook friends. Importantly, Facebook "Posts" are structured so as to foster response and often debate. As a person posts items to their "Wall", their friends can see these posts via a "Newsfeed" and can respond either with comments or with "Likes". However, with 200 Facebook friends, one may not see every single post from every single friend immediately on their newsfeed. Facebook algorithms limit the newsfeed to those with whom most interaction takes place.[15] Nevertheless, individuals have access to nearly all of their Facebook friends' posts should they seek them out.

November 9, 2016

My finger hovered over the "post" button as I pondered the potential impact of a comment I was about to write on my Facebook wall. It was November 9th and Donald Trump had just been elected president. My post? Three simple words: "Stunned. Sad. Disillusioned" plus the hashtag #lovetrumpshate.

It was foolish to be wasting any emotional energy at all over this, I thought to myself. After all, it was just a silly social media forum, something designed for young adults. Plenty of my friends weren't even using social media. Here I was, a 56-year-old soon to be grandmother, wasting emotional energy over a social image of myself that I had constructed over the past nine years; my online identity. Until that moment, my online identity had been genuine but incomplete. Ever

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[15] Oremus, Will. "Who Controls Your Facebook Feed." *Slate*, January 3, 2016
http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/cover_story/2016/01/how_facebook_s_news_feed_algorithm_works.html.

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mindful of the diversity of my universe of Facebook friends, I always tread a fine line between seeking camaraderie and sharing warm memories with my friends versus sharing some of my honest views and opinions.

Real life was so much easier, I thought. On Facebook, there is no such thing as a bi-lateral friendship. Instead, friendships are "networked" in a way that allows everyone to hear our voice simultaneously. Was it really worth risking friendships by expressing my disappointment in Trump's election, I wondered? Yet, my feelings were so strong that any other post would not seem genuine.

I punched the "post" button and quickly scrolled away from Facebook. It was done. I knew I had family members in swing states who voted for Trump and wondered how they would react. Five minutes later, I gingerly fired up Facebook again to see how many "notifications" I had. There were quite a few, and my "likes" and positive comments grew throughout the day. Emboldened, over the next few weeks, I shared a number of articles supportive of my views, interspersed with Thanksgiving photos and pictures of my new grandson. It turns out that my constructed Facebook identity had suddenly taken a sharp turn towards being more overtly political. Since then, I have found myself continuing to post my political views on Facebook. However, I now more consciously welcome opportunities to interact in a less provocative way with friends who may not share my politics by "liking" their posts about daily experiences that demonstrate our shared human experience. I have been surprised, lately, at the "likes" I have gotten on my political posts from those whose views are different than mine. Maybe some of them are reading the articles that I am posting, in an effort to understand my perspective.

My experience shows how Facebook provides a space for vernacular debates and deliberations on political, social, and cultural issues. As opposed to Habermas' model of the bourgeois public sphere, where the issues of the day were debated only by educated, landed men, Facebook provides a space where issues of common concern can be deliberated by people of all social classes and backgrounds, using their own vernacular form of language.

Habermas envisioned a public sphere where everyone could leave their status at the door and come to debate issues of societal interest. In the 18th century, however, the men who frequented coffee houses and salons to participate in such discussions likely knew one another on a personal basis and shared some common interest in their civic role in society. In this way, people's political consciousness was formed and knowledge was produced. I posit that a similar thing can happen on Facebook in the 21st century. There are many educated critical thinkers who use Facebook regularly. In the space of billions of posts and reposts, critical publics do form to discuss contemporary issues. These issues are often of vital personal importance to the people discussing them but they can also be broadly relevant societally. In much the same way that the press functioned to broaden the public sphere debate in 18th century Europe, Facebook can be seen to extend the reach of civic debate, often beyond national boundaries.

Social Media as a Contemporary Public Sphere

Online fora can bring people together in many different ways. Even before the advent of social media, Lincoln Dahlberg observed that the Internet could provide a public forum for deliberative, rational, and critical discourse.[16] Dahlberg argued that there were challenges to expanding the

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[16] Dahlberg, Lincoln. "The Internet and democratic discourse: Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere." *Information, Communication & Society* 4, no. 4 (2001): 615-633.

public sphere through the Internet because deliberative spaces must not only be created but citizens who have been socialized within an individualistic and commercial culture must be attracted to participate. With the advent and growth of social media, however, similar cultural attributes that Dahlberg believed might hinder participation in Internet dialogue are at the very core of the attraction of social media, contemporary society's focus on individualism and commercialism.

According to a study by the Pew Research Center two-thirds of adults in the US use some form of social media. Facebook is the most widely used platform and is also most representative of the population as a whole in its user base. Among Facebook users, approximately 75% use the site daily.[17] On June 27, 2017, founder Mark Zuckerberg posted on Facebook that the site had reached two billion users worldwide, indicating that 25% of the world's population uses Facebook every month.[18] Many people are still left out of the social networking experience. Nevertheless, trends indicate a growing adoption of social networking and, therefore, a broadening base of potential participants in transnational, vernacular debates and deliberations on political, social, and cultural issues. These deliberations seem to make possible the formation of public opinion outside the direct control of governments. Social media is often associated with banal social communication but it is also a space, according to Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, where political speech and cultural norms can spread quickly, leading to the rapid adoption of opinions among diverse global publics.[19]

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[17] Pew Research Center. "Social Media Fact Sheet." January 12, 2017. http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/social-media/.
[18] Zuckerberg, Mark. Facebook Page 6/27/17.
https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10103831654565331
[19] Nahon, Karine, and Jeff Hemsley. *Going Viral*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

There are several areas of disagreement among theorists regarding the applicability of public sphere theory to the potential for deliberative democracy, particularly on social media. Key to the debate is the question of whether or not social media provides a space for hegemonic powers to flourish, or if it provides a deliberative space for resistance to hegemonic power structures. Douglas Kellner suggests that Habermas' analysis provides important theoretical resources for understanding the public sphere and its relationship to democracy but that the subsequent global restructuring of capitalism and the technological revolution requires an expansion of his work.[20] For Kellner, the Internet creates new public spaces for political intervention that have the potential to invigorate democracy, but it also fosters greater manipulation and social control.

While Kellner warns of the possibilities of greater manipulation and social control through social media, many other scholars see social media's potential to relocate power to its users who have the ability to reframe societal debates in real time.[21] In this way, new modes of public opinion formation are fostered, modes that are more dynamic, emergent and less susceptible to hegemonic power structures. By providing a platform for users to be part of many small conversations, across

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[20] Kellner, Douglas. "Habermas, the public sphere, and democracy." In *Re-Imagining Public Space*, pp. 19-43. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014.

[21] Broersma, Marcel, and Todd Graham. "Tipping the Balance of Power Social Media and the Transformation of Political Journalism." *The Routledge companion to social media and politics* (2016): 89-103; Castells, Manuel. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015; Fenton, Natalie. "The internet of radical politics and social change. *"Misunderstanding the internet* (2016): 149-176; Hauser, Gerard A., "Vernacular Discourse and the Epistemic Dimension of Public Opinion." *Communication Theory* 17 (2007): 333-339; Shirky, Clay. "The political power of social media: Technology, the public sphere, and political change." *Foreign affairs* (2011): 28-41.

national boundaries and time zones, Facebook allows users to elude traditional political power structures.

