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A Pragmatic Take on Privacy and Democracy

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Revealing private content on the Web can also spark public engagement. To understand this, we need to challenge our common sense notions of privacy and democracy.

By Andreas Birkbak

The Web should work in the most democratic way viable, while doing as much as possible to protect the privacy of its users. These are statements that most people seem to agree with, to an extent where they have become common sense. The widespread uptake of social media use, however, suggests the conventional distinction between something private and something public does not always hold in practice. For example, prominent Web scholars like Nancy Baym and danah boyd note how we might understand social media better if we see that "even the most private of selves are formed in relation to diverse others."

This insight is taken from pragmatist philosophy, and I would like to suggest that this line of thinking is fruitful for challenging our tendency to think about the Web in terms of a strong public/private dichotomy. My source of inspiration is the classic American pragmatist John Dewey [1].

In a deceptively small book from 1927, *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey offers an alternative take on the public/private distinction. Like any other pragmatist his vantage point is practice, that is, human actions. What Dewey is interested in is how we might come to better understand our actions and their consequences. More specifically, the problems of the public that Dewey is pointing to arise from the observation that as our societies grow increasingly technological, our actions also tend to have an increasing number of unforeseen and indirect consequences. In order for people to live democratically, by which Dewey simply means to be able to direct one's own life in a meaningful way, it is imperative to come to grabs with all these indirect consequences. This is where the public enters the picture.

Dewey distinguishes between direct and indirect consequences of actions. If consequences are direct, it means they are contained in the situation where the act is taking place, and they can be dealt with privately in that situation. If consequences are indirect, however, they spread beyond the boundaries of the immediate situation in which the act takes place. The result is that a public needs to be formed in order to take care of the indirect consequences. One might take pollution as a simple example: If a father is burning garden waste, and the direct consequence is the smoke prevents his children from playing outside, it is a private matter to put out the fire or postpone any playing outdoors. However, if the father is also burning material that contains toxic chemicals, his actions might have the indirect consequence of polluting the air in the whole neighborhood. In this situation, a public is needed to a) sort out the consequences, e.g. by putting up air quality measurement instruments and b)

Illustration by JNT Visual

legislate so that the father will hesitate to repeatedly release toxics into the air.

The important thing to notice here is the apparently private act of burning waste needs to be qualified as having public consequences in order to be controlled. A process of inquiry has to take place, the result of which is that it becomes clear the burning of waste is in fact polluting. The act of burning waste is now seen in an entirely new light: It is no longer a mundane everyday event, but an unacceptable practice.

In my work on social media groups, I have noticed how infrastructures like Facebook groups sometimes come to serve this purpose of qualifying acts as having indirect consequences. One case I have studied is the use of open Facebook groups during a severe snowstorm on the Danish island of Bornholm [2]. People in the more rural parts of the island were snowbound for up to a week, something few of them were prepared for. In dealing with the situation, some inhabitants not only searched for information and tried to help each other, but also questioned whether the authorities on Bornholm had done enough to remove the snow from their roads. This concern formed the rationale behind the Facebook group that became an important meeting point for a couple of hundred snowbound islanders.

With Dewey we might come to understand this Facebook group on Bornholm as contributing to democracy in the pragmatist sense in so far as the members collectively qualified their snowstorm troubles as not only a result of forces of nature, but also of the (in)actions of the local authorities. The snowbound Facebook users came to understand their situation as also an indirect consequence of the authorities' act of not removing more snow. Importantly, the members of the Facebook group did not ask the authorities to do the impossible, but rather to understand the situation of people in the rural parts of Bornholm. The rural dwellers felt overlooked and misunderstood. In order to compensate for that, they used Facebook to share updates about the snowstorm and its consequences from their perspectives.

This is where the story becomes interesting for a discussion of privacy. The Facebook users on Bornholm had to share private stories, photos, and videos in order to qualify their situation as a public issue of uncontrolled indirect consequences (of the inaction of the authorities). In other words, the sharing of personal accounts formed the basis of public engagement. Revealing private content, even unintentionally, can have productive consequences for how other people understand the issues they struggle with. Powerful "we-identities" can be built around deeply personal stories that people can relate to.

Such we-identities can then provide the self-confidence needed to take action on issues, as when the snowbound Facebook users on Bornholm worked together to attract national media attention to their situation and help each other in other, more mundane ways. What is more, democracy does not necessarily hinge on rational deliberation in an abstract public sphere. Rather, public engagement happens when people work to qualify their personal problems as public issues. What I have observed is social media platforms like Facebook provide interesting ways of making such moves.

However, we are not used to thinking about the Web in these pragmatist terms. Rather, our ideas about how the Web should work are informed by other kinds of philosophies. Let me highlight two widespread concerns with how the contemporary Internet works.

First, some fear that too much is

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revealed too easily on the Web. The notion of having privacy only makes sense in relation to its counterpart—the notion of exposing something private in public, that is, a breach of privacy. Here, public simply means "visible" and private simply means "hidden." Or to put it in terms of control, public is taken to mean "deliberately revealed" while private means "only shown to a select audience." Such an understanding of the public/private distinction is highly intuitive and indeed captures many of the concerns with user privacy in the age of social media.

