3 Publics without Politics: Surplus Publicity as Depoliticization

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As the last straw breaks the laden camel's back, this piece of underground information crushed the sinking spirits of Mr. Dombey.

                                      – Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (1848, 15)

Perhaps the most interesting thing to emerge from the 2010 episode during which WikiLeaks dramatically published reams of secret diplomatic cables and state documents was the candour with which the organization's leader expressed its intentions. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Julian Assange said, "It is not our goal to achieve a more *transparent* society; it's our goal to achieve a more *just* society" (Stengel 2010). It came as no surprise when the architects of mainstream discourse moved swiftly and successfully to slot Assange into the various categories now routinely used for anyone who is seriously impolite to wielders of power: terrorist, criminal, conspiracy theorist, narcissist, sociopath. The same was true for the apparent source of many of these documents, US Private Bradley Manning. Despite clear indications that he had been motivated by disillusionment with American foreign policy (he had reached a tipping point after witnessing US-backed Iraqi police forces detain several people who had distributed a critique of Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's prime minister) and his statement that he hoped his actions might "actually change something," mainstream media accounts of Manning followed a script typically reserved for serial killers and child molesters. Thus, we learned that Manning was a frustrated homosexual; the child of a broken marriage; a victim of schoolyard bullying; a high-school dropout; an itinerant, heartbroken, vain, suicidal, and "troubled young man" who had experienced "trouble fitting in at school" (Verma 2010). What a relief.

"Troubled" though he may have been in his youth, at least Manning was not tortured. It is not clear the same can be said of his experience after he was arrested. Prior to his court martial, Manning was held for 11 months in solitary confinement at a marine base in Quantico, Virginia, where he was also subjected to prolonged, forced nudity. According to UN special rapporteur on torture Juan Mendez, this "constitutes at a minimum cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in violation of article 16 of the convention against torture. If the effects in regards to pain and suffering inflicted on Manning were more severe, they could constitute torture" (Pilkington 2012). What would prompt an ostensibly democratic government to treat one of its own citizens, one of its own *soldiers*, with such brutality? Was the content of the information Manning allegedly disclosed so dangerous to national security? (At the time of this writing, the American state is still intact.) Or was the true danger that he had obeyed his conscience rather than his superiors? Was it the scandal of publicity or the horror of political action?

Even more telling than the ease with which the protagonists in this drama were pathologized (as I will suggest later in this chapter, there is, after all, some truth to this: political action is pathological by definition) was the consistency with which the mainstream imagination of what happened in the WikiLeaks case steered clear of the express motives of its perpetrators. Despite their explicit assertions that, in this case, publication was merely instrumental to more substantial, albeit vaguely defined, political goals of "justice" and "change," the issues raised by WikiLeaks were framed as concerning the incendiary value of information under technological conditions that have allegedly *changed everything*. Isn't information supposed to be public in a liberal democracy? Aren't some secrets necessary to protect and promote democratic freedom? Where do you draw the lines between transparency, privacy, and security? Who gets to decide? Has emerging media technology made it impossible to enforce these limits? Is this a good thing or a bad thing for democracy?

These are all interesting questions. They are not, however, intrinsically unsettling ones, or even questions that a liberal democratic political culture is incapable of handling. A conversation about transparency is one that a liberal democratic society is well prepared to have, just as we are well prepared to live with the contradiction between the ideological promotion of "openness" and its ongoing material denial. And it is a conversation we are content to have stand in for the more demanding and disruptive sorts of actions that might be required to open the possibility of justice. Conveniently, the conversation about

transparency directed attention away from what was arguably most re-
markable about the case of WikiLeaks: not the fact that so much secret
information was publicized, but that two people, collaborating with a
network of others, took serious political action in the face of extreme
personal risk and aimed at massively disrupting the operation of state
power. This small but exceptional fact points to the heart of the matter.
For, if the issue is the political significance of WikiLeaks and every-
thing it purportedly represents, then the central question must be this:
Once information is made public and people know what is going on,
what will they do? In light of events in the Middle East shortly after the
WikiLeaks cable dump, it is tempting to answer that once they are in-
formed, people will be moved to act politically, and even dramatically,
in favour of justice. After all, US Embassy diplomatic cables document-
ing the corruption of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and first leaked by
WikiLeaks and then translated and circulated by a range of social me-
dia networks, as well as by the Al Jazeera broadcasting service, have
been widely credited in 2011 with sending Tunisians into the streets in
numbers that the regime could not deny, an action which proved conta-
gious in other parts of the Arab world (Sanina 2011).