Kitchin, et.al., claim that social media produces new forms of public geography and digital practices whereby the relationship between reader and writer is altered and debates can occur in real time as issues unfold.[22] Therefore, these new public spaces can challenge hegemonic formations in ways that academic articles rarely can. Control over media is directly related to political power, as is so effectively described by Timothy Mitchell in his analysis of Egypt as a site of colonial power.[23] Here, the introduction of the printing press represented a threat to political power through the rapid spread of ideas that could be discussed and reinterpreted. Authorities lost the ability to control the 'messaging'.

José Van Dijck claims that social media creates new, greater challenges to power through its ideology of online sociality.[24] Broersma and Graham argue that social media also eliminates traditional journalistic channels of mediation, giving the audience a role in producing information, thus allowing citizens to gain greater control over the way that issues are framed and even which issues are addressed.[25] Nancy Fenton claims that the Internet provides new ways of being political

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[22] Kitchin, Rob, Denis Linehan, Cian O'Callaghan, and Philip Lawton. "Public geographies through social media." *Dialogues in Human Geography* 3, no. 1 (2013): 56-72.

[23] Mitchell, Timothy. *Colonising Egypt: With a new preface*. Univ of California Press, 1991.

[24] Van Dijck, José. *The Culture of Connectivity: a critical history of social media*. New York, Oxford Press, 2013. Van Dijck discusses the economic, political and cultural foundations of social media. She provides a model for thinking critically about the ways that social media is about much more than entertainment and commerce by historicizing social media within a complex political-economic and technological context.

[25] Broersma, Marcel, and Todd Graham. "Tipping the Balance of Power Social Media and the Transformation of Political Journalism." *The Routledge companion to social media and politics* (2016): 89-103. These authors examine the disruptive role that social media plays within the previously stable press-politics power relationship. Where there had been an interdependence based on information monopolies between political reporters and politicians, now the audience/citizenry has a role in producing information.

through new practices characterized by speed and space, although she also notes that these technologies are not neutral and still operate within existing systems of power.[26] In fact, efforts to control social media-led public opinion formation have confounded hegemonic powers that seek to suppress it, leading Clay Shirky to argue that democratic governments should welcome and encourage free and open access to social media as a tool to spread democratic ideals worldwide.[27]

Some scholars have addressed themselves more directly to the applicability of the Habermasian Public Sphere Theory to the Internet and modern forms of communication. Gerard Hauser critically examines Habermas' claim that the epistemic dimension of democracy resides in public opinion.[28] He argues that the conditions of possibility for democracy reside within the knowledge production that arises from public idea exchange among ordinary citizens forming a deliberative model of public opinion. Hauser examines the role of Internet communication in opening new avenues for this knowledge production that can challenge corporate power's ability to control the message. Hauser claims that mass communication's power to distort opinion is not one-sided, opening up the possibility for Internet communication and participation to elude corporate power's capacity to control public opinion.

Similarly, Yannis Theocharis maintains that digitally networked participation is a form of political participation in ways that are not always immediately recognizable.[29] He posits that the 'non-political' ways that we engage in social life online and in everyday contexts can be more

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[26] Fenton, Natalie. "The internet of radical politics and social change. *"Misunderstanding the internet* (2016): 149-176.

[27] Shirky, Clay. "The political power of social media: Technology, the public sphere, and political change." *Foreign affairs* (2011): 28-41.

[28] Hauser, Gerard A., "Vernacular Discourse and the Epistemic Dimension of Public Opinion." *Communication Theory* 17 (2007): 333-339.

[29] Theocharis, Yannis. "The conceptualization of digitally networked participation." *Social Media+ Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 2056305115610140.

politically impactful than participation more commonly recognized as political. Both Hauser and Theocharis provide a basis for understanding the ways social media can have an impact on a society's political climate or discourse in subtle ways that are not always immediately perceived or understood to be political but that might rise to the standard of public sphere opinion formation as envisioned by Habermas.

As I struggled to find just the right tone to strike in my Facebook post on November 9, 2017, I found myself examining the history and structures of my connected relationships against the backdrop of my desire to be honest and true to myself. I was also aware of the potential for my comments to spark debate and recognized that not everyone would agree with me. By sharing my thoughts and feelings about a significant political event on a networked, global platform I was inviting my Facebook friends and their Facebook friends to enter into dialogue with me and with each other.

In the next chapter I will discuss the ways that Facebook acts as a platform for political engagement that can lead to collective action despite the pervasive intervention of commercial content. Furthermore, I will explore Facebook's role in amplifying the voices of and empowering the marginalized.

Chapter 2: New Practices of Engagement and Relocation of Power

Facebook is not only a platform for deliberation. It is also a convergent technology[30] that brings various other voices and media outlets into conversation with the individual user. As a public sphere, it is unrealistic to imagine a forum where commercial or state interests are exempt. Those influences pervade social relations. Facebook is awash in neo-liberal commercial content. However, this does not mean that Facebook cannot provide a forum for thoughtful engagement and deliberation of societal issues, sometimes giving rise to collective political action. In fact, I suggest that it can and does, in particular because Facebook is an effective platform for the marginalized to be heard and to accumulate a greater agency and increased power.

January 21, 2017

The response from my friends across the world was swift, and positive. That was the first thing I noticed about my Facebook check-in post from the Women's March in Washington DC. I was marching with my two daughters to fight for civil rights and human rights. We brought signs with quotes from Martin Luther King and Maya Angelou. On the ground, I noticed the diversity and sheer number of people who descended on our nation's capital. Here I was, actively participating in a protest march that I had learned about on Facebook. It was exhilarating and gave me a new appreciation for the power of Facebook to mobilize people.

What surprised me more, however, was the power of Facebook to mobilize the world. I received comments and likes on my post from friends across the world from a former au pair in Oslo to a former colleague in London, from family friends in Mexico to a friend of a friend in Argentina. I even got a "like" from a friend's daughter serving in the Peace Corps in South Africa. Once I got

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[30] Convergent Technologies allow one platform, such as a cell phone, to perform various technological functions or for social media to contain content from other media sources such as print media or video.

back home to Chicago, my appreciation for the global reach of this effort strengthened even more when I saw pictures shared on Facebook of Women's Marches all over the world. My feeling of kinship with women across the world was facilitated by Facebook.

The reality is that I would not have ongoing daily friendships with people around the globe, let alone feel global support for my activism, if it were not for Facebook where we share routine news and pictures of our families. There is no doubt that the global reach of my Facebook friendships has been broadened welcoming au pairs into my home and living abroad. However, many of these friendships would likely have died away had it not been for Facebook. Now I can instantaneously communicate with individuals in other countries to discuss global issues or to check in when natural disasters occur.

Traditional Media, Social Media, and Convergence

There has been much scholarly work examining the dynamics of social media as opposed to traditional media as a vehicle for political engagement. For example, Vincent Miller claims that social media communication is not conducive to fostering social change because it is increasingly empty, emphasizing idle conversation and maintenance of relationships, and therefore does not provide an environment that fosters a public sphere that is engaged.[31] Miller further argues that participation in social media politics is not only conversational, but also is likely to simply reproduce the status quo versus emphasizing conflict or transformation. Conversely, while acknowledging that social media surely provides a space for idle chatter, scholars such as Lance Bennett, Jason Gainous and Kevin Wagner, and Lauren Langman see in social media the potential

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[31] Miller, Vincent. "Phatic culture and the status quo Reconsidering the purpose of social media activism." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* (2015): 1354856515592512.

to allow new forms of democratic engagement, allowing for interventions beyond just passive consumption of information.[32] This new paradigm for political communication allows for social fragmentation and personalized politics that can give rise to collective action. Future developments in social media design could also critically impact social media's ability to create a public sphere in the Habermasian sense. The study of the social and cultural ramifications of social media is in its infancy and will require a forward-looking approach with new theories beyond traditional 'network theory'. In fact, Matt Ratto and Megan Bolar claim that social media allows citizens to organize and protest in new ways that allow for new forms of engaged democracy that is proactive and allows for interventions rather than passive consumption of information.[33] The authors claim that new hybrid forms of activism that do not distinguish between direct or mediated experiences lead to a blurring of social and political practices and redefine traditional understandings of what is "political", thereby creating new forms of civic engagement.

