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Staying with the Secret: The Public Sphere in Platform Society

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Abstract

Investigating the structural transformation of the public sphere should reckon with the secret and its modes of organization. The expansion of secrecy effected by the infrastructures, platforms, and applications of media technology is constitutive for the emergence and transformation of ‘digital publics’. Offering a rereading of Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* that is attuned to the organizational principle of secrecy, this paper discusses current notions of mediated publics in juxtaposition with the redoubling of media-technological and organizational secrecy at work in platform society. How are illegibility, opacity and unavailability organized? Instead of assuming accountability, publicity and transparency as epistemological a priori, investigating the transformation of the public sphere would benefit from adopting epistemes of secrecy and opacity.

Keywords

digital publics, public sphere, secrecy, secret societies, technological culture, transparency, social organization

Arcanization

Some years ago, the historian of science Peter Galison played a remarkable numbers game in an effort to quantify the ratio of classified to declassified documents. By aggregating the acquisition rates and inventories of large American libraries and the Library of Congress, and calculating with the official data provided by the Information Security Oversight Office, Galison estimated that the ‘classified universe’ was five to ten times *larger* than the body of publicly accessible texts (Galison gauged that there are around 8 billion pages of classified material from the years 1978 to 2003). Inverting common-sense assumptions, ‘[t]he closed world is not a small stronghold in the corner of our

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collective house of codified and stored knowledge' (Galison, 2004: 231). Rather, there is a sphere of secrecy and unavailability that has been growing dramatically in a climate of 'augmented secrecy' under the conditions of digital media technology, a climate promoted by the desire of private corporations and government administrations to engage in surveillance and keep things hidden.

Galison's numbers game problematizes a largely unquestioned assumption that underlies popular and scholarly studies of digital culture: that the immeasurably increasing power of data processing will be accompanied by the publicity and transparency of information. According to the media theorist Wendy Chun, the conflation of computerized operations with ideas of transparency is paradoxical, for it tends to conceal the fact 'that they compute'. For one, the transformation of computerized data into information is an act of abstraction whose rules and protocols remain hidden. Increasingly, machines read, write, classify, and discriminate (and learn – such is the promise of machine learning) without any human assistance; they have become illegible to human consciousness. Importantly, computers do not primarily display or make transparent what exists elsewhere; their computations generate texts and images (Chun, 2004: 27). The prominence of the vocabulary of transparency, according to Chun, is therefore a compensatory gesture.

Trevor Paglen's series of images titled 'Cable Landing Sites and Undersea Cables', which the artist produced in 2015 and 2016, can be understood as a visualization of Galison's and Chun's theses. Devoted to 'landscapes of secrecy', the images make use of the late-antique and medieval format of the diptych. One side of each diptych contains a photograph of coastlines, beneath which one sees the so-called 'choke points' where communication cables disappear into the land. Juxtaposed with each of these images is a nautical map of the area, on which is collaged the information leaked by Edward Snowden and other sources on actors and connections of security networks and data-based surveillance. 'Rather than trying to find out what's actually going on behind closed doors [. . .], I'm trying to take a long hard look at the door itself.' Paglen is not concerned with disclosing or revealing specific secrets but rather with the organization and infrastructures of the arcane, with secrecy as a fundamental ordering principle (Jacob, 2018: 28). Paglen's images reflect the disappearance of what can be experienced and represented in 'digital' societies of control and surveillance (Foster, 2020).

Making Things Secret

These findings and images are indicative of an expansion of secrecy that goes hand in hand with the infrastructures, platforms, and applications of digital media technology, perhaps encapsulated by Frank Pasquale's notion of the 'black box society'. Pasquale (2015) updates the desire for transparency and accountability as panacea. Yet with recourse to a premodern typology of secrecy (Horn, 2011), and schematically put, Galison refers to the expansion of betrayable *secreta*; Chun gestures at the media-technological condition of inscrutable *mysteria*; and Paglen seeks images of the safely hidden, locked away *arcana*. What is made public here is a structural transformation of secrecy, a technologically mediated 'covert sphere' (Melley, 2012),¹ which cannot be fully submitted to the imperatives of transparency and publicity. Rather, the secret and its

modes of organization appear to be constitutive for publicness. Inquiring into a new structural transformation of the public sphere therefore has to reckon with secrecy as technological and organizational force.

