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ABSTRACT

As an increasing part of everyday life becomes connected with the web in many areas of the globe, the question of how the web mediates political processes becomes still more urgent. Several scholars have started to address this question by thinking about the web in terms of a public space. In this paper, we aim to make a twofold contribution towards the development of the concept of publics in web science. First, we propose that although the notion of publics raises a variety of issues, two major concerns continue to be user privacy and democratic citizenship on the web. Well-known arguments hold that the complex connectivity of the web puts user privacy at risk and enables the enclosure of public debate in virtual echo chambers. Our first argument is that these concerns are united by a set assumptions coming from liberal political philosophy that are rarely made explicit. As a second contribution, this paper points towards an alternative way to think about publics by proposing a pragmatist reorientation of the public/private distinction in web science, away from seeing two spheres that needs to be kept separate, towards seeing the public and the private as something that is continuously connected. The theoretical argument is illustrated by reference to a recently published case study of Facebook groups, and future research agendas for the study of web-mediated publics are proposed.

Author Keywords

networked publics; issue publics; public/private; social media; democracy; Facebook, Dewey

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INTRODUCTION

We have now been living with the web in its popularized form for a couple of decades. One consequence of the fact that the web is no longer an entirely new technology is that it becomes possible to trace the history of how we have thought about the web in the past decades [12]. More specifically, social scientists have used a number of terms to try to capture and describe online activities adequately. Some of the more prominent ones have been community and cyberspace [37,40]. Today, there is a growing interest in thinking about the web, and especially social media, in terms of publics [10,20,24]. The shift is an interesting one, because it highlights a growing awareness of the fact that the web is not an alternative reality, but an infrastructure deeply entangled with everything that goes on offline. The question of the web as a public space is also an important one, not least because social media are increasingly used for collective action in relation to diverse projects, from protest to disaster relief [24,31]. Following this popular uptake of social media use, politicians and authorities have also taken up social media as a tool for communicating with 'the public' in a way that bypasses the traditional broadcast media [3]. The notion of 'networked publics' has been put forward to try to capture this convergence of heterogeneous media, groups and institutions in a world of digital connectivity [10,20,21].

The background for the theoretical argument made here is the current use of the notion of publics to understand the web. In this paper, we aim to do two things in order to advance further the usefulness of the concept of publics for thinking about the web. First, there is a need to think carefully about what happens when the concept is used, including the theoretical assumptions that follow the notion of publics. Here, we focus on two widespread concerns raised by introducing the notion of publics to discussions about the web. The idea of something public does not make sense without its counterpart – the private. The first concern has to do with the violation of such private space as a result of the complex connectivity of the web [1,23]. The other concern has to do with the enclosure of public debate in virtual 'echo chambers' that are biased by more or less 'private' interests, and thus impairs democratic debate [38]. Related to this is the concern with the power law

distribution of online attention, which means that a few (commercial) players with private interests come to dominate the web [18]. The first part of the argument we seek to make is that these concerns all draw on specific set of assumptions about the public/private distinction in a liberal democracy, here exemplified by Habermasian theory. While this philosophical heritage has no doubt played a valuable role in the development of liberal democracy, it is not the only way to think about publics. Especially in the case of the web, which introduces so many new dynamics, it seems important to make explicit what theoretical constructs are imported, and also experiment with alternative understandings that may have gained new relevance with the rise of the web.

Having identified some of the philosophical assumptions underlying the current use of the concept of publics to understand the web, the second part of the argument suggests that it then becomes possible to experiment with such alternative theories of publics. In particular, the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey offers an alternative take on the public/private divide that seems useful for reframing the two concerns outlined above [13]. The consequence of Dewey's pragmatist vantage point is a focus on concrete actions that may or may not make publics relevant, depending on whether such actions have indirect consequences that can only be handled through the intervention of a public. In a sense, the task is to connect the private and the public rather than understanding them as two spheres that should be kept separate. The argument thus has affinities with Bimber et al's reconceptualization of collective action as dependent on communication that reaches across boundaries between public and private life [6]. With Dewey, however, it is possible to develop rather than replace the notion of publics. Based on the pragmatist focus on concrete problem solving, turning to Dewey involves as shift from networked publics to issue publics.

