Zizi Papacharissi (2010, Malden, MA: Polity Press), *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age*

Sónia Pedro Sebastião
ssebastiao@iscsp.utl.pt
ISCSP (UTL) - CAPP

A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age by Zizi Papacharissi deals with new civic habits that have emerged from the relationship between democracy and technology, attempting to understand the way in which technology transforms personal relationships through processes that lead to new communicative habits, i.e., it aims at highlighting how people connect in contemporary democracies. Papacharissi principally questions two concepts: citizenship and the public sphere. For that purpose, she divides her book into six chapters that deal with the concepts of contemporary democracies, civic participation and the media; public and private; the convergence of media, audiences and audience figures; citizenship; the public sphere and the private sphere.

According to Papacharissi, we live surrounded by a crowd of citizens who are "digitally enabled and digitally extended" (p. 2), in a representative democracy marked by cynicism, apathy and "disconnected" voters. Furthermore, the public sphere is defined as the referential *locus* within which civic deliberation and participation operate in a representative democracy (p. 12), even if, within this sphere, citizens might feel impotent and without control over or trust in institutions.

Accordingly, Papacharissi suggests that the concept of democracy has not kept up with current civic practices, given that there has never been such an omnipresence of technology in the lives of citizens, a presence which promotes new behaviours and modes of political engagement. In addition, technology presents new spaces where citizens can participate more easily and in a more "self-regulated" way. Generically speaking, technology does not influence the conditions of democracy to a great extent. However, it is a vehicle for the promotion of narratives of emancipation, autonomy and freedom in the collective imagination.

Since Plato and Aristotle, the concepts of public and private have characterised the way in which individuals organise their daily lives and relate to each other. These concepts are, therefore, historically and culturally determined. In modern times, the private was equated with the "personal", as opposed to the public, which was "impersonal". As a consequence, the understanding of those concepts includes the answer to questions such as: who reaps the benefits? Who participates and how do they do it? Who governs and how do they do it?

In contemporary democracies where technology is ubiquitous, the concepts of public and private blur boundaries and become hybrid. According to Papacharissi, we are witnessing the privatisation of public space and the return of the home as political space. Habermas's public sphere, conceptualised as a social space that facilitates social encounters, is outdated, because political discussion takes place in the "digital private

space". The new technologies and mediated communication soften the limits, and promote the convergence, of public and private space, and of political interest and the commodification of daily life.

Papacharissi thinks of convergence as reconfiguration and reorganization: (1) of a technological nature which changes the way citizens maintain themselves up-to-date; (2) of spaces which change the location of civic practices; and (3) of practices that suggest the continuity of activities in social, cultural, economic and political categories. For Papacharissi, human action traverses private, public and social planes; not necessarily in this order nor in an exclusive fashion, for the multiplicity of "spaces" is accompanied by a multiplicity of options for the individual. The technological convergence of contemporary democracies gives rise to a blurring of differences, of the distinctions that, traditionally, could be made between the different media, the audience figures, audiences, citizens, consumers and producers. Within the digital medium the roles intermingle, and so do the designations of citizen, consumer and producer. Convergence is, thus, the predominant characteristic of today's society, and it expresses the fluidity, the superficiality, the fragmentation, the interpenetration and the emergence of new contexts of engagement and civic practice.

Consequently, citizenship in converged environments articulates the difficulty in defining the very concept of citizenship and the need to reconceptualise the concept in the face of both the evolution of economic, socio-cultural and political dimensions, and of ethical, moral and religious systems. For Papacharissi, citizenship requires engagement with civic issues and is prescriptive with respect to the ways individuals act in order to relate to the political sphere and to public administration. For that reason, the concept has four basic dimensions: democratic development; capitalism; consumerism and civic engagement; and commitment and social capital. It is alterations in these dimensions that have accompanied the evolution of the concept throughout history and that allow an assessment of what "good citizenship" is.

However, Papacharissi recognises that the exercise of perfect citizenship has never existed. As she traces the evolution of the concept, Papacharissi describes the way in which we can conceive citizenship in contemporary democracies that are characterised by the convergence of the media and new civic practices promoted by technological means. Accordingly, Papacharissi diagnoses the existence of five modalities of citizenship:

1. The citizenship of the consumer, who privileges material objectives characterised by the acquisition of goods and thinks of purchasing as a civic commitment in the sense that it encourages the economy and energises markets;

2. Cultural citizenship rooted in culture as a central element of affirmation of the identity of individuals and of their daily consumption, that is, as defining the lifestyle and choices of citizens.

