

Constructing Digital Democracies: Facebook, Arendt, and the Politics of Design

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Abstract

Deliberative democracy requires both equality and difference, with structures that organize a cohesive public while still accommodating the unique perspectives of each participant. While institutions like laws and norms can help to provide this balance, the built environment also plays a role supporting democratic politics—both on- and off-line. In this article, I use the work of Hannah Arendt to articulate two characteristics the built environment needs to support democratic politics: it must 1) serve as a *common world*, drawing users together and emphasizing their common interests and must also 2) preserve *spaces of appearance*, accommodating diverse perspectives and inviting disagreement. I then turn to the example of Facebook to show how these characteristics can be used as criteria for evaluating how well a particular digital platform supports democratic politics and providing alternative mechanisms these sites might use to fulfill their role as a public realm.

Author Bio

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In early 2016, Facebook unveiled a new design feature, the result of a year-long project to revise the platform’s “Like” function. Symbolized by a thumbs-up icon that has become synonymous with Facebook itself, the “Like” button is one of the most common ways that users respond to content on Facebook. But for years, Facebook users have requested ways to signal more complex responses—not all content is likeable, for example, though it may nevertheless still be important, interesting, or engaging. In order to meet this perceived need for more varied means of interacting with site content beyond simply “liking” it, Facebook sought an alternative “way to leave feedback that was quick, easy, and gesture-based” (Stinson, 2016). The solution was “Reactions,” a set of six emoji that represented the most common sentiments that users expressed on the site: “Love,” “Haha,” “Wow,” “Sad,” and “Angry”—in addition to “Like.”

The introduction of Reactions into users’ Facebook experience may at first appear to be a relatively mundane design tweak. Yet seemingly small changes to the design of digital platforms can have enormous implications for how, and how well, we collectively practice democratic politics. Indeed, as recent discussions regarding the democratic consequences of digital technologies have noted, it is the *structural* features of platforms like Facebook that contribute to their role in, for example, spreading misinformation, fueling inter-group conflict, or mobilizing social movements (Tufekci, 2017; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).¹ The design of the built environment, in other words, whether physical or digital, profoundly shapes the ways we engage—or not—in democratic activity.

¹ Though the specific challenges of fake news and Facebook’s role in elections, for example, are important dimensions to consider when evaluating digital technologies’ role in democratic politics, they fall outside the scope of this paper. For a discussion of Arendt’s usefulness in thinking through the problem of ‘fake news,’ see Simone Chambers’s contribution to this special issue (especially pages XX-XX). For a discussion of how the design of digital platforms might help address the ‘fake news’ problem democratically, see (Forestal, forthcoming).

In order to develop digital platforms that support democratic deliberation and discussion, then, we must be as attentive to the design of platforms like Facebook as we currently are to the activity that occurs within them.

In the case of Reactions, for example, the Facebook design team intended to expand the number of ways Facebook users could engage with one another while providing a kind of universal visual language that everyone using the platform would understand (Teehan, 2016). Their challenge, then, was how to introduce a new mechanism that would register a wider array of users' responses to content without alienating those same users by deviating from existing (and familiar) patterns of behavior on the site. Yet while the Reactions team, by all accounts, succeeded in negotiating this tension, the overall effect of this design change did little to improve the platform's ability to host robust *democratic* engagements between users. Despite offering users more options than just "Like," Reactions, in combination with the News Feed, nevertheless continued to homogenize and isolate site users, rather than drawing them into a self-consciously diverse deliberative community—and the effect was to undermine the platform's democratic potential.

In attempting to strike a balance between accommodating diverse responses while still providing a familiar experience that would appeal to the platform's 2.2 billion users, Facebook engineers faced a dilemma familiar to democratic politics. Democratic deliberation requires agreed-upon standards that govern public discourse and ensure that all participants recognize themselves as part of a shared public (Chambers, 2003). At the same time, however, these standards impose uniformity on an inherently diverse body of citizens, with the effect of excluding certain potential participants (Benhabib, 1996). Recognizing this tension, the challenge for deliberative democrats—as well as for platforms like Facebook which are influential spaces in our contemporary deliberative system (Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012)—lies in balancing these two competing interests:

generating consensus while also leaving room for active participation and disagreement among participants.

Seeking to manage this tension, those interested in digital deliberation have tended to focus attention on the rules that govern our behavior online, investigating how well discourse in digital spaces conforms to deliberative norms of, for example, civility, relevance, and authenticity (Han et al., 2018; Molina and Jennings, 2018; Oz et al., 2017; Papacharissi, 2004; Stroud et al., 2015).

Approaches such as these, focusing on the organizing principles found within the *activity* of democratic politics, are certainly valuable. But they tend to minimize or overlook the ways that the design of the built environment shapes activity within the digital public realm. In this article, then, I turn to the 20th century political theorist Hannah Arendt, a thinker who places the tension between equality and distinction—between similarity and difference—at the heart of her political theory, for help elucidating the role of the built environment in balancing these two competing interests and thus creating spaces that can successfully host democratic deliberation among users.

