

Book Review

Facebook Democracy. The Architecture of Disclosure and the Threat to Public Life, Marichal, J. (2012). Surrey: Ashgate, 200 pp.

Jose Marichal's investigation into Facebook, as a setting for democracy and potential influence on the public sphere, identifies something special about Facebook that both makes it popular and unique, even among social networking sites. This enables him to focus on the use and potential repercussions of Facebook specifically, freshening familiar discourse about the relationship between Internet use and democratic activity. Marichal's idea is that Facebook's appeal is based on supporting personal interactions—specifically *disclosure* and *connection*. Facebook users are continually attracted by the human desire to strengthen our relationships by connecting with each other and expressing (disclosing) ourselves to people within our social network (p. 155). Facebook monetises the resulting data: thus Facebook is designed, managed and re-designed to maximise this sharing of personal experiences. Marichal calls this Facebook's "*architecture of disclosure*".

Marichal suggests that this use of Facebook increases a bias towards personalisation and self-expression in day to day interactions, seemingly the preferred modes of the modern western world. He is primarily concerned about the encroachment of the personal into political and democratic life escalating as Facebook users are habituated into seeing "*the public through the lens of the private*" (p. 57). Negative effects include losing the skills necessary for reasoned analysis and rational deliberation, especially for dialogue with those holding quite different views. The corrosive personalisation of politics is also increased.

Facebook Democracy is essentially a well-argued literature review with a thread of empirical research running through it. Marichal has conducted a content analysis of 250 Facebook groups, from 32 countries, in 2011. When setting up Facebook groups, administrators choose from set categories. Marichal chose his 250 groups from 500 groups categorised as "general interest/politics". The methodology is not described in much more detail. The data presented in the book is taken from the groups' titles and descriptions. This may be the extent of content that was analysed. Marichal does not mention joining any groups or trying to contact group administrators or members. Nor does he describe how Facebook groups work in much detail. In particular, he does not contrast their structure or style with those of the Facebook user's personal newsfeed, where presumably the majority of personal connection and disclosure takes place. Facebook pages, which also provide ways to involve people in political organisations or issues [5], are neither described nor discussed.

Marichal is disappointed to find that the groups generally present statements of opinion, rather than spaces for deliberation. This is illustrated by the absence of invitations to discussion, such as "All opinions welcome", within titles or descriptions. Perhaps an analysis of group posts would provide a different picture. The groups seem to resemble petitions, with their call to back a specific statement, combined with Facebook's prominent display of the number of people in each group, though Marichal does not mention this parallel. This is wonderfully illustrated by a group opposing the Georgian President, titled "*I bet I can get at least 10,000 or more ppl who dislike Mikhael Saakashvili*", with the description "*The President of Georgia is an asshole that's what I think! If u agree with me and dislike Misha join my group and let's make it to 10,000 to prove that he's a real asshole!*" (p. 142). (Bucher [2] provides an interesting discussion of Facebook's display of headcounts, as part of a *technicity of attention*).

The term *architecture of disclosure* echoes Thaler and Sunstein's ideas about "nudge" behaviour [8]. It refers to various ways in which Facebook encourages its members to share more, to share specific types of data, like photographs or reactions to brands or entertainment products, and to share with more people. For example, Facebook users manage their settings, including the publicity levels of types of content, through dashboards. Frequently changing these dashboards can make it difficult for people to set privacy levels. Frequently changing default privacy settings may result in content becoming more widely shared, as less attentive or confident users fail to re-master and re-adjust their settings. Few other potential elements of the *architecture of disclosure* are described, and none that relate to Facebook groups, rather than users' profiles or home pages. (A potential exception is Marichal's assertion that group administrators cannot remove content, which is not the case at the time of writing this review.) The "*architecture of disclosure*" is most vividly described through financial drivers: it exists because Facebook's commercial model requires users to provide data about themselves and their lives. Given the continual development of Facebook interfaces, policies and APIs, the *architecture of disclosure* is probably more useful as a theoretical concept than a technical term, though this becomes problematic in the conclusion: when Marichal suggests an "*architecture of listening*" (p. 158), after Crawford [3], few specific elements can be identified to illustrate potential reforms.

Aside from unease about the ethically challenging combination of expressive disclosure and commercial profit, Marichal's main concern is that Facebook users become so habituated to the cosy world of personal expression, within a selected public, that they lose the ability to consider the world "out there" with the abstraction necessary to rationally think through and deliberate its complex problems. Though Marichal's discussion of the public sphere includes a range of writers from Aristotle to Papacharissi [6], his touchstone is Arendt's [1] concern about a modern retreat into the private sphere, considering the public sphere an essential arena for full development of the self. In classical times, private life (*idion*) was associated with the mundane and self-preservation; public life (*koinon*) enabled men to fulfil their potential. Tellingly, *idion* was the domain of women and slaves (p. 61).

