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Analysing the Intersections between Technology, Performativity, and Politics: the Case of Local Citizen Dialogue

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Introduction

Say “public sphere,” and the history of the ancient Greek poleis or Tocqueville’s vibrant description of early American democracy does not seem far away. In fact, such societies have indeed constituted much of the theoretical heritage of cultures in which information, ideas, and debates are freely spread in a tolerant way. Likewise, in the social and political fabric of Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the emergence of a public sphere was something of a new departure – one that gave a voice to members of the public who had not been included in issues of governance before. Recently, the Internet has been said to have had a similar effect. Terms such as “virtual sphere” (Papacharissi, *Virtual Sphere* 20) or, more famously, “network society” (Castells 500), reflect the idea that the Internet can revitalise the public sphere; an idea that has not gone unquestioned, especially as others suggest that the Internet constructs a new kind of publicness that makes the concept of public space nostalgic (Newman; Breen). Since the new publicness eludes much of what could be called the bourgeois regulatory system of Enlightenment rationality, the old categories of public are somehow outdated (Breen 52). Hence, the aim of this paper is to discuss the challenges to the theories of the public sphere posed by a digital society. It is suggested that this is best achieved by analysing the intersections of technologies, performativities, and politics, combining close empirical detail with abstract understandings of socio-political and cultural contexts – perspectives that make it possible to understand not only how public spheres are constructed and shaped in digital societies, but also how they are encountered based on citizens’ performances.

The pre-Internet development of a public sphere has been described by Habermas, and in coining the “public sphere” concept he includes several important elements. One is that the public sphere was formed through discussion, often mediated. Second, that it offered a new space for debate for many who had previously been excluded. Last, ideas presented in the public sphere were considered on merit, and not on the social standing of the speaker. Since Habermas’s work, there have been various reformulations and additions to the idea of the public sphere (for example, Dahlgren, *Public Sphere; Internet*). One example, which speaks to the impact of online politics on public sphere theory, is the notion that there are multiple publics rather than one overarching public sphere (Asen and Brouwer). The possibility of multiple public spheres is relevant here, given the large number of people who use the Internet. In a multiple sphere framework, people can be divided along identity-based or interest-based lines. These are, in Dahlgren’s terminology, “issue publics” – public spheres formed around issues of interest, much as Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere was an issue public formed around issues of interest to the European bourgeoisie at the time, meaning primarily trade and politics.

The political dimensions to activity and engagement in public spheres have long been examined

in the social sciences (Almond and Verba; Putnam, *Making Democracy Work; Bowling Alone*). Common to such approaches is the assumption that civic culture and engagement will spill over to vitalise and strengthen democratic processes. When it comes to the research of information communication technologies (ICTs) in such spheres, it is said to be largely under-theorised (Macintosh, Coleman, and Schneeberger), leaving crucial questions mostly unanswered. In this paper, we elaborate on these questions raised above using the findings of a study on online citizen dialogue in a Swedish municipality.

The paper has the following disposition. The theoretical background is presented, preparatory to an investigation of the online public sphere using a framework that consists of three analytically distinct dimensions: (i) technology, (ii) performativities, and (iii) politics. To provide a more detailed picture, an explorative examination of the theoretical framework is provided. The implications of this proposed framework and the manner in which it might contribute to the understanding of digital public and political spheres are then discussed.