Presumptions of this sort conform to certain widely accepted ideas
about the relationship between democratic politics, publicity, and me-
dia technologies. By "publicity," I mean to indicate not just the sort of
organized promotional activity typically associated with public rela-
tions both inside and outside what can be called the publicity state but
also the broader condition of *publicness* – public goods, public spaces,
public citizens, public exposure, public information, public discussion –
that is thought to distinguish political activity from a range of "merely"
private experiences, practices, and interests. Feminist theory and ac-
tivism have provided us with good reasons to reject the claim that
the private, domestic, and personal realms – saturated as they are by
authoritative permissions and prohibitions and unequal distributions
of power and status – are somehow devoid of politics, and emerging
technologies have rendered the distinction between public and private
more difficult to discern. Nevertheless, in the liberal democratic imagi-
nation, political life remains largely equated with public life. Politics
is carried out by citizens who appear before, with, and against each
other in public encounters. These encounters, in which political judg-
ments are made and political actions are taken, unfold in a variety of
communicative spaces, sites, and practices that together comprise the
public sphere (Habermas 1991). Our experience of the public sphere is

one of being simultaneously separated from, and connected to, a multiplicity of others, which is to say that all public experience is *mediated* experience: whether it is in a city square or a community hall, or over the radio spectrum or an Internet connection, to experience publicity is to be joined to others by media that stand between us, separating and connecting us across both time and space (see Fletcher's chapter for the role of the media in political communication). Liberal democratic publicity also entails a set of practices that are thought to be characteristically political: *communicating* with others in a variety of modes; producing, consuming and circulating *information* in various forms; and *participating* with others in discussion, debate, and decision concerning common affairs. These characteristically public activities invoke a set of normative expectations according to which we can evaluate the democratic quality of the various media that make public life possible. Media that provide expanded means of public communication, improved access to publically relevant information, and enhanced opportunities for public participation are understood to support the possibility of democratic politics. It is in this light that emerging media technologies – digital networks and the various devices and applications connected by them – are widely thought to optimize publicity in a manner that supports the possibility of democratic politics, an equation that the case of WikiLeaks and the Tunisian revolts would seem to confirm as universal.

Those who are interested in the political implications of digital information and communication technologies surely have much to learn from the events that took place across the Arab world in winter 2011 and later, and it will require careful study to take full measure of the role emerging media played in those events. With that said, two early lessons stand out. The first concerns the ease with which sensible (and nervous) liberal elites rushed to fetishize "information" as the motive force behind these uprisings. As in the Dickensian epigraph at the start of this chapter, a focus upon "the last straw" tends to obscure long-standing structural and material conditions of inequality and brutalism, borne over time by the camel, such that its back is made ready for breaking – conditions that, when it comes to the illiberal regimes of the Arab world, western governments and their citizens have been complicit in perpetuating for a very long time. It also entails more than a hint of condescension. As Eltahawy (2011) put it, "By buying into the idea that leaked US embassy cables about corruption 'fuelled' the revolution, commentators smear Tunisians with ignorance of the facts and perpetuate the myth

that Arabs are incapable of rising up against dictators." As if Tunisians (or Egyptians, or Bahrainis, or Libyans) had not actually *lived* for decades under corrupt and authoritarian regimes, or at least did not *know* they did, until it was revealed to them by a leaked diplomatic cable from the US Embassy. That the alleged last straw in this case happened to be "a piece of underground information" also served to confirm liberal prejudices about the relative "openness" of western democracies, as well as liberal fantasies about the simultaneously solvent and galvanizing power of information itself (see Morozov 2011).

