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(Dis)Affordances: Publicness and the Question of Absence

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Abstract

Recent works in media and communications studies have increasingly embedded the analysis of publicness within Science and Technology Studies (STS) and, interrelatedly, the new materialism. The result has emphasized the significant role that everyday objects play in engendering various publics. Yet, the uncritical incorporation of the new materialism and its bias toward present forms of materiality has led many scholars of the media to ignore the relationships between absent material objects and publicness. This is a key shortcoming since absent material realities are actively, and not so innocently, produced as non-thinkable alternatives to what exists, impeding externalized material worlds from becoming pronounceable as a need or an aspiration within the contexts of hegemonic globalization. In this essay, I draw on emerging works in media and communications studies, along with the social and political history of revolutionary Iran, as touchstones for a critical discussion on the linkages between publicness, materiality, and absence. I conclude with some observations and questions on publicness amid emergency climate change.

Keywords

absence, affordances, new materialism, materiality, objects, post-colonial, public, publicness, science and technology studies, Subaltern

The Materiality of Publicness

Willems (2019) and Özkan (2023) demonstrate two distinct ways in which scholars of the media have conceptualized materiality. Writing under the rubric of "The Politics of Things," Willems's discussion of the materiality of publicness focuses on the *function*

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of technical objects within the context of the sociology of communication and particularly Habermas's (1989) work on the public sphere. Willems's aim is to resolve the dichotomy between "online" and "offline" forms of publicness by showing that publics emerge at the intersection of technical media, physical space, and materiality (see also Cassegard, 2014; Iveseon, 2007; Tierney, 2013). This perspective is consonant with a broader, albeit recent, movement in media studies that is partly shaped by STS and the new materialism. Whereas earlier scholarship on the public sphere was centered on print, electronic, and digital media (see Anderson, 1983; Habermas, 1989; Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998; Thompson, 1995), recent works have also focused on the key role that everyday objects, including walls, shoes, and foods, play in generating publics and, by extension, politics (see Agbiboa, 2017; Banegas et al., 2012; Gilman, 2009; Guseh, 2008).[1]

The strength of this literature is that it illuminates the specificity of relations between everyday objects and publicness. Its limitation, however, is that this body of work is shaped by a model of communication based on the exchange of meaningful messages from producers to receivers, which is pervaded by the former's intentionality. While Willems does not dismiss the latency of materiality, she is primarily concerned with objects as carriers of meaningful content. This includes an offline smartphone that is significant insofar as it has pictures stored, a T-shirt emblazoned with different words, and a color that is marked with political connotations (Willems, 2019: 5–10). An emphasis on meaning, however, falls short of capturing what objects *do* (Gillespie et al., 2014; Packer and Crofts Wiley, 2012; Parks and Starosielski, 2015). Many contingent objects act by means of their very materiality, not least by often revealing the ontological indiscernibility of medium and world (Peters, 2015). And this is precisely Özkan's point.

Titled "Wireless Telephone, Materiality, and Making of the National Auditory in Turkey" (2023), Özkan's article focuses on the *matter* of technical objects as structurating phenomena in ways that recall Innis's (1950) *medium theory*. Özkan is not particularly concerned with the function of the wireless technology she studies, that is, the transmission of sound and meaning. Instead, she explores how ordinary people tinkered with the new wireless as technological objects in 1920s Turkey, including assembling/fixing transmitters and receivers. So doing, she illustrates how these emerging wireless objects afforded the attainment of new technical skills in the conduct of everyday life – skills that, in turn, became the markers for social differentiation. In other words, Özkan sheds light on how a new medium reassembled social relations through its materiality and the technical virtuosity it exhibited. As Innis (1950) reminds us, mediums are not necessarily linked to meaning directly. Rather, they are the things whose physicality can change social and political relations.