The paper develops the argument in four sections. In the first section, the background for the theoretical argument is substantiated. Two major concerns prompted by understanding the web in terms of networked publics are reviewed. We argue that although they appear to understand 'public' in two different ways (visible vs. democracy), the two concerns are united by a common set of assumptions stemming from liberal political philosophy. In the second section, Dewey's theory of publics is introduced as a resource for rethinking the public/private distinction in web science in more pragmatist terms. In order to illustrate the potential of such a pragmatist understanding of publics, Dewey's theory of publics is then illustrated by an empirical case of two Facebook groups used during a snowstorm emergency in Denmark in 2010 [7]. Finally, the last section of the paper discusses some of the implications of adopting a pragmatist understanding of the public/private distinction, including how research questions might change in web science.

BACKGROUND: NETWORKED PUBLICS
The term networked publics has been defined by Mizuko Ito as "a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media" [20:13]. Ito highlights phenomena such as the increased aggregation and accessibility of information, and the potential for collective intelligence that such a development entails, including the contributions of peer-to-peer communities and the increased value of positions in the long tail or at the edges of networks. In a later article, boyd attempts to flesh out more specifically how social media affords networked publics [10]. She highlights four affordances resulting from the fact that networked publics are fundamentally "made out of bits", including persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. While analyzing affordances is crucial for understanding the web, what boyd explicitly does not do is more than nod at "the different discursive threads around the notion of publics".

This is where we seek to make a contribution by highlighting that the notion of publics comes with normative connotations. In the words of Ito "the term *publics* foregrounds a more engaged stance" [20:14]. More specifically, we wish to suggest that when we talk about the web in terms of networked publics, we tend to draw on liberal political philosophy. In order to substantiate this claim we start by trying to unpack two of the discursive threads that boyd suggests exists in relation to the notion of publics. Here, we focus on two of the most central and widespread concerns with the 'social, cultural, and technological developments' that belongs under the umbrella term of networked publics. The first concern focuses on the flipside of the increased aggregation and accessibility of information that Ito noted, namely the question of privacy on the web. In this discursive thread, we argue, public is primarily taken to simply mean 'visible to many people'. The second concern puts more philosophical weight on the notion of publics by associating it with democracy. Here, we have to do with the flipside of Ito's hopes for more engagement and a stronger voice for groups on the edges – the development of virtual echo chambers and winner-takes-all effects that harm public debate. We end the section by arguing that both concerns share similar assumptions about the public/private dichotomy.

When Public Means Visible
The concern for the privacy of web users is widely expressed in both academic and more popular texts. For instance, the way social media affords persistence has raised concerns about the loss of the ability to 'delete' or 'forget' [29]. What we upload to the web at one point in time is likely to follow us in one shape or another for the rest of our lives. The concern over the persistency of web content is no doubt reinforced by the other affordances of replicability and searchability that boyd also noted in her

discussion of social media [10]. Google chairman Eric Smith highlighted the inability of the web to forget in a recent talk at the University of Cambridge, which speaks to the high-profile nature of the concern with user privacy [34].

Underlying these concerns with the lack of an efficient delete button on the web is the analysis that social media blur the lines between public and private domains. While such blurring is probably part of what makes social media attractive to use, it also puts users at risk of unintentionally exposing private content in public, without being able to take it back. For example, there might be a discrepancy between the "imagined audience" that one is addressing when composing status updates or uploading photos on Facebook and the actual group of people for whom such content is visible [1]. While the notion of an imagined audience is far from new, it has taken on new significance in recent scholarship. As put forward by Litt [23], research into what variables determine the makeup of imagined (and actual) audiences is valuable in so far as it helps "people navigate through mediated publics – particularly for those who may at risk because their imagined audiences do not match up closely enough with their actual audiences" [23:342].

These examples of current interests in the lack of an online delete button and the proliferation of opaque audiences shows that there is both a strong public discourse and a research agenda concerned with the privacy of web users. The first step of the argument proposed here is that the concern for user privacy cannot be understood outside the context of understanding the web as a public space. The notion of user privacy could seem to suggest an understanding of the word public as simply meaning visible or open, whereas more private venues, such as emails or Facebook messages, are seen as hidden or closed for the larger public. Indeed, in a recent text, Baym and boyd explains public and private as "openness and closedness" [5:322]. Such a conceptualization might seem free from normative connotations, that is, purely descriptive. However, there is a liberal normativity involved with casting privacy as desirable, and public exposure as harmful. In order to see this, it is helpful to turn to the hopes and concerns for the web as a democratic public space, because this is were the connection between publics and normativity is immediately clear.

