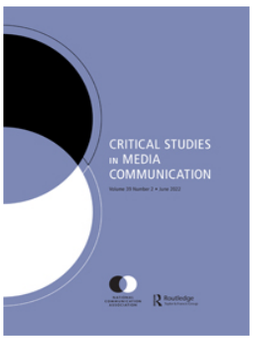

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Life after privacy. Reclaiming democracy in a surveillance society

by Firmin DeBrabander, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 170, £19.99/$24,95, ISBN 9781108811910

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BOOK REVIEW

Life after privacy. Reclaiming democracy in a surveillance society, by Firmin DeBrabander, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 170, £19.99/$24,95, ISBN 9781108811910

Contested privacy and the challenge of the public sphere in the age of surveillance

Firmin DeBrabander's *Life after privacy* is not just another book about the dangers of the internet, social media, big data, and the tech industry to the contested issue of privacy. In about half of the book, DeBrabander, who is Professor of Philosophy at the Maryland Institute College of Art, indeed discusses these issues and pushes the now familiar objections: the incredible power of data, the ubiquity of the internet of Things, and social media, which means that nothing, absolutely nothing, remains hidden for the algorithms of Silicon Valley. There is good reason to worry about this. No one can judge how this data will eventually work against users, although the predictions, and some experiments, such as China's Social Credit System, wherein good behavior is rewarded, but a misstep can have major consequences for finding a job, a home, or anything else, are certainly depressing. For DeBrabander, this, however, is already a bygone conclusion. Resistance is good, as well as careful use, but forget about the idea that these developments still can be stopped, let alone reversed. We are so set on convenience and comfort, and we expect more and more smooth and frictionless experiences, that we surround ourselves with products that serve us more and more, and accept environments that track and trace all our doings, while simultaneously exposing our lives and thoughts via the social media. The lax attitude of most users of the services of, for example, Apple, Google, Facebook, and Amazon, betrays the fact that the genie is out of the bottle and will be impossible to put back in.

DeBrabander's concern, however, is beyond private life. How do these developments impact public life? The subtitle to the book is even more specific: his aim is "reclaiming democracy." DeBrabander unfolds his position in a well written text, which is certainly accessible to a broad public. It is rather to the point, as the book is only 170 pages, divided into eight short chapters. In the first four chapters, he discusses the phenomenon of privacy and how it is under pressure in today's society. Privacy is not something that has only come to the fore in modernity. Already in antiquity, particularly within the Stoic tradition, privacy was essential. It received a second boost during the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter Reformation during the sixteenth century, supported by beliefs in the individual relationship between the Lord and each human being, without interference of any institute or society. Finally, privacy became indeed a major issue as well as achievement in the twentieth century, with the increase of wealth and spare time in the Western world. It nevertheless is a paradoxical achievement, expressed in the sprawl of suburban neighborhoods, wherein white, middle-class inhabitants were able to create a private paradise (or castle). But this ideal of privacy is not amendable to public participation. On the contrary, it meant a withdrawal from the world and public space and its unexpected, unanticipated, and unwanted encounters, as is expressed in the increasing constructions of walls around properties and neighborhoods, installing surveillance camaras, and initiating neighborhood control (p. 92). Suburban neighborhoods are the expression of segregation, the increasing distrust of strangers, and the loss of any democratic ideal beyond public space. It leads to "privatism," DeBrabander argues, a "focus on private, that is, personal goods, in contrast to—and inimical

to—common concerns" (p. 94). This brings him, in the final three chapters, to discuss the issue of public space, the democratic ideal, and collective action.

