

Constructing a Concept of *Distributed Political Participation*

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The topic of IT and public political participation has captured the attention of many who see the potential in distributed technologies as a way to bring citizens into politics. However, we are still in an exploratory stage and like much early work whose subject matter was the role of the Internet on social practices, academic work in new media and politics has tended to fall on two ends of a spectrum: either narrowly-framed studies of success stories or writings that have a cautionary and sometimes dystopian flavor. It is argued here that what is needed now is work that attempts to understand the relationship of new media and public political engagement in a theoretically- and historically-grounded way – marrying, on the one hand, an empirical approach on the use of IT for public issue emergence and, on the other hand, a theoretical framework for understanding public emergence in a contemporary context. The primary purpose of this article is to sketch out the latter – a theoretical framework to understand an area of democratic political practice I am calling distributed political participation. My argument is current social and political theories, on their own, are not sufficient to understand this emerging area of democratic practice. The analysis which follows starts to build that framework by drawing on theoretical and empirical work from three distinct intellectual fields: theories on the public and participatory democracy; actor-network and infrastructure theories; and emerging work on distributed collective practice.

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Four days before Christmas I was sitting in my parents' kitchen in Phoenix, Arizona. Next to me was my sister who had, after finishing breakfast, powered up her laptop. A first-time Philadelphia homeowner, she was looking for an update on the city's decision the night before to place two new casino complexes in Philadelphia. She quickly found that hers was one of the neighborhoods chosen. Looking at her husband she said: "It got approved. There are already 200 comments about it." An odd response, I thought, two hundred comments from whom?

What I started to figure out was my sister, sitting 2,500 miles away from her Philadelphia home, was reading and commenting to an online discussion, with people she had not met, about a casino slated to be built less than a mile from her South Philly house. That morning, while looking for information

about the issue, she hadn't gone to the website for the city's newspaper, she hadn't looked up the city council minutes, and she hadn't sought out her neighborhood civic association, mailing list, or block program. What she was reading was what a range of Philadelphia residents were writing on Phillyblog.com. When I asked her about it, she said: "I don't read the local news. They aren't covering this issue. The debate about the casinos is happening online. Phillyblog. Hallwatch."

Phillyblog, a Philadelphia-based online forum started in 2002, was founded with the vision of an "online community [to] become an idea-generator, or basis for action in our real community - for people to take ownership of their comments and ideas on the board, and make our community better by starting their very own mini-movements." Since its inception, the site, which is divided into neighborhood forums, has grown to approximately 12,000 registered members with three to four times as many guests. To date, those members have written nearly 410,000 posts and created about 28,000 new conversation topics. Posts run the gamut from debates about the upcoming mayoral election to the perils of online dating in the city. The posts are generally short (a few lines), not always serious, and frequently not particularly "neighborly" (troll, outsider, henchman are names regularly lobbed at posters). Some, including a few in the Philadelphia media, have been skeptical about the role of a forum like Phillyblog – trivializing the kind of discussions taking place as uninformed, shrill, or "just talk." Others, including contributors to Phillyblog, claim the forum is a place for "real people" to write about topics of "importance to themselves and others."

On the surface, the Phillyblog example may seem a bit mundane – just another blog (which technically it is not), just a bunch of people who listen to each other talk, just one of the latest Internet technologies. But for those of us interested in politics and the connection between information technology (IT) and democratic political practice, online spaces like Phillyblog raise important questions that go beyond this particular blog (or even the blog technology itself). At first glance, these conversations do not fit normative conceptions of politics, at least not deliberative politics, nor do they fit normative conceptions of information. Participants hurl insults and opinions that often seem to polarize rather than move towards consensus; and the "information" circulated includes rumor, unverified facts, and propaganda. We should ask, then, can posts that are brief, oftentimes sarcastic, and not mediated by an official or expert source, whose foci are complex city issues (e.g. crime, casinos, economic development), be described as a way for people to identify and understand local issues? Are public issues emerging or being defined through these forums? These questions lead to a more general, but more fundamental one: if public issues are emerging and being defined, discussed, and acted upon through distributed information and communication technologies using distributed information practices, how do we understand the relationship between IT and public participation in local issues and neighborhood politics?

To be sure, the topic of IT and public political participation has captured the attention of many, and for good reason. Many see the potential in distributed technologies as a way to bring citizens into politics with a range of programs attempting to connect IT and democracy – from eGovernment to online citizen journalism. However, we are still in an exploratory stage and like much early work whose subject matter was the role of the Internet on social practices, academic work in new media and politics has tended to fall on two ends of a spectrum: either narrowly-framed studies of success stories or writings that have a cautionary and sometimes dystopian flavor. The result has been to either overestimate the role of IT in democracy, or to trivialize it. What is needed now is work that attempts to understand the relationship of new media and public political engagement in a theoretically- and historically-grounded way – marrying, on the one hand, an empirical approach on the use of IT for public issue emergence and, on the other hand, a theoretical framework for understanding public emergence in a contemporary context.

The primary purpose of this paper is to sketch out the latter – a theoretical framework to understand an area of democratic political practice I am calling distributed political participation, emerging at the intersection of distributed information practices and civic engagement. My argument is current social and political theories, on their own, are not sufficient to understand this emerging area of democratic practice. Instead, a cross-disciplinary framework is needed. The analysis which follows starts to build that framework by drawing on theoretical and empirical work from three distinct intellectual fields: theories on the public and participatory democracy; actor-network and infrastructure theories; and emerging work on distributed collective practice.

The first two sections of the paper examine ideas and definitions of the public and public emergence from the perspective of three thinkers who have been influential in the area of participatory democracy – John Dewey, Walter Lippmann, and Jürgen Habermas. Reading the three provides a useful starting point in understanding three concepts which are critical to the framework set forth here– publics, public emergence, and the work of publics in issue formation. I look at how each addresses the questions of what is a public, how a public emerges, and what work the public does in defining or forming public issues. Though a crucial starting point, each of their analyses has shortcomings when trying to conceptualize politics in our contemporary environment. As will be discussed, some of those limitations have been addressed by a second generation of deliberative theorists who take Habermas’s (and to a lesser degree Dewey’s) theoretical stance and expand upon or revise it. Despite these expansions, looking only to discourse-based political theory is not enough to explain contemporary, IT-enabled public emergence because: a) these theories do not fully account for the ways in which publics and public emergence is structured in and through things; and b) these theories do not adequately describe the ways in which the emergence of new (or newly-expanded) forms of distributed collective practice may be altering how public issues – and therefore the very possibility of publics themselves – are defined and formed. I look to two other intellectual fields to address these issues. In the third section of the paper, I examine actor network and infrastructure theories. These neighboring theories forefront the technological and material, emphasizing the constitutive, mediating role of things (e.g. technical code, information, architectures, artifacts) in society; contending the social world cannot be understood or explained without accounting for these material objects. The fourth section looks at work on distributed collective practice, specifically: distributed volunteering, cognition and decision-making. This work emphasizes that the character of distributed practice is different from individual practice and, as such, the very nature of distribution may alter the way in which publics and public issues emerge and are defined.

My contention is each section contributes to a larger cross-disciplinary framework for understanding and helping to define a conceptually and empirically complex phenomenon – distributed political participation. And though the ideas each of the theorists or theoretical schools advance is an important starting point, my assertion, and indeed purpose for writing this paper, is to show distributed political participation cannot be understood theoretically or empirically by reducing its practices to one disciplinary camp or social theorist. If we are to understand how IT and public engagement in politics are related, then we need a multi-disciplinary approach.¹

II

Publics – Lippmann and Dewey

Philosopher Alastair Hannay recently wrote: “To ask ‘what is the public?’ sounds as if we were asking for features of some abstract object, or trying to pin down the public on a chart of ‘kinds.’ The question sounds abstruse and philosophical” (Hannay, 2005, p. 2). Yet, that very question has long been an occupying interest to journalists and social activists, political philosophers and politicians. Used as a modifier for terms like ‘space,’ ‘sphere,’ and ‘opinion,’ the idea of the public underlies many theories of participation, particularly democratic political participation.² Like the concept of democracy itself; public is a highly-contested and ill-defined term. If public(s) exist, what they are, how they do or do not emerge, and their role and purpose in participatory politics is far from settled.

Despite these limitations, the term carries with it several analytical advantages and, consequently, I examine the notion of publics at some length in the first part of this paper, formulating a conceptual definition which is informed by Lippmann, Dewey, and Habermas. I argue that public, as opposed to terms like ‘community’ or ‘civic,’ better captures the emergent, shifting and distributed nature of the kinds of contemporary politics in which I am most interested. Second, unlike terms like ‘citizen,’ public does not carry with it the same connection to particular institutional forms of government – allowing us to better focus on politics that occur outside specific governmental or institutional sites. Finally, it puts the focus on local political actors as opposed to bureaucrats, technocrats or other experts.

It is for these reasons that it is worth exploring the term ‘public,’ looking first to the work of John Dewey and Walter Lippmann and their debate about democratic publics. The celebrated Dewey-Lippmann debate took place primarily in the 1920s, beginning with the release of Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925) and Dewey’s subsequent responses – a review in the *New Republic* (1922) and later with the publication of *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). The debate is seen by many as a key discussion in American democratic politics because it pointed to both the virtues and limitations of modern participatory democracy – looking at the potential for citizens to participate in democracy, as well as the inherent problems and complexities of that participation. And, indeed, many have pointed out that contemporary debates on participatory, representative and elite democracy are, to a large extent, variations on the debate Dewey and Lippmann had in the 1920s (London, 2000; Westbrook, 1991; Whipple, 2005). And, like Whipple (2005), I see their dialogue not as an “over-and-done with” historical event, but as an entry point and framework for understanding the term ‘public.’

Walter Lippmann and the Omniscient Citizen

The period of the late 1910s and early 1920s, after the conclusion of World War I, was a hopeful time for many American political radicals and liberals. As Robert Westbrook notes in his intellectual history of Dewey, liberals, including Dewey, “believed that the war had greatly weakened the established order and opened the way for the development of one form or another of industrial democracy” (1991, p. 275). Politically, the period saw significant social movements including a Communist revolution in Russia, a strong U.S. labor movement, and an expansion in the British labor party. In the U.S., it was a decade marked by economic growth, broad technological advances, and mass production. And, at least as early as 1918, there was some optimism about the possibilities of postwar reorganization (Westbrook, 1991).

But as Michael Schudson (1978) points out, even at the height of 1920s prosperity, there was “deep pessimism about political democracy” among intellectuals.³ Increasingly, a group of critics, referred to as “democratic realists,” questioned the very feasibility of democracy (Westbrook, 1991). Their critique of participatory democracy focused on two of its tenets: the capacity of all people for rational political decision-making and the practicality and even desirability of public participation in policy-making. Basing their critique, in part, on a series of empirical voting studies⁴ as well as experience with an increasing use of war and industry propaganda during the twenties, the democratic realists concluded participation, and specifically voting, was “indiscriminate and unintelligent” (Carroll Woody as quoted in Westbrook, 1991, p. 284)

The most widely read and influential of the democratic realists was Walter Lippmann. Lippmann, a journalist, media critic, and philosopher argued existing concepts of participatory democracy were oversimplified, resting on the assumption of a fully informed and rational public (Wellborn, 1969). First, with the publication of *Public Opinion* (1922) and later *The Phantom Public* (1925), Lippmann provided a scathing critique of the potential of participatory democracy and the role citizens as publics could play in both acquiring and understanding the information necessary to self-govern. Based in part on his experience as a political propagandist during World War I,⁵ Lippmann argued a public, at least as it was defined in the language of participatory democracy, was a myth or “phantom.”