When Public Means Democracy

Ito's understanding of publics as something that has to do with a more engaged stance has a long history, also when it comes to the web. Before the current interest in talking about the web in terms of publics, the notion of cyberspace has been associated with freedom of speech, and a more general freedom from state control. Similarly, the notion of the web as home to online communities has been associated with empowerment, self-organization and participatory

democracy. When it comes to the connection between the currently rising notion of publics and democracy, Habermas has provided a well-known and almost paradigmatic theory. In brief, Habermas conceptualizes the public as a specific sphere that exists to provide a rational critique of the state [17]. This is possible because the public sphere in Habermas' model is situated as the mediator between the market that is dominated by private interests and the public institutions that are controlled by state interest. In order to counterbalance these domains, the public sphere is ideally a space of free, open, and (communicatively) rational debate between equal citizens over how to best further the common good.

While Habermas has certainly been criticized [11,16], some of the fundamental arguments in his model continues to serve as a yardstick for measuring the contribution of web-mediated publics to democracy. Three widespread and associated sub-concerns with the web as a public democratic space can be highlighted. The first argument starts with the Habermasian assumption that democracy is partly about making sure that a diverse set of perspectives gets heard in the public sphere. Based on this, scholars have noted that the power law distribution of attention on the web is bad for democracy, in so far as it means that a few select actors gain a strong voice online, while most actors are ignored [18]. For example, Lu et al. [24] found that Facebook activity in relation to the Greek anti-austerity 'indignados' movement quickly converged around a few massively popular pages and groups, making it potentially difficult for alternative perspectives to gain traction later in time.

Another related argument starts from the assumption that democracy is dependent on an open public sphere where people from diverse backgrounds meet, develop a common understanding, and find a rational way to come to terms with each other. In this perspective, it becomes a concern that social media affords the easy opting in and out of group membership, potentially resulting in so-called "echo chambers" [38], where users confirm each other's biases instead of engaging in 'real' arguments. Foreshadowing the empirical case of Facebook groups that follows later in the chapter, recent research on such groups have found that they tend to be relatively homogeneous [22,25]. Such findings are concerning when held up against Habermasian ideals of an ongoing dialogue in a public sphere with universal reach.

Finally, Bohman [8:144] has remarked how social media like Facebook and Twitter tend to "construct the user as a private person", which might be seen as counterproductive to the spirit of citizenship vital to the Habermasian public sphere. In a similar vein, studies of Facebook have suggested that users tend to act in somewhat superficial ways focused on self-representation rather than engaging in

"excellent quality discussion", as Feezeell et al. calls it [15,33].

It should of course be recognized that evidence has also been produced that the concerns reviewed here are less urgent. Even though the aggregated attention of web users follows power law distributions, the web continues to offer a much lower threshold for making public appearances than more conventional media such as books or television, for example. However, the aim here is not to decide whether the web lives up to promises of democratization or not, but rather to experiment with an alternative way to think about the potential of web infrastructures in terms of publics. In order to do so, we end this background section by pointing at some of the fundamental assumptions in the dominating discursive threads related to the notion of publics. By making these assumptions explicit, it then becomes possible to confront them with an alternative, pragmatist philosophy of web publics.

Liberal Philosophical Assumptions
The common mindset on which the mainstream concerns with the web as a public space draws is that public and private spheres should be kept strictly separate. The logic can be found both in the concern with keeping the private content of users out of public space, and in the concern with keeping private biases out the public sphere. This assumption of a strong public/private dichotomy is rarely fleshed out in detail in web science, but can be traced back to ideas prevalent in liberal political philosophy. The French Enlightenment philosopher Rousseau, for instance, famously formulated the moral imperative to control private desire and follow the 'general will' of the public [32]. Since then, it has been a common virtue to show an attitude of citizenship, in the sense of asking not only how to further one's own interests, but how to contribute to the common good [9]. In the case of capitalism, self-interested pursuits are precisely legitimized by the argument that the intervention of the 'invisible hand of the market' will make sure that self-interested actions are beneficial for *everyone*. In other words, a hierarchy developed in liberal political philosophy, where public interests came to be seen as superior to private ones [19]. To draw on one of the central tensions in social science, individual concerns must make way for societal concerns when it comes to democratic politics. This is not least reflected in Habermas' theory of the public sphere, where private biases are to be left at home before participating in the rational debate of the public sphere.

