

2019-1

## Exploring the Role of Twitter as a Public Sphere that Facilitates Civil Discourse

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**Exploring the Role of Twitter as a Public Sphere that Facilitates Civil  
Discourse**

**By**

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**January 2019**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

B.A. in Film and Broadcasting

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## DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of

B.A. in Film and Broadcasting

Is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for assessment for any academic purpose other than in partial fulfillment for that stated above.

Signed ..... (Candidate)

Date .....

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## ABSTRACT

Recognising the polarising nature of discourse today, this research analyses online discussion platforms and their potential as modern public spheres. It is particularly concerned with the importance of civility as an aspect of conversation, and whether the online environment aids in civil discourse. Twitter has been chosen as the online platform that is the focus of this study. This is to allow for a more in-depth exploration of a public sphere that exists online. Key themes that distinguish Twitter from public spheres that exist offline are discussed. These include: anonymity, public shaming, social control, and distortions. This research relies on previous academic literature to help inform its conclusions. In conjunction with this, an analysis of articles that outline significant events that happened on the site, and the tweets that appeared as a result, is undertaken. The research findings help to facilitate a more informed discussion about ideas surrounding the public sphere, and from this conclusions are drawn. In regards to each of the individual themes, the study finds that there is a struggle between discourse that is serious and dramatic on Twitter. It suggests that the overshadowing effect that the entertainment aspect of the platform has, weakens the potential for civil discourse. Ultimately, this research concludes that Twitter is not suitable as a public sphere for civil discourse because users seem to prefer it more as a space for entertainment, rather than productive debate.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

At one time, communication between individuals was exclusively offline. In today's society, media and technology have become huge parts of discourse. Whether the effects they have had on conversation are predominantly negative or positive is up for debate. In a climate where people seem to be noticeably divided and outraged, both socially and politically, it raises the question of whether these technologies can help people to have productive debate about important subjects? What makes debate productive though? It could be argued that civility is a key aspect of healthy discussion that is often forgotten.

Communication that is uncivil is usually not concerned with democratic principles. Civil discourse allows people to be heard without their rights being impinged upon. As well as this, individuals should feel able to express themselves without their views being undermined by unfair stereotypes (Papacharissi, 2004). Major events, such as the campaigns for the 2018 US Presidential Election, have been accused of undermining democracy. It is argued that, in particular, the Republican campaign abandoned certain rules and principles that are supposed to be agreed upon and practiced by opposing parties (Beauchamp, 2018). In fact, the person who has received most of this criticism, Donald Trump, went on to win the election. If one of the highest offices in the world is being labelled as undemocratic, it is possible that this can begin to trickle down and make the public prone to less civilised interactions between each other. If people cannot trust their leaders to act fairly, could that make them begin to lose faith in the idea of a democracy?

Europe has received similar criticism in relation to recent immigration policies that have been introduced. It is argued that countries like Sweden have gone backwards and embraced a type of 'racist nationalism' when discussing and voting on policies that aim to restrict immigration (Jenkins, 2018). It is not the legislation itself that could be deemed uncivil, but rather the stereotypes minority groups are subjected to when debating the issue (Jenkins, 2018). If people are unfairly labelled as something

that they are not, it undermines what they may want to contribute to the conversation. When taking part in civil discourse, ideally, people should feel that their voice can be heard without the fear of being subjected to antagonistic stereotypes.

With this small insight into the current political climate, it is clear that there is an issue with how people are communicating with each other. The outrage that has been alluded to above could show that people do not feel understood and listened to. When trying to fix these communication problems civility is an important aspect to consider. Civility promotes democracy, which makes people feel as though there is an element of fairness to discussion, and also discourages prejudice, which makes people feel more able to participate. Could the online world be a place that might help civility to become a more regular feature of discussion? Are there certain features of this online environment that might allow for healthier discussion amongst individuals? In contrast to this, could online platforms be fuelling less productive debate, and ultimately be acting as an obstacle for civil discourse?

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The arrival of the Internet provided a new platform for public and private discussion. Social media websites, in particular, allow people living on opposite sides of the world to communicate and interact with each other like they have never been able to before (Papacharissi, 2002). This research plans to explore the potential role of these platforms as public spheres. It will particularly focus on civility, and its importance as an aspect of a productive public sphere. How and why people choose to talk to one another in certain ways in this online environment and the consequences of this will be examined. Twitter has been chosen as the social media website that will be the focus of this research because the platform's main function is discussion amongst its users, as well as to make profits from selling advertising and data services. The definition of civility is often misunderstood, and reduced to simply being about manners and etiquette. As Papacharissi (2004: 260) acknowledges 'Adherence to civility merely ensures that the conversation is guided by democratic principles, not just proper manners'. The importance of this distinction will be further unpacked in a later chapter. Democratic discussion is a key characteristic of a public sphere that allows for fruitful debate between individuals and groups. Therefore, civil discourse is a key component to consider when assessing a platform like Twitter's effectiveness as a public sphere. Under this umbrella of civility five key themes will be considered. The first will look at the anonymity that Twitter affords its users and whether this interferes with civil discourse. This will be followed by an analysis of recent arguments that claim Twitter is a platform that facilitates unfair public shaming (Ronson, 2015). The authenticity of interactions on Twitter, due to social control and pressures, will also be investigated. In addition to this, certain aspects of Twitter, such as algorithms, that may distort public reaction and opinion, will be critiqued. Lastly, it will look at Twitter and its potential as a public sphere by examining it alongside ideas of key theorists in the area, such as Jürgen Habermas. Conclusions made from the first four themes will be tied together and used to help determine whether Twitter does function as a public sphere that allows for productive and civil discussion.



## **Anonymity**

When critiquing Twitter's effectiveness as a public sphere, it is first important to question aspects of it that are not present in face-to-face discussions. One key feature is the anonymity that Twitter users can take advantage of. John Suler (2004) talks about 'the online disinhibition effect', which he describes as the theory that people do and say things online that they would never do or say offline. Suler (2004) distinguishes between 'benign disinhibition' and 'toxic disinhibition'. 'Benign disinhibition' refers to the positive outcomes of people acting differently on the Internet, such as being more forthcoming and generous with other users. However, the more common outcome, he argues, is 'toxic disinhibition', which sees people use the online environment as an excuse to be more rude, critical, and hateful. He explains that the anonymity individuals experience on websites like Twitter gives them a sense of freedom that can be dangerous: 'When people have the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out' (Suler, 2004: 322). Suler (2004: 322) adds that 'In the case of expressed hostilities or other deviant actions, the person can avert responsibility for those behaviours'. This suggests that users disassociate their online persona from their real lives and this can result in them acting in ways that are not reflective of the person they are in face-to-face conversations. A consequence of people losing their sense of reality could be that they make outlandish comments to compete with fellow users, rather than expressing their genuine feelings. An individual who could be perfectly civil in offline conversation could therefore lack this civility in their online interactions, because they become competitive and see discourse in the online environment as more of a game to be won. It is possible that this sense of discussion as a sport may pose a threat to a productive public sphere.