The central problem of participatory democracy, according to Lippmann, was it assumed an “omniscient” citizen – a citizen capable of making any public decision if presented with all the facts. In reality, instead of total competence, people were often misled in their conceptions of the political environment. He argued it was impossible (and with the introduction of more complex technologies it had become even more unlikely) that we could directly experience or understand everything that affected us. Therefore, as a way to make sense of our highly-complex environments, we had to construct a “pseudo-environment” or medium of “fictions,” based on a picture in our head about what the world looked like. And it was on the basis of this fictitious world that we made decisions and caused action in the “real” world.⁶

He posited there were two main causes for these fictions. The first were what he termed “external” or structural limitations which limited people’s access to information. The modern political environment was too complex, often invisible, and only indirectly accessible; consequently, citizens had to rely on other sources of mediated information. Those other information sources were most often the news media, which Lippmann claimed was not capable of the job. Second, Lippmann argued even if those structural limitations could be eradicated there was still a problem of “internal” limitations. That is, distorted information, what he termed stereotypes, was inherent in human thinking. In Lippmann’s view, because we could not understand the world in all its complexity, we had to re-present it in a simpler form. As such, people were more likely to believe and make decisions based on these simplified or stereotyped symbols than through thought and direct experience. The problem for democracy was these symbols could easily be manufactured and manipulated. As a result, according to Lippmann, we are all “inevitable victims of agitation and propaganda” (Lippmann as quoted in Schudson, 1978), leading Lippmann to question if the public viewpoints of everyday citizens could be easily manipulated (a manipulation that was becoming increasingly evident and concerning to Lippmann and Dewey during the 1920s⁷) then the public opinion and public consent those citizens produced was also dubious.

Returning for a moment to the questions with which the section began – specifically what is a public, how does a public emerge, and what work does a public perform in issue formation and decision making – we can see the answer to the first and second questions, for Lippmann, is somewhat problematic. A democratic public – a body of people who had an opinion on all public questions – does not exist. Instead, he saw that as a mass, people were “naturally and structurally unable to form intelligent, democratic publics” (Whipple, 2005, p. 160). Lippmann argued a single public could not form that had an opinion on every public question. Instead, private citizens would be involved in the issues in which they already had an interest.

So what can be made of the third question: what work does a public perform in issue formation and decision-making? Here Lippmann is quite specific. His solution to the problem of publics and public opinion was not the complete abandonment of democracy, but a notion of democracy he viewed as more realistic. Lippmann tried to create some middle-ground between “a democratic fantasy and a democratic despair” (Schudson, 1978), arguing the role of citizens, as a public, in decision and policy making should be limited. In place of a public that makes decisions, we should look to science and expertise to define and explain popular will. This would be accomplished through the introduction of, “some form of expertness between the private citizen and the vast environment in which he is entangled” (1922, p. 238). This mediating layer between the public, which he termed outsiders, and the governing elite was to be composed of a group of “insiders” – technical experts, specialists and bureaucrats. Lippmann envisioned these insiders as being disinterested experts who had access to accurate information, the ability to separate themselves from stereotypes, and distill and analyze complex social problems. These experts would organize facts for decision-makers and then decision-makers would make informed, rational public decisions based on this disinterested, undistorted information.

On occasion, the private citizen who was implicated, or had some interest, in a particular public affair would be involved in that public decision. However, most of the day-to-day public decisions should be left to experts, in Lippmann’s account: “It is on the men inside, working under conditions that are sound, that the daily administrations of society must rest” (1922, p. 251). And for all the public affairs in which a private citizen did not have a direct interest, the citizen’s role was to be limited to issues of leadership selection and of mediation or “procedure.” He writes:

The broad principles on which the action of public opinion can be continuous are essentially principles of procedure. The outsider can ask experts to tell him whether the relevant facts were duly considered; he cannot in most cases decide for himself what is relevant or what is due consideration. The outsider can perhaps judge whether the groups interested in the decision were properly heard. . . . He can watch the procedure when the news indicates that there is something to watch. He can raise a question as to whether the procedure itself is right, if its normal results conflict with his ideal of a good life. But if he tries in every case to substitute himself for the procedure, to bring in Public Opinion

like a providential uncle in the crisis of a play, he will confound his own confusion (1922, p. 251).

John Dewey and the Public

Advocates of participatory politics, like Dewey, saw Lippmann's proposals as bleak. While agreeing with Lippmann's critique of actually existing democracy, his concern about the manipulation of public opinion, and his understanding of the historical-situatedness of any form of government, Dewey held a more optimistic view of both democracy as well as people's capacity to participate.⁸ Underlying much of Dewey's work was a belief and advocacy for democracy as a "way of life," not simply a form of government (Stuhr, 1998). Dewey argued democracy was not just a means to an end, but it was a desirable (though not yet accomplished) end in itself; democracy was "the idea of community life itself" (1927, p. 148).

Most of Dewey's work in the 1920s was an attempt to deal with the challenge brought from democratic realists like Lippmann. Through a series of lectures, culminating in the publication of *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey provided his most comprehensive response to the democratic realists as well as his most formal work of political philosophy. As formal political theory, the essay explored the emergence and functions of the state, the public and government. Dewey defined the public and the state in quite specific ways. In keeping with his pragmatism, he contended humans existed in association and interaction. As such, human action inevitably had consequences on others. Dewey divided those consequences into two categories: consequences which affected the individuals directly engaged in the interaction; and consequences which indirectly affected individuals not immediately engaged in the association (1927, p. 12-13). This was the essential, and only, distinction between private and public.⁹ As such, he conceptualized multiple publics, emerging each time the indirect consequences of conjoint interactions were recognized and required management. He explains: "Indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling those consequences" (1927, p. 126). In order to handle the effects of indirect association – mitigating the negative consequences and promoting the positive ones – publics would organize to form a 'state' and establish officials to serve their interests.

There are several points worth emphasizing here. First, instead of defining democratic politics based in a pre-existing, essentialized, ahistorical, bounded public or mass, Dewey conceptualized publics as *emergent* social formations which are continuously developing, overlapping and disbanding. Publics change and are dependent on their historical circumstances. Dewey writes, "In no two ages or places is there the same public. Conditions make the consequences of associated action and the knowledge of them different. In addition the means by which a public can determine the government to serve its interests vary" (1927, p. 33). Second, what triggered publics to emerge were their shared problems. When Dewey refers to the public and its problems, he is making two points: a) agreeing with Lippmann, he argues the democratic public is problematic because it is currently inchoate ("in eclipse"); and b) more fundamentally *problems constitute a public*. Publics emerge when issues appear and when people are affected by those issues, as such publics and their issues cannot be separated. Third, unlike Lippmann who saw the salvation of democracy through disinterested experts, Dewey saw *interests* as the very "participatory impulse" that caused democratic publics to emerge. The nature of a public is the way in which it is implicated in issues. As Heikkilä and Kunelius (2002) note, "for Dewey, to allow interests to penetrate the notion of the public is not to contaminate it, but to point to its genuine foundations." Fourth, democratic publics emerge and organize when *no other institution exists* to address their problems.¹⁰ Finally, in his description of publics, Dewey reconceptualizes the problem of *complexity* that Lippmann was so careful to diagnose (Marres, 2005, see also Antonio & Kellner, 1992). Dewey agreed the public's ability to perceive and trace the effects of indirect associations had been further complicated with new technologies. He wrote:

The machine age has so enormously expanded, multiplied, intensified and complicated the scope of the indirect consequences, has formed such immense and consolidated

unions in action, on an impersonal rather than a community basis, that the resultant public cannot identify and distinguish itself. And this discovery is obviously an antecedent condition of any effective organization on its part (1927, p. 126).

At the same time, those complexities had ushered in a volume, intensity and diversity of problems that made it even more imperative (and possible) publics would emerge. In essence, Dewey argued complex issues “actually enable public involvement in politics” (Marres, 2005, p. 209). In summary, then, for Dewey, publics are emergent social forms, triggered in response to problems, highly interested or implicated in those problems, initially composed of people not in the same social community, and not only capable of dealing with, but born in, complexity.

If that is how Dewey defined what a public was and how a public emerged, what did he conceive as the work those publics should accomplish in democracy? Here Dewey set forth an ambitious proposition. He argued a public had to recognize its shared problems, and because no one else was addressing those problems, the public had to organize into a “state,” designate representatives, and identify an addressee that could take care of the problems. While recognizing this level of issue-definition and organization were not easy tasks, he argued states must always be “rediscovered” through a process of experimentation. He noted the state could be rediscovered either through “degrees of blindness and accident” or “intelligently, because guided by knowledge of the conditions which must be fulfilled” (1927, p. 33). Not surprisingly, Dewey favored the latter. That, however, required members of the public to be able to perceive the consequences of other’s associations, trace those consequences to their source, and acquire the resources to organize into a state. Finally, it required the selection and establishment of officials to represent the public’s interests, which often entailed opposition to already existing and entrenched state powers.

The fundamental political problem for Dewey was to find the means for a “scattered, mobile and manifold public” to self-identify. He saw the answer in social inquiry (via science), full publicity, and communication – requiring both an improvement in the “conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion” as well as “freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and dissemination of their conclusions” (1927, p. 165-168). For Dewey, it required no less than the Great Society of the 1920s become the Great Community. If a public was going to recognize and define its interests it would have to rely on effective and organized social inquiry. Finally, the public would have to communicate and disseminate the meanings of its discussions and inquiry as a way to organize action. Here, again, Dewey insisted while industrialism had brought complications and threats to democracy, complexity and social pluralism were necessary to give rise to a type of reflection that favored discussion and reason, rather than stereotyped decisions.

Although he saw a role for publics in social inquiry, he also agreed with Lippmann’s critique of the “omnicompetent” citizen. Dewey agreed it was not necessary for all citizens to be involved in every aspect of social inquiry. His political theory saw a place for experts in governance, but what was required of the public was to be able to judge the information provided by those experts. So unlike Lippmann, Dewey stressed the enlightenment of the public took precedence over the enlightenment of experts: “Democracy demands a more thoroughgoing education than the education of officials, administrators and directors of industry” (1927, p. 144). For Dewey, once the relevant information was made public through the appropriate modes of communication (e.g. a free press), discussion and deliberation would help the public to determine the nature of their problems.

A Working Definition of Publics and Public Emergence

At this point, it is useful to summarize what can be taken from Lippmann and Dewey. Lippmann argued, and I believe rightly, democratic politics cannot be based on an ideology of omnicompetence where every citizen must have a reasoned opinion about every public decision. Importantly, Lippmann’s identification of this problem led to a questioning of what *could* constitute a democratic public, if it was not total political competence. Lippmann also pointed to a flaw in democratic theory which assumed all citizens are necessarily interested in all political issues. He posited, instead, “democratic realism,” an

argument which claimed citizens were interested only in those issues in which they were implicated. Where I believe we need to depart from his argument is in his over-reliance and romanticizing of expertise, as well as his assumption that the “enlisting of interest” into public affairs is always, and necessarily, a negative manipulation. On this point it is important to remember Lippmann published *Public Opinion* in the early twenties and was among many who had a strong belief in the power of science, expertise, and the problem of political propaganda in public opinion manipulation (Schudson, 1978; Westbrook, 1991).

Lippmann is also instructive because he diagnosed a problem of democratic publics that Dewey expanded upon. I find Dewey’s analysis of publics particularly helpful because, first, Dewey’s conception of *public emergence as a process of issue emergence, identification and definition* is useful for a contemporary understanding of IT-enabled, political participation that is the focus of this analysis. Second, his notion of publics as emergent social forms, triggered by complex problems which are not being addressed by current social institutions, is a useful description of some local distributed forums where strangers communicate about their issues of concern. Finally, Dewey’s description that members of the public are fundamentally *interested* in their problems is also instructive, since it allows us to acknowledge politics can occur when people talk about, collectively define, or act upon a range of problems of importance to local actors. The advantage of this conceptualization is that politics is viewed as not only a discussion of elections or ballot proposals; publics can emerge in response to more “mundane” interests like trash removal, zoning decisions, or parking regulations.