Correspondingly, liberal political philosophy has long argued for the necessity of protecting the individual against the state [4]. In the Habermasian model, this is both a prerequisite and a motivation for the development of the public sphere, which cannot work as a critical force if it is co-opted by state interests. One side of this coin is the hopes that the US administration has expressed that social media can be used actively as a tool for shaking authoritarian regimes, pushing them towards liberal democracy [2]. The other side of the coin is that social media and the web in general afford the collection of unprecedented amounts of data about the everyday behavior of citizens. In the American liberal tradition, protection from state control and surveillance based on unalienable civic rights have a central position, leading perhaps to a heightened focus on discussing the new dangers to privacy offered by the complex connectivity of the web [14].

In sum, when the web is thought about in terms of a public space, we tend to draw on a liberal understanding of the public and the private as two spheres that must be kept separate and protected from each other. When research about e.g. social media emphasize how these domains become blurred and even co-constitutive online, it has thus resulted in a number of concerns, two of which have been highlighted here under the general labels of user privacy and impoverished public debate. What has not been done so much in Internet research, however, is to make explicit the philosophical assumptions behind such preoccupations. The argument we wish to make here is that a fundamental reorientation of the public/private divide might open fruitful research agendas beyond the conundrums of echo chambers, power laws, and privacy breaches. In the following section, we turn to such an alternative theory of publics.

RECONCEPTUALIZING PUBLICS
In their discussion of socially mediated publicness, Baym and boyd notes how pragmatists like James and Cooley, and sociologists like Goffman have long argued that "even the most private of selves are formed in relation to diverse others [5:323]. Drawing on Cooley, Litt expands this position in her discussion of how social media usage is dependent on the imagination of audiences: "The imagined audience (…) is one of the most fundamental attributes of being human [23:331]. In other words, our understanding of the people and society around us constantly informs how we carry ourselves as individuals. It might be accepted as intuitively plausible that what we are as individuals and what happens in our private spheres is inevitably shaped by what goes on in larger, public spaces. The question, however, is what consequences this pragmatist insight has for the public/private distinction in relation to the concerns touched upon above. Here, it is useful to consult another pragmatist thinker, namely John Dewey, who back in 1927 wrote a small, dense book called "The Public and its Problems" [13].

Dewey's Theory of Publics
In his book, Dewey argues that it is counterproductive to equate the public/private distinction with a society/individual dichotomy, as done above in the liberal tradition. For Dewey, neither 'society' nor 'individual' are

very useful terms for describing reality. The argument is based on the pragmatist position that human experience and human action forms the basis of reality. Since it always takes an individual to act, it does not make sense to see individuals and society as two distinct realms. At the same time, individuals are in no way neatly separated from the world around them, following the pragmatist argument introduced above by Baym and boyd.

Having rejected the notion of the private as something that has to do with individuals, and the public as something that has to do with society, Dewey offers an alternative understanding of the public/private divide grounded in his pragmatist focus on concrete actions, or more precisely, obstacles that block our courses of action. For Dewey, it is when we are blocked from carrying out an action that we leave the realm of habit and invoke the intelligence that makes us human. This intelligence is defined by the ability to see consequences of actions "as consequences" [13:12]. In other words, it is our human intelligence that makes it possible for us to explain the appearance of an obstacle as the result of other people's actions.

It is on this level of consequences of actions that Dewey reconceptualizes the public/private distinction. When an obstacle is a direct consequence of actions done by people in our immediate surroundings, it is a private issue. When an obstacle is the result of actions with indirect consequences, however, a public must be organized in order to deal with the obstacle. It becomes a public issue. For example, one might imagine that a family in a residential area is prevented from enjoying being outdoors due to polluted air. If the polluted air is the direct consequence of the family dad burning garden waste, it is pretty clear what needs to be done to overcome the obstacle. The fire must be put out. However, if the polluted air comes from a nearby factory where the family mom works, it can be seen as an indirect consequence of the income-generating production that sustains the family. In this case, it is not clear what the children and parents in their garden can do about the issue – a public needs to be organized to trace the indirect consequences back to the factory, hold the relevant people accountable, and works towards a lasting solution. Of course, such public action might generate new indirect consequences, which arguably is a challenge that the public sector faces all the time.