Though she does not often use the term “democracy” to describe political action, Arendt’s description of politics as an activity that “deals with the coexistence and association of *different* men” (Arendt, 2005: 93),² is ultimately a democratic one. Politics is, for Arendt, the means through which individuals “interact with one another without compulsion, force, and rule over one another, as equals among equals... managing all their affairs by speaking with and persuading one another” (Arendt, 2005: 117). Thus, while there are no doubt differences in emphasis between the agonistic aspects of Arendt’s political theory and the deliberative tradition, their shared commitments to a participatory, communicative model of democratic political activity makes for a productive juxtaposition between the two. In turning to Arendt, then, I do not make claims regarding Arendt’s standing as a ‘proper’ deliberative theorist; rather, I follow previous scholarship (e.g. Benhabib,

² Throughout this essay, I follow Arendt’s use of the masculine pronoun.

1992; Lederman, 2014; Warren, 1996) in arguing that there are resources in Arendt’s work—particularly her attentiveness to the effects of the built environment—that can help to clarify a problem that is often identified by deliberative democrats: the challenge of balancing equality and difference.

As Arendt notes, human activity is not a self-contained phenomenon; our intersubjective practices are always also influenced by the physical structures in which we find ourselves. As acting and speaking beings, in other words, we act and speak *somewhere*. And the design of that “where” can have important consequences for how—and whether—we are able to act and speak together as democratic citizens, whether on- or offline. Evident in Arendt’s discussions of “the world” as a collection of physical objects, this attentiveness to the physical requirements of democratic politics is an often-underdeveloped—though no less integral—aspect of securing spaces for democratic deliberation.

To that end, this article examines the effect of software design choices on a platform’s democratic potential. Drawing from Arendt’s work, I identify two characteristics the built environment, whether physical or digital, must exhibit if it is to serve the political function of a “public realm.” The built environment must 1) serve as a *common world*, drawing people together and emphasizing their common interests. And the built environment must also 2) preserve *spaces of appearance*, meaning that it accommodates diverse perspectives and—importantly—allows for disagreement among individuals. Taken together, spaces of the built environment must “relate and separate” (Arendt, 1998) individuals if they are to successfully function as part of our modern deliberative system. These characteristics, then, serve as criteria for evaluating whether, and how well, a particular digital platform will support democratic politics. To the extent that digital spaces are designed to elicit uniform patterns of behavior in all users (collapsing spaces of appearance) or else to isolate users rather than draw them together (destroying common worlds), I argue, these sites

will undermine democratic deliberation by cultivating a mentality that Arendt calls “the social”: an abdication of responsibility for the consequences of our actions—a turning away from politics entirely.

Though Arendt herself was famously quite skeptical of the possibilities for politics in the age of modern mass society, with its emphasis on behaviorism and administration, conformity and retreat from public life—“social” phenomena which, arguably, culminate in today’s digital technologies—her work nevertheless provides valuable resources for articulating strategies for designing digital platforms that can serve as part of the public realm, both providing common worlds and preserving spaces of appearance. Indeed, while I at times depart from her own conclusions, my argument is nevertheless Arendtian in spirit. As an attempt to “think what we are doing” with digital platforms like Facebook, it provides “a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears” (Arendt, 1998: 5). As I will argue, Arendt’s discussions of the political importance of plurality and its relationship to “worldly objects,” as well as her remarks on the ways in which “the social” threatens possibilities for political action, provide a conceptual framework that not only helps us to understand why Facebook may not currently support the robust democratic deliberation we want it to, but also suggests strategies for improving Facebook, and sites like it, to foster democratic politics in the future.

The argument proceeds as follows: in the next section I examine Arendt’s remarks about the relationship between plurality, politics, and the public realm. From these discussions, I show how the built environment—if it is to host discursive political activity as part of the public realm—must be constructed to accommodate the human condition of plurality. It does so, I argue, by balancing equality and distinction, serving as a common world that gathers individuals and relates them to one another while also separating and creating space for the revelation of differences and disagreements. In the third section, I return to the example of Facebook to show how certain design choices

undermine the platform’s role as a public realm in a two-fold sense. First, Reactions collapse spaces of appearance by consciously imposing universal standards on users that work to homogenize user behavior. And second, the News Feed’s algorithm prevents Facebook from acting as a common world by isolating individual users in an ever-shifting stream of personalized content. Yet this need not be the case. Using the criteria of the public realm, I discuss alternative structures, such as comments and Facebook Groups, that may mitigate this collapse. Finally, I conclude with some remarks about the relationship between Facebook’s design and other considerations like that of capital.

Politics, Plurality, and the Public Realm

As a mode of politics centered around “debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” (Chambers, 2003: 309), deliberative democracy is, at its core, a normative theory of how to manage a world shared in common with other people. Yet, as much recent work has noted, there is an inherent tension in the idea of democratic deliberation (Benhabib, 1996). On one hand, deliberative democracy requires equality, meaning that “[a]ll deliberative democratic theory contains, either implicitly or explicitly, an idea of a well-ordered public sphere... drawn loosely from an ideal notion of deliberation” (Chambers, 2003: 322). Though scholars differ in their organizing principles—from a rational “discourse principle” (Habermas, 1996) to dispositional factors such as the “deliberative stance” (Curato et al., 2017)—the possibility of agreement, and the assumption of common ground, necessitates the laying-down of rules to govern and equalize interactions in the public realm.