Although their research focuses on comments left on online newspaper articles, rather than social networking sites, McCluskey and Hmielowski still offer some interesting insights into the positive aspects of Internet users being able to hide their identities. They do not deny the potential negative effects of anonymity that Suler warns of, but they acknowledge that:

'... anonymity gives reluctant individuals an avenue to express views, expanding the number of participants in the discourse and potentially the range of views aired' (McCluskey and Hmielowski, 2011: 307).

This point of view supports the idea that if allowing people to conceal their identities creates a discussion with a greater number of participants and more diverse views, then this perhaps is more important than worrying about some individuals not being as civil as they may be offline. McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011: 306) also point out that these additional perspectives that are added when people's identities are hidden are often from minority groups such as women and immigrants. They determine this by referencing data that found, when asked, women and minority groups said that they felt more comfortable submitting comments when they did not have to give their names or personal information. This is an interesting point to consider because it raises the question of why these minority groups maybe do not feel as comfortable in offline spaces. Is it because their opinion might not be as respected if their identity is known, or is it because they might face dangerous reactions to their thoughts in the offline world? Lastly, they conclude that anonymity has the potential to encourage more genuine discussion, even if conversations become uncivil at times: 'It could free anonymous writers from social pressures that come with expressing unpopular opinions that do not conform with dominant opinions' (McCluskey and Hmielowski, 2011:308).

Greek academic, Zizi Papacharissi, takes a more neutral stance on the issue of anonymity on websites like Twitter. She agrees that 'Anonymity online assists one to overcome identity boundaries and communicate more freely and openly...' (Papacharissi, 2002: 16). However, she also concedes that 'The same anonymity and absence of face-to-face interaction that expands our freedom of expression online keeps us from assessing the impact and social value of our words' (Papacharissi, 2002: 16).

Does this opportunity to conceal one's identity offer an incentive to users to ignore accountability and pose a significant threat to civil discourse? Do the potential benefits of anonymity outweigh its disadvantages?

### **Public Shaming**

The potential for users to disassociate from their offline selves, discussed above, could have other consequences. As mentioned previously, there is a possibility that it

allows individuals to become crueller and more judgemental and the effect this has on recipients of this harsh demeanour is an important aspect to consider. An article written by Dan Kahan titled *What Do Alternative Sanctions Mean?* generated a lot of debate amongst academics about using shame as a tool for punishment. Kahan's article is centred on the prison system but its ideas about shaming and the criticisms it has received are relevant when considering a website like Twitter. Kahan (1996: 635) says about shame sanctions: '... they do something that conventional alternative sanctions do not do: express appropriate moral condemnation'. This suggests that if someone were to act in a way that was deemed inappropriate and uncivilised by Twitter and its users, then the best way to punish this person would be to publically humiliate them. Kahan (1996: 646) adds:

'Shaming penalties might be extremely effective in regulating behaviour and shaping preferences precisely because the prospect of a permanent loss of status is so dreadful'.

Here he is arguing that shame sanctions are not only a good tool for punishment but they are also a significant deterrent for potential deviant behaviour. However, in an article that was published years later, Kahan recants some of the claims he made in his original article. In this updated work, he does not concede that shaming punishments are not optimal because they are cruel or uncivil, but because he believes they are unfair and can be influenced by power:

'What's really wrong with shaming penalties... is that they are deeply partisan: when society picks them, it picks sides, aligning itself with those who subscribe to norms that give pride of place to community and social differentiation rather than to individuality and equality' (Kahan, 2006: 3).

James Whitman was one of the first critics of Kahan's original essay. One of his issues with Kahan's theories was what Kahan later admitted to in his follow up piece, that shaming gives an unfair power to a potentially bias public:

'They involve a dangerous willingness, on the part of the government, to delegate part of its enforcement power to, a fickle and uncontrolled general populace' (Whitman, 1998: 1088)

In addition to this, he also disagrees with shame penalties because they are undignified and overly harsh, something that Kahan does not acknowledge even in his more recent work. On this Whitman (1998: 1062) says that 'Speaking of shame sanctions as "condemnation" does not do justice to our intuitive sense of their peculiar kind of brutality and terror'. Whitman (1998: 1090) also argues that once someone

has accepted a punishment for their actions, any additional sanctions like shaming from the public are ‘... a violation of our modern sense of what we might call transactional dignity’. In simple terms, if someone admits to a wrongdoing and a punishment is agreed upon, then is adding additional punishment, for example shaming, undermining a person’s attempt to make amends? If we apply this logic to Twitter, are users too easily condemning actions of others and not considering the consequences of their judgements in the long term? The fast paced nature of Twitter, and the ease at which information spreads, could make users not process tweets and stories in the most rational way. However, do certain aspects of Twitter itself provide the ideal setting for outrage and verbal abuse? Aspects such as the anonymity it affords users and its algorithm based search function, which organises tweets in terms of popularity and newness, may help fuel this outrage culture.

A more recent look at shaming, and specifically shaming online, can be found in Jon Ronson’s best selling book *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed*. Although the book contains some elements of entertainment, and is not strictly academic, its insights are very closely aligned to the research that is being undertaken in this dissertation and its conclusions have garnered respect amongst academics in this field of study. Ronson (2015: 10) discusses how when shaming first appeared in the online world it seemed to be great for holding big organisations accountable for their corporate antics and that ‘The silenced were getting a voice’. In recent times, Ronson (2015: 90) argues that shaming online has spun out of control, becoming uncivil and is often directed at undeserving recipients. He mentions how it is no longer just people like Jonah Lehrer, a best selling author who later admitted to using fake quotes in one of his books, who are being shamed: ‘The people who we were destroying were no longer just people like Jonah... They were private individuals who really hadn’t done anything much wrong’. A big reason for this he suggests, is that a large proportion of the information available on these social media websites has become sensationalised and exaggerated: ‘... we’ve created a stage for constant artificial high drama. Every day a new person emerges as a magnificent hero or a sickening villain’ (Ronson, 2015: 79). If Ronson’s perspective is accepted, does this mean that individual’s lose a sense of personal responsibility when in the online environment? Does this mean that civil discourse is more achievable in face-to-face discussion because the individual recognises more easily how their behaviour may affect others and themselves? Does it mean that

people engage in the pleasures of righteous indignation and negative social comparison without any concern for real world consequences?

### **Social Control**

Practices, such as public shaming, that exist in the online space may result in users being more aware and mindful of how they conduct themselves (Ronson, 2015). Although his book does not reference the Internet directly, Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is a key piece of literature to reference when trying to understand how and why people present themselves in certain ways. Goffman insists that often:

‘... the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain’ (1959: 17-18).

He says this is a result of people wanting to fit in and not become social outcasts:

‘Society is organised on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way’ (Goffman, 1959: 24).