As Facebook has grown in size and influence, its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, has sought to frame Facebook's role as a technology company rather than a media company.[34] In this way, he argues, Facebook does not have an editorial role or responsibility. Rather, he argues, each user has the ability control and curate their own content. Advertising and the proliferation of misinformation and hoaxes on Facebook has challenged this position. Facebook is a purveyor of corporate and political power, much like traditional media companies. Social media is still a

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[32]Bennett (2012) discusses the emergence of personal politics which he claims has captured contemporary discursive spaces like social media, triggering debates and proving to be a successful means of protest; Gainous, Wagner (2014) examine social media's impact on the democratic political process through its ability to bypass traditional media, thereby creating new modes of political communication; and Langman (2005) constructs an updated social movement theory based on contemporary electronic networks which she claims create virtual public spheres that can create the conditions of possibility for social justice.

[33] Ratto, Matt, and Megan Boler. *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2014.
"DIY citizenship: Critical making and social media." Boston: MIT Press, 2014.

[34] Zuckerberg, Mark. YouTube. 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atimqokiB-k.

relatively new technology and nefarious efforts to warp public opinion with inaccurate information

have presented an early challenge to the industry.[35] Going forward, the ways in which these

challenges are met by social media companies will have a dynamic impact on their political role.

Facebook's initial approach has been to encourage individuals to become more savvy as to these

deceptive practices.[36]

One area where scholars seem to agree is that social media is an outgrowth of modernity that

brings practices of politics into new and uncharted territory. In fact, the Internet creates a climate

that breaks down our relationship to time, space and movement, both individually and as a society

in ways that are relatively new and allow for the rapid, at times 'viral' spread of information.[37]

Social media's rise from both a cultural and economic perspective is examined by Van Dijck as

she historicizes social media within complex, political-economic, and technological contexts.[38]

Furthermore, the acceleration of technology, argues Harmut Rosa, is not simply an outgrowth of

Marx' theories of capitalist production, but is in fact more nuanced with concrete political

consequences.[39] He claims that as technology rapidly advances societies are made increasingly

complex and difficult for governments to control, even democratically. As a result, he argues that

governments are left to follow where technology leads.

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[35] Lashinsky, Adam. "Facebook Eviscerated Over Spread of Fake News." *Fortune.*
http://fortune.com/2018/02/13/facebook-fake-news-wired-article/.
[36] Tiku, Nitasha. "Facebook's Latest Fix for Fake News: Ask Users What They Trust." Wired.
https://www.wired.com/story/facebooks-latest-fix-for-fake-news-ask-users-what-they-trust/.
[37] Virilio, Paul. *Open sky.* Vol. 35. Verso, 1997. The author claims that global electronic media creates a climate that breaks down our relationship to time, space and movement both individually and as a society. This dystopian perspective is important to consider because it is difficult to objectively analyze the role of social media in our society given that it is pervasive and so embedded in our lives.
[38] Van Dijck, José. *The Culture of Connectivity: a critical history of social media.* New York, Oxford Press, 2013.
[39] Rosa, Hartmut. *Social acceleration: A new theory of modernity.* Columbia University Press, 2013.

Facebook – Isolating or Engaging?

Some of the most provocative and recent work on social media involves the question of whether or not this new media empowers or entraps, cutting people off from meaningful contact with others. In examining social media's potential for democratic engagement, Zizi Papacharissi argues that convergence of technology, practices and spaces is changing the way we function as citizens in contemporary democracies.[40] Public and private spaces are less clearly delineated and discourses of globalization and commercialization result in the convergence of roles (audience/producer, citizen/consumer, personal/political) informing our political behaviors.

Convergent technology allows us to do things like use our smart phones to take pictures, videos, surf the web, pay bills, text, etc. (in addition to speaking on the phone) or to read traditional media content such as newspaper articles on Facebook. These converging technologies "present a new way to counter powerlessness by allowing individuals to propose new spaces, upon which newer, more empowering habits and relations may be cultivated."[41] While these new habits are cultivated, powerful corporations are simultaneously using social media to advance their own agendas. As a result, Facebook is not immune to the invasive influence of commercial interests. Corporate interests on social media have been largely focused on exerting economic power through digital advertising. Facebook and Google have collectively captured 84% of global spending on digital advertising (excluding China).[42] Corporate political

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[40] Papacharissi, Zizi. "The virtual geographies of social networks: a comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld." *New media & society* 11, no. 1-2 (2009): 199-220.

[41] Papacharissi, Zizi. *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity, 2010. 15.

[42] Garrahan, Matthew. "Google and Facebook dominance forecast to rise." *Financial Times*. https://www.ft.com/content/cf362186-d840-11e7-a039-c64b1c09b482.

speech on Facebook has been driven by print and broadcast media outlets which already exist alongside social media and are simply disseminating their ideas more broadly.

The convergence of media platforms on Facebook can, at times, marshall the political power of the platform by making individuals rapidly aware of a common cause and empowering collective action. For example, the idea for the Women's March spread rapidly on Facebook and other social media platforms and resulted in a heavily attended real-world, politically motivated event.

April 19, 2017

While I had never watched Fox News, it was hard to miss the growing controversy surrounding Bill O'Reilly. I knew that there was a growing backlash against him related to accusations of sexual harassment. I had seen a few comments on Facebook encouraging people to boycott certain products for being advertised on his show and understood that the boycotts were having some impact on Fox. As I watched CNN one night while preparing dinner, I heard Erin Burnett describe O'Reilly's firing from Fox News. While eating dinner, I pulled up Facebook and posted a comment "Happy that Bill O'Reilly is out. Disgusted that it took so long." Another Facebook friend posted an article from the Chicago Tribune noting that women everywhere could share stores of harassment, encouraging an end to the silencing of those stories. The next morning, I pulled up YouTube on my computer and watched Trevor Noah's treatment of the subject the night before. It was at that point that I realized that O'Reilly not only had an issue with women, but that he was a racist too. When I got to work that day, I engaged in several conversations on the topic with colleagues. Later, I noticed and commented to my daughter that only one man had "liked" my post.

The particulars of Bill O'Reilly's fall from grace initially appeared to fall short of being relevant from a civic engagement perspective, but Facebook is not playing out in a vacuum. Facebook is part of a collection of formats and fora that facilitate public deliberation. Individuals toggle between traditional media, online media, social media, and face-to-face dialogue in digesting and deliberating the news of the day. Furthermore, issues of great importance are embedded in discussions that might appear on the surface to be banal. In the case of the Bill O'Reilly story, which could appear on its surface to be no more than a tabloid magazine-level drama, much deeper societal issues were being deliberated across media outlets including Facebook. Through the satire of late night television and reposting of those videos on Facebook, to the sharing of personal stories and perspectives, an important narrative was taking shape.