Indeed, if publicness refers to what is open or visible to a multiplicity, then its objects need not act as projection screens for meaningful or intentional content. Rather, a certain order of objects is also visible for all or many to see, feel, and inhabit, occasioning a public through its material affordances. Sociolinguists Shankar and Cavanaugh (2017) have shown that everyday objects can authorize, allow, encourage, permit, suggest, and influence words and concepts. Thus, by exploring objects not as mere couriers of messages (e.g., a T-shirt emblazoned with different *words*) but also in terms of what they *do* with language, we open up new ways of understanding the linkages between materiality,

publics, and politics. This is because everyday objects are capable of transforming into generative actors whose appearance and standardization can regularize our vocabularies, political discourses, and backgrounds of shared meaning, constituting distinct publics in the process (Sefat, 2020, 2023).

Take my work (2023) on the institutionalization of martyrdom in revolutionary Iran during the 1980s as an illustrative example. The dead body of an Iranian soldier killed during the Iran-Iraq conflict imposed constraints on what words came to successfully represent it socially. "Renegade," "rebel," and "mercenary" are all terms that failed to signify the corpses of Iranian soldiers at the level of multitudes in Tehran during that time. Conversely, the politico-religious term "martyr," which is embedded within provincial historical text and speech in Iran, was disseminated widely even if it had not been extensively used before. The institutionalization of martyrdom that followed in Tehran between 1981 and 1989, therefore, was also a process by which the proliferation of dead bodies *mobilized* provincial terms into an Islamist discourse of martyrdom. Said differently, corpses as material things merged with convention to help propagate an Islamist discourse with wide-ranging social and political consequences.

This insight is linked to one of cultural sociology's key achievements, which is to illustrate that the *physicality* of an environment is interwoven with what is politically *thinkable* there (Cabrera Arus, 2017; Molnár, 2016, 2017; Mukerji, 2012; Pugh, 2022). Scholars of the recent material and infrastructural turn in media and communications studies, as such, are right to pay attention to the myriad ways in which publicness and political imaginaries are linked to a broader world of *things*, and how this fundamental connection changes what it might mean to conceive of posthuman agency and the political. Yet, the bulk of the scholarship on materiality has failed to adequately consider the subaltern spaces of *absences*. This shortcoming may be the result of the Eurocentrism that permeates the human and social sciences and which leads one to ask: How do absent objects shape publics and politics?

The Question of Nonhuman Absences

As Derrida's (1977) deconstructionist theory has demonstrated, pairs of opposites such as culture/nature, soul/body, and mind/matter play a fundamental role in ordering discourses in Western cultures. This is a hierarchy of value in which one side is given priority over the other (here, the left side). *Presence* over *absence* is another relation of subordination that is constitutive of Western metaphysics. It is a hierarchy of opposition that may be seen as related to the *presentism* that harnesses not only STS and the new materialism but also the field of media studies. This is a problem, particularly from the vantage point of scholars of (post)colonialism, feminism, and subaltern studies (Butler, 1993; Chakrabarty, 2007; Guha, 1983; Santos, 2001, 2006; Spivak, 1985a, 1985b; Stoler, 2016). With respect to the latter, the problem is especially critical since the subaltern is conceived not as an absence that is waiting to appeal to return to the collective. Rather, it is an exteriority whose radical absence conditions the possibility of our domains of intelligibility (Chakrabarty, 2007; Spivak, 1981a).

Hammer's (2020) work on imperial history homes in on this point. She shows how the *externalization* of racialized bodies paved the ground for the use and circulation of

emancipatory terms such as liberté, égalité, and fraternité *within* the body politic in colonial/revolutionary France. Indeed, the French civil sphere expressed its priorities and desires by means of a referential system that was formed by two projects of epistemic overhaul that worked as dislocated and unacknowledged parts of a vast two-handed engine within "France" and on the colonial frontier. Constituted by and through the externalization of the "other," that referential system contained implicit colonial prejudices predating the individuals uttering them. The weight of that colonial history and prejudice, as such, came to bear on any articulation within the "civil sphere," helping to sustain the *externalization* of certain groups by stabilizing relations between colonial words/concepts and their referents.