This suggests that people understand that if they act in a way that society deems acceptable then they will receive a certain amount of respect and acceptance in return. Even if they disagree with this widely agreed upon way of conducting oneself, it is still worth pretending in order to reap the social rewards. On Twitter, users could hide their true feelings during divisive discussions, and act civil under false pretences, out of a fear of losing the social benefits that arise from agreeing with the majority.

German scientist, Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, undertook research about how people are influenced to vote in elections. Her conclusions supported Goffman's ideas about people choosing to present themselves in certain ways. Noelle-Neumann's (1984) major theory was ‘the spiral of silence’. This theory outlined how when an individual perceives that they are in the minority they will choose to stay silent. She notes that ‘The fear of isolation seems to be the force that sets the spiral of silence in motion’ (Noelle-Neumann, 1984: 6). She goes as far to say that ‘... most people will join the majority point of view even when they can have no doubt that it is false’ (Noelle-Neumann, 1984: 38). Could this possibility of social ostracisation prevent Twitter users from expressing their true feelings during discourse and, if true, is this worth it

if the exchanges remain more civil as a result? Lastly, Noelle-Neumann argues that this social pressure to conform may not always be a bad thing because it keeps the values of the community at large intact:

‘Nor should one simply condemn a society as intolerant or illiberal when it threatens the deviant individual with isolation to protect the value of its mutually held convictions’ (1984: 182).

However, Noelle-Neumann’s research has received criticism. A key observation that Salmon and Kline (1983: 6-7) make is that ‘Noelle-Neumann has based her spiral of silence notion on face-to-face, small group situations’. This is an important critique as this research is focused on Twitter, a website with a huge amount of people that are not speaking to each other face-to-face. They also argue that from their own research they found:

‘... support for one’s position- even if the support comes from only one other person- apparently makes an individual confident enough to express his or her own opinion despite overwhelming opposition from the majority’ (Salmon and Kline, 1983: 6)

They add that ‘... an individual’s willingness to speak out against a majority might depend on how involving or salient that issue is to the individual’ (Salmon and Kline, 1983: 33). This perspective supports an alternative point of view that sees the Twitter user as being able to express themselves as long as they feel they have some support and are motivated to comment on an issue because it holds a significant importance to them. However, could the fact that tweets can be archived and potentially brought up years later complicate this argument? Salmon and Kline are discussing offline discussion and therefore their position does not take into account that user’s tweets can be seen by both the people who agree and disagree with them. Maybe individuals would not want opinions they share with friends to be seen by family or co-workers, as it may have real world consequences. Is the idea that certain perspectives monopolise Twitter, and scare away other points of view through a threat of isolation, a myth? In contrast, does Twitter lend itself towards polarisation, where opinions are labelled as belonging to one extreme or the other? Are particular ideas promoted to try and discredit platforms like Twitter as good places for productive and honest debate?

### **Distortions**

There are a number of aspects of Twitter that may distort how a user perceives discussion concerning a certain topic. An example of this is the site’s use of

algorithms. The possible negative consequences of these algorithms have been critiqued by many academics, including Friedman and Nissenbaum (1996), who argue that they introduce biases when a user is navigating a particular website. Friedman and Nissenbaum (1996: 332) explain that three categories of biases exist in relation to these algorithms: ‘... pre-existing bias, technical bias, and emergent bias’. They first define pre-existing, saying that it is the bias that emerges as a result of personal beliefs and opinions of developers of the computer system. Technical bias, they explain, is caused by the limitations of technology and how it is sometimes unable to recognize social meanings and therefore does not understand the context in which things are said. Lastly, emergent bias occurs because of a change in society’s knowledge or social values and the algorithm adapts to reflect this change (Friedman and Nissenbaum, 1996). Friedman and Nissenbaum (1996: 346) argue that ‘... freedom from bias should be held out as an ideal’ during the development stage and that this is the best way to tackle the issue of biases in algorithms.

Van Wel and Royakkers (2004) view data mining as the worst consequence of these algorithms, saying that: ‘One of the most obvious ethical objections lies in the possible violation of peoples’ (informational) privacy’. They believe that the issue with harvesting data is the fact that ‘... it is often unclear to a web user how some apparently trivial piece of data might result in non-trivial patterns’ (Van Wel and Royakkers, 2004: 133). In simple terms, users do not always know what information is being taken from them, what it is used for, and how it will effect what they are shown online. Is it ethical for websites like Twitter to not fully disclose, in simple terms, how it is using an individual’s information? Van Wel and Royakkers (2004: 137) suggest that the best solution is for both the web company and the user to share accountability. They say, in the case of websites like Twitter, ‘monitoring should be done by an impartial organisation’ to make sure the user’s privacy rights are not being violated. In terms of the user, they suggest they should take privacy precautions, such as using anonymity tools, which ‘... reduce the amount of information revealed while browsing by, for instance, adding cookie-rejecting tools’. This aligns with McCluskey’s and Hmielowski’s claims, that were discussed previously, about how anonymity can afford users a healthy sense of freedom online.

Although the two earlier pieces of research provide a good insight into some of the shortcomings of algorithms, neither of them reference Twitter directly. Tufekci (2015) looks at Twitter's algorithms specifically. She uses the 2014 incident in Ferguson, where a young African-American man was controversially shot and killed by a white police officer, and the reaction it got on Twitter, to make observations about Twitter's algorithm. Tufekci (2015: 213) does this by comparing it to Facebook's algorithm, which she says inhibited important discussion about this devastating event: 'By contrast Twitter's algorithmically unfiltered feed allowed the emergence of millions of tweets from concerned citizens'. In comparison to its peers, Tufekci insists that how Twitter filters data allows for a more genuine and productive discussion, which is more reflective of actual public opinion. She goes as far as to say that:

'Without Twitter's reverse chronological stream, unmediated by an algorithmic gatekeeper, that allows its users to amplify content as they choose, the news of unrest and protests may never have made it onto the national agenda' (Tufekci, 2015: 214-5)

It must be noted that the website's default setting now organises tweets in terms of popularity. Despite this, the option does still exist for users to view tweets in terms of newest to oldest.

However, Twitter's algorithm is not free from criticism. Forelle et al. (2015) discuss the negative impact of bots. They define these Twitter bots as '... computer-generated programs that post, tweet, or message of their own accord' (Forelle et al., 2015: 1). In relation to political campaigns in Venezuela, they observe that these bots in recent years '... have gone from simply padding follower lists to retweeting volumes of their own commentary and announcements' (Forelle et al., 2015: 6). This is where Twitter's algorithm, which filters content based on a combination of newness and popularity, has potential weaknesses. For technologies like bots, Twitter's algorithm easily allows for mass spamming and manipulation of elements of the site such as the trending section. This arguable flaw shows a business element to how Twitter operates. People can buy and employ bots to potentially sway opinion of other users. Does this business undertone undermine Twitter's ability to act as a platform for genuine debate and conversation? This also correlates with Noelle-Neumann's research about how public opinion can be easily skewed by outside factors.