From Dewey, then, I define public emergence as a process of issue emergence – where a group of people form together (via an event – a blog, a neighborhood meeting, a petition) around a particular issue of concern and through a process of communication which includes, though is not limited to, discourse, those people define a common issue. These publics can be short-lived or long-lasting, they can be successful at organizing and confronting existing political institutions or they can fail at doing so.

Though Dewey provides a useful discussion of publics and public emergence; in *The Public and Its Problems*, he was less specific about what role people should (or could) play in public emergence or organization. Dewey’s philosophy emphasized experimentation and consequently was not prescriptive, programmatic, or necessarily normative. He argued he was not wedded to any particular mechanisms of democracy such as “universal suffrage, frequent elections, majority rule, congressional and cabinet government.” And goes on to write: “These things are devices evolved in the direction in which the current was moving, each wave of which involved at the time of its impulsion a minimum of departure from antecedent custom and law” (1927, p. 145). This very openness is appealing because it is historically-specific, non-prescriptive, located in people’s actual interactions, and focused on emergence and process. That said, Dewey’s openness and lack of prescription poses some challenges for operationalizing his concepts.

To extend Dewey, I borrow from one of his fellow pragmatists: Herbert Blumer. Blumer (1971), in his essay “Social Problems as Collective Behavior,” argues “social problems” are the product of a “process of collective definition.” Like Dewey, Blumer contends what are viewed as social problems are so because people have defined them as such. Instead of claiming a particular issue is society’s problem, Blumer advocates sociology start to understand “the *process* by which a society comes to recognize its problems” (emphasis added, p. 300). He continues: “The societal definition, and not the objective makeup of a given social condition, determines whether the condition exists as a social problem. The societal definition gives the social problem its nature, lays out how it is to be approached, and shapes what is done about it” (p. 300).

Blumer identifies five stages in the lifecycle of social problems. The first stage is *emergence* where the problem is initially recognized as a social problem.¹¹ In the second stage, *legitimation*, a problem must acquire social endorsement or “respectability” in order to be taken seriously and move forward. Blumer writes social endorsement often happens via the press, civic organizations, and legislative bodies. He notes that out of the many social conditions which are recognized as harmful, relatively few achieve legitimacy: “If a social problem does not carry the credential of respectability necessary for entrance into these arenas, it is doomed” (p. 303). The third stage, *mobilization of action*, is the stage in which a problem becomes an object of discussion, debate, controversy and differing representation. He argues, and I believe rightly, this stage is crucial because it is a point when the problem

becomes collectively defined (and redefined), writing: “Discussion, advocacy, evaluation, falsification, diversionary tactics, and advancing of proposals take place in the media of communication, in casual meetings, organized meetings, legislative chambers, and committee meetings” (p. 304). In the fourth stage, *formation of an official plan of action*, is the stage in which society (often via institutionalized organizations) decides how it will act in regard to the problem. Problems are often collectively redefined in this stage via compromise or concession. *Implementation of the official plan*, the final stage, is when the official plan of action is implemented and more often than not the problem goes through another re-definitional period.

In my interpretation, when Blumer talks about social problems he is referring to large-scale social problems (racism, poverty, obesity). Though this is not a direct fit to the work proposed here (I am more interested in local, neighborhood, or “smaller” public problems), his problem stages are useful for four reasons. First, he adds some conceptual detail to Dewey by dividing public issue emergence into stages of emergence, definition, legitimation and action. Second, he further emphasizes public issues are not pre-existing, essentialized matters but are born out of a collective definition process. And, importantly, that definition is constantly shifting and enlisting new people and things in the process. Third, he adds the concept of legitimation to issue definition – issues are not only identified and defined, but must be socially endorsed or “made respectable.” Finally, he emphasizes that issues are not simply discussed (or deliberated upon), but are also evaluated, falsified and exaggerated.

III

Publics – Habermas

Though Dewey has generally been viewed as a champion of participatory democracy, he has been criticized for his lack of specificity in setting forth the role citizens would play in democratic government. Further, the criteria he established for the transformation to the Great Community were demanding and he offered little guidance in implementation (Fott, 1998; Hannay, 2005; Schudson, 1997; Stuhr, 1998; Westbrook, 1991). Despite these critiques, Dewey’s work was a powerful and theoretically significant alternative to the pessimism of democratic realists, such as Lippmann, and other critics of participatory politics. And his emphasis on the participatory and communicative aspects of democracy has received renewed attention from scholars who argue Dewey’s theories are a forerunner to contemporary deliberative democrats, conceptually similar to German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (Festenstein, 2001, see also Bohman, 1999; Farr, 1999; Fott, 1998).

Part of my purpose in this paper is to explore the concept of public as a way to gain conceptual (and ultimately empirical) traction on an area of IT-enabled participatory democratic practice I am calling distributed political participation. Dewey provides a compelling understanding of public emergence as a *process* of conjoint activities and interests; Habermas is crucial because it is in his work we see what is widely considered the most theoretically sophisticated ideas about what role the public should play in issue definition and formation.

Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere

Though not a direct successor of Dewey, there are a number of relevant parallels which can be drawn between Dewey and Habermas.¹² First, both theorists place interaction and communication as a central feature of social relations and of politics (Antonio & Kellner, 1992). As a consequence, each emphasizes the participatory or communicative nature of democracy as opposed to an individualized or interest-based perspective. Second, both see the role for reason (what Dewey called intelligence) in political decision-making and public opinion. In this conceptualization, public decisions should be based on reasoned citizen opinion as opposed to pure coercive power, bureaucratic domination or the simple

aggregation of individualized interests. Third, both saw politics and democracy as historically-contingent, changing and changeable based on increased complexity in social, economic and political relations – changes which they both note were, in part, enabled by technological transformations. Fourth, both their theories rely on a role for consensus or unity in the formation of, or at least the articulation of, collective public(s) interests.¹³ Finally, both can be read in response to more pessimistic critics and seen as cautiously optimistic about the potential of democracy – Dewey, as discussed earlier, writes in response to Lippmann’s attack on the viability of participatory politics, while Habermas’s early work is widely seen as a response to the cynicism of his Frankfurt School teachers, Adorno and Horkheimer. It is important to note both were *cautiously* optimistic, recognizing the threats of industrialism (e.g. mass commodification and specialization which could lead to public manipulation, apathy, or confusion), but at the same time arguing increased complexity could be an opportunity for freer, wider and more diverse channels of communication (Antonio & Kellner, 1992).

Like Dewey, Habermas’s theoretical work is expansive. For purposes of this analysis, his earliest work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1989, orig. 1962), is a critical entry point into his theory on the public.¹⁴ The focus of the work was to identify conditions which made the “bourgeois public sphere” possible and to account for its devolution. As conceived by Habermas, the public sphere was a conceptual category defined as a political space somewhere between the market and the state. It was a space free of coercion where private individuals could engage in “rational-critical” debates on issues of general concern. This rational-critical debate function rested on a set of procedures or conditions which, in principle, governed the dialogue. Those conditions included: a commitment to open accessibility; voluntary participation; equality in participation; the use of publicly (versus privately) justifiable arguments; norms of civility; and a goal (though not necessarily an ending point) of consensus. The purpose, or work of the public sphere, was to produce public opinion which was a representation of its collective will. This public opinion, unlike what Lippmann described, was a rational, reasoned and legitimate opinion precisely because it was reached through these rational discourse procedures.¹⁵

Habermas argued this bourgeois public sphere emerged in eighteenth century Europe and linked its materialization to the development and transformation of capitalism and a series of legal changes (the establishment of rights to free association, expression, and the press). Habermas explains the public sphere went through a type of devolution, accounting for its demise by arguing that as it became increasingly open to others it became fragmented. Secondly, with the transformation of capitalism and rise of mass democracy, society and the state became interlocked, making a unified and independent public sphere unviable. The public moved from one of debate and reasoning to one of consumption. As a consequence, it was no longer possible for a single public to rationally devise an independent, critical opinion about the state.¹⁶

To return to the three questions which have occupied the analysis thus far, we can see the public, in a Habermasian sense, is defined as a single public – the democratic polity – made up of private individuals who come together to discuss issues of common concern. It is called into being, or emerges through a particular type of rule-bound discourse. For Habermas, it was in private but openly accessible settings, through the process of interaction and communication (political talk not voting) and guided by the procedures of rationality (rational-critical debate), that the public (not experts, bureaucrats or the media) defined and articulated its common will (public opinion). This was the work of the public in issue formation. Work only the public could accomplish.

Though Habermas concluded *Structural Transformation* with a good deal of pessimism, he advocated that his description of the “how” – the conditions – of public opinion production, in other words the *ideal* of rational-critical debate, had democratic relevance. Habermas’s examination of the public sphere is both an historical analysis as well as a normative one. The work’s twofold role is important because Habermas is documenting the emergence (and decline) of an actually existing public discourse space and at the same time arguing the bourgeois public sphere is an ideal worthy of contemporary democratic aspiration.¹⁷ As a normative project, Habermas outlined several conditions which *in principle* applied to public opinion production. First, the discussion was open and accessible to everyone regardless of status. Second, participants entered into discussion voluntarily, on equal-footing, and with an open mind as to the possible outcome of the deliberation. While Habermas recognized status

inequalities existed, he argued those inequalities were to be bracketed, with participants deliberating *as if* they were equals. Third, solely private justifications were inadmissible. Interlocutors entered into discussion asserting claims that were backed by reasoned, publicly understandable arguments. Ideally, through discourse, people's initial perspectives and opinions would be transformed and the best-reasoned arguments would win out. Fourth, rules or norms of discourse applied, such as civility, mutual respect, argumentation, and turn taking (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002). Finally, though perfect consensus was not a necessary ending point of deliberation, a unity of opinion was desirable.

It was in his exploration of these normative conditions that Habermas has been the most influential. His emphasis on the role of interaction and participation, through the act of discourse, in public issue definition and will-formation has been particularly significant, with his work being partially credited for a "deliberative turn"¹⁸ in political theory towards a more thoroughgoing focus on participatory or discourse-based democracy (see Chambers, 2003; and Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Part of the scholarly appeal of Habermas and other discourse-based democratic theorists has been their advancement of an alternative conception of democracy, focused on participation, which has been positioned in opposition to liberal or aggregative democracy (cf. Chambers, 2003; Mouffe, 1999, 2000; Schudson, 1992; Whipple, 2005; Young, 1996). Liberal democracy sees the nature of politics as a process of will-formation determined by competition among autonomous individuals with success measured, or aggregated in, votes or polls. Deliberative theorists criticize, and I believe rightly, that this approach is an overly-privatized and mechanistic conception of politics. They counter democracy cannot be reduced merely to procedures and that public opinion should be produced through discourse on collective problems and goals.

This deliberative focus has generated considerable attention – spawning a whole subfield within political theory (see reviews in Chambers, 2003; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004) as well as a range of empirical studies on the "effects" of deliberation (see review in Ryfe, 2005). These "second-generation" deliberative theorists have updated, expanded upon and strongly critiqued Habermas's ideas of the public sphere and discourse-based democracy. Before turning to the critiques, let me start by commenting on why I think the deliberative position, despite its shortcomings, is a useful starting point. First, Habermas (like Dewey) outlines a primary role for publics, in association or interaction, to determine public opinion and to define common interests. Public issues are not simply pre-defined, already-existing matters, nor are they determined by experts or bureaucrats; instead public issues are defined through a process. For Habermas that process is necessarily a certain type of discourse, a position which I will take issue with later in the paper; however, the focus on the public's role of issue definition as a discourse process is a critical notion. Second, deliberative theories advocate a democratic public can, and indeed must, be constructed by methods outside formal, institutional mechanisms of participation like voting. From this vantage point, politics occurs in everyday contexts (e.g. libraries, schools, churches, and blogs). Third, the discourse-based approach insists political talk, albeit highly rule-bound political talk, is a form of political participation, and moreover, it is a way for public issues to be defined and articulated.