While there is a rich field of inquiry into the emergence of new publics, it is striking that the question of secrecy has taken on a shadow existence. Symptomatic of this is Bruno Latour's remark that his project on *Making Things Public* 'even' has to take into account the secret: 'Even in our lands obsessed by the transparent republic, much effort is put into doing just the opposite, that is, into making things *secret*' (Latour, 2005: 35; emphasis in original). In the following, the understanding and the transformation of the public sphere is systematically and historically related to its actual antonym and counterpart. '[T]o stay with the secret *as secret*' (Birchall, 2014: 26; emphasis in original) implies positioning secrecy as a constitutive social and media-technological force in whose light the affirmative and critical investigations of old and new publics should be interrogated. In this respect, the secret is seen as a fundamental form of social organization (Assmann and Assmann, 1997: 10) and therefore as an 'organizing principle of social communication' that is closely correlated with the 'organizational principle of the public sphere' (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 57, 142). The emergence of technologically mediated 'digital publics' is then linked to an organization-theoretical and media-theoretical understanding of (digital) media as materials for organizing space, time, and power (and not, or only secondarily, in terms of their messages and meanings) (Peters, 2015).²

Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989 [1962]) is marked by an awareness of the mutual conditioning of secrecy and publicness that is missing from contemporary inquiries into digital and material publics. I therefore first offer a rereading of the *Structural Transformation* that is attuned to the organizational principle of secrecy. On this basis I can briefly discuss the proliferation of digital publics in recent research. Juxtaposing this work with recent diagnoses of the rise of platform society – platformization of the social, algorithmic control and surveillance capitalism – I reflect on the redoubling of media-technical and organizational secrecy that shapes digital culture's 'calculated publics' (Gillespie, 2014). Moreover, this structural transformation of the secret leads (back) to secret societies, to their practices of anonymity, disconnection, obfuscation and opacity – and to new struggles on the old battlefield of secrecy and publicness.

Secrecy, Secret Societies and the Public Sphere

Galison's, Chun's, and Paglen's findings and speculations suggest a reconsideration of the relationship between secrecy and publicness. This cannot take the form of mutual exclusion, as though secrecy would have to disappear in the course of a structural transformation of the public sphere. One way of framing the interdependence of secrecy and publicness is to view the secret as the 'disavowed basis', as the unacknowledged condition of a phantasm of the public sphere with its normative ideal of publicity, which produces distrustful subjects who always proceed from the belief that they must reveal *secreta* (Dean, 2002: 16). A perhaps sociologically more fruitful approach is to understand secrecy in Georg Simmel's terms as a 'universal sociological form, which, as such,

has nothing to do with the moral valuations of its contents' (Simmel, 1906: 463). Simmel formulated an unresolvable dialectic of social development that is tied to the form of the secret: 'Thus we might arrive at the paradoxical idea that, under otherwise like circumstances, human relations require a definite ratio of secrecy which merely changes its objects' (pp. 467–8). While Simmel's speculation that 'the affairs of people at large become more and more public, those of individuals [become] more and more secret' (p. 468) has not aged well in light of today's social media usage, his insights into the reciprocal relationship between secrecy and publicness remain an important point of departure. Every presumed development toward transparency and publicity corresponds to specific forms of 'arcanization' (Assmann and Assmann, 1997: 16).

Traces of the secret's constitutive role in the history of the public sphere can be found in Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Already the development of bourgeois subjectivity in the context of the patriarchal conjugal family, in which individuals learned to perceive of themselves as independent actors, points to an everyday sphere of opacity out of which the bourgeois public developed. Expanded by 'the public sphere of a rational-critical debate in the world of letters', in which bourgeois subjectivity communicated with itself and 'attained clarity with itself', the opaque protective space of intimate family relations, and secrecy in the form of making things private, served as the condition for the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 51).

Yet the organizational principle of secrecy mainly prepared the bourgeois public sphere through the rise of secret societies in the 18th century, a phenomenon Habermas treated as an ancillary issue in comparison with the subjectivation of family life and the literary public sphere. If, in the arcane practices of the absolutist state and its bureaucracy, the public sphere was a mere performance and ritualized representation of power enacted to demonstrate the aura of the sovereign, there thus originated in secret societies an arcane praxis of informed and critical discourse. In Habermas's words:

The coming together of private people into a public was therefore anticipated in secret, as a public sphere still existing largely behind closed doors. The secret promulgation of enlightenment typical of the lodges but also widely practiced by other associations and *Tischgesellschaften* had a dialectical character. Reason [. . .] needed to be protected from becoming public because it was a threat to any and all relations of domination. As long as publicity had its seat in the secret chanceries of the prince, reason could not reveal itself directly. Its sphere of publicity had still to rely on secrecy; its public, even as a public, remained internal. [. . .] This recalls Lessing's famous statement about Freemasonry, which at that time was a broader European phenomenon: it was just as old as bourgeois society – 'if indeed bourgeois society is not merely the offspring of Freemasonry'. (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 35)

In the preface to the 1990 German re-issue of his book, Habermas more forcefully emphasizes this dialectic between secrecy and the public sphere, in which clubs, 'enlightenment societies, educational associations, secret societies of Freemasons, and the Order of Illuminati' had had significance more on account of their modes of organization than because of their 'manifest functions'. Joined voluntarily and recruited on the basis of their members' private decisions, the inner circles of these associations engaged in 'egalitarian forms of exchange, the freedom of discussion, and majority

decision-making' and had therefore been practising the 'political norms of equality of a future society' (Habermas, 1990 [1962]: 14; author's translation).

All of this recalls Simmel, who attributed particular value to the organization of secret societies and formulated *en passant* a brief organizational theory of the secret. Apparently, however, it was Reinhart Koselleck's work *Critique and Crisis* that had inspired Habermas's expositions.³ Here, the secret is thought to stand at the very beginning of the Enlightenment and bourgeois society. The social form of Enlightenment's 'historical twin' is the secret society in all its variety, from lodges to Freemasonry. Within the still absolutist state and yet removed as much as possible from its grasp, there arose 'a form of organization peculiar to the new bourgeois society', which was governed by secrecy and discretion (Koselleck, 1988 [1973]: 62, 71). This was civil society's own arcanum, which then appeared alongside the mystery of the Church and the *arcana imperii* of absolutist rule. For the genesis of this arcanum, the secret had a protective function that concealed the indirect political consequences of secret societies, whose conflicts with the state and the Church could take place under the guise of ostensibly apolitical gatherings. Moreover, secrecy provided affective and morally coded cohesion. Koselleck even speaks of the 'Masonic mystery', which was created by the aura and the promise of a new life. The Enlightenment was based on the arcanum of the lodges, in which bourgeois critique was invented, thrived, and ultimately itself became a form of public dominion that drew everything into its wake. Koselleck claims that '[t]he Enlightenment and its political secret seemed to have taken over the functions of the state and its arcana' (Koselleck, 1988 [1973]: 121).

In Habermas's work, 'the light of reason, thus veiled for self-protection' now began to shine brightly (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 35). Secret societies became early reason-based projects that gradually lost the protective space of the secret and that helped the bourgeois public sphere to get on its feet. They were rational proto-publics that turned against the sovereign's merely representational public sphere. Habermas therefore reduced the role of secrecy to a functional and temporary condition (and one to be overcome) for the development of the publicity of reason, whereas Koselleck's 'pathogenesis' emphasized civil society's arcanum as a long-term 'indirectly effective political factor' that allowed certainties, knowledge, and judgements to develop, albeit at the price of a divided (and hypocritical) logic (Koselleck, 1988 [1973]: 60).

Beyond the historical (German) context of 'the conservative desire for self-assertion in the early 1950s', of which Koselleck's study may be an example (Neugebauer-Wölk, 2003: 12), it is instructive that Koselleck and the historical research on secret societies conducted after him have made it clear that attention should be directed toward the fundamental significance of secret modes of organization to the constitution of public interests. This entails, to fill in a gap left by Koselleck, the significance of the state's ongoing monopoly on secrecy (Caygill, 2015), and thus the 'central contradiction' enacted by the 'covert state', namely that 'Western democracy can preserve itself only through the suspension of democracy' (Melley, 2012: 6). In this respect, there has been some debate about how proto-democratic, exactly, the bourgeois behaviours practised in the secret cults of early modern associations in fact were and about how monolithic, for its part, the absolutist power of the sovereign was (with its *arcana imperii*). It rather seems as though 'two arcane worlds' collided, for the decision-making within the 'hyperlocal

organizational platform[s]' of secret societies and their 'infrastructure of networking' and of arcane modes of communication were neither transparent for their members nor necessarily characterized by egalitarian practices (Neugebauer-Wölk, 2003: 27–33). With their project-based and secretive networking, moreover, lodges and secret societies were to some extent able to become part of an organizational complex for the formation and implementation of state politics by forming an alliance between the bourgeoisie and the nobility (Neugebauer-Wölk, 2003). Accordingly, the arcane spheres of the state and of secret societies were already interconnected during the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere and its mechanisms of power and exclusion.