## **Twitter as a Public Sphere**

In his seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas ignited the debate surrounding what type of environment is best suited for productive discourse amongst citizens. He promotes a space that is free from state control and where the public can participate in ‘... formal communication conducted through intra-organizational public spheres’ (Habermas, 1989: 248). By using the term ‘formal communication’ Habermas indicates that conversations between individuals should ideally remain polite and civil for them to be effective. Habermas (1990: 67) also advocates for ‘moral argumentation’ in these discussions, which he argues ‘... serves to settle conflicts of action by consensual means’. He critiques the role of the media in public discourse, saying that they generate publicity for ‘... show or manipulation’ in order ‘... to create a plebiscitary follower-mentality on the part of the mediated public’ (Habermas, 1989: 247). This suggests that the exaggeration that the media adds to these conversations could affect the civil nature of these discussions. Although Habermas’ ideas predated the Internet, his theories are still relevant and important today, and can be easily applied to a modern platform like Twitter.

Habermas’ vision for the ideal public sphere is not free from criticism. Lyotard (1984: 10) rejects the notion that debates should only involve polite language and niceties, arguing that ‘... to speak is to fight... ‘ and that ‘Great joy is had in the endless invention of turns of phrase, of words and meanings... ‘. How uncivil can discussion become though before it is no longer productive and does not enrich discourse? Lyotard’s (1984: 65) main criticism of Habermas’ work is that he disagrees with the notion that ‘... the goal of dialogue is consensus’. From this it can be gleaned that he is an advocate for disagreements not always being resolved and believes that a productive debate does not have to end with all parties being in agreement. It seems Lyotard is more of a proponent of conflict and enjoys debates for their tendency to reveal how people disagree, while Habermas sees them more as a tool that can resolve conflicts. Similar to Habermas, Lyotard’s work was published before the Internet age but is still a key piece of literature considering how highly regarded and referenced it still is amongst academics.

Nicholas Garnham also criticises Habermas' theories about the public sphere but acknowledges some aspects of them that he agrees with. In relation to Habermas he says: '... his rationalist model of public discourse... leads him to neglect the continuing need for compromise between bitterly divisive and irreconcilable political positions' (Garnham, 1992: 360). Like Lyotard, Garnham renounces the notion that consensus is the goal of debates and highlights the importance of compromise. He continues by pointing out that Habermas '... neglects both the rhetorical and playful aspects of communicative action, which leads to too sharp a distinction between information and entertainment...' (Garnham, 1992: 360). Twitter promotes discussions amongst its users about a variety of different topics, both serious and entertaining. Garnham's ideas imply that enforcing strict restrictions on how people communicate with one another leads to a lack of fun and playfulness in conversation that is essential for us as social beings. It is also even more important today, given that elements of politics and entertainment have merged. The one area where it could be said that he leans more towards Habermas' point of view, instead of Lyotard's, is when talking about accountability. Garnham (1992: 368) agrees that individuals can say whatever they want in a discussion forum but '... the speaker cannot dissociate him- or herself from the possible effects of his or her discourse'. He also advocates for participants to respect the rules that have been predetermined in any conversation they wish to enter: 'The individual citizen or group cannot, except in very rare circumstances, simply opt out and refuse to play whatever game has been decided upon' (Garnham, 1992: 372). Garnham believes it is necessary to accept these rules, in order to make conversations productive and fruitful. To summarise, he is in favour of free and open discussion but at the same time warns that the individual or group must be aware of, and accept, any consequences that may arise from acting in an uncivil manner.

John Durham Peters (1993) offers Habermas' work more praise than the two previous academics. Peters (1993: 551) believes that a lot of the criticism his work receives comes from a misguided Foucauldian perspective that sees any participation in organised political discourse as giving up control and power: 'Habermas is out to prove that democracy and reason, are more than a totalizing dream of discipline'. Where Peters does see an issue with Habermas' public sphere is in terms of how it relates to other forms of media. Peters (1993: 565) believes that Habermas is too

dismissive of how alternative forms of media can be integrated into productive discussion and that his theory ultimately ‘... leaves us with both an impoverished account of how communication in fact works and impedes the imagination of alternative forms of participatory media’. In relation to Twitter, this could mean that its potential as a platform to enhance and enrich discussion should not be underestimated or discounted. Despite some of the site’s shortcomings, discussed above, Twitter’s potential to service civil discourse should not go unrecognised.

In terms of acknowledging the importance of civility in relation to the public sphere, Papacharissi (2004) offers some interesting insights. Both Habermas and Lyotard make some persuasive points about what conditions create the best environment for productive discussion. Papacharissi (2004: 260) argues that the definition of civility has evolved over time and that the word is often confused with politeness: ‘Civility is misunderstood when reduced to interpersonal politeness, because this definition ignores the democratic merit of robust and heated discussion’. If civility is simply viewed as good manners and etiquette, its importance as a part of a well functioning public sphere can seem underwhelming. Instead, Papacharissi (2004: 267) insists the word describes a conduct that aims to prevent ‘... behaviours that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups’. This description highlights aspects of conversation that are essential for a modern and progressive public sphere.

Much research exists in the area of civility and conversation. This pool of information gets smaller when looking for works about civility in relation to online discussion. Within the texts that do address the Internet, the focus is mainly on comment sections of newspapers’ websites or political message boards (McCluskey and Hmielowski). More research on civility in relation to a social media website like Twitter, that involves discussion that is both political and entertaining, is needed. The five themes that were discussed above have a lot of research in their individual areas but there is a lack of analysis in terms of pulling all of these themes together and making broader and more extensive observations. Study into the area of civil discourse online is still relevant and important because even in 2019 we are seeing very divisive opinions about the extent to which we should expect civility on the Internet. The firing of film director James Gunn last year, after some of his old tweets resurfaced, is a prime

example of this (Kroll, 2018). Taking all these aspects in to consideration, the research title for this study is: Exploring the role of Twitter as a public sphere that facilitates civil discourse.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

Recognising the emergence of a multitude of new public spheres in the past decade, this study was undertaken with the purpose of trying to identify significant changes in the environments people use for discussion. Analysis of key literature in the area was deemed to be the method most suited to the research. There is a significant volume of literature that discusses the public sphere and themes that relate to it. The topic of civility creates a lot of disagreement amongst academics, and that is why civil discourse became an area of focus. The current discussion in the literature highlights gaps in relation to this research topic. These gaps invite people to expand upon current theories and add to the debate.

In terms of the work that is referenced in this research, most of it stemmed from Habermas' book, *The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere*, which is celebrated for introducing the concept of the public sphere. When reading both Habermas and his critics, some of the core themes, such as anonymity, public shaming, and social control kept re-appearing. These themes clearly linked to the over-arching topic of civility.

Twitter was chosen as a representation of a modern day public sphere. Given that the online world, especially social networking sites, created a whole new way for people to interact, it seemed fitting to pick a social networking site as the focus of this research. Only one website, Twitter, was chosen to allow for a more in-depth discussion of the topic, and because discourse amongst users is a prominent feature of Twitter. Additional themes, such as distortions in the form of algorithms and bots, emerged once it was decided that Twitter would be a focal point of this study.

