Post digital dialogue and activism in the public sphere

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Abstract

Dialogue in the public sphere includes the biopower of the individual, his or her agency and legitimacy as an activist. Digital technology and social media platforms provide individuals and groups with opportunities to communicate their personal experiences, and to share their opinions and views within various continually evolving digital networks that may or may not consist of structures that can facilitate protest action. Digital dialogue has drastically altered our social and political realities as well as our modes of participation within the virtual public spheres. The purpose with this conceptual paper is to explore the opportunities dialogue in the virtual public sphere offers political protestors to influence more diverse groups, increase their resistance of normative hierarchies and improve quality of participation from like-minded citizens. The discussion is contextualised within a political protest in the Alexandra Township, South Africa.

Keywords: post digital dialogue, activism, biopower, agency, legitimacy

Introduction

The notion of public space or sphere has always been regarded as the foundation of democracy since its existence entails constant engagement between those who occupy and

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engage with or move through this space, including government, publics and private stakeholders (Akbar, 2018). While notions of public sphere were initially understood in physical terms where street politics could be enacted and offered multiple and overlapping opportunities for engagement with various ideas and opportunities for debate, these debates were most often removed from the centre (or institutions of power). Instead, these engagements occurred on the periphery or margins that were deemed outside of the control of centres or institutions of power, and therefore offered greater accessibility and possibility for participation. The notion of public space was revolutionised by the renowned philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas (1991, pp.176), who first introduced the term 'public sphere' and defined it as "a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space." This conceptualisation of public space as a virtual sphere also introduced the possibility of digital dialogue within a publicly accessible space where participants can engage each other in digital debate and expression of diverse opinions.

From this perspective, public sphere represents a space for the identification and discussion of societal problems that also influence political action (Akbar, 2018). Rutherford (2000, pp.18) suggests that the public sphere generates opinions and attitudes through acts of assembly and dialogue, that also serve to "legitimate authority in any functioning democracy." Habermas (1991) regards rational critical discourse as the cornerstone of the success of the public sphere, and argues that the public sphere is best constituted and maintained through dialogue, speech acts, and debate and discussions by voluntary opinion-forming associations.

The public sphere is also a contested space that is often used by those in authority to exert dominance and power through what Habermas (1991) terms "refeudalization" of power whereby sanction is offered to the decisions of leaders by maintaining the illusion of the public sphere (Rutherford, 2000, pp.18). However, in "Rethinking the Public Sphere" Fraser (1991, pp.76) argues that "any conception of the public sphere that requires a sharp separation between (associational) civil society and the state will be unable to imagine the forms of self-management, inter-public coordination, and political accountability that are essential to a democratic and egalitarian society." Therefore the boundary between the public and private sphere must be regarded as constantly evolving, flexible and permeable, and therefore neither fixed nor static. A more critical look at the distinction between public and private sphere suggests that these are not straightforward delineations of pre-existing societal interests and groupings, but rather represent cultural classifications and rhetorical labels. Fraser (1995, pp.292) argues that participatory parity in this space is not fully achievable

where systemic inequalities exist, and therefore there should be a recognition that different interests occupy the same social space. However, Fraser (1995, pp.293) suggests “democratic publicity requires positive guarantees of opportunities for minorities to convince others that what in the past was not public in the sense of being a matter of common concern, should now become so.” Fraser (1995, pp.292) therefore concludes that relations within a social space where publics are differentially empowered such as within highly differentiated societies, are more likely to be *contestational* than deliberative in nature. According to Rutherford (2000, pp.18) the success of the public sphere is determined by:

- the level of access (as close to universal as possible)
- degree of autonomy (citizens must be free from coercion)
- rejection of hierarchy (eradication of power differentials to ensure equal participation)
- rule of law (in respect of sub-ordination to the rules of state)
- quality of participation (commitment to the principle of logic)

The development of digital technologies is offering new possibilities for engagement and dialogue. In this regard, Jandrić, Hayes, Lacković, Knox, Suoranta, Ryberg, Ford, Asher, Smith, McGregor, Steketee, Peters, McLaren, Hennessy, & Arndt. (2018, pp.893) suggest that we are “no longer in a world where digital technology and media is separate, virtual, ‘other’ to a ‘natural’ human and social life.” The emergence of new media technologies has had a profound influence on how individuals can interact with democracy and enact their roles as citizenry because they are now active participants in a public conversation, instead of passive recipients of information that has to be engaged with privately (Benkler, 2006). Bennett and Segerberg (2012, pp.743) refers to civic engagement by younger generations in post-industrial democracies as “an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles and grievances”. As such Jandrić et al (2018) argue that the post digital era offers new opportunities for dialogue, that “reclaims the digital sphere as a commons.”

