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Editorial

Affordances, Affect and Audiences - Making sense of networked publics, introduction to AoIR 2017 special issue on networked publics

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Introduction

The 2017 annual conference of the Association of Internet Researchers took place in Tartu, Estonia, and was focused on networked publics, which, as the call for papers highlighted, "play an important role in shaping the political, social, economic, cultural but also moral, ethical and value-laden landscapes of contemporary life." This special issue is comprised of papers presented at the conference (AoIR 2017) and its doctoral colloquium, and engages with the affordances that networked communication technologies (social media platforms, websites, internet based governmental or corporate infrastructures for voting or banking) have for the emergence or maintenance of networked publics; but also, and more specifically, the affordances that these networked publics have for manifestations of human affect, sociality and sociability. Our collaborators undertake analyses of networked publics of solidarity and hate (Nikunen, 2018; Kuo, 2018), connection and disconnection (Dremljuga, 2018), democratic participation and authoritarianism, tolerance and intolerance (Sikk, 2018; Kuo, 2018), as well as the affordances of networked publics for reaching one's imagined audiences (Tikerperi, 2018) and whether these imagined audiences evoke individual and institutional trust (Männiste & Masso, 2018).

The figure of a single, coherent, central public sphere, where individuals come together, put aside their differences and participate as equals (i.e. the one Habermas envisioned in 1989) has arguably always been a somewhat sentimental ideal - comparable to the figure of "community" as Zygmunt Bauman (2001) has described it. This conceptualization of a public sphere has been criticized for its ideological blindness to barriers of participation and its reproduction of existing boundaries of marginalization. The ideal figure of a public sphere, however, has further unravelled with the spread of digital technologies and platforms, which have allowed spaces for, and made visible the fractured abundance of (sometimes) overlapping public-like communicative situations. This has been described in more and less optimistic terms. On the more optimistic end of the spectrum, perhaps, is Axel Bruns' (2008, p. 69) suggestion that what we have is "a patchwork of overlapping public spheres centred around specific themes and communities, which through their overlap nonetheless form a network of issue publics that is able to act as an effective substitute for the conventional, universal public sphere of the mass media age." The more pessimistic interpretations evoke the metaphors of echo chambers (Sunstein, 2001; 2007) and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) to argue that group dynamics like homophily and selective exposure (cf. Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015), group biases like confirmation bias, self-serving bias, anchoring bias or cognitive dissonance (cf Kahneman, 2011) along with the algorithmic interventions on platforms (Brossard & Scheufele, 2013) foster polarization rather than a coming together. In fact, it has been argued that the new public sphere is occupied by multiple parallel publics and counterpublics that coexist in relation to an abundance of digitalized symbolic material, which lends itself to remodelling a multitude of interpretations (Downey & Fenton, 2003). As one of our collaborators, Kaarina Nikunen (2018) writes: "Herein lies one of the painful challenges of the current media environment: it is increasingly difficult to argue how the proliferation of social media participation might enable a vibrant public sphere and a sense of social solidarity. Instead, we see more polarisation, contestation and intensified disputes across the digital space, which affects the everyday lives of activists and media workers." Scholarship engaged with ideas of group behaviours, ideologies, attitudes and opinions on and with the internet have contributed an array of conceptualizations of publics to address these complexities. This special issue does, and we now will, engage with a couple of such conceptualizations.

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What are networked publics?

Mizuko Ito's (2008) description of networked publics as "social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media," inspired what is probably the most cited definition of networked publics today. For danah boyd (2011, p. 39) "networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies (...) they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice (...). They allow people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes and they help them connect with a world beyond their close friends and family."

There are particular characteristics and dynamics to communication on the internet that shape how networked publics come to be experienced and enacted. boyd (2011) lists three important, interconnected dynamics - the largely invisible audiences, the often collapsing social context and the resultant blurring between what is public and what is private.