At the same time, however, critics of deliberative democracy have emphasized the ways that these rules often impose exclusionary expectations on participants (Lupia and Norton, 2017; Sanders, 1997; Young, 2001). Instead, many thinkers emphasize the value of difference—and of the

conflict and incommensurability that can result (Honig, 1993; Mouffe, 2013). The challenge for democratic deliberation, then, lies in reconciling these competing demands of equality and difference, of creating a public realm that is both organized enough to facilitate agreement yet open enough to accommodate an infinite number of different perspectives.

This tension between equality and difference lies at the heart of Hannah Arendt's concept of politics. Arendt's political theory is grounded in a material fact of human existence: "we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (Arendt, 1998: 8). This condition of plurality, the idea that we are all similarly human, but we are all also *differently so*, is the foundation of politics; in acting politically, we reveal our individuality in the process of acting collectively. But in order for politics to take place, Arendt tells us, there must be certain artificial structures that will organize "those who are absolutely different with a view to their *relative* equality and in contradistinction to their *relative* differences" (Arendt, 2005: 96); democratic politics requires, in other words, that we relate to one another not as an infinite number of distinctive human beings, but as equal collaborators with specific—and limited—shared interests or common goals.

Laws, norms, and other examples of "mutual agreement" do this, of course. Consider a professional organization like the American Political Science Association (APSA). The by-laws governing membership ensure that APSA members are not a collection of unrelated distinctive individual humans, but are instead an organized body. Our shared interest in political science, not our bare humanity, is what forms the basis of our equality. And our specific differences in opinion *on the topic of political science*—rather than our inherent individuality—are the salient distinctions that must be accommodated for the organization to be properly called democratic. Without institutional structures that help members distinguish *what* similarities and differences are relevant to any given interaction, we lose the possibility of engaging in collective action (Keenan, 2003; Waldron, 2000).

Yet while these institutional forms of social organization—like laws, norms, and other “mutual covenants”—are certainly important in creating conditions that support democratic politics, they are not exhaustive. The built environment, as Arendt acknowledges, also plays an important role in structuring our political lives. Indeed, “[t]he crucial point” about political freedom, Arendt tells us, “is that it is a spatial construct” (Arendt, 2005: 119). Politics, then, requires not just “the company of other men” but also “a common public space to meet them” (Arendt, 2006b: 147). Collective action means we have others to act and speak with—and it is in the public realm, as “a publicly organized space” (Arendt, 2006b: 152), where we encounter the presence of others.

And while the language of space is often used metaphorically, here I want to stress the material dimension to this claim. Citizens must be together—in the same location—if they are to engage in democratic deliberation. Only then can they generate what Arendt calls “power,” or the capacity for collective action. Indeed, for Arendt, “[t]he only indispensable material factor in the generation of power is the living together of people” (Arendt, 1998: 201); historically, cities have performed this function. Because traditionally a city is “purposefully built around its public space, the agora, where free men could meet as peers on any occasion” (Arendt, 2005: 123), Arendt tells us, “the foundation of cities... is therefore indeed the most important material prerequisite for power” (Arendt, 1998: 201). We must co-exist with others before we can think of sharing, deliberating, or acting with them. And the easiest way to recognize our coexistence is to be in the same location; absent a shared material space—like the city—citizens will have nowhere to act collectively.

Arendt is not alone in recognizing the political importance of the built environment; political theorists have studied the function of public space as a background for democratic politics (Kohn, 2016; Parkinson, 2012) with particular attention to the role of architecture in organizing the intersubjective relationships that facilitate collective action—or that fail to do so (Bickford, 2000). Likewise, using the model of the modern city, thinkers like Iris Marion Young (1990) have argued

for the value of heterogeneity and “unassimilated otherness” in creating conditions supportive of democratic politics, while more recently Bonnie Honig (2017) has explored the role of “public things” in constructing a body politic. But while political theorists have done important work in theorizing the role of space and architecture in constructing intersubjective relations in physical spaces, these insights are largely absent from similar discussions of digital spaces (But see Forestal, 2017; Wright and Street, 2007).

In this section, then, I draw from Arendt’s discussions of the “public realm”—as a specific physical location, in “the world”—to identify architectural strategies for achieving the balance between equality and distinction necessary to support democratic politics. In particular, I identify two functions of the public realm corresponding to the condition of human plurality, which “has the twofold character of equality and distinction” (Arendt, 1998: 175). To function as a public realm, I argue, the built environment must 1) serve as a *common world* and 2) provide *spaces of appearance*. Designing spaces that gather and keep users together while still allowing for multiple interpretations is therefore the challenge facing software developers interested in supporting democratic politics.

Building a common world

Democratic politics, as a collective activity through which we manage common affairs, requires a degree of commonality—we must recognize and acknowledge what we share, and with whom, before we can begin the work of caring for it together. Cultivating and acting on this sense of recognition can be difficult, however. Hence, as many—including Arendt—note, politics requires institutional structures like the ties of law or contract to impose a kind of “conventional and artificial” political equality among participants, one that is both derived from, and reminds us of, our collective obligations toward a common aim (Arendt, 2006a: 270). These institutional structures thus serve to organize our interpersonal relations, providing structure, continuity, and direction to an otherwise disparate collection of individuals, turning them into a deliberative community.