Theoretical background and the literature

Much contemporary research has begun to question the notion that technological advances will create a democratic utopia. Several arguments are used to scrutinise the nature of online public spheres. First, the issue of inequality of access to both technology and information is often addressed (Selwyn). This phenomenon, known as the digital divide, includes several dimensions. As argued by Rose, one of these is the difference in access to ICTs between societies and within them. Another duality in this concept is discussed by Min, who argues that there is a considerable disparity between having physical access to the Internet and having the ability to use it, or the interest in using it for political purposes. That inequalities exist, regardless of the type of distinction, is confirmed by many researchers, and the impact this will have on democracy has been stated by Nam: "the degree of the digital divide predetermines the extent to which ICTs enhance participatory democracy via the Internet" (131). The risk is a widening democratic divide (see Norris 235-240), with participation in an online public sphere proving to be at least as skewed as in traditional political participation. This leads on to another core issue: the circumstances that enhance involvement in an online public sphere. The literature on this is now extensive, but it is still rather unfocused when it comes to defining forms of participation; as yet, it is orientated towards political involvement. Best and Krueger in particular stress Internet skills as the single most important determinant of online political participation. Nam, however, when examining political activity on social networking sites, finds other patterns of inequality that are positively related to civic and political interest and negatively related to age. Thus, one should clearly expect that involvement in online dialogues will be expressed with a type of bias. Finally, there is also the quality of the deliberation in an online public sphere. Dahlberg addresses the question of how fragmentation and polarisation in online spheres should be understood, and how they can risk becoming homogeneous. Papacharissi (*Democracy Online*) discusses civility and politeness among online debaters and how a deficiency of such manners can make discussions impossible. Focusing on one of the core conditions for deliberative democracy, Hindman instead deals with the matter of whether anyone really listens to anyone else online, pointing out the difference between speaking and being heard. Obviously, the Internet allows us to convey our opinion through forums, social media, or blogs, but that is not to say that our opinion will be heeded by anyone.

Similar discussions, though more closely related to the making of technologies, are found in critical technology studies focusing on the social, organisational, and political nature of technology development (for a survey, see Feenberg). In this perspective, the questioning of economic-technical rationalism, technology-driven development models, and positivistic superiority in terms of valuable knowledge fundamentally affecting the making of technologies is central. The Internet is, as such, understood as a material without defined, tangible qualities and something that could be adhered to in almost all possible future scenarios, whether political participation increases or dissolves. Underlying such assumptions is the notion that the

interpretative flexibility implicit in technology is closed and stabilised by the action of various social processes (Pinch and Bijker). What is meant by closure is that social concepts become increasingly alike, and stabilisation is taken to mean that, eventually, even the field in question becomes stable. Thus, in due course, a given technological artefact in a given social context will undergo a “stabilisation process” (Pincher and Bijker 424 ff.), with the result that interpretative flexibility is accordingly reduced. An important point in this perspective is that different social groups can ascribe a variety of meanings to the technology, and the stabilisation processes can find different expressions in different social contexts. Where one finds different notions of ICT-based local citizen dialogues – albeit shared ones – and descriptions of their applicability, one must then seek social explanations for why the technology is understood and stabilised in different ways. The study of technological development as a social process in this instance requires us to study how the development of a technological design process shifts from interpretative flexibility to closure –the process by which social concepts of a certain technology become all the more homogeneous (for example, Pinch and Bijker).

Moreover, we would argue that there is a need for further research that both questions the meaning of political participation and empirically examines performances of individuals’ involvement in politics in digital societies. One way to explore online performances is to look at performativity (Butler *Performative Acts; Gender Trouble*), and related concepts (Mahmod). While Judith Butler is a noted gender theorist, it is less often remarked that her theorizing is undertaken in the name of radical democracy. This concern continues in her approach to democratic politics and in her assessment of the possibilities for radical democratic transformation. While it is ultimately intended as a means of prising open the general issues in political theory (see, for example, MacKenzie), Butler’s work, it must be remembered, insists that our understanding of gender is wholly implicated in the political. For Butler, the distinction between the personal and the political, or between private and public, is itself a fiction designed to support an oppressive status quo: our most personal acts are, in fact, continually being scripted by hegemonic conventions and ideologies. In order to examine performances of individuals’ involvement in politics in digital societies, we will here analyse performativities as they occur in local citizen dialogue. Our analysis of performativities is inspired by Butler (*Performative Acts; Gender Trouble*) since the term performativities highlights the fact that social reality is continually created “through language, gesture and all manner of symbolic signs” (*Performative Acts* 270).

