

Zizi Papacharissi, **Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015, 176 pp., \$26.95 (paperback).

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Zizi Papacharissi's approach in her most recent book, **Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics**, is deceptively simple: She sets out to explore what happens to publics when they materialize through affect and through the "discursive mediality" of Twitter (p. ix). To engage this question, the author considers the power of affective attunement, that is, how people come to *feel* their proximity to, or distance from, current events, news stories, and civic mobilization through various new media interpellations. More specifically, she explores how public displays of affect function as political statements (p. 7). To ground her work, Papacharissi presents three case studies centering on (sub)cultural reactions to repression as anchor points to examine what she describes as the form, texture, and shape of networked communication: namely, the Arab Spring (#egypt), the Occupy movement (#ows), and trending topics on Twitter. In exploring these lines of inquiry, her research builds on and is in conversation with scholars concerned with understanding emerging modalities of civic engagement. To be sure, this book responds to Law's (2004) call of taking into account the "messiness" of complex, diffuse phenomena and of "incorporating some of this messiness into scholarly practice" (Hillis, Paasonen, & Petit 2015, p. 11).



For Papacharissi, whose previous book-length work, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (2010), deftly examines newly emerging civic tendencies, tensions, and habits that arise within media-heavy democracies, affect provides an illuminating point of departure for theorizing what she calls "the soft structures of [civic] engagement" (p. 115). And just as her previous study seeks to highlight the unproductive nature of reinforcing longstanding binaries (public/private), this work rightfully advocates for a sustained balancing of affect and reason in the articulation of political theory, not a steadfast championing of the latter over the former. For readers unfamiliar with the "affective turn" scholarship of the mid-1990s—and with the breadth of affect theory scholarship that materialized in its wake¹—Papacharissi presents an excellent distillation of the core issues and debates, and offers the context needed to situate affect studies within a growing body of media and communication studies scholarship. Affect, she writes, captures "the intensity of drive or movement with a not yet developed sense of direction" (p. 21). Due in part to the perceived limits of knowledge production in research centered on

¹ For a representative sample of book-length contributions, see Castells, 2012; Clough & Halley, 2007; Gould, 2009; Grace, 2014; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Grusin, 2010; Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012; Knudsen & Stage, 2015; Liljeström & Paasonen, 2010; Hillis, Paasonen, & Petit 2015; Protevi, 2009; and Ratto & Boler, 2014.

signification, mediation, subjectivity, and representation (Hillis, Paasonen & Petit 2015), it is precisely the intensities associated with these untapped potentialities and capacities that have set off a great deal of discussion and debate surrounding affect's political promise in the realm of civic digital culture. Part of Papacharissi's broader argument is that networked digital modes of expression and connection are overwhelmingly characterized by affect, and for publics that are networked digitally and connected discursively, the study of affect provides a window into studying how the glue that bonds publics together comes to cultivate its stickiness.

Public displays of emotion on Twitter have come to inform and even characterize the discursive contours of the platform, reflecting to some degree the culture, mood, and feel of the contemporary moment. The popular microblogging service, thus, represents a compelling site to explore the affective relations and dynamics at work in social movements, personal politics, and the performance of identity, particularly with respect to its capacity to accommodate expressions of dissent. If "spaces that stimulate political interest, expression, and engagement work best when they invite impromptu, casual, and unforced forays into the political" (p. 121), Twitter is here cast as giving shape to such spaces, albeit fleetingly. Papacharissi offers a welcome scholarly overview of its sociotechnical properties, affordances, and constraints. From the outset, she frames the platform as a "social awareness system" (p. 36) whose always-on platform ambience offers a global audience the opportunity to listen in on emerging, developing, and ongoing conflicts. Put another way, Twitter connects remote news stories and publics to an interactive global audience (and vice versa). What's more, the storytelling affordances of the platform facilitate the hybridization of news storytelling practices, whereby news stories are regularly infused with personal, subjective, emotive, opinionated, and affective modes of address. Of note, for example, in her analyses of the overarching rhythms and tendencies in storytelling on #egypt, the creation and circulation of affective news content (paired with networked information-sharing practices) produced connective (and not necessarily collective) ties that bolstered an alternative set of news values: the crowdsourcing of elites, instantaneity, ambience, and solidarity. Echoing *A Private Sphere* (Papacharissi, 2010), she examines the quality of discursive interactions emanating from the multiple social realities, relationships, and environments made possible by converging technology and media. Through a mixed methods approach deploying Twitter-based network, semantic, content, frequency, and discourse analyses, Papacharissi concludes that the chorus-like stream of repetitive, cumulative, and amplified expression of affect through tweets, retweets (RTs), addressivity markers (@), and attribution (via) permits publics to feel more intensely, to make narratives more porous, and to disseminate viewpoints that are traditionally underrepresented. These include expressions of a(nta)gonism (#ows) and solidarity with the movement (#egypt), as well as the performance of mininarratives through trending topics (#JustStopRightThere). The connective nature of these "networked structures of feeling" (p. 26) produces impact that is symbolic, agency that is semantic, and power that is liminal.

The study of affect—and by extension, Twitter—certainly has its limitations. Even in the best-case scenarios, networks function as unpredictable environments and ecologies, not as deterministic forces that incite protest or bring about change. As the author argues elsewhere, most technologies and platforms have little to do with the condition of democracy (Papacharissi, 2010). If social media facilitate feelings of engagement, it remains to be seen how the affordances of social media can move beyond producing latent bonds or weak ties. And while affect may amplify and intensify one's awareness of a given issue, it does

not follow that one's understanding of a problem or knowledge of an issue will be deepened or that thick forms of civic engagement will ever materialize (p. 120). As Lawrence Grossberg suggests, "Because it has come to serve, now, too often as a 'magical' term . . . affect lets people off the hook [and] it lets them appeal back to an ontology that escapes" (2010, p. 315). Boler has recently argued that the term's open-ended quality allows for generous interpretation, meaning that it is "now all too easily invoked as a gesture towards the virtual, the possible-potential, and capacities" (Boler & Zembylas, 2016, p. 23). In a useful analogy, Boler reminds us that just as the fields of cultural studies have periodically been taken to task for not sufficiently engaging theory with praxis, so too do studies of affect risk floating ideas, theories, and research findings that do not connect with materiality and everyday life. One of the great successes of *Affective Publics* is that the author presents a provocative theoretical and methodological model for thinking about the role of emotive expression in a networked digital era. In a book seeking to contextualize and explain the intensities surrounding the experience of reason and emotion, Papacharissi writes with great clarity and intensity in a work that offers an important contribution to affect studies in communication and media research.

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