But laws and norms are not the only mechanisms that can facilitate this mutual recognition of participants' shared goals and commitments; nor are these institutions the only sources of organization in political life. The built environment, too, serves this purpose. Just as the legal institution of citizenship organizes political communities around a shared object of "the state," so too do "the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life" (Arendt, 1998: 137). The built environment, or what Arendt calls "the world," is comprised of durable objects that outlast discrete instances of human activity. As a result, they provide an "objective reference point" through which individuals can begin to make sense of their relationships to other people (Arendt, 1998: 137). In its role as a *common world*, then, the built environment gathers people together, highlighting what they hold in common and facilitating a recognition of who they share it with. To that end, the spaces of the built environment must have a degree of durability that provides the continuity of experience required to form expectations against which we engage in collective action.

Consider Arendt's example of a table. In it, she describes the way the built environment helps us organize our relationships in the same way as do laws. "To live together in the world," says Arendt, "means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; ...[it] gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak" (Arendt, 1998: 52). By sitting around a table, we can more easily identify both what we share with others (the table) and who we share it with (the others sitting at it). Key here is not that the existence of the table *creates* these interpersonal ties; rather, Arendt is pointing to the way the built environment shapes the way we *perceive* our relationships. Because we share a world with others, our actions will necessarily affect others; the built environment, when designed as a public realm, helps us to recognize this fact and act accordingly.

Arendt further develops this point when she laments the dangerous changes to the world introduced by "mass society:"

The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible. (Arendt, 1998: 53)

The séance attendees still share the same interests and relationships, irrespective of the presence of the table. Yet once the table disappears, “the world between [the attendees] has lost its power to gather them together” (Arendt, 1998: 52–53). The point here is not that the relationships have changed—the attendees still have shared interests. Yet the attendees’ shared interests and relationships are *harder to conceptualize* in the absence of a built environment that highlights what they hold in common—the fact that they are seated at a table together, for example, and therefore have equal interest in determining how it is regulated. The result, Arendt warns, is that because the séance attendees cannot conceptualize their common world, they will not engage in political action to manage it. If the built environment fails to gather us together—or if it does so only intermittently, in irregular or unpredictable ways—collective action will be more difficult because citizens will be unable to recognize one another as equal collaborators in a shared political project.

Designing spaces of appearance

Of course, just having a common world is not itself sufficient for democratic politics—the role of the public realm, recall, is to relate *and separate* us. Though we may need to recognize our shared interests in order to engage in democratic deliberation, we also must have the flexibility—and encouragement—to disagree about the things we share with others. This room for disagreement is what Arendt calls the “space of appearance” in which individuals are able to “appear to each other... *qua* men” (Arendt, 1998: 176) and “reveal actively their unique personal identities” (Arendt, 1998: 179). Though collectively managing common affairs is the purpose of democratic politics, we participate in unique ways. But for this to happen, says Arendt, we must exist in an environment that

allows for it: one that invites individuals to approach a shared object from multiple perspectives and to share those unique perspectives with others.

Consider again the table in Arendt's example. The experience of gathering around a table facilitates a recognition not only that the diners have something in common (the table) but also that each diner relates to the table differently, since they are sitting in different seats. The design of the table, in other words, makes salient to us the fact that "though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects" (Arendt, 1998: 57). The table therefore provides a *space of appearance* insofar as it enables the diners to better conceptualize and articulate their diverse perspectives regarding the table and whatever might be upon it.

The political importance of the built environment's function providing spaces of appearance cannot be overstated. Indeed, Arendt tells us, "[o]nly where things can be *seen by many in a variety of aspects* without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear" (Arendt, 1998: 57, emphasis mine). Indeed, the "simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives" is, for Arendt, the "meaning of public life" (Arendt, 1998: 57); it is what testifies to the plurality of the human condition and is what makes political action not just desirable but possible. If we all had the same perspective—or if we acted as if we did—there would be no need to engage in collective action. And while this uniformity may be more efficient, acting in this way means denying a fundamental characteristic of being human and, in so doing, eschewing the value of political action. In order for the built environment to support democratic politics and serve as a public realm, then, it must balance its role as a common world—in the sense that "everybody is always concerned with the same object" (Arendt, 1998: 58)—with the preservation of spaces of appearance that reflect and

reveal the “differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives” (Arendt, 1998: 57) of participants and, crucially, invite participants to share those differences.

Modern threats to democratic politics

As we have seen, the built environment can play an important role in facilitating democratic deliberation, in so far as it 1) serves as a *common world*, gathering people together, highlighting what they have in common, and 2) offers *spaces of appearance*, opening to multiple perspectives and inviting individuals to share their unique views. There is, however, no guarantee that the built environment will perform these functions. Indeed, much of Arendt’s writing is preoccupied with precisely this problem: how spaces of political action are threatened by, among other things, the “rise of the social.”