In conjunction with this review of the literature, content analysis of both articles describing major events on Twitter, and the reaction they received in the form of users' tweets, was undertaken. Under each of the five major themes, examples of a significant event that was discussed on Twitter, and the reactions it garnered on the

website, were explored. A maximum of two examples were used for each theme because of the word count limitation, and to allow for a more fleshed out dialogue about the different ideas. The examples were chosen on the basis of how much they linked to the overall topic of civility and how much they aided in the discussion of each particular theme.

The main advantage of this style of analysis is that it caters for time and cost limitations. Reference material is readily available both in the library and online. Unlike other methods, it is flexible in terms of scheduling (Denscombe, 2010).

Some disadvantages can become apparent when only using this style of research method (Denscombe, 2010). When looking for credible references, all documents had to be evaluated thoroughly, especially tweets, which must be taken into context when analysing them. In addition to this, these sources, a lot of the time, did not link exactly to the topic being researched and a certain level of interpretation had to be used. The academic literature and user tweets were written for purposes that often did not exactly correlate with the aims and focus of this dissertation. Despite these possible limitations, the research methods that were employed allowed for time constraints to be overcome, while still creating a well informed and thought out dialogue about civility and Twitter.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANONYMITY

When considering modern public spheres, which exist online, anonymity is an essential aspect to analyse. The online environment allows anonymity to occur on a much larger scale than it does in traditional, face-to-face conversation. Anonymity is a key feature of Twitter that distinguishes it from offline and in-person spaces that are used for civil discourse. To aid in the discussion of this theme, the two examples that have been chosen are in stark contrast to each other, and show how anonymity can be both a useful and dangerous tool. This will help with having a broader and more extensive debate, rather than one that is clearly one-sided.

The merits of anonymity online are clear in Brammer's (2017) article, in which he talks to several members of the LGBTQ community who began exploring their sexuality and identity in the safety of the anonymous online environment. One of the participants, Anthony, describes how websites like Twitter allowed him to come to terms with his sexuality: "ONTD and Twitter were initially just outlets for my fascination with pop culture, but I quickly discovered that much of the community was LGBTQ" (Brammer, 2017). This suggests that being able to conceal one's identity allows for exploration of personal feelings without the fear of being judged. It gives the person a chance to take time to contemplate complex issues, such as sexuality, without feeling as if they are expected to have definite answers straight away. This ties in to what McClusky and Hmielowski (2011) believe about minority groups, in particular, reaping the benefits of anonymity online.

Another participant, who calls themselves Apollo, finds that Twitter, in comparison to other social networking sites, is better in terms of concealing identity, because it does not require as much personal information on user profiles: "I'm not out on Facebook, because I would rather ... [not] deal with all the informed commentary from people I know in real life saying things like, 'We always knew' or 'You're going to hell,'" (Brammer, 2017). This links to McClusky and Hmielowski's (2011) argument about how environments that allow for greater anonymity are often able to attract a more

diverse group of participants. Not having to worry about criticism from family and friends can make people feel more able to offer their honest opinions on topics that are divisive.

The last participant that will be highlighted is Millie who explains how she did not disclose her sexuality to her real life friends and acquaintances out of a fear of isolation: "I spent most of my school years at an all-girls school where if someone thought you were into girls, you were ostracized," (Brammer, 2017). Again, it is relevant to mention McClusky and Hmielowski (2011). They would argue that anonymity on websites like Twitter helps individuals like Millie to feel safe in expressing a point of view that may offend the dominant opinion amongst people in their day to day lives. Hiding one's identity can give someone the confidence to reject potential prejudices they experience in real life and help with the loneliness they may experience as a result. Members of minority groups, such the LGBTQ community, can discuss ideas they may be struggling with in a dignified manner, without worrying about harm that could be done to them as a result of expressing these views. Although it might be tempting to only acknowledge these benefits, the potential negative consequences of anonymity cannot be ignored. These will be explored in the next example.

Fitts (2017) gives an overview of the entire debacle involving tech developer, Adria Richards, and what happened when she attended a coding conference in 2013. Two men were sitting behind Richards during the conference and at one point she overheard heard them making, what she thought was, inappropriate sexual comments. This prompted @adriarichards (2013) to tweet, alongside a picture she had taken of the two men, 'Not cool. Jokes about forking repo's in a sexual way and "big" dongles. Right behind me #pycon'. As a result, one of the men lost his job and this provoked a huge response on Twitter. Although Richards had some supporters, most of the reaction on Twitter empathised with the man who had lost his job over, what a lot of people deemed, a harmless joke: '@adriarichards Well this is an inappropriate use of soc media. Please talk to people instead of getting them fired. NOT COOL' (@Zlatan\_Onkovic, 2015). In the beginning most of the criticisms were similar to this and were simply trying to create a dialogue about whether Richards tweet was appropriate or not. However, the negative aspects of this online anonymity became



apparent as these criticisms of Richard's original tweet evolved and eventually turned into hateful and vicious trolling.

Fitts (2017) explains how Richards received hundreds of tweets that included sexism, racial slurs, death threats and photoshopped pictures of her head on porn stars' bodies. One of the less explicit examples of these tweets is: '@adriarichards Good job at being a picture-book feminist bitch' (@WhoAreYouQuotin, 2013). On top of this, she was a victim of the modern practice called "doxxing", which involves posting someone's address on the Internet. Probably the worst, and most ironic, consequence of this mass trolling is how Richard's former employer, SendGrid, was hacked by a group of trolls, from a number of different sites, and was told that the hack would not stop until Richards was fired. Richards did, in fact, lose her job. This aligns with Suler's (2004) beliefs concerning 'toxic disinhibition', and how anonymity allows users to disassociate from themselves and say things they would never say without this guarantee that no one knows who they are. Ultimately, online harassment to this degree ruins productive discussion. Adria Richards arguably deserves to be criticised for what she did, but when it turns into a nasty witch-hunt, where she is scared that someone is going to show up at her house, it severely weakens the opposing argument.

The two examples show how anonymous accounts can both offer freedom and harm to users. Individuals can take advantage of the anonymity Twitter affords them and find commonalities with people that may be absent in their real lives. The problem is whether people can be trusted to act civilly when granted this freedom. The polarizing nature of the website, which seems to promote extreme views, could harm attempts to find common ground with users who may have alternative opinions. There is merit in Papacharissi's (2002) view that '... there is a danger that these technologies may overemphasize our differences and downplay or even restrict our commonalities'. People can see a heightened version of themselves and others on social media. As a result of them being able to separate their online persona from the real world, they can often not consider what real world consequences may arise from what they say. Interestingly, Ronson (2015) says the same with regard to public shaming on these websites, which will be discussed next. To end this chapter on anonymity, overall, it does not seem like it is an aspect that aids in civil discourse. It may allow for more

interesting discussions with a more diverse group of people, but the unfiltered stream of hateful trolling that can occur as a result of this anonymity, does not allow the discussion to reach any meaningful conclusion much of the time. Trolling and extreme opinions seem to be what users become fixated on, and often this prevents civilised and level-headed discussion to develop and be recognised.