Expansions and Critiques: "Second Generation" Deliberative Theorists

Despite the central position Habermas's conception of the public sphere and political discourse occupies in current theories of participatory politics, it is a contentious position. While many, including myself, find his notion of the public sphere a critical starting point in theorizing about democracy, a range of scholars have argued his theory has a number of shortcomings because: a) it cannot deal with issues of difference (e.g. Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1992; Mouffe, 1999, 2000; Young, 1996); b) it is based on idealized or overly-romanticized conceptions of face-to-face conversation, discounting the role of mass media (Schudson, 1997); and c) there is a disconnect between the theory of deliberation and its practice (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Paley, 2004; Ryfe, 2005).

Problems with Difference

For Habermas, the "how" of deliberation is critical. In order for discourse to fulfill democratic purposes, the public sphere should be governed by a range of procedures (e.g. impartiality, equality,

openness, lack of coercion, and unanimity).¹⁹ But these conditions, what Habermas develops in later works as the “ideal speech situation,” have been challenged by a number of academics with the strongest critiques coming from a range of feminist scholars who argue the public sphere and rules governing it are not devoid of power. The thrust of their argument is Habermas’s work is based on an idealized and romanticized vision of the bourgeois public sphere where there were little power or status differences among participants. The result has been that Habermasian theory has difficulties in dealing with issues of difference: a) valorizing certain white, male, middle-class norms of speech and argumentation, while silencing the type of discourse favored by women and ethnic minorities; b) masking difference with calls for unity and consensus, ignoring the role of conflict and power in politics; and c) creating an untenable distinction between what are considered public versus private matters.

Taking on difference in cultural modes of discourse, Iris Marion Young (1996) argues Habermas failed to consider the existence of cultural barriers which govern deliberative discourse and therefore valorizes certain white, male, middle-class norms of speech. Noting the model of deliberative discourse is derived from specific Western institutions such as scientific debate and legal deliberation, Young claims these foundations of argumentation carry with them implicit cultural assumptions, such as an emphasis on formal, general and dispassionate discourse norms. While not departing from deliberative ideals of democracy, Young challenges the Habermasian valorization of argumentation as the *only* mode of democratic discourse advocating instead an ideal of “communicative democracy.” In her vision, communicative democracy is a more inclusive model of democratic communication, incorporating a wider range of norms and styles of speech. Young does not dismiss the role of argumentation in political discussion. Instead, she promotes three additional modes of interaction, “greeting,” “rhetoric,” and “storytelling.”²⁰

A second critique of Habermas made by Young as well as French political theorist Chantal Mouffe (1999, 2000), is the Habermasian ideal either assumes unity as a starting point to deliberation or some form of consensus is the goal of deliberation. Mouffe criticizes that by advocating consensus, deliberative theory ignores issues of power and conflict inherent in democracy. Arguing the possibility of neutral or rational dialogue free from the effect of power is a “conceptual impossibility;” Mouffe posits, instead, conflict actually plays a crucial role in the formation of collective identities, or publics. She asserts that well-functioning democracies are *based* in confrontation between differentiated positions – issues are demarcated through conflict. Departing further from Habermas than Young, Mouffe sets forth an idea of “agonistic pluralism.” In agonistic pluralism, the question of power and conflict are placed in the center of the theory,²¹ and people are seen as adversaries (as opposed to enemies) whose ideas we struggle with but “whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question” (1999, p. 755). Through struggle political compromises are made, but those compromises are always accompanied by dissent.²² She advocates that pluralist democracy has to make room for this dissent and “for the institutions through which it can be manifested” (1999, p. 756).

Nancy Fraser (1992) makes a third critique of Habermas, claiming there is no tenable distinction between the “public” and the “private.” Habermas assumes discourse in the public sphere should be restricted to deliberation about the common good and discussion of private interests is undesirable. But what constitutes a public matter is disputable and Fraser points out: “until quite recently, feminists were in the minority in thinking that domestic violence against women was a matter of common concern and thus a legitimate topic of public discourse. . . . Eventually, after sustained discursive contestation, we succeeded in making it a common concern” (1992, p. 129). In a similar vein to Dewey, Fraser sees that through discourse, issues are *defined* as public concerns. And like Young and Mouffe, Fraser conceptualizes a role for difference in politics and problematizes Habermas’s idea of a single, unitary public. She introduces the concept of “subaltern counterpublics” as a way to talk about alternative, but parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated groups create alternative discourses, terminology, institutions and artifacts for their issues.²³ Fraser notes not all counterpublics are necessarily virtuous or democratic. However, she defines counterpublics as emerging “in response to exclusions within dominant publics” and therefore, regardless of their particular stance, they help expand the discursive space.

The “Romance of Conversation”

While Young, Mouffe, and Fraser expand upon Habermas’s notion of the public sphere and deliberation, to varying degrees each sees discourse as a fundamental part of politics. Michael Schudson (1997) argues conversation, in and of itself, is not inherently democratic, claiming it is not the fact of conversation, but the norms and institutions that govern it which make it useful for democracy. He distinguishes between two modes of conversation: social, which he defines as non-utilitarian and spontaneous conversation; and problem-solving or that which is oriented toward the articulation of common ends. Schudson argues democratic discussions are not social in nature, instead, democratic talk is essentially rule-governed (civil), problem-solving, and public (among people of different viewpoints). An important part of Schudson’s argument is to critique Habermas’s, and to some extent Dewey’s, work as being based on idealized or overly-romanticized conceptions of face-to-face conversation. Part of Habermas’s contention was the public sphere devolved at the same time there was a rise in mass media. Schudson takes issue with these claims and writes the privileging of face-to-face conversation discounts the role of mass media as a source of political discussion. Schudson counters face-to-face conversation is not superior to mass communication and argues, instead, *both* the source of democratic talk is public sources which are based in the mass media, and the results of that democratic talk are disseminated through the mass media.

Connecting Empirical and Theoretical Work

With increasing scholarly interest in deliberative political theory there has been a corresponding interest in both implementing deliberative projects as well as empirical analysis on the results of deliberation on political knowledge and participation. David Ryfe (2005) notes the empirical findings on the “effects” of deliberation have been mixed. In some work, deliberation has been shown to produce more participatory citizens, but those outcomes have been infrequent and, in general, research has indicated deliberation is a “difficult and relatively rare form of communication” (p. 54). Ryfe contends part of the problem with the empirical work to date has been its focus on deliberation “effects,” rather than understanding what deliberation looks like in practice. He further notes the result of a group’s deliberation, once it has entered a larger political structure where policy decisions are made, has often been left unexamined. Ryfe finds this omission in the research problematic, writing: “This evident reluctance to incorporate citizen deliberation more fully into policy making indicates a structural ambivalence within deliberative democracy about the relationship between talk and action” (p. 61).

Anthropologist Julia Paley (2004) makes a similar argument, using ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Chile as a way to critique the apparent disconnect between deliberation and accountability or action. Though Paley sees a role for deliberation in democracy, she claims it is a “necessary but insufficient condition.” She introduces a concept of “accountable democracy” positing that normative theory must look not only at discourse, but also account for the impact of that discourse on policy. She defines accountable democracy as having two components: a) the link between opinion formation and policy making is direct; and b) citizens’ ideas are “taken into account” by lawmakers. She summarizes: “In both of these senses, the standard for democracy is citizens’ impact on policy and law” (p. 498). Arguing the analytical focal point of democratic theory should be the *result* of deliberation on policy, she contends political theory needs to move from a focus on procedure to a focus on outcome.

Political communication scholars Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacob (2004), also advocate a change in focus for deliberative theory – arguing for a broadening of the concept of political discourse beyond the deliberative procedures set forth by Habermas. They put forth the idea of “discursive participation.” As defined, discursive participation has five characteristics: a) it is focused primarily on discourse with other citizens; b) it is a form of political participation, noting most empirical work on participation has ignored political talk and instead focused on voting, lobbying, protesting, or volunteering; c) it can include formal institutions of political life but is not limited to those institutions; d) importantly for our analysis, discursive participation can occur through a variety of media, including face-to-face conversations, email exchanges, or Internet forums; and e) it is focused on local, national or international issues of public concern. According to the authors, not all talk-centric activities constitute discursive participation. They note discursive participation is *not*: communication between elites (e.g. campaign debates or pundit talk shows); citizen-to-elite discussions, such as school board meetings or letters to the editor; elite-to-citizen

communication (e.g. press conferences); “self-deliberation” where people internally justify or challenge their political viewpoints; or discussions that are focused on “personal issues” not directly related to “broader public issues.” The authors conclude when research focuses more broadly on discursive participation, discussion of public issues – though not necessarily meeting the rules of deliberative theory – is relatively widespread among Americans.

The “Work” of Publics – Discourse as Part of Issue Definition

The first two sections of the paper have been an attempt to formulate a conceptual definition of public. To sum up, Dewey provides a theoretically and analytically useful notion of public emergence (and publics) that can be extended to a contemporary understanding of distributed, technologically-enabled discourse forums. Blumer can be seen as extending Dewey because he outlines several stages of that public emergence process. And Habermas has also been used here as an extension or addition to the Deweyan definition; providing some theoretical detail on the “work” of the public in issue definition, focusing particularly on the stage at which issues are defined through discourse.

The critiques and expansions of Habermas add a more nuanced perspective of publics and public emergence. Young, Mouffe and Fraser correctly note significant flaws in the Habermasian notion of the public and argue that healthy democracies need a multitude of alternative, conflictual discourse spaces. They also identify that one of the fundamental features of politics is that it is based in power relations and point out that rational discourse is only one form of interaction between people – discourse can also include conflict, emotion, personal stories and rhetoric. Schudson and Delli Carpini *et al.* open up the possibility that political discourse need not be face-to-face but can be mediated. In particular, Delli Carpini’s definition of discursive participation broadens an understanding of political participation to include a wider range of talk as potentially political – a viewpoint that is critical when thinking about new, non-institutional forms of political discussion.

What these extensions have allowed us to see is that discourse is a critical part of the work that a public does to define issues. However, procedural discourse is not the *only* work of a public in issue definition. It is my contention that Habermas’s normative rules are too restrictive and have difficulty dealing with the emergent, changing, and conflictual politics witnessed in many distributed, online settings. In addition, his expectation of what politics *should* look like may make it easy to dismiss the political activities in which people do engage. And though some of these critiques are dealt with by Young, Mouffe and Fraser; these scholars still seem attached to normative discourse theory, which may be an overly restrictive position when thinking about new or newly-expanded political practices. Schudson’s contention that the types of conversation which serve democracy are rule-governed, problem-solving, and public is also overly restrictive because it discounts the possibility that what begins as a social or “private” conversation may then move into a “public” or problem-solving one. Finally, while Delli Carpini *et al.* expand the notion of political talk, they also limit it to “public issues,” which they leave undefined, and ignore conversations citizens have with elites disregarding what effect discourse might have on policy making.

Though I understand the desire and necessity to draw some lines around the concept of public, to focus only on deliberative politics is too limiting. For the purpose of the framework here, discourse is an important part of public/issue emergence because it is a fundamental way in which issues are defined; but, borrowing from Paley, it is a necessary but insufficient condition for public emergence. I do not account for its insufficiencies for the same reasons Paley purports, however. It is my contention that looking only to discourse-based political theory is not enough to explain contemporary, IT-enabled public emergence because: a) these theories do not fully account for the ways in which publics and public emergence is structured in and through things, and b) these theories need to be updated to address how distributed publics may alter the way in which public issues are defined. We turn to those points in the following two sections.

IV

Things and Publics

As has been described, Habermas is quite concerned with the “how” or the procedures of political discourse. What is absent in his theory is the “what” of that discourse, or the issues and things that bring a group together to deliberate. This is an argument Bruno Latour (2005) has taken up, claiming:

From Hobbes to Rawls, from Rousseau to Habermas, many procedures have been devised to assemble the relevant parties, to authorize them to contract, to check their degree of representativity, to discover the ideal speech conditions, to detect the legitimate closure, to write the good constitution. But when it comes down to *what* is at issue, namely the object of concern that brings them together, not a word is uttered. In a strange way, political science is mute just at the moment when the objects of concern should be brought in and made to speak up loudly. Contrary to what the powerful etymology of their most cherished word should imply, their *res publica* does not seem to be loaded with too many things. Procedures to authorize and legitimize are important, but it's only half of what is needed to assemble. The other half lies in the issues themselves, in the *matters* that matter, in the *res* that creates a *public* around it. They need to be represented, authorized, legitimated and brought to bear inside the relevant assembly (emphasis original, pp. 15-16).

