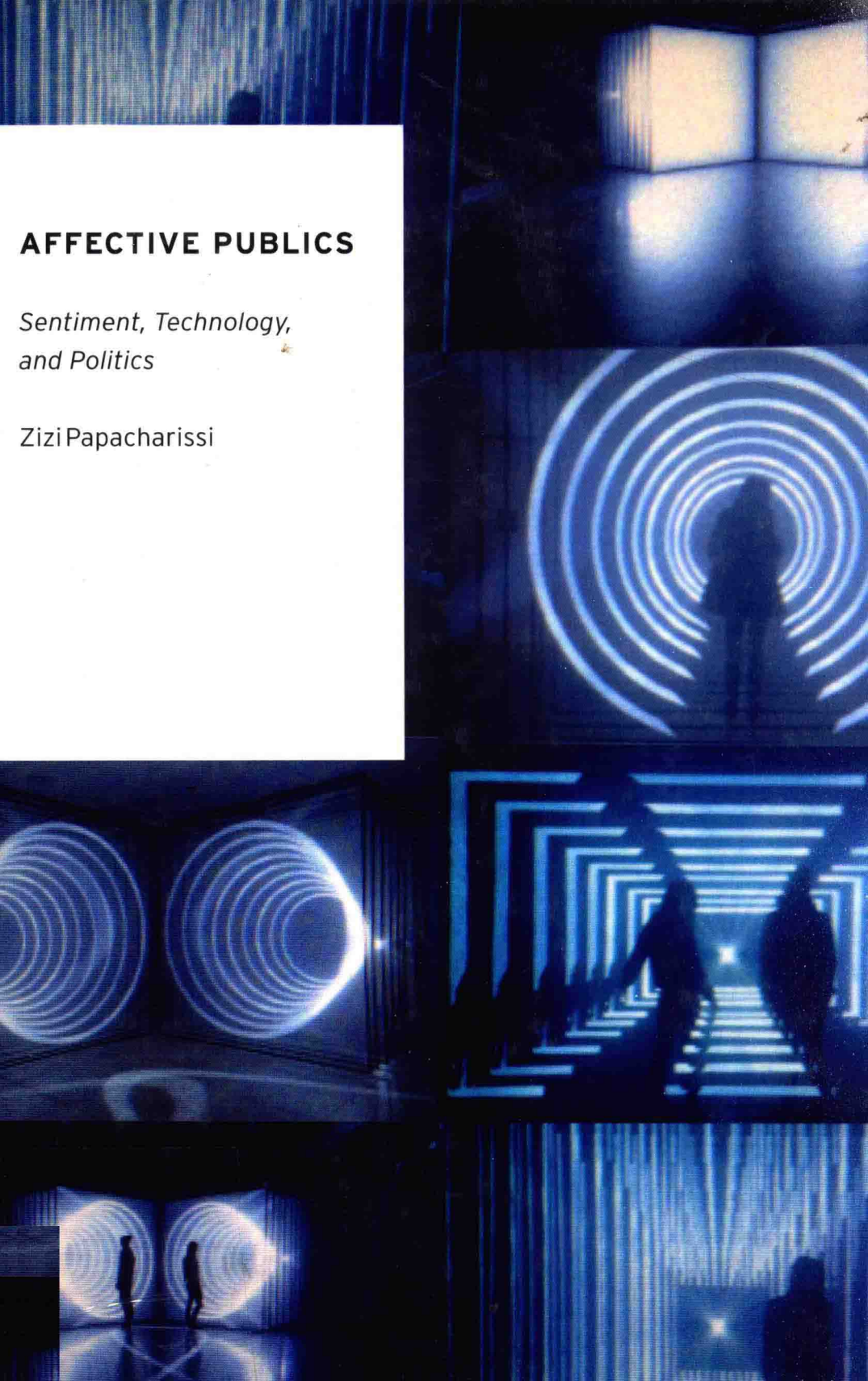


AFFECTIVE PUBLICS

*Sentiment, Technology,
and Politics*

Zizi Papacharissi



Affective Publics

SENTIMENT, TECHNOLOGY, AND POLITICS

ZIZI PAPACHARISSI

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To S. and A.