What then of the relationship between the three different theoretical concepts outlined above, given that the understanding is that a cumulative value is reached when so combined? Political notions question the foundations of unproblematic citizen participation, referring to both direct and indirect forms of inequality, while performativity casts additional doubt on how participation arises in public discourse and how it is expressed, in particular when it comes to the ability to isolate personal-political or private-public issues. Such ideas, however, are dependent on the role of technology being suitably problematised (the simplistic standpoint of it as being value-free, homogenous, and objective has no place here). Applied together to the analysis of online citizens dialogues, these perspectives will be used to analyse how technology creates boundaries, and how, in combination with notions of inequality and an ambition to look beyond constructed dichotomies, those boundaries affect citizens’ ability to perform in the online public sphere. The issue at stake is how individuals become involved, how they enact and perform their citizenship in practice, and how that relates to the technological and political context of participation. It speaks to an understanding of the public sphere within digital societies, focusing on online publics as something more than just a neutral place where citizens can represent themselves and make themselves heard. After all, conceptions of what citizens are and how they are supposed to behave are deeply implicated in how these spheres are organized and put into practice.

The literature does not present many examples of a similar triangulation of theoretical perspectives. In a recent paper, Dunne examines local online forums as a feature of the virtual

public sphere that can potentially reverse political disengagement, in this case in the UK. The conclusions are quite discouraging: forums built in conjunction with local government have no such effect. In more theoretically founded research, Goldberg and Breen discuss the commercialisation of the Internet, focusing on how participation online always has an economic dimension driven by Internet-based companies. Since the individual is positioned alone in front of the monitor, the online “public” sphere makes the concept of publicness problematic, because the individual is no longer constrained by the social forces that ensure civility (Breen).

Method and data

These three theoretical perspectives will together inform an analysis of an example of citizen dialogue in the city of Sundsvall in central Sweden. Sundsvall is by Swedish standards quite a large city with almost 100,000 inhabitants. Since 2010 it has been governed by a Centre-Right coalition. The planning of the city’s state schools has in recent years been high on the agenda, both in the local media and in the political discourse, largely due to fluctuating birth rates and competition from private schools. In the studied example, the municipality presented a long-term plan for the state schools in one particular city district. The proposal, worked out by school employees, public officials, and a consulting firm, included dramatic changes including the closure and even demolition of some schools and a considerable expansion of others. After the plan was presented in the spring of 2012, the public was invited to comment, and the municipality offered two ways to do so. First, a public meeting was held, which in the end about 150 people attended, with the opportunity to comment in group discussions on the proposal. Second, the municipality’s online dialogue function was opened for comment for a period of a fortnight. These comments were guaranteed to be part of material used by local politicians and civil servants when considering the proposal. It is these online discussions that are analysed in the present study as an example of a dialogue carried out in a local public sphere.

The chosen theories necessarily influence the method of the analysis, with a textual analysis of the online comments conducted in the light of all three theoretical perspectives, in terms of the “thematic dimensions” derived from each: *technology*, *performativity*, and *politics*. The online comments, duly transcribed, were read and reread to identify statements that reflected public assumptions, knowledge, and expressions of civic, public, and political life.

Of course, since this study is based on a single, local case-study, one cannot generalise too much from the results. The empirical findings from this particular case serve more as an example – at this juncture, how to analyse online public spheres in terms of how individuals enact and perform their citizenship in web-based practices, and how that relates to the technological and political context of their participation. Yet, by understanding something about this particular case, however limited in scope, the general phenomena come within reach, pointing to fruitful avenues for future research on the same theme.

Analysing a virtual public sphere

In this section, we continue by analysing the online dialogue from the perspectives of technology, performativity, and politics. All in all, the online dialogue resulted in 22 posts in the forum that stem from 14 different users.

Technology

Analysing a local citizen dialogue as a technology means studying how the development of a technological design process shifts from interpretative flexibility to closure –the process by which social concepts of a certain artefact become all the more homogeneous (see Pinch and Bijker). In this particular case, it might seem that the way the local citizen dialogue is used leads to a closure of a kind.