As it turns out, the Bill Reilly "affair" was only the 'tip of the iceberg'. Public awareness of sexual harassment as a pervasive problem grew from there and then went viral after Harvey Weinstein stood accused of harassment and in the wake of Roy Moore's ultimately unsuccessful campaign for the Senate.[43] Sexual harassment existed as a topic of discussion, but had not enjoyed a level of broad societal debate before. Now, women came out in numbers on a variety of social media outlets including Facebook. They joined the #MeToo campaign and shared their stories of harassment. The movement went viral quickly and started a serious civic conversation.[44] #MeToo provided a powerful platform for a nationwide, even global conversation. Suddenly, through the

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[43]Garcia-Navarro, Lulu. "Sexual Harassment: Have We Reached a Cultural Turning Point?." NPR. https://www.npr.org/2017/11/19/564987076/special-report-a-cultural-turning-point-on-sexual-harassment.
[44]A Hashtag is a word or phrase preceded by a hash mark (#). It is used within a message to identify a keyword or topic of interest. Hashtags allow social networks to index these words or phrases so that they become searchable. In this way, hashtags provide a form an online citation system.

power of social media, even media icons could not hide behind their money and influence. Social media gave a voice and platform to those who had been abused by power.

Connection and Agency

Social media presence can be understood to represent a powerful new form of human agency and subjectivity, particularly as it fosters a sense of belonging and connectedness. Vanessa May, a sociologist, examined the role that a sense of belonging plays in connecting a person's sense of self with society. Claims for belonging are connected with issues of power and inequality and can also be viewed from an ethical perspective in so far as belonging is a prerequisite for citizenship within society. The connection between the self and society is foundational for understanding citizenship and political subjectivity.[45] In conceptualizing the Internet as a discursive space, the idea of 'voice' can be connected with power. How individuals and institutions make themselves audible using the Internet through the eloquence of their representations is a good way to think about how identity narratives are formed and can gather power.[46]

Social media is the only form of media that can actually go beyond replicating conversation in the sense that participants are impacted not just by the messages they send and receive back, but by the very act of articulating ideas and composing content.[47] Not only does the mental process involved in composition of language and formation of written ideas contribute to the formation of a political subject, but the networked nature of social media takes that conversation and

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[45]May, Vanessa. *Connecting Self to Society: Belonging in a Changing World*. New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.
[46] Mitra, Ananda, and Eric Watts. "Theorizing cyberspace: the idea of voice applied to the internet discourse." *New media & society* 4, no. 4 (2002): 479-498.
[47] Shah, Dhavan V. "Conversation is the soul of democracy: Expression effects, communication mediation, and digital media." *Communication and the Public* 1, no. 1 (2016): 12-18.

communicates it in successively wide circles, much as a pebble tossed into water. The ripple effects of that political subject's written thoughts and the deliberation that ensues has a much wider impact than conversations that take place in more temporally or spatially limited venues.

Facebook constitutes a deliberative space for human engagement where political consciousness can be formed. This consciousness can sometimes compel to action. The Women's March in 2017 as well as the #MeToo and now #TimesUp" movements are useful models for the way in which social media can accelerate and broaden civic deliberation and impact society. As a networked platform, Facebook also brings a multitude of voices into conversation with each other across space and time without regard to status. Just a casual survey of the landscape at the Women's March or look at the variety of women who have come forward and spoken of sexual harassment is emblematic of the ability of social media, and Facebook in particular, to gather a people around a common cause regardless of their status. Habermas' idealized public sphere where social interaction disregards status and inclusivity reigns have taken a step closer to being realized in the Women's March and #MeToo movements where issues of civic importance are being actively discussed and problematized.

The next chapter explores the variety and richness of personal connections facilitated by Facebook and how these relationships enrich public sphere discussions and support the development of political consciousness. Far from cutting us off from society, Facebook enables a web of sociality that would not be possible without the networked nature of the platform.

Chapter 3: Global Networks

Facebook not only amplifies individual voices, but it facilitates exposure to a variety of other voices and opinions on a global basis in real time. Not only are Facebook users exposed to the political ideas and opinions of people they know personally, but also those of people who may be several degrees of friendship removed but still connected through shared personal relationships. As such, it is not surprising that Facebook facilitates a growing political consciousness among its users. The ideas and opinions offered on Facebook are personally delivered in the current moment. They are not being delivered via letters or hearsay. These ideas, shared on Facebook, can have a reflexive impact on the debate itself, as if an in-person deliberation were taking place in a fixed location, thus functioning as a modern-day virtual, Habermasian public sphere.

April 7, 2017

On April 7, 2017 President Trump launched an attack on Syria, sending 59 Tomahawk missiles to bomb an airfield from which it was alleged that Bashar-al-Assad had launched a chemical attack against his own citizens. I wasn't sure what to think of this. It was clear that Trump had acted impulsively and in response to horrific television images of insured children. Part of me was happy to see that he had done something but I had reservations about his overall lack of strategy and vision. There were a few stories on my Facebook wall from news sources like PBS and some comments from my friends that mostly fell along partisan lines. Then, I remembered that my son and his wife have a good friend who is Syrian and until recently lived and worked in the Middle East on refugee issues. I asked my daughter-in-law to let me know what Amena was saying on Facebook about the bombing.[48] She sent me a couple of screen shots but I really wanted to

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[48] The name "Amena" is a pseudonym.

know more and asked Amena to be my "friend" on Facebook. Within fifteen minutes she accepted my request and I spent the next hour reading what she and her Facebook friends were saying about events in Syria, often using Facebook's "translate" feature, as much of the conversation was in Arabic.

Globally Networked Communication

Due to its globally networked structure, Facebook provides a space for various public spheres to overlap and provides multi-dimensional frames for giving voice to a variety of considered opinions. The transnational nature of Facebook also lends itself to this concept of multi-dimensional publics. The bourgeois public sphere, as conceptualized by Habermas, existed at the nation-state level, representing the considered opinions of each nation's citizens regarding issues of common concern. Facebook, on the other hand, allows various public spheres to form without regard to national boundaries and even in spite of those boundaries. This facilitates the consideration of broader humanistic concerns. These multi-dimensional, transnational publics can be a force for the relocation of power from national political leaders to interest-based groups and those sympathetic to them.

Amidst all of the banal conversation on Facebook, it is quite easy to seek out and engage in a critical, educated debate on societal issues. Furthermore, these debates often meet or exceed even Habermas' criteria for coffee house/salon-style public spheres. In this case, the participants were highly educated and thinking critically about societal issues. They were also speaking out against powerful state interests and commercial concerns. Importantly, however, unlike the conditions which existed during the idealized coffee house debates that Habermas envisioned

during 18th century Europe, Facebook provides a space for a broader cross-section of those affected by governmental policies to express agency.