## CHAPTER V

### PUBLIC SHAMING

The entertainment aspect of a website like Twitter sometimes makes users forget about the consequences that their comments might have. It could also be disputed that, because of its large and widespread reach, users have the power to call out inappropriate behaviour and provoke a response to it. Twitter's diverse and large group of users, who are protected by elements of the site, such as anonymity, can raise issues that may not be as easily talked about in offline public spheres.

An example that illustrates both aspects of public shaming involves the director James Gunn, and what happened when some controversial tweets of his resurfaced earlier this year. Kroll (2018) describes the incident when the, now deleted, tweets of *The Guardians of the Galaxy* director were labelled as racist, and mocking serious issues like rape and paedophilia. An example of one of these tweets is: 'Wondering which Disneyland character would be the worst to get raped by. I think it is Goofy. But Sleepy would suck too' (@JamesGunn, 2009). @JamesGunn (2008) also tweeted: 'I burnt my tongue on an enchilada. Fucking Mexicans!'. When a lot of people first read tweets like this their initial instinct is to be outraged. The problem with Twitter is it is easy to become offended and respond too hastily without considering the full context.

However, it is important to acknowledge the positives that can come out of an incident like this. It does hold people in powerful positions, like James Gunn, accountable for what they say and do. As Ronson (2015: 10) points out: 'When we deployed shame we were utilizing an immensely powerful tool'. This is obvious when we consider how, as Kroll (2018) explains, Disney fired James Gunn as the director for the upcoming *Guardians of the Galaxy* film, due to the backlash. Discourse on Twitter does not exist solely online, it transcends the virtual sphere and can impact people's offline lives. Maybe this is because, today, individuals spend a lot of their time communicating with each other in the online world. Therefore, an overlap between their online and offline lives is almost inevitable. This means that it can have an impact on real world issues and help incite changes in behaviour.

Kroll (2018) mentions how a lot of the backlash was heightened because it was in the midst of the ‘Me Too’ movement, a campaign that started to combat sexual harassment and misconduct in the industry. A lot of these incidences are too easily grouped together. James Gunn is being compared to the likes of Harvey Weinstein, who allegedly sexually assaulted numerous actresses, for making some distasteful jokes (Victor, 2017). Most rational people would recognise the difference between the two, but because of how quickly new stories come and go on Twitter and how things can be filed under a hashtag, it is not as easy to make these important distinctions evident. Gunn was most likely fired because his tweets were at odds with Disney’s family friendly image. However, it was only when Twitter users popularised the tweets that Disney saw them as an issue. In summary, it seems like the tweets were not a problem for Disney until they realised that other people were aware of and offended by them. Kahan (1996) makes a convincing argument for the effectiveness of shame sanctions, but just because they might work does that make them fair and ethical to use?

It’s important to note that these tweets were all roughly 10 years old. This archive system that Twitter has allows for a culture that almost celebrates catching people out and digging up dirt. Whitman (1998: 1091) says that ‘Shame sanctions belong to a style of twentieth-century mass politics that draws its power not from a sober public, but from a fired-up crowd’. This suggests that the Twitter mob does not care about the details once they are caught up in the hunt. James Gunn posted all of these tweets before he was involved in *The Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise, something he alludes to himself in his response to the controversy:

‘Many people who have followed my career know when I started, I viewed myself as a provocateur, making movies and telling jokes that were outrageous and taboo. As I have discussed publicly many times, as I’ve developed as a person, so has my work and my humor’ (@JamesGunn, 2018).

The discussion changes from a healthy debate about how people in powerful positions should be more aware of how they speak and act, and more about ruining someone’s career, because you feel like you are part of an important movement. Ronson (2015: 283) expresses this sentiment when talking about a similar situation, in which a woman lost her job after tweeting a bad joke about AIDS: ‘It was the desire to be

compassionate that led people to commit the profoundly uncompassionate act of tearing apart a woman as she slept on a plane...’. Most of the people shaming James Gunn are not heartless trolls, but rather concerned users who feel like they are making a difference. Maybe the ease, at which someone feels like they can be part of a revolutionary movement on Twitter, is dangerous because it means they do not put situations like this into perspective. Sure, James Gunn made unfunny and inappropriate jokes when he was younger, does this mean he should lose his job 10 years later?

The over-reaction that scenarios like this are accused of garnering also undermine bigger movements linked to these scandals, such as ‘Me Too’. A movement trying to shine a light on the real and important issue of sexual harassment in Hollywood loses respect and credibility because of its failure to treat each incident separately, and to not conflate minor offences with major offences. This seems to be the main issue with shaming on Twitter. Once people think that they have a voice that can incite change, they are tempted to grossly overuse it, even when it is not always necessary. None of the users who criticised James Gunn for making a stupid joke had to look him in the eye as he lost his job. It is positive that people feel like they can express themselves, but the mob mentality that Twitter facilitates can lead people to exaggerate their thoughts and become angrier with issues than they would if they were face to face with a person. The need to completely ruin people is not a characteristic of healthy, civilised debate. The shaming that exists on Twitter in the current climate is a reason why the site is possibly not ideal as a public sphere. As Ronson (2015: 310) says about Twitter: ‘Let’s not turn it into a world where the smartest way to survive is to go back to being voiceless’. Unfortunately, there is a chance that people do chose to alter how they present themselves on Twitter out of a fear of being shamed. This is what will be explored next.

## CHAPTER VI

### SOCIAL CONTROL

Fear about how one is viewed in the online environment can influence the extent to which discussions are genuine. If people are too afraid to express their opinions, can productive debate about topical issues exist? To investigate whether or not this fear creates a significant threat to open discussion on Twitter, Matt Damon and his comments about the ‘Me Too’ movement will be analysed. Desta (2018) describes how in late 2017 the actor, Matt Damon, was met with major outrage from Twitter when quotes from an interview he did about the ‘Me Too’ movement were released. In the interview he said he feared that people were not acknowledging that there was a spectrum for sexual harassment. Twitter users deemed his comments as being undermining to the movement. The actress Minnie Driver expressed her distaste for the interview, tweeting, ‘God God, SERIOUSLY?’ (@driverminnie, 2017). Desta (2018) describes how eventually Damon released a public apology and vowed to remain silent on the issue in the future. The question is did Matt Damon say anything wrong in the first place and did he apologize because he wanted to or because he felt that he had to?

The first aspect of this story to look at is whether or not what Damon said deserved the controversy it received. Eppolito (2017) gives a direct quote from Damon’s interview: “There’s a difference between patting someone on the butt and rape or child molestation. Both of those behaviours need to be confronted and eradicated without question, but they shouldn’t be conflated”. When this quote is isolated it does not sound so unreasonable. He is not saying anything to discredit the ‘Me Too’ movement, he is just pointing out something many people who are part of the campaign would agree with. By directing attention towards, arguably, unworthy comments like this, ‘Me Too’ could lose support from individuals who are on the fence about the movement.