Latour and his colleagues have proposed an idea of “object-oriented democracy” and begun to apply work originally completed in the sociology of science to the political realm (e.g. Latour, 2004b; Latour & Weibel, 2005), arguing political theory has been unable to deal with the objects of politics. Here, the “object” of politics is both the issues of politics (the “what” that has brought a public together), as well as the “things” (mechanisms, technologies, architectures and events) of politics. In the first instance, we can see how Latour is indebted to Dewey (see Latour, 2005; Marres, 2005), conceptualizing political publics gathering around their common issues of concern. He writes: “We might be more connected to each other by our worries, our matters of concern, the issues we care for, than by any other set of values, opinions, attitudes or principles” (2005, p. 14). In the second instance, Latour is drawing from his work on actor-network theory (ANT) and adjoining infrastructure theories (e.g. Bowker & Star, 1999; Star, 1999; Star & Bowker, 2002). I will address each of these aspects of “objects” as Latour proposes—looking at the broader conceptions of ANT and infrastructure first as a way to ground the specific ideas Latour has about an object-oriented democracy.

Actor-Network Theory

Developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law in the 1980s, actor-network theory is both a theoretical perspective as well as a method of study. At its core, it makes a simple but profound assertion. It contends society cannot be described by setting up a dualism between the social and the material or technological. Instead, ANT urges we think of society and technology as one heterogeneous collective, composed of people together with technology, machines, and things. It is the interaction among these heterogeneous objects which constitute society and these interrelationships are conceived as networks of human and non-human actors, each of which is itself a network of heterogeneous things (Doolin & Lowe, 2002). For the purpose of study, human and nonhuman actors are treated equivalently.²⁴ Latour calls these non-human objects the “missing masses” knocking on the door of sociology, “requesting a place in the accounts of society as stubbornly as the human masses did in the nineteenth century” (Latour, 1992, p. 227). And though this position has caused controversy with claims ANT is

morally relativist and apolitical, what ANT does well is to think of the human, the social and the technological all at once, looking across each to understand how they are interchangeable and, also, irreducible to an essentialized category. It also forces us to forefront the objects that mediate social interactions while eschewing notions of dualism (near/far; micro/macro; text/context; small scale/large scale) or causality traps (e.g. technological determinism).

There is some disagreement as to whether ANT is a “theory,” a “method,” or a scholarly perspective. As a theory, ANT does not try to explain *why* a network takes the form it does; instead, it explores *how* actor-networks emerge, sustain themselves, or disintegrate. In this sense, networks needn’t be harmonious and in fact are often composed of conflicting relations. However, the implicit assumption in ANT is that all networks are an accomplishment, and as such, potentially precarious and conflictual with relations between actors needing to be continuously “performed” in order to sustain the network. It is in these performances, or interactions, that ANT focuses its analytical attention – looking at how networks are formed to produce particular effects. If, for example, networks are larger or more stable, it asks how that size, power and organization was generated (Law, 1992). It also asks how scientific and technological products, as well as the social roles of actors, are redefined as the network grows or changes.

One of the key points is that actors are constantly moving, interacting, changing, and in flow. Methodologically, then, the work of the analyst is to follow that interaction – to see networks as a process of activity. ANT scholars speak of “tracing” these activities; every action leaves a trace and our job is to describe those traces. The goal, however, is not simply to trace a word, opinion, or claim as it circulates within the network. Instead, Latour urges that what circulates has to be defined by what constitutes it. He writes, “It is defined by the competence it is endowed with, the trials it undergoes, the performances it is allowed to display, the associations it is made to bear upon, the sanctions it receives, the background in which it is circulating, etc.” (1997).

As a method, then, its focus is on description (not prediction or explanation) and, as such, most of the work has been empirical, qualitative case studies. But ANT is not “mere description.” Part of the assumption of ANT is that nothing is outside of a network. Therefore, we cannot explain social phenomenon by imposing external theories or frameworks. Latour insists, instead, that what we can do is to describe the actors and their activities. He contends actors make everything, including their own frameworks, theories, contexts, and ontologies. The focus is to understand and describe the network in all its detail and the way to do that is to “follow the actors” and their activities. In his inimitable way Latour makes the point best, writing actors:

. . . too compare, they too produce typologies, they too design standards, they too spread their machines as well as their organizations, their ideologies, their states of mind. Why would you be the one doing the intelligent stuff while they would act like a bunch of morons? What they do to expand, to relate, to compare, to organize is what you have to describe as well. It’s not another layer that you would have to add to the ‘mere description’. Don’t try to shift from description to explanation: simply go on with the description (2004a).

According to Latour, actors are “entities that do things” (Latour as quoted in Stalder, 1997) and take their shape by virtue of their relationship with other actors. Latour also employs the term “actant” as a way to indicate that action need not be from a human, nor does acting necessarily imply intentionality. Actors constantly shape and are shaped by each other, with each having the ability to change the overall makeup of the network. As a consequence, the ability to act is not inherent to the actor itself; instead it is dependent on its position in the network. For example, national public opinion polling was severely limited without the telephone. Did the telephone cause national public opinion polling? No. National public opinion polling and the telephone are co-constituted in a network. But the point is the telephone is as much a part of “the social” as the pollster who asks the questions and the respondents who answer them.

Networks tie together people and things. And each actor is a network in and of itself, thus the hybrid term actor-network. Though you can define things and people separately, you cannot separate

them in analysis because they are interconnected – actors constitute networks and networks constitute actors. Using our example above, national public opinion is a network made up of people (pollsters, statisticians, politicians, responders) as well as things (telephones, telephone networks, laws regulating the telephone industry, software to analyze poll responses, printing presses to distribute poll responses, kitchens equipped with telephones). A national public opinion is impossible without that heterogeneous network of people and things. For ANT, then, public opinion is not simply the collective will of people via discourse or voting. Public opinion is a construction of a variety of heterogeneous objects (things and people) working together to generate it. If that public opinion is particularly strong or solid, ANT poses an empirical question: how did it generate that power?

ANT posits each network is an accomplishment. As actors interact with each other to develop and stabilize networks, they “enroll” allies. And as the network evolves, the identities and interests of the actors involved are themselves transformed or acquire new definitions through a process of “translation,” where actors are persuaded it is in their interest to interact in the prescribed manner (Latour, 1991). In this manner, actants gain power by translating the interests of others. It takes work to make the network stable and it takes work to enroll allies. But when the actor-network starts to break down, its component parts begin to be revealed. That is easy to see when thinking of our telephone example – when the phone doesn’t work we realize there is a multiplicity of actors that make it operate (technicians, phone lines, buttons, wires). But it is also relevant when thinking about [a] national public opinion. Public opinion might be (and often is) questioned as illegitimate or unrepresentative, and at those crisis points the heterogeneity of the network is most evident (the procedures of collection were not valid; the software for analysis broke; the data was misinterpreted by the analyst; the pollster did not have the proper credentials; the wrong homes were polled).

ANT scholars argue, and I believe correctly, the theory provides a powerful tool for describing and, thus, understanding how a heterogeneous network of people and things is generated and sustained. ANT is not, however, a predictive or a normative theory. It makes no claim to predict how an actor *will* act. Nor can it be used to normatively explain how an actor *should* behave and makes no *a priori* assumptions about what kinds of association are possible, “any association is possible provided it is obsessively coded as heterogeneous associations through translations” (Latour, 1997). Further, ANT can describe associations, but it cannot differentiate or define them. And finally, ANT cannot tell you where to stop or start your analysis.

Infrastructure Studies

A neighboring school of thought regarding the co-constitutive role of things and people in society is the study of infrastructure. Infrastructure studies has been influenced primarily by the work of Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey Bowker (Bowker & Star, 1999; Star, 1999; Star & Bowker, 2002). Though Star and Bowker do not make the same ontological commitment to actors being human and non-human nor do they assume everything is within an infrastructure, they, like Latour, argue for the importance of studying technological infrastructures (what Star calls “the boring, the mundane”) because values, symbols, politics, and policies are embedded within them. For example, in their work on classification systems, Bowker and Star (1999) note that although classifications are often used in policymaking (for example zoning), scholars and policymakers have not paid much attention to the social and moral implications of categories and standards. And even in the face of problematic political and sociological situations arising from classification decisions (e.g. the classification and later de-classification of homosexuality as a disease, the inclusion of a multi-racial option on the U.S. Census), they argue “none of the above-named disciplines or social movements has systematically addressed the pragmatics of the invisible forces of categories and standards in the modern built world, especially the modern information technology world” (1999, p. 4).

Star provides the fullest conceptual definition of infrastructure as having a number of properties. She writes infrastructures are: embedded within other structures; transparent to use; reach beyond a single event; learned as a part of membership; linked with conventions of practice; embodied in standards; built on an installed base; and often visible upon breakdown (1999). She also argues infrastructures are not

simply a “system of substrates;” instead, infrastructure is a relational concept – asking not *what* is an infrastructure, but *when* is an infrastructure (Star & Ruhleder, 1996). But because infrastructure is relational – different depending on where you are positioned – Star indicates the way to study infrastructure is through ethnography. “Its strength has been that it is capable of surfacing silenced voices, juggling disparate meanings, and understanding the gap between words and deeds. Ethnographers are trained to understand viewpoints, the definition of the situation. Intuitively, these seem like important strengths for understanding the enormous changes being wrought by information technology” (1999, p. 384).

This relational or associational aspect of things and people is one common trait between the work on infrastructure and ANT. Another similarity is the assumption infrastructures are the result of much, often invisible, work. Also like ANT, Star and Bowker articulate particular (though not programmatic) ways to trace or describe that productive work. Bowker, for example, introduces a concept of “infrastructural inversion” (Bowker, 1994) where what is usually in the background is brought to the foreground, while Star suggests several additional “tricks of the trade” for studying infrastructure including trying to uncover the main or central narrative that is inscribed or encoded into an infrastructure (1999). Where Star and Bowker most significantly diverge from ANT is in ANT’s insistence on “following the actors.” They challenge, such an approach ignores people who are explicitly disadvantaged or excluded from the network. They write in reference to their work on classification: “Thus if we just follow the doctors who create the International Classification of Diseases at the World Health Organization in Geneva, we will not see the variety of representation systems that other cultures have for classifying diseases of the body and spirit; and we will not see the fragile networks these classification systems subtend. Rather, we will see only those actants who are strong enough, and shaped in the right way, to impact the fragile actor-networks of allopathic medicine. We will see the blind leading the blind” (Bowker & Star, 1996).

Object-Oriented Democracy

These points of convergence between ANT and Star and Bowker’s work on infrastructure are important because both perspectives emphasize the constitutive, mediating role of “things” in society. And despite the often invisibility of these things the social world cannot be understood or explained without accounting for them. Making that point, John Law (1992) argues, “If human beings form a social network it is not because they interact with other human beings. It is because they interact with human beings and endless other materials too.”