First, when we interact online, the audiences of our expressions are largely invisible - we do not know exactly, who sees and notices what we have posted - which leads us to imagine our audiences to be able to decide on any course of communication. As Eden Litt (2012, p. 331) describes it: we create "mental conceptualizations of the people with whom we are communicating" and these mental conceptualisations are used as guides for what is appropriate and relevant to share, when an actual audience is unknown or not physically present. Although the audience is always imagined in every communicative act, people engaged in social media environments lack information about their audience and thus "it is often difficult to determine how to behave, let alone to make adjustments based on assessing reactions"(Boyd, 2011: 50). Furthermore, there are a multitude of online environments which all have their separate rules and structures. Thus, while engaging in networked publics, users first need to adjust their *practices* according to the general online principles, and then change them strategically depending on the rules and norms of a specific online environment. In this issue, one of our collaborators, Mari-Liis Tikerperi, explores how Estonian public schools make use of the affordances of networked publics, and whom do they imagine as the audiences of their school websites when sharing information related to the first day of school.

Second, when engaging in networked publics, it is difficult to maintain distinct social contexts. In other words, when we interact in a space where spatial, social, and temporal boundaries are blurred or lacking, as they often are in internet mediated interactions, it is difficult to keep our audiences segregated (Goffman, 1959) and our social contexts may collapse. Scholars focused specifically on understanding how we imagine our contexts and audiences on social media and what the implications of those imaginaries are, differentiate between two main types of these imagined audiences: (1) an abstract imagined audience, which is vague and general and (2) a target imagined audience, which is more specific and directed, and comprised of personal, communal, professional, and/or phantasmal ties (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). In the latter case, studies suggest that social media users end up creating an "ideal audience", (Marwick & boyd, 2010) i.e. people with whom they share a common taste in music, who like similar films as they do, and who understand the jokes that they make; express similar disgust about Trump's politics, or voice similar concerns about the refugee crisis. In short, when faced with collapsed contexts, social media users quite often imagine their closest friends, allies and partners as those privy to their posts – almost aiming to create a mirror image of themselves as viewers and readers of their expressions. For instance, in the case of young people, they often imagine their closest peers, friends and mates to be the main audience of their posts, because these are also the people, who most often comment, like and share their content – i.e. the audience which is responsive and communicative is the audience the easiest to acknowledge (Oolo & Siibak, 2013). Thereby, as suggested by Schmidt (2013, p. 4) collapsed contexts of social media platforms invite creating our own personal publics, "an ideal type of communicative space" where a) "information is being selected and displayed according to criteria of personal relevance; b) "addressed to an audience which consists of network ties made explicit"; and c) where communication is conducted mainly in a conversational mode". This perceived personalization of publics goes beyond choices of how to express ourselves, or whom we imagine seeing what we say.

It is also evidenced in Dremljuga's (2018) analysis of how millennials disconnect or disengage from their personal networked publics. Her informants manipulate the temporal structure of social media platforms and their own visibility (i.e. by turning off their notifications) to proactively eliminate communicative moments and discard contexts that they do not want to experience.

These difficulties with keeping audiences separate, then, lead to a complication of the boundaries between public and private, the third of the dynamics discussed in the context of networked publics. In fact, the flip side of the perceptions and experiences of an '*ideal imagined audience*' or the '*personal public*' described above, is an experience of "public surveillance" (Nissenbaum, 2004), where the online audience are perceived as vast, uncontrollable, even dangerous, and thus translate onto one's perceptions and understandings of privacy. Therefore, as suggested by Alice Marwick and danah boyd - personal publics on social media challenge users to "maintain an equilibrium between a contextual social norm of personal authenticity that encourages information-sharing and phatic communication (the oft-cited '*what I had for breakfast*') with the need to keep information private, or at least concealed from certain audiences" (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 124). It can be argued, that this capacity and tendency to imagine an audience to guide our behaviour in mediated and mediatized settings extends interpersonal communication. Männiste and Masso (2018) analyse how Estonian internet users perceive threats to their privacy, operationalizing this via the concept of individual and institutional trust and people's consideration of '*trust cues*' in mediated settings. Their respondents were asked, whether they have ever had a feeling that some institutions, companies or people are violating their privacy through the internet or social media. What they found (Männiste & Masso, 2018) was that offline "the object of trust is typically a person or an entity," but online, the object of trust is a "technology (primarily the internet), and the organization deploying the technology". This means that the imagined audiences that guide our participation in the networked publics also involve non-human actors or rather, can be made sense of, as a human-technology-corporation assemblage.