Firstly, the electronic form of public comment is not open to a great variety of uses. It is a fairly simple message board on the municipality's website where people can post messages or comments on some issues selected by the local municipality itself. There are different forums for different issues, open for a specified period, and then archived. The postings in each forum are organised by subject in a hierarchical or tree-like structure; each new discussion forms a topic thread, and there is no limit to the number of people who can respond, or the number of threads they can join. Translated into the symbolic logic of the technological construction and performed practices of a local citizen dialogue, it serves as an "issue public" that divides the dialogue into a number of interest-based spheres (see Dahlgren, *Public Sphere*).

Secondly, one of the key facets of a public political sphere is of course free and open debate between citizens. However, this official, web-based format does not seem to be a common way for people to take part. For example, the public meeting held at one of the affected schools was attended by about 150 people; the relevant online message board garnered 22 posts by 14 different individuals, in four different threads. Another indication of a greater interest in physical meetings is the fact that there are also references in the threads to other local meetings that have taken place; similarly, it might be the case that there are other unofficial online forums where the subject is being discussed.

Thirdly, there is very little actual debate, as the participants tend to agree with one another; rather, there is confirmation of their opposition to the suggested changes. Based on the analysis of the postings, it would seem that the local citizen dialogue is constituted as a site of resistance where citizens comment on and challenge the local municipality's proposal. The technological design of the message board may have had a hand in this outcome, making more for general concurrence than a polemic discussion among citizens.

Finally, another dimension that can affect the dialogue is the possibility for participants to remain anonymous. The message board is public, which means that you do not need to log in to be able to read the content. Citizens have the opportunity to be anonymous in the public space, but before entering the forum, they have to register as community members, and have to log in to be able to post a message. One might assume that these procedures would affect the presentation of opinions. However, the message board's design means that they cancel each other out, as it both allows freer expression under the cover of anonymity from other members, and creates constraints through the process of registration. Nevertheless, the debate shows no sign of being either extreme or uncivil.

Performativity

In terms of technology, to perform citizenship in web-based citizen dialogues is not (yet) a normalised way of participating in local politics. The technological design of the forum means it is limited to being an "issue public" where citizens can express their opinions, but where there is not much of a dialogue. Participants hardly ever refer to other postings. When moving from technology to performativity, then, the focus shifts towards how those forms of involvement, subject-citizen positions, and interests are articulated.

The postings in the local citizen dialogue are here considered to be performative acts of speaking, and particular focus is on the scripts used when politics and/or a subject-citizen position are encountered. Scripts are understood as compositions of reified and naturalised knowledge. The local citizen dialogue is part of a culturally restricted and corporeal space, the scripts are very much designed before entering the scene, and, as Butler, says, "the script survives the particular actors who make use of it; but which requires individual actors in order for it to be actualized and reproduced once again" (*Gender Trouble* 272).

Looking at the case in terms of problem definition and space for negotiation, the forms of

involvement are restricted from the start, offering a pre-developed solution to some predefined problems. This, of course, shapes the ways in which scripts are used, since it both structures and restricts the possible outcomes of any involvement, and influences what citizens can and cannot do. The message board's participants were probably expected to represent their interests, but not necessarily to protect them at all costs. They were expected to deliberate together about how the different interests could be balanced and how to achieve a compromise. The different position of citizen involvement shows that the initiative to organize a local citizen dialogue, in terms of creating dialogue, was not realized. All citizen performances act as interest representatives; they have a clear idea about what their interests are and how to present them. For example, the scripts show how different political discourses come into play, and how the positions of the speakers shift between different interests: "taxpayer" and "municipality / citizen consumer" versus "child protector" and "local resident" are all positions that often appear, even in the same thread, although in different postings.

The excerpts from the scripts below exemplify the three demonstrable interests among the forum participants, and the ways they chose to perform citizenship: (i) cultural values, (ii) pupil and child protection, and (iii) financial reasons.

Script I – cultural values

The cultural values that are invoked are most often of local neighbourhood significance, and, generally speaking, the arguments visible in the postings are seldom related to a larger community perspective. Most of the postings concern the closing of an old village school near a historic monument. When cultural values are raised as an issue, the school's historical background and its physical surroundings are often mentioned, as well as the benefit it brings to the village, as illustrated in the quotations below:

The local school has a great cultural value for the neighbourhood residents and it is the oldest school in the whole county.