Before the advent of social media, Lincoln Dahlberg discussed the possibility that the Internet could provide a public forum for deliberative, rational, and critical discourse by claiming that "the decentralized communications enabled through Web publishing, electronic bulletin boards, e-mail lists, and chat rooms does seem to provide public spaces for rational-critical discourse."[49] Dahlberg argued that there were challenges to expanding the public sphere through the Internet because "it requires not only developing deliberative spaces but also attracting participation from citizens who have been socialized within a commercialized and individualized culture hostile to public deliberation."[50] His argument proved to be prophetic. One of social media's signature features is its ability to be personalized not just by users but by advertisers, creating a convenient marriage of interests.[51]

Dahlberg's argument directly addresses one of the strongest arguments against social media as a public sphere.[52] He claims that individuals are socialized to interact with media in a way that is so heavily influenced by society's commercialization and focus on the individual that public deliberation on a civic level would be highly challenged. If this were true, then public deliberation on social media in the United States would be nearly impossible as the culture is particularly

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[49] Dahlberg, Lincoln. "The Internet and democratic discourse: Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere." *Information, Communication & Society* 4, no. 4 (2001): 616.
[50] Ibid. 615.
[51] Diorio, Stephen. "How Marketers are Driving Growth through Personalized Content." Forbes. (2016) https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesinsights/2016/02/11/how-marketers-are-driving-growth-through-personalized-content/#7f591d0670f9
[52] Dahlberg, Lincoln. "The Internet and democratic discourse: Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere." *Information, Communication & Society* 4, no. 4 (2001): 616.

suffused with commercialism and individualism. Yet, we see interventions everywhere. These cultural qualities actually support the growth of public deliberation on Facebook. For example, commercialization has supported the seamless blending of traditional media and social media and our individualized society has encouraged more voices to participate on social media. Public deliberation is richly supported by Facebook even though it gives the initial appearance of being much different from 18th century coffee house debates.

Exposure to a variety of voices, experiences, and worldviews with little exclusion of informed perspectives is fundamental to a formation of public opinion in a Habermasian sense. Social media, as an open forum for voicing opinions would seem to contain this key ingredient for the formation of public opinion. With the vast networked nature of social media, users are routinely exposed to a variety of opinions, some of which they may not agree with or even bother reading. In fact, if opposing views become pervasive, users may choose to 'unfollow' certain people or threads of conversation. This functionality itself is not a threat to inclusive public opinion formation, however corporate algorithms that limit certain content would be stifling. Authors Bakshy, Messing and Adamic studied the role of social media algorithmic rankings compared to personal choices to click through on stories in exposing Facebook users to content that is diverse or cross-cutting.[53] They hypothesized, and showed quantitatively, that user actions play a greater role in determining diversity of content exposure than do built-in algorithms. My experience and analysis provides a framework for understanding how Facebook may expand users' exposure to new, ideologically diverse ideas.

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[53] Bakshy, Eytan, Solomon Messing, and Lada A. Adamic. "Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook." *Science* 348, no. 6239 (2015): 1130-1132.

By connecting with Amena through Facebook, I was exposed to views and opinions from citizens directly impacted by an important global event. No commercial interests or state actors got in the way of that direct contact. Facebook is a new, vast, forum and doubtless there are many examples of commercial influence or state coercion, but in this and many instances on Facebook, it was possible to tap directly into the political opinions and deliberations of collectivities other than the one of which I am a citizen.

Linking the Personal to the Political

Many times, especially for those born well before the advent of social media, relationships that began in childhood or perhaps young adulthood fade away with time and distance. Facebook often provides the vehicle for renewed engagement.

November 26, 2017

I was riveted by the senatorial election in Alabama. I could hardly believe that Roy Moore was favored to win a senatorial seat in Alabama. A year earlier, I didn't know who Roy Moore was, had very little appreciation for the dynamics of Alabama politics, and would have laughed at the idea that I would get a large proportion of my political information from Facebook. I would have considered myself much too educated to rely on Facebook for information. Yet, here I was chatting on Facebook messenger with Elizabeth, an old friend I hadn't seen in seventeen years. She and I had been fellow expatriates in South Korea but since returning to the US had reconnected on Facebook. Now we exchange pictures of our grandchildren while sharing strategies for political resistance. "There's a FB group called Flip Alabama", she wrote, "I'm writing election reminder cards to registered Democrats in Alabama". And so it began. Soon I started following a Facebook page called "Postcards to Voters". Once approved, I was able to

write postcards to democratic voters in various elections throughout the country, encouraging them to get out and vote. My first order of business was to write one hundred postcards to Alabama voters. As I addressed the cards, I found myself looking up a map of Alabama in order to understand where my efforts were targeted. On the night of the election, December 12, 2017, I felt a sense of connection and empowerment. I felt connected with my friend Elizabeth and with the people of Alabama. More broadly, though, I felt a sense of empowerment that I could personally make a difference. The transformation of my vague political concerns about the Alabama senatorial race into action occurred through a simple detour in my Facebook conversation with Elizabeth. I saw some of the information she was publicly posting on Facebook, sent her a private message in order to catch up with her privately and to learn more. Our conversation ranged from grandchildren to political resistance. Photographs of our families were intermixed with links to resistance organizations such as Postcards to Voters. On the night of the election, I was woken in the middle of the night by the "ping" of my phone. Elizabeth sent me a simple three-word message: "We did it" followed by ten exclamation points and an image of a woman dancing.

Facebook makes possible the maintenance of extended social connections that would be impractical to maintain face-to-face.[54] For example, individuals can keep up with friends in other countries via Facebook, staying apprised of their activities and interests in ways that would not be feasible in person given the distance. Likewise, people often use Facebook to rekindle or develop relationships with people that they had lost touch with, sometimes discovering new points of common interest via each other's Facebook posts. It may be easy to let go of meaningful personal

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[54] Watkins, (2009) provides an evidence-based portrait of people who grow up surrounded by new media technologies. He argues that these individuals don't just use digital technology as a tool but as a way of life. Socializing online is an activity of choice and many use social networking sites to manage many parts of their lives.

contact with friends who live nearby, given the false sense of intimacy that can develop around a social media-based friendship. Indeed, Facebook represents a convergence technology that allows individuals to be at once close yet far away from others, both geographically and socially. What is at stake in the context of the public sphere is the capacity for meaningful deliberation given the breadth and depth of social media relationships. This has implications for civic participation as well.

It has been a long time since I have seen Elizabeth in person. Our friendship is largely built on our shared career beginnings, our shared experience as parents, and our deep commitment to "The Resistance" movement against Donald Trump. Because our friendship has been largely along shared interests, I haven't experienced any complexity or nuance in sharing my political views with her on Facebook. Through Elizabeth and some of the Facebook groups she belongs to, I have been connected with many civic-minded individuals who engage in thoughtful online deliberation and share strategies for political change. In this way, social media can create a space not just for idle conversation, but for deliberative dialogue about civic issues.

This form of media is flexible, allowing for participants to shift topics, audiences and perspectives fluidly. Bruce Bimber argued that, even before the advent of social media, the Internet promoted pluralism as interest-based political groups became increasingly fragmented with less institutional coherence.[55] However, once social media emerged around 2005, a variety of studies have shown that a new type of participatory civics online has emerged which can foster democratic deliberation and promote political participation. Ethan Zuckerman examines what he terms "participatory civics", the phenomenon by which people engage politically through online

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[55] Bimber, Bruce. "The Internet and political transformation: Populism, community, and accelerated pluralism." *Polity* (1998): 133-160.

activities. He explores why people are drawn to this type of civic engagement, its drawbacks and strengths.[56] A 2012 study presented research testing the thesis that social networks can promote political participation when people use these sites to keep up with public affairs or news about their communities.[57] Zúñiga, et.al. claim that informational use of social media sites has a positive impact on an individual's civic and political activities. Furthermore, the results showed that there were also higher levels of social capital produced, possibly facilitating greater overall involvement in community life. They posit that further study could suggest that learning through social media could contribute to a healthier or more "participatory" democracy. In 2015, Daniel Halpern and Jennifer Gibbs examined the potential for social media to foster democratic deliberation by conducting a study of activity on the Facebook and YouTube media channels managed by the White House. They used a qualitative method to analyze social media messages using indicators developed to evaluate the deliberative democracy potential of online discourse derived from the work of Habermas. They concluded that political discussions on Facebook would allow symmetrical conversations among users and expand the flow of information relative to YouTube (which would be more anonymous).[58]

If social media can set the stage for the formation of a new type of political consciousness, how might this knowledge help us 'make sense' of contemporary challenges to authority? A growing body of literature suggests that social media has fundamentally changed the way that social movements take root. Castells argues that societal change is born out of the power struggle

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[56] Zuckerman, Ethan. "New media, new civics?" *Policy & Internet* 6, no. 2 (2014): 151-168.