Acknowledgments

Every language is rich with terms that suffer in translation yet are unique in capturing the essence of things in ways that the same terms in other languages fail. I grew up bilingual so I frequently find myself using English words to describe things that are captured much more elegantly in Greek, and vice versa. I have been studying what newer media offer politics that is unique for some time now, and the ancient Greek word that I keep returning to time and time again is *διεγείρεσθαι*. The word describes ways in which energies, somatic and exosomatic, are reorganized, shaken up, and reimagined with the greater and abstract goal of transcendence, of movement toward something beyond that which previously was. This is how I would describe the ways that newer media energize people, their political routines, and the civic habitus. But you see how many words I had to use to describe that, and I probably still lost some of the essence of *διεγείρεσθαι* in translation. The closest I have come to capturing the heart of this word is through studying scholarly work on affect. *Διεγείρεσθαι* is a general feeling of movement subjectively experienced, an overall sensation of something that is in the making. It may produce emotions, or rationalizations, or new structures, or not much at all. The more I read about affect and affect theory, the more I came to realize that this was indeed the terminology I had to use, although I have to confess that affect is nowhere near as rich a word as my ancient Greek favorite. And so I wrote this book about what happens to publics when they materialize affectively through the discursive mediality of Twitter. I wanted to describe what form publics take on when they are rendered primarily out of a general sensation of *διεγείρεσθαι*. What is their texture like? What are the tendencies and tensions that characterize them?

It is a somewhat abstract notion, I know, and so I owe huge thanks to Andrew Chadwick, who encouraged me to work through this idea in the context of the Oxford Studies in Digital Politics series. I am also grateful for the support and valuable advice of Angela Chnapko at Oxford University Press. Maria de Fatima Oliveira and Sharon Meraz helped me apply my analysis to the networked infrastructure of Twitter, and I am deeply thankful for their generosity and insights. Stacy Blasiola and Indira Neill, my research assistants of formidable patience, talent, and perception, were there to support the analysis and offer a critical view of my interpretations. Finally, my deepest and most heartfelt thanks to S., who generously (always!) offered me the *Διεγείρεσθαι* connection in the first place, to A. who helped me make sure I was applying it correctly, and to both of you for showing me how to reimagine energies and practices in everyday life, time and time again.

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Prelude

... the first delegation of the drive in the psyche is the affect ...
Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (p. 282).

On November 14, 1973, students at the Athens Polytechnic (Πολυτεχνείο) barricaded themselves inside the university in protest of the military junta that had been in place in Greece since 1967. The coup d'état had been led by a group of colonels following a lengthy period of instability dating back to the aftermath of World War II. During the civil war that developed in the postwar struggle for political power, government forces backed by the United States and the United Kingdom had battled communist factions, a conflict that led to the defeat of the communists and the banning of the Communist Party in Greece. Greece became a part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Economic Community, a precursor of the European Union. Still, unresolved tensions accumulated and eventually led to a clash between liberal centrist reformers and the king in the 1960s. The colonels seized power and dissolved political parties during a vacuum of leadership in the spring of 1967. Politicians and citizens opposed to the junta were exiled or fled, while those who stayed were imprisoned and tortured.

The November 1973 student uprisings were preceded by a gradual series of protests against the dictatorial rule of the regime. These were led by vocal protestors, both in Greece and abroad, who spoke openly and raised awareness about the civil rights violations occurring in Greece daily. In addition to other authoritative measures, the military regime had enforced a law requiring that subversive youths be drafted into the army, and this prompted

the student protests. And so, the November 1973 uprisings were the culmination of a long period of resistance to the regime, aimed at increasing domestic and global awareness of the atrocities it was committing in Greece.

The students organized inside the university and constructed a radio station out of lab equipment, broadcasting locally to Athens. Their broadcasts were picked up and redistributed across Greece and abroad. The students spoke simply and earnestly against dictatorship and for democracy, and their ideas were heavily influenced by youth movements of the 1960s, and the May '68 movements in particular. Soon thousands of workers joined them, protesting the junta outside and inside the Polytechnio. This quickly turned into the largest protest mounted against the junta, and one that attracted the attention of global media. Under increasing pressure and in an attempt to dissolve the crowds and put an end to the movement, the colonels ordered a military tank to crash through the gates of the university. Using the radio station, the students addressed the soldiers directly, calling them "brothers in arms" and pleading with them to stop. In the early hours of November 17, 1973, the tank proceeded through the gates, at which point the emotional broadcasts of students reciting the lyrics of the Greek national anthem abruptly stopped. Film shot by a Dutch journalist showed people clinging on to the main steel entrance gates as the tank brought them down. This footage, along with the last radio broadcast, was shocking. It mobilized and unified sentiment against the junta within and beyond Greece. The escalating pressure became too much and the regime crumbled. Constantine Karamanlis was invited back from self-exile in Paris and was appointed interim prime minister. He was formally elected in the first free elections that followed a year later, on the anniversary of the uprising, November 17, 1974.