“The social” is a complex and much-contested concept within Arendt scholarship, tied throughout Arendt’s work to other modern phenomena like automation, behavioral science, and the rise of totalitarianism. In its various manifestations, however, “the social” is best understood as a mentality or attitude, “the absence of politics where politics belongs, a condition in which a collectivity of people...cannot (or at any rate do not) effectively take charge of the overall resultants of what they are severally doing” (Pitkin, 1998: 252). “The social” is, in other words, “the denial of human agency” (Pitkin, 1998: 192). Instead of actively engaging in democratic politics, in collectively managing common affairs, “the social” describes a condition in which citizens act “*as if* they had been swallowed by some Blob that deprived them of their individuality and capacity for initiative, compacted them into an undifferentiated mass” (Pitkin, 1998: 202). The problem of “the social,” then, is not—Arendt is clear to note—that we are *incapable* of acting politically (Arendt, 1998: 323) but that we have *abdicated* our responsibility to do so. Whereas “resistibility is the sine qua non of Arendtian politics” (Honig, 1991: 108), “the social” describes a condition in which the majority of people turn away from politics, choosing instead to treat the “large-scale outcomes of their

activities” as if they were irresistible and “independent of any human agency” (Pitkin, 1998: 201–202).

Scholars interested in the social have examined its relationship with mediating institutions (Klein, 2014) and with social norms and practices (Locke, 2013). And they have pointed to the ways that “the social” sensibilities are shaped by institutional structures like governments, markets, norms, and discourses (Gündogdu, 2015; Pitkin, 1998). Yet just as these intangible institutions shape our behavior, so too does the built environment; like the markets and bureaucracies which occupied Arendt and many of her readers, the built environment can also undermine opportunities for practicing politics by enabling “the social” mentalities of conformism and isolation.

In its “conformist” manifestation, as Pitkin (1998) describes it, “the social” collapses differences of opinion and instead substitutes “universal,” and singular, modes of behavior. Rather than invite unique perspectives—and their attendant potential for disagreement—the conformist social “expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” (Arendt, 1998: 40). The conformist social, in other words, demands that everyone act as though they have “only one opinion and one interest” (Arendt, 1998: 39). By insisting on uniformity, the conformist social threatens the possibility for political action by undermining plurality.

This logic of conformity—“the leveling demands of the social” (Arendt, 1998: 39)—appears, Arendt tells us, throughout modern institutions, from the “no-man rule” of bureaucracy, to the “modern science of economics” and “behavioral sciences” (Arendt, 1998: 40, 42, 45). Yet the built environment can—and often does—also exert similar demands on individual behavior. Consider a Las Vegas casino or large chain supermarket. These spaces are intentionally designed to elicit certain behaviors in patrons, working subtly to encourage us to gamble more money or buy more products

without even thinking about the reasons why (Friedman, 2000; Vrechopoulos et al., 2004). Rather than encourage patrons to act in unique and unpredictable ways that reflect their distinctive identities, these spaces are designed to elicit the same behavior in everyone who enters; in so doing, they collapse spaces of appearance and encourage conformism.

But conformism—the loss of difference—is not the only threat to politics posed by “the social.” In its “economic” manifestation, “the social” also isolates us from one another, such that we “feel, and therefore conduct [our] intentional activities, as if [we] were unrelated” (Pitkin, 1998: 193). Here, then, “the social” acts like the “magic trick” that disappears the séance table in Arendt’s example. Though we of course still share common concerns, the economic social mentality obscures the collective consequences of our individual activity such that “the sameness of the object can no longer be discerned” (Arendt, 1998: 58). Rather than “seeing and hearing others,” of recognizing our shared reality, the economic social encourages us to stay “imprisoned in the subjectivity of [our] own singular experience” (Arendt, 1998: 58). By obscuring our connectedness, the economic social threatens politics by leaving us isolated and unable to recognize—and act on—our collective concerns.

And, again, institutions can help exacerbate this problem of perception. The logic of a free market, for example, invites us to think of the consequences of our individual actions of production and consumption in isolation (Pitkin, 1998); the “large-scale consequences” of our behavior often seem beyond our influence or control. Yet the built environment can also invite this mentality. Studies show, for example, that the design of suburbs—with their car-intensive design and absence of communal spaces—is connected to social isolation (Leyden, 2003; Wood et al., 2008). Rather than foster residents’ recognition of collective interests, these spaces destroy common worlds by encouraging residents to ignore the collective consequences of their actions, eschew common concerns, and act in isolation.

Just as the built environment can be constructed to reflect and support the needs of politics, then, it can also be designed in ways that further entrench in us the logic of “the social.” When the built environment works to 1) homogenize behavior, by collapsing spaces of appearance, and 2) isolate individuals, by destroying the common world, it encourages unthinking conformism and cultivates misperceptions of ourselves as isolated actors. In short, when the built environment fails to act as a public realm, it undermines democratic action by facilitating the two-fold “social” mentalities of conformism and isolation—both of which contribute to the abdication of collective responsibility for managing the consequences of conjoint activity; they thus discourage political action. These threats, as we have seen, are already present in the physical environment; the digital, however, is no less immune to these challenges.

Facebook & the Future of the Public Realm

With the near ubiquity of digital technologies in our lives, Arendt’s concerns about “the social’s” threats to democratic politics take on renewed significance. Sites like Facebook are wildly popular; even after repeated controversies over misinformation and privacy, almost 70% of US adults use Facebook—and almost three-quarters visit the site *daily* (Gramlich, 2019). And while much user activity on Facebook seems “private,” as exchanges between one’s family and friends, these platforms profoundly shape the wider practice of democratic politics. As sites where citizens find and discuss news and information, form and exchange opinions on issues of public concern, and publicly reveal data used for advertising, campaigning, and beyond, digital platforms like Facebook not only operate as spaces of “everyday talk” in the wider deliberative system, but they are also themselves institutions that shape our collective lives. Indeed, scholars have long noted the ways that digital technologies can exacerbate racial biases, act as gatekeepers for information, and compile detailed personal profiles with our data (Noble, 2018; Pariser, 2011; Pasquale, 2015; Tufekci, 2015), as well as their ability to influence users’ perceptions, interactions, and even desires

(Grosser, 2014). To the extent that these sites encourage users to abdicate responsibility for managing the consequences of these institutions and our role in perpetuating them—to give up on politics where politics belongs—these platforms facilitate the dominance of a single “social” mentality that can undermine the entire deliberative system by ceding major decision-making power to a few elites (Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012, especially chapter 1).