In the words of the sociologist Noortje Marres, one way to sum up Dewey's pragmatist conceptualization of publics is to employ the dictum: "No issue, no public" [27]. Although it might seem intuitively acceptable, this is in fact a quite radical position to take, for at least two reasons. First, it implies that 'issue publics' are the only groupings that qualify as publics, since only public issues (actions with harmful indirect consequences) 'spark publics into being' in the sense that publics are needed to settle such issues [28]. This goes against a more conventional use of the term

'issue publics' as merely one out of several types of possible publics [36], including networked publics, mundane publics, and counter-publics. Moreover, the notion of issue publics in the plural undermines the feasibility of the Habermasian model of a singular public sphere. What we should expect, following Dewey, is a variety of temporary issue publics that are always entangled in ongoing processes of tracing and articulating issues, mobilizing participants, and holding actors accountable.

The second radical move built into a Deweyan understanding of publics is that it changes the relationship between the public and the state. Instead of the liberal juxtaposition of a state apparatus with a critical public sphere of free citizens, based on a dichotomy between individual and society, Dewey suggests that state action is always the outcome of a process of organizing publics, if it is to be legitimate. Rather than being detached from each other, or even opposed to each other, states are now on a continuum with publics, as a means through which a public may act to overcome the issue that it is organized around.

A Different Normativity
According to Marres' operationalization of Dewey's theory of publics, the normative concern that comes to the fore in this theory does not have to do with free, open, and rational dialogue among equal citizens, but focuses on what she calls issue displacements:

> "...issue displacements alter the configurations of subject definitions, procedures, and ideals that frame issue formation. (...) The question is whether such alterations of democratic space enable or disable the articulation of a public affair and the organization of a public around it." [27:144]

Marres' question can be used as an analytical frame for thinking about the web in terms of Deweyan publics. The normative hope attached to the notion of publics then become that the connectivity of the web makes it easier to trace and articulate chains of harmful indirect consequences in a way that makes issue publics come alive. The corresponding concern is that issues are displaced to spaces, in this case media, where issues are 'privatized' in the sense that harmful indirect consequences are prevented from being framed as public issues that needs to be acted on.

THE BORNHOLM CASE
The implications that such a reconceptualization of publics might have for web science, and the study of social media more specifically, can be illustrated by an example from an empirical case in which Dewey's theory of publics proved useful. The example draws on a case study of media use during a severe snowstorm in Denmark in 2010. The Bornholm case serves only as an illustration here, and it has been presented in detail in another paper available through

the ACM Digital Library [7]. What this paper adds to the case is the theoretical interest in different ways to conceptualize publics.

During Christmas 2010, a severe snowstorm hit the Danish island of Bornholm. The Baltic Sea island with 40,000 residents is not unaccustomed to harsh winter storms, but this time the snow lingered longer than usual. One important result was that while most major cities could be reached, hundreds of people in the more remote areas of the island were snowbound for up to week. The sudden lack of mobility led to a number of problems, such as citizens running out of vital supplies and concerns that emergency vehicles would be unable to reach rural homes in case of need. As has been found to be the case in previous emergency situations, people turned to a variety of media technologies to develop a better understanding of their situation, including local public radio and the web [39].

In the Bornholm case study, three of the most prominent online venues where investigated as potential mediators of publics – the public radio news website, the comment threads below the news articles on this website, and the public Facebook groups that were founded by Facebook users on Bornholm as a reaction to the snowstorm. The results that are relevant here can be summarized briefly. The analysis of 118 online news articles related to the snowstorm found that official accounts of the snowstorm dominated the public radio service, and that these accounts were made to appear objective and neutral by the professional journalists. These findings correspond well with other sociological findings about how news media works [35]. In the comment threads below the news articles on the public radio website, discussions about the snowstorm situation seems to have been unfocused and even destructive in some places. These results reflect other findings about anonymous and easily accessible online forums as ripe with inappropriate behavior, often called flaming when taking place on the web [30].