[57] Gil de Zúñiga, Homero, Nakwon Jung, and Sebastián Valenzuela. "Social media use for news and individuals' social capital, civic engagement and political participation." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 17, no. 3 (2012): 319-336.

[58] Halpern, Daniel, and Jennifer Gibbs. "Social media as a catalyst for online deliberation? Exploring the affordances of Facebook and YouTube for political expression." *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, no. 3 (2013): 1159-1168

involving the construction of meaning in peoples' minds. This, he suggests, is a more stable source

of power for states than physical violence.[59] We have only to look at state efforts to control or

manipulate social media to see that this principle is well understood by those with political power.

Technology has changed civil society relations significantly since Habermas first wrote about the

bourgeois public sphere. Social media creates a space where public opinion can form outside of

state or commercial interests in the spirit of the Habermasian public sphere but with greater fluidity

between issues, audiences, and affiliations. This newly conceptualized public sphere creates the

possibility for counter-hegemonic cultural and political practices because of the power it carries to

construct meaning and to shape public opinion rapidly and across political boundaries.[60]

My interactions with Amena and Elizabeth demonstrate two of the ways that political

consciousness can be heightened through Facebook. By affording the possibility to reach across

time and space in order to engage in civic deliberation, Facebook creates the conditions of

possibility for a virtual public sphere that can lead the development or advancement of important

civic debates.

The next chapter examines Facebook as new form of public sphere that blends the public and

private, the commercial and social. The language of Facebook is vernacular, interactions are

among diverse actors and a variety of topics are discussed simultaneously. Minority opinions are

aired and sometimes amplified. It is a far messier public sphere than the one envisioned by

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[59] Castells, Manuel. *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*. 2nd ed.
Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015.
[60]Carroll, William K., and Robert A. Hackett. "Democratic media activism through the lens of social
movement theory." *Media, culture & society* 28, no. 1 (2006): 83-104.

Habermas but as we shall see, it is also a productive space for the development of political

consciousness.

Chapter 4: Agency, Connection, and Inclusion

Facebook is a dynamic, networked site which facilitates a multitude of interactions between individuals and groups. Facebook users sometimes know other users personally, through connections with friends, or only through the platform of social media. In this chapter, I explore the intricacies of navigating a path toward a public sphere on Facebook alongside maintenance of friendships and fostering of social capital. Not surprisingly, all three of these activities have a symbiotic role to play in the process of Facebook engagement.

January 25, 2017

It was the night before my birthday and I checked Facebook one last time before turning in for the night. There were already three "Happy Birthday" notifications from friends overseas for whom it was already January 26th. I smiled, this was going to be fun. When I woke up in the morning, I could expect quite a number of good wishes on my Facebook page, helping to start my day with a little extra lift.

As I started to shut down the app, I hesitated. My profile picture was from the Women's March. It was a fairly flattering image. I was relaxed and smiling while wearing my daughter's "pussy hat". Well, it was a bit subtle, I decided, you couldn't really tell what kind of hat it was unless you were really paying attention and I did like the picture generally. My background picture was the banner from the Women's March, which I had switched to the week before. The March was over, I reasoned, no point in keeping the banner as my background picture. Besides, I like to keep it neutral such as a Chicago skyline scene when I am not traveling somewhere or looking forward to a new season. Most of my background pictures have been scenes of Chicago, or the cities my children have lived in, Phoenix, Seattle or Baltimore. Sometimes I like to throw up something

seasonal, like the ski slopes of Colorado or beautiful flowers in the Spring. I would switch it back to a Chicago scene, I decided, before too many people saw my profile when they sent their birthday greetings.

At the time, I didn't think too much about why I was doing this, but a few days later it came to me. I had depoliticized my Facebook page just before a broader group of Facebook "friends" was likely to see it. Birthdays are odd on Facebook. Even if you rarely interact with a particular "friend", you will receive a notification that it is their birthday and often this is the only time you go to their wall. I clearly wanted to make sure that the people who may not have been completely familiar with my recent Facebook posts would not find my political views off-putting. My recent openness to being more political on Facebook had been a different calculation when I imagined a smaller audience.

Facebook and Social Navigations

Although Facebook has provided a platform for my growing political consciousness, it has also been a space that requires considerable social navigation. Papacharissi claims that this convergence in the arena of information technologies is "rooted in greater convergence of social, cultural, political, and economic tendencies."[61] This convergence can be observed very clearly on Facebook where the political and economic blend seamlessly with cultural and social expression. Individuals routinely navigate the blurred boundaries between the private and the public Facebook, ever mindful of the fact that they are sometimes sharing private information with a broad public of Facebook friends, while also reposting broadly read public media content with their private group of Facebook friends or on a narrower interest-based group page. This fluid shifting between

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[61] Papacharissi, Zizi. *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity, 2010. 53.

topics both social and political is, according to Papacharissi, human nature. "Individuals discuss politics among and together with other things, and this practice helps them connect politics to essential parts of their everyday routines. Political life has developed out of the human need for sociability, and, as such, it adopts the practices and pace of social life."[62] My birthday offered an opportunity to consciously interact with the broadest spectrum of my "Friends" on Facebook. As such, I was challenged to navigate a variety of relationships simultaneously while recognizing my own growing political consciousness.[63]

Papacharissi argues that convergence of technology, practices and spaces is changing the way citizens are constituted and their function in democratic societies. As a result, public and private spaces become less clearly delineated and discourses of globalization and commercialization result in the convergence of roles. People become both audience and producer, citizen and consumer. Moving across the spectrum of public and private spheres within social media informs our political behaviors.[64] In my own case, I toggle between politically charged commentary and quirky observations, between neutral images of beautiful places to which I have traveled and outraged reposting of, in my view, newsworthy injustices.

Over time, connections and interactions that occur on Facebook, spanning everyday activities as well as political observations and commentary, create practices and rituals of sociality that begins to form greater subjectivity among individuals. Papacharissi observes that "it is through

[62] Ibid. 78.

[63] Duggan, Maeve, and Aaron Smith. "Political Content on Social Media." Pew Research Center. http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/10/25/political-content-on-social-media/. This study showed that Facebook users tend to be exposed to a broad range of political views among their Facebook Friends. Even though political discussion on Facebook is shown to add frustration and stress, a total of 80% of users feel that these platforms help users get involved with issues that matter to them while a similar percentage feel that social media helps bring new voices into the political discussion.

[64] Papacharissi, Zizi. *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity, 2010. 131.

association with others that civic identity and solidarity are actualized, while at the same time sustaining the control, autonomy, and self-expression capabilities of the private sphere."[65] Facebook is situated at the intersection of this private sphere of control and self-expression and a space for a broader, networked dialogue.

