

5-12-2015

## Review of Facebook Democracy: The Architecture of Disclosure and the Threat of Public Life by José Marichal (Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012)

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### Recommended Citation

Foote, Justin G. (2015) "Review of Facebook Democracy: The Architecture of Disclosure and the Threat of Public Life by José Marichal (Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012)," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol11/iss1/art11>

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**Abstract**

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**Keywords**

Facebook, Democracy, Self, Public

As the influence of social media continues to thrive in our everyday lives, the connection between democracy and social media has become a subject undergoing intense study within multiple areas of academia. José Marichal's *Facebook Democracy: The Architecture of Disclosure and the Threat of Public Life* seeks to broaden our understanding of Facebook's role within democracy in an attempt to better elucidate how individuals have utilized social media as an outlet for democratic action both implicitly and explicitly. Marichal introduces many of the commonly known issues about Facebook (i.e. privacy, security, mobilization) and positions them alongside their complementary democratic concerns. Unfortunately, the book serves best as an introduction into the potential connection between Facebook and democracy rather than an in depth investigation into the theoretical concepts. It raises many poignant questions and provides valuable inquiries; however, readers may be left feeling the analysis was rudimentary or even underdeveloped regarding the depth of the discussion.

Marichal's book functions best when approached as two distinct segments: Chapters 1 through 6 concentrate on how the architecture of disclosure constructed by Facebook affects contemporary democratic life while Chapters 7, 8, and 9 each contribute relevant material toward our understanding of the influence Facebook willingly, or unwillingly, operates within diverse realms of democratic discourse. Marichal then provides a concluding chapter summarizing the previous chapters' main arguments as well as suggesting the importance of embracing a greater sense of listening, as a possible means for increased collaboration, on social media.

The primary argument posited (Chapters 1-4) focuses on how the structure of Facebook affords users the unique opportunity to enact democratic discourse beyond previously held conceptions. Chapter 1 provides a clear exploration of the utopian and dystopian perceptions previous research on Facebook has employed, as well as a detailed account of the market forces influencing user activity. Chapter 2 begins the crux of Marichal's argument, Facebook's architecture of disclosure and the importance of sharing personal information thus leading toward increasing an individual's sense of personalization when engaging other users on Facebook. Facebook's continued success requires users to share information. Facebook is thus designed to increase a user's desire to share information all the while continually advocating that users control the information they both share and encounter from other users. In Chapter 3, the author argues that Facebook's "preselected" networks diminish our sense of the public. Thus, we begin to see the conflict arising between our need for interaction with/in the public sphere and our desire for personalization within the private sphere. Chapter 4 continues Marichal's argument as he develops the importance of the personal citizen. In this chapter the author argues that Facebook allows users the ability to engage public

discussion within the comfort and security of their personalized space by engaging others within Facebook groups. Through Facebook groups, users can maintain a sense of comfort while engaging the oftentimes-unknown world of public political discourse. Chapter 5 expands the argument constructed in the previous chapter by connecting Facebook's architecture of disclosure to the concept of digital citizen and arguing how Facebook allows users to participate in democratic action. Chapter 6 concludes Marichal's primary argument by arguing how users on Facebook present a performed self and the consequences that accompany the ability to personalize information when engaging political discourse.

The remaining chapters each follow a unique line of argument that furthers Marichal's argument on the connection between Facebook and democracy. Chapter 7 focuses on the role of Facebook in mobilizing citizens for social change which the aspect of the power of social media which most people are familiar. The chapter identifies both the benefits of increased networking ability and the potential downfalls of increased corporate intrusion. Chapter 8 addresses issues of privacy and the creation of a specified self, questions of anonymity, and the potential for backlash once users determine the need for privacy outweighs the importance to disclose information. Chapter 9 is a noticeably shorter chapter devoted to probing the connection between power and social media. Examining the connection between public and private, the author examines the connection to the nation state and consequences that ultimately arise when using social media as a means to navigate discussion between public and private spheres. Each of these chapters provides valuable insight into the respective issues but seems to emerge without the foresight indicated throughout the previous group of chapters.