Facebook Groups as Issue Publics
In contrast to these two online venues, the interesting result found through the analysis of relevant Facebook groups was that in the two groups with the by far most activity, two quite different accounts of the snowstorm developed (the sampling strategy and sampling frame is discussed in the already published paper [7]). While the most populated of the two groups found the snowstorm to be spectacular and entertaining rather than threatening, the other group was united by a sense of being overwhelmed and overlooked by the local authorities. As a result, this last group developed a supportive community. One group member wrote on the wall:

> *"No matter how... one looks at it, in times like these it is nice with fellow humans who understand*

> *one's situation and not least understand how to react to it. Thanks is only a small word..."*

The qualitative content analysis of all 549 pieces of content on the group wall showed that this statement illustrates the sentiment in the group well. The group was used to develop a shared understanding of the snowstorm situation, which again helped members act on their problems. One way to act was to use the confidence gained from finding 'fellow humans' in a similar situation to reach out to journalists in order to promote their understanding of the situation as dangerous. As the group founder explained to me:

> *"I created the Facebook group because it made me desperate that we who lived in the countryside were forgotten and that the snow removal efforts seized already the 21st December in the rural areas. In fact, we were left to ourselves and I had to do something."*

On top of providing emotional support and highly localized information, the Facebook group was thus used to promote an understanding of the snow trouble as connected to the lack of action by local authorities. These efforts were directed both internally (towards members who looked to the group for a narrative that could explain their problems) and externally (towards journalists who were invited to interview members of the group, and thus build public momentum for increased help to the rural areas). One member formulated the perceived inaction of the authorities in this way on the group wall:

> *"It is about time [the authorities] realized how bad it is out on the island. It does not seem bad in Rønne [the main city on Bornholm], but those of us who live outside Rønne know how grim it is"*

As such, the usage of this specific Facebook group on Bornholm could be interpreted as another example of how networked publics work in the 'convergence culture' where old and new media collide in unpredictable ways [21]. As argued above, the problem is that it is difficult to stop here when thinking about the web in terms of publics. Many analyses draw explicitly or implicitly on liberal and Habermasian ideals about the public as a general sphere. However, based on Habermasian assumptions it is difficult to see any of the three online venues analyzed in the Bornholm case as valuable contributors to the public sphere. The public service media stayed very close to the official accounts of the snowstorm, as fed to them by the authorities. Such a focus is far from working as a critical force that holds the state accountable. The comment threads on the news media website did make it possible for a diverse set of citizens to engage in conversation about the situation, but failed to produce any kind of well-functioning

dialogue, not to mention rational argumentation. Finally, the two Facebook groups reveal each other's biases by disagreeing so fundamentally on the urgency of the situation.

If we shift to a Deweyan understanding of publics, however, the criteria shifts from free, open, rational debate over the common good, to the articulation of indirect harmful consequences as consequences. In this perspective, only the last Facebook group qualifies as a public in the Deweyan sense, because only this group articulated their snowstorm trouble as a public issue, that is, as an indirect consequence of the (in)action of the authorities. The other Facebook group, and the news articles and comment threads, might be publicly accessible, but they are not publics in the Deweyan sense of a group of people coming together to address a shared issue.

The crucial difference is that by drawing on Dewey, it becomes possible to appreciate what first appears to be 'biased' and 'insular' Facebook groups as potentially valuable issue publics. The lesson that we wish the reader to take away from this brief empirical example is that it might be exactly because the Facebook group on Bornholm was isolated from the general audience in the comment threads, and built up enough collective confidence to question the authoritative voice of the local emergency management, that a shared identity was able to develop to an extent where it greatly helped some people in getting through the situation. By articulating their snowstorm troubles as not merely a result of wild weather, but also an indirect consequence of the inaction of the local authorities, the Facebook group was able to start addressing the snowstorm as an unsolved public issue, which required the organization of a snowstorm public through Facebook.

