

'Like', 'Dislike', or 'Ignore'? Examining Popular and Scholarly Discourses on the Political and Social Meaning of the Internet

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Abstract. What do discourses about the democratic and political meaning of the Internet emanating from social science literature and renowned public intellectuals contribute to our understanding of democratic theory that addresses the ostensibly trans-historical changes wrought by processes associated with globalization? This paper examines these discourses with the goal of systematizing and categorizing their claims in terms of liberal and republican democratic traditions and conceptual categories, especially those set out by recent cosmopolitanism. It considers in particular those that refer to the Internet's implications for the public sphere, the security of states and individuals, and the improvement and consolidation of the liberal political logic. While volumes have been written about the Internet and democracy, the scholarly, empirical and theoretical literature is highly disjointed and severely lacking in consensus. The paper argues that the presence and importance of the discourses are at work in cases NSA-spying scandal and the so-called Facebook revolutions that play out on social media. Demonstrating how the discourses both shape and take advantage of ongoing historical events reveals deep disagreement on both the premises and consequences of digitally-mediated politics on democracy and societal well-being. The possibility that a fundamental agreement on the mechanistic effects of Internet practices is explored. The exercise suggests putting these findings into dialogue with democratic theory to gain a better or more direct understanding of the Internet's meaning to democratic possibility in a digital age because the discourses ultimately rely upon democratic, liberal and republican conceptual foundations. A tentative framework is synthesized from the especially speculative statements found in democratic theory on the meaning of technology and in Internet discourse on the meaning of democracy. It concludes that it is possible make sense of the discourses by focusing on digital practices and treating them as democratic and everyday practices.

KEYWORDS: Internet; Democracy; Discourse; Political Theory; Social Media

‘Like’, ‘Dislike’, or ‘Ignore’? Examining Popular and Scholarly Discourses on the Political and Social Meaning of the Internet

“In our society, the public space of the social movements is constructed as a hybrid space between the Internet social networks and the occupied urban space: connecting cyberspace and urban space in relentless interaction, constituting, technologically and culturally, instant communities of transformative practice” (Castells, 2012: 11).

“The Internet embodies the culture of freedom” (Castells, 2012: 231).

Those invested in the well-being of democracy are increasingly aware of its interfacing with digital communications technology. It is clear that our lives are increasingly performed online, mediated through digital communications technologies.¹ The fields of political science and political theory can benefit from a more systematic understanding of the ways in which the decentralized horizontal design of the Internet and the conversational style of social media have wide-reaching effects through digitally mediated experiences and practices. The recent “4chan” celebrity hacking and phishing scandal² showcased the fragility of autonomy and security people experience when living out their lives online. It also highlighted the contested nature of what constitutes public and private content once it is rendered digital. The far from settled discussions about net neutrality in the United States and the European Union show how corporation and other organizations attempt to control the flow of information in their favor. Their moves are resisted through petitions to the state and digital piracy. These events seem to suggest that there is something inherently subversive about the Internet, especially in the ways it supports collective action. But is this really true? The discourse at the intersection of the Internet and democracy has severe limitations, and is fraught by the problem of “dueling anecdotes” (Shirky, 2011). I argue that this is due to its understanding (or lack thereof) of the democratic theory concepts upon which it relies. The discourse employs a public sphere-based understanding of how the Internet exerts political effects. While it is said to improve liberal political forms of participation and governance, the virtual public sphere also has effects on political action, from protest to revolution, in that, digital mediation mutes qualities of spontaneity. And this is to the benefit of actors seeking change.

The Internet has many faces. First, it has been hailed as a revolutionary technology that supports social movements concerned with civil rights and dignity, such as that exemplified by #BlackLivesMatter in 2014, political protests like Occupy, and the ‘hacktivism’ of Wikileaks and Anonymous to expose corruption and abuses of power. Second, the Internet is promised to support democracy. Specifically, it is

¹ According to the Pew Research Internet Project, 87% of Americans report using the Internet on a regular basis, compared to just 14% in 1995. The 60% threshold of adoption was passed in the summer of 2002. In January of 2014, 74% of those who said they are regularly online also report using a social networking site. The 60% threshold was surpassed in the early 2010. (<http://www.pewinternet.org>).

² While the victims are celebrities—often seen as legitimate targets due to the intense publicity of their lives—the uproar was more about privacy, security, and appropriate hacker practices (hack, don’t trick) than it has been about the scandalous nature of the images themselves.

seen as an extension of the all-important public sphere in virtual space with the power to revitalize stagnant political cultures in post-capitalist societies. Third, many hope that the Internet can support new modes of participatory governance, where deliberation (ideas), discussion (choice) and crowdsourcing (of information) are employed to produce greater justice in politics and policy. Fourth, Internet-based tools are thought to get us nearer to the goal of the political-economic dream, making cooperation so efficient by reducing transactions costs to nearly zero, thus fulfilling the libertarian promise of ‘free culture’, where everything that is worth doing can be done. Lastly, the Internet is perceived as an anti-public sphere full of vitriol, pornography and consumerism that serve to reinforce existing power structures.

This paper explores how what people do online and what people say people do online affects our understanding of democratic concepts vital to recent work dealing with questions of democracy and justice in a post-Westphalian and post-globalization world.³ In particular, it explores how the Internet is said to impact the public sphere, the security and potential for justice within states and other political communities, and the improvement, consolidation, and expansion of liberal political logic. The task is to explore the ways in which the concepts of the public sphere, participation and governance, and collective action and solidarity are treated within the discourse, looking especially for assumptions held in common. Doing so helps to reveal the differences between public sphere- and practice-based subjectivities.

The paper is organized into five sections. The first section asks the literature what the Internet’s relationship is to politics. It aims toward generating a notion of what the Internet is in terms that are useful for democratic theory. To do so, a set of four themes from the discourse are introduced. A second section briefly outlines democratic theory’s perspective on concepts important to the discourse, namely, the public sphere, participation, governance, solidarity and collective action. After briefly touching on the usefulness of the cosmopolitan-globalization literature, a third section presents evidence from the Internet-democracy discourse, organizing them along the dimensions outlined in the first section, with a goal toward putting it into dialogue with democratic theory. A tentative framework is synthesized from the especially speculative statements found in democratic theory on the meaning of technology and in the Internet discourse on the meaning of democracy. A fourth section synthesizes the literature and posits that there is fundamental agreement on the causal/mechanistic effects of the Internet (via individuals and groups). The paper concludes by arguing for a practice-based understanding of the Internet. Such a perspective enables a larger project to distinguish notions of practice-based and public sphere-based conceptions of subjectivity. It is possible to make sense of the discourses by focusing on digital practices and treating them as democratic and everyday practices. The location of politics has moved into the

³ See, for example, the work of Young (2000, 2011), Bohman (2008; 2010; 2004), Dryzek (1999, 2006), Follesdale & Hix (2006), Fraser (2009; 2013), Steffek & Janz (2008), Kuper (2004), McGrew (2002), Anderson (2002), Leatherman & Webber (2005).

digital world,⁴⁵ and therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the same digital practices that we employ in our everyday situations are manifest in the way we engage in politics.

What is the Internet's relationship to politics?

Volumes have been written about the political and social implications of the Internet. However, the literature—spanning almost every discipline and subfield—is highly disjointed and lacks consensus. Although multiple dozens of empirically-informed scholarly articles on the topic appear each month,⁶ some of the most highly cited works in the discourse are without rigorous evidence needed to generate causal claims able to cumulate. This generates a long-standing debate on whether the Internet is ‘good or bad for x,’ a situation that makes it quite difficult to assess claims. Across the subfields, there is no solid foundation from which to stand (represented by the examples below, too, incidentally). But a lack of agreement on the implications of the Internet also stems from a lack of ontological consensus on what the Internet is. We can begin to alleviate this problem by focusing in on the discourse at the intersection of the Internet and democracy (the Internet-democracy discourse). Here, the discourse ultimately depends upon democratic, liberal, and republican conceptual foundations. But we are left without a notion of what the Internet is in terms friendly to democratic theory. By taking criticisms of democracy for granted, the content of this discursive framework undermine its own normative, emancipatory goals. Such a project involves the unearthing of the content and implications of the Internet-democracy discourse and putting them into dialogue with democratic theory. Doing so increases our leverage in understanding the Internet's meaning to democratic possibility in a digital age.

The chapter/paper demonstrates how discourses both shape and take advantage of ongoing historical events reveals deep disagreement on both the premises and consequences of digitally-mediated politics on democracy and societal well-being.⁷ It becomes clear that the discourse relies on a few particular, high order—even rare—digital practices (and not others) to found its claims. It is missing an understanding of the political consequences of the most basic behaviors: digital everyday practices.

There are a few common ways in which the relationship between the Internet and democracy is conceived. The following four tropes are not exhaustive, nor should they be taken as representative of the

⁴ Kahn and Kellner, in a highly-cited piece (2007) argue that “one of the novelties of the contemporary era is that much significant political struggle is mediated by technopolitics”. See also Kellner, 1997; Best & Kellner, 2001; Kahn & Kellner, 2005). It is hard to argue against this position. As current protest movements around the world, including, incidentally, the Islamic State in Syria and Levant, demonstrate, it is the norm to employ Internet-enabled tools in political mobilization and information dissemination.

⁵ The literature often displays a tendency to claim that the politics follows a digital or Internet logic. And this leads people to find their own theoretical perspectives embodied by the Internet. For example, Castells (2012) claims that the new type of politics, the new form of social movements of 2011 and beyond, are ‘viral’, and follow the logic of his famous usage of the conception of the “network society”.

⁶ A quick search on Google Scholar retrieves over 5,000 results from 2015 publications alone.

⁷ Refraining from drawing conclusions from historical evidence prematurely helps to reveal the contested nature of the Internet and democracy, on their own, and the relationship between the Internet and democracy.

literature on the Internet as a whole. But they are highly-cited examples, are often referred to in passing in popular discourse, even in the 2015 State of the Union Address.⁸ Raising these particular examples foregrounds an engagement with the evidence presented in future work. They help to reveal that, although the claims themselves are often at odds with each other, the practices that are responsible for these disparate outcomes are not altogether different. This means that the different interpretations of the democratic concepts are of utmost importance. The literature ranges from that claiming the Internet is mostly good for democracy and beneficial to society, almost unconditionally, to that viewing it as a domination-producing technology.

Example 1: Facebooking to Freedom: The Internet Revolution

“For us [in the pre-millennial generations], no matter how deeply we immerse ourselves in new technology, it will always have a certain provisional quality...The mistakes the novices make come from a lack of experience. They overestimate mere fads, seeing revolution everywhere, and they make this kind of mistake a thousand times before they learn better. But in times of revolution, the experienced among us make the opposite mistake. When a real once-in-a-lifetime change comes along, we are at risk of regarding it as a fad” (Shirky, 2008: 303).