3. Cosmopolitan citizenship centred on the principles of a global village in which citizens identify in local, global and hybrid terms.

4. Monitorial citizenship which defines citizens as passive but aware, ready to intervene in moments of crisis, which they predict from information received from the media. This is, nonetheless, a fragmented and individualised activity developed within the private sphere that Papacharissi calls "subpolitics" (p. 101). However, "monitorial" citizens are no better than citizens from other times, nor

are they more informed, despite having greater access to information, that is, having the potential to be more active and aware.

5. Finally, digital citizenship, which defines civic responsibility through digital technologies and that, as such, is uneven due to exclusions in access and literacy.

To these five models, Papacharissi adds a sixth one: liquid citizenship. This category summarizes the previous ones and presents 21st century citizens as autonomous individuals whose independence can be amplified with the use of convergent technologies which allow for more opportunities for interaction, self-expression, options and control. Despite being "digitally equiped, monitorial and voyeuristic, motivated and apathetic, the liquid citizen flows in a fragmented continuum but does not anchor" (p.111).

Although they have a democratising potential, digital and converged technologies do not necessarily generate social and political capital for three reasons: access to information; reciprocity of communication; and the commercialization of online space.

Firstly, because access does not lead to knowledge, nor to engagement, nor to trust, which are essential elements for civic participation. On the other hand, there are inequalities in the interpretation of information, in its production and decoding, and contents are easily manipulated by elites and by those who control information offline. Secondly, reciprocity requires equality, that is, that individuals are mutually involved in conversation. Digital technologies permit similar points of view to be shared, but they also reinforce cultural and social inequalities. On the other hand, practices show the privileging of similar information and weak political discussion in terms of the effects that digital technologies have on individuals' lives and engagement. There is thus a predominance of individual and private interest practices over practices that favour common interests. Finally, the virtual sphere, that is, the space created by digital technologies, has turned out to be a space for the exchange of goods and services which facilitates commercial dealings and boosts the economic market. Consequently, it is more a space for the exercise and satisfaction of private interests than a space for the discussion and promotion of democracy.

Faced with these facts, Papacharissi concludes that the internet is a public space to which individuals have access, which they can use and benefit from; however, it is not a public sphere, as it is limited by the three factors explained above. In her opinion, the virtual space only highlights discussion, whereas a virtual sphere would aggrandize democracy (p. 124). Consequently, online technologies allow for new spaces, both public and private, instead of a public sphere. These spaces accommodate new concepts of public and private, constructed as a result of the fusion of common and individual interests.

This delimitation leads Papacharissi to reconceptualise the phrase "private sphere", which now includes new civic habits that emerge in hybrid digital spaces. For Papacharissi, citizens feel they have more power when negotiating their place within democracy from a private sphere. The dislocation of their civic practices to this sphere is an act of dissidence and, hence, a political act. The vote itself is no longer a right of citizens, but a gift from the citizens to political parties, and if the citizens do not trust the parties, they refuse to vote.

The autonomy granted by the digital space allows citizens the exercise of monitorial and liquid citizenship from a familiar "territory", where individuals develop their daily

practices and make their choices, which is to say, a citizenship adapted to their lifestyles, their paces and their wishes. The digital space therefore configures a contingent private sphere, where citizens digitally exercise their rights to expression and reaction, where they discuss political matters and participate civically. In this way, individuals create the space where they contemplate, assess and act; where they are alone but not isolated, given that they cultivate civic habits which allow them to connect with others and share social, cultural and political priorities. Amongst these habits are: remote connectivity with other citizens (the networked self) which augments the reach of the private sphere; digital narcissism associated with the personalization of contents (weblogs); satire and subversion (through the use of platforms such as Youtube); news aggregation and the plurality of news filters; and social activism. Papacharissi sees these habits as tendencies rather than established habits. These habits also show the plasticity of the boundaries between public and private through the use of mediated spaces that promote privatised sociality and citizenship that is networked, but not engaged in the traditional sense of the word.

As a conclusion, Papacharissi states that the concept of citizenship is adaptable and flexible, and it is based on a personal agenda; it promises autonomy but it does not guarantee privacy nor complete control. Digital technologies have structures that promote the expression of several "private spheres", secure their connection and avoid isolation. Nonetheless, the digital private sphere is neither the exclusive domain of the personal nor of the political, and it requires a specific mixture of both which makes citizenship less political than as traditionally conceived. However, it does not grant democracy because it is dominated by personal interest, which is often instrumentalised by those who hold technological literacy and political expertise. ✎

Translated by João Paulo Silva