

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Jose Marichal, *Facebook Democracy: The Architecture of Disclosure and the Threat to Public Life*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012, 193 pp., \$89.95 hardcover, 978-1-4094-4430-5

In this rewarding and thoughtful book, Jose Marichal situates Facebook within the landscape of contemporary political life, asking how what he calls Facebook's "architecture of disclosure" is reframing the possibilities of political agency and the political identity of individuals. The book draws on a wide range of literature in social and political theory, from Arendt and Sennett to Giddens and Castells, to develop a broad argument around transformations in public and private life, the political subject, and the personalization of political engagement in the age of social media. This is a readable and lively text that moves beyond well-worn considerations of whether Facebook enhances or diminishes democratic ideals and processes. Rather, the text examines some of the evolving ambivalences and contradictions between Facebook and the political, between a proprietary platform and communitarian sensibilities. Marichal uses a content analysis of 250 political groups on Facebook to think through how "mediated publics" affect processes of mobilization, deliberation, and engagement. The book makes an important contribution to debates about social media and politics, asking what kind of politics is being framed and mobilized.

The first chapter provides a short literature review of key issues and debates, which include dominant narratives of Web politics, the fluid public and private aspects of Facebook, and its relationships with citizenship. The author argues that Facebook's primary effect is to transform our social networks into a matter of private choices, thus constituting a powerful bridging of the "neoliberal Web" with the "communitarian Web" (p. 31). Following this, *Facebook Democracy* is organized around several important themes explored across nine subsequent chapters.

First, the ways in which Facebook encourages the privatization and commodification of previously public acts (such as *connecting* with others) forms the backbone of the book. Marichal argues that Facebook is able to prioritize "disclosure" over other modes of relating to the world in a way that appears to be simply a user's rational choice. He uses examples of code changes in how the newsfeed operates, the "updating" of

privacy policies, and efforts to make user information “radically transparent,” to show Facebook positioning itself as a neutral platform while at the same time structuring specific trajectories of user activity. This is a similar argument to Jose van Dijck’s (2013) compelling account of how Facebook’s platform makes “sharing” a default imperative, as part of a broader “engineering of connectivity.” Marichal goes on to argue that this pulls us closer to our intimate networks but distances us from the “world out there,” encouraging a political “mobilization over topics that are personal” (p. 113).

Second, the personalization effect is thought to have several important ramifications. Drawing on Arendt’s articulation of the significance of a political public sphere, Marichal argues that Facebook does not foster political disengagement but rather encourages the disclosure of personal affective politics that increasingly frame our sense of larger issues in the public sphere, such that “we see public life strictly through the lens of the personal” (p. 64). Further, the push to become preoccupied with the self through connected profiles, to “create a pre-selected venue where we can comfortably present ourselves to others” (p. 74) represents a “conflation of the market and the polis” that alters our political subjectivity. For example, the prioritization of disclosure over *listening*, means that we are in danger of becoming “passive” political subjects, through which a potentially “extraordinary politics” is transformed into the regulated and strictly normative precisely because of the *visibility* of Facebook. The complex ways in which the personal and the private have become *where* the political and the public are located and articulated is explored in detail elsewhere by Papacharissi (2010); it is usefully examined here in the specific cases of Facebook political groups that exemplify both a “plurality of voices” (p. 90) and the *performance* of political identity that seeks legitimation in this visible public archive.

Third, exploring how the performative aspects of political identity are shaping the nature of mediated political activism illuminates the ambivalence of relationships between Facebook, political mobilization, and models of the public sphere. Examinations of the role of Facebook in coordinated political action, particularly in the Middle East, show how the personalization of the political can “work as a primary tool for liberation” (p. 126) in states where the self is repressed or negated, but work far less well in Western democracies, where the “retreat to the personal” exemplifies the commodification of the self. In Marichal’s account, Facebook neither simply reproduces existing political activity nor radically alters it. Similarly, concerns around privacy, the increasingly specified and predictive self fostered through Facebook data analytics, and the

generalized visibility of private life through social media, has starkly different implications and consequences for diverse populations.

The book integrates these themes in the conclusion to make an argument for “listening to the other” (p. 158) through social networking, against the current default to disclose and connect. Marichal argues that this requires a re-engineering of platforms but also an emphasis, with Nick Couldry, on “voice” in wider political culture. The book weaves together a considerable number of themes, is detailed in its examination of particular cases and maintains an admirable sense of unpredictability and contingency throughout.

There are a number of elements in the book that, I think, might have been dealt with more satisfactorily. First, while the skillful use of the author’s own examples of Facebook political groups throughout provides cogent illustrations of key arguments, I would have appreciated a more systematic overview of the groups at some juncture, or at least an appendix or typology of these groups. As it is, while the content analysis of these group pages may have been robust, the reader is left uncertain about the relative significance of particular cases. Second, although the emphasis on the architecture of Facebook is to be commended, I would have liked to know more about the author’s position on technical and discursive agency and how this frames the relations between this “choice architecture” and the diverse activities of Facebook users, especially given the geographically wide range of examples used in the book. This would help to explain how the desired shift from architectures of disclosure might be practically pursued. In Chapter Seven, Marichal recognizes the increasing significance of how people access and mobilize this architecture through mobile devices across diverse contexts, and I think this would have been a useful thread to incorporate throughout the book. The view of Facebook as primarily a business is a common argument, but has constraints that have been significantly challenged elsewhere (Miller 2011). Third, there is a tendency to repeat and italicize core arguments throughout. The considerable disparity between chapter length and density begs the question whether the latter chapters could have been organized to avoid some of this repetition. Finally, and this concerns the publisher, there are a great many typos throughout that detract from an otherwise well-written text that is full of great clarity. These are all relatively minor points in what is on the whole an enjoyable and timely book that will certainly be of major interest to scholars and students across sociology, media and communications, and political studies, that are interested in the co-evolution of platforms and political life.

REFERENCES

- Miller, D. 2011. *Tales from Facebook*. Cambridge: Polity.
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