The school is very important to our district; if it is closed down, I fear that we will get a lot of very bad effects from it. . . . I also see a risk that our house will be difficult to sell and our village will slowly die out.

It is apparent that it is not only the life of the village that is important; so is the possible impact of the school closure on local house prices.

Script II – pupil and child protection

In the second script, concerns for the children are raised. In the postings, the small village school represents an idyllic place where all children feel safe, looked after, and valued. Not only are their social needs fulfilled, but also their educational goals:

In a changing world, it is very important for children to feel safe at school and in their educational setting. This school provides that, so let our children keep their feelings of safety and a good learning environment.

Every time I go past the school, I think it must be a cosy house and a nice school to spend those first years at school in.

I think it feels insecure to have schools with such a large numbers of pupils as the proposal suggests.

Evidently, in relation to the image of the small village school, the proposed new school is portrayed as a large, unsafe place with too many pupils where the children will no longer feel

safe. Part of the safety aspect at the small village school is connected with its location close to the children's homes:

If you move the children away from their local schools to somewhere where they need to go by school buses you're also playing right into the hands of the private schools . . . The closeness to home is of course the local school's biggest competitive advantage.

Many will switch to private schools just because this new school would take away the advantages of having a school nearby, within walking distance and the opportunity to attend the same class as friends who live down the street.

It becomes clear that the position as a child protector often segues into a citizen consumer position, where the community state schools' competitive advantages will decline and the possibility (for which read risk) of families choosing private alternatives is noted.

Script III – financial reasons

Another important argument is the feeling of being a taxpayer without any ability to decide how "their" money is spent:

After all, it's our tax money that's at stake at the end of the day, and they could spend the money on children in other ways instead.

The school is certainly old and outdated but it must be a better deal to renovate than to invest in the new project. . . . New construction eats up the savings for a long time to come; it's not impossible that it'll take over 50 years before it's paid off. It is taxpayers' money and it's our children who are the losers.

To invoke the position of being a taxpayer shows that the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. According to Butler, by endlessly citing the conventions and ideologies of the social world around us, we enact that reality. In the performative act of speaking, we "incorporate" that reality by enacting it with our speech acts. Seen in this perspective, the situated "scripts" of the postings analysed here can tell us a great deal about how, and from which position, the political is encountered in this particular case.

Expressing one's views and representing one's interests in an effective and meaningful way is completely in line with the dominant understandings of democracy, free speech, and citizenship. Involvement then requires not only knowledge of these frameworks, but also language and writing skills, a certain interest in the issue, inventiveness, and courage, and the forum runs the risk of excluding those citizens who lack those capacities, by ensuring that they are unable to become involved and be heard. According to the Habermasian ideals of communicative rationality and the superiority of "the best argument," we know that some types of elitist discourse often dominate participatory processes, effectively silencing those who are uncertain about their capacity to join these discussions. In the present case, with boundaries that were already set, the representation of some interests was enabled while others were potentially silenced. An authentic deliberative process seems a distant prospect under such circumstances.

Politics

Turning to the political dimension, we will restrict ourselves to the themes already elaborated upon – who participates, how they participate, and what their potential input into the political system might be. First of all, there is the question of the level of participation in this dialogue. With a total of 22 posts, it cannot be regarded as especially intense, in particular bearing in mind that hundreds of pupils and their families are affected by the municipality's proposal in one way

or another. This lack of interest corroborates earlier empirical studies of local authority ambitions for online discussions (for example, Dunne), and also emphasizes the constraints that through political, cultural, and technological mechanisms, exclude the citizens concerned. Regarding the digital divide, the pertinent question to ask would be who participates in these dialogues; however, with a few exceptions, the anonymity that the Internet provides makes this hard. In some posts, the authors announce themselves to be either parents of children of school age or local residents. The opinions presented are consequently dominated by a grassroots perspective.