DISCUSSION

Of course, the example from the Bornholm case can only serve to illustrate one possible use of the theoretical argument put forward here. More empirical work is needed in order to examine the fruitfulness of a pragmatist reconceptualization of the private/public divide. Nevertheless, the case of the Bornholm snowstorm public on Facebook suggests that it is not automatically problematic when private experiences are put forward in public. On the contrary, it might be crucial for the collective development of a shared understanding of the situation, a process through which private problems may become public issues that can then be acted upon [6]. In this perspective, being concerned with user privacy is not the most urgent issue when it comes to understanding what goes on online in terms of publics. In fact, a strong focus on delimiting audiences might impede what seems to also be a productive blurring of what content is visible and what is hidden, as others also have noted in relation to collective action dynamics. Similarly, trying to keep 'biased' private interests out of online publics, or disqualify publics that

seem to contain bias as 'echo chambers', might make it difficult to see and understand the dynamics that spark actual publics into being.

What might a research agenda for examining the web as a mediator of issue publics look like? First of all, the preoccupations with user privacy, power-law distributions and echo chambers appear less urgent. In a pragmatist perspective, there is no such thing as an isolated individual with perfect privacy. What seems important is rather to share 'private' experiences with other individuals, especially in the case where personal problems can be turned into public issues. Here, social media seems to offer a great potential that needs to be examined further. As Lu et al. argues, there is a need for people to converge on a limited number of sites in order to develop the shared identities that are key to collective action [24]. This was also the case on Bornholm, where the articulation of the snowstorm as a public issue became possible in one relatively like-minded group rather than through the news media articles or comment threads that were directed at a more general audience, which approximates Habermasian ideals about the public sphere. The point is that while the winner-takes-all effects that follows from the power law distributions of attention online can certainly be problematic in the pragmatist perspective of creating the associations needed to get a complex issue settled, there is also a need to appreciate the value of 'echo chambers' when it comes to building robust issue definitions. In this perspective, the quest for a networked 'super-public' seems less important if it results in issue displacements to venues that impair public engagement by being 'too connected', such as the comment threads on Bornholm.

To end this discussion, we propose two concrete avenues for future research. First of all, what needs to be improved in order to keep the web in service of publics are affordances for preventing 'privatization' of problems by issue displacement to venues that make it difficult to forge the strategic associations needed for showing the public nature of an issue. Following Marres, one place to focus is on how the connectivity of the web makes it possible to trace issues and issue displacements [26]. This is one research agenda, where web science might use the vast repositories of online data and the ever-growing arsenal of tools for extracting, manipulating and visualizing such data to (re-)discover and communicate surprising connections between actions and their unintended consequences.

A second research agenda might work to shift focus from comparing web-mediated publics with the ideals of liberal political philosophy, towards technologies that are flexible enough help people collectively convert individually experienced troubles into public issues. In this regard, social media sites such as Facebook is of particular interest, in so far as almost any snowbound islander in Denmark or any 'indignados' in Greece can create a group based on a

message of his or her choice. This ability, which has been celebrated as 'value at the edges' or the 'long tail' of the web, is not interesting in itself, but because it allows for ongoing experimentation with issue articulations that may or may not mobilize publics. In other words, the important question is not how everyone gets a voice, but how media technologies such as the web and social media maintain a flexibility that affords the appearance of publics in unexpected places at unexpected times – because articulating and solving fresh issues is the virtue of publics, and ultimately, democratic engagement.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have tried to provoke thought about what happens when we think about the web in terms of publics. We hold that this is a worthwhile activity because it captures the inevitable entanglement of what goes on offline and online better than past terms, such as cyberspace or online community. However, when using the notion of publics it is also important to question the philosophical connotations that follow the term. The liberal, Habermasian assumptions of the public and private as two spheres that should be kept separate has led to conundrums in web science over user privacy and virtual echo chambers. The aim of this paper has been to experiment with an alternative philosophical fundament, namely Dewey's pragmatist theory of publics. As illustrated by the usage of Facebook groups on Bornholm, such a pragmatist perspective invites us to focus on connections between personal troubles and the harmful indirect consequences that cause them, which can only be solved by organizing publics. The results are new research agendas for web science. One such agenda could focus on the connectivity and digital nature of the web as a resource for tracing and unraveling the complexity of public issues. Another agenda could focus on the agnostic flexibility of social media infrastructures as everyday laboratories for ongoing experimentation with issue articulations that mobilize ordinary people to participate in publics.

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