January 2017

Whenever I think about putting a post on Facebook I think of my uncle. This isn't because anything about Facebook reminds me of my uncle, far from it. It is just that my uncle represents the person I am Facebook friends with who is kind of my litmus test. I would suppose everyone has one person like that. He is the person who I am most likely to offend and who I would least like to offend. It's kind of a virtual "Venn Diagram" of my Facebook friendships. I've thought a lot about why this is, or if it should be that way but there you have it. Facebook is where I construct my online identity and I pride myself on maintaining an authentic online self. Not that there is anything shocking about who I am, far from it. It's just that my uncle and I haven't always seen eye to eye on politics.

The rub here was the Women's March. He and I had recently had a fairly testy conversation about the post-election mood in the country. He felt that everyone should just "calm down" and give our new president a chance. It was generally couched in the vein of respect for the office. He characterized protests as violent and not a good idea. Well, I was going to the March with my girls and, as I pointed out to him, it was my civil right to protest. I was irritated. I'm sure he was irritated too. What he was hearing from me had to sound like an echo of the feminist movement in the 1970s, a time in his life of uncomfortable social upheaval.

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[65] Ibid. 139.

When March Day finally arrived, I had to decide how much I was going to share about my political activities and views on Facebook. This was going to be the most visible and potentially vocal part of my opposition to the conservative turn that the country was taking. For anyone who didn't know it before, my progressive political leanings would be on full display on my Facebook wall. I hesitated for only a moment. Yes, my uncle was my Facebook litmus test. Yes, he would have to come along for the ride. This was too important.

If there was one moment in my life that galvanized my growing political consciousness and political interactions on Facebook, it was The Women's March in January 2017. My desire to be honest and to share my political views with friends and acquaintances on Facebook overtook, at least for a time, my concerns about navigating personal differences. I began to see Facebook as a valuable space for civic engagement as well as for casual social interaction. Papacharissi argues that convergence of technology, practices and spaces is changing the way citizens are constituted and their function in democratic societies. As a result, public and private spaces become less clearly delineated and discourses of globalization and commercialization result in the convergence of roles. "Online media which enables acts of civic engagement frequently carry a distinct commercial component, which confuses the roles of citizen and consumer."[66] People become both audience and producer, citizen and consumer. Moving across the spectrum of public and private spheres within social media informs our political behaviors.

As my political consciousness grew, I noticed that a small but vocal minority of my Facebook friends were posting what I considered to be disturbingly racist or bigoted posts. People are complicated and everyone has their own baggage. Yet it bothered me that some of my

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[66] Ibid. 52.

Facebook friends and family members equated patriotism with pictures of little girls saluting the flag, were happy to "share" articles denigrating immigrants and believed and shared anything Fox News had to say on any topic. And yet, because I knew these to be good people, I was curious. Could I possibly be missing something? Might there be areas of agreement?

My personal response to controversy and polarization on Facebook doubtlessly reflects my personal communication style and demographic make-up. Whenever I hear or see something that seems to run counter to my beliefs I tend to "read up" as they say. I have come to my Facebook friendships with a similar openness. What I have discovered is that opinions are fluid, dependent on life experience, perspective, education and economic circumstance. They can change and it is best to keep dialogue open. I tend not to directly disagree or comment on posts if they are coming from people whose friendships I value. Instead, I try to find areas of common ground and am sure to "like" their personal posts on family events or photos.

At times on Facebook, the variety of voices and opinions and the complexity of social relationships can be overwhelming. In Habermas' idealized bourgeois public sphere of 18th century Europe, participants engaged in civic debate all came from similar backgrounds with reasonably shared aspirations and world views. In the context of today's society, an updated conception of public sphere would require a broader plurality of voices including a diversity of gender, class, race, nationalities, religions, political views, etc. Only then, could the public opinions formed out of this debate be considered to rise to the level of the common good. It would be a mistake to underestimate the power of the many and varied voices that are emerging as public spheres on a global basis sharing stories and experiences through Facebook. Indeed, Papacharissi argues that "to the extent that participatory media culture becomes collective and critically

diffused, then it could present an alternative to media power."[67] Whether or not that challenge to media power could translate into political power and a "subversion of mainstream political objectives by alternative movements"[68] is a topic taken up more directly by Nancy Fraser.

A Multiplicity of Facebook Public Spheres

In her response to Habermas entitled "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", Fraser argues that the idea of the public sphere as described by Habermas involved 'bracketing' of inequalities of status in a sort of 'as if' way that acts to mask domination. At the same time, she claims that "some new form of public sphere is required to salvage that arena's critical function to institutionalized democracy."[69] Fraser argues that a single public sphere is not an ideal model and she advocates for alternative publics which she calls "subaltern counter publics."

Fraser's argument is not so much of a repudiation of Habermas' theoretical framework as an extension of it. Her analysis brings Habermas' deeply historical analysis into conversation with more contemporary contexts and offers a number of useful tools for advancing the conversation into the age of Facebook. In particular, the suggestion that multiple public spheres are needed in order to make the public sphere truly inclusive is a useful expansion of the theory. One of the sharpest criticisms of a single public sphere, whether in a Habermasian sense or more generally, is the idea that one voice can speak for all. If public opinion is conceptualized as the voice of the

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[67] Ibid. 65.
[68] Ibid. 159.
[69] Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (1992): 109-42. 111.

people, then only those with power will be audible. If multiple publics flourish, then power will be more diffused and fewer will be silenced.

Another way to conceptualize the idea of multiple publics is to think of them not just in terms of their attributes as individual actors coming together (i.e. women, indigenous populations, union members, youth, etc.), but to think of multiple publics in terms of specific interests that are shared. In the context of Facebook, this better reflects the way that public deliberation actually takes place. The public sphere might be conceptualized as a discursive space where strangers can discuss issues that they believe are consequential for themselves and their group. Gerard Hauser coins the term "rhetorical public spheres", claiming that public spheres naturally form around issues rather than around group identities.[70] Conversation among these people, who often do not know each other personally, is discourse-based, not class-based. Many intermediate dialogues can take place simultaneously and then meld into one discussion. He claims that norms develop from these discursive practices as arguments are judged by how well they resonate with others. These norms help to move the conversation toward shared concerns, weed out debates, and drive consensus. Therefore, these rhetorical public spheres, made up of individuals with disparate identities, can come together in agreement on key issues of concern.

November 2017

I am Facebook friends with my nieces and nephews, who use the platform to varying degrees. I have always tried to keep my Facebook interactions with them fairly minimal. They are young adults and I haven't wanted my online presence to be an unwelcome intrusion into their

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[70] Hauser, Gerard A. *Vernacular Voices: The rhetoric of publics and public spheres*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999.

social sphere. As a result, I am mostly an observer. One of my nephews is a very active Facebook user with very militant, strongly held, and narrowly accepted political views. It is through my lens into his Facebook activity that I have seen the clearest evidence of alternative publics and rhetorical public spheres. My nephew identifies himself a Libertarian. He believes in children's rights to do as they please without the oppressive and heavy handed interference of parents or societal institutions and that no activity that does not harm others is or should be a crime. It has surprised me how many groups of people he has found on Facebook with whom he can debate these issues. On occasion, these debates are serious and academically grounded. They are often contentious. They are debates that take place among people who largely do not know each other personally and there is no reason to believe that they share the same socioeconomic or educational levels. There is no indication that they share anything except political views. Sometimes, I reply directly to one of my nephew's comments on these conversation threads. Usually, only when I think his logic has gone far afield. By and large, though, I am a witness to the flowering of civic debate on civic issues that rarely get media coverage.