While some argue that these threats are inherent in the logic of automated technologies (Schwarz, 2014), I argue that the problems of “the social” lie not with technological changes themselves, but with the ways in which we *orient ourselves to them*. As a mentality, recall, “the social” threatens politics when people abdicate their responsibility to interrogate, evaluate, and manage objects of common concern. And this describes precisely how many relate to digital technologies today. Though Facebook’s design is widely discussed among academics and commenters, for example, the majority of Facebook users do not know the company categorizes them based on traits and interests (74%), do not understand how the News Feed works to filter and display content (53%), and have not intentionally tried to manage the content they see on the site (63%) (Smith, 2018). And while this is certainly a problem that can be addressed through, for example, laws regulating transparency or norms of digital literacy, we must also consider how the *design* of these digital spaces contributes to this “social” behavior and undermines our ability to identify common interests, gather together, and act politically to manage them.

In making this claim, then, I join previous work in calling for a reorientation of software developers’ values. Scholars have called for developers and tech firms to think beyond profits (Dunne, 2005; Knouf, 2009), consider the ethical implications of their work (Ananny, 2015; Mittelstadt et al., 2016), and build technologies that are more amenable to the needs of “agonistic pluralism” (Crawford, 2016). These are all important considerations. But if we are to build digital technologies that serve a specifically political purpose in supporting deliberative democracy, we will

need to design platforms that exhibit the two specific characteristics of a political realm: that it serve as a common world and provide spaces of appearance.

In this section, I return to the example of Facebook to show how the company's design choices have largely failed to build with these requirements in mind; as a result, their choices compounded to create a condition of "worldlessness" that exacerbates the two-fold threats of "the social." First, in designing Reactions, the developers consciously built structures premised on users' conformity to expected behaviors, imposing universal standards on distinct individuals and disincentivizing more disclosive modes of engagement. Likewise, by privileging the News Feed's algorithm in determining users' experiences, the company undermined Facebook's role as a common world by creating an ever-changing personalized space that isolates users rather than gathering them together. But this need not be the case. With Arendt's framework clarifying the design standards required to construct a public realm, I argue there are aspects of the Facebook platform—particularly Groups and comments—that seem more promising alternatives as we consider how to build digital spaces for democratic politics.

Facebook Reactions

Recall that, in its conformist manifestation, "the social" works to impose uniform standards of behavior onto unique individuals. As political action requires "the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself" (Arendt, 1998: 57), this conformity undermines possibilities for politics; it collapses spaces of appearance by designing a table, say, to elicit the same reaction in us all, thus demanding that every person see the world "only under one aspect" and through "only one perspective" (Arendt, 1998: 58). And this is precisely what happened in the case of Facebook Reactions.

Created in response to Facebook users' demands for "more ways to express themselves on Facebook" (Teehan, 2016), Reactions were, as one designer wrote, intended to be a "universally

understood vocabulary” so that “if a friend from Japan reacted to your post, you mutually agree upon what that reaction meant” (Teehan, 2016). Coming to mutual agreement is, of course, one aspect of democratic politics. And, as we know, the possibility of agreement—or any collective action—requires the imposition of institutional structure. And yet, as Arendt notes in her praise of the US Constitution, for these institutions to be democratically valuable and not oppressive, they must be objects that “one could approach from many different angles and upon which one could impose many different interpretations” (Arendt, 2006a: 148). In order to serve their democratic function creating spaces of appearance, then, these institutions must invite the possibility of disagreement.

In designing Reactions, however, the team created an object that could be approached from only a very *limited* number of angles. First, in designing Reactions, the Facebook team intentionally limited the number of responses available to users, on the premise that “having hundreds of reactions to choose from... would be difficult to consume” (Teehan, 2016). Instead of seeking to expand and make easier ways for users to signal their unique responses, the Reactions team analyzed *existing* patterns of behavior on the site, distilled them into the six most commonly used categories, and developed Reactions that would make it easier for users to follow those patterns (Teehan, 2016). In effect, the design team built a table that funneled diners into the same six seats, encouraging conformity through ease-of-use.