Extending work accomplished in ANT, Latour has begun to apply this “thingy” perspective to understanding politics. Proposing an idea of “object-oriented democracy,” Latour argues political theory has lacked a proper understanding of the objects of politics (Latour & Weibel, 2005). In this object-oriented perspective Latour is making two points, talking both about the concerns or issues which have brought a public together as well as the things of politics (the re-presentations, the gatherings). In the first instance Latour draws from Dewey’s political philosophy, specifically his conception of a public as a group of actors who are jointly affected by a problem. In the second instance, Latour expands upon ANT and borrows from the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, particularly his essay on “things.”²⁵

Part of Latour’s project of bringing objects into politics is to argue each issue “gathers around itself a different assembly of relevant parties” (2005, p. 15). In this conceptualization, politics is not only about humans but is also about the issues, or the matters of concern, to which they are attached. Importantly, these issues join actors in ways that are not usually recognized as “the political.” For example, if one understands politics from the perspective of gatherings of issues (of Deweyan publics) then the political world does not simply play out via legislatures or city councils; it also plays out in a variety of everyday contexts (Latour mentions supermarkets, financial institutions, fashion show catwalks). Furthermore, these Deweyan publics are networks in the ANT sense; they are distributed and associational, connecting all sorts of people and things. As such, they are quite different than a political public as has been traditionally conceived because they are distinguished by their distributed, emergent, and associational qualities.

But this is not the only sense in which Latour shares characteristics with Dewey. Both look at the world as based in association and interaction. Though Latour extends that associational aspect to include non-human actants, both see the world as a process of action and activity. Second, both reject setting up the world into a series of dualisms (nature vs. politics, subject vs. object).²⁶ Third, neither sees the world as fixed or stable; if there are instances of stability then that stability has been gained through work. Stability is not the only result of work; both see that what is considered an issue of concern has been collectively defined as such. In this sense, publics and their issues co-evolve and both Dewey and Latour seem to focus on processes of emergence, connection and co-evolution. Finally, each ground their work in everyday reality with little nostalgia or reverence for particular forms, procedures or norms. Latour, particularly in his early work, rejects any kind of normative stance for describing the world and, I would argue, Dewey seems far less interested in dictating what politics *should* be than his counterpart Lippmann or later theorists such as Habermas.

Though these affinities with Dewey are useful in understanding the connection between the two theorists, it is also valuable to drill further into why Latour focuses so intently on the issues, the “what” of politics. In part he is making the argument that issues (matters of concern) are not simply free-floating human ideas which are decided upon once all relevant people have been legitimately assembled via proper procedures. Issues must be “represented, authorized, legitimated and brought to bear” upon this assembled body (2005, p. 16). So while Latour sees a place for political theories that understand representation as a process of ensuring relevant parties or procedures have been followed; he argues that there is another aspect of representation that is missing from most political theory. And it is here he stresses that political theory has ignored the “thingy” meaning of representation as a process of *re-presenting* the issue of concern to those who are affected by it. It is in this second meaning of representation where things are required (e.g. maps, polls, gathering spaces, technological architectures, storage devices, pieces of information).

In his second use of “object,” Latour argues we must move from understanding objects as “matters of fact,” and instead understand them as things or “matters of concern.” Here Latour points to Heidegger’s discussion of things as gatherings or assemblies. Things, for Heidegger are sites for gathering social relations and, as such, are socially grounded – connected to a world of human practice. Latour also traces the etymology of “thing” to “Ding” (therefore the title of the essay “Dingpolitik”). The tracing is important because he points out that the root of “thing” is not a material object as we often think of it, but a public event or gathering of many. Second, these gatherings around issues bring people together precisely because those issues divide people. Latour sees in division there is strength because “we ourselves are so divided by so many contradictory attachments that we have to assemble” (p. 24). So Latour, in a similar fashion to Dewey, sees publics (collectives) assembling not out of some social desire but because of their divisive issues. He writes: “We don’t assemble because we agree, look alike, feel good, are socially compatible or wish to fuse together but because we are brought by divisive matters of concern into some neutral, isolated place in order to come to some sort of provisional makeshift (dis)agreement” (p. 23).

Toward a “Thingy” Perspective on Publics

As I noted in the introduction, the primary purpose of this paper has been to sketch out a theoretical framework to understand an area of democratic political practice I am calling distributed political participation. In the first half of the paper, I looked primarily to the political theory of Dewey and Habermas as a way to understand what a public is, how a public emerges, and what work the public does in issue definition. I have borrowed heavily from Dewey to define public emergence as a process of issue emergence – where a group of people form together around a particular issue of concern. I believe Habermas and his critics provide some additional layers to the framework because of their focus on the process of discourse in which publics define public issues. To these political theories the actor-network and infrastructure perspectives add a critical component because they point to the way in which publics/issues emerge in and through things.

Why is this “thingy” perspective on publics so crucial? Latour argues, and I believe rightly, the social world cannot be understood without accounting for things. Therefore, politics, as a part of the social, cannot be understood without the same account. But this is the perspective that is missing from Habermasian discourse theory. Its focus, as we have already discussed, is on the procedures of politics: how legitimate public opinion can be formed through particular discourse procedures; how those procedures can be devised to assemble all relevant parties; how those relevant parties can be ensured equitable participation in the discourse.

As Latour points out, what the discourse-based theory does not address is the way both matters of concern and material things constitute the political. But, importantly for the framework being set forth here, it is these things which constitute *what makes it possible for publics to emerge* – how is the issue presented, framed, disseminated, archived, and mediated and in what forum or via what media is it defined (blogs, newspapers, meet-ups, library meeting rooms). And in the co-evolutionary process of issues of concern and publics, things help constitute *what is collectively defined as an object*– an artifact, an op-ed, a blog post, a petition, a new website, an installation. This thingy perspective is the way Latour sees a place for ANT in understanding politics. And it is, I believe, a way we can understand how information science contributes to an understanding of politics. How issues are presented, framed, disseminated, archived and mediated are information and communication questions. Via what media those issues are defined is a question for information and communication design. And, the product of those definitions (artifacts, websites, blog posts) are concerns for information science as well. Understanding these questions may help us to understand how socio-technical practices affect (improve or weaken) political action. If democracy is thought of as more than people and ideas, if democracy is thought of as people in association with things, then, I would argue, democracy is something information science can have a part in describing.

I also believe there has been methodological ground gained by examining ANT and infrastructure theories. The focus from each is on empirical, qualitative case-based studies. The ANT approach is to “trace” an actor as a way to describe how networks are constituted, to reveal relations, to understand how resources and people are mobilized, and to see how political choices, values or power relations are inscribed in mundane things. However, instead of tracing an “actor,” I argue it would be fruitful to trace an *issue* as it moves throughout a network.

Why focus on issues? The primary reason goes back to the definition of political publics as issue publics – again, borrowing from Dewey, I am defining a political public as a group of actors (in an ANT sense) who are jointly affected by an issue—issues are the foundation of a public. Then, borrowing from ANT, we can conceptualize how that issue is defined through objects or things and itself becomes a thing of contestation. These are the key reasons I argue an approach of issue tracing; however, there are two additional analytical advantages. First, the issue approach may help avoid some of the problems Star identified with ANT, in particular how it potentially ignores those who are already marginalized. She writes: “A stabilized network is only stable for some, and that is for those who are members of the community of practice who form/use/maintain it. And part of the public stability of a standardized network often involves the private suffering of those who are not standard – who must use the standard network, but who are also non-members of the community of practice” (Star as quoted in Doolin & Lowe, 2002). Issue tracking would allow a tracing which moves through multiple networks, including on and offline.

Second, Doolin and Lowe (2002) point out that much research in information systems has borrowed from Habermas, but they argue ANT provides an alternative because of its empirical commitment. I would argue as well, looking only to normative political theories, such as Habermasian discourse theory, makes it too easy to trivialize the kind of discourse that is occurring in many places on the Internet (e.g. blogs). Actor-network and infrastructure theories, with their strong empirical emphasis, place our focus not on what the Internet could or should do for public issue formation. Instead, it asks us to understand what is actually going on, from the bottom up. I make no presumption, however, that what is happening is necessarily good or necessarily bad for politics. My point, instead, is that what is happening should be engaged on its own terms.

Focusing on issues is an approach Noortje Marres has taken to understand how ICTs have been used in issue-formation via the Internet (Marres, 2004; Marres & Rogers, 2005). Marres makes the case

that actor-network theory is a particularly useful methodological approach to understand the interrelationships between politics and IT, claiming: “when it comes to grasping political process, actor-network theory invites us to focus on the *processes in which issues come to be defined as objects of public contestation*” (emphasis added, 2004, p. 126). In her conceptualization, ANT provides an analytical edge over structural accounts of politics because it allows us to account for political practice as a process of issue formation.

Marres also argues ICTs are particularly well-suited to tracing political practices because even the most ephemeral actions leave a trace:

The minutes of a meeting of an expert committee, the plans of an activist group, fresh scientific data, that is, many of the snippets of information that might at some moment, in some location, feed into an issue, can be found online. The Net can be regarded as a practically limitless storage space of issues-in-the-making. As such, it appears as a particularly fruitful site of research for empirical inquiry into distributed processes of issue formation (2004, p. 134).

Using an empirical case study regarding the controversy around the World Bank’s Developmental Gateway, Marres traces a “trajectory of issue formation” where a variety of civil (particularly NGOs) and institutional actors contributed to “successive articulations of the object of contention” (2004, p. 127). Using Issue Crawler software to draw the formation of a hyperlinked issue network, she traced the “definitional shifts” of the Development Gateway issue as it circulated among institutional and civil actors as well as a range of other actors who were interfaces between the civil and institutional organizations. In her work, she saw the issue of the Development Gateway was increasingly politicized as it moved through three stages – debate, scandal, and product. Drawing from previous work, she describes “debate networks” exhibit a wide-range of multi-organizational networking; “scandal networks” tend to be limited to a smaller circle of actors and mainstream media (which link to the organizational actors); and finally the defined “product” of contestation which is disseminated.

In additional work, Marres and Rogers (2005) more specifically operationalize the concept of issue-networks to see if the web can help understand if and how publics are organized over the course of an issue’s development. In this research, the authors are interested to see if these issue publics have a bearing on the “fate of the issue.” For our purposes, the work here is important not because of its focus on the efficacy of the public on an issue’s fate. Instead, it is in their operationalization of issue networks that some methodological insights can be found. First, they see issue networks as “delineating spaces” where nodes in the network were not necessarily talking to each other (deliberating), but were actually defining issues in a process which “built from and countered issue-definitions presented on other pages in the network” (p. 922). Second, they define an issue network as “a heterogeneous set of entities (organizations, individuals, documents, slogans, imagery) that have configured into a hyperlink-network around a common problematic area, summed up in a keyword such as climate change” (p. 928).

What Marres has provided to the work already forged via actor-network and infrastructure theory, is specific empirical applications of issue tracing. Though her focus is solely on a web-based ethnography, she provides insights into understanding how a political issue can be traced and understood as a process in which issues emerge and are defined as objects of public contestation. She helps to see one approach in empirically describing how issues are politicized, defined and legitimated as public concerns. So, to extend my borrowed definition from Dewey, I would like to add the insights gained from ANT and infrastructure: Public emergence is a process of issue emergence where a heterogeneous set of entities (organizations, individuals, documents, maps, blogs posts, online petitions, slogans) configure into a network to constitute a common issue of concern. Through various activities (e.g. discourse, dissemination, archiving) and through various media (e.g. blogs or meet-ups) that collective works to define and legitimize a common issue and to make it a “thing” – an object of public contestation (e.g. “the Philadelphia casino issue”).

Distributed Collective Practices

There is an additional concept that needs to be taken into account if we are to get a handle on IT-enabled public issue emergence: understanding how distributed collective practices may (or may not) be altering the way in which public issues are defined. First, I understand actor-network and infrastructure theories are, at their base, theories of distributed practices and there will undoubtedly be conceptual overlap between the previous section and this one (as there have been overlaps throughout all sections). Second, there has been a wide and burgeoning interest in distributed and collaborative practices that has ranged from the theoretically and empirically grounded to the more hopeful and even breathlessly optimistic.²⁷ My purpose here is not to inventory the field. Instead, I will draw upon work I believe could be expanded or extended for the framework being developed.