Networked communication develops, changes and mutates at a breakneck speed. As Männiste and Masso (2018) highlight, we now live in a post-Snowden era of social datafication, which has led to "new and opaque regimes of population management, control, discrimination and exclusion," much more visible to internet users compared to the time danah boyd defined networked publics. This suggests that the scholars of networked publics, might need to add elevated data privacy and security concerns to the dynamic we presume shape networked publics. Concurrently, networked publics are contingent not only on the mentioned dynamics, but also on particular platform's technological architecture and the practices and content that people gather around in each specific case (Duguay, 2017). Making sense of how these different "arrangements of users and platform features come together" (Duguay, 2017, p. 37) has inspired a myriad of developments and extensions to the idea of networked publics, which we will address in the following.

Issues, affect and opposition

Many scholars have noted the importance of hashtags in forming publics. Hashtags are user-generated descriptive annotations (Zappavigna, 2015) that make social media content searchable (i.e. hashtagging generates machine-readable categories). However, hashtagging is also a "distinctly rhetorical practice" of metacommunication (Daer, Hoffman, & Goodman, 2014, p. 2). During the last decade, we have witnessed people gathering around specific hashtags on specific platforms (most of this work engages with Twitter) during natural disasters, political crises, or other significant events. This temporary coming together is interpreted by scholars as a *'hashtag public'* or an *'ad hoc public'* (Bruns & Burgess, 2015; Rambukkana, 2015; Oolo & Siibak, 2013). These approaches highlight that social media platforms allow for people interested in particular issues to get into publics in real time, as events happen, and respond to breaking news with great speed.

While these ad hoc publics are often understood as coalescing around an issue (thus called issue publics, cf. Bruns, 2008), they can also gather around shared emotions or affect, where strangers care about the same thing, and presume at least a partially shared worldview and values. This

type of an ad hoc networked public is then called an intimate public (Berlant, 2008) or an affective public (Papacharissi, 2015). In this vein, Khoja-moolji (2015) uses the concept of intimate publics to discuss the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag campaign rallying to get back the Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram, and Olszanowski (2015) builds on the same notion to analyse the shared emotions among feminist photographers on Instagram. In both cases the focus is on creating an imagined collective with shared affective ties via social media practices of hashtagging and sharing. Zizi Papacharissi (2017) sees hashtags like #BringBackOurGirls or #BlackLivesMatter as "framing devices" that render crowds into (...) affective publics that come together and/or disband around "bonds of sentiment" and want to tell their story "collaboratively and on their own terms". She points out (Papacharissi, 2017) that affective publics (1) materialize uniquely and leave distinct digital footprints, (2) support connective yet not necessarily collective action, (3) are powered by affective statements of opinion, fact, or a blend of both, and (4) produce disruptions of dominant political narratives by presenting underrepresented viewpoints.

However, as Nancy Fraser has argued "members of subordinated social groups" may come together based on issues or affect that is sustained by rejection of dominant interpretations, these groups "invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" thus forming "subaltern counterpublics" (1990, p. 67). Bryce Renninger (2014) relied on both boyd's (2011) concept of networked publics and Fraser's (1990) idea of counterpublics to explore how some marginalized groups (in this case those identifying as asexual) use specific platforms (in this case Tumblr) for counterpublic communication. One of the contributors to this special issue - Rachel Kuo (2018) defines the Asian American political formations around #Asians4BlackLives/#Justice4AkaiGurley and #SavePeterLiang/#Justice4Liang as affective racial counterpublics, connecting Zizi Pappacharissi's (2015) *'affective publics'*, with Catherine Squire's (2002) conceptual framework of Black counterpublics, discussing the convergence of events, issues, affect and marginalized status in online sociality and discourse.