Post digital dialogue and activism

It can be argued that technologies of e-citizenship turn cyberspace into a publicly shared locality for the contestation of claims about citizenship in much the same manner as physical spaces offers opportunities for dialogue and debate about street politics. However, the nature of the virtual public sphere offers greater possibilities for both access and the cultivation of a culture of democratic participation than the conventional public sphere (Rheingold, 2008).

Fuchs (2014) nevertheless points to the contradictions that result from political economy between critical voice and autonomy on the one side, and resource unpredictability and lack of visibility on the other side. Rheingold (2008) therefore suggests that the possibilities that the virtual public sphere affords for participation is dependent on both the availability of digital communication technologies, and on the access to these technologies as limited by the kind of constraints the state places on its use. Access and use of digital technology by political leaders further depend on the quality of existing relationships between leaders and supporters. This interplay between virtual and physical spheres is evident in the Alexandra case study where the constraints that exist in terms of access to digital technologies have resulted in digital platforms almost serving a complementary role to face to face interactions. Whereas the community leader engages in both the virtual and physical realm, the participation of the community itself is limited to the conventional public sphere due to inequalities of political economy. As a consequence, the culture of democratic participation within this community is constrained, and civic participation and dialogue depends both on the quality of the relationship between the community leader and the community, and the community leader's ability to use digital technologies to mobilise the community. In the Alexandra case activism is regarded as the means used by the community as a response to the inequalities that are experienced, and the agency of the leader is what connects resistance from the margins to actions.

Jandrić (2017) regards digital technologies as "inextricably linked to dialogue" but cautions that human agency should take precedence over the novelty and convenience of automatisation and instant communication that it offers in its post-digital form. From this perspective Couldry, Stephansen, Fotopoulou, MacDonald, Clark and Dickens (2014) regard 'digital citizenship' as a heuristic concept for understanding how digital infrastructures are constituted through social relations and practices, and not simply used as a tool for engagement. As such, Bennett and Segerberg (2012, pp.739) suggest that the connective action of "personalised content shared on media platforms changes the core dynamic of the action." Spaces for dialogue, as conceived by Dahlgren (2003) are conducive to civic culture by embedding unobtrusive or routinised practices that promote civic engagement through participation and dialogue. Civic culture according to Dahlgren (2003, pp.154) embodies those features of the "socio-cultural world – dispositions, practices, processes – that constitute pre-conditions for people's actual participation in the public sphere in civil and political society."

Ganesh and Zoller (2012, pp.67) suggest that the prevalence and centrality of dialogue and activism in communication scholarship and transformative social change require consideration of these theoretical concepts. They argue that while perspectives and definitions of what constitutes activism vary, contestation is a core characteristic that is consistently associated with all approaches to activist communication, and its key concepts such as advocacy, conflict, and transgression are closely associated with various notions of what constitutes activism. The variety of dimensions and variables associated with activism serve to illustrate its complexity. Variables such as personal motivation, education, the media, economic, political, organisation and cultural contexts (Benecke, 2019), converge to stablish a cultural space in which new meaning(s) can be either co-created or recreated (Cizsek, 2015).

