IV   Emerging Publics

13   Emerging Publics: Totem-Poling the 'We's and 'Me's of Citizen Participation

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Almost a century ago, a debate on the relation between new emerging technologies and the constitution of publics took place between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. Marres (2005) states that at the time it was often assumed that complexities related to new technology for communication, as well as transport and manufacturing, were a threat to the democratic society. The remedy, many thought, would be to simplify. Although Lippmann and Dewey debated from different perspectives, they both argued that strange, unfamiliar, and entangled objects are the conditions for public engagement and for public affairs to arise, rather than a threat. A concern or an issue that can be resolved by experts, institutions, or a social community doesn't become a public affair. In other words, issues that are too complex for a community to resolve bring *a public* into being. Although the Lippmann-Dewey debate took place almost a century ago, it still seems relevant.

The processes and places for innovation are often characterized by ubiquitous speed; unbounding collective intelligence in the service of societal and technological development is an act of fast, rational, and efficient production. In this production, places and agoras can be exemplified by artifacts such as meeting rooms, online or offline forums, conferences, and voting machines. These artifacts are considered tools for "coming together," but it is often a coming together that has the goal of increasing the speed of production. Virilio (1986, 5) describes the city as a "human dwelling place penetrated by channels of rapid communication." But when the pace is slowed, we can recognize that places, as well as objects, are more than mere tools. They have a role in the collective, quite similar to their human counterparts, and the doings of the collective constitute what we call "the public." Those publics, because they are numerous and diverse, are *emerging* rather than specified in constitutions, blueprints, or construction plans. And sometimes we must permit those publics to be slow-paced. We must also recognize that they are often ephemeral, highly situated, and entangled in complex ways.

An older example of public artifacts is the totem pole. Slowly carving a totem pole from a cedar tree was a tedious and slow process. Contrary to popular belief, totem poles were not meant for worship. Their meanings were as varied as the cultures that

produced them. Neither were they monumental in the sense of permanence; most often they were left to rot once erected. But they were carriers of meaning within local communities, and they were public artifacts.

The chapters in this part of the book will address different aspects of how the "totem poles" of collective future-making are constructed as public places. This doesn't imply the geographical meaning of place as being superior. The act of "becoming public" is also processes and tactics. Both objects and places participate in the act of "becoming public." For example, shouldn't we recognize the SIM card in a mobile phone as one of the communicating actors in a phone call? Means for "becoming public," such as designed objects and places, are also highly *appropriated* by people other than those who often are mentioned as "originators." The act of appropriation is perhaps the most important aspect of the emergence of publics, especially if we want to address behavioral changes toward more sustainable lifestyles. This calls for also accepting slowness in ways that differ from the traditional notion of innovation in product development and business development. However, we do not see the emerging publics, here elaborated and recounted, as oppositional to design, service, and product development. On the contrary, we find them to be strong candidates for producing good and sound things, elaborating mutual joint futures, and, in cases, also good business opportunities for product development. The way people appropriate technologies has long been a focus for understanding future use of the developed technologies. Open innovation models in which "the public" is represented are no longer new. Many stories stress how gaining insight to the everyday creativity of the public might be crucial for successful innovation. The concept of open source, exemplified by the development of the operating system Linux, is but one such story. How Short Message Service (SMS) was implemented as a marginal feature is another example; no one anticipated that it would be a foundationally new way of communicating, with large social, societal, and cultural effects. From the point of view of innovation, the notion of public participation is now widely accepted. The concept of public participation is a central theme of this book. It is reflected differently in each chapter, but the relation to different socio-material practices and issues of spatiality binds the chapters together. All the authors attempt to instantiate actual geographical places as innovation platforms and to frame problems at the hyper-local scale, mobilizing local residents to innovate solutions.

The notion of *practices* is important, since all the chapters in this part address different ways of *making* spaces public. The *makings* and the *doings* of these publics are performed differently in each case. In all cases, however, we can observe how networks of actors are emerging. These networks are being constituted by complex and dynamically changing relations of people, artifacts, spaces, and activities. The networks get stabilized before again being re-configured in rhythm to the doings that constitute their very essence. As spaces, they need not only to be produced but also to be re-produced,

and they are enacted as different sets of artifacts. Normative values affect the flow of participation.

