
Book Review

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Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics

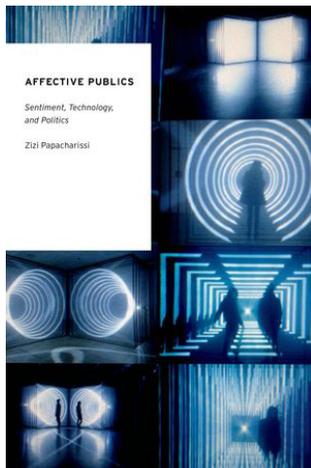
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Book presentation from the publishers' website

- first political science text to apply affect and emotion as a parameter to our understanding of civic engagement online
- built around original big data and qualitative analyses of Twitter streams
- explains what role Twitter plays in uprisings and movements, but also everyday political expression
- introduces a new concept of affective publics to explain how people use newer technologies to make their voices matter in politics.

Over the past few decades, we have witnessed the growth of movements using digital means to connect with broader interest groups and express their points of view. These movements emerge out of distinct contexts and yield different outcomes, but tend to share one thing in common: online and offline solidarity shaped around the public display

of emotion. Social media facilitate feelings of engagement, in ways that frequently make people feel re-energised about politics. In doing so, media do not make or break revolutions but they do lend emerging, storytelling publics their own means for feeling their way into events, frequently by making those involved a part of the developing story. Technologies network us but it is our stories that connect us to each other, making us feel close to some and distancing us from others.

Affective publics explores how storytelling practices facilitate engagement among movements tuning into a current issue or event by employing three case studies: Arab Spring movements, various iterations of occupy, and everyday casual political expressions as traced through the archives of trending topics on Twitter. It traces how affective publics materialise and disband around connective conduits of sentiment every day and find their voice through the soft structures of feeling sustained by societies. Using original quantitative and qualitative data, *affective publics* demonstrates, in this groundbreaking analysis, that it is through these soft structures that affective publics connect, disrupt, and feel their way into everyday politics.

Readership: Students and scholars of political science, political sociology, political communication, and social movement studies; as well as journalists, policy analysts and consultants, and general readers interested in social media and politics.

List of chapters and appendices

- Prelude
- Chapter 1: The Present Affect
- Chapter 2: Affective News and Networked Publics
- Chapter 3: Affective Demands and the New Political
- Chapter 4: The Personal as Political: Everyday Disruptions of the Political Mainstream
- Chapter 5: Affective Publics

Chapter contents

In the introductory chapter, the main question to be treated in the book is presented: «*what happens to publics when they materialise affectively through the discursive mediality of Twitter*». Using as examples events such as the Greek Coup d'Etat in 1973, as well as the downfall of Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi, the author opens up the discussion on the role of Twitter as a platform supporting networked discussions and the way the general public reacts to them. The author argues in favour of a new perspective, that of *affective attunement*, in the way citizens use social media to feel engaged with politics.

Chapter 1, *The Present Affect*, analyses the concept of affect and the way Twitter facilitates political structures of feeling. According to the author, in a way much similar to the affective attunement invoked by music, online media facilitate affective connection of ideologically disparate viewpoints, mixing facts with opinions, and with emotions, in a manner that simulates the way that citizens politically react in their everyday lives.

Chapter 2, *Affective News and Networked Publics*, moves on to explore the use of Twitter as a mechanism for news sharing and storytelling in regimes in transition. In this context, Egypt before and just after the resignation of Hosni Mubarak is used as a case study so as to tackle tropes and modalities of civic engagement via Twitter. Quantitative and qualitative data and their graphical visualisations are used in order to highlight how political expression via Twitter was produced and consumed within the Arab Spring movement in Egypt.

Chapter 3, *Affective Demands and the New Political*, elaborates on the use of Twitter as a mechanism for news sharing and storytelling in contemporary democracies, by showcasing the evolving patterns of communication of the Occupy Wall Street movement on Twitter. Mechanisms are highlighted of networked framing and networked gate-keeping, that enabled diverse sets of publics to contribute to evolving narratives about the movement, supported by a wide variety of feelings for and against the Occupy movement.

In chapter 4, *The Personal as political: Everyday Disruptions of the Political Mainstream*, everyday discussions that individuals have via Twitter are examined, as a context different from those of news and public affairs, but still charged with personal as well as political connotation. In this line of thought, the chapter moves on to discuss the political meaning embedded in those everyday tweets and interactions.

Finally, in the concluding chapter of the book, simply entitled *Politics*, the author embarks on synthesising research findings of Chapters 2–4 and proposing a theoretical model of affective publics, defined as public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds. These publics, in the authors' viewpoint, materialise discursively on Twitter, and also through a variety of digital platforms that support expression and connection.