Ganesh and Zoller (2012, pp.67) further argue that three positions on dialogue are particularly relevant to exploring the relational links and tensions between activism and dialogue, namely dialogue as collaboration, dialogue as co-optation, and dialogue as agonism. Where theorists treat collaboration and consensus as defining features of dialogue, Ganesh and Zoller (2012, pp.85) distinguish three different views of the relationship between activism and dialogue, namely dialogue is privileged as either oppositional, or contested or dichotomized in terms of internal dialogue and external confrontation. Dialogue as co-optation depicts dialogue as a specialised form of communication in which power is regarded as pervasive and difficult to maintain because of the inherent fragility and the vulnerability of dialogue. This vulnerability of dialogue either stems from positions of power where people serve their own interests and therefore employ dialogue as a legitimizing practice, and/or from the pervasiveness of inequity and the inherent problems involved in practices of representation.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) view agonism as a manifestation of radical democracy that emerges out of difference, conflict, disagreement, and polyvocality. Agonistic perspectives "privilege conflict as an element of social change and promotes a pragmatic approach to dialogue that highlights shifting relationships of power, identity, and vulnerability, while simultaneously paying explicit attention to questions of justice and social and material needs" (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012, pp.77). Agonism aids theorising about activism and dialogue because it recognises the potential for dialogue that employs a wider array of methods than collaborative-oriented theories. Ganesh and Zoller (2012, pp.85-86) therefore argue that it is suitable to shift the scholarly bias away from consensus-based approaches, and aid activist theorising and dialogue in a number of ways that also include:

1) recognition that it is unrealistic or naïve to understand activist dialogue in terms of the abandonment or suspension of power differences;
2) allows examination of the multiple ways in which tensions themselves serve to construct contestation and dialogue; and
3) uncover the multiple ways in which dialogic openness is enacted in activist practice.

The basis of democracy is the ability of all voices to contribute to public debate within communities where members share interests and not necessarily a place or location (LaPoe & Carter, 2018, pp.208). In order to understand dialogue within current democracies and public spheres an investigation of agency, power and individual or biopower of an activist within social movements is needed. Minority voices should be allowed to influence decisions taken by media leaders as to who needs to be heard (LaPoe & Carter, 2018, pp.206). Listening to uncomfortable opinions, acting inclusively with diverse 'voices' whilst understanding power relations and personal motivation form part of dialogue in this new public sphere.

Power, biopower and agency of activists

By building on the position adopted by Ganesh and Zoller (2012) with regards to dialogue, the following section will consider activism within a post digital context with reference to notions of power, agency and legitimacy as representation of the psychological factors that influence activists in their decision making and enactments. Activism and power are interconnected, and subject to constant conflict in a bid to secure the necessary level of power to exert influence and bring about change. Power and identity also have a strong inter-connection since they both evolve from ongoing discourse, that adjusts and aligns in response to the context, thereby producing meaning and forging new or different power relations (Hardy & Clegg, 2004, pp.19). Power has been defined by many scholars as the ability that individuals have to motivate others to do what they want them to do (Hardy & Clegg, 2004). According to Holtzhausen (2012, pp.25), power must be taken out of the "external sphere to the internal, individual sphere, with knowledge and particularly self-knowledge being able to transform us". Biopower, namely the internal power of the individual, and based on self-knowledge and moral consciousness, requires self-reflection on how one deal with conflict, resistance and disagreements. In a study conducted amongst selected early career millennial public relations practitioners in South Africa, participants reflected on their biopower and agency by relating it to their representation of other marginalised voices (Benecke, 2019).

This type of role enactment challenges hegemonic views of power as something that is vested in senior decision-makers and that denies the power and influence of individuals to represent at all levels of society. Instead it recognises the ability to influence and shape meaning through interaction, and recognises that their own social representation of concepts assist with meaning making within various contexts. This requires an openness to listen to other voices (MacNamara, 2016), and an ability to represent the views of other citizens. If they are unable to do so themselves, it requires the willingness to act as intermediaries in order to develop symbolic power, agency and legitimacy.

Agency as a concept references the power and creativity individuals demonstrate (Bardhan, 2011) in any given situation in order to conduct themselves with authority, and make meaning from the communicative interaction taking place. Agency is thus understood to be both contextual and reflexive where activists use their own unique understanding of the context- as influenced by their experiences- as a basis to negotiate power in relationships. Listening within agency facilitates an understanding of the various enactments that are associated with agency, and that promote an understanding of the structures that perpetuate dominance and is therefore open to resistance from activists (Dutta, 201, pp.72). Structures of communication, along with agency and culture, are constructs that are recognised within a culture-centred approach. Structure refers to both the communication processes and roles that enable participation and interaction (Dutta, 2014). Structures are created by society, and resources for the communicative processes are assigned them (Dutta, 2014, pp.71). The manner in which social movements such as Put People First (PPF) and 15M used digitally enabled action networks in their communication, are examples of how structures and resources can be used by social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, pp.742). Through digitally networked action (DNA) these movements presented two possibilities for individual participation, either through broader public engagement or through individualized experiences that could be shared quickly to larger networks through various social media platforms. Within this approach individual and personal experience was key in facilitating both physical and emotional involvement.