As has already been said, participatory culture has its place in a chain of innovation, and that has implications for the market economy. But, of course, participation in public spaces also has implications for our understanding of the democratic public. It is often taken for granted, quite spontaneously, that a strong relation between publicness (as in being *visible to all*) and democracy is inherent, almost like a natural relationship. But in view of how political instability and the ever-changing nature of public acts get entangled with a variety of sometimes competing other public acts, the "bond" between publicness and democracy may not be so straightforward. New media practices and ICT development have created multi-layered territorializations in which different communities populate the same ground and engage with the same issues from different perspectives. The ways in which issues of concern become public matters are becoming more and more complex, and the border between public and private gets more and more blurred everyday as a result of the increasing use of social media.

The authors of the chapters in this part do not aspire to give an overarching analytical account of this complex discourse. Rather, we aim to give concrete accounts, more at the level of storytelling, of various public practices. Some short reflections on the concept of the public as put forth by Jürgen Habermas and a commentator on his work on publics and structural transformation might shed some light on the reference to totem poles and to 'we's and 'me's.

In his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas describes the public sphere as a space between the private and the authoritarian state. This space is neither private nor individual. It is also a "non-representational" sphere, not governed by governments, kings, or presidents. Public debate takes place in face-to-face meetings between citizens. Strong socio-material aspects, where the material settings affect social relations, are also at play. Habermas mentions coffee houses and Tischgesellschaften (table societies). One of the chapters in this part of the present volume (chapter 15) mentions a sewing circle, adding a maker's perspective to the "talked" debate. For Habermas, an overall inclusiveness characterizes the public sphere; it is open for everyone, which is an idea that also has been subject of criticism since specific positions, such as gender, ethnic origin, and social status still were criteria for inclusion or exclusion. It has been observed that the relationships between multiple publics are conflictual. Issues of governance with regard to participation certainly can be applied. That a public be open for everyone all of the time seems to be an unreachable ideal. To be fair to Habermas, it must be said that he observed that the claim to open access was never fully realized. However, distinguishing a space that is neither private nor governed by official institutions still provides a good framework in which to reflect on the notion of the public.

The lack of completeness in Habermas' thoughts can be observed and debated. Nancy Fraser (1990) challenges some of the assumptions underlying Habermas' notion of the public sphere. First, she addresses how open access to the public sphere relied upon a bracketing of indifferences in social status, a bracketing that was really not efficient since the public sphere indeed was governed by protocols which themselves were correlating markers of social inequality. Thus, a public sphere cannot be a zero-degree culture. Even more important, inclusiveness should also deal with decreasing social inequality, and should not pretend that it doesn't matter. Second, Fraser questions the possibility of a single, homogeneous public sphere. She argues that a multiplicity of publics serves better to advance democracy. In line with the idea of parallel discourses, Fraser argues, we should focus not only on internal public communication but also on inter-public interactions. An interesting example of pluralistic use of technological tools for publicness, such as smartphones, can be found in the story of Bambuser (chapter 16). Participants in a demonstration broadcast the events with their mobile phones, while simultaneously being documented by the police using the very same application. Another example is *Threads*, the sewing-circle project discussed in chapter 15; it illustrates how, even within the same framing, the networks change as the *Threads* exhibition travels from one place to another. Third, Fraser stresses a complex relation between private and public interests in debates. There are no clear boundaries between private matters and what will constitute common affairs; it cannot be foreseen or decided at beforehand. A democratic, public space must ensure that there are opportunities for minorities to convince others that what in the past counted as private actually should be a concern for the public; as an example, Fraser notes that domestic violence was once considered a private affair. Interest groups, and *self*-interest, cannot be ruled out from the public; the entanglement of the private and the public is a complex mesh. Addressing the tension between the shared common and at times hidden private motivates trying to enroll both the 'we's and the 'me's of public participation, cutting across the distinction between public and private. Finally, Fraser questions the sharp distinction between society and state. If the gap between public debate and decision-making mechanisms remains, what will then be the effects of a good public debate? In contrast, Fraser puts forth the idea that the public includes both strong publics (as in decision makers) and weaker publics (which should not be constrained to mere opinion forming).