Distributed Volunteering

One type of distributed collective practice that has been a focus of research is net-based public voluntary work. In recent work Sproull and Kiesler provide examples of electronic “voluntary communities” in which “people can participate in small units of time, at any time, and from any place (with technology and net access)” (2004, p. 362). The authors point out that our models for organizing voluntary activity were created in the early twentieth century; as a consequence, those models tend to have a local, geographically bounded focus with a locally-organized volunteer base, face-to-face meetings, and volunteering commitments which require blocks of time measured in day or hours, not minutes. The authors note it is impossible to provide an accurate approximation of the number of Internet enabled voluntary groups, but they estimate between 10 and 15 million people participate in hundreds of thousands of these volunteer cooperative communities (2004, p. 362). They provide examples of five types of voluntary, cooperative groups: 1) volunteer technical support; 2) volunteer health support; 3) software development; 4) volunteer scientific and scholarly work; and 5) volunteer mentoring and tutoring.

Though these cases range in their purpose (e.g. software development versus emotional support), all are distinguished by three characteristics: they are voluntary (versus net-based cooperative workgroups); they are often self-organizing; and the primary organizing medium is the Internet. The other important characteristic of these groups is they are based upon what Sproull calls “microcontributions.” Microcontributions are defined as contributions which “consume a rather small unit of time and attention,”²⁸ so while people may devote hours a week to online volunteer activities they can do so in small units of time and at their own convenience (2004, p. 363). These microcontributions can be in the form of discussion posts or, as in the case of software development, in the form of bug reports, code, or patches. The authors argue, however, that in order for these microcontributions to be useful they have to be aggregated and organized into larger units and both technical and social mechanisms are necessary to do so. They give an example of a threaded discussion list where, “People can indicate that their contribution is a response to a previous one and can display messages as ‘threads’—a seed message and all responses to it. Threads organize message microcontributions so everyone can see their constituent parts, making it easy for potential contributors and beneficiaries to see what has already been contributed” (2004, p. 363).

The authors contend as more people make voluntary microcontributions, online social and legal conventions to support it will become increasingly important. One concern they raise is an issue of “quality control,” noting that if volunteers produce erroneous or low quality contributions then the experience of the group can weaken. They note that there have generally been two mechanisms for quality control: self-policing, where members challenge problematic messages; and rating or trust systems where members rate postings and then software aggregates and displays those ratings. A second challenge is the need to encourage and sustain long-term volunteers and they point to reputation software systems as

one possible aide to recognizing high contributors. Finally, they note that not all volunteering can be completed via the Internet, for example, when physical resources must be collected or when people must work in the same time and place.

In other work, Sproull and Patterson (2004) focus specifically on microcontributions in the “local infocity,” defined as electronic communities which are tied to or embedded within physical, geographically bounded locations. They argue participation in electronic communities often begins with a search for information and continued participation is based on the type of information received, writing: “People certainly report receiving information benefits from their participation, including facts, solutions to problems, learning, and insight. These benefits are derived from personalized information, rather than the depersonalized or authoritative information found in official databases and documents” (2004, p. 34). In addition to informational benefits, the authors write participants may also receive social and emotional gains. Sproull and Patterson note these participation benefits have most often been studied from the perspective of the individuals who have benefited. They counter, however, that when electronic communities are tied to a physical city, it is also useful to think about how that physical city might benefit from the individual voluntary contributions. They posit: “The argument is that if people can easily ‘meet’ each other online, discovering common interests and concerns, they will have more incentive to participate in physical-world organizations that address the same interests and concerns” (2004, p. 34).

Distributed Cognition

Cognitive psychologist Ed Hutchins has proposed the idea of distributed cognition (1995). His interest is in looking at situated cognition, or cognition in its natural environment, versus the more traditional approach of studying cognition in a laboratory setting. His approach is ethnographic in nature and he concludes cognition is not brain-focused but cultural – it is socially distributed in a system of people and “material media in which representations are embodied, and in the physical processes that propagate representations across media” (p. 266). As a result, he argues these activity systems have cognitive properties different from and irreducible to the individuals that participate in those systems.

In one of his best known works on commercial airlines, he applies a cognitive framework to what he sees as a distributed socio-technical system – the airline cockpit. For Hutchins, then, the unit of analysis is larger than a single individual. Instead, he looks at how the whole system of the cockpit remembers speeds in order to make critical take-off and landing decisions based on the weight of the plane. Hutchins applies a classical cognitive science framework to this larger unit of analysis asking the same questions, specifically how information is represented and how those representations are used by the system (e.g. transformed, combined and propagated). He argues a methodological advantage to this approach is that representations in a distributed system can be directly observed rather than elicited or inferred from the pilot’s mind. He notes: “We can do a lot of research on the cognitive properties of such a system (i.e., we can give accounts of the system’s behavioral properties in terms of its internal representations), without saying anything about the processes that operate inside individual actors” (p. 267).

He characterizes the cockpit’s remembering of speeds as a memory that is larger than any individual’s internal representation, arguing in a way similar to actor-network theory, that this memory is distributed among individuals, technologies and various representations of information. These representations are contained in different media each of which has different properties (e.g. a written booklet is a permanent representation versus spoken representations which are more ephemeral). Furthermore, the structure of the environment is exploited for use in creating and propagating representations. He notes: “The interaction of the representations in the different media gives the overall system the properties it has. This is not to say that knowing about the people is not important, but rather to say that much of what we care about is in the *interaction* of people with each other and with physical structure in the environment” (emphasis original, p. 286).

Hutchins notes that because this memory is distributed, some of the representations that exist for the larger system do not exist in individual’s minds. As a consequence, the system’s cognitive process is not simply an aggregation of the memories of the individuals within it. Further, the success of the system

is not determined by any single individual or even a combination of individuals. Instead, the success of the system is determined by the system's capabilities. In this way, Hutchins argues, a distributed cognitive system compensates for inherent limitations of human memory.

Distributed Decision-Making

An area of distributed practice that has received considerable attention recently, particularly in business, has been distributed decision-making. One of the best known works in this area is James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2004). The thrust of his argument is that the collective knowledge of a group of people is almost always superior to that of a single individual, including experts. Surowiecki, a journalist at *The New Yorker*, opens the book with one of many anecdotes. He describes a story of Sir Francis Galton who was attending a livestock fair in the fall of 1906. There Galton witnessed a weight-judging competition for an ox. As the story is told, Galton was surprised that after aggregating the 800 individual guesses of the crowd, the average of those guesses accurately predicted the animal's weight. Moreover, the group average was closer to the ox's actual weight than most of the individual guesses (including the experts – farmers, butchers). Surowiecki points to the Galton example as the basic argument of the book, writing: “under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them. Groups do not need to be dominated by exceptionally intelligent people in order to be smart. *Even if most of the people within a group are not especially well-informed or rational, it can still reach a collectively wise decision*” (emphasis added, 2004, p. xiii).

As Surowiecki notes, not all crowds are smart. For example, as has already been discussed, Walter Lippmann contended that, as a mass, people could not be expected to make rational public decisions. Other scholars have focused specifically on the negative side of crowd behavior. Gustave Le Bon (1982, orig. 1896), an originator of crowd psychology, argued a crowd of people was more than the sum of its individual members. As such, the psychology of that crowd differed from the psychology of the people which made it up. Le Bon was particularly pessimistic about crowds, positing they always acted unconsciously and often dangerously. He wrote: “Civilizations as yet have only been created and directed by a small intellectual aristocracy, never by crowds. Crowds are only powerful for destruction. Their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase. . . . When the structure of a civilization is rotten, it is always the masses that bring about its downfall” (p. 10). One of the primary problems of the crowd, according to Le Bon, was it submerged an individual's rationality to reach a stage of a “collective mind.” In this stage an individual would feel, think and act differently than if they were alone. This collective mind then spread throughout the crowd with the result of everyone acting or behaving the same, what Le Bon called “contagion”.

Psychologist Irving Janis (1983), in a series of case studies on political decision-making “fiascoes” by governmental policy makers, proposed the idea of “groupthink.” According to Janis, groupthink is a mode of thinking exhibited by group members who try to minimize conflict as a way to reach consensus and make decisions. In an effort to maintain cohesiveness, group members do not “realistically appraise alternative courses of action” (p. 9). Instead, of independent thinking, individuals will take on the position of the group. Moreover, the more cohesive and “amiable” a group, the greater the danger for the group to make hasty and irrational decisions.

While recognizing the situations in which groups make poor decisions, Surowiecki sets forth three conditions which are necessary for a crowd to be wise: 1) there must be a diversity of opinion where each person either has different information or that they draw different conclusions from the same information; 2) there must be independence where people's opinions are not determined by the opinions of those around them; and 3) there must be some form of decentralization where people are able to specialize and draw on their own local knowledge. Finally, the author argues (in a similar vein to Sproull) in order for a crowd to be wise there has to be some mechanism of aggregation that turns private judgments into a collective decision. For Surowiecki that mechanism is best represented in the market.

Expanding specifically on the idea of diversity or difference, Scott Page (2007) also argues that diversity can lead to better outcomes. He notes that diverse groups of problem solvers consistently outperform groups made up of the “best individual performers;” concluding that diversity should be

considered as, or even more, valuable than ability. Critiquing Surowiecki's work as being based mainly in anecdotal evidence, Page posits definitions, frameworks and models in order to understand the role of difference in problem solving, prediction and information aggregation. He writes: "Without collective intelligence, decentralized markets and democracies would have little hope of functioning effectively. Yet we do not fully understand the causes of successful collective performance. We tend to think that it rests in ability, that if we make the individuals smarter, we make the group (or mob) smarter. . . here I show that if we make the individuals more diverse, we get the same effects" (p. 4). Page notes that there are conditions necessary in order for diversity to produce benefits, including: a) the diversity must be relevant to the problem at hand; and b) in order for the diverse group to function its members must get along (p. xxiii). But like Surowiecki he argues diverse collections of people, none of whom are experts, have been able to make accurate predictions and more importantly have been able to find more and better solutions to complex problems.

There are several important points to note when thinking about distributed decision making in comparison to the framework being developed here. First, Surowiecki is discussing specifically decision-making, problem-solving or prediction. He argues crowd intelligence can be used on a variety of problems regardless of their complexity, but focuses on three types: cognition, coordination, and cooperation. Cognition problems have or will have definitive solutions (e.g. "who will win the presidential election?"). The second, coordination problems, require that a group figure out how to coordinate their behavior with each other (e.g. driving safely with a lot of traffic). The third is a cooperation problem, in which one must cope with others to work together (e.g. paying taxes). The important point, however, is that what he is focusing on is individuals making a decision, making a choice, casting a vote or making a purchase. My focus, though, is prior to a decision; it is a public recognizing and defining there even is a problem. The question is do the "crowds" have a role in recognizing and defining that an issue exists?

In many of Surowiecki's examples – such as the ox weighing contest – the rules of the game were already set-up and it was the crowd's job to decide among already defined choices to solve a problem which had a solution. He argues even for problems that are not well-defined the crowd can be useful because it can first uncover possible alternatives and then decide among those alternatives. He uses the example of the bee hive where bees do not necessarily know where there is going to be food but a whole number of bees are sent out as scouts with the assumption that one will find food. Extending that to business innovation, Surowiecki argues it is necessary to have a diversity of ideas or proposals in order to solve problems. Again, however, his focus is on solving a problem which everyone knows exists (e.g. the bee's had to eat).

Second, in many cases what Surowiecki is describing are market mechanisms or opinion polls where a diversity of independent, autonomous individuals make a choice and those choices are aggregated and averaged. He writes: "What I want to argue here is that the more influence a group's members exert on each other, and the more personal contact they have with each other, the less likely it is that the group's decisions will be wise ones. The more influence we exert on each other, the more likely it is that we will believe the same things and make the same mistakes" (2004, p. 42). Applying this to politics, in many ways this reflects a similar position as liberal ideas of democracy which Habermas and other discourse theorists have argued against as being an overly-individualistic and mechanistic concept of politics.