The fact that Matt Damon did end up apologizing reinforces Noelle-Neumann’s (1984) spiral of silence theory. Maybe he genuinely regretted what he had said in the

interview, or maybe when he saw the backlash from both the public and his peers he worried that his career and reputation would be threatened. Perhaps, Damon did not see the point he was making as worthy of potentially damaging his reputation so he allowed himself to be bullied into silence. There is a strong likelihood that others, who had similar views to Damon, saw how his comments were received and decided to stay silent out of a fear of attracting the same outrage. It is completely fair to criticise Damon for focusing too heavily on a certain aspect of the issue of sexual harassment, but should the aim be to stop him from talking about the issue completely? Debates need more than one party to function and if one side does not allow the opposing party to speak then it possibly limits how productive the discussion can be. Twitter allows for a tribal and competitive atmosphere where sometimes users only care about who can shout the loudest. The speed, at which people can find millions of others with the same perspective, and the same level of outrage as them, possibly inhibits their ability to view disputes with a rational and level-headed mind-set. It goes back to a point that has been made in previous chapters: does the entertainment and high-drama element of Twitter make its users as equally dramatic and over-the-top in their conversations? Of course, there are sections of Twitter that do involve more rational and healthy discussion, but recently drama and entertainment on the website seems to drown them out and dominate conversation.

Salmon and Kline (1983: 12), who criticised the validity of the spiral of silence, found in their research that ‘It was the dominant opinions of close, intimate groups, not some amorphous public, which brought these “deviates” back into line’. The problem with Twitter is that your close family and friends can see what you tweet, as well as the general public. If someone tweeted an opinion similar to Matt Damon’s they would have to do it under the disguise of an anonymous account if they were worried about how people in their lives might react. This adds an element of secrecy to conversations and does not let users openly express themselves. A user should not feel like they have to use an anonymous account out of fear, it should be an active choice they make.

Ultimately this can all be linked back to what Goffman says about human beings being afraid of going against popular ideas:

‘The maintenance of this surface of agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values which everyone present feels obliged to give lip service’ (1959: 17-8).

Most compassionate individuals understand the seriousness and importance of the issue of sexual harassment. Despite this, it is not a black and white problem that is above criticism. If we link what Goffman is saying to Damon’s apology, it could be seen as an attempt to appease the angry mob. Just because he criticised a small part of the ‘Me Too’ movement, does not mean he is against it. To a large extent, Twitter does not allow for any in-between, it has to be one extreme or the other. An aspect of civil discourse is that you allow your opponent to voice their opinions and listen. Perhaps listening is the missing component in Twitter as a public sphere? A platform that evokes this outrage in people, where they feel they need to silence any form of criticism, does not seem appropriate for productive debate. Certain components of Twitter seem to aid how stories and conversations are exaggerated and that is what will be discussed next.



## CHAPTER VII

### DISTORTIONS

It might not be the virtual environment itself that exaggerates news on Twitter, but rather technologies like algorithms and bots that have become key parts of the website. Does Twitter actively try and combat the negative consequences of these technologies on healthy discussion, or is the site more interested in whatever generates the most profits and attention? Russia's involvement in the 2016 US Election will be used as an example to question these claims.

Popken (2017) details how pro Trump organisations in Russia were able to pay for Twitter bots to retweet a certain message so many times that the algorithm was manipulated into making it into a trending topic. Once something is trending on Twitter this means that genuine accounts will start to pick up on this information. A lot of these stories that the bots promoted were fake, which led to real people believing and spreading these false claims. The Russian bots were also able to increase the number of followers certain accounts had so as to enhance their credibility. Friedman and Nissenbaum (1996) argue that it is up to the developers to identify these potential flaws in the algorithm but is that realistic? Hackers can always find new ways to bypass restrictions and is there a risk that if too many restrictions are put into place that the accessibility and reliability of the algorithm is compromised for the average user? Tufekci (2015) celebrates the old Twitter algorithm, which organised itself in reverse chronological order, for how it helped in the Ferguson controversy. This algorithm was criticised for encouraging bias so, as a result, Twitter changed it to reflect what tweets were most popular (Romano, 2018). Now the issue with bots, as is explained above, exists with this new system. The point is that it is unlikely that an ideal algorithm can be created in the development stage.

The dangers of data mining, that Van Well and Royackers (2004) warn of, also could tie into this. If a user's personal data helps the algorithm to decide what is shown on their feed, then these Russian bots could manipulate the algorithm to show propaganda to certain users. For example it could show a fake news story about police

brutality to someone living in an area, such as Ferguson, where that has been an issue. Van Well and Royakkers' (2004) suggestion to both introduce an independent organisation to monitor Twitter, as well as for users to take personal responsibility for how they protect their privacy online, is probably a better solution. It allows for a constant re-evaluation of the current climate on Twitter and makes both the site and the user accountable. Does Twitter want to stop these bots though?

Popken (2017) adds that the Russian bots did not only create their own political tweets but in response to genuine political discussion they '...flooded the reply thread with aggressive messages, memes and GIFs, poisoning and drowning out the conversation with angry static'. These bots not only create conjecture but they also actively try to dismantle healthy discourse. Their aim is to drown out any opposing voices and to make the conversation as uncivilised as possible. Forelle et al. (2015: 6) acknowledges how bots are becoming a political tool in many campaigns: 'Bot-generated propaganda and misdirection has become a worldwide political strategy'. They have infiltrated fruitful debates on Twitter and if they become a permanent part of conversations then civility cannot exist in these exchanges. The fact that these bots now impact such large-scale events, such as the 2016 US election, shows that Twitter has not done much to combat the issue. Twitter receives benefits from not monitoring their algorithms or not doing more to get rid of these bots. It cannot be overlooked that the website does have a business element to it. Is the need to make profits more important for the site's shareholders and developers than creating a platform for genuine, unbiased discussion? It seems as if the site prefers quantity over quality when it comes to user interactions. Can it ever succeed as a modern public sphere with this huge incentive to make money? Is conversation on the site so badly distorted by these technologies that honest and valuable discourse is an unattainable notion? So far several key factors relating to civil discourse within a public sphere have been considered. It seems appropriate to conclude by tying these elements together to aid in having a more in depth conversation about original ideas concerning environments for debate. Habermas (1989) and his description of the ideal public sphere would seem to suggest that Twitter is not an appropriate forum for productive discussion. Are his theories still as relevant in this modern world that is obsessed with media and technology?

