

**Review of Papacharissi, Z. (2010), *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age*,  
(Polity)**

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**A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age** by **Zizi Papacharissi**. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010. 200pp., £14.99, ISBN 978 0 7456 4525 4

Throughout academic literature there is concern for widespread political apathy among citizens in Western democracies; this is despite the omnipresence of political content shared online. *A Private Sphere* aims to expose this disjuncture as a lack of appreciation for the architecture of contemporary political engagement, and how and where it occurs. Zizi Papacharissi blames this on the dichotomy that exists in regard to public and private spaces, and the failure to understand the role of technology and convergence of the social, cultural and political. It is not that individuals are rejecting the political per se, but rather that a growing lethargy exists for the political mainstream, and subsequently the public sphere as it is traditionally conceived.

*A Private Sphere* attempts to conceptualise how digitally enabled, self-motivated, private acts can have a public political effect. The private sphere is a descriptive theoretical hypothesis that reframes the spatial construction of where political acts occur, and details how public civic engagement can be enabled through media interactions located within an individual's own private, personalised space. The private sphere highlights the unique spatial hybridity of digital media, as it possesses both the familiarity and autonomy of the private space, but with the potential audience of a public act.

This is exemplified through a number of mechanisms: the proliferation of social networking sites has enabled the networked individual to interact with multiple audiences; self-expression through narcissistic blogging contributes to the plurality of political discussions; and social news aggregation (e.g. Reddit) offers a potential challenge to dominant political narratives. It is the combination of these networked activities that provides the basis of a widespread participatory culture, one that Papacharissi suggests may have

democratising consequences. Despite this the book does not fall into the utopian trap of many contemporaries. The author employs a critical eye throughout, detailing the limitations of the technologies, such as access inequalities.

While the book often teases the reader in its judgement of what effect this convergence is having on democracy, this does not detract from the unique theoretical framework the private sphere offers for future empirical work. Furthermore, the book offers a fresh, evolutionary approach to the conceptualisation of democracy and citizenship. Seasoned scholars with a pre-existing interest in cultural studies, media studies and political communication will find *A Private Sphere* an innovative approach to the ongoing debates surrounding the democratic value of new media tools, while students will appreciate the extensive conceptual overview of citizenship and the public sphere.