The quote from Clay Shirky’s *Here Comes Everybody* is typical rhetoric about the Internet being revolutionary and freedom-producing. The entirety of Shirky’s narrative rests upon the argument that the Internet represents a rupture from the other contemporary technologies supporting forms of communication and cooperation. This is a revolution, and we cannot risk not taking advantage of it. But this was also the second time we heard about an Internet revolution. And the Occupy movements have provided a third round of such pronouncements.

Shortly after the early libertarian/hacker/fanfare about the revolutionary qualities of the Internet subsided, the advent of so-called Web 2.0—marked by the emergence of Xanga, MySpace and Facebook—initiated a new round of rhetoric about the ways in which the Internet would revolutionize politics and society.⁹ Social media signify the emergence of sharing and cooperation supported by the Internet.

One of the prominent themes in the early days of the Internet was that it was a revolutionary technology set to overturn the last vestiges of undemocratic bureaucratic rule (Moore, 2003; Barlow, 1996). This aspect of the discourse is making a comeback with the linking of social networks to the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement. If not for Facebook, the revolutions could not have been possible, and

⁸ The speech highlighted the ways in which the Internet is educational and therefore uplifting to average Americans, innovative and supportive of economic development, and vulnerable to foreign nations and hackers. President Obama called for legislation to “protect the technologies that have unleashed untold opportunities for people around the globe” (www.whitehouse.gov).

⁹ This included much fanfare about how political campaigns could become participatory and, in turn, help to get policies that were closer to the desires of the majority (Trippi, 2005; Moulitsas 2008).

almost certainly they would not have cascaded across borders and societies in the ways they did (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012).

The Internet is said to have ushered in a “new economic democracy” (Tapscott and Williams, 2007) in the “age of engage” (Shiffman, 2008). The “participatory culture” is imbued in the technologies of Web 2.0 (Jenkins, 2008), contributing to the emergence of new forms of activity, like “produsage”, blurring the distinction between the roles of user and producer (Bruns, 2008). New media is interactive, globally networked, and increasingly participatory (Deuze, 2007). Benkler’s influential account posits that the Internet ushers in an era of commons-based peer production systems that are “radically decentralized, collaborative, and nonproprietary; based on sharing resources and outputs among widely distributed, loosely connected individuals who cooperate with each other without relying on either market signals or managerial commands” (2006: 60). The Internet brings with it revolutionary changes in the modes of production.

What is convenient is that this is a revolution without any of the things traditionally associated with a revolution like violence, economic depression, or international condemnation. “These changes will transform the world everywhere groups of people come together to accomplish something, which is to say everywhere” (Shirky, 2008: 24). Thus it is more a revolution terms of the ways in which organizations work. The “old limitations” have been “radically reduced” (Shirky, 2008: 12). Indeed, “We are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside of the framework of traditional institutions” (Shirky, 2008: 21). Instead of having to gather together and then share information and opinions, today, people share information and opinions, and gather together later (36). But it is also a revolution in the capacity for self-expression: “We are living in the middle of the largest increase in expressive capability in the history of the human race” (Shirky, 2008: 106).

Example 2: Democracy, the Public Sphere and participatory e-Governance: The Revitalization of the Public Sphere

“The value of freedom outweighs the problems, not based on a calculation of net values but because freedom is *the right thing to want* for society” (Shirky, 2008: 298, emphasis added).

When scholars began to seriously explore the relationship between the Internet and democracy in the early 2000s, they usually premised their arguments on the notion that democracy is in decline; it is not efficacious for solving what are perceived as fundamentally new problems and behaviors (specifically, lack of civic participation), and needs to be revitalized. Globalization, neoliberalism, recession and racism challenge democracy’s institutions. Problems understood as highly technical and transnational, such as global warming, reveal that the old liberal democracy is a poor mechanism of governance; legislative

bodies hardly produce policy due to partisan gridlock. How can they come together to solve important problems?

Enter the digital public sphere and the *netizen*. Armed with more information and more diverse and developed opinions, the netizen is better able to practice citizenship than his predecessor, the liberal, modern, mass citizen. The Internet can host a new and improved public sphere. More people can participate in productive discussions, and more opinions can be heard, due to the speed and freedom of communication flows, as well as, importantly, reducing the necessity for people to be geographically proximate. These arguments rely on a conception of the Internet as a tool for many-to-many communication, of both interest aggregation and public deliberation. The public sphere could be ‘fixed’ through a technologization of practices of liberal citizenship.

The literature on the Internet and public sphere was swept up into the fanfare surrounding political blogs like Daily Kos and email lists like MoveOn.org. In principle, large scale participation through e-governance was posited as a realistic possibility, and one that would increase the fairness and efficacy of public policy. Moreover, creating digitally-supported centers of governance was seen as the *responsibility* of a liberal democracy, as the costs were low and the benefits were eminently clear.

While this discourse takes a Habermasian conception of the liberal public sphere, it ignores his critique of the structures surrounding the public sphere. Habermas expresses a preference to get reduce the influence of capitalism in the public sphere, as well as the democratization of the power of media. But according to the discourse on the Internet and the public sphere, democracy could be revitalized without disturbing the march of neoliberalization. Freedom, more important than reform, after all is the right thing to want for society, as Shirky’s quote claims. Cynicism, fragmentation, unfair policies, all could be obviated by without challenging the neoliberal model.¹⁰

Neoliberalism’s victory over socialism and communism seemed to do give credence to the Schumpeterian and Schmittian critiques of democracy. Mass participation in decision-making was seen as not only unlikely, but unfeasible. However, with the advent of the Internet, as with radio and television before it, participatory, deliberative and direct democrats came out of the woodwork, arguing that the problems with democracy are not ontological, but epistemological. The Internet presented a technological solution. Everyone could have a voice, every opinion deliberated, and every issue decided by every citizen.

¹⁰ And here is another hint that the Internet shows us that the public sphere is not a deliberative space, but more another tool to aggregate interests.

Example 3: The Libertarian Dream of Free Culture: Cooperation under the Structure of Zero

This aspect of the discourse argues that the Internet can aid the realization of the libertarian dream of free culture, where cooperation is so cheap and easy that non-economically motivated goals are now on the agenda. Projects that express a collective desire to construct the world we want to live can be met without straining any particular individuals, and without the creation of an unwieldy government hierarchy. Because of its ease, people are able to do what they want: they can participate as much or as little as they want. The communicative and computing power of the Internet allows individuals to have their efforts multiplied in ways that compensate for others' lack of interest in society-building. Everything can be free and individuated. Importantly, this means that people do not need to be subjected to mass culture. This is an extreme expression of John Stuart Mill's experimental life, but without the social pressure toward conformity in society, let alone in political participation. Citizenship is effectively a voluntary activity, not a responsibility.

In particular, Shirky claims that the Internet reduces the barrier to the attainment of information which may increase efficiency in the provision of public and private goods and services. Combining economic and social organization theory, Shirky claims that the reduction in transaction costs has drastically altered the incentives for people to organize themselves. What is most amazing to him, are the "tools that provide simple ways of creating groups lead to new groups, lots of new groups, and not just more groups but more kinds of groups" (2008: 20), or "ridiculously easy group forming".

Anderson argues that the Internet increases the ability for the economic concept of the 'long-tail' to matter. The importance of the mainstream is reduced. Those with unpopular tastes can remain significant because the Internet reduces the transaction costs associated with reaching these potential consumers. Diversity is thus encouraged, as is the ability for people to organize themselves along different kinds of interests beyond the typical categories of socio-economic class or political party.

There is life on the Internet, and it is free, "pulsating, dynamic, radiating through countless modes" because of the technology's being modeled on the vision of the open commons (Bollier, 2009: 5). Its population, concerned with improving the environment, public health, human rights, and social development, is free from the influence of U.S. (Moore, 2003). "Governments of the Industrial World, ... You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather" (Barlow, 1996). The Internet is said to support non-market sharing practices that make possible "a world where all have access to cultural works, the right to share them and the technical means to produce new works" (Aigrain 2012: 15). Piracy practices are to be celebrated, not condemned.

Example 4: Raining on the Parade: Capital, the State and Nonsense

Finally, there is a discourse that emphasizes the capitalistic and surveillance aspects of the Internet. It has enjoyed increased prominence in light of recent events, such as the 2014 Sony hack. It argues that global capital, the media, and elite ideology have eroded the fabric of the liberal democratic compromise. The Internet is only here to contribute to antidemocratic tendencies. The Internet was created through official sanction of the global hegemon in an effort to extend its rule. As such its efficiency vastly increases the scale of surveillance. Moreover, it is infested with consumer capitalism. The neoliberal practice of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that control valuable infrastructure and demand compensation for the kinds of data it or their investors deem undesirable may spell and end to the equal access to the Internet and the equal treatment of data.

Some argue that what is most notable about social media is the massive provision and storage of personal information that is in turn used to sell us products (Fuchs, 2012). There also those who view social media as, understandably, yet another way to extract excess labor from unsuspecting groups. The commons of society (the content we post on Facebook and YouTube) are exploited by capital through advertising (Fuchs, 2011; Andrejevic, 2009). Web 2.0 optimism is quite uncritical, is an ideology that serves corporate interests (Fuchs, 2008b, Scholz, 2008). It almost goes without saying that there are contradictions everywhere in Web 2.0 practices (Cammaerts, 2008).

Cyberwarfare, the ways in which autocratic regimes used SNS to crackdown on protestors, and the revelations over U.S. government spying have renewed efforts to theorize the Internet as a place of surveillance. People share information about their lives that can be used in various ways, but the psychological impact of this self-disciplining practice is even more severe. We know what is appropriate and expected of us to put on Facebook and Twitter, and we force ourselves to do so. This leads to conformity but also to a kind of alienation from what we would prefer to do and what we portray ourselves as doing.¹¹ Eventually, the two are indistinguishable, and the Internet, especially social media, is mostly another disciplining apparatus. If it is the norm that politics are conducted online, even revolutionary movements run the risk of reinforcing the status quo by using social media to organize themselves. It is far from guaranteed that they will learn practices fit to subvert technical hegemony.¹²

While Internet evangelists like to claim that the Internet cannot be ‘shut down’—a stylized fact underpinning the progressive nature of their claims—these authors in the skeptical group are wont to warn that this is only a half-truth at best. What “Spygate” revealed was that even what appears as

¹¹ Jodi Dean’s book, to be discussed in later chapters, ties well into this conversation. Personal note.

