

Public Interfa(e)ces

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“If language is beautiful, it must be because a master bathes it - a master who cleans shit holes, sweeps offal, and expurgates city and speech to confer upon them order and beauty.” (Laporte 7)

In the article, I develop a critique of pervasive technologies in terms of what they expurgate from the public realm. The proliferation of privatized social networking platforms and current developments in cloud computing have profound consequences and are characterised by the commodification of social intellect.

Publicness has largely fallen into disrepute

There has been much recent interest in revisiting Hannah Arendt's ideas in relation to a reconceptualisation of publicness. She states (in *The Human Condition*, written in 1958) that the political realm arises out of acting together, in the sharing of speech and action. In Paolo Virno's work, further recognising the linguistic and performative dimension of capitalism, this is emphasized because of the relative ineffectiveness of political action today. He laments the current depoliticisation of action, which explains the current “crisis of politics, the sense of scorn surrounding political praxis today, [and] the disrepute into which action has fallen” (51). Can the same be said of publicness?

What is at stake for Virno is clear, that “if the publicness of the intellect does not yield to the realm of the public sphere, of a political space in which the many can tend to common affairs, then it produces terrifying effects” (40). Proprietary technology arguably plays a significant role here in distancing speech from affect in a situation where action and words have lost their power (to echo Arendt).

To put it differently, in Christian Marazzi's writing on the relations between economics, language and affect, there is little hope for effective action when people have become incapable of maintaining concentrated attention on the same object for a long time. Extended to intellectual and social behavior, Franco Berardi calls this a catastrophe of modern humanism, where we no longer have sufficient attention spans for love, tenderness and compassion. As language and affect become increasingly economicised, social attention is captured with dire consequences in terms of the subjectivities being produced (and this is the terrifying effect of the so-called attention economy). According to Berardi, only the autonomy of intellectual labour from economic rule can save us from the forces of capitalism (or ‘semio-capital’ as he calls it). The point is emphasised in the current attack on Universities – although of course this is part of a broader neoliberal assault on public services, the welfare system, and public education. Moreover, Berardi is invoking general intellect and the social function of intellectual labour, what Virno refers to as the “know-how on which social productivity relies” (64). The point is that intellectual labour is no longer

separated from general conditions of labour; that there is no longer a separation between ordinary labour and intellectual activity that was once considered to be of a superior kind. Aspects of socialism and general intellect are incorporated into what Virno calls the “communism of capital” (110). In other words, the social potential has been stolen from the public realm and commodified.

Again, Arendt is inferred through her assertion that publicness should be understood in terms of plurality not singularity per se. This is evident in speech and action in that it both represents the capacity for equality and distinctiveness (176). To Arendt, action is bound with the expectation of the unexpected that results from the sameness and uniqueness of human plurality leading to the creations of publics and counter-publics. The political realm arises in this way, out of acting together in this way, but crucially this is expressed as a collective activity, preempting Virno’s description of the many tending to common affairs.

Publicness is expressed in paradoxical forms and actions

But what of communications technologies more specifically (given the context of this conference addressing the interface), in as much as software can be seen to represent both expression as in speech or writing (or word and deed) but also something that performs actions? For Christopher M. Kelty, again referring to Arendt, the free software movement is an example of emergent and self-organizing public actions. Underpinning this is the sharing of source code, rooted in the history of the UNIX operating system and its precarious position between the public domain and commercial enterprise characterized by the parallel developments of free software and open source in the late 1990s. The history reflects the paradoxical forms mentioned earlier in which technology’s social potential has been captured. More optimistically, the cultural significance for Kelty is captured by the term ‘recursive public’ to account for the ways in which the public is: “vitaly concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence as a public; it is a collective independent of other forms of constituted power and is capable of speaking to existing forms of power through the production of actually existing alternatives” (3).