The Media-Organizational Complex

Later I will return to the figure of two arcane worlds colliding. First it is necessary to discuss another trace of the secret as organizational principle that does not concern the genesis but rather the downfall of the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas considered the model of the bourgeois public sphere to have become 'inapplicable' because both the literary public sphere and the separation between public and private sphere had disintegrated: 'The sounding board of an educated stratum tutored in the public use of reason has been shattered; the public is split apart into minorities of specialists who put their reason to use non-publicly and the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical' (1989 [1962]: 175). The specialists who reason non-publicly gather in organizations, and the collapse of the public sphere corresponds, as Habermas put it in the 1990 edition of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, to the rise of the 'organization society' and to the fact that the 'organizational level had become independent' (1990 [1962]: 24). Associations and political parties began to 'engage in the exercise and equilibration of power in cooperation with the state apparatus, treating it as a matter internal to their organizations', while the mass media generated publicity 'from above' and replaced 'critical publicity' with 'manipulative publicity' (Habermas, 1986 [1962]: 177–8).

Organizations, which Simmel regarded as the discreet social form per se (characterized within and without by various degrees of secrecy and opacity; see Parker, 2016), now became the agents responsible for the disorganization of the public sphere. Whereas it had been the organization of secret societies that formed the foundation for bourgeois proto-publics, the rise of organized private interests led to the 'refeudalization of the public sphere' and its 'mood of conformity' – formulations that, not coincidentally, allude to features of the absolutist, representative era and its rituals and spectacles. Against the backdrop of the ideal of a public sphere, what remains is hope in the 'democratization of societal organizations engaged in state-related activity' and in the 'mutual control of rival organizations themselves committed to publicity' (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 195, 209–10). Later, Habermas would split the organizational principle of the public sphere into the distinction between stronger and weaker forms of institutionalization. The institutionally inherited mechanisms of consensus-building were then to be set apart from 'the spontaneous uninherited currents of communication of a *disorganized* public sphere' (Habermas, 1990 [1962]: 43; transl. by author, emphasis added).

Importantly, this story of collapse and weak redemption lends prominent value to the shifting 'infrastructure of the public sphere' (Habermas, 1990 [1962]: 27). Already the

literary public, as a midwife to the bourgeois public sphere, had been medially conditioned and was inconceivable without the circulation of books and pamphlets. The infrastructure of expanded book production and the appearance of newspapers and journals had already changed the interaction among those from whom the public sphere first arose. If in the publishing industry, according to Habermas, ‘the degree of economic concentration and technological-organizational coordination’ had once seemed minimal, matters now looked different in the ‘new media of the twentieth century – film, radio, and television’. As the seat of ‘manipulative publicity’, the latter ‘have turned during the last hundred years into complexes of societal power [. . .] [t]o the extent that they were commercialized and underwent economic, technological, and organizational concentration’ (Habermas, 1989 [1962]: 187–8).

Digital Publics and the Cumulative Public Sphere

In relation to the opaque organization of media-technologically conditioned ‘public spheres of production’ (in Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s terms), the reflection of today’s digital publics remains peculiarly silent. In her examination of the publics of digital sociology, Noortje Marres (2017: 143–72) regards concepts such as transparency, publicity and participation as a constellation of legitimizing ideals that have provided a normative direction to the ‘digital transformation’ and influenced the sociological search for digital publics. A sort of messianic potential has thus come to be associated with the ideal of *transparency* and ideas of transparent organizations, open-access science, and the constant updating of one’s own profile on social media (Schneider, 2013). The ideal of *participation* has become a standard term for postulating the consequences of the social use of digital technology (Marres, 2017). And, as Jodi Dean has argued, the ideal of *publicity* can be understood as a leading concept of the information age. By conjuring the norms and practices of publicity, the critical discourse of democracy (too) closely aligns itself with the promises of digital capitalism: ‘Publicity is the organizing element of democratic politics and the golden ring of the infotainment society’ (Dean, 2002: 15).