¹² This perspective also argues that social networking sites have a role to play in practices that resist domination. The contradictions within the field of surveillance present this possibility. Citizens themselves, given the right tools and knowledge, are able to conduct their own surveillances of the surveillers, and generate attention and sympathy in public for injustices committed by the powerful upon the weak (Fuchs, Boersma, Albrechtlund, Sandoval, 2012).

autonomy is subject to state and corporate surveillance. The “Facebook revolutions” occurred in regimes where the Internet was seen as something mostly innocuous, a welcome distraction for restless society. In other words, the Internet was social, not political (Schwarz, 2012; Morozov, 2011). And so while the digital protest activities got a head start, and a boost from online organizing and international publicity, states reacted swiftly to both shut down access to the Internet, in some cases even cutting off cell phone towers, to curtail activist practices. Moreover, content from social networks was used to track down people who were pictured participating in the protests.

The Internet is portrayed as chaotic, unprofessional, and disorganized: a space of nonsense. As such, it is an impediment to the consolidation of democratic society. While it is ostensibly good that anyone can publish online, it also means that the probability of inaccurate information increases, leading to a situation where it is impossible for them to participate in decision-making processes with those with correct or relevant information. In his discussion of deliberative enclaves, Sunstein (2007) claims that while people learn a great deal by reading blogs, they have a difficult time distinguishing truth from exaggeration, creating an atmosphere of misunderstanding no conducive to (liberal) deliberation. Spending too much time in one space is likely to do more harm than good, dealing a major blow to the plurality thought necessary for the well-functioning of democratic society. Because people can hide behind anonymity and easily interact without changing out of pajamas, the Internet encourages unvirtuous and illiberal behaviors that ultimately contribute to the failure to internalize social norms. Therefore, the Internet does real damage to the functioning of the public sphere, especially in causing incoherent or illegitimate collective action and unpluralistic solidarity. Most users are wrapped up in a precarious underclass of creative types in need of new economic models that help them to get by on a day-to-day basis. Blogging is a “self-centered, nihilistic, cynical activity” (Lovink, 2008; 2012). Thus, most of the content enabled by the supposedly liberating communication technologies and publishing platforms is nonsense and not democracy producing.

If protest activity is so unpredictable, spontaneous and untraceable when organized online, then it stands to reason that surveillance¹³ can be too. The insidious aspect of the Internet is surveillance is now (even more) hidden, unseen and impossible to trace. It is through surveillance practices that some uses of the Internet become “official” in that formal decisions are made to establish surveillance systems which in turn control Internet populations.¹⁴

¹³ According to Mathieson, there are a few characteristics of surveillance that come to the forefront in the digital age. Surveillance-the-practice is transformed into a system or a set of systems that “silently silences” people. It is described as “suave, unnoticeable, and undetected” that in turn silences opposition.

¹⁴ But where there is domination, there is always the possibility for resistance: “The Internet is not only a surveillance tool that allows the state and corporation to watch citizens and to create political profiles, criminal profiles, and consumer profiles, but that it also poses the potential for citizens to conduct surveillance of the powerful and to try to exert counter-

Democratic Concepts and Digital Practices

In the above examples, numerous assumptions about democracy and democratic concepts are made, and the consequences of doing so are taken lightly. Clay Shirky in particular eschews such a discussion in order to focus on a normative agenda promoting what he thinks are the best features of the Internet age. A more systematic discussion might reveal several shortcomings of not employing an analytical framework. *Here Comes Everybody* relies heavily liberal democratic conceptions of the public sphere, the free market, and the Bill of Rights. This section goes on to specify the theory underpinning the most prominent concepts: the public sphere, participation and governance, and solidarity.

The Public Sphere

The public sphere is of integral importance to the Internet & democracy discourse. If the public sphere can be improved via the Internet, in various ways, then democracy can be improved. The discourse largely adopts the Habermasian bourgeois conception of the public sphere. It is my position that the critiques should be taken seriously as well.

The public sphere is an open space, held in common, where individuals and groups that populate a society discuss the kind of society they wish to live. It is a space where people come together as a public to rationally-critically debate rules governing relations in society. The public sphere is distinct from a private sphere and often a political sphere. It is a space that influences politics and policy through the vehicle of public opinion. Actors, public and private, *appear* in public, to articulate opinion and be held accountable. Individual opinions are aggregated, but also debated. In this way, the practices of public communication mesh with the practices of democratic politics.

Normatively, the public sphere's function speaks to the notion of the general will, in that the ideal constitution of a society can be gleaned from the processes and outcomes found within and emerging from the public sphere. This entails adherence to principles of equality and inclusivity. Ideally, common and not particularistic issues are to be discussed and language to be used. Moreover, discussions within the public sphere help to confer legitimacy upon persons and policies. Structurally, the media (independent or otherwise) plays an important role. And if the media is captured by non-democratic forces of capital and vocal minority interests, the discourse argues that it is important that the Internet can help to ameliorate these negative tendencies.¹⁵

power that tries to create public attention for injustices committed by the powerful against the weak" (Fuchs, Boersma, Albrechtslund & Sandoval, 2012: 13). There are ways of watching the watchers and surveilling the surveillers (14).

¹⁵ The critiques of this cursory understanding of the public sphere are many, and the Internet & democracy discourse fails to take them seriously. It ignores the fact that it is male dominated, excludes alternative publics, brackets inequalities based on identity and class, and that there is little way to agree to an objective understanding of what constitutes a

On face, it is true that the Internet contains a diversity of comments, opinions, content, and access that compares favorably to even the ideal bourgeois public sphere. But there are three dimensions of the public sphere that come to light in each of the four examples of the Internet and democracy discourse and that should be considered before celebrating the promise of the virtual public sphere. The first regards the relationship between speaking and deliberation in public. Any act of deliberation assumes a subject and this is problematic online because it is quite difficult to understand who is speaking for whom and to what audience. But deliberation enables citizens to come to an understanding about the rules by which they will live together. Deliberation also contributes to democratic goods of legitimacy, publicity, and efficacy. Some theorists also direct our attention to the subversive elements of some deliberative practices. This often leads to calls to make the practices themselves subject to deliberation. Deliberation is said to aid people in thinking about unjust and arbitrary social conventions. Thus, it is integral to identifying a subjectivity's members and its character. The form that communicative action takes, deliberative or not, effectively defines the public sphere. These are insights missing from the discourse.

Deliberative practices tend to privilege one identity over others, especially as group members reinforce their identity through socialization processes.¹⁶ The communicative form matters a great deal to what kind of subjectivity potential members orient themselves to. Communication thus has an affective dimension, and it is people's experience with the particular form or practice that determines its consequences. Lastly, the Internet could support a public sphere, because the sphere could be conceived of as less a thing or a space and more an ideal type of public reasoning. To the extent this space can be guaranteed by non-state entities, the myth of Westphalian sovereignty is just that.

Recent democratic theory (an essentially the entirety of the Internet-democracy discourse) retains the concept as an element crucial to any well-functioning and justice-distributing democracy. It is a space for informal deliberation and innovation in the liberal tradition, but it also construed as a forum for the construction, consolidation and performance of collective identity. While the state can aid the public sphere through official means, there is a tradition that celebrates the unofficial public sphere of associations (Tocqueville; others). The activity of these associations helps to establish a notion that democracy is self-evidently practical. In addition to creating officially-sanctioned institutions to inspire citizens to develop civic capacities that enable them to more effectively participate in political processes and reduce cynicism, associational life is also a kind of institutional space that produces solidarity and

common concern. Thus, while there is such a thing as a public sphere, there are also other spaces of subaltern counterpublics and counterpolitics (Benhabib, Fraser).

¹⁶ While Habermas is criticized for excluding people from the public sphere because they do not know the proper language with which they must participate, and for asking them to shed identities and engage in a subject-less form of communication (cf. Benhabib, 1996, Young, 2000), I argue that, when reading Habermasian theory alongside actual everyday digital practices, people can learn deliberative processes organically from associations, from iterated, if mundane, interactions with others.

affinity for democratic society. By privileging the positive development of democratic affinity, the design of institutions should try to maximize the natural character of people that has been distorted by the unfair formation of society. Thus, it seems possible to many democratic theorists that institutions can explain the emergence of new democratic subjects by creating and including 'new' citizens.

The public sphere is constantly under threat from private and capital intrusion. Arguably, globalization processes have accelerated these tendencies. In response, several theorists seem to recognize the emergence of a transnational critical public sphere acting through Internet and global communications media and networks (Fraser, 2009). The critical function of the public sphere seems to be shifting into activities typically associated with the private sphere. Thus, the conceptual elements of the public sphere support some of the strongest claims about the effects of globalization and global communications technologies on democracy.

Solidarity-Generation vs. Linking-Generation & Collective Action

How does collective and/or political action come about in a democratic society? The literature can be distinguished by its emphasis on either solidarity-generating or linking-generation strategies and mechanisms. Institutions promise to do both. Institutions can provide guidance for appropriate political practice, and also help to determine and publicize procedures that help to determine membership. Institution can be conceived of as spaces of learning, and therefore, productive of social and political order. They represent or are rules that may be internalized by participants but they are also spaces that produce solidarity through the legitimate creation of decisions. When laws are created, those participating in the process are said to constitute the democratic subject, those to which membership is bestowed.

Institutions may also 'wear off' onto individual participants, which in aggregate, makes for a healthier, more highly skilled deliberating public. Well-designed institutions do not merely aggregate and adjudicate differences; they can produce new understandings and identities. Solidarity emerges from the act of lawmaking. Every act of legislation defines a basic subjectivity and boundary (Benhabib, 2004: 104). For republicans, solidarity or affinity might be said to arise from the legitimacy of the decision-making process and the quality of the outcome.

Collective action is an important part of the Internet-democracy discourse. Collective action is often seen in tension with communication, in terms of practices. Action in public is part of any act of association and for the maintenance of a subjectivity, especially one not anchored in material realities. Action takes place in a network of actors and relationships. Communication is important for the articulation of a subjectivity, for the diffusion of ideas and adherence to the publicity principle, but it stops short of connoting a 'speech act'. Communication therefore serves more a linking function than as a solidarity production function.