While the civil and public spheres point to fundamentally different phenomena, Nancy Fraser's (1990) well-known critique of the latter is similarly centered on the linkages between absence and domination. Fraser deromanticizes Habermas's account of the public sphere by questioning its gendered bearers of visibility. The "bourgeois conception of the public sphere [and its absent women] . . ." says Fraser (1990), "was also a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule" (p. 62). These works seek, in their different ways, to demonstrate that what does not exist is *actively*, and not so innocently, produced as non-existent, non-credible, and non-thinkable alternatives to what exists (also see Go, 2020; Norgaard, 2019; Stoler, 2016; Willems, 2023).

Note, however, that humans do not have a monopoly on issues related to marginalization and absence (Fowles, 2010; Miller, 2005; Olsen, 2003). Yet a lingering form of human-centrism burdens much of the literature on marginalization, limiting its scope to humans alone, including disparaged/externalized peasants, religious groups, women, different races, and the colonized. The result fails to adequately consider how the operations that help subalternize humans are also inflicted on species of plants and animals, along with material flows that refuse form. Indeed, the subalternization of humans and non-humans are never two separate processes (Stoler, 2016).

Take the 17th-century demarcation of "nature" and its "objects" from "society" and its "subjects" (Latour, 1991). That division of labor was reinscribed in 19th-century colonial anthropology in the form of new dualisms such as primeval/modern and savagery/civilization (see Klemm, 1853; Morgan, 1877; Tylor, 1871). In the process, the *absence* of sophisticated (industrial) technological objects was linked to *primeval* and *savagery*, while the *presence* of those objects was associated with *modern* and *civilization*. The result continues to posit *progress* as the very temporal structure of modernity, consisting of a linear movement from the *absence* to the *presence* of developed/sophisticated technological objects, that is, from primeval to modern and from savagery to civilization (Fowles, 2010).

Technological things, as such, remain the sovereign objects of *progress* and its many academic subfields such as development and globalization studies, while the bio-habitat, in its endless heterogeneity, can only be articulated in the name of *that* history. This slide problematizes the idea of plants and animals representing themselves in the modern human sciences. It is a problem that becomes obvious to us in a very ordinary way: while academic works centered on ecology find it necessary to also speak of technology, books about modernity, progress, development, and globalization seldom find the bio-habitat,

and its various species, a topic *necessarily* worth engaging with. The point here is that savages and primitives (people who, unlike the moderns, lack sophisticated technological objects) and species of the bio-habitat (things that, unlike technological objects, cannot retain any chronological trace of their prior development) had to be *woven together* and *externalized together* to enable progress to emerge as the temporal structure of modernity.

This ecological connection between humans, nonhuman organisms, and artifacts means that the externalization of aspects of one is always already the subalternization of aspects of the other (Ingold, 2012; Stoler, 2016). The forces that produce human/nonhuman spaces of absences are also similar. They include western-based scientific knowledges (Go, 2020), market-based capitalist notions of productivity (Santos, 2001), dominant scales that privilege the universal and the global over the particular and the local (Chakrabarty, 2007), modern systems of classification that naturalize difference (Spivak, 1981b), and, not least, the dominance of linear time over an ecology of alternative temporalities (Fabian, 2014). Overcoming the lack of consideration of power and domination in our formulations of publicness thus requires that we move beyond our human-centrism and, interrelatedly, our emphasis on artifacts. It also requires that we ask: What do we lose by disregarding *absent material forms and flows, including living organisms*, in our analysis of publicness?