In various ways, the ideas of transparency, participation, and publicity influence the renaissance of the notion of the public, which has developed over the last 20 years with recourse to the ubiquity of digital infrastructures and social media (Schäfer, 2016). Thus, practices and visions of multiple *networked publics* and their *digital flaneurs* have been enabled and formed by the spaces of social media (boyd, 2014: 203). The *algorithmic publics* of a presumably transparent audience have reconfigured the self-perception and praxis of journalistic work (Anderson, 2011). The *recursive publics* of technophilic groups such as the free-software movement have constituted themselves by means of transparent and participatory forms of developing technical applications and infrastructures (Kelty, 2005). In *augmented publics*, the fleeting nature of emerging, circulating, and situated public spheres is radicalized through the mediation of mobile technologies such as smartphones and further fuelled by the profanization of images, texts, and sounds (Boyle and Rivers, 2018). The antagonistic potential of fragmented *cyberpublics* has been stressed as a countermovement to the presumably dominant understanding of the public sphere as a consensual sphere of deliberative exchange (Dahlberg, 2007). At the same time, on social media (with their practices of acclamation and approval) there has

been a renewal of the age-old motif of an *acclamatory public* and its technology-driven rites of participation (Dean, 2017). The storytelling infrastructure of platforms like Twitter have mobilized *affective publics* or *transient publics* whose ‘soft structures of feeling’ may be contrary to the communicative logic of deliberative exchange (Papacharissi, 2015: 37, 116), but whose affective power is being harnessed in a disturbing manner by authoritarian populists. Finally, mention should be made of the neo-materialist turn toward *material publics*, which goes beyond digital technology and which hopes to lend a voice to non-human agents and things. This would be a ‘public space profoundly different’, filled with ‘loads of stuff’ made available to the public (Latour, 2005: 15, 17; Marres, 2012).

Habermas’s enormously influential study of the structural transformation of the public sphere frequently serves as a foil (and is sometimes read as a caricature of itself) against which the formation of new publics can be defined. This typically implies a turn toward a plural understanding of publics, which *prima facie* may not be subordinated to any rational or reason-based negotiation of different interests, which can therefore not be understood in themselves as a symptom of the disintegration of a formerly integrative public sphere, and which, in their fragmented forms, operate more inclusively (and in a more participatory manner) than the historical forms of the European, patriarchally-shaped bourgeois public sphere. Borrowing one of Habermas’s later concepts, one could refer to them as institutionally weak and comparatively disorganized publics, with the public sphere as amorphous medium and normative horizon of this polyvocality. As Negt and Kluge argued 50 years ago, the public sphere could then be understood as an unstable meshwork of diverse types of publicity, transparency, and participation that go hand in hand with various technological, economic, and political modes of organization (Hansen, 1993; Negt and Kluge, 1993 [1972]).

It is striking, however, that adhering to the idea of a (media-technologically mediated and more or less fragmentary) public sphere as a ‘cumulative public sphere’ (in Negt and Kluge’s terms) requires any study of digital publics to oscillate between normative assumptions and empirical descriptions. Habermas may thus be regarded as the founder of a discourse from whose work it might be necessary to distance oneself, yet which constitutes the horizon on which the later investigations are situated. His foundational thesis of the public sphere as an organizing principle of political order thus remains preserved.⁴ Yet the scholarship on digital and material publics is at risk of receding behind Habermas’s emphasis on technological-organizational coordination and its non-publicity. Habermas devoted more attention to the media-technologically based organizational conditions of the public sphere – understood as a complex of power – than studies of today’s networked, augmented, affective and material publics tend to do.⁵ In this sense, making secrecy taboo and uncritically or unwittingly adopting notions of transparency and publicity conjure up a sphere of uncontrollable power, namely the opaque operations of algorithmic ordering and surveillance capitalism.

The Digital Media-Organizational Complex

As has been pointed out with regard to the ubiquity and pervasiveness of digital mediation, transparency and intransparency are reconfigured and newly interwoven,

summoning an ongoing visibility management as organizational practice (Flyverbom, 2019). Yet what is made visible is itself predicated on ‘a field of [technologically] distributed *invisuality*’, a ‘platform seeing’ (MacKenzie and Munster, 2019: 18–19; emphasis in original). The structural transformation of secrecy is tied to the rise and ubiquity of computational media – its infrastructure, platforms and algorithms – which shape the conditions of ‘opacity, partiality, and illegibility’ (Amoore, 2020: 8), of what can be betrayed, what remains hidden and what is inaccessible and cannot be accounted for. The infrastructure and algorithms of mediated ordering update more radical and older notions of secrecy and non-appearance in the form of locked away *arcana*, even of inscrutable *mysteria*, a ‘media arcane’ as it were (Beyes and Pais, 2019), or a technologically mediated covert sphere.