The quality of the online discussions is a closely related issue, since it has a bearing on how online activities can influence the political system. Although, given certain similarities in the message board participants' backgrounds, several sub-subjects are also discussed, counteracting the homogeneity of a uniform debate, and leaving room to address different types of comments on the proposal. As Papacharissi (*Democracy Online* 260) argues, political discussions characterised by civility and politeness are crucial for a political discourse. In this case, such a requirement is hard to exaggerate, since the process by which public bodies solicit public input could hardly tolerate impolite comments of any type. However, no such tendencies are evident in the data analysed here. Instead, the tone is polite and civil. One reason for this could be to do with the fact that the discussion was essentially free of polemic – in other words, almost all the participants are united against the municipality's proposal. In a telling contribution to one of the threads, the perceived drawbacks of the proposal are clearly summarised in a way that brings into focus the essence of the issue that seems to be shared by many participating in the debate:

almost every kid in this school district will be forced to change room for school or nursery school, or find their school greatly expanded with children from other schools. In what way does this promote teaching?

While the different participants agree in terms of their general criticism of the proposal, the posts themselves show some evidence of a variety of vested interests that lead participants to act for their own neighbourhood. At the same time, this means that the dialogue mostly lacks contributions that discuss the suggestion in an impartial way, based on what is best for the whole municipality. There is only one exception to this, where a post argues that greater public concern is necessary:

All opponents, stop thinking of yourselves, and do not be afraid of change.

Of course, a crucial stage in analysing online dialogues of this kind is how these viewpoints might influence the decision-making process. The material gives no such clues by itself, but with the help of the theoretical framework the question can be addressed. Among other conditions, a polity that encourages developed citizens' participation in political matters needs to create both a capacity and established channels for inserting citizens' standpoints into the local political system. Previous research (for example, Lidén) implies that even if an awareness of these prerequisites exists among politicians, there is often great reluctance to spend taxpayers' money on such matters. Dialogues that are maintained by government still have the advantage of being more closely related to a greater variety of such established channels, since they can be an institutionalised part of the political system. On the other hand, these tend to be less popular among citizens. Uncontrolled forms of dialogue on the Internet present the opposite dilemma, namely that they often have no formal connection to the political system in question. Here, Hindman's words about a lack of actual influence (indicated earlier) are of particular relevance (16).

Concluding remarks

In this article, we have applied three theoretical perspectives to an online citizen dialogue, and out of these perspectives, we have exemplified several of the challenges that theories of the public

sphere face in a digital society. The analysis emphasises different aspects of this empirical material, but also reflects some that are highly comparable, and which can initiate theoretical development. Deriving from the idea of a multiple sphere framework, the citizen dialogue examined here is in many ways restricted, demonstrating constraints of several types. The format, meaning the technological artefact, imposes its own limitations on the online dialogue, both directly, through a disregard for the requirements of digital skills, and indirectly, by shortcomings in attracting citizens who otherwise do not use the technology for political purposes, all of which causes a certain bias when it comes to participation. This is also apparent when turning to the characteristics of the content of the dialogues. The prevalence of individualisation in the posts, without any notion of what might best for the common good, is not in line with the often pragmatic solutions that local governments often can symbolise. Clearly, this affects the status of the communication, which lacks traditional dialogues and ends up resembling a newspaper's letters page. Although many standpoints are shared by the participating citizens, the implication is that deliberative processes are unachievable because of the lack of polemic.

The expression of political opinions in web-based formal publics serves naturally to expand freedom of expression, but an analysis of how this space is technologically designed and politically shaped, and how citizenship is performed, illuminates the underlying assumptions about what local democracy is and should be. Even in the small example used here, many problematic issues arise. The local citizen dialogue is very much built within a multiple sphere framework, where one predefined issue is made available for comment in the form of a public message board, which in turn is not at all related to any overarching or more general questions. Moreover, as the literature shows, people are often divided along identity-based or interest-based lines in this kind of issue public. The same is true of the content of the local citizen dialogue. As has been shown here, the discussions witness to the special interests that characterise this debate. This verifies Breen's argument of a dominating "privatism" (10), where the question of what is best for the public is disregarded in favour of the citizens' own interests.

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