The second early lesson of these events is that the character of the relationship between publicity, its technologies, and political action depends heavily on the context in which the relationship is situated. This means that the supposed universality of publicity as a normative category needs to be approached critically. In what follows, I will suggest that the relationship between publicity and political action has become marginal in liberal, capitalist democracies where emerging media technologies continue to proliferate and that, under these conditions, publicity has more to do with depoliticization than it does with moving people to act politically. However, it would be doctrinaire to suggest the same is automatically true of illiberal and undemocratic contexts in which emerging media technologies might bear on the possibility of politics quite differently. In situations where access to mass media is tightly controlled by state authorities, the ability of citizens, non-citizens, and activists to communicate via such technologies can be crucial to their political prospects. Recognizing this is not to fetishize the WikiLeaks cables or to condone the branding of every popular uprising with the commercial trademark of whatever social networking application happens to have been favoured by those carrying it out. The point is that the meaning of these technologies in relation to the possibility of politics is not universal but depends heavily on the particular conditions in which their use is situated.

This appeal to context in assessing the relationship between publicity and politics should be distinguished from the sort of phony and patronizing multiculturalism that for so long has vouchsafed western "tolerance" of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world (from whose capacity to enforce order the west has profited so handsomely) on account of alleged "cultural differences" that left their people naively unprepared for democracy and vulnerable to fundamentalist theocracy. In an interview on Al Jazeera English television during the 2011 Egyptian revolt, Žižek (2011) put paid to this sort of particularism:

> Where we are fighting a tyrant, we are all universalists: we are immediately in solidarity with each other … It is the struggle for freedom. Here we have direct proof, a) that freedom is universal and b) against that cynical idea that somehow Muslim crowds prefer some kind of religiously-fundamentalist dictatorships … No! What happened in Tunisia, what happens now in Egypt, is precisely this *universal* revolution for dignity, human rights, economic justice. This is universalism at work … They gave us the lesson against this falsely respectful but basically racist prejudice that says, "Oh, you know, Arabs have their specific culture, they cannot really get it." They got it. They understand democracy better by doing what they are doing than we do in the West.

The meaning of the appetite for dignity, equality, and freedom, and of political struggles to contest their systematic denial, does not vary significantly from one context to another. The role that something such as publicity and its mediating technologies might play in relation to those universal appetites, and to the struggles to satisfy them, does. In a context where denial of access to publicity and its technologies is indexed to the denial of dignity, equality, and freedom, a sudden proliferation of emerging technologies that afford opportunities for enhanced public communication will have one set of implications for the possibility of politics (Mohammed 2011). However, in a context where people already enjoy a surplus of publicity and ready access to its technologies, and where this corresponds to an experience of relative material security and liberty, the implications of emerging media for the possibility of politics might be altogether different. We fortunate western liberal democrats have lived with extensive publicity, including the sort intensified by digital networks, for quite some time now, long enough at least to suspect that this most recent explosion of access to information might provide what publicity has always provided for political action in liberal democratic contexts: an alibi for not taking such action.

This is what is at stake in Assange's assertion that his actions were aimed at justice rather than transparency for its own sake. Justice, he wagered, might have a chance if constant exposure means that state authorities can no longer function in the manner to which they have grown accustomed. What would happen, he asks, if under the threat of total disclosure, American political parties "gave up their mobile phones, fax and e-mail correspondence – let alone the computer systems which manage their subscribers, donors, budgets, polling, call centres and direct mail campaigns?" (Assange 2006, 5). Under these conditions, some

new, more just way of organizing power and authority might possibly emerge. As Assange put it in his 2006 manifesto on conspiracy, the aim is "to radically shift *regime* behaviour" (1); save for a couple of asides about "resistance" that are clearly meant to indicate a radicalized minority (of one?), the text makes no reference at all to information motivating or "empowering" citizens to become democratically "engaged" or hold their representatives "accountable." Indeed, the words "democracy" and "citizen" do not appear in the tract at all. Assange seems well aware that information, or knowing what is going on, has never been enough to move good, liberal citizens to act politically against organized injustice. Neither his manifesto nor his subsequent actions were primarily about technology *enabling* liberal democratic citizens; rather, they were precisely about technology *disabling* liberal democratic government. His was an insurrectionary political act that had nothing whatsoever to do with the terms in which the relationship between emerging technology, publicity, and democracy is presently discussed in respectable circles. This suggests the lesson of the WikiLeaks incident is not so much about the increased political potential of publicity in the emerging media environment as it is about its limits.

Politics, Pathology, and Publicity

Wherever it arises, politics can be recognized by its pathological character. Politics is what happens when we are confronted with a wrong (definitively, the wrong of inequality) that calls for judgment under conditions of undecidability, in which the outcome of that judgment cannot be given in advance, and it inheres in the action that arises from such judgment – disruptive, exceptional action that typically unfolds at the borders of inclusion and exclusion, and which opens onto a terrain of radical uncertainty and unpredictability. As such, politics entails judgment and action that alter the parameters of the possible and the impossible in any given situation. It is in this sense that politics that can be distinguished from what Rancière (1999, 28–30) calls "police," referring to those agencies, practices, and institutions – including the institutions of liberal democratic government – whose function it is to contain the disruptive possibility of politics, even as they give the impression that politics is taking place.

Under such conditions, being carried away by political judgment and action is not normal. Instead, politics is a pathological event that a person would normally avoid if given the choice. Politics is exceptional,

disruptive, antagonistic, burdensome, and dangerous. It is like a sore that erupts on the smooth skin of democracy. According to Rancière (ibid., 30), politics arises only in response to a fundamental wrong, a wrong that takes the form of a structuring exclusion or silencing, a basic miscount that produces an antagonism between the whole and the "part that has no part." This wrong is materialized in the structure of publicity itself, at the border between those who are counted as part of the public and those who are not. We tend to associate publicness with inclusivity, but the truth is that every public is as much defined by those who are not part of it as it is by those who are. We might say that politics arises to refuse or contest the social, conventional, and material inequalities and exclusions that are institutionalized over and against the incontestable equality that is otherwise basic to our humanity and that publicity is one of the names for this inequality and exclusion. It is for this reason that politics is always threatening and why its relationship to publicity is more contradictory than what is typically attributed to it in the liberal democratic imaginary.

Politics happens when and where people can no longer afford the luxury of its absence. In situations where the experience of inequality and exclusion are acute, and where this coincides with a deficit of publicity – whereby actionable information is scarce, communication is tightly controlled, and participation denied or meaningless – the expectations attached to information, communication, and participation take on the character of political demands, and the practices of communicating, informing, and participating can achieve the status of political action. Politics presents itself as a material imperative at the threshold between affluence and deprivation, both within comparatively prosperous societies where violence and misery persist but are safely consigned to the margins of mainstream public experience and between these societies and the global poor. At this threshold and on these margins, the camel's burden is always already heavy, and there is no telling when an additional straw, even something as light as a piece of "underground information," might break its back and raise the imperative of politics, an imperative with which the situation is already pregnant. Under conditions where people are hungry and brutalized, and their opportunities to communicate, inform themselves and others, and participate in altering their situation are minimal, expansions of the horizon of publicity can open political possibilities where before there seemed to be none. Conversely, in situations where inequality and exclusion are experienced in tolerable moderation (where injustice seems

to be not so great, or not experienced directly by so many), and where this experience is compounded by a surplus of publicity – abundant information, free communication, and a surfeit of opportunities to participate – the politicizing function of publicity is reversed and tends in the direction of depoliticization.

This is the great insight of Dean, who argues that the norms of liberal publicity – information, communication, and participation – have come to stand in for the political ends that they might otherwise be presumed to serve, ends such as material and political equality and social and economic justice. This substitution is abetted by the apparent materialization of the promise of publicity in emerging media technologies. As Dean (2005, 63) writes, in established liberal democracies, "the complexities of politics – of organization, struggle, duration, decisiveness, division, representation, etc. – are condensed into one thing, one problem to be solved and one technological solution. So the problem of democracy is that people aren't informed; they don't have the information they need to participate effectively." This is a problem that emerging media technologies solve in advance, although it is not clear that lack of information is really what prevents most people from engaging in political judgment and action. Indeed, as Dean (2006, 9) has shown convincingly in her rendering of Žižek's political thought, the ideological hold of liberal democratic capitalism and its militarist and imperialist state forms operates not under the sign of ignorance or false consciousness but rather under the sign of knowledge and awareness. The definitive gesture of contemporary ideology is the fetishistic disavowal – "Je sais bien, mais quand même …" (I know very well, but all the same …) – which, together with the thumbs-up and thumbs-down signalling of likes and dislikes online, suggests the essence of publicity in the emerging media environment. I know very well that the prime minister is lying when he says he supports freedom of expression, but all the same I congratulate him for condemning foreign governments who censor the Internet (👍 for freedom of expression!). I know very well that Petro-Canada paid the Libyan government (i.e., the Gadhafi family) a $1 billion "signing bonus" in 2008 to secure the right to drill for undersea oil (Saunders 2011), but all the same I need to gas up the car and get the kids to hockey practice (👍 for WikiLeaks! 👎 for Arab dictators!). I know very well that the Quebec firm SNC-Lavalin is building a $275 million prison in Libya for the Gadhafi regime (Waldie 2011), but all the same I got a tweet linking to an article that says the prison will be "built according to international human rights standards" (👎 for torture! 👍 for

Twitter!). *I know very well, but all the same …* Not all people are as well informed as they could be, but information alone has never been sufficient to motivate political judgment or action, and a lack of information is not what prevents most of us from taking the risk of disruptive judgments and action. The distribution of possibility and impossibility is a material question more than it is a question of information.

The same can be said of communication. The traditions of western political thought, and the traditions of western political culture, give us many reasons to believe that political judgment and action are somehow identical with communication. And to the extent that emerging media technologies appear to liberate the potential of intersubjective communication, it is hard to resist the conclusion that they contribute to the possibility of politics. Once again, emerging media technologies would seem to deliver precisely what the normative framework of publicity has habituated us to expect from politics. However, one could also say that the proliferation of communication sponsored by emerging media acts as a vaccine against other, more burdensome and disruptive expressions of political judgment and action. In the contemporary climate, whenever there is a threat that genuine dissent, discord, or disagreement might break out, a threat that something political might actually happen, the liberal democratic response to these disruptions is always the same: more, better communication. In the age of social media, blogging, and user-generated content, emerging media stand ready to absorb potentially pathological political energies into the relatively innocuous world of dialogue and circulating contributions. However, as Dean (2009, 32) points out, it is not so much the technology that guarantees this form of depoliticization as it is the normative framework of publicity that enables the "reduction of politics to communicative acts, to speaking and saying and exposing and explaining, a reduction key to a democracy conceived in terms of discussion and deliberation."

The question is not whether communication is *necessary* for politics but rather whether communication is *adequate* to politics. According to Dean (ibid.), "When communication serves as the key category for Left politics, whether communication configured as discussion, spectacle or publicity, this politics ensures its political failure in advance: doing is reduced to talking, to contributing to the media environment, instead of being conceived in terms of, say, occupying military bases, taking over the government, or abandoning the Democratic Party and doing the steady, persistent organizational work of revitalizing the Greens or Socialists." Dean refers here to "Left politics," but her observations would

seem to apply to any sort of politics that actually seeks to do something rather than just say something. The trouble is that saying something has always been much easier than doing something, and emerging media technologies have made it easier than ever to say something without doing anything. Most of us embrace the ease with which we can use *saying* something as an alibi for *doing* nothing not because emerging technologies force us to, but rather because the norms of publicity have conditioned us to accept, and even to expect, the reduction of politics to communication. The problem of depoliticization arises from convenience, not apathy. As Dean (2005, 61) observes, "The circulation of communication is depoliticizing, not because people don't care or don't want to be involved, but because we do."

This line of argument is similar to one advanced in 1948 by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1971, 565) in their account of the "narcotizing dysfunction" of the mass media:

> The interested and informed citizen can congratulate himself [*sic*] on his lofty state of interest and information and neglect to see that he has abstained from decision and action. In short, he takes his secondary contact with the world of political reality, his reading and listening and thinking, as a vicarious performance. He comes to mistake knowing about problems of the day for doing something about them. His social conscience remains spotlessly clean. He *is* concerned. He *is* informed. And he has all sorts of ideas as to what should be done. But after he has gotten through his dinner and after he has listened to his favorite radio program, and after he has read his second newspaper of the day, it is really time for bed.

Politics is pathological in that it invariably aims at the fundamental disruption of the milieu in which it emerges, a redrawing of the horizons of the possible and the impossible. As with any pathogen, the viability of the organism in which it arises relies upon its containment. Depoliticization is the name given to the various strategies and techniques whereby the pathological threat of politics can be managed without recourse to the sort of outright repression that is more likely to motivate resistance than to contain it. We are accustomed to the long-standing accounts given by critics of mass culture that locate depoliticization in the operation of ideology – manipulation of the subjective consciousness of individuals in a manner that immobilizes them, either through the cultivation of false but system-reinforcing needs or through deception and distraction (Marcuse 1964; Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002).

In these accounts, it is a failure to really meet the expectations of publicity that is held responsible for depoliticization. The emerging media environment brings us to consider an alternative possibility, namely, that depoliticization arises not from failing to live up to the norms of publicity, but instead from their satisfaction.

The role that emerging media technologies, combined with contemporary normative expectations surrounding publicity, play in regard to the problem of depoliticization is not captured by the figure of "narcotization" – the induction of stupor (stupidity) or slumber (in Lazarsfeld's and Merton's account, the newspaper reader literally *goes to bed*) – but rather are better characterized in terms of inoculation. Inoculation is a technique that came to the west in 1700 when small quantities of smallpox virus were introduced into bodies "in order to induce a mild and local attack of the disease, and render the subject immune from future contagion" (Oxford English Dictionary 2010, s.v. "inoculation"). After 1799, inoculation began to be carried out by means of vaccination, whereby the pathogen introduced was attenuated or weakened so as not to be dangerous. We might note that one of the secondary meanings of inoculation associates it with information: to inoculate is to "imbue a person or community with a feeling, opinion or habit" (ibid.). As we know very well from recent experience with a potential influenza pandemic, the best way to contain the outbreak and spread of an unwanted pathogen is to inject a little bit of the pathogen into the system we are seeking to protect – an attenuated bit with the dangerous part neutralized. When we are seeking to contain the spread of a pathogen or disease, we do not *narcotize* people, we *inoculate* them: we introduce a weakened strain of the pathological agent, provoking a benign form of disease that generates immunity to more dangerous strains.

Ironically, inoculation against the pathology of politics has arguably always been a primary function of "normal" politics. To think of politics in this way is to concede that most of what goes for politics in liberal democratic contexts comprises a routinized habit aimed at containing the possibility of politics itself. As Rancière (1995, 19) observes, "Politics is the art of suppressing the political … Depoliticization is the oldest task of politics, the one which achieves its fulfillment at the brink of its end, its perfection on the brink of the abyss." In his book *Political Machines*, Barry (2001, 207) locates depoliticization firmly within the normal context of what goes by the name of politics in contemporary liberal democracies: "One of the key functions of established political institutions," he writes, "is to place limits

on the possibilities for dissensus and restriction on the sites in which political contestation can occur. What we generally term politics thus always has something of an anti-political impulse." My suggestion is that the depoliticizing impulse of conventional political participation operates not in the manner of narcotization but rather in the manner of inoculation. The pathogen of politics is contained not by the logic of repression, manipulation, and exclusion but rather the logic of permission, participation, and inclusion – the logic of publicity, a logic whose effectiveness is dramatically enhanced in the emerging media environment. As Barry (ibid., 129) puts it, describing the proliferation of network-enabled forms of "interactivity" in governmental contexts, "In an interactive model, subjects are not disciplined, they are *allowed*" (emphasis in original).

Information and communication have long been understood to play a privileged role in managing pathological forms of politics. This is true not only of Lazarsfeld and Merton but also of other foundational figures in communication studies such as Lasswell (1971) and cyber-neticists such as Wiener (1948). Communication and the circulation of information contribute to equilibrium, not disequilibrium; feedback (arguably the paradigmatic mode of communication in the emerging media context) performs a system-stabilizing function, even without resort to repressive forms of propaganda and covert surveillance. The habits of information, communication, and participation sponsored by emerging media are particularly well suited to perform this function. In capitalist, liberal democratic, technological societies such as ours, emerging media provide subjects with ready access to copious volumes of high-quality, factual, and interpretive information in which the truth about power is exposed, explained, confirmed, and contested. These same media also provide for a proliferation of opportunities to choose, vote, rank, comment, discuss, create, debate, collaborate, engage, contribute, interact, access, share, deliberate, and communicate. Every day, millions upon millions of people take advantage of these opportunities to participate. In some cases, the information and communication mediated by these technologies mobilize events that are potentially disruptive. But in many more cases, for most people most of the time, the innocuous habit of participating in the emerging media environment comes in lieu of more burdensome, inconvenient, and disruptive forms of political judgment and action. For most of us, clicking ☟ simply leaves us sitting with our thumbs up our asses, and we are comfortable with that because the discomfort of politics is too much to bear.

To experience a political situation is to be uncertain as to what might happen next. In contemporary liberal democracies, there is perhaps nothing that is more regular, in terms of both its occurrence and outcome, than the absorption of periodic popular grievance into the circuits of social media. In Canada in late 2009, the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper prorogued Parliament, a move widely attributed to the government's desire to avoid scrutiny of its role in placing enemy Afghan detainees at risk of human rights abuse and torture by transferring them to the custody of Afghan state security agencies. It is interesting to note that Canadian complicity in the torture of Afghan detainees had been revealed in the mainstream national press as early as 2007, information that, at that time, failed to prompt significant political protest by Canadian citizens (Koring 2007). Nevertheless, something about the democratic affront represented by the prorogation of Parliament (and not, it must be stressed, the fact that the Canadian state had been revealed as having facilitated the illegal torture of enemy combatants[1]) prompted what by 2010 had become an utterly predictable occurrence: somebody started a Facebook group. Quickly, Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament (CAPP) gathered over 200,000 friends, some of whom were organized to participate in anti-prorogation rallies held across Canada on 23 January 2010 as part of a national day of action. Pundits were quick to inaugurate a new era in Canadian publicity: "Never before has Facebook filled Canada's streets. It did today" (Capstick 2010). This was Canadian politics' Facebook moment.

Like many aspects of this particular episode, "filling the streets" was somewhat of an exaggeration. Sympathetic estimates put the total number of participants in the day's rallies at 25,000, the majority of those concentrated in Toronto, Ottawa, and Vancouver (ibid.). According to organizer Shilo Davis (2010), "That makes it not only the biggest Facebook group in Canada, but also the quickest large-scale grass-roots political mobilization in Canadian history." The modifier "quickest" is, one supposes, key to this distinction. Otherwise, the number 25,000 would probably call to mind the number of workers who took to the streets of Winnipeg on Bloody Saturday during the General Strike of 1919 (Bumsted 1994). And for sheer size in multiple cities, one might think back to Days of Action against the neoliberal economic policies of the Ontario government under Mike Harris's Conservatives in the late 1990s, in which the numbers of demonstrators in London (20,000), Hamilton (120,000), and Toronto (250,000) were perhaps all the more

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impressive precisely because they were mobilized without the aid of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Turk 1997). Notwithstanding the relative modesty of the CAPP mobilization, organizers were quick to inflate its impact. Much was made of a drop in public support suffered by the government, attributed to the Facebook campaign. According to S. Davis (2010), "The growing buzz around the CAPP Facebook group helped turn the prorogation issue from a political non-event on Dec. 30 to a major headache that cost Mr. Harper approximately ten points at the polls two weeks later." A few days before the rallies were to take place, the Facebook group's founder, Christopher White (2010), declared his constituents to be "the new power brokers in Ottawa." To put this claim into perspective, if every one of the 25,000 Canadians who joined the anti-prorogation protests on 23 January 2010 had moved to Calgary Southwest and voted in the 2008 election for Harper's nearest rival, they still would not have been able to prevent the prime minister from winning his own seat in Parliament.[2]

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The truth is, the Conservative government was never in jeopardy over this issue, which (along with the issue of the Afghan detainees) quickly receded from public view. Roughly a year later, the government remained standing and its percentage of public support was again polling the high thirties, roughly 10 percentage points ahead of its nearest competitors (who had valiantly taken up the Facebook nation's cause in opposing prorogation). Indeed, the Facebook nation itself had largely stood down. Organizers had boldly declared that "a 200,000-strong Facebook group and nationwide anti-prorogation rallies show the government that, regardless of what else divides us, Canadians will not stand for the suspension of Parliament for partisan advantage" (S. Davis 2010). Except, of course, that they did stand for it, and they will. In a flourish of insurrectionary rhetoric, White (2010) had decried Parliament as "an institution that has turned its back on its people" and called upon the disenfranchised multitude to "work together and take it apart brick by brick and build it anew," which made the campaign's defence of Parliament as a democratic institution, and its ultimate goal of convincing MPs to "return to the Hill," all the more incoherent. As one supporter put it, somewhat more modestly, "Canada needs its House of Commons up and running" (Capstick 2010). This is exactly what Canada got – an outcome that was never in doubt – a few short months later. Perhaps this is what explains the message on the CAPP (renamed, but conveniently with the same acronym) Facebook page a year later: "Canadians Advocating Political Participation does not have any upcoming events."

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Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to show that despite the tendency to equate communication and access to information with democracy itself, publicity is not the same thing as politics. Under conditions where access to information and communication is tightly controlled and restricted in ways that bolster existing inequalities, demanding these resources can certainly have a political character, and emerging technologies that loosen such control and restrictions definitely have political implications. However, under conditions where access to information and communication are relatively widespread already, demands for more of the same might not be so politically challenging, especially when emerging technologies stand ready to extend and intensify access to these resources. Under these conditions, the identification of democracy with publicity can serve to absorb political energies that might otherwise be devoted to contesting other forms of persistent inequality, marginalization, and disadvantage. If this is true, then the emerging media environment should prompt us to reevaluate, rather than uncritically celebrate, our commitment to publicity as the primary and defining norm of democratic society. This is not to say that transparency or enhanced capacities for interactive communication are unworthy of our investment or concern. Rather, it is to remember, with Manning and Assange, that these are merely means to a much more substantive and challenging end.

Emerging media hold out the promise of realizing publicity's dream of universal inclusion, but the possibility of politics is more likely in response to the experience of publicity's structuring exclusions. As soon as one is included in the public sphere – or even merely *feels* included or as if one could *choose* to be if one so desired – the wrong of structural exclusion is absorbed back into the promise of liberal publicity and deprived of its motive potential. We might recall here the Habermasian prescription that, in an adequately democratic public sphere, it is not necessary that citizens actually *are* equal but rather only that they interact *as if they were* (Habermas 1991). Inclusive publicity, even if only apparent, provides liberal capitalism with an alibi for structural inequality. To the extent emerging media technologies make it possible for most everyone to be included in the public sphere *as if* they were equals, they mitigate against pathological outbreaks of the sort of political judgment and action that might arise when people are confronted with the fact that they are actually not equal after all. Faced with publicity's exclusions, the struggle of and for politics is not simply the

demand to be included (a demand that technology promises to meet) but rather rejection and reconfiguration of the very terms of inclusion and exclusion altogether.

Most of us do not really have the stomach for this; politics is inherently risky, incalculable, unpredictable, and disruptive, and so we are more than prepared to accept information, communication, and participation as ends in themselves, ends that become identified with politics as such. Emerging media technologies stand ready as means to deliver us to these ends. But the true end of politics is justice, not information, communication, or participation, and getting to it is hard, not easy. Whatever debates we might have over degree and quality, one thing that emerging media technologies appear to have accomplished is a massive expansion of access to information, communication, and participation. They provide precisely that form of shallow encounter with the possibilities of judgment and action that contemporary liberal democratic subjects have been habituated to expect from politics. And it is in this respect that emerging media contribute to depoliticization – to the closure of spaces and options for political judgment and action – even as they apparently satisfy the prevailing normative framework of publicity. As Dean (2002, 165) writes, "The public is an ideal whose materialization undermines its very aspirations." Emerging media, like the media that have gone before them, sustain depoliticization not because they fail to meet the normative expectations of contemporary publicity but because they succeed.

Acknowledgments

NOTES

1 A survey of members of the group revealed that while 33 per cent of respondents identified the Afghan detainee issue as their primary reason for joining, 53 per cent joined because "prorogation is undemocratic" (Killeen 2010, 4).
2 Stephen Harper polled 38,545 votes in the riding. Marlene Lamontagne, the Liberal candidate, polled 4,918 votes (Chief Electoral Officer of Canada 2008).