Consider algorithmic ordering and the platform as perhaps the most consequential contemporary organizational form and regime of visibility and invisuality (Stark and Pais, 2020). As ‘apparatuses for the management of relations’ (Steinberg, 2019: 120), platforms are sites for relating users and simultaneously recording these relations to extract and commodify data. Channeling all kinds of data-driven traffic, they have ushered in a ‘platform society’ dominated by a mostly corporate ‘global [. . .] platform ecosystem’ (van Dijck et al., 2018: 4). In platform society, the behaviour of users and providers is enrolled in, and monitored and modulated through, opaque and illegible processes of algorithmic management.

Among the different critical analyses of platform-based organization (Beyes, 2020), Shoshana Zuboff’s (2019) study of surveillance capitalism perhaps most directly speaks to the phenomenon of organized and media-technological opacity understood as an organizational complex of power and control. Zuboff attacks today’s ‘rogue capitalism’ – with Google as main actor and thus contemporary media a priori (Peters, 2015: 9) – as a form of domination that itself operates in obfuscation. From the raw material of data, surveillance assets are extracted and made commercially valuable by means of algorithmically organized pattern recognition and predictive analysis. Such means are used to produce a secret ‘behavioural surplus’ in the sense of excess behavioural data, which in turn is marketed by predicting and stimulating future behaviour. The decisive ordering mechanism thus takes the form of behavioural modification enabled by comprehensive, data-based surveillance – a way of controlling life that is based on automation, self-learning, and inaccessible algorithms and their ‘shadow text’:

The commodification of behaviour under the conditions of surveillance capitalism pivots us toward a societal future in which an exclusive division of learning is protected by secrecy, indecipherability, and expertise. Even when knowledge derived from your behaviour is fed back to you in the first text as a quid pro quo for participation, the parallel secret operations of the shadow text capture surplus for crafting into prediction products destined for other marketplaces that are *about you* rather than *for you*. These markets do not depend upon you except first as a source of raw material from which surplus is derived, and then as a target for guaranteed outcomes. (Zuboff, 2019: 328; emphasis in original)

Zuboff’s dismay about the machinations of surveillance capitalism is explicitly formulated in terms of losing an open future, understood as the Enlightenment legacy of autonomously acting individuals and public decision-making processes being replaced by the

cybernetic temporality of predicting and conditioning human behaviour. The ideals of transparency, participation, and publicity are thus perverted by a media-technologically enabled arcanum of behavioural modification. 'Radical togetherness' as a telos of data-driven modelling, prediction, and control corresponds to 'radical indifference' as a 'fundamentally asocial mode of knowledge' and as a 'managerial discipline' (Zuboff, 2019: 505, 512). Absolute transparency becomes a demand on the datafied subject, for whom there are no longer any back stages or hiding places; such 'zombie transparency' (Birchall, 2021: 2) corresponds to the opacity of the media-organizational complex. Practices of social participation are conditioned – both embraced and paralysed – by commercial interests; the means of participation are therefore supplanted by those of behavioural modification.⁶ And, as Zuboff (2019: 455) notes with reference to the idea of networked publics, the promise of publicity has become a paradox because visibility is subjugated to a business logic of influencing behaviour and maximizing surveillance. With Clare Birchall (2017; 2021: 93–117), it might be more fitting to speak of *shareveillance* to reflect on the opaque conditions of surveillance and control under which information is constantly and automatically shared. The problem is then less the invasion of a presumably private sphere and its 'datafication' but rather the lack of recognition and opposition from a public sphere that should be more than just an aggregated dataset to be shared. Adopting the terms used here, the public sphere itself has become the arcanum of a data-based economy. It takes the form of an indecipherable 'data mass', in which subjects are configured and modulated as mere data providers.

Zuboff guides Habermas's story of decline to its conclusion. For Habermas, the world fashioned by the mass media took the form of a pre-structured public sphere in which 'a struggle is taking place to achieve [. . .] the most cryptic possible control over the currents of communication that influence behaviour' (1990 [1962]: 28). For Zuboff, this struggle for hidden types of control has developed into an opaque apparatus for monitoring, predicting, and tweaking human behaviour. It is therefore consistent to look beyond the Habermasian lament of the refeudalization of social order and present this 'annexation of human experience' as a return to 'premodern absolutist authority' (Zuboff, 2019: 513).