My point is that the "crowds" work is focused on a particular project and needs to be held up to scrutiny for the framework being developed here. That said, there are three points I think are particularly useful from Surowiecki's analysis. First, he emphasizes not all members of a group need be well-informed because via distributed mechanisms an informed (or wise) decision can be generated. Second, Surowiecki makes an argument against Lippmann (even though he doesn't explicitly mention Lippmann), contending the group or crowd is almost always smarter than experts because a diversity of individuals (each with a diversity of relevant information) can make decisions, solve problems, and make predictions. Third, he, like many theorists of difference, argue: "the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and contest, not consensus and compromise" (2004, p. xix).

A Distributed Perspective on Publics

Each of these areas of distribution could fall under what Turner *et al.* (2006) have called distributed collective practice (DCP). They describe DCP as “collective activity mediated through geographical and conceptual distances, time, collective resources, and heterogeneous perspectives or experiences” (p. 97). The authors define collective practices as practices which are conducted among distributed individuals who are acting independently but in a coordinated manner (p. 102). Recognizing a significant amount of empirical work in distributed practices has focused on CSCW in industry or the workplace, the authors argue distributed work should be more broadly conceived, encompassing collective practices which are carried out through information and technological infrastructures inserted “between human and human in a huge range of collective activity” (p. 97). To that end, the authors point out the movement toward distributed collective practice has deep historical roots – the invention of writing, the invention of the printing press, and the development of trust in writing over public witness. They note that the Global Information Infrastructure is now becoming a major substrate for distributed practices; as such we need to learn how to describe and build infrastructures which support DCP.

Though their main project is to advocate an understanding of DCP as a way to think about design, the work is useful here because they both define distributed and collective activities as well as see these distributed collective practices expanding beyond the infrastructures which support professional work, noting that much less is known about how “ordinary people” are engaging in Internet-enabled distributed collective practices. They contend, for example, that people are becoming less willing to let others speak for them regarding the issues in which they are most concerned. Challenging both CSCW and actor-network theories they ask: “Can we assume, for example, that before people are experts, professionals or ‘actors,’ they are first and foremost ordinary citizens concerned about the quality of the life they lead and what the future will hold for themselves and their children? Would this lead us to start thinking about designing infrastructures for collective practices differently, in ways that would help citizens better engage in the economic, political and social processes that shape their lives?” (p. 100).

What the discussion of distributed collective practice has provided to the work already forged in the other sections of the paper is a focus on how the nature of distribution may affect or alter public emergence. From Sproull we have a focus on voluntary versus workplace-based collective activities. And, more importantly, she provides us with the concept of microcontributions where time and work contributions (e.g. small units of text or commitments of time) provided by individuals who are distributed across location and time can be aggregated to produce “socially beneficial” results. In Hutchins work we see memory and cognition is distributed across people and things and that, as a result, the whole system of activity (e.g. a cockpit) is an entity that cannot simply be represented as an aggregation of all the individuals within it. That, in fact, this system has properties and capabilities that are quite different than its single individual components. Finally, from Surowiecki, we can see that a heterogeneous group of individuals, even if each individual is not fully-informed (or omniscient), can produce wise decisions under the right conditions.

So, to extend my borrowed definition from Dewey and ANT, we can now see that public emergence in an IT-enabled setting is a process of issue emergence where a heterogeneous set of distributed entities configure into a network to constitute a common issue of concern. Through a range of activity that collective works to define and legitimize a common issue and to make it a “thing” – an object of public contestation. That activity can be small (a microcontribution) as long as there is a mechanism or infrastructure in which it can be aggregated.

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Notes

¹ I am not arguing the theoretical categories I have chosen to explore in this paper are the only ones that could contribute to understanding this field nor are they even necessarily “categories” that are mutually exclusive. Further, it is important to stress the number of scholars writing about IT and politics is enormous. I cannot discuss all the work being done in the field and I will surely leave out some potentially important contributions. That said, I believe the fields I have put together are a sound, important and useful starting point.

² The list of those who connect public participation with democracy is long. Benjamin Barber (1998), for example, advocates for a conception of “strong democracy” in which citizens participate in “deliberative, self-governing communities.” American social capital theorists, such as Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone* (2001), make an underlying assumption that civic or public participation is fundamentally a part of self-governance. A full listing or discussion of these various theorists is outside the scope of this project. And though I also make normative assumptions about the importance of the public in participatory politics, this particular project focuses on conceptions of public issue emergence (or the lack of public emergence) and its relationship to IT.

³ Westbrook notes that even by late in 1918, Dewey had increasing doubts about the possibilities of postwar reconstruction and voiced concern over the manipulation of public opinion during the war (1991, p. 277).

⁴ See Norman C. Meier’s 1924 presidential election study and Carroll D. Woody’s study of the 1926 Chicago primary as described in Westbrook (1991).

⁵ See Wellborn (1969) for further discussion of Lippmann’s wartime experiences and their effect on his subsequent writing.

⁶ Lippmann was careful to point out this fictitious world was not a lie, but it was a human-made representation and that this creation was an inevitability. Lippmann wrote the political world that citizens were expected to engage in was always “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined” (1922, p. 18). This out-of-reach, imagined environment caused a problem for traditional conceptions of participatory democracy, however. In a complex political environment, citizens would necessarily have to make public decisions about things in which they had no direct experience and with a reliance on mediated information. According to Lippmann, those decisions would often be based on their distorted images of the world outside. Moreover, it wasn’t only that people did not have direct experience of the object of public debates; it was possible that people did not even know there was a debate, or what the debate was about (Marres, 2005).

⁷ Schudson (1978) writes the 1920s was a time when journalists, in particular, were becoming increasingly suspicious of “facts.” He notes two trends to account for this: an increase in industry public relations and an increase in war propaganda.

⁸ Though I believe Dewey provides a more optimistic reading of the ability of people to participate in public life than Lippmann, in no way do I contend that he was nostalgic about a particular type of democratic participation. Dewey’s own writings challenged any notion that a specific form of democracy was the only possible form.

⁹ In this distinction, Dewey rejects the concept that the private is equated with the individual and the public with the social, writing: “the line between private and public is to be drawn on the basis of the extent and scope of the consequences of acts which are so important as to need control, whether by inhibition or by promotion.”

¹⁰ See Marres: “If the issue is to be addressed, those who are jointly implicated in the issue must organize a community. What the members of a public share is that they are all affected by a particular affair, but they do not already belong to the same community. This is why they must form a political community” (2005, p. 214).

¹¹ In this article, Blumer does not operationalize these stages, but poses a series of questions, asking: how do social problems arise (e.g. agitation, political leaders, large scale organizations), what does society pick out as its social problems, and how does it come to pick out those problems?

¹² Antonio and Kellner (1992) argue Habermas was one of the few (if only) of the Frankfurt School theorists to critically engage with American Pragmatism. They go on to write the connections between Dewey and Habermas have largely been left unexamined in the academic literature and by Habermas himself and contend though

Habermas “noted his affinity for Dewey” and undertook analyses of other pragmatists, including Peirce and Mead, he never undertook a “systematic interrogation of Dewey’s work” (p. 278). See also Mark Whipple (2005) for a more recent article connecting Dewey and Habermas. Whipple connects the two on the basis of what he sees as a larger (though still outside of the mainstream) trend in social theory and empirical sociology toward participatory democratic theory.

¹³ Though Dewey insists the existence of a multiplicity of interests and multiplicity of publics which do not hold a common or essential shared interest, Pauline Johnson (2001) points out that in Dewey’s conceptualization, publics go through a process “whereby solidarities via an interpretation of the indirect consequences of transactions” form perceived common interests (p. 216). She continues: “this interpretive process must be capable of achieving consensus about the significance of these effects” (p. 217). Marres (2005) makes a similar claim stressing an idea of unity (versus consensus), writing that in a contemporary context, “it is not really possible to assume a public would display the type of unity that Dewey’s recipe for the settlement of issues supposes” (p. 215).

¹⁴ Widely seen as a response to Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Habermas’s *Structural Transformation* is an attempt to reconcile some of the pessimism of these earlier Frankfurt School theorists (Benhabib, 1992; Uwe Hohendahl, 1992). Though the older Frankfurt School thought is evident in his analysis, *Structural Transformation* is viewed as more optimistic about the democratic potential of the European Enlightenment and the role of reason in political will formation.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that Habermas’s conception of public opinion was different than Lippmann’s. Habermas distinguishes public opinion both from “mere opinion,” or uncritical prejudices of single individuals in aggregate form, and also from a “reputation that emerges in the mirror of opinions” (1989, p. 90). Instead, Habermas argues a public opinion can only be formed by a single public which engages in rational-critical debate.

¹⁶ It is in this aspect of Habermas’s analysis that his Frankfurt School roots are particularly evident. Again while more optimistic than Horkheimer and Adorno, *Structural Transformation* has vestiges of the mass culture critique (See Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T.W. (1972). *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (pp. 120-167). New York: Continuum). He criticizes as media were mass-circulated, news and information became a consumer item. Instead of fostering public deliberation, these media undermined the ability of audience members to engage each other in a discursive relationship. The public received already-mediated information, which they consumed rather than critiqued. As a consequence, instead of developing public opinion through rational-critical debate, public opinion became something that was manipulated and manufactured and the public sphere became a fiction.

¹⁷ Habermas begins his normative project in *Structural Transformation*, where his idea of the public sphere is first, and most comprehensively, developed. This is his most frequently referenced work in relation to his concept of the public, with many of his interpreters focusing here. Habermas’s later works continue to expand upon his ideas of the public sphere first developed in *Structural Transformation* and further develops his ideas of the ideal speech situation.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the “deliberative turn” in democratic see Dryzek, J.S. (1990) *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy, and Political Science*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press

¹⁹ In proposing his idea of discourse-based democracy, Habermas writes: “Discourse theory has the success of deliberative politics depend not on a collectively acting citizenry but on the institutionalization of the corresponding procedures and conditions of communication” (1996, p. 27).

²⁰ In this conceptualization, greeting refers to a mode of interaction where participants acknowledge the points of views of others; rhetoric includes the more affective norms of discourse and persuasion; and storytelling is a way to convey the situated or context-based knowledge of the various participants through a position of personal storytelling.

²¹ Arguing power relations are constitutive of social relations, Mouffe’s project is not to try to eliminate issues of power from political discourse; instead, she argues we need theories that understand how “to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values” (1999, p. 753), understanding power relations as a way to transform them.

²² Mouffe distinguishes between *antagonism* and *agonism*. Agonism is a struggle between adversaries not enemies. Or, in other places, she talks about the struggle between “friendly” or “legitimate enemies.” It is also important to note that Mouffe still advocates there are certain rules to political discourse, in the sense that “adversaries” adhere to some “ethico-political” principles of democracy (the right to speak, norms of civility); and second, she does not contend politics will not aim for some kind of unity or consensus, but that consensus will always be temporary, conflictual, and accompanied with dissent.

²³ For Fraser, these counterpublics have a dual constitution – they are both a space where marginalized groups can withdraw and “formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1992, p. 123), as well as a space or “training ground” where subordinated groups can try out different forms of protest.

²⁴ This is called the principle of “generalized symmetry” where all actors (human and non-human) can and should be described using the same terms.

²⁵ See Martin Heidegger, *What is a thing?*, trans. W. B. Barton, Jr., Vera Deutsch, Regnery, Chicago, 1968.

²⁶ In *Politics of Nature* (2004b), Latour spends a significant amount of time debunking what he sees as arbitrary divisions (human/nonhuman, nature/politics, subject/object). In that book he envisions “bringing the collective together” into one heterogeneous whole.

²⁷ For example, in a recent review by *Publishers Weekly* of *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, the reviewer notes that problems arise in the book: “when the authors indulge an outsized sense of scope- ‘this may be the birth of a new era, perhaps even a golden one, on par with the Italian renaissance, or the rise of Athenian democracy’.”

²⁸ Sproull & Kiesler (2004) note that studies have reported the mean message length ranges from 8 to 30 lines of text and people spend 10-20 minutes per session participating in their online cooperative work groups.