Solidarity is a disposition involving feelings of emotional connection and commitment to support the struggles of others to challenge oppression (Ferguson, 2009: 186; Gould, 2007; Mohanty, 2003; Barkty, 2002; Allen, 1999; O'Donnell, 2007). The concept of solidarity has taken on new meanings over time. But due again to the increase in political and social connections across identities, classes and borders and the interdependencies of international political economy, the concept of solidarity needs to be expanded beyond its Marxist comfort zone (Gould, 2007). Once we think of solidarity as something more akin to fraternity, the possibilities multiply. Substantively, one can think of cosmopolitan, civic, interest-based and welfare state conceptions of solidarity. More specific to the purposes here, a cosmopolitan solidarity “would claim that all humans should be conceived of as one big moral community, and thus that we have moral obligations to aid and support all other people” (Ferguson, 2009: 190). The problem is that it is not ‘realistic’ in the sense that there are empirical difficulties associated with getting people who do not know each other, and may not even be like each other, to developing feelings of solidarity (Barkty, 2002). Pragmatically, solidarity among potentially fiercely independent individuals has developed by the ‘fact’ that by forming a group with the express purpose to stand up for common purpose creates a moral or political obligation to defend group rights against opponents who threaten the common interest (Ferguson, 2009: 191).

The concept of solidarity is important to recent, more neo-Marxist aspects of the Internet-democracy discourse, in addition to its real role in cosmopolitan or transnational democracy. If democracy is said to spill across borders, theorists recognize the necessity of at least a thin solidarity as a precondition.

Globalization and Democratic Theory

Globalization, a concept and an integrative process signifying a different logic of bordering, the breaking open of boundaries, a new experience of spatiality all marked by increased neoliberalization, has attracted the attention of democratic theorists. Literature on the intersection of democracy and globalization is on a more solid footing than the literature on the Internet and democracy.

Although politics is increasingly located online, much of the democratic theory literature resorts to speculation about, remains silent on, or folds this shift into more general discussions about globalization processes and their effects. Because democratic theory is largely conceived with the modern states system in mind¹⁷, by challenging the nation-state, globalization also tests the limit of democracy. Globalization has led to the fragmentation of sovereignty, leaving people connected to each other to a degree unaccommodated by traditional democratic arrangements (Behabib, 2004). Decisions made by one

¹⁷ For an account of how historical international relations made a decisive impact on democratic theory, and not vice versa, see Inayatullah and Blaney's *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (2004).

polity undoubtedly affect another, meaning that actions generate moral obligations that are mostly left unfulfilled. The dichotomy of self-preservation vs the duty to others is an increasingly inadequate way to conceive the normative obligations of governance. In fact, state action contributes to disorder when it has fought back against the countervailing globalization process, especially, for example, as states began to denaturalize members of unwanted minority groups, creating refugees and stateless people across borders. It is no surprise that political communities are turning to alternative forms of organization, such as networks and supranationalism. In doing so, they are also innovating in new ways of constituting themselves as a people, as a democratic subject.¹⁸

The thinking about the effects of globalization is relevant to a discussion of democracy and the Internet, and subjectivity in particular because, in such an environment, is it thought that subjectivity is harder to pin down. Democratic theorists of various traditions have attempted to confront the difficulties present in the globalization-information-digitization moment. For example, Barber (2003) argued that technology and communication are crucial to the evolution of democracy in the globalized era. Barber believes that the speed, and, to some degree, scale, of communication is a net negative for democracy. Citizens are not provided enough time to reflect and effectively deliberate. This can lead to a kind of schizophrenia where people are able to rapidly switch their affiliations with several constitutive subjectivities or allegiances. Much of this occurs without regard to borders, and is reinforced by global communications technologies.

In many ways the Internet is moving faster than globalization, in the sense that what is happening online is a precursor to what lies ahead for the globalization processes, as the two are inextricably linked, especially in our theorizations. It is said that the Internet is helping to accelerate trends that have been present since the 1940s (e.g. Mathieson, 2013 in Fuchs et. al 2013). Thus, it is more of a precursor suggesting where we are going, rather than a space of activity indicating where we are right now. The same kinds of horizontal community formation and linking processes that are happening online also tend to occur in the globalized world. By looking at how democratic theory has treated globalization and its consequences, we may find clues as to how it might treat the digitization of politics, more generally.

While many argue that institutions explain the emergence and perpetuation of democratic subjects due to their normative and coerce capacities to bind people together, a starting point is the general will, the social contract and its legacy in more recent democratic theory. In the digital and globalized era, the expressions of founding acts are increasingly more arbitrary, and are better conceived as a series of acts or

¹⁸ The literature on the politics of inclusion or membership expand the notion of who is available to join in the new memberships emblematic of transboundary democracy. When new people are included in decision-making processes, they bring new ideas and perspectives to the table and they learn basic skills by associating with various democratic practices and liberal values. While the ethical issues regarding agency are left unresolved in such a process, it is possible that 'they' may be able to learn just enough to leverage transnational networks or global communications technology and become efficacious citizens in innovatively organized political units.

an ongoing process. We are able to give ‘others’ the benefit of the doubt and include them in ‘our’ deliberations because, in the globalized age, we are decreasingly certain of how *all* is (or ought to have been) included in ‘the people’s’ founding acts of association, to the extent they exist, because of the difficulties of finding the boundaries of political community. Innovations like the all-affected principle are meant to compensate for a lack of knowledge about the citizenry (subject) or constituency of a particular decision-making assembly while simultaneously increasing the legitimacy of the decisions. In other words, when faced with an environment where there is no discernable founding act, it is still preferable to have mechanisms in place that allow for deliberation to discover what the founding act might have been and who was included in that act that put us into reciprocal relations (i.e. a social contract) with others. The relationship between sovereignty and the demos also comes into play, as processes associated with globalization threaten to wear away the material foundations of sovereignty. Geography and cultural homogeneity have been undermined by the freer flow of people, ideas and capital. Thus, a collective identity, often seen as a necessary component of any subjectivity, is founded less on material and more on ideational elements.

The next section goes on to systematize the claims of the Internet and democracy discourse in terms more friendly to the task of theorizing. The works analyzed in the following sections are, for their part, highly-cited and highly visible within various literatures. It asks: what *is* the Internet? And what is it doing to and for democracy?¹⁹ The “Internet” is an understandably vague and ambiguous term. It facilitates all kinds of activity, and it is impossible to decisively deduce its meaning, effects, explanatory attributes, etc. I believe it is helpful to treat it as an analytical concept with a large conceptual family. Rather than define it, it is best to think of it as “the Internet and x.” Thus, while it is in aggregate a technology that distributes information through networks of computers, it is also much more than that. It is infrastructure, it is media, it is a tool, it is a platform. It is dynamic in that it has an ability to scale and reach beyond its physical and immanent capacities.

¹⁹ While there have been past attempts to assess the discourses surrounding the Internet and the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001),¹⁹ this paper brings the discussion up to date.

Table 1.

Internet Discourse by Concept	Characteristics
Public sphere	Liberal (best ideas will rise to the top) Inclusive (easy to publish) Free (unconstrained) Sharing information and ideas is productive
Participatory governance	Emancipatory Technological solutions for mitigating path dependence (political choice) Virtual communities with perfectly voluntary membership
Solidarity & Collective Action	Fast and spontaneous Liberal Networks Internet does not guarantee success

The Internet and the Public Sphere

Much of the literature relies upon the Habermasian conception of the public sphere. There are those who subscribe to the idea that the Internet represents a new public sphere, and those who believe it represents the potential for the creation of ideal institutional settings for deliberative democracy. The Internet is said to support the idealized public sphere that was lost in the transformation detailed by Habermas. Anyone can publish and a plethora of opinions are available, allowing the better argument to emerge. Moreover, it can help keep government official accountable. The Internet enables the escape from corporate for-profit media into a meritocratic information realm. Included in this camp are also those who believe that the Internet can support ideal deliberative decision-making settings, through creative programming, with a view towards reinvigorating democracy and realizing the ideal of self-rule. It appears so self-evident that the Internet should be a deliberative space because there is *so much* text; the “send-reply” format of publication is hegemonic.

The discourse suggests that the Internet is highly structured yet supports spontaneity. Putting Shirky into dialogue with Arendt reveals that it is conceivable social media platforms can support Arendtian-like spontaneous formations of democratic subjects. Because of the technical structure and the popularization of lightweight social networking sites, such spontaneity is made knowable to a larger number of people, and the barriers to participation are reduced. Arguably the practices that constitute mashup culture and flash mobs are akin to those employed in more momentous events, like the Occupy movement(s).

Dimension A: It's liberal. The public sphere that the Internet supports is a liberal one. It has room for everyone and is supportive of minority cultures. In doing so, it is said to have the opportunity to “expand dialogue” (Bohman, 2004) through the inclusion resulting from linking practices. This goes hand in hand with the notion that the Internet, especially “Web 2.0” (i.e. social media) can support the construction of a healthier public sphere (see Shane, 2004; Trippi 2004). This is in part due to the “openness” of the Internet, whereby the Internet is highly accessible (unlike newspapers or television). The Internet is ostensibly “open to everyone” and in terms of making our thoughts known, “anyone can do it.” The Internet-democracy discourse posits that democracy and democratic subjectivity itself is transnationalizing via technologies that enable a more robust public sphere, easily scalable collective action, more efficient knowledge dissemination, and, in turn, the growth of a thin solidarity emerging from common practices. Openness is generally good. Although it makes it easier for us to be subject to public criticism, it also makes it easier for people to “find each other” (Shirky, 2008: 12), which is good for the promotion and circulation of good ideas.

Dimension B: It's “free”. Second, the Internet-based public sphere is also “free” and it should be kept that way. It is able to subvert authoritarian regimes and thwart capitalism. It is a “basic truth” that communicative freedom is good for political freedom (Shirky, 2011). The way the Internet “works” means that conversations are effectively impossible to police (12). One recent study of the Russian media landscape found that alternative media was able to act independently from state rules, something deemed self-evidently impossible before the Internet (Kirita, 2012).

Folded into these arguments are that the Internet can thwart the laws of supply and demand. There was no known demand for alternative media in Russia, but the low costs of producing it and evading state retribution made it possible. As noted above, the notion that the Internet reduces transaction costs is a longstanding element of the Internet-democracy discourse. Such observations have inspired a sub-literature on copyright reform and what is known as net neutrality. The realities of the way that the Internet distributes information necessitates a return to the pre-20th century capitalism mode of cultural production and dissemination.²⁰ This line of argumentation combines two logics. The first is the equal

²⁰ Zittrain (2006) and Lessig (2009) have separately argued that there is a need to establish a new social contract for cyberspace. It is time to make a choice between more or less democratic versions of the Internet. While neither Lessig or Zittrain specifically venture into drawing conclusions about the normative politics of the Internet, they do each establish a related criteria for which to evaluate proposed alternatives to the status quo. Lessig, in speaking of regulability, interrogates the benefits of regulable technologies in the expression of liberal democratic values. The Relative democratic-ness of the Internet depends upon the relative democratic-ness of the regulations and regulators. Zittrain, in conceptualizing generativity, discusses the merits of particular characteristics of a technological artifact in terms of a general benefit to a particular society. It could be added that certain characteristics enable a society to better provide for its general welfare and extend happiness. Such outcomes purportedly extend democratic society's benefits to more people. The connection between democracy and regulability is tenuous, but workable, in that both concepts address phenomena that should take place in the liberal democratic public sphere. Generativity provides a conceptual framework for

treatment of data, held as a liberal right. The second is the common ownership of a culture, held a republican right. Both acknowledge ways in which the Internet helps obviate the need for gatekeepers and middle-men: “we don’t need them anymore.”²¹ The ideas, opinions, and interests flow freely.

The discourse promotes the idea that anyone can publish, and publish proper, as if they were their own media outlet, with their own op-eds promoting ideas and their own investigative reporting speaking truth to power. The amateurization of the public sphere makes it easier for people to connect with one another as well, to find mutual interests in publicizing something. In other words, there are no more gatekeepers: “the mass amateurization of publishing undoes the limitations inherent in having a small number of traditional press outlets” (Shirky, 2008: 65). Shirky supports the notion that the amateurs have acquired and employed a digital literacy that makes collaboration possible.

Dimension C: Sharing Practices in the Virtual Public Sphere are Productive. The discourse on the Internet and the public sphere also included the notion that the Internet is supportive of the creation of a productive space represented by the “virtual public sphere”. What people do online, including one of the most common activities, sharing, is generative of a sense of community and a subsequent culture. Political blogging communities in the United States have, by now, contributed to new forms of campaign politics, as well as contributing to an increase in polarization, especially in primary campaigns.

Sometimes these cultures are thought to be good for democracy, even piracy cultures. When Condry (2004) right asks “why do people want music in the first place?” it implies that new cultures should not be prejudged by other criteria. The virtual public sphere is a space where minority cultures can flourish, functioning as a training ground so they can be more effective in the more general debates in the larger public sphere.

Sometimes the results are less than desirable. For example, sharing practices extricate users from responsibility for their actions; they may not be able to see how their actions undermine the well-being of the community (Hinduja, 2008). If people spend too much time more or less homogenized communities, they risk becoming radicalized automatons as opposed to empowered liberal citizens (Sunstein, 2007).²²

Finally, there is a sense that the arrival of the Internet is a marker of another historical transformation of the public sphere. Papacharissi (2010) argues that the Internet and social media, by

discussions of Internet-enabled cultural creation and participation. A generative artifact enables democratic control of cultural commodities.

²¹ As I shall go into further detail elsewhere, this line of argumentation follows from the piracy culture, and may even be construed as a discourse of apology for the activities of those sharing copyrighted digital content. For example, Lu and Weber (2009) found that Chinese users of file-sharing networks were able to articulate that their activities were a local aspect of a larger resistance to global copyright enforcement. They did so because the Internet is a “public domain”, the socialist market economy is more just, it is patriotic to resist copyright, and that Chinese culture has a distinct understanding of cultural property.

²² Bad information, lack of cross-linking, etc, often difficult to distinguish truth from reality.

transmitting in public space what would traditionally be considered private thoughts, have aided a shift of the political from the public to the private sphere. Thus, we should begin to treat what looks like private thoughts and experiences published on social media, at least according to the conventional conceptual distinctions, as at least potentially political. For reasons that will become clear from the empirical work in this dissertation, it is quite difficult to separate the political and the personal with any scientific confidence; one slides into the other. Therefore, it is important to consider the effect these changes have on various understandings of the public sphere and its role. What most people think of as vapid 140-character posts into the Twitter void may indeed constitute what counts as the political.²³

Wading into these details regarding the Internet and the public sphere suggests that reveals that we really are not talking about a public sphere anymore. The real question then becomes: ultimately, can we even locate the public sphere proper in such a media landscape, where everyone is engaged in the same dominant digital practices?

It may therefore be useful to think of the Internet and social media as foregrounding an historical rupture, not revolution. Chadwick implies that we are “living through a time of fundamental change in the nature of political life as a result of the disruptive influence of digital communication” (2013: 3, emphasis added). The transformation of the public sphere will inevitably empower new groups. Using ethnographic evidence from the boundary, Chadwick (2013) claims that it is those in the alliance between the online video-broadcast media. He observes that “changing practices in the world of older media, particularly television, increasingly mesh with these online norms (210). Rather than only “transmission and reception” of ideas and information, there is “circulation”, “recirculation”, and “negotiation”.

The discourse suggests that the virtual public sphere is liberal, free, and the practices it supports are productive of subcultures and new relationships between the public and private spheres. The next section looks at the ways in which the Internet affects governance. The discourse largely relies on its ideal images of the virtual public sphere.

The Internet and Participatory Governance

There are those who think that the Internet represents a chance for a truly emancipatory politics. This group includes libertarians as well as techno-socialist-utopians. The emancipatory value of the Internet is highest in situations where it offers the only viable space for the rearticulation of identity and cultural meaning (Langmia, 2008; Franklin, 2007 in Dahlberg & Siapera). This is especially true in

²³ And here, there is support from the discourse as well. Shirky takes pains to defend the mundane from being dismissed outright, or for having the mundane come to define the new digital public sphere. He argues that just because Tweets or cat pictures or drunk texts about girls are in public that does not mean they are public (2008: 87).²³ “Now that the cost of posting things in a global medium has collapsed, much of what gets posted on any given day is in public but not for the public” (Shirky, 2008: 90).

authoritarian societies. The Internet's revelatory tendencies expose the uniformity of bureaucracy and challenges the administration of life by encouraging self-identity formation at blogs, in forums and social networking sites. The unlimitedness of the Internet space seemingly allows people to move rather freely away from undesirable or oppressive situations.

The Internet offers a better way to institutionalize rules due to its uniform and horizontal qualities (i.e., its technical structure).²⁴ The structure of the Internet is such that there are essentially no permanent structures, beyond those limited by the digital paradigm. The Internet is unruly and free. Institutions, when they exist, are usually a product of the creators of Internet protocols, who have been relatively free of uninvited influence. Winner (1980) argues that "machines, structures, and systems of modern material cultures...can embody specific forms of power and authority" (121). Technologies can be political in their conception and design or purpose and in their compatibility with particular kinds of political relationships.

The highly cited work of Manuel Castells is especially imbued with the narrative that the Internet was purposely designed as a technology of free communication.²⁵ The key is the openness and free modification of the source code of Internet software (2001: 38). Being able to do so encourages a culture of cooperation under the "free articulation of technical knowledge" (38). Moreover, all of the key Internet subcultures he identifies "contribute to the ideology of freedom" (Castells, 2001: 36). His discussion of the hacker culture reveals that it is one of "technological creativity based on freedom, cooperation, reciprocity, and informality" (50).²⁶ The networking capacity of the Internet was able to spread these values of "freedom, horizontal communication, and interactive networking" to others and to the social realm. Triumphant claims such as these cannot stand without some significant conceptual stretching.

If there is to be Internet-based participatory governance, there need to be rules determining membership. There is a sense that, in the early days of the Internet, what observers were doing by

²⁴ Some have suggested that large numbers of people use the Internet to escape into a realms with more appealing rules and structures. People, as well as corporate-commercialized interests, have been able to claim some agency in the creation of the public realm of the internet. In doing so, they are expressing by their very divergence from the physical public realm a dissatisfaction with it, a feeling most evident in spaces that explicitly attempt to dialogue with the status quo and critique it. With ever more people extending their lives online, it is interesting to consider how the vast number of people are touched by experiencing a qualitatively different social structure.

²⁵ The counter argument is just as prevalent, and one gets the sense that the discourse wants it both ways: the Internet is democratically-oriented and the Internet is a "mere tool" or extension of immanent human capacities and desires. The mere tools theme claims that social media are simply a way to channel existing motivation, that we now have the technology available to match our innate social prowess as humans. As Shirky claims "we now have communications tools that are flexible enough to match our social capabilities, and we are witnessing the rise of new ways of coordinating action that take advantage of that change" (2008: 20). People have "always desired to share" they just could not do so in these ways in the past (45). And these desires are so strong that any tool that makes sharing easier will spread. The key here is the naturalness of the desire for and skill at group effort.

²⁶ The problem with *The Internet Galaxy* is that he relies on a random interpretive history of these cultures, where a systematic genealogy would be more appropriate and illuminating.

defining ‘virtual communities’ populated by ‘virtual citizens’ or ‘netizens’ was to instill these groups with some unit-like qualities, such as boundaries, membership criteria, and shared cultures of practice.²⁷

An older debate begun by Rheingold (1993) regarding the ways in which the Internet provides new ways of defining membership within communities (Goode, 2010) permeates the discourse. The Internet is undoubtedly supportive of subcultures. It is easier to find like-minded people with unique tastes online. Again, Shirky is instructive here. Empirical work has found that immigrant and diasporic communities are supported and supplemented by online activities (Langmia, 2008).²⁸ Koster & Houtman (2008) demonstrated that groups stigmatized in offline society find online forums—perhaps especially true for right-wing groups—as a refuge. Mainstream culture is less likely to inspire a sense of community online. There is a sense that the worst of the Internet can simply be evaded. For example, it seems logical that if a space on the Internet becomes oppressive from the perspective of a user, he or she can rather easily leave it for another, or create their own. Even a highly structured site like Facebook can serve in this process with the self-organization of people around pages, groups and notes. The same can be true of groups rapidly switching from one platform to another due to concerns about privacy, corruption, etc.

Thus it makes sense to some scholars that we need to rethink the meaning of community in a digital age (Feenberg & Barney, 2004), reconsider the 18th century assumptions about human capacities, restate the place of various conceptual distinctions that form the basis of democratic politics, such as the public-private divide (Margolis and Moreno-Riano, 2013).

Indeed, the Internet seems to challenge conceptions of deliberation and participation. The first waves of theorizing about the Internet’s impact on democracy were quite optimistic that it could support perfect participation. In fact, an edited volume appearing in 2007 went so far as to say that the Internet was the logical destination for the realization of radical democracy (Dahlberg and Siapera, 2007). Presumably, people who use social networks, for example, create their own blogs, and share photos they have taken are presented with an ability provided by digital technologies to dictate their own rules for interaction. During their heyday, political blogging communities like Daily Kos and RedState were hailed as more or less ideal forums for deliberation. The rules, regulations and social norms there were meant to facilitate discussion and encourage participation. The rules were relatively free—self-policing, self-organized, vaguely democratically decided and of course much debated (that is, reflexive—with the

²⁷ There is a fairly significant effort to promote a set of myths about the creation of the Internet and its founding fathers. They serve to highlight the inherent goodness of what happens online. For example, Bollier’s (2009) conception of the Internet, as stated in *Viral Spiral*, is based on the tenuous position that the interactions between people and information are “free” from the physical world’s structures. This is so because the Internet was created with “freedom in mind” (2-3). Bollier’s evidence for this is the emergence of alternative copyright regimes like the Creative Commons. Their creation was the result of what might be called norm entrepreneurs who were inspired by the way the Internet as a technology works. The self-proclaimed “commoners” explicitly referred to their forays into the digital piracy of cultural commodities, finding that the old laws were unworkable.

²⁸ Besides Facebook, which was built as a platform for elites (college-types), Twitter and other social networks like Vine and Instagram users are disproportionately populated by black Americans.

barriers to participation much lower than traditional modes of publication. So long as the discussion remained within the bounds established by the essentially self-policing communities, political talk was cheap and easy.²⁹

Blogging communities, to the degree they adhere to these principles, are reminiscent of the constitution of local democratic forms. Exploring this literature with the Internet in mind reveals that what were once thought of as local democratic forms—the republican community, the town hall, the issue area-based interest and civic groups, deliberative bodies, co-ops, etc.—are being supported by the Internet, and importantly, they are spanning boundaries. Or at the very least this is what the Internet and democracy discourse implies, without specifying them as such, to our detriment.

But these local forms of democratic politics, due to the digital technologies, do not rely on geographic proximity. So then it is apropos to consider the literature on transnational democracy. But instead of focusing on how “democracy across borders” would work, including ever growing numbers of communities, it considers how people can have membership in many communities at once. Social media allows individuals to quickly find themselves wrapped up in any number of communities, of a different kind, different purpose, with highly overlapping memberships and organization logics.³⁰ This is supported by a burgeoning empirical literature employing network analysis to the activities of individuals on social networks like Twitter and Facebook.

The Internet, Solidarity, and Collective Action

The Internet-democracy discourse focuses heavily on the possibilities for digitally-organized collective action to compensate for apathy, isolationism and inefficacious state activity. It can do this because it lowers the opportunity costs associated with organizing, enabling the “self-synchronization of otherwise latent groups” (Shirky, 2008: 39). Given the right tools, anything is possible.

²⁹ In terms of the actual practices they learned, there are four promising areas. First, individuals might express frustration with political leadership and elected officials in particular, or bureaucratic administration more generally. They may advocate for the establishment of autonomous power bases. Second, individuals may be concerned that issues of local importance are not being effectively addressed, reflecting a frustration with the centralization of politics. Third, individuals might be expected to express frustration with the Internet medium or forum itself, in that it is not enough to simply have a say in the political process. They desire to obtain the capacity for action beyond speech. Fourth, people may see themselves engaged in a historical struggle to restore power to the people, irrespective of their actual perspectives or ideological affinities. As such, they may feel like an embattled minority, under the tyranny of a bureaucracy ruled by no one. They may, moreover, become explicitly self-aware of the fact that although they are seemingly controlled, administered, or dominated by external, seemingly objective forces, their experience on the Internet has shown them that this may not always be so, for they have expressed freedom of action and redesigned political spaces and structures.

³⁰ The challenge for democratic politics is to develop some kind of thin transnational constitutionalism that may serve as the basis of a truly reflexive political order. The overlapping-ness may indeed provide the minimum conditions needed to establish an order in which global justice is an attainable goal. The most important aspect of globalization may then be the way that it changes the political or democratic subject.

Dimension A: it's fast and spontaneous. There are those who believe that the Internet represents a new Arendtian space of appearance³¹ for the realization of (the benefits) of spontaneous collective action. This pillar includes literature celebrating the ways in which the Internet supports social movements with limited resources by disseminating information to participants and linking them to transnational advocacy networks to garner financial and political aid. There is, simply put, more and more. Social media present an enhanced ability to undertake collective action (Shirky, 2011). They do not need to be locally situated to the information. This of course can help any groups, but it is especially helpful to a more loosely organized one “operating without managerial direction and outside the profit motive” (47), to react (153).³² An event “can go from local to global in a heartbeat” (Shirky, 2008: 12). Any particular event can be subjected to crowdsourcing and made into something large. The fleeting nature of hashtags on Twitter is a apt reminder of this.

One might call the meetup.com-inspired (Shirky's favorite example in his 2008 book) theme “solving suburbia.” People meet online, find out they have things in common, and meet up in the real world. Though fragmented in the suburban physical world, it is possible to find each other online. Cyberspace is considered a “safe” place where people can organize themselves and begin to move onto the real world.

Others have cited the accomplishments of ‘hacktivism’ to challenge corporations and governments by direct hacking activities, shaming, and virtual sit-ins (Jordan & Taylor, 2004). Shirky is not alone in saying that the Internet encourages, rather than stamps out, creativity; it can enable temporary but situationally-significant units geared for political action. “The Web became a core part of modern life as quickly as it did precisely because it is such a flexible environment for letting people try new things” (Shirky, 2008: 158). It is relatively cheap to try new things, and sometimes, something truly amazing and profitable is churned out, like Twitter or Wikipedia.

But at the same time, Shirky expresses a glowing adoration for the work of Wikipedia contributors to deal with vandalism. Although it shows how communities may enforce basic rules of proper conduct, it also means that the arbitrary social rules are even more in play: there is little room for creative spontaneity. While the Internet may promote it in some ways, the rapidity of response to it lessens the impact of (non-liberal) protest activity. And thus, the Internet supports Mill's experimental life, even as it enables an unprecedented degree of social policing and self-surveillance. Both are “good” things.

³¹ For an in-depth discussion of these possibilities, see Schwarz, 2014.

³² And here, the discourse about the post-Westphalian world emerges. Shirky (2008) is quick to dismiss other organizational logics as old and ineffective: “Organizations that assume geography as a core organizing principle, even ones that have been operating that way for centuries, are not facing challenges to that previously bedrock principle” (155).

Dimension B: Using the Internet does not guarantee success. The failures in Belarus in 2006, the Green Movement in 2009, the Red Shirt Uprising in Thailand in 2010—violence did them in.

Dimension C: it's liberal. According to the discourse Internet tends to support liberal protest action. While it tries to claim that it is empowering to any underrepresented group, upon closer look, the discourse is quite clear that social media are tools for democracy because they inspire distinctly liberal forms of action and politics. This is especially true under authoritarian regimes. Instead of a revolutionary hierarchy that can be arrested or repressed, the examples that Shirky refers to show a distinct form. No leaders, not plot. The “flash mob” protest is the pinnacle of liberal political action. In Belarus, flash mobs left the government with a choice between either “gross overreactions (a curfew in Oktyabrskaya, a ban on ice cream or the internet) or to waiting for the mob to form, then disrupting it” (Shirky, 2008: 170). We are faced with an either-or (largely rhetorical) question: either we prevent groups from forming (shutting down the Internet) or we start making decisions on which groups to oppose.³³

The consequences of these choices can be seen in the lead up and response to the Arab Spring revolutions (Castells, 2012). And with collective action, all good things go together. Liberalism gave us globally accessible publishing which promotes the freedom of speech which is “now the freedom of the press, and the freedom of the press is freedom of assembly” (Shirky, 2008: 171).

The frequency with which Shirky raises and celebrates liberal protests is not insignificant. These tools, besides being held as “mere tools”, are still, conveniently, inspiring liberal activity. It is difficult for Westerners to see other ways in which the Internet and social media would be used. Moreover, the West is given a pass for creating tools that perpetuate banal content because “we” already have “democracy”.

Shirky also assumes that we are all in a rich liberal system where other barriers to collective action do not exist: “Most of the barriers to group action have collapsed, and without those barriers, we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done” (2008: 22).³⁴ Moreover, the mundane content is only to be judged harshly by those who are “users” of social media. Non-users are

³³ Both of these options are counter to the liberal logic, and it would appear he does not like either of these options, and would prefer to keep things in the social, rather than the political, realm.

³⁴ This is especially true in the vignette about the stolen cellphone and the crowdsourced effort to have it returned. Shirky opens this book with this story, expecting the audience to be absolutely fascinated by it—the tools and practices supported by the Internet, specifically crowdsourcing, “the cloud” and publicity to right a wrong, or, more specifically, the restoration of private property. Shirky even sensationalizes the off-topic nature of the forum created to help get the phone back, implying that what was truly remarkable was how seldom participants ventured off-topic into racist or sexist commentary. He is astoundingly optimistic, refraining all the while from thinking through the implications of how a poor black person’s life was ruined to appease a rich white guy and a mainstream audience interested in law and order. Instead, according to the narrative, it was “the people” that did it, by “coming together” (6) to put pressure on a teenage girl and the police to mete out justice. Shirky does at one point later in the book acknowledge that comparing this episode with the work done to help families find each other after the tsunami in Thailand is problematic. But in the same breath, he argues that the logic is exactly the same: the new ease of assembly makes more groups happen, even if they have undesirable goals content.

therefore excluded from the conversation about the merits of such a world (see the introduction of Chapter 4).

Dimension D: Networks. The Internet is said to be especially adept at supporting collective action organized in network form. This is because the Internet is largely a communication medium: “Since our practice is based on communication, and the Internet transforms the way in which we communicate, our lives are deeply affected by the way in which we communicate, our lives are deeply affected by this new communication technology” (Castells, 2001: 5). According to Castells, people network to create meaning. Communication practices are about sharing meaning through information exchanges. *Socialized communication*, he adds, “exists in the public realm beyond interpersonal communication” (Castells, 2012: 6).³⁵ *Mass self-communication*, presumably what takes place online, is facilitated by horizontal networks of interactive communication. Their form means that they are difficult for governments or corporations to control.

A very large empirical literature has taken up these kinds of claims. Analysis of the use Internet networks by social movements is prevalent. Internet networks serve to personalize contentious politics by encouraging *connective action* “based on personalized content sharing across media networks” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). What social media does for us, is enable the sharing of internalized, personalized ideas images and plans with networks of others. Facebook and YouTube, etc., are providers of massive action networks at a scale and accessibility unheard of prior to their arrival. The application of social ties theory to social media explores the possibility for the spread of a thin transnational ethic about the ways in which politics should be conducted.³⁶

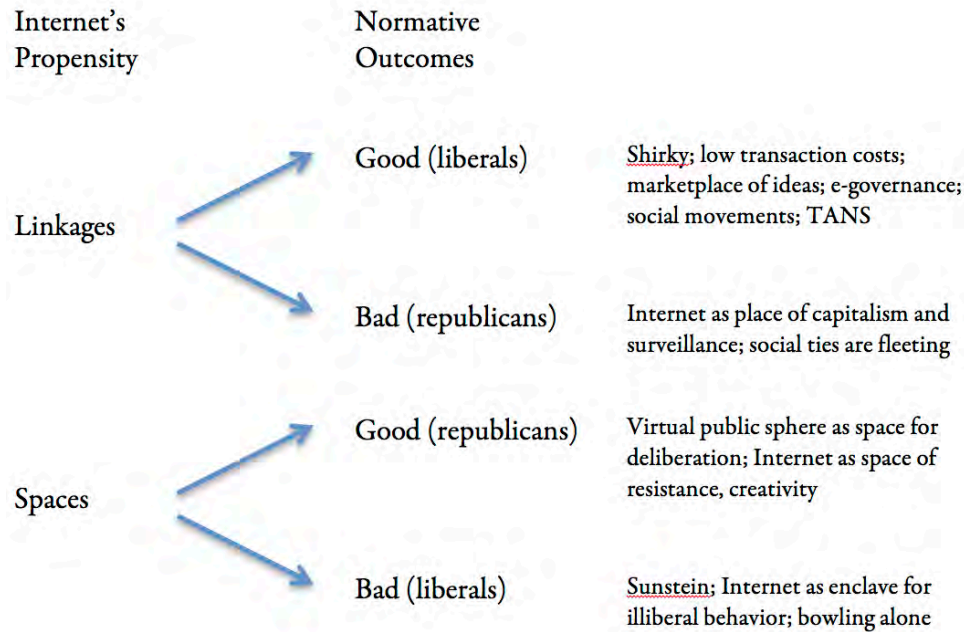
Conclusions

From here, the paper moves on to gesture toward a few conclusions and avenues for future exploration, based on the foregoing analysis. Rather than trying to once again reorganize the literature in new ways, I think it is more useful to begin to directly assess what the Internet and democracy discourse contributes to a discussion of the digitally mediated construction of subjectivities. When read in tandem with democratic theory, the literature is largely divided on the role of the public sphere along liberal and

³⁵ He goes on to say that “There is however, one feature common to all processes of symbolic construction: they are largely dependent on the messages and frames created, formatted and diffused in multimedia communication networks. Although each human mind constructs its own meaning by interpreting the communicated materials on its own terms, this mental processing is conditioned by the communication environment. Thus, the transformation of the communication environment directly affects the forms of meaning construction, and therefore the production of power relationships” (Castells, 2012: 6).

³⁶ In analyzing the diffusion of the Occupy movement, Castells (2012) argues that there are important commonalities across regions. Protest participants wish for dignity, accountability, sustainability, and a commitment on the part of governments to anticorruption. The movements also espouse the rhetoric of leaderlessness and horizontalism. See also (Gerbaudo 2012).

republican lines: that which emphasizes the objective or instrumental capacity of technology to link things together³⁷ and that which emphasizes the productive capacity of digital public spaces.³⁸ Because the liberal public sphere is a constant in both camps, it is possible to synthesize from both an account of how a subjectivity might come about. At this point it is important to acknowledge that there are many alternatives to the mainstream Internet and democracy discourse that are making positive inroads into political theory. I highlight this because the four to five discourse examples the paper began with are far from an exhaustive list.³⁹



Putting the Internet and democracy discourse into dialogue with democratic theory reveals that the Internet exerts mechanistic effects: it is a one-way causal street, and depending on the assumptions about democracy made by the author, it has different effects.

First, Internet communities learn together. Members are taught how to craft their opinion and where to publish it to get the desired effect. In doing so, they pick up norms that are ideally moderating

³⁷ The linkages perspective is manifested in discussions emphasizing that technologies are largely apolitical tools for the solving or creation of political or social problems. Content is easily shared across borders (of groups, states, etc.). They follow liberal assumptions in that this capacity enhances Mill's marketplace of ideas and his experiments in living. Social meaning, rather than being produced in concert via various activities and practices is promoted, appropriated and borrowed from others. Identities may be linked together and in doing so, common ground may be found. But no new social meaning is necessarily produced. Therefore, solidarity is a function of the degree to which values are shared across interested groups and/or the relative gravity of the problem at hand. Linkages approaches therefore celebrate the Internet's capacity to promote inclusion.

³⁸ Public space approaches emphasize the ways in which technology, especially the Internet, contribute to the production of social and political meaning. The Internet is a space where people come together and share ideas, arguments, perspectives, and solutions to problems. When they find common ground to take action, the participating individuals open themselves to the possibility of identity transformation. Therefore, and orientation to a particular subjectivity is a product of the experience of conversation, deliberation and various practices and activities conducted in concert.

³⁹ What is missing, however, is the practice-based interpretive framework oriented toward understanding why people share things online, and how this sharing has political effects on democratic practices.

and that encourage the development of the objective viewpoint. When they express opinions, the possibility of feedback motivate them to do it “well”. In spaces like political blogging communities, members learn to articulate political arguments and deepen their political knowledge (Cappella, Price & Nir, 2002). Inclusion motivates participants to improve the quality of their contributions by changing their claims from expressing self-interested or, in the case of the online world, inflammatory statements to appeals to justice (Young, 2002: 15).⁴⁰

What do people produce by engaging with social media? Some have pointed to the notion of a new market based on “socially created value” (Bollier 2008). From a different perspective, they are creating networked communities, with collective identities constituted by images and text, held in common, remixed and diffused across boundaries. What social media presents us with is the question “what kind of political community is good for today?” Not yesterday, and not tomorrow, but right now. If we live in a world of fleeting, ad hoc and self-selected groups, then what does subjectivity look like?

Early work in sociology exploring the most basic of Internet behaviors tried to address the question: how is the Internet moving us away from everyday life, and how is it adding new layers of connectivity and opportunity?⁴¹ As an independent variable, is the Internet supporting new dimensions in social life, or is it reproducing well-known behaviors? By now there are myriad an ongoing studies answering, what are people using the Internet for? Spending time online necessarily redistributes the way we spend our other time.⁴² The degree to which social media and ubiquitous Internet connectivity have dislodged these longstanding questions ought to be considered, as well.

Producing a Transnational Solidarity? The ubiquity of digitally-mediated everyday practices, especially the constant connectedness of ‘friends’ and ‘digital identity’,⁴³ may generate a layer of thin, latent solidarity existing across borders. In its midst are particularly thick solidarities around issues or values to the degree that a commitment to them binds people socially, intellectually, or accidentally. If practices generate solidarity—or, at least, a felt disposition or affinity to a particular practice, held in

⁴⁰ For example, anyone who spends time reading or commenting on political blogs like Daily Kos generally understands that the potential for substantive deliberation exists, even if some posts are lazy, many comments are inane, or few alternative perspectives are shared. However, it also becomes clear that people try to write carefully so as to gain and maintain the attention and readership of the community, even though their abilities to do so vary widely. This is especially true if members are exposed to even nominal levels of disagreement (Gutman & Thompson, 1996).

⁴¹ See, for example, the large edited volume entitled *The Internet in Everyday Life* (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002).

⁴² This is an important observation for theorists to confront, in part because it transcends the question of the particular effects of a particular technology.

⁴³ As noted below, the consequences of democracy’s interaction with digital communications technology are far from settled. It is clear that people are rapidly spending more and more of their lives online, whether through personal computers or cell phones. At the international and transnational levels, the idea that solidarity oriented toward collective action can emerge through deliberation is especially important as we face down looming global crises of global warming and economic depression. If collective identity formation can be achieved more easily in the era of global communications, then cooperation and collective decision-making will be more likely and perceived as more legitimate.

common—even unconsciously or “willy nilly”, as Bourdieu says, then they also have the power to transform identities and interests. Therefore, solidarity is a function of the degree to which values are shared across interested groups and/or the relative gravity of the problem at hand. Some approaches therefore celebrate the Internet’s enhanced capacity to promote inclusion. This falls in line with institutional approaches to solidarity in democratic theory that bestows importance on the ways in which efficient institutions link people and interests together.

Another theme emphasizes the particular ways in the Internet, contributes to the production of social meaning. People come together and share ideas, arguments, perspectives, and solutions to problems. When they find common ground and take action, the participating individuals open themselves to the possibility of identity transformation. Therefore, solidarity is a product of the experience of conversation, deliberation, and various practices and activities conducted in concert. Solidarity is part and parcel of group consciousness, an integral component of any subjectivity, even non-democratic ones. All this points to an admittedly thin solidarity. The people might fail to remove Putin using hastags and flashmobs, but it was never a life or death situation for any particular participant.

The Mechanism of Openness. The Internet and democracy discourse suggests that openness itself is the mechanism that enables astounding action. Internet networks, especially social media, are ostensibly open to everyone, and everyone can do it. Cascades of protest activity across borders and revolutions within them emerge suddenly—not from nothing, but actions snowball much more quickly and unexpectedly. Such openness is also responsible for the more common fleeting nature of online-mediated social and political movements and actions.⁴⁴

People learn through their experiencing of these practices. Some enterprising individuals and groups got above and beyond and make splashes. These avenues for action are ostensibly accessible to everyone. These observations show the very real transformations that present alternatives to us to the prevailing understanding of democratic subjectivity, made knowable by our encounter with the Internet.

⁴⁴ The fleeting nature has implications for how we think about subjectivities. In their contemporary form, they may not be as stable or knowable as their modern counterpart.

Table 2.
Subjectivity in the Digital Age

Perspective	Internet and Democracy Discourse	Digital Everyday Practices
Type	Public sphere-based subjectivity	Practice-based subjectivity
Membership	Appearing/Speaking in Public	Knowledge of tactics
Participation	Deliberation, voting, conforming to institutional norms	Mundane practices of linking and sharing
Articulation	Expression of public opinion in media outlets	Sharing something in common, expression of solidarity
Action	Speaking, social movements, politics of inclusion, petitioning state, political / electoral campaigns	Linking across constituencies or emotional communities, resistance to state/powerful entities techniques and strategies
Constitutive/normative content	Liberal	Repetitive unconscious action over time (horizontal, err on side of action, politics of request fulfillment)
Relationship to the state	Complimentary or adversarial	Absent or adversarial
Quality of felt membership / solidarity	Constructed we-feeling, imagined communities	Emotional, often characterized by empathy
Relationship between politics and constitutive components	Content and membership appears before politics	Content comes about during the process of activity
General effect on status quo	Reinforcing of hegemonic, in this case, liberal discourse and logic	Destabilizing, unpredictable. Could produce domination or emancipation depending on the cultures from which practices emerge
Form of governance	Hierarchical, institutionalized, egalitarian, information-driven	Networked, based on personal investment in a particular issue, driven by repetitive experience

Conclusion: Internet Communities, Collective Identities, and Democratic Subjectivities

This paper explored how what people do online and what people say people do online affects our understanding of democratic concepts vital to recent work dealing with questions of democracy and justice in a digital, post-globalization world. It paid particular attention to how the Internet is said to impact the public sphere, the possibility of justice within states and other political communities, and the consolidation and diffusion of a thin transnational liberal political logic. It explored the ways in which the concepts of the public sphere, participation and governance, and collective action and solidarity are treated within the discourse, looking especially for assumptions held in common. Doing so helped to reveal the differences between a public sphere- and practice-based subjectivity.

This paper represents an early exercise in trying to tease out a notion of how a decidedly political community might come about through what are mostly social digital practices. It begins such a task by putting the Internet and democracy discourse in dialogue with democratic theory. Because of the assumptions about democracy made in the discourse, I think it is appropriate to move away from the public sphere-based conception of subjectivity and begin to theorize a practice-based understanding of subjectivity. Much of the literature refers to the importance of communication in the production of virtual public space and virtual communities. Communication also serves to link people and groups together through information exchanges. In order to direct us toward the task ahead, I would like to conceptualize these acts of communication as digital everyday practices.

The framework relies upon Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau's work on practices, especially the distinctions between action and unconscious strategies, and official (strategies) and unofficial (tactics) practices. Digital environments have the potential to re-orient the worldview of individuals toward democracy due to their experiencing empowerment through the (digital) institutionalization of participatory (democratic) practices.⁴⁵

A practice-based subjectivity is distinct from a public sphere subjectivity, as detailed in Table 2. The advantage is that within the internet and democracy discourse, there is a lack of agreement, empirically, that these supposed activities are going on, and it presents problems for specifying democratic subjects in the digital era. There are also normative disagreements centering around whether the liberal public sphere is able to support critical-rational discourse, inclusion and emancipation, and whether it should be revitalized. A practice-based understanding of subjectivity is founded on the more basic, seemingly simple activities of everyday practices (e.g. leaving the higher order citizenship requirements behind). It thus has the advantage of explaining the emergence of illiberal political forms and groups with non-liberal agendas. These include forums like Stormfront. A practice-based subjectivity could help to think through identity politics or the politics of inclusion. The difficulty is that, in the absence of a proper public sphere, the political effect will not be known until the actions are already taking place. In other words, there is a politics—constitutive of subjectivity—occurring without deliberation. Without a public sphere to help make a subjectivity knowable, it is imperative to analyze the cultures from which the practices emerge and are imbued so as to ascertain their potential effects, all the while keeping in mind that these communities are based more around what they do than what content they

⁴⁵ To the degree that everyday digital practices can be perceived as empowering—a observation that must be established elsewhere—people learn that democratic practices are preferable, even *good* due to the perceived disempowerment resulting from power asymmetries, *felt* as a lack of freedom or autonomy. People may begin to associate their identity with digital everyday practices, especially as they come to confront problems collectively in extraordinary situations.

share. It is more important that communities emerging around everyday practices be able to keep doing. This is especially so since the stakes are raised: everyday practices are the source of identity formation.⁴⁶

The framework renders even the most uncritical celebrations of the Internet and social media illuminating. Looking at Shirky (2008) in terms of practices reveals that the all-important vignette about a stolen cellphone, the public humiliation of the ‘criminal’, and the subsequent arrest of the criminal, Sasha, is actually more about the penetration of the state bureaucracy through the tactics of publicity and sympathy than it is a story about the power of crowdsourcing. The tactics of the everyday person—which he or she uses everyday, for different purposes, usually—ran counter to state strategies of hierarchical control and secrecy.

Although the way the narrative is presented is not unproblematic, it is no fluke that the story about a cellphone, something of decidedly trivial import, gained public traction. For one, the cellphone is something many the world-over have and value. Second, the event is not overtly political or contested in the sense that it is commonly accepted that it is unvirtuous to steal personal property. It may be, therefore, that individuals and groups will (almost) unknowingly engage in political activity to the degree it appears to them as social, common, and within the moral mainstream. The upshot of the story is that, from Shirky’s perspective, such practices of sharing, discussion, and crowdsourcing will bleed into more momentous events. The same logic that drives the cell phone story is present in the ice cream flash mobs he describes in Belarus.

The discourse wants it both ways. People on Shirky’s side truly believe that the Internet lets us all have our cake and eat it, too. We are provided the freedom to do whatever we want to do online, but also the tools to control it (unlike, say, a nuclear power plant), even democratically: the new tools “enable alternate strategies for keeping that complexity under control” (2008: 21).

One largely unnoticed aspect of Shirky’s book, at least in terms of its impact within the discourse, is his discussion of how the momentous is juxtaposed with the mundane. One might go on to LeBron James’ Instagram account to find out what shoes he’s wearing, what music he’s listening to, or what his thoughts were on the previous game. But instead, he or she is greeted with a post about how #BlackLivesMatter. And then the next post is one with his family by the pool. Shirky highlights how an upper-middle class woman posted photos of the coup in Thailand on her personal blog. Remarkably, within the same entry, she also discussed how much she liked her new camera phone and how she had too much to drink the previous evening.

⁴⁶ None of this precludes the possibilities for deep divisions between those communities with sharing practices in common based on what they are sharing. The idea is that even in competition and contention, they tend to contest the nation-state model, in that they are frustrated with the lack of accountability, horizontalism, reciprocity and efficiency characteristic of their experiences online.

One of the difficulties with making the claim that practices can be integral in the constitution of a subjectivity⁴⁷ is that they may not be adequately deep or strong. But if these everyday practices of sharing can be construed as communicative practices, there is more promise. In his observation about the Internet and collective action, Shirky argues that conversation is a form of cooperation, and that sharing is “easier” than cooperation. According to this formulation, sharing occupies a lower rung on the ladder of action than even conversation. But, Shirky does offer a window into why sharing might be a satisfactory basis for the establishment of groups in the digital era: “Conversation creates more of a sense of community than sharing does, but it also introduces new problems. It is famously difficult to keep online conversations from devolving into either name-calling or blather, much less to keep them on topic. Some groups are perfectly happy with those effects (indeed, there are communities on the internet that revel in puerile or fatuous conversation), but for any group determined to maintain a set of communal standards some mechanism of enforcement must exist” (2008: 50). The takeaway is that conversation is hard, sharing is easy.

Castells also gestures toward the contentious elements of the practice-based framework. The newly-created community (subjectivity is what really gives it the power, right? Maybe this is your theoretical inroad) had real power vis-à-vis the state and other dominant institutions. They employed technological networking “tactics” that allowed them to expand their reach, defeating the state and capital powers, making the Internet ubiquitous in our daily lives. So, they poached the resources of the state, created something not quite what the state wanted, and transformed society. But I would not argue it was as revolutionary as Castells makes it out to be: “The culture of the Internet is a culture made up of a technocratic belief in the progress of humans through technology, enacted by communities of hackers thriving on free and open technological creativity, embedded in virtual networks aimed at reinventing society, and materialized by money-driven entrepreneurs into the workings of the new economy.” (61).

Employing the concept of sharing as a basis for the construction of political communities is not only more inclusive, but would skirt the kinds of things that the parade-rainers like Sunstein, Lovink and Morozov rightly point out, that the Internet is a place of gestation for normatively bad content and

⁴⁷ Castells work, too, is instructive in the identification of subjectivities. He notes that the Internet was created by a technocracy “enlisted” in a project by the global hegemon to help it dominate the world in the realm of power-knowledge. But the community fought back, keeping its autonomy by relying on peers (and here, the “peer review” culture of the academy was key) as a source of legitimacy. The impetus for the construction of the Internet as we now know it came from the hacker culture (which followed from the male-dominated libertarian counter-hippie culture exemplified by Stewart Brand). Hackers helped to specify the ways in which the meritocracy would reward members and, therefore, construct boundaries of the technologically-inclined community. Membership was awarded based on an individual’s capacity to create technology and share it. Thus, we get a subjectivity imbued with meritocracy, technological expertise, maleness, and having the economic wherewithal to share things for free, all wrapped up with a set of practices, over time taken for granted, that over time became an ethic from which the rest of the content of the subjectivity followed. Castells notes how this ethic quickly spread to the social realm. (61). If a constitution were to be drawn up, the first fundamental human/hacker right would be free access to technology.

undemocratic behavior. Sharing is also a practice that leads to “collaborative production”, which, for Shirky, is the real prize. There is no necessity that there be institutional or procedural rules to guide collaborative production through sharing practices, nor do there need to be any strict requirements on who can become a nominal member of such a project. People do it because they want to, and perhaps more importantly, because they can (whether or not there is an innate desire to share is irrelevant). There is no need to engage in external or even internal deliberation, and there is a space and group for every taste.

Digital literacy becomes an important threshold for participation. The lower this threshold is, the better. Shirky notes that the basic question facing all potential cooperators in the digital era is “how did you do that?” That is, how did you post that picture? How did you archive those Tweets?” How did you make your sources so transparent to the reader? The key is that asking such a question “in public” (in a forum or blog or Twitter) “is a spur to such communities of practice, bridging the former gap between publishing and conversation” (102-3). That is, between making public statements one might stand by, and deliberating. There is little need for formal training in digital techniques. Rather, people learn the skills they need by necessity, as they get through the day.

On this basis, perhaps, instead of communities proper, formed around some shared values, Shirky points to “communities of practice”, which are “inherently cooperative, and are beautifully supported by social tools, because that is exactly the kind of community whose members can recruit one another or allow themselves to be found by interested searcher” (2008: 101). This is about finding each other, finding the ‘other’ who has shared interest in cooperation on some project. The shared practice of, say, hashtagging is what provides the link. In this way, it is the process of locating the link that becomes most important.

The Internet and democracy discourse is instructive for updating our notions about how subjectivities come about in the era of digitally-mediated, ubiquitous, horizontal person-to-person communication and interaction. Although its insights are somewhat limited, the discourse generally highlights an important, yet overlooked, emergent fact: the activities the Internet supports are of utmost importance. It may not be that they are revolutionary, changing the nature of our social relations. After all, there are deep disagreements within the discourse regarding the effect of the Internet on democracy. There are conflicting notions about the role of the public sphere, the ways in which collective action may come about, and how collective identities and thin solidarities are consolidated. But looking at what people do everyday might tell us something about the emergence of the basic building blocks of a democracy—“the people”—and how the processes by which they become a people affect their behavior as such. Investigating this question is more pressing than considering the ultimate possibilities for emancipation, freedom, or justice that the Internet would appear to enable. Returning to one of the most fundamental, widespread activities that people engage in online—sharing—helps to skirt the debates over

whether the Internet is principally about linkages between people and groups or about spaces of resistance and production, and whether what happens online is good or bad for 21st century democracy. “To insist on talking about the Internet in everyday life is to deny the medium its extraordinary status, to see it as ordinary, but in no case as unimportant” (Bakardjieva, 2011: 59).

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