With reference to Max Weber's concept of elective affinity, Zuboff admits that, under the protection of a surveillance-technical state of exception, '[t]he contours of a new interdependency between public and private agents of information dominance began to emerge' (2019: 115).⁷ The 'merciless extraction and retention of information' (in Zuboff's words) unites 'datapreneurs' and the covert state. This updates a more paranoid mode of speculating about a new organizational complex, for instance in the guise of the 'security-entertainment complex', which would designate 'an era of permanent and pervasive war and permanent and pervasive entertainment' (Thrift, 2011: 11). What the security and entertainment sectors have in common is that their work is based on the ubiquity and availability of data. They share the forms and results of 'intelligence gathering' – its research results, infrastructures, and software codes. And, Thrift adds (2011: 11), they are marked by a paranoid vigilance and a focus on correctly identifying the potential of each moment in order to determine and influence its future outcome.

The strategies, methods, and codes are secret, as is the knowledge that is acquired by them. Yet we are by no means dealing merely with weak (because betrayable) corporate

or institutional secrets such as those of Google, Facebook, and the NSA. Rather, the security-entertainment complex is based on *machines à gouverner* of data extraction and targeting that are inaccessible. Its processes for accumulating, connecting, and evaluating data and data traces elude inspection and intelligibility. In this context, Howard Caygill has updated an older register of secrecy to speak of an arcanum of the manhunt. The organizational complex is characterized by accumulating presumably precise and predictive knowledge about potential (commercial, political, and military) prey; about the degree to which they deviate from norms of conformity, normality, and compliance; and about automated means for controlling stimuli and reactions (Caygill, 2015: 24, 36).

Clandestine Organization, Anonymous Collectives

The motif of arcane worlds colliding extends to ‘the reassessment of the secret society as a cultural technique’ (Lovink and Rossiter, 2018: 5). An arcane-political battlefield has emerged, fuelled by practices of anonymization, opacity, encryption, and disconnecting. So far, the case of Anonymous is perhaps the most eye-catching attempt to evade the surveillance apparatus by means of unattributability and unidentifiability, while at least some members of this hacker movement have continued to address an undefined public sphere (Beran, 2020). The anthropologist Gabriella Coleman describes Anonymous as the ‘quintessential anti-brand brand’, as an opaque ‘collective of collectives’ whose name is essentially available to anyone and in whose context the accumulation of power and prestige is frowned upon. Here, secrecy has become an organizational principle to evade the arcana of economic behavioural control and datafied human identification. Under current media-technological conditions, the secret functions of the Freemasons’ lodge, of egalitarian forms of exchange, and of affective cohesion have been reorganized – all the way to the mystery of an anonymous movement’s aura, which in this respect is unbetrayable (Coleman, 2015: 300).

Avoiding being hunted and monitored by hiding, shifting, and making oneself anonymous – this was not only the first arcane practice enacted by the old secret societies; it is also the tactics of today’s ‘experimental secret societies and anonymous collectives’ in their conflicts with the data sovereignty and predicative and manipulative knowledge of surveillance capitalism (Birchall, 2017: 55). Such clandestine modes of (dis)organization take different forms. They might be characterized by practices of anonymization, unreadability and invisibility to technologically distributed invisuality; by tactical plays of obfuscation and its masses of misleading, useless, or distracting information (Brunton and Nissenbaum, 2016); by provoking and enacting glitches as a strategy of refusing, queering, or dismantling gender and identity performance (Russell, 2020); by practices of disconnection and the temporary cutting or undoing of networks (Karppi et al., 2020); or by enacting a right to informatic opacity (Blas, 2018). These modes should not be understood as aberrations or anomalies along the way toward a more cumulative public sphere, more connectivity, and more transparent processes. The secret is the condition of possibility for these associations; it has also, in turn, become an organizing principle of community. That which a community shares, according to Clare Birchall, ‘is non-belonging and otherness’ (2011: 74). In comparison to the secret societies of late absolutism and early modernity, the conditions of possibility for secret action have intensified in this

sense. Experimenting with organizing practices of disorganization invariably occurs in networks or under the condition of ubiquitous connectivity (Stäheli, 2021).⁸ So this is hardly a matter of nostalgically returning to premodern or analogous ideas of ‘disconnected’ secret societies; rather, it is about situationally trimming back, distorting, cutting or reconfiguring connections and experimenting with the possibilities of secrecy within the media-organizational complex. In the vocabulary of the arcanum of the manhunt, it remains to be seen if such situational and temporary ‘black boxings’ can prevail, before the automated apparatuses of targeting and behavioural modification are able to identify the clandestine and dispersed subjectivities, predict their next steps, make them commercially or politically viable, or eliminate them altogether.