The Material (Dis)Affordances of Publicness

"Affordances" is a productive term with which to think about relations between material absences and publicness. Ecological psychologist Gibson (1979) introduced affordances as the *potentialities* held by an object for a particular set of actions. The chair, for instance, invites us to sit down. Or, a plunge into a river's pool invites the indexical name/signifier *ta ta* for the Runa in the Amazon (Kohn, 2013). Anthropologists Ingold (1992, 2018) and, more recently, Keane (2018), along with media scholars Hutchby (2001, 2003) and Lievrouw (2014), have helped develop this concept by arguing that the sheer materiality of things can provide openings to new possibilities, systems of meaning, and languages that traverse processes of subject formation.

Not surprisingly, Keane's and Hutchby's shared embrace of the notion of affordances stems from their common disdain for the more reductive versions of determinism and the stronger versions of social constructivism that have long afflicted and exhausted debate in both anthropology and communications studies. What Keane and Hutchby see in affordances is the reconciliation between the two opposing poles through the merger of subjectivism and objectivism and, by extension, interpretation and causality.

Take the objective features of a chair – a stationary thing, a rigid surface, correct height – that affords sitting on. Yet, the chair is realized relationally and thus interpretively in that one, particularly a child, may not sit on it. The chair, therefore, "exists as affordances relative to the other properties of some other perceiving entity and relative to that entity's activity" (Keane, 2018: 31). This insight shapes Keane's attempt to replace the term "precondition" with "affordances." To call something a precondition, Keane explains, suggests that there is only one relevant outcome. "Affordances," Keane (2018) continues, "leave things more open-ended – without, however, turning people into

Promethean creators of their worlds, as if from scratch" (p. 32). The appeal of this structured kind of open-endedness is also what motivates Hutchby (2001, 2003) to call for reframing the study of communication technology by focusing on material affordances.

Let us, however, move beyond the classic example of the chair's affordances and ask: What are we to make of the profound asymmetries, the muffling of contingency, or the radical suppression of chance that the vast sociological literature on domination has brought to light (see Bourdieu, 1977; Scott, 1990; Thompson, 1984; Wacquant, 1998)? As Bourdieu (1977) correctly points out, there are no competing discourses or options under domination. *Doxa* makes an asymmetrical social milieu appear inevitable and timeless or part of the order of nature rather than culture. Such a world "goes without saying because it comes without saying" (Bourdieu, 1977: 167). Domination, Bourdieu contends, establishes our very notions of common sense, which we embody with time.

Similarly, Scott's (1990) pioneering work on domination points out that the regulatory law in such a context helps generate a hidden transcript that, while subversive, is spoken offstage, underground, and in private, *forbidding* it from the luxury of open political activity. So, can there really be more than one relevant outcome under domination? Does the concept of "affordances," as formulated by Keane and Hutchby, retain its relevance in such a context? As Spivak (1985a) deftly inquired, when the robber presents the non-choice of "your money or your life," what voice are you really *afforded* (p. 129)?

While the attempt to develop a more dynamic and flexible alternative to determinism is understandable, the notion of affordances does not offer an adequate matrix for understanding how the materiality of things, in their presences or absences, generates various forms that social relations take, including domination. Affordances, I wish to contend, is a more useful concept if deployed in juxtaposition to *disaffordances*. Whereas affordances is about how the presence of certain kinds of materiality occasions various outcomes, disaffordances is about how the absence of distinct kinds of materiality stifles certain possibilities. This includes unique kinds of representation, like how the absence of fire (as a referent) disaffords smoke (as its sign). It also includes alternative referential systems. Here, too, my previous work (2020, 2023) on revolutionary Iran provides an illustrative example by showing that the disappearance of a great many *things* from the public in Tehran during the 1980s disafforded a liberal vocabulary at the level of multitudes.

Consider the relations between the exteriorization of women's bodies, domination, and Ayatollah Khomeini's seemingly transcendental status as a revolutionary leader during the Iran-Iraq conflict.[2] With the state law making the hijab compulsory in Iran, and women coerced into veiling themselves beginning in the early 1980s, their attire became standardized across most cities. Two forms of hijab emerged: the *chador*, a long fabric that covered the entire body except for the face; and the *manto maghnae*, which consisted of a long coat over long trousers, and fabric covering the hair. The only skin visible through the latter was the face, from one cheek to another and from the forehead to the chin. Hands were also visible from the wrists to the tip of the fingers. Thus, women's hair and the bulk of their skin were pushed into the private domain. This form of material externalization from the public, however, was not limited to women's bodies but came to cover most things that discursively pertained to bodily pleasures, including bright attire, luxury items, Western foods, and so on.

What is interesting here is that the removal of such objects from the public was linked to the disappearance of various public concepts and terms, including the notion of "plurality." This is because the term "plurality" no longer had public objects to address. The division of objects into conscripts in the battle of "good" versus "evil" that sustained martyrdom as a discourse during the 1980s, and pushing "evil" objects such as women's skin/hair, alcohol, VHS tapes, and so forth out of the public domain and into the private, meant that the middle ground was left with no objects to speak of, so it was not an objective space to begin with. Thus, the term "plurality" had no ground on which to emerge and no objects to signify, and was gradually phased out from public circulation between 1981 and 1989. Similarly, the usage of other liberal terms such as "freedom" and "rights" were muffled as they no longer had material things to refer to and circulate through. The result consolidated martyrdom as a referential system and suppressed the existing liberal background of shared meaning.

One consequence of this process was the absence of any public debate concerning the appropriateness of sending children to fight in the Iran-Iraq conflict, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of adolescent fighters. State censorship was by no means solely responsible for the lack of such debate. Rather, in the absence of a liberal vocabulary, the concept of "children's rights" was not a public concept. This does not mean that the idea of child soldiers escaped ethical concerns. Even war recruiters had reservations about enlisting some children based on their young age or small size (Ahmadi, 2018).

Those who insisted on recruiting children, however, often claimed that they were "spiritually ready" or had received training in using armor, despite their small stature (Ahmadi, 2018). The key point here is that parental and recruiter misgivings about child soldiers were not expressed through the liberal language of "rights" in general, and "children's rights" in particular. Instead, grief or criticism had to be framed in terms of martyrdom as the dominant referential system of the era, which was interwoven with Ayatollah Khomeini. Said differently, the elimination of distinct kinds of materiality from the public *disafforded* an alternative liberal vocabulary at the level of multitudes during Khomeini's leadership in the Islamic Republic, and this was but one way through which domination was established under his reign (Sefat, 2023).

But what is remarkable here is how the removal of various objects from the public also helped shape private dissent. Indeed, private conversations inside Tehran did not seem to portray a cohesive understanding of how dissenters might systematically push back against the state in Iran. What we know now of the various private conversations about the future among dissenters *within* Tehran between 1981 and 1989 is that they had come to view Ayatollah Khomeini as beyond their reach, as beyond the law, and as interchangeable with the Islamic Republic.

This condition propagated two primary fantasies about the end of Khomeini's reign among these dissenters in Tehran: the regime's implosion or a foreign invasion. And many dissenters generally saw no role for themselves in either scenario. They believed that the regime's "backwardness" and its "pure evil" would lead to its own demise. In other words, so long as the totality remained, Khomeini appeared as beyond the dissenters' reach. Thus, Khomeini's unraveling seemed inconceivable short of the Islamic Republic's implosion, and the subject did not understand how it could play a role in bringing about such an outcome. This constituted, to use Derrida's terminology, Khomeini's *transcendence*.

The "transcendental" is that which appears to be beyond the reach of freeplay (e.g., resignification, performativity, history) (Derrida, 1978). God is an example of this. Despite being constructed within this world by historical processes, contingencies, materiality, and performativity, God can still appear as the world's originator and thus its origin, so that it can appear as beyond this world – as *transcendental*. Note, however, that a transcendental God does not mean that it is beyond the structure – it is not – rather, it means that it *appears* beyond it. Khomeini's transcendence was, therefore, also a matter of appearance. Appearance is generated by objects visible to us. Thus, Khomeini's transcendence was, in part, linked to the *disappearance of some objects* from, and the *regularization of other objects* within, the public (Sefat, 2020, 2023).

Indeed, everyday objects, in their presences and absences, remain key collaborators in constructing and impeding various modes of publicness that condition the possibility of hegemony and domination. Publicness, as such, is as much about visible objects as it is about things that have been externalized and consigned to the public's outside dumping ground. As scholars of the media, then, we must consider publics in terms of the affordances and disaffordances that the presence and absence of things generate. In so doing, we offer not only materialist accounts of the political discourses that exist in our object-domains of analysis but also show how the absence of certain kinds of materiality suppresses the formation of various alternative referential systems, impeding distinct kinds of political action and resistance in the process.

Scholars of the media who aim to pursue new directions in exploring relations between various absent material forms and domination may wish to take note of the relatively recent, but growing, body of work that brings an ecological imagination to bear on publicness (Cox, 2013; Ehrenfeld, 2020; Peters, 2015). These works are important not only because of the perilous conditions occasioned by climate change but also because they extend our conceptions of materiality to material flows (clouds, ruination, etc.) and living organisms (body, hair, etc.). One suggestion here is to consider the dual material movement that has been unfolding since the 19th century and accelerating since the 20th century. On the one hand, technological things now weight about 30 trillion tons, representing a mass of more than 50 kg for every square meter of the Earth's surface, forming an all-encompassing Technosphere (Haff, 2014). Here, the key question is: What kinds of referential systems, backgrounds of shared meaning, and publics is the materiality of the Technosphere *affording* in various contexts?

On the other hand, this vast Technosphere is primarily dependent on fossil fuel, the burning of which has multiplied the earth's temperature and helped eradicate an unprecedented range of living material forms. Indeed, the current rate of the *loss* of diversity among species is similar in scale to the event that wiped out the dinosaurs around 65 million years ago (Chakrabarty, 2021). Here, the key question is: What kinds of alternative discourses, substitute referential systems, and liberatory *publics* has the disappearance of a diverse range of living material forms *disafforded*?

Ingold (2018), who has developed one of the most distinct voices within the new materialism, emphasizes the latter question by encouraging us to position ourselves at the weave crest of material disappearances and examine how such instances of loss correspond with the foreclosure of distinct modes of thought. The point here is to rethink the *matter* of publicness by adopting an ecological perspective on materialism, such that we

can recover the possibilities that our dominant approaches in media and communications studies have stifled, and to prepare ourselves for the possibility of a new critical scheme with which to scrutinize the *present* and its formative *absences*.

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Notes

1. As Thompson (1995) has pointed out, the terms "public" and "private" have been articulated in two predominant senses since at least the medieval to early modern periods. In the first instance, "the domain of institutionalized political power . . . increasingly vested in the hands of a sovereign state and . . . the domains of economic activity and personal relations which fell outside of direct political control" (Thompson, 1995: 121) came to constitute the dichotomy between the public and the private. From the mid-16th century on, then, the "public" has referred to the domain of the state and the "private" to the sphere of life excluded or separated from it. This definition of the public, however, is not relevant to critical theory for reasons that I do not wish to explore here. The more relevant and useful definition, and the one that I have in mind, revolves around a second sense in which the public-private dichotomy emerges. Here, "public" refers to "open" or "available to a multiplicity" (Thompson, 1995: 121). What is public is what is visible for all or many to see or hear. What is private, by contrast, is what is hidden from view and restricted to a circle of people (Thompson, 1995: 122). Thus, visibility at the level of multitudes is key to publicness.
2. Ayatollah Khomeini emerged as one of the most visible leaders of various revolutionary movements in the lead-up to the Iranian Revolution in 1979 (Sohrabi, 2018). With the inauguration of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini became the highest state authority – the Leader of the Revolution – until his death in 1989.

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