November 17 is now a national holiday in Greece. I was only a few months old in 1973. Growing up, I vividly remember listening to the broadcasts and watching the news films year after year, as our teachers retold the events at school. Some of my own teachers had been imprisoned and tortured by the junta. On these annual occasions for remembrance, media coverage revived our collective memories of the events, and we all reflected on the censorship, humiliation, and human rights violations that had plagued the country that invented democracy but also had a short track record with it. In the democratic tranquility that followed, commemorating the event became institutionalized. Collective memory of the event, imprinted in our psyches and recycled via the media, rendered it a permanent part of our history and identity.

In reference to this landmark, a revolutionary terrorist group adopted the name November 17th, reappropriating and remixing its ideology into vague anti-American manifestos that followed its numerous bloody attacks. Yet that did not seem to contaminate the purity of the November 17th movement in our minds, which was viewed as a separate event that affirmed our collective faith in democracy, punctuated by the yearly playbacks of footage of the military tank crashing through the gates against the pleading voice of the student radio announcer. Nor did it interfere with Greeks electing into parliament, a year or so short of the fortieth anniversary of the movement, the contemporary incarnation of the neo-militant, neo-fascist, anti-immigrant party of Golden Dawn. Conversations about the role of the uprising and the radio broadcasts in the downfall of the dictatorial regime persist forty years later, with the public still debating whether it was the university protests or mounting failures in economic and foreign policy that brought the military regime to its end.

What am I getting at here? There is an interesting, captivating connection between affect and ideology, feeling and belief, emotion and reason. These three groupings reflect imbricated yet distinct layers of engagement with public affairs. Conventional wisdom frequently drives us to separate reason from emotion, suggesting that we think with our brains and act with our hearts. Similarly, emotions may be considered fleeting but beliefs are more fixed, while ideology expresses conviction versus the overpowering, albeit occasionally ephemeral, sway of affect. The folklore surrounding our perceptions may prompt us to view these groupings as opposite extremes of a continuum. In fact, they are pairings of co-occurring tendencies. When co-present, they can be responsible for the most inspiring but also most confounding moments of human history. What reason, belief, and ideology suggest, affect, feeling, and emotion frequently overturn in favor of the irrational. Yet affect, feeling, and emotion also reflexively drive movements that express rationally focused expressions of ideological beliefs. Such was the case with the mobilization of sentiment against the Greek junta. Subsequent attempts to evoke that same feeling as the country moved on frequently repackaged it into something far removed from the sentiment of that historic moment.

I am interested in the balance between affect and ideology and how this balance enhances or entraps publics evoked through media. For the November 17th movement of 1973, radio was the medium that brokered widespread awareness and helped mobilize support for a burgeoning revolt. This was not

a radio revolution, but a revolution broadcast via radio. The radio broadcasts helped protesters coordinate and disseminate the message about oppression to broader publics. The affective attunement enabled through the radio broadcasts presented a way for diverse publics to tune in and emotionally align with the movement.

There are countless stories of how media serve as conduits for affective expression in historical moments that promise social change. These are typically stories of connection and expression. This book is about how newer media invite people to *feel* their own place in current events, developing news stories, and various forms of civic mobilization. The storytelling infrastructure of platforms like Facebook or Twitter invites observers to tune into events they are physically removed from by imagining what these might feel like for people directly experiencing them. Storytelling devices like photographs, YouTube or Vine videos, condensed descriptions of tension filled moments on Twitter, or live-blogged accounts of revolutions-in-the-making convey a sense of immediacy that makes us feel like we are *there*, wherever *there* may be. This capability is not new, nor is it specific to newer media. Broadcast journalism, and the 24/7 television news cycle in particular, has amplified our ability to affectively tune into events physically removed from us. Prior to that, print journalism enabled us to construct our own biased, subjective mental images of the lives of others, or what Walter Lippmann (1922) had famously pegged a pseudoenvironment—a blend of the world outside and the pictures in our heads.

Newer media follow, amplify, and remediate that tradition of storytelling. They permit meaning-making of situations unknown to us by evoking affective reactions. Tuning in affectively does not mean that reactions are strictly emotional; they may also be rational. But it does mean that we are prompted to interpret situations by *feeling* like those directly experiencing them, even though, in most cases, we are not able to *think* like them.

This point is key. Affective attunement is defined by its evanescent nature. We imagine what things might be like through affectively enhanced forms of storytelling, but we are not the Greek revolutionaries of the '70s, nor are we the Greek indignados of Syntagma square forty years later. We imagine what it might feel like for them, but our experience of their reality is precisely that: imagined. It lacks the gravitas of actuality. We feel for the Egyptian protesters fighting for and then celebrating the downfall of Hosni Mubarak first, and then Mohamed Morsi later. We imagine their feelings of excitement first, and disillusionment later, but we do not always know enough

about background, context, or history to have a full appreciation of their circumstances. Still we respond affectively, we invest our emotion to these stories, and we contribute to developing narratives that emerge through our own affectively charged and digitally expressed endorsement, rejection, or views. Technologies network us but it is narratives that connect us to each other, making us feel close to some and distancing us from others. As our developing sensibilities of the world surrounding us turn into stories that we tell, share, and add to, the platforms we use afford these evolving narratives their own distinct texture, or mediality. In doing so, media do not make or break revolutions but they do lend emerging, storytelling publics their own means for feeling their way into the developing event, frequently by making them a part of the developing story. It is this process of affective attunement and investment for publics networked digitally but connected discursively that I am interested in exploring further with *Affective Publics*, energized by sentiment and energizing a new political.¹

The Present Affect

In late January and February 2011, thousands of Egyptians coordinated online and offline to protest the prolonged and cruel rule of Hosni Mubarak. As protests culminated and generated global support, the movement was lauded for its persistence, passion, and lack of a single leader. The absence of any explicit allegiance to existing political factions in Egypt, especially Muslim ones, comforted Western publics uneasy with the ramifications of the uprising. But it also served to legitimize the movement; it communicated unity and distance from partisan, and potentially corrupt, politics.

Late September 2011 saw the first demonstrations of the Occupy movement in various cities in the US and Europe, protesting global economic and social inequality. By contrast, this movement was quickly criticized for being leaderless and not possessing a specific agenda. The lack of ideological definition that gave the movement in Egypt credibility seemed to have the opposite effect for Occupy. Concurrent *indignados* movements taking place throughout Europe were similarly critiqued as ideologically shapeless. All of these movements emerged out of different contexts but shared one thing in common: online and offline solidarity shaped around the public display of emotion. The emotion infiltrating the texture of political expression, or affect, was indignation with a set of circumstances that had gone on for too long (e.g., Castells, 2012). The circumstances were different, but the public display of affect united these publics despite and beyond ideological differences. In addition, affective expressions of indignation that were shunned as ideologically shapeless in some contexts were interpreted as signs of ideological solidarity in others. These personal and affective expressions accumulated and dispersed virally through digitally enabled networks, discursively calling into being further publics of support.

This book focuses on public displays of affect as political statements. I examine what affective intensity does for digital politics and networked publics. I do so by focusing on Twitter and employing three case studies: the Arab Spring movements, various iterations of Occupy, and everyday casual political expressions as traced through the archives of trending topics on Twitter. The focus is on Twitter, but given the interconnected nature of these media, findings are extrapolated to other ambient platforms affording social awareness in general, and affect in particular, including YouTube and Facebook. This volume is about the role of affect in politics and the ways in which online media facilitate political formations of affect. I am ultimately interested in what these mediated feelings of connectedness do for politics and publics networked together through the storytelling infrastructures of a digital age.

The Affect of Online Media

Online media afford visibility to voices frequently marginalized by the societal mainstream (Berry, Kim, & Spigel, 2010; Couldry, 2012). In this book, I examine the form publics take as they are networked together, through affectively charged discourses about events that command our attention in everyday life. Affect, as the sum of—often discordant—feelings about affairs, public and private, is examined as the energy that drives, neutralizes, or entraps networked publics.

The past few decades have witnessed the growth of movements that use digital means to connect with broader publics and express their point of view. Naturally, these manifestations of digital connectivity and networked engagement invite both utopian and dystopian speculation about the civic impact of internet-related technologies. Not unlike other media preceding it, the internet reorganizes the flows of time and space in ways that promise greater autonomy but also conform to the habitus of practices, hierarchies, and structures that form its historical context. Still, recent digitally aided waves of unrest, reaching from the various political movements of the Arab Spring to demonstrations of indignation with late capitalism spreading through the *indignados* movements in Europe, to the global Occupy movement, have prompted renewed interest in the impact of social media. Debates populating the mainstream are consumed with whether these are

indeed social media revolutions, and whether tweeting the revolutions can in fact make or break a revolution in the making. These questions make for compelling conversation, but they are questions that present little interest to researchers, for they have already been answered. More interesting questions remain. What do I mean by this?

Careful examination of the social phenomena at hand, coupled with extensive research, suggest that the internet pluralizes but does not inherently democratize spheres of social, cultural, political, or economic activity (e.g., Bimber, 1998; Papacharissi, 2010). Research reminds us that even though the path to mobilization is increasingly becoming digital, it is also more than simply digital (Couldry, 2010; Howard, 2011). While online media are utilized as resources that help accelerate mobilization, they present a necessary but not a sufficient cause for radical mobilization (Ingram, 2011; Tufekci, 2011). And so, impact is not determined by the technology but rather by the historically singular interplay of the various sociocultural, economic, and political conditions at work. A more interesting direction for researchers lies not in questions of impact but rather in questions of content. If online media do bear the potential of accelerating mobilization, then what form of communication do they tend to invite? As networked platforms increasingly present paths to social change, what do these digital paths look like? What is the texture of storytelling that fills online platforms as individuals mobilize online and offline, and what kinds of public formations of political expression does this texture support? What properties inform the texture of this expression, and what does this mean for emerging contemporary forms of political expression and civic engagement? I argue that networked digital structures of expression and connection are overwhelmingly characterized by affect. This book is about how digitally afforded affect informs the structure and potential of networked publics and crowds in societies democratic and non-democratic.

My argument is grounded in research suggesting that social media facilitate feelings of engagement (Dean, 2010; Gregg, 2011; Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012; van Dijck, 2013). Most notably, they help activate latent ties that may be crucial to the mobilization of networked publics. Online activity, however, cannot be confused with impact. Yet, depending on context, online activity may introduce primary disruptions to the stability of powerful hierarchies that grant a movement momentum, which may accumulate over time. On a secondary level, online activity may energize disorganized crowds and/or facilitate the formation of networked publics

around communities, actual and imagined (e.g., Howard & Hussain, 2013). These publics are activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity, however fleeting or permanent those feelings may be. The connective affordances of social media help activate the in-between bond of publics, and they also enable expression and information sharing that liberate the individual and collective imaginations. This is perhaps why the influence of social media in uprisings that take place in autocratic regimes frequently persists despite attempts to shut down the networked infrastructure that supports them.

Dean (2010) draws attention to the notion of affect to describe the circulatory drive that characterizes networked publics, in that they become what they are and simultaneously “a record or trace” of what they are (p. 22). Sustained by ongoing reflexivity that is regenerated by singular moments of expression and connection deposited by individual users, the affective flow and affective links remain and resonate with networked publics even after the specific links to content have been shut down. Affective attachments to media cannot produce communities, but they may produce “feelings of community” (p. 22). Depending on context, these affective attachments may reflexively drive a movement that aims at community and/or capture users in a state of engaged passivity.

In this volume, I focus on the role of affect in politics and the ways in which online media facilitate political formations of affect. These questions are broad and are examined here in the context of one online platform, Twitter, and through tracing this form of communication across three case studies: the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, and trending topics on Twitter. Using these case studies, I employ various forms of content, discourse, semantic, and network analyses to examine the form and texture of politically infused expression on Twitter. The findings are interpreted along with other concurrent research to present a theory on the form and texture that networked publics take on. I premise this analysis on the concept of affect, and begin with an explication of the term.

Affect

Affect has always energized rituals of public and private life, although discussions of its place in politics tend to assign it a backseat to reason. Placing the emphasis on rationality, conventional political thinking tends to view