The Politics of Non-Appearance

Beyond the systematic and historical insights into the dialectics of secrecy and publicness, today’s media arcane calls for a close engagement with notions of secrecy in coming to terms with digital culture. The different varieties of digital publics and their structures and imaginaries of participation, transparency, and publicity are embedded in this context. In the words of Negt and Kluge, ‘all the substations of this [cumulative] public sphere are organized as arcane realms’ (1993 [1972]: 16), and this now includes both the computerized substations of data processing and the metaphorical substations of surveillance capitalism. The radicality of thinking secrecy as constitutive for publicness then goes beyond imaginaries of the withholding and eventual disclosure or betrayal of information (Birchall, 2021). In the machinic covert sphere, calls to make algorithmic ordering accountable – to open the black box, disclose the codes – come across like pretty fictions, perhaps returning us to a supposedly benign state of reciprocal capitalism such as the one envisioned and projected back by Zuboff. They also suspiciously look like a machinic update of Habermas’s bourgeois subject that makes itself transparent to itself, attaining clarity about and giving account of itself. Yet what if such disclosure is not – and never was – at one’s disposal, neither human nor machinic (Amoore, 2020)?

One response to these developments is to derive an ethical postulate in support of the secret – as a basis, for instance, of individual freedoms and of the state’s legitimate classified information (Broeders, 2016); or, more attuned to media-technological configurations, to envision a ‘cloud ethics’ based on a demand for opacity, which accepts the world-making power of algorithms as a non-tractable, non-resolvable ethicopolitical practice in its own right (Amoore, 2020). Another response is to reject the concept of the public as an ideologeme of surveillance capitalism. In this sense, Dean has argued that critical publicity has become a norm out of control because such publicity is technologically and automatically produced (Dean, 2001: 254–5). Belief in the ideal of the public sphere in the form of the platform society’s plural publics then constitutes a ‘Habermasochism’ (Dean, 2002: 37).

It seems more sociologically fruitful not to normatively resolve the dialectic of secrecy and public sphere toward one side or the other or to reject it altogether. The notion of multiple, networked publics, tied to the normative ideal of the cumulative public sphere, would benefit from a terminology of secrecy in order not only to avoid Habermasochism but to remember Habermas’s foundational insights into the

media-technological and organizational conditions of public communality. How are illegibility, opacity and unavailability organized? Instead of assuming accountability, publicity, and transparency as epistemological a priori, investigating the transformation of the public sphere would adopt epistemes of secrecy and opacity (Amoore, 2020; Beyes and Pias, 2019; Birchall, 2021; Walters, 2021), for instance through distinctions of *secreta*, *arcana*, and *mysteria*, which have informed this paper.

The politics of the media arcane is perhaps not primarily a politics of space (with a private and a public sphere). In the words of Alexander Galloway, the structural transformation of secrecy goes hand in hand with a ‘politics of appearance’, or better: of non-appearance, for ‘we are observing a rise in the politicization of absence- and presence-oriented themes such as invisibility, opacity, and anonymity, or the relationship between identification and legibility, or the tactics of nonexistence and disappearance’ (Galloway, 2011: 246–7). This implies what Birchall (2021: 184) calls a politics of post-secrecy that would accept a more complex register of secrecy, which includes the unknowability of the media arcane, and that would be able to imagine and enact ‘communities that can tolerate and work with opacity’. If the transformation of the public sphere is understood as a new enactment of the constitutive tension between secrecy and publicness, then it remains to be seen whether a civic mechanism of arcane socialization will develop that might give rise to a greater public. For it is true that the modes of organization and media technologies of arcanization, the practices of making things secret, and the politics of radical secrecy and non-appearance are also unthinkable without the horizon of the public sphere.

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Notes

1. Adopting Melley’s notion of the covert sphere, Galison’s calculations refer to the ‘covert sector’, the institutional apparatuses of state secrecy; and Paglen’s images feed into the sprawling cultural imaginary of the covert sphere and its many narratives of secret operations, which ‘allows the public to know on the level of fantasy what it cannot know in an operational sense’ (2012: 8).
2. Media in this sense are ‘civilizