



Social movements and revolutions: the power of relationships and digital affections Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics

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Social movements and revolutions: the power of relationships and digital affections

Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics, by Zizi Papacharissi, Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2015, 176 pp. £17.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9780199999743

Media have the capability of transmitting a sense of immediacy to facts, places, people, etc. They tune audiences into something physically or temporally removed from them, and contribute to change attitudes, knowledge and behaviors, channeling ideas and information, key for making historical events parts of people's identity and collective memory. This is the case of Twitter, a social network online platform that played a key role in the protests against social inequalities in New York (Occupy Wall Street) and revolutions that provoked political changes in northern African countries like Egypt and Tunisia (the so-called Arab Spring movements).

Similar the Ancient Greek agoras, online networked platforms exercise a large impact in culture and society. To understand the relational processes explaining sociocultural changes, Zizi Papacharissi analyses how publics are energized in their political and civic habitus when they use the discursive mediality of Twitter to express and materialize affections, feelings and emotions.

In Chapter 1, the author defines the key concept (affection) and its interactions with new media structures. Chapters 2 and 3 are two empirical studies that demonstrate how networked publics changed the media and political scenarios. Chapter 4 explores the impact of networked affectivity on social identity. Finally, in Chapter 5, the author explains the role of sociocultural context and the structure of what she defines as affective publics.

In a nutshell, *Affective Publics* is a must-read short book that intend to show how storytelling platforms like Twitter facilitate the balance between affect and ideology, emotions and reason, understood as different types of engagement in public sphere, allowing publics to decode situations by experiencing (feeling) them. 'They permit meaning-making of situations unknown to us by evoking affective reactions' (4).

After an extensive literature review, Papacharissi used quantitative content, network analyses and case studies to show that interactive platforms like social networking sites, differently to traditional media, empower social actors giving them the possibility of creating and interchanging affects and ideologies with others. That is precisely the novelty of the book: to analyze empirically the role of emotions in the processes facilitated by newer media like Twitter. They mediate the process of transforming spectators into protagonists and audiences into publics, boosting relationships in special historical moments can ignite social and cultural changes. This may be particularly interesting for institutions that promote positive messages and lifestyles, such as mercy and solidarity, even in post-modern societies: communication strategies should be based in interpersonal closed relationships that allow affective exchanges and emotional attachments. Once again, evidence supports that communication is more than the transmission of a message, but dialogue and particularly, relationships between active social and personal actors.

Accordingly to Paracharissi '... networked digital structures of expression and connection are overwhelmingly characterized by affect' (8) that, through an ongoing reflexivity

that trace what publics really are, help activate social ties, crucial for movements and cultural shifts, giving to disorganized groups the ‘feeling’ of relationships, the appearance and power of coordinated communities. Those feelings or affects are far from an irrational decision-making process opposed to logic or rationality.

Social media establish real interactive relationships, collapse interpersonal distances and produce rational understanding, even though it is not based on thinking but on feelings. The exchange of ideas and emotions within networked publics, connected discursively, facilitated two recent political uprisings: the so-called Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movement. The first were mass protests that started in Tunisia in 2011, forced Egypt’s then-president Mubarak to resign, and spread social revolts demanding democracy and change in several northern African countries. The second was an international network of protesters against economic inequalities that characterize the contemporary liberal Western democracies. Both sociocultural uprisings defied traditional political status-quo channeling affections through new media.

After a brief but effective analysis of the dualism between emotion and reason that includes authors like Plato, Weber and Habermas, the Author defines affect as ‘... a key part of how people internalize and act on everyday experiences’ (12). The affect mechanism is linked with ‘a sense of self based on relations between sensations experienced’ (21). Digital media sustain and transmit affect, reproducing patterns of relationships with others through medialities that create informal meeting third places and situations sustained by conversations and hybrid forms of storytelling. Those new spaces are public-private spheres where individuals bring their own lifestyles and personal political identities. They allow new civic habits, engaged through grassroots outlets like Twitter.

Besides a controversial way of presenting the role of the church and the state before enlightenment, which ignores historical evidence about the issue, Papacharissi’s theoretical approach, although innovative, lacks of considering Archer’s and Donati’s studies on reflexivity into the discussion. Those authors define relational reflexivity as internal conversations oriented by ultimate concerns. They offer a theoretical and evidence-based framework for explaining social action and the attitude-behavior gap that does not imprison emotions in the cage of psychological tendencies, and presents the relationship as the emergent factor of socio-cultural interactions. From this point of view, without denying the role of affects, technologies do not facilitate ‘... networked circulations of affective flows’ (15), but the exchange of mediated personal interactions that generate relational lifestyles and subjective culture.

Therefore, effects and technological events are not unrelated realities, because the later could not be isolated from interpersonal relationships. Papacharissi’s efforts to overcome the theoretical opposition between the person as social actor and the socio-cultural structure in which he lives, makes an important contribution to communication theory development when considers humans emotional and rational, although may have made a bigger one including their relational and reflexive practices too.

From Chapters 2–4, Papacharissi explores how ‘affective processes are enabled in the online environment by examining the form and texture of communication’ (27) of Arab Spring movement in Egypt (analyzing a sample of approximately 150,000 tweets), Occupy movement in U.S. (279,597 tweets) and every day casual political expressions (2807 tweets). To do so, after a literature review, the author applied interesting sampling strategies, which would be a reference for future studies, and analyzed both flow and contents of tweets, and the role of hashtags, markers, retweets, URLs and other digital storytelling tools.


Data confirmed that Twitter facilitates always-on interactions that adopt the characteristics of spontaneous conversations and reflect the presence of social ties and collaborative networks. This finding was showed by discourse analysis, which revealed the existing

networks between emerging leaders and media elites. Digital news reflect the same values of traditional media, particularly instantaneity, the crowd-sourcing of elites, solidarity, and ambience. However, platform's medialities allow 'crowds to participate in collective and networked processes of framing and gatekeeping' (50) that contribute to empower publics in difficult social and political circumstances. Digital structures facilitate post-modern ways of collective actions that do not require top-down hierarchies, clear leadership or membership processes and therefore are less controllable by governments and elites: the connective actions, which 'emphasizes network-based over group-based forms of mobilization' (70). The analysis made by Papacharissi on the issue connects the empirical data with the theory described in Chapter 1 and opens new paths for further studies on social movements. Quantitative content and network analyses showed differences between them, which makes the book a landmark in cross-cultural studies in the digital arena.

While in Chapters 2 and 3 Papacharissi focuses on the analysis in the public sphere, in the Fourth she concentrates the attention in Twitter as a space of self-representation and public identity development. People's behaviors in social media are performances of their self: 'they claim agency and negotiate power within social structures and imaginaries. They are part of the ongoing story or the reflexive project of the self' (96). Digital performances enable individual to reinvent identities and adopt dominant or innovative political narratives. In this way, the 'What's happening?' of Twitter becomes an opportunity of play (and therefore, experimentation) with language and aesthetics, sustaining what the Author calls a 'networked sense of self' (99). Chapter 4 presents a quite interesting content and correlational analysis methodologies, particularly regarding the classification of performances in dimensions like magnitude and play, that showed a large degree of individualism and self-focus, and the way audiences deal with the politically correct trends and the phenomena like the spiral of silence. Quantitative findings revealed play as a strategy for overcoming the later.

In the last chapter of the book, Papacharissi introduces the concept of structures of feelings, which define the discourses produced and exchanged through storytelling platforms, and work as connective affordances for what she called 'affective networked publics' (118). In consequence, social media are not new only for the speed at which they disseminate ideas or other technological characteristics, but because they spread affects that empower people for engaging in public life, allowing 'fluid or liquid forms of power' (119).

To conclude, in spite of the highlighted theoretical limitations regarding sociological literature, Affective Publics should be consider as a relevant and necessary explorative effort in an important field of communication theory, media and cultural studies. Although the last chapter deals with the role of socialization, accelerated reflexivity and habitus in networked affects, more data are needed for analyzing the impact of sentiments on behaviors, which may be related with the adoption of specific lifestyles and subjective cultures. Another limitation, pointed out by the author, is the lack of in-depth interviews, which may provide sound insights on digital communicative actions (109). Overall, 'every artifact tells a story – if one knows how to read it' (136). Papacharissi gives us a clue and opens the path for future research.

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