From a critical perspective public relations activism includes biopower, agency and legitimacy of the individual that is enacting an activist role (Benecke, 2019). Since power, biopower and agency have been discussed in the preceding section, the focus of the following discussion shifts to the concept of legitimacy. Holmström (1995) suggests that the legitimacy of the acting individual (also called agent) depends on his or her knowledge, and their ability to persuade others to support a specific ideology. Legitimacy is achieved through the

development of symbolic power that adds value to interactions, and that in turn facilitate the development of various other forms of capital (Edwards, 2012). Knowledge consists of the combination of common sense (the consensual sphere of knowledge) and scientific knowledge (the reified sphere of knowledge) as it is normalised in different contexts through the acceptance of others (Batel & Castro, 2009). These two spheres of knowledge are of equal importance, and both are essential for decision making (Moscovici, 2000). Both universes are conceived as "dynamic, composed by a plurality of forms of knowledge, mutually influential and presenting dynamic rather than rigid boundaries" (Batel & Castro, 2009, pp.418). Decisions taken from within these different universes are distinct. Strategic action is most often associated with the reified (scientific) universe, and it is characterised by monologue interactions that are premised on expert knowledge that is communicated by a single knowledgeable source. The consensual (common sense) universe is associated with an understanding of the heterogeneity of representation, and is premised on the inclusion of persons of equal group status and entails interactions that are aimed at promoting dialogical communication. Research conducted by Batel and Castro (2009, pp.431) confirm that individuals use both reified and consensual knowledge approaches to effect or resist change in a specific context.

Activists are unique and diverse individuals whose actions require specific research methodologies in order to understand their psychological processes, and the social contexts that influence their actions (Curtin & McGarty, 2016, pp.236). Wolf (2013) refers to the work of Bourdieu to explain a redefined role for activists in society, namely, one that encourages critical interrogation of existing practices and opinions instead of simply promoting vested financial business interests of others. This role requires a curious mindset, awareness of and a sensitivity for the lived experiences of others. A redefined activist role necessitates the establishment of networks (including social media networks), the development of symbolic power, and the use of symbolic violence to motivate for social change.

Social movements and their connective action

Any discussion of post digital dialogue in a political context should include a focus on the participants that are involved in the interactions, and include a recognition of their motivations and connective actions that result in meaning making and influence within different structures. Bennett and Sederberg (2012, pp.743) argue that political involvement is an expression of "personal hopes, lifestyles and grievances" and that this kind of involvement

is more prevalent in the younger generations of post-industrial democracies. This motivation is also evident in the Alexandra case study where activism is construed by the community leader to be linked to a desire to address inequalities that cannot otherwise be expressed or responded to. However, his own personal motivation for resisting, is driven first and foremost by the desire to improve the lives and circumstances of the community of which he forms part. The term 'new activism' (Wolf, 2013, pp.77) was coined by Hughes and Demetrious (2006) and refers to the influence that social media and the Internet has on changing activism and activist actions, along with contemporary forms of engagement.

Research concerning how traditional social movements evolve identify three determining factors, namely the relevance to individual; secondly, interpersonal considerations such as empathy and solidarity; and thirdly, individual traits such as an outward-directed focus (extraversion), a level of agreement with cause, commitment, openness to change and emotional maturity (Omoto et al., 2010, pp.1711). These factors can be applied to the #Feesmustfall protests experienced by Higher Education institutions in South Africa 2015-2017 to better understand the emergence of a social movement for change in its wake. The relevance of these protests is clearly high since students were protesting critical issues such as free education, decolonisation of curricula and the insourcing of contract support staff (Constandius et al., 2018; Luckett & Pontarelli, 2016). Empathy and solidarity within the #Feesmustfall movement was characterised by high emotional involvement of both students and faculty that altered how staff and students engaged each other. In the case of #Feesmustfall protest action researchers identified "mind and body learning" as part of the process of changing existing university policies and practices, thus implying that both psychological and physical aspects are involved in change enactment (Contandius et al., 2018, pp.84). Finally, the personality traits of activists, as well as their commitment levels along with an understanding of how activist participation can be sustained, require further research. One explanation for why the #Feesmustfall context has to date been under-researched may lie in the fleeting nature of student-university relationship, and another is perhaps the level of apathy that South African millennials display for political participation (Azionya, 2015).