DeBrabander, of course, is not the first to draw a relationship between private life and privacy on the one hand and public life and democracy on the other. Moreover, as he claims in the opening chapter of the book, privacy is an essential part of the American Constitution; the book is rather America-orientated, which does not mean that it does not offer lessons for other Western countries. They certainly face the same challenges, although in the European Union there seems to be more room and power to limit the power of the tech industry. The right to live one's own life without interference from the state is at the heart of the American political system. This is not only because in America so much value is placed on freedom (which is often translated as freedom from government interference), but also because democracy and privacy are much more closely linked than one might expect. "Democracy requires that privacy be protected," writes DeBrabander, "because it nurtures an independent spirit, and emboldens citizens to experiment, with their travels as with their thoughts" (p. 3). Needless to say, this freedom of travel, including the travels of the mind, is under enormous pressure today. The more connected we are, the more friction there seems to be. This is a striking observation, since it was precisely the internet and, in some cases, the social media that were (and still are) presented as the new public spaces of our time: the places where people talk to each other, and where something of a collective opinion-forming takes place, as the philosopher Jürgen Habermas described to meetings over newspapers and books in the cafés, salons, and coffee houses of Vienna, Paris, and London in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Before our eyes, however, we see so-called echo chambers appearing, the power of harsh voices increasing, and with them the hardening of political positions. What social media engenders, especially when algorithms increasingly are used to serve us more and more of the same, was a "gamified" public discourse. It does not create room to actually appear to one another, to refer to the ideal of public space as stressed by Hannah Arendt, another philosopher that issued the challenge of public space in the modern age. It is precisely the public space that is understood as the heart of any democracy. The rule of the people only is possible through interaction, but outsourcing this interaction to government professionals is not enough (p. 162). That is why the withdrawal from public space and the retreat into the safe and private environment of the suburb or the virtual echo chamber is a direct threat to democracy. It is not a withdrawal that is temporary, a moment of isolation, in order to recuperate and appear in public again.

The democratic ideal beyond public space is the encounter with one another, the exchange of ideas and convictions, learning to deal with plurality and to bear with strangers. This ideal is regularly connected to the public sphere, which has both a physical and a translocal dimension: it reaches from the square, street, theater and church where people encounter one another towards discussions in the media like newspapers, television shows, and the socials. Clearly, all these are contested: are the socials indeed public? Is television not too divided to different target groups? What about newspapers in times of distrust? Are there still spaces where we indeed can encounter one another? DeBrabander has sufficient eye for the physical space, although as an architect I am of course biased here. Concrete public space has lost its meaningfulness, he writes, partly because of the movement to the suburbs and the attempts to exclude strangers from these spaces. However, also the new embracing of public space in a movement as *New Urbanism* does not fulfill the democratic ideal. On the contrary: the new public space either does an attempt to rebuild the charm of a 1950's community, or is completely dominated by the commercial exploitation of the place. In both cases, it is at odds with the agnostic character of meaningful exchange between participants (p. 140). But DeBrabander is not without hope: new networks certainly

also can empower the public. Occupy Wallstreet as well as the Arab Spring movement, both from 2011, started on Facebook. To really get others and a more plural audience involved in the protest, it had to take to the streets, occupy the square, become a public protest. Whether the movement actually succeeded is up for debate. DeBrabander points out the lack of hierarchy and organization as a weakness of these movements—while both also have their strengths. The Black Lives Matter movement is a better example, where democratic participation goes hand-in-hand with clear leadership.

The greatest challenge of public space is of course its boundaries and surveillance, especially if we take plurality as the starting point of this space. Plurality certainly comes with friction and discomfort. In this respect, he also argues that all voices need to be heard in public. Even the extreme voices of supremacists: "Racists views," he writes, "can be addressed better this way, I wager, and potential violence preempted, prepared for, or defused" (p. 150). He acknowledges that success is not guaranteed, but still he would prefer to take this risk, then to let them hide, and grow and flourish under the skin. Any interference in the debate is, of course, also framed, putting dissenting voices in an underdog position, allowing them to gain momentum again. However, this remains a difficult dilemma, because the other side is that the message may be refuted in an open discussion, but do arguments really change the position of those participating and those reviewing the debates? It might be, but not always in the direction one would hope for. In Europe, we can see how far right-wing parties have gained a foothold, not only by being represented in parliaments, but also by the established parties slowly but surely adopting positions (out of fear of losing votes).

The question that remains, in my opinion, is to what extent we as a society should "reclaim democracy" by tackling the big tech companies? What should they do with fake news and obvious lies? How to prevent serious influences on elections? Is there a way to break through echo chambers and filter bubbles? This is all rather obvious: every democracy does need to set its limits. But if the whole surveillance industry has this impact on democracy, can we not also turn it around, use it in a positive way? What would that mean? Is it more than adjusting or even banning algorithms (which would of course be the end of every tech company)? Or can we expect companies such as Google and Amazon teaming up, not to gain more data, not to keep them attached to their screens, but to use their power and platforms draw people back into public spaces? DeBrabander wrote his book on the eve of the Corona pandemic. The pandemic, and the restrictions imposed on public life to curb the spread of the virus, make his point even more apparent: it is out there, where we can have unplanned encounters and bump into one another by accident, is the place where we can ultimately reclaim democracy.

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