Significance for the state of research and practice

According to recent literature, the impact of social media on political engagement may vary depending on whose interests are being served, the openness of the public sphere, the degree of online/offline integration, and various other characteristics of the movement, the medium, and the socio-historical context (Lewis et al., 2014). Therefore, social platforms like Twitter, that are considered to allow political actors and the general public to operate as narrators of social issues (Segovia, 2014), have political engagement impacts that result from a multitude of factors, encompassing platform characteristics as well as external contexts.

At the same time, as argued by El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009, 2012), exploring the role of social media in the revolt in Egypt, virtual communities are extensions of offline communities, and the meaning and values of a virtual community are ultimately constructed from the participants of that community. Virtual communities, in this line of thought, do not function as isolated entities, but they rather reflect cultural and social values of their participants.

Making an important contribution in this area of thought and research, the book enriches the ongoing debate about the role of social media in political life. Acknowledging the fact that social media offer new ways of expression and affiliation, the author identifies affect and emotion as parameters that can potentially inspire and expand political movements and proposes a new concept, that of *affective publics*,

in order to reflect upon and explain the ways in which people use new technologies to make their voices matter in politics.

The book comprises a first comprehensive study of this kind, providing both theoretical analysis and empirical methodology and data to highlight the multidimensional character of social media usage in politics. Arab Spring movements, various iterations of the Occupy movement, as well as everyday casual political expression, as traced through the archives of trending topics on Twitter, are used as cases studies and sources of argumentation. Building on these cases, the author embarks on an endeavour to trace how affective publics materialise and disband every day around connective conduits of sentiment, and may eventually find their voice, through the soft structures of feeling sustained by societies.

As elaborated by researchers such as Hands (2011), internet technology is “a product of human society and culture – as socially constructed”. Although online social networks matter a lot, they neither incarnate freedom nor bring about some ultimate, heaven-like stage of human history. In order for social media to be effective in initiating change, they have to be complemented by an active civil society, with political groups and networks that already dispose of some basic levels of engagement and organisation. When such groups exist, social media can serve as tools (possibly, privileged tools) for accelerating public mobilisation. And beyond mobilisation, social media may potentially contribute to political revolution, but only under certain circumstances. A complex ensemble of events, forces and people needs to be in place in order to allow social media to bring forward political change in an effective way (Rieff, 2011).

Concluding the reading of this book, we can clearly identify an innovative perspective in digital activism analysis. The operation of social media, and Twitter in particular, as digital activism platforms, can best be considered alongside the concept of publics which, according to the author’s standpoint, are *affective*, namely publics that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds. This approach has a potential to enlighten the way in which we study how social media reshape protests and mobilisations, and provide more informed grounds to discuss the concept of alternative social media, such as Occupy, N-1, Diaspora, Occupy wiki, Occupy collaborative, to name but a few, as public service and commons-based internet platforms that benefit not just an elite, but can advance the public good and the common interests of all (Fuchs, 2014).

Last but not least, this book opens up interesting directions of future research. Clearly, more work is needed to better understand the affective attunement concept, the role and behavioural patterns of ordinary users as networked gate-keepers, as well as the effects of social media usage patterns on social patterns. It would be quite interesting to cross-reference the author’s approach to affective publics with perspectives of other researchers such as, for instance, Diakopoulos and Zubiaga (2014), who argue that social deviance is generally correlated to more re-tweeting.

Significance for managers and instructors

Drawing from the literature, we can consider social media as an ensemble of

- information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content that has individual value but reflects shared values

- digital content that takes the form of personal messages, news, ideas, and eventually that of cultural products
- people, organisations and industries that produce and consume both these tools and this content (Philip and Muzammi, 2011).

From an optimistic standpoint, social media help to turn individualised, localised, and community-specific dissent into structured movements with a collective consciousness about both shared grievances and opportunities for action (Philip and Parks, 2012).

Still, the assessment of the role of social media in political mobilisation is in need of much cautiousness in order to avoid traps of technological determinism or cyber-utopianism. As authors like Jones (2011) claim, social media are often a useful complement to the kinds of activism that take place in the offline world. Consequently, social media cannot be studied in isolation, but only alongside parallel offline activism, as regards their political mobilisation potential.

From an academic and research standpoint, therefore, the book offers an excellent starting point for those interested in innovative interdisciplinary perspectives (drawing on areas such as political sociology, political communication, mass psychology, psychological frames of protest) to approach digital activism. Through a well-thought spectrum of case studies, from Arab Spring movements and Occupy variations to everyday exchanges, the author defines and explores for the first time Twitter activity as storytelling practices that facilitate affective connection of ideologically disparate viewpoints.

From an instructor perspective, the book comes of hand for political communication and social movement courses, as well as for courses on participatory digital communication and governance subjects, at both an undergraduate and a postgraduate level, combining theoretical and empirical analysis of social media platforms and usage as digital activism and protest instruments.

At the same time, the book offers to a broader constituency (journalists, communication managers, policy analysts and consultants, as well as general readers interested in social media and politics) a helpful lens towards a comprehensive understanding of social media as mechanisms for political communication and social resistance.

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