Second, some fear that the Web is harmful to democracy. These concerns have to do with the notion of public space as something fundamentally important in a democracy. The concern here is not that we are too exposed by our social media content, but quite the opposite: What happens on social media tends to be "too private" to qualify as public deliberation. Here is a tendency to talk about public and private in binary terms. A popular way to describe this is to use Cass Sunstein's term "echo chambers," which describes how the groups we participate in on social media tend to confirm our own (read: biased) beliefs rather than challenge them. This is not conventionally seen as a good dynamic, since democracy is understood as dependent on the clash of divergent opinions in an open public space.

The two sets of concerns—privacy and democracy—are key to the way scholars in Web science and related disciplines try to capture the current Web as a domain of "networked publics." The concerns stem from understanding the relationship between the private and the public domains as fundamentally problematic. Concerning privacy, the thinking goes, it is a good thing that people can share content from their everyday lives with each other through the Web, but people need to be able to control where the line between public and private is drawn. Concerning democracy, it is a good thing that people get new ways of engaging through social media, but if people are not entering into a dialogue with opposing viewpoints, the contribution to democracy is far from clear. In the worst case, social media might

distract people from engaging in the "proper" public deliberation that is seen as key to any real democracy.

My question is: Are these dilemmas inevitable? One way to find out is to investigate the assumptions on which they rest. For this purpose, it is useful to go beyond understanding public/private as meaning visible/hidden, but also take into account the normative relationship between the notion of public space and democracy, as just introduced. The reason is that these normative ideas draw on well-known political philosophies that understand "the public" and "the private" as different spheres that should ideally be kept separate. This idea is the source of our dilemmas about privacy and democracy on the Web, and there are at least two prominent ways of arriving at it.

"People are the best versions of themselves in their private spheres." This is a key idea in liberal political philosophy. The logic is that the state should be of minimal size, only just large enough to secure the fundamental rights of its individual citizens. Apart from protecting basic freedoms and safety, the public sector should stay out of the private sphere. In a comparative perspective, this kind of liberal logic is more proliferate in the U.S. than in Europe, but it offers an extremely influential argument for why the private and the public should be kept separate.

"People are the best versions of themselves in the public sphere." This is a notion central to republican political philosophy. This set of ideas turns the liberal logic on its head, but has the same result of imposing a strong public/private distinction. According to the republican ideal, private interests need to be contained in order to achieve the public goods that benefit everyone. The logic is that being a good citizen means shoving private interests aside in order to make space for communal interests. This kind of logic is arguably more widespread in Europe than in the U.S., but it certainly also exists in both places, offering another influential argument why the private and the public needs to be kept apart.

While these two powerful logics seem mutually exclusive, they co-exist in practice. How is this possible? Apart from the fact that humans seem to

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have an amazing capability of uniting in practice what seems hopelessly divided in the abstract, the coexistence of liberal and republican ideas is arguably made possible through the idea of free-market capitalism. The logic I am thinking about is the idea that while we might be egoists when we pursue our private interests, the "invisible hand" of the market ensures these individual pursuits are at the same time good for everyone. At a stroke (of an invisible hand), the liberal and republican ideals may coexist.

This is hardly the place to go into discussions about how capitalism justifies itself, or not. The point I want to make by venturing into political philosophy is merely if it feels intuitively right that the public and the private are domains that should be kept separate, it is probably because of the powerful and widespread logics just described. These are important political philosophies that will no doubt continue to be central to the way we think about and practice democracy. However, by pointing to the philosophical origins of our ideas about public and private, it also becomes possible to see that there must be philosophical alternatives.

The alternative vantage point for thinking about the Web in terms of publics, which I find most fruitful, is that of pragmatism. One general insight pragmatist thought has to offer is that in practice, we never exist as isolated individuals. Even in our most private moments, we always draw on the habits, skills, and ideas passed over to us from others, and we constantly imagine the thoughts and re-

actions of others when we decide on a course of action. This means any ideal of perfect privacy must be taken with a grain of salt.

At the same time, importantly, there is also no collective level floating around over the heads of individuals, such as "society," "democracy," or "the public sphere." In practice, it is always individuals who act. Even when we say we are all caught up in an uncontrollable process of globalization, for example, it always takes an individual to actually trade stocks across continents, and a prime minister or an activist to express concern that we have lost control over the global economy. The consequence of this pragmatist viewpoint is that when we talk about "the public" it never exists automatically, but is brought into being by a lot of connected individual acts.

The point I would like to reiterate is the widespread intuition that the public and private should ideally be kept separate oversimplifies how these things work in practice. This is what I tried to illustrate with the case study of how Facebook groups were used in the Bornholm snowstorm. The philosophical assumptions lying behind the conventional view on privacy and democracy come from a specific place and might thus be replaced. One fruitful experiment might be to replace these assumptions with more pragmatist ones. Because while we should not accept uncritically what shiny, new Web technologies have to offer, we should also not discount the ways in which social media might make productive moves across the public/private divide easier for millions of regular users in thousands of specific situations.

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Biography

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