Distinctions between public and private political topics are not clear. Arendt identifies pain as a private matter, too subjective for the public sphere. Yet pain is implicated in a range of political topics, from cuts in disability benefits to the systems under which the pain relief is controlled by public health bodies or the black market. Marichal provides very few examples of public sphere topics that require structured, de-personalised consideration: specifically, financial institutions, global warming and Tsunamis. It is not clear that an abstract and rational understanding of these phenomena, however detailed, would be threatened by personal regard. Arguably, the presentation of financial institutions as working beyond the understanding of customers and regulators enabled the property and debt bubbles to precipitate the recent financial crisis, affecting many people, personally. In a quick historical overview of the public/private dichotomy, religion is not discussed as the traditional power-base for personal issues within public life.

Perhaps the public sphere is distinguished by interaction mode. Marichal seems taken with Sennett's [7] public sphere actors' appropriate presentation: cool, formal and ready for business. This public mask enables, through de-personalisation, the necessary actions of the political world. The modern penchant for self-expression threatens development of this diplomatic skill and undervalues it in politicians. Contemporary politicians need to present as authentic, with additional informality on social media, generally with the help of their staff. Marichal's discussion is entertaining and he notes essential differences between European and U.S. politics. However, the highly formalised language and processes of traditional politics are not identified, by Marichal, as potential barriers to participation. Further, formal political masks may enable hypocrisy or even corruption. Political figures like Scotland's Cardinal O'Brien and former MSP, Bill Walker, may pronounce publicly on one thing Parliament, while practicing its

opposite in private. (Cardinal Keith O'Brien objected to plans for Equal Marriage and sex education and blocked a report into sex abuse in the church. He resigned due to inappropriate sexual conduct. Bill Walker was found guilty of domestic abuse. Allegations surfaced after he spoke in a discussion about domestic violence in The Scottish Parliament.)

Perhaps the public sphere is distinguished by its inhabitants, with women and slaves at home. Marichal introduces the feminist discourse around public and private within the theme "*engagement as personal citizens*" (p. 89). This covers the fragmentation of the public sphere, as well as personalised modes of political action, such as narrative, drama and public conversation. Women do not fragment the public sphere with their concerns. Topics such as childcare and equal pay are at the centre of both political discourse and economic systems. There can be no public sphere without women.

That said, Marichal has some very interesting perspectives on the role of personalised politics in totalitarian states, including theocracies. He recognises that where individualism is denigrated by the state, personal narratives carry a particular power to reveal oppression. Marichal describes the role of social media in supporting uprisings in the Middle East, including tensions between anonymity and personal identification, as Facebook required a named administrator for the "We are all Khaled Said" group. This group was set up to bear witness to the death of the Khaled Said, at police hands, in Alexandria, in 2011, and is credited with galvanising Egyptian youth into a mass-movement (p. 122). Marichal contrasts this situation with established democracies in the West, where politics may be regarded as an unwelcome topic. In this case, Facebook has a vested interest in limiting its users' exposure to potentially difficult or unpleasant interactions.

Marichal's study of Facebook groups, while interesting, does not substantiate his suggestion that disclosure, connection and personal expression are the dominant Facebook modes: the study does not investigate the experiences of Facebook users, for example by interviewing them. Some evidence is presented through the results of other studies, based on surveys of users and content analysis of posts. However, these are unrepresentative, with a bias towards college students as participants, whereas Facebook use differs between people, across age groups and cultures. In a Facebook.com [4] content analysis of one million status updates, from U.S. users, younger people were more emotionally revealing than older people. Unrepresentative data sets may account for the mismatch between personal expression dominating Facebook, the theme of this book, and the diverse picture I find in my own research and in my personal experience. In interviews with people active in their communities, I have found that the most popular approach to using Facebook is rarely to post personal, non-political, statements, but to use Facebook to promote activities, as well as keep up with communities, organisations and events. My own newsfeed is full of updates from campaigns and arts organisations, including frequent requests to sign petitions, interspersed with photographs of children, dogs and local scenes. Useful information is exchanged and families keep in touch across continents. Facebook Democracy is an engaging read, well written and interesting, however, more evidence is needed to corroborate one of the book's central ideas: that expression and disclosure are the principal motives for using Facebook.

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