For Kelty, the collective technical experiment of the Free Software movement is an example of a recursive public that draws attention to its democratic and political significance and the limitations of our understanding of the public in the light of the restructuring of power over networks. The intervention is to extend a definition of a public grounded in discourse (as with Arendt) - through speech, writing and assembly - to other legal and technical layers that underpin the Internet in recognition of the ways in which power and control are structured – to include both discourses and infrastructures (50). In this way, recursive publics engage with and attempt to modify the infrastructures they inhabit as an extension of the public sphere (his example is the case of Napster). Thus publicness is constituted not simply by speaking, writing, arguing and protesting but also through modification of the domain or platform through which these practices are enacted.

Publicness is founded on the management of human waste

The intervention of Dominique Laporte, in the *History of Shit* (first published in French in 1978), is to verify that modern power is founded on the aesthetics of the public sphere and in the agency of its citizen-subjects but that these are conditions of the management of human waste. He insists that in parallel to the cleansing of the streets of Paris from shit, the French language was similarly cleansed of Latin words to establish official French without “foreign leanings” (according to an edict of 1539). Both public space and language were cleaned and policed in parallel, as purification requires submission to the law (as the Laporte quote at the beginning of the article asserts). Thus he contends that language was purged of its “lingering stink” to become purer and invested with authority: “Purified, language becomes the crown jewels, the site of law, of the sacred text, of translation and exchange. There the muddied voices and their dialects are expurgated of their dross, losing their pitiful ‘remnants of earth’ and the vile fruits of their dirty commerce. Guttersnipes and merchants cannot sully the virginal emblem of power, for the King’s language does not wash them of their sins. But neither does it abandon them to their sinful state. Rather, it cleanses the fruit of their common labor, elevating it to the divine place of power freed from odor.” (18)

The desire for clean language, as well as clean cities, sublimates shit and demonstrates an expression of new biopolitical forms of control over subjectivity (including the bodily functions of speaking and shitting) and one where the market is sovereign (rather than the State or indeed King). Can we say the same of clean code, and that the kinds of technologies that are found on the streets (installed in mobile devices and such-like) are similarly cleansed? Is it that the technologies made available to us are simply not shit enough?

Service-based platforms (or so-called cloud computing) provide an example of a purified form in a similar way, disputing Kelty’s statements about free software as there is no code to share – as software and network services merge into one platform through which people access the internet using their mobile devices and tablet computers. This is the Apple paradigm of software development with specially conceived proprietary “apps” (for iPhones and iPads) that close off users from the underlying impurities (‘stink’) of code (through the cleanliness of iTunes for instance). These developments are crucial for a fuller understanding of the suppression of political expression in the public realm and the ways in which general intellect is becoming ever more privatized through the use of pervasive technologies and free market logic.

Publicness of the intellect is a political issue

But perhaps all is not altogether expurgated. The paradoxes around these developments are also evident as counter-publics emerge in parallel with rather more messy intentions. For instance, Dmytri Kleiner/Telekommunisten’s *Thimbl* is a free, open source, distributed micro-blogging platform. It uses common server software called Finger and adapts it to the principles of the open web, the

publicity stating: “The most significant challenge the open web will need to overcome is not technical, it is political.”

[image: Thimbl screengrab]

The challenge addresses the private interests and profiteering of the social web by returning to the best principles of sharing in the public domain. With *Thimbl*, the client owns their webhost rather than be served through the authoritarian client-server architecture of a platform like Twitter. The concept and source code of *Thimbl* are explained in detail on the website positioning it in relation to the legacy of the social project of the early Net and peer to peer organisational forms. To Kleiner, this is “venture communism”.

[image: Telekommunisten screengrab]

Similarly, the argument of the paper is that the commodification of social potential evident in the applications that currently pervade our lived experience might be open to further transformation – this is what used to be referred to as expropriating the expropriators. Kelty describes the radical possibilities of “argument-by-technology and argument-by-talk” (58), and this seems to be exemplified by the work of Telekommunisten. Taking the Hegelian move from in-itself to for-itself further, via class consciousness or class for-itself in Marx’s adaptation, Virno combines it with Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectual to characterise “mass intellectuality”. The interlinking references help to assert Virno’s line of argument that the publicness of the intellect is not a positive public force unless it is at the same time recognised as political. Repeating another earlier point to conclude, only the autonomy of public intellectuality in its separation from the free market can save us. Clearly it is possible to conceive of technological development in similar terms.

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