And because Reactions, as a “quick, easy, and gesture-based” form of engagement, are easier to access than more disclosive forms of engagement on Facebook, like comments, there is some evidence that the introduction of Reactions has disincentivized users from engaging in these more nuanced, yet time-intensive, actions (Smoliarova et al., 2018).³ Prior to Reactions, users were

³ That commenting is now both more difficult and more valuable is evident from Facebook’s updated News Feed algorithm, which “prioritizes active interactions like commenting and sharing over likes and click-throughs (passive

incentivized to *comment* on posts for which ‘Like’ was not appropriate (Burke and Develin, 2016); with Reactions, users are able to easily provide more refined “gesture-based” responses and therefore eschew the use of comments to clarify their unique perspective. Like the casino or grocery store, then, Reactions grant the *illusion* of a distinctive response while at the same time homogenizing behavior by channeling users into specific—and uniform—patterns of behavior, ultimately facilitating a conformism that undermines democratic deliberation. The result is a thoroughly “social” platform that regularizes human behavior into more predictable patterns and classifies and collects data on user preferences more efficiently, but that does so at the expense of the spaces of appearance necessary for democratic politics.

Facebook News Feed

By deliberately designing Reactions to elicit the same response in each user, the Facebook developers ultimately made design choices that worked to close off spaces of appearance by minimizing areas of multiple interpretation and disagreement and making more revelatory actions like commenting comparably more difficult. Alongside this minimization of the site’s spaces of appearance, however, Facebook compounded the “social” dimensions of the site by undercutting the site’s function as a common world with the News Feed algorithm. Central to a user’s experience on Facebook, the EdgeRank algorithm that powers a user’s News Feed is what sorts through the thousands of posts generated by one’s Friends, selecting only around 10% of those posts to show and determining in what order to display them (Oremus, 2016). In this capacity, then, the News Feed algorithm operates in much the same way as the built environment—just as the EdgeRank algorithm helps us to organize our digital relationships, so too do walls, fences, streets, and sidewalks provide us with ways to gather our bearings in the physical world.

interactions)—the idea being that actions requiring more effort on the part of the user are of higher quality and thus more meaningful” (Tien, 2018).

But recall that as a common world, the built environment must gather people together and orient them towards their shared interests and commitments; “the social,” by contrast, works to obscure these connections such that we act as if our individual actions are disconnected from others’. And the design of the Facebook News Feed embodies and reinforces this social mentality of isolation. Populated by “status updates” from one’s family and friends, one’s News Feed seems intensely personal, even private. Yet one’s Reactions, comments, shares, clicks, and even pageviews not only shape one’s own News Feed experiences, they are also aggregated and used to influence the News Feeds of others—as well as sold to advertisers. And while Facebook has increased transparency regarding how users are classified and their information managed by the algorithm, it has done little to provide spaces in which these users can gather to share, compare, discuss, and manage these classifications and their larger collective effects. Moreover, this is an intentional design decision; while users cannot identify others in their various groups, Facebook can—it is the source of their lucrative advertising revenue. The result is that groups of users can be specifically targeted by advertisers to see content without knowing who else—or even how many others—are seeing the same.

Though we ostensibly share a common “Facebook experience,” in other words—in that Facebook works the same way for (and on) us all—the platform nevertheless fails to facilitate our recognition that the site is an object we share with others. It is as if we are all sitting around the same table but cannot see who else is dining with us; instead, we think of ourselves as dining privately, without considering how our actions affect those around us. The platform is thus well-designed for the administrative logic of the economic social. Facebook administrators and advertisers can view and manage users’ behavior easily and efficiently—by silently tweaking the algorithm, for example (Kramer et al., 2014); Facebook users, however, are ill-equipped to identify, discuss, and manage these changes, in part because the site’s design keeps each user isolated from their peers. This

decreases the salience of the collective consequences of one's activity on the site and obscures recognition of the interests one shares with others. By destroying common worlds on Facebook, then, the News Feed works to minimize, obscure, and undermine the possibilities for political action by users—the result is that the majority of users (63%) leave decisions about their collective interests up to Facebook rather than taking that responsibility upon themselves (Smith, 2018).

Alternatives

Facebook has, to date, shown little inclination to alter its designs for the sake of democratic politics. Instead, the company seems to happily exemplify the dangers of “the social”—building products intended to homogenize and isolate its users rather than “relate and separate” them in preparation for political action. Yet, as I have been arguing, this result was not a foregone conclusion; instead, we can trace the problem, at least in part, to the company's design choices. This suggests that there may be alternative design features that might mitigate the twin threats of “the social”—conformism and isolation—and better support the needs of democratic politics. Indeed, there is evidence even from within Facebook's current architecture that the company could make changes to the site such that it could better serve as a public realm: notably, Facebook Groups and comments.

Facebook Groups are not new; as early as 2010, Facebook introduced Groups as a way to make it “easy for you to build a space for important groups of people in your life” (Hicks, 2010). Groups exist for all sorts of reasons; Facebook users can create Groups for whatever purpose they choose and add members as they see fit. In all cases, however, Groups function to gather Facebook users in well-defined communities of interest. By default, newly created Groups are “closed,” meaning all Facebook users can see the group and its members but only members of the Group can see and leave posts. The result is a clearly delimited space within Facebook that has all the politically valuable properties of a common world. By virtue of their Group membership, users can more easily

see what they have in common with others—Groups, in effect, act as tables for certain segments of the general Facebook population and, in so doing, clarify relationships that would otherwise be hard to identify if they were left free-floating in one’s News Feed or hidden away in one’s privacy settings. By emphasizing Groups, then, Facebook could help reintroduce those elements of a common world that facilitate the recognition of shared experiences. With Groups, or a similar kind of design element, Facebook would make salient those shared interests currently obscured by the site’s design; moreover, Groups provide spaces for users to gather with peers to identify and discuss those interests they share and begin to act collectively to manage them.