Affordances for networked publics

When thinking about how people use technology to come together (or become even more distanced from each other), we can do so through the concept of affordances. Affordances can loosely be defined as the perceived potentialities for action of any device or technology. Thus, in the discussion at hand, we can ask what kinds of potentialities for action do people perceive social media to have for forming shared spaces and coming together as an imagined collective. In danah boyd's (2011, p. 39) original argument, internet and social networking sites structure publics via what Bucher and Helmond (2017) have since dubbed *'high level affordances'* - specifically - persistence, replicability, scalability/visibility and searchability. This means that social media platforms automatically record and archive expressions, which can be easily duplicated, potentially witnessed by very broad audiences, and accessed through search. And this, in turn, shapes how publics form with the help of social media (i.e. around a hashtag on Twitter) or how specific social networking sites (i.e. Facebook) function as networked publics. Somewhat similarly, Treem and Leonardi (2012) list visibility, editability, persistence, and association as the affordances of social media. Alternatively, we can think of Nancy Baym's (2015, p. 6) seven concepts she uses to compare different media to one another and to face-to-face interaction as social media's high level affordances for the formation of networked publics. In this case we would pay attention to the perceived potentialities of action that stem from social media platforms' high technical interactivity, the fact that it allows both synchronous and asynchronous communication, is lean on social cues, (often automatically) stores easily replicable messages, and runs on portable devices, which means that messages can be exchanged from wherever (Baym, 2015). In the following, we will bring up some points that are often made about social media affordances and networked publics, and complicate these oft-raised points with some arguments made by the authors of this special issue.

- ***The socio-technical affordances of social media allow for formation of publics on an unprecedented temporal (very fast), spatial (geographically dispersed) and affective (strong, mobilizing sentiment) scale.***

Social media makes (it seem that) time and space of communication are malleable, that the persistence or ephemerality of utterances is at least partially controllable - albeit possibly by platform owners and not us, and that this significantly lowers the cost of "becoming a speaker" (Baym & boyd, 2012, p. 326). In simple terms, social media affordances and networked publics are seen as imminent to each other. However - Helis Sikk (2018) drawing on her study with queer South activists in the US - finds that networked and face-to-face interaction have different affordances for the formation and sustenance of a public, and networked interactions do not necessarily come out on top of this comparison. "As much as scholars have argued for the positive potential of online networked publics, SONG as a grassroots activist network creates change by very much being grounded in offline moments of interaction," she writes: "online environments are safe, but face-to-face interaction has proven to be more effective for SONG on a long-term basis, (...) it appears that technologies of interactivity only contribute to Southern activist locality in meaningful ways, if offline networks have been established in person first, especially in locations that are at the cultural and geographical margins of queer life."

Nonetheless, both networked publics and social media affordances are consistently linked to democratic participation, and even overt political activism (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012). By removing gatekeepers and middle-men, who have traditionally policed entry to public debate, set agendas, or framed what is worth public attention, social media is seen as a more egalitarian space. Analysing the affordances of social media for affective racial counterpublics, Kuo (2018) shows how specific hashtags function as "indexical signifiers of solidarity," which circulate "visible claims." Thus in her analysis, it is the hashtags, specifically, that have affordances for networked publics and for wider, subaltern participation. In Kuo's analysis (2018) hashtags affectively mobilize publics, actualize particular affinities towards a community, function as a collective framing tool, archive and link racial discourses and allow discursive spaces for constructing counternarratives and reimagining group identities. However, as Nikunen (2018) states: "social media are commercialised, contested spaces of participation." Some voices are systematically marginalized or silenced, and participating in a public comes with a different amount of risk depending on one's opinions, and socio-demographic and political positions.

Finally, it is obvious that different people experience and perceive social media affordances differently, and may choose to use a technology in a way that diverges from, or counters the intended use (Tiidenberg, 2018). Dremljuga (2018) analyses the platform specific disconnection of millennials and shows disconnecting to be a "long term negotiation: between the user, the platform and the affordances," where the users' patience and the platform affordances are connected via a "set of fragile strings that are being pulled by the strength of the negative emotions and thoughts that occur when using the platform." These negative emotions can be linked to the (changing) platform features or to the discrepancies between one's imagined, intended and actual audiences. Thus, these same affordances that make networked publics possible for some people, can lead others to opting out of social media platforms entirely, either because they do not wish to be a part of some of those publics, or because they find the conditions of engagement unacceptable.

- ***High level social media affordances allow formation of networked publics regardless of the topic/issue/affect/belief that these publics gather around.***

It is generally presumed that these high level affordances allow the gathering of people and ideas into imagined collectives regardless of the topic, or the ideological bent of the shared affect. The affordance of scalability (i.e. the use of a hashtag to gain momentum and involve more people) allows for the formation of both pro-, and anti-immigrant publics, but is that the case in equal measures? Nikunen (2018) argues that current social media governance models amplify hostile content, because its distribution "benefits from the vague policies and the algorithmic clustering of social media content and groups." This means that social media often do not remove racist and hateful comments and connect different hate groups, because from the perspective of the recommendation algorithm - a member of one might legitimately like the other. She also suggests (Nikunen, 2018) that because of the social convergence and context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011) so common on many dominant social media platforms (i.e. Facebook), the pro-immigrant or

solidarity publics have started to sequester off into closed and private groups to avoid harassment. This allows solidarity publics to hide, which shields individuals, but leads to counter-publics losing their capacity to widen the public sphere, and commodifies "solidarities to superficial performances of self-interest" (Marwick & boyd, 2011). According to Nikunen (2018) then, social media affordances amplify hateful networked public and weaken solidarity based ones.

Conclusion

Networked publics continues to be a productive conceptual framework for engaging with how people discursively, affectively and cognitively come together (or grow distant) on and with social media platforms and other networked communication technologies. This introduction has offered brief insight into the terminology and the concepts currently utilized in academic discussions around networked publics, and highlighted what the collaborators in this special issue contribute to the conversation.

Our special issue consists of six pieces. First, Kaarina Nikuinen analyses a variety of materials pertaining to Finnish pro-, and anti-immigrant activism on (social) media to discuss its affordances for solidarity-, and hate-driven networked publics. This is followed by an article by Maris Männiste and Anu Masso. Based on a representative survey among Estonians, they analyse people's emerging personal and institutional privacy concerns. Their findings indicate that trust in institutions may be a key variable explaining the adoption of new technologies in Estonia, and link people's institutional privacy perceptions to new forms of data activism. Third is Rachel Kuo's article on the discursive and visual use of *'Asian-ness'* in forming racial counterpublics around #Asians4BlackLives/#Justice4AkaiGurley and #SavePeterLiang/#Justice4Liang. Specifically, she looks at how hashtags are deployed to produce and mobilize affect. Kuo's piece is followed by Helis Sikk's analysis of how networked localities emerge in grassroots queer activist practices by LGBTQ activists physically located in Southern United States. In our fifth article, Mari-Liis Tikerperi looks at how Estonian public schools share information on their websites, and how audiences and their affordances are imagined in the process. Finally, we close this special issue with an article by Ramona-Riin Dremljuga. She examines millennials' experiences of platform-specific disconnection, focusing on the ambiguous intersection between engagement, disengagement, perceived platform affordances and use experiences. Her paper provides insight into media resistance and non-use, by challenging the common assumptions around people's reasons and motivations for disconnecting in the digital age.

Collectively, we see these papers offering a number of contributions to, and extensions of the conceptual lens of networked publics. They highlight the need to include non-human actors in our conceptualizations of the imagined audiences. We suggest that a human-technology-corporation assemblage deserves future scholarly attention as a potential form of imagined audience. Our contributions also suggest that the original model of three dynamics posited as central to networked publics by boyd (2011, imagined audiences, collapsed contexts and blurred boundaries between public and private) may need to be supplemented with at least one additional dynamic - that of elevated data privacy and security concerns. More detailed attention needs to be paid to the different affordances for the formation and sustenance of publics offered by face-to-face and networked interactions. It seems that despite social media platforms allowing for the ad hoc, fast formation of issue and affective publics, there are plenty of examples where networked interaction does not sustain a productive convergence of people, ideas, actions and affect. Finally, our reading of the contributed articles leads us to interrogate how the same perceived potentialities for action can be experienced as affordances and as dysaffordances (Wittkower, 2016) - making networked publics possible for some people, while driving others to opt out of social media entirely, amplifying some discourses, messages and publics while stifling others.

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