## CHAPTER VIII

### TWITTER AS A PUBLIC SPHERE

A platform that is so ripe with gossip and drama, that depends on the media so heavily for its discussion and news, would seem to be the antithesis of the small and respectable public sphere, free from state influence, that Habermas (1989) imagined. Even though it is far from what Habermas describes, does Twitter live up to any of the expectations he outlines? Also, are the characteristics that Habermas insists are essential for a civilised arena for discussion really necessary, or has Twitter created a modern space that improves on his original ideas? The final example that is going to be used is the 2016 US presidential election. This example has been used in a previous chapter, but that was in relation to Russia, whereas this will look mostly at Trump's use of Twitter during and after the campaign. This event has been chosen because it marks a shift in how Twitter went from a place where, predominantly, silly and fun conversations occurred, to a platform where the president of the United States tweets important announcements and thoughts about major world issues (Samuel, 2017). Trump's use of Twitter, as a means of discourse with the public, will also be used to help tie together all of the themes that have been discussed throughout this research, which will allow for broader conclusions to be made about the central topic of civility.

Perhaps the biggest similarity that could be drawn between Habermas' (1989) public sphere and Twitter is that, although media can use the platform, Twitter users can bypass the media when expressing ideas and opinions. @realDonaldTrump (2016) admitted this is why he enjoys the website as a tool for communication: 'We did it! Thank you to all of my great supporters, we just officially won the election (despite all of the distorted and inaccurate media)'. The fact that Donald Trump was able to go on and win the election, by predominantly communicating to his supporters through Twitter, highlights the potential power the platform has. Does Twitter give its users a unique voice, that can go unfiltered by biased media, and that can still have a widespread reach? As Samuel (2017) points out though, the problem with this notion

is that it assumes that all media is propaganda and that independent users are always honest, and cannot also make false claims.

@realDonaldTrump's (2017) approach aligns more with Lyotard's (1984) ideas, that promote discourse which is fun and has an entertainment element to it: '@CNN is in a total meltdown with their FAKE NEWS because their ratings are tanking since election and their credibility will soon be gone!'. Trump provides no evidence for this claim but the casual and, arguably, melodramatic way in which he expresses himself is a form of entertainment and it captures the public's attention. Tweets are less appreciated for how well thought-out and researched they are and more celebrated for catchy slogans like 'fake news'. It is acceptable, to some extent, to want jokes and playfulness to be a part of conversation, but if it begins to dominate serious discussion then civility and thoughtfulness start to get lost.

Maybe Garnham (1992) is right in suggesting that people can say whatever they want, they just have to be accountable for it. However, little seems to happen, especially to people in power, on Twitter when they say something that is outright false and claim it as fact. This is especially worrying when people like Trump, who are expected to uphold some level of truth, engage in this dishonest behaviour:

'Looking more & more like the Trump Campaign for President was illegally being spied upon (surveillance) for the political gain of Crooked Hillary Clinton and the DNC. Ask her how that worked out - she did better with Crazy Bernie. Republicans must get tough now. An illegal Scam!' (@realDonaldTrump, 2018).

The fact that the president can so casually make such outrageous accusations against government organisations is both liberating and scary. On one hand, the thought of leaders being able to have a dialogue with the public, without the manipulation of the media, seems groundbreaking and progressive. On the other hand, if it is used to spread falsehoods, like Trump demonstrates in the above tweet, it does not improve discourse and make it more open. Instead, it adds a further element of dishonesty and deceit. Citizens being able to so easily converse with their leaders is an ideal that can, as has been demonstrated, quickly create a multitude of new problems. In fact, Trump seems to use the site to broadcast rather than to converse. Maybe this is the issue: he

puts forward the illusion that he is more connected to his audience, when actually he is just talking at them, not listening.

Another element of Habermas' public sphere, that both Lyotard (1984) and Garnham (1992) disagree with, is his aspiration to have consensus be the outcome of debate. Trump's ability and tendency to say whatever he wants on the site does not help in promoting agreement between opposing parties, but is this necessarily a bad thing? Civil discussion can still occur even if a consensus is not reached. It could be argued that it is better that individuals know how Trump truly feels, even if they disagree, because it allows new topics of conversation to emerge organically. If too heavy of an emphasis is placed on reaching a consensus, it might make people hold back controversial opinions. However, Trump's tweets could also be a tool to garner attention and outrage, rather than to express genuine points of view. Maybe trolling has to be accepted as an unavoidable aspect of online discussion if more diverse and controversial perspectives are to be expressed.

Habermas' (1989) more contained public sphere does appear to introduce fewer complications than a modern online discussion platform, such as Twitter. Peter's (1993) outlook that suggests that although Habermas' theories make some valid points about environments for discussion, his lack of acknowledgement of what media and technology can add to communication, weakens his model of the public sphere. It has been shown throughout this research that aspects like anonymity, which allow for more participants and greater diversity, and shaming, which can hold people in powerful positions accountable, are features of Twitter that highlight its potential as a modern public sphere that can enrich and add meaning to discourse. The problem is the online environment can bring out a need in people to rebel. Someone will twist this positive nature of anonymity and instead use it to shame and be vile towards people who do not really deserve this treatment. This in turn will create an echo chamber where only the majority view will remain dominant because people become so fearful of this shaming. The echo chamber becomes even louder when users manipulate features of Twitter, such as the algorithm, to promote certain points of view, and drown out any opposing opinions. Sure, Twitter itself does not always help to combat these glaring issues because of the business aspect of the company, but it is the users who dictate how the platform operates on a day-to-day basis.

Perhaps, in terms of civility, Papacharissi makes the most convincing argument about why it should be held up as an essential aspect of any modern public sphere. Her belief that the term civility has grown to encompass much more than simply good manners is an interesting insight to consider (Papacharissi, 2004). She argues that maybe people focus on politeness, rather than civility, when trying to design better platforms for discussion and that ‘One could argue that impoliteness is not so bad; it implies emotion, and emotion implies compassion, which in turn implies humanity’ (Papacharissi, 2004: 279). Potentially, Twitter creates a culture that gives more attention to tweets that sound dramatic, or contain offensive language, and ignore comments that are actually worth questioning and discussing. Papacharissi (2004: 279) warns that ‘Messages that are polite yet uncivil, especially when they deny others rights, threaten democracy, or use antagonistic stereotypes should concern us more’. This definition of civility could, at least in some ways, satisfy both Habermas’ and Lyotard’s vision for the public sphere. It aims to enforce democratic principles within discussion while also allowing debate to not be too restrictive in terms of the language that can be used.

Twitter could easily facilitate civil discourse, but there is a large demand for it to remain a place for escapism and memes. Productive discussion can take place but it is often overshadowed by the entertainment aspect of the website. The combination of both serious and dramatic discourse makes it difficult for genuine and fruitful debate to occupy the majority of the platform. This would suggest that, currently, Twitter is not suitable as a public sphere for productive discussion. The site appears to be a more toxic place than ever before for rational and balanced debate, with it now affecting even government offices. In terms of its possibility for civil discourse in the future, the trend so far does not look promising. No matter what new designs or features Twitter add, the general attitude of users would need to change for a major shift to take place. This is arguably the main issue: most users seem to be more attracted to dramatic and sensationalised discussion, rather than conversation that is meaningful and productive. Habermas’ public sphere is too dismissive of media and technology but these things can only aid in civil discourse if they are utilized in a contained and focused way. Twitter, ironically, seems to be a space where people go to be uncivilized.

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