Chantal Mouffe is another scholar who has sought to find other ways to think of democracy than the liberal one. She writes about the drawbacks of the universality that, for example, Habermas and Richard Rorty put forward: the liberal framework forecloses the antagonistic dimension of coexistence. Mouffe writes that Habermas and Rorty want to "retain the vision of a consensus that would not imply any form of exclusion and the availability of some form of realization of universality" (Mouffe 2005, 88). "This," Mouffe continues, "is why, no more than the Habermasian discourse-theoretical

approach, can Rorty's pragmatism provide an adequate framework for a pluralist democratic politics."

Mouffe herself argues for an agonistic, non-consensus-seeking democracy. While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation in which the conflicting parties recognize the legitimacy of their opponents, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict. They are adversaries, not enemies. This means that while in conflict they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place (Mouffe 2005). Mouffe means that the way to live in a pluralistic democracy is to bring issues and concerns into a political sphere, not a moral one.

Judith Butler's (2011) account of street politics uses the mass demonstrations that occurred that year in Cairo's Tahrir Square—with movements between the square, side streets, and back alleys—to contest the distinction between political and moral and the distinction between public and private. Butler argues that public space is not public in itself, or because it is planned to be so; publicness has to emerge through action, and the material conditions for political actions matter. Every act needs some kind of material support, which in turn means that the material support is part of the action, as well as that which the struggle is about. In other words, it matters that it is a public square that is being occupied. It matters because it becomes a way of securing the material conditions that are needed to perform in public, such as the square having a certain size, being accessible for many and do not have locked gates etc., and this is also what the struggle is about. It becomes a way of negotiating the public character of our material environment.

Public spheres do not necessarily have to achieve permanent status. If we reflect on the totem pole metaphor, we can say that totem poles are not monumental but they are rather included in the complex ecology of everyday things, mundane doings as well as institutional practices, and not with the presumption of permanence. They emerge and vaporize. They have a socio-material foundation, thus constructing spaces for social interaction, meaning that they are not foremost abstracted in principles and legislation, but in concrete doings, beyond mere talk. A common misunderstanding of totem poles is that they are foremost religious icons. It is true that they express relations with Native American spirituality, but as a metaphor joining the chapters in this part, a stronger interpretation is to see them not as containers of original culture but as part of a narrative that tells us about a long history of cultural relationships—both colonialism and the history of settlement—as well as the reaction against it: a Native American response made for a specific representational practice. That is also the case with the three chapters in this part. They are not stories from a specific point-of-view only, but the stories are integrated in a complex mesh of relationships, and it is the very entanglement that is put forth as characteristic of the idea of emerging publics.

On a conceptual level, two interrelated things bind the chapters in this part of the book together. First, we have the notion of *appropriation* and the accompanying aspect of social shaping of technology. In chapters 14 and 16, the design of empowering technologies is described, but it is stressed how the technologies must be appropriated in use. That they must be appropriated implies that without the social shaping of them—and the user-generated content necessary for making them meaningful—they are really nothing. The technologies themselves are simply empty placeholders, and it is the creative "colonialization" of them that make them players in the "collective creation of values" described in chapters 14 and 16. They, thus, represent how the participatory function of media is necessary for an understanding of present-day media ecologies. Second, the concept of *boundary infrastructuring* might be used as a common denominator for the three chapters. Earlier in this introduction, the possibility of a single homogeneous public sphere is heavily questioned. On the contrary, it is argued here that a multiplicity of publics actually better advances democracy. This implies that the often-sought consensus of opinions in debates is not what is strived for. Instead, what matters is to find commonalities strong enough to support the formation of publics but weak enough to permit different publics to appropriate them differently. One such concept, put forth by Star and Griesemer (1989, 297), is that of boundary objects:

Boundary objects are those objects that both inhabit several communities of practice and satisfy the informal requirements of each of them. Boundary objects are thus both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use and become strongly structured in individual-site use.