Facebook as Location for Gathering Agency

While I do not agree that children as young as twelve should be allowed to drive, drink, vote or come and go as they please, the broader question of whether or not our society has created an artificially prolonged adolescence and has infantilized and disenfranchised millions of its citizens is probably worth debating. On one level, I think that engaging in endless debates with total strangers on Facebook can be largely a waste of time. However, in observing my nephew's style of engagement with Facebook, I can see that his political consciousness is being enhanced through this process and among the various voices debating these issues, knowledge is being produced. My nephew uses Facebook almost exclusively as an outlet for his political views. He

appears to believe that society's most powerful actors are abusing those powers at every turn. As he situates himself as one of those victimized by this abuse of power, his political discussions are often passionate, frustrated, and I assume empowering.

Let me explain. Social media is rife with interaction in the vernacular. By its nature, Facebook facilitates interactions of all kinds, both civic and social. While my Facebook presence began as purely social and migrated toward a mix of civic and social, my nephew has emphasized the political. In some ways, his use of Facebook is the closest approximation of public sphere in the Habermasian sense that I have seen. State influence is roundly rejected at every turn and commercial concerns are non-existent.

Given the networked nature of Facebook, individual users are communicating simultaneously with multiple publics both in terms of identity and rhetoric. It is therefore not surprising that most language used on Facebook is highly vernacular. Communication on Facebook tends to be casual in style, designed to be comprehensible to the broadest possible audience. Many issues that may be of interest across identity groups are discussed broadly on Facebook and meet the criteria for a public sphere that Hauser lays out in his analysis.[71] For example, a person on Facebook may be participating simultaneously in conversations on a wide variety of topics from immigration reform, to the Super Bowl, to a popular satirical blog. The same person might also be discussing a foreign destination that a friend just visited with concerns about

[71]Hauser, (2007) critically examines Habermas' claim that the epistemic dimension of democracy resides in public opinion. He argues that the conditions of possibility for democracy reside within the knowledge production that arises from public idea exchange among ordinary citizens forming a deliberative model of public opinion. The author examines the role of Internet communication in opening new avenues for this knowledge production that can challenge corporate power's ability to control the message. The author claims that mass communication's power to distort opinion is not once sided, opening up the possibility for internet communication and participation to elude corporate power's capacity to control public opinion.

the security of air travel. All of these conversations can be taking place simultaneously with different subsets of Facebook friends who, in turn, are likely having those conversations along with others of their own with other Facebook friends. All of this can take place through actual direct personal Facebook connections, by association with mutual friends or simply by joining an issues-based group of like-minded people.

Lost in the morass of commercialism and personal biographical details on Facebook, one can seek out and find a rich variety of public spheres where the issues of the day are being debated in a style described by both Fraser and Hauser.[72] Facebook provides a space for interaction that is at once personal and public, that traverses public and private spheres and forms the conditions of possibility for a connection between self and society that is foundational for understanding citizenship and political subjectivity. Ananda Mitra and Eric Watts posit that "the way that individuals and institutions voice themselves using the Internet through the eloquence of their representation is a good way to think about how identity narratives are formed and can gather power."[73] In conceptualizing the Internet as a discursive space, where individuals can collectively form opinions, the idea of "voice", or agency can be connected with power. Facebook can thus act as an aggregator and amplifier of individual human agency, which can gather power.

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[72]Hauser, Gerard A. "Vernacular voices: The rhetoric of publics and public spheres." (1999). Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (1992): 109-42. 111.

[73]Mitra, Ananda, and Eric Watts. "Theorizing cyberspace: the idea of voice applied to the internet discourse." *New media & society* 4, no. 4 (2002): 479-498.

Conclusion

Habermas' concept of the public sphere surfaced in the post-World War II era, when he and others were interested in seeking out a space for productive, public deliberation. At the conclusion of his analysis, Habermas had determined that the public sphere had collapsed amidst the intrusion and power of market-based commercial interests.[74] Against this pessimistic position, I introduce Facebook as a space with potential to offer a Habermasian public sphere in a highly contemporary new way. I argue that Facebook offers new hope for development of civic deliberation and political consciousness. I use my own entanglement with Facebook to illustrate how someone of my background can develop political consciousness at a certain historical moment, in this case the age of Trump. I explored the notion of the public sphere, new forms of engagement, social media context, and issues of inclusivity and agency, evaluating my own experiences in light of the literature. It could be analytically fruitful to gather additional narratives in order to explore how other individuals' experiences might differ from mine.

This thesis examines the construction and development of a Facebook "self" as a vehicle for communication across a far reaching social network that allows the blending of civic and social dialogue. I posit that Facebook facilitates such broad participation that it diffuses hegemonic power, state or market based. Facebook is so effective as a platform for political engagement that it has led to collective action both on line and offline that is in direct opposition to powerful interests. Specifically, I point to the Women's March as well as the #MeToo and #TimesUp

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[74]Habermas, Jurgen. *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge: First MIT Press, 1991. 247

movement as examples where civic engagement emerged through social media and resulted in tangible evidence of growing political consciousness and relocation of political power.

Through vignettes, I describe my growing political consciousness and the role that Facebook played in bringing it to fruition. From my initial hesitancy to share my horror at Trump's victory to proudly sharing tales of my activism a year later, Facebook served as a space where I could explore and share my beliefs and convictions about politics. It also served as a space where, through dialogue, I became aware of and participated in various forms of political activism and witnessed the viral power of social media to sweep political movements into the mainstream consciousness of everyday Americans. The vignettes also illustrate the power of Facebook to weave political consciousness into everyday exchanges and to encourage dialogue among friends and family members. This is illustrated in my exchanges with my uncle and nephew and in my hesitation to be too political on my birthday when a broader mix of friends would see my posts. The variety of personal connections on Facebook enables a web of sociality that supports and encourages dialogue including topics both banal and political.

I am interested in how social media, and Facebook in particular, can be an effective space for change. The literature and my experience suggest that Facebook offers a new way to engage politically that makes space for a greater diversity of voices to be heard and amplified. Facebook allows for interest-based discursive spaces and the formation of a various, often overlapping public spheres. By creating a global web of sociality, Facebook users can deliberate issues rapidly, transnationally, and empowerment is often the result. The Women's Marches as well as the #MeToo movement demonstrate that movements that begin on social media can rapidly be transformed into powerful challenges to authority. Political subjectivity gains momentum through social-media as individuals feel less alone and more empowered.

The public sphere as manifested on Facebook, I argue, functions as a contemporary version of Habermas' idealized public sphere. The contemporary Facebook public sphere comes much closer to realizing Habermas' goal of inclusivity than would have been possible in the 18th century and the Facebook public sphere is more suited to disregarding status. On Facebook, when discussing issues of civic importance, it is often very difficult to ascertain the status of participation in the deliberation unless it is explicitly revealed. Finally, while commercialism is rampant on Facebook today, commercial interests, rather than ubiquitous commercialism, were certainly present in Habermas' 18th century public sphere. In fact, those more concentrated commercial interests may have played a greater role in influencing the civic debate than today's more general commercialism is likely to play in shaping civic debate on a broader, more inclusive basis.

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