Ghobadi and Clegg (2015) discuss a wide variety of both positive and negative effects online activism has on dialogue and collective action. Online activism is used to describe "social activism relying on the Internet" (Ghobadi & Clegg, 2015, pp.54). It is argued that online activism has the potential to cross boundaries and connect marginalised individuals, establish collective identity and equality between individuals and groups, and provide

anonymity which may result in franker debates that also enable social change. Criticism of online activism alerts to certain negative consequences such as surveillance of social activists by opposing and often dominant forces; a flawed understanding of the need for offline engagements; and, the unequal access resulting from unavailability of resources (e.g. cost of data and government regulations). Research findings suggest that online activism initially enhances public support during the early stages of resistance and dissent, but this wanes over time until collective action is reduced and limited to inter-passive activism or other forms of "clicktivism." Ghobadi and Clegg (2015, pp.65) determined that online activism during the 2009 Iran election contributed to the emergence of a new social movement that published a wide variety of visual content with a very broad reach that created awareness and international support for activists who tried to protect the identity of protestors out of fear of prosecution. On the other hand, online activism also mobilised opposing forces, and allowed 'dominant elites' to filter information dissemination on the Internet by blocking access to social networks and entertainment platforms and by prosecuting activists. One of the key findings by Ghobabi and Clegg (2015, pp.67) is that 'the balance of interventions determine the outcomes of online activism." Both online as well as offline actions require specific action by participating individuals (Bennett & Sederberg, 2012).

The concept of connective action (Bennett & Sederberg, 2012, pp.744) links activism and dialogue in the virtual sphere because of the possibilities it provides marginalised individuals to utilise technology to connect with other like-minded individuals. It enables differently situated individuals, including marginalised 'others', to symbolically present personal experiences online and to share content using their personal communication technologies. It aims to establish a platform for diverse identities to force more inclusive dialogue and the recognition of personal experiences. The logic of connective action moves away from the collective action suggested by online activism because of its premise that participation becomes the self-motivating form of personal expression. Social networking however, involves co-production and co-distribution that is premised on a different kind of 'economic and psychological logic" (Bennett & Sederberg, 2012, pp.752). An important aspect that is worthy of further research is the functions the networks that emerge from these self-motivated expressions have, and how they influence resistant action and political dissent (Bennett & Sederberg, 2012, pp.760).

Conclusion

Dialogue involving contentious issues like dissent and activism can no longer be ignored, managed as a risk or feared. Digital technology and social media platforms provide individuals and groups with opportunities to communicate their personal experiences, and to share their opinions and views within various continually evolving digital networks that may or may not consist of structures that can facilitate protest action. Further research is required on digital network action (DNA) in order to investigate both structurally-mediated and self-organising action by political protesters, and its sustainability and influence in transforming society (Bennett & Sederberg, 2012).

Digital dialogue has drastically altered our social and political realities as well as our modes of participation within the virtual public spheres. The physical realms of protest and action have been transcended, and it has turned the digital realm into a public space that facilitates resistance from the margins. However, despite the enormous potential it offers for engagement and dialogue, especially in respect of marginalised groups, "it has created a system of highly complex and nuanced social, political, economic, and even environmental interactions which, in order to be fully understood and successfully implemented, require a highly critical evaluation of social media's impact on our political agency (Chapman, 2016, pp.3). While the digital technologies may be a powerful means for mobilising civic engagement, protest and action, its decentralised nature, low level of regulation, and the easy access for initiation, social media-based activism leaves its social movements susceptible to misrepresentation, co-option, and value corruption. Some suggest that without strong leadership digital activism within the unregulated public space of the digital sphere places the values of any movement at risk of subversion by an external agent(s).

A critical, socio-cultural turn in the public relations research agenda has shifted attention away from a predominately organisational focus to include the individual practitioner, and their symbolic power relationships (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). This has resulted in critical interrogation of issues such as dissent, power and activism in professional role enactment with an emergent, activist stance that actively questions and resists existing power structures and normative practices (Holtzhausen, 2012). This is of particular relevance within a poly-contextual and developing environment such as found in South Africa. Public relations practitioner (PRP) role enactment in this context may not only entail representing the interests of those who are marginalised and excluded from social contexts, but also requires advocating for the legitimacy of their own role in their contexts of practice. It is this

agency and power that allows them to co-create a better understanding of diverse views, and to negotiate new meanings in their engagement with various stakeholders. Such an activist stance may enable a level of understanding of their relational contexts that are more representative of various (conflicting) interests and are therefore more equitable and fair. As such activist PRPs act as symbolic intermediaries, and this role enactment represents the best hope PR professionals have to do the right thing, and to actualise the possibilities of the practice by serving the interests and voices of many.

The nature of this activist role is very clearly articulated in the interview conducted with the leader of the Alex Shutdown movement where the leader's agency and personal bio-power has created legitimacy and personal influence. Through the interplay between both conventional and digital participation his self-motivated expressions have been turned into resistant connected action and political dissent aimed at bringing about social change that addresses inequalities of political economy.

Views of a political protest leader

The Alex Total Shutdown movement (ATS) started in April 2019 with the residents of Alexandra Township in Gauteng, South Africa protesting for better service delivery. Although South Africans are very familiar with service delivery protests, with around 280 protests taking place in 2018 (Municipal IQ, 2018), the ATS made headline news for several weeks. Some people claimed that the protests were politically motivated due to the national elections planned for May 2019, highlighting the power struggles between the ANC (national ruling party) and the DA (Gauteng provincial opposition party rulers). Some media reports also claimed that the leaders to the ATS movement, who acted as community liaison staff of the Alexander Renewal Project (ARP) stood to benefit from the ATS movement and that they were motivated to protest as the mayor plans to dissolve the ARP community development project.

One of the leaders of the ATS movements, Sandile Mavundla was asked to present his views on personal influence, legitimacy and agency against the background of negative media reports and criminal charges laid against the movement by the mayor of Johannesburg, Councillor Herman Mashaba. Here are some of his responses:

How do you see activism and activists?

"I see activism as dealing with inequalities experienced by communities. They say we are equal but we do not see that! The legal system is not accessible to ordinary citizens. I do not

have the money to go against the mayor as I cannot afford an advocate or legal team. Activists, I think are people who have an interest in uplifting the community and not for own interest, someone who is willing to take a bullet for the community".

What is your personal role in developing the community?

I've been staying in Alex all my life and my heart is in the people. I've been working for the ARP since it started with stakeholder engagements. These include going to the community, doing environmental impact surveys, speaking to the service providers. I use Facebook to communicate. In the end, I personally worked to get clinics fixed and ready for the community. I'm not getting any benefit from it even if consultants are paid millions for environmental impact studies. I want my children to be proud of me when we walk in the street. The community must say '…your dad did this for us'. The community know me and what I have, '…I still stay in a one room house, don't have money to repair my car, my kids go to the local, public school and I use the public clinic'. Only those with fancy Twitter know about the things the mayor is saying about me, but the ordinary people of Alex know me and my children".

How do you ensure that a protest does not turn violent or destructive?

"I'm calling for the education of the community, not to destroy the little that we have, it still needs to sustain us for the future. The SA Constitution is very open, '…you can protest as long as you picket peacefully, don't carry any dangerous weapons and it allows you to submit petitions on behalf of the community. We cannot be silenced, then it's not democracy. Leaders need to engage the people and experience the conditions [the people] are living in. Proper planning is needed when developing an area. People cannot be allowed to build illegal structures or flush their waste in the Jukskei river (the river runs through the township). Leaders need to be willing to be criticised and insulted if they want to lead, take what is being said and answer what needs answers".

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