And yet, as we know, this recognition of common experience is insufficient; democratic politics must also accommodate diverse perspectives in the practices of deliberation through which we govern ourselves. Absent spaces of appearance, an emphasis on Groups may simply work to entrench homogenous enclaves. Alongside Groups, then, we might also consider additional design elements through which we can preserve spaces of appearance among Facebook users, mechanisms that can both ensure enough similarity so as to be mutually comprehensible yet allow enough leeway for users to reveal their unique identities through speech and action. Again, however, there is one possible mechanism for these spaces of appearance already in place on the site—user comments. By leaving a comment, users are able to reveal their unique interpretations of the shared object at hand—to give reasons, explain and respond to others’ opinions, and react in ways that cannot be entirely captured by ‘sad’ or ‘angry.’

But rational speech, as traditional text-based comments are often taken to be, is also not necessarily the best or only mode of reacting to content. The introduction of GIFs into Facebook comments therefore provides another alternative to Reactions. With GIFs—a commonly-used image format that loops animated images, often clips from movies or television shows—the possibilities for user expression are almost limitless; GIFs can therefore provide more nuanced, and

distinctive, responses than the pre-selected six emotions that comprise Reactions. They have the same kind of revelatory quality Arendt is looking for and that, unlike Reactions, is difficult to quantify; they also expand deliberation beyond the conditions of rational speech. Yet GIFs, as a standard file format, also provide the kind of universalism required for democratic politics—because they are a standard format, they can be searched and used in the same way as emoji or Reactions. While Facebook fully supports GIFs on desktop, however, it does not provide the same functionality on the mobile site—a mode of access used by 95% of Facebook users (*Statista*, 2018). Expanding GIF support, then, is another possible “quick and gesture-based” mode of engagement that could serve as an alternative to Reactions while providing a better balance of equality and distinction, readability and individuality. Most importantly, GIFs and comments would reintroduce spaces of appearance in which users could reveal their distinctive perspectives regarding content they share with others.

Conclusion

Deliberative democratic politics requires a balance of two competing impulses. As a means of collectively managing our common affairs, deliberation’s success presumes a set of organizing principles—we must at least be able to agree on what we share (the object of deliberation) and who we share it with (the other participants). Yet as a mode of decision-making which claims legitimacy by virtue of its representativeness, deliberative democracy must also ensure a certain level of accommodation and inclusion—the organizing principles which structure our decision-making must therefore generate equality and commonality while still leaving room for difference and disagreement.

Democratic theorists are not blind to this challenge. Scholars have argued for laws, norms and practices that can organize the public sphere so as to manage this tension. Yet while these approaches are certainly valuable, they are not exhaustive. In addition to these more commonly

studied institutions, the design of the built environment can also exert considerable influence over how—and whether—the conditions necessary for democratic politics are met. The built environment, in other words, structures the public sphere just as much as the laws, norms, and practices which take place within it.

Drawing from the work of Hannah Arendt, I have shown how the built environment must serve two functions if it is to act as a public realm that can support democratic politics. More specifically, the built environment must 1) serve as a *common world*, gathering users together and highlighting what they hold in common. And it must also 2) provide *spaces of appearance*, opening differently to each individual and allowing for disagreement among participants. Yet as we move increasingly into digital environments like Facebook, it is becoming more difficult—though certainly not impossible—to ensure that the built environment can serve this two-fold function as a public realm. With more deliberate design choices aimed at increasing their role as a common world and preserving spaces of appearance, however, I argue that digital sites like Facebook *could* host democratic politics in much the same way as the cities that occupied Arendt’s imagination.

Unfortunately, it seems, there is little evidence that Facebook and other digital technology companies are inclined to build platforms for the sake of democratic politics. Revelations regarding Facebook’s internal decision-making, including the company’s emphasis on growth (Frenkel et al., 2018), its lack of accountability (Ortutay, 2017), and its careless attitudes towards user data (Barrett, 2018), for example, indicate that the company is prioritizing profit above all else—despite founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s aspirations to “develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community” (Zuckerberg, 2017).

In response to these deeply troubling revelations regarding Facebook’s business model, scholars and critics have identified several solutions for “fixing” Facebook. Some have called to regulate Facebook (Robertson, 2018; Tufekci, 2018) while others advocate a change in ownership

structure, whether breaking up the behemoth to reduce its monopoly power (Reich, 2018), nationalizing it (Raddi, 2018; Staff, 2018), or turning over control to site users (Fox, 2018). These are intriguing possibilities, to be sure. And they would certainly disrupt the company's current exclusive focus on profits and growth. Yet, as I have been arguing throughout, simply nationalizing, regulating, or dismantling Facebook is insufficient because Facebook's problems are not solely grounded in questions of ownership and control. Indeed, there are privately owned platforms, like Reddit, that—while not without problems—nevertheless exemplify the qualities of an Arendtian public realm. Thus, I argue that these questions of ownership must necessarily be complemented with the kinds of design considerations I suggest above. A Facebook that is centered around the personalized News Feed, and that de-emphasizes commenting, will not host the kind of robust democratic discourse many of us hope to see—even if it is owned by the users or heavily regulated by governments. Profit motive and ownership structures are not enough; the design of the platform matters, too.

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