As previously mentioned, although certainly holding promise, the book never quite grasps the level of analysis or importance hinted at in the introductory section. One key area where the problem becomes exceedingly evident arises when the book fails to delve into varying types of democracy. Marichal implies the connection between his material and deliberative practice multiple times throughout his book, but little more than a passing glance of discussion rarely accompanies these instances. He identifies deliberation as a necessity of democracy but any larger argument languishes. Additionally, Marichal provides a limited discussion of agonism midway through the book when discussing Facebook's ability to foster a more pluralistic society (p. 91) and implies a connection to agonistic democracy when discussing the necessary friction of democratic life (p. 154). Agonism acknowledges the political not as being unipolar but instead as multiplural, requiring individuals to view others as allies instead of allies. Thus, agonism adopts a framework requiring an individual to

respect multiple perspectives, creating a necessary interaction of competing value systems. Marichal concludes *Facebook Democracy* with a call for Facebook users to embrace increased connection and discussion between diverse users as a means to allowing the site to become, “more useful in creating effective citizens.” (p. 159). He admittedly does not focus this book on the different styles of democratic society yet such a discussion could only bolster the book’s effectiveness at demonstrating Facebook’s influence on democracy.

Marichal’s concluding chapter on “How to Listen on Facebook,” presents one greatly under-represented area of social media research—how to incorporate the art of listening in a realm of constant chatter. Marichal’s argument throughout the chapter identifies the importance of listening as a means to creating increased connection and understanding among individuals. The author argues that adopting a focus on listening would allow Facebook users to position their selves at the forefront of a digital public sphere. Continuing the major critique of the book, however, Marichal provides multiple ideas for readers to ponder but provides limited analysis and in depth discussion. For instance, while highlighting the importance of listening, little research on listening as a practice is utilized throughout the discussion. As a brief example, the author’s argument parallels Lipari’s notion of “listening otherwise” as a means to overcoming difference. Lipari describes listening otherwise as, “to welcome the other inside, but as an *other*, as a quest, as a not-me. It doesn’t insist on understanding or familiarity, or shared feelings.”<sup>1</sup> Focusing on the importance of listening, Marichal echoes Lipari’s belief that listening creates the opportunity to encounter radical alternative perspectives thus creating disruption to our everyday thought process and challenging our beliefs.<sup>2</sup> This brief discussion ties nicely into Marichal’s call to action at the close of the book.

Finally, while the text provides a solid overview of basic information there are multiple grammatical and editorial errors throughout the text. These errors do not undermine the validity of information being present but they do distract the educated reader and they certainly do not enhance the author’s arguments. The proofing errors as well as the general lack of depth in many of the chapters may lead readers to feel that they are reading a collection of separate papers rather than a unified argument that spans multiple areas of analysis. At the very least, the errors may cause readers to believe they are reading an almost polished draft rather than a finished manuscript on such an important topic. Marichal’s book does not approach the depth available for such a rich topic; however, the surface

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<sup>1</sup> Lipari, Lisbeth. (2009). Listening otherwise: the voice of ethics. *The International Journal of Listening* 23, 56.

<sup>2</sup> Lipari, Lisbeth. (2010). Listening, thinking, being. *Communication Theory* 20, 350.

level analysis provided truly helps establish multiple potential areas for further research. The author's ability to mine information from a wide variety of disciplines evidences the boundless influence social media has, and will continue to have, on our contemporary democratic society. Looking past the deficiencies, Marichal's book provides a worthwhile examination of the current transition to a greater digital democracy. The author provides readers valuable discussion on a breadth of significant issues concerning the connection between Facebook and democracy as well as sufficiently raising questions that warrant future consideration. The book will surely increase a reader's interest on such an important topic and will no doubt prompt contemplation on how the arguments and ideas can be expanded into different social media platforms and democratic practices.