Boundary objects are similar to boundary infrastructuring, but the latter can be understood as a process of providing a common ground for diverse stakeholders who at times have different agendas. This can be applied to the technological design of artifacts, which plays a major role in the chapters in this part, but it goes beyond the border constituted by material objects. It can also include the building of relationships and the shaping of communities through collective actions, as described in chapter 15. The re-configuration discussed in chapter 15 relates back to the concept of appropriation. It can be said that several of the technological artifacts described in this part of the book originate from technologies for monitoring and control, but as they are contextualized here—not least in the case of Bambuser—they rather try to re-direct the power of consumer- and monitoring technologies.

Chapter 14 explores the setting up of digital flows in the city of Malmö through the use of wireless media distribution in public spaces, and how mobile gaming can be used for storytelling about the mundane places that have potential for being transformed into a kind of urban publics. With a focus on urban youths, the chapter addresses the role of devices in urban place-making and the relationship between places and the

everyday practices of urban youth and highlights the complex entanglement of rela-
tions, between citizens and other actors, that are characteristic for emerging publics
in cities. Stories are provided from two different design experiments, each constructed
of a series of events, where rather simple technologies have been used as sketching
tools for how new-media applications can be used for temporarily appropriating public
spaces. The first experiment involves the use of BluePromo (what could be described
as a technology probe for distributing self-produced digital media via Bluetooth) by
a grassroots youth movement in various urban places. Some specific qualities of the
probe are discussed, as is the importance of performing public experiments. The second
case, Urblove, makes use of a mobile gaming platform for storytelling about mundane
local places. The discussion of Urblove focuses on what kinds of places were chosen and
their meaning to the young people involved. Through the emerging design, associated
both with the co-creation process and with the potential of the product/game engine,
possible controversies in the use of urban spaces are put forth as they are used differ-
ently by actors with diverging agendas. These public experiments, in which different
youth groups try out prototypes, bring forth narratives and stories of alternative use of
urban spaces.

The subject of chapter 15 is a mobile sewing circle in which messages received by
means of SMS (Short Message Service) were embroidered by hand or by an embroidery
machine with bespoke software. While many stories in this book argue for design as a
driving force in emerging publics, they do so from different perspectives. Most of the
time, design prompts us to think about the products that are made. This chapter, how-
ever, explores how processes of making can constitute ground for co-articulations of
issues from a multiplicity of perspectives. Here, the active building of new relationships
can be seen as an example of how a strong boundary infrastructuring process makes
it possible for a collective, not knowing each other in advance, to become materially
implicated in a variety of potential issues. The invitation to embroider text messages
is not a definition of a problem in itself, but rather an articulation of an area of curios-
ity, which can be framed as curiosity concerning ways of living with technologies. The
account deals with how new relationships emerge through *making* (that is, being in
close relation to digital and physical materials, as well as being close to other human
beings). The chapter suggests that it is important to extend the network of connections
to humans and non-humans that are not in the immediate realm, be it geographical
or temporal.

Chapter 16 shares the story of the development and use of a highly relevant tool
for democratic interventions in emerging publics: the Bambuser mobile-phone appli-
cation, which is democratizing the live video broadcast. The Bambuser application
enables streaming of live video, at almost no cost. It was used extensively at demon-
strations and protests in Egypt and Tunisia during the so-called Arab Spring. The re-
directing of what originally were intended as consumer- and monitoring technologies

is very obvious in this chapter. Surveillance is turned into *sousveillance*—the monitoring of events by citizens rather than authorities. The chapter recounts both the design of Bambuser and interesting examples of its use. It highlights how much of the research on digital divides has been focused on access, while little attention has been given to inequality in the ability to use and fully comprehend the nature of the technology. In line with this, the chapter argues that the digital divide should be seen as, first of all, a social problem in which the technological aspect is highly integrated, and that Bambuser provides opportunities to significantly alter the structure of public spheres and bring marginalized groups of citizens closer to a deliberative state of forming public opinion. A central argument is how the use of technology could, and should, be seen as support for citizens in reflecting on their own awareness of what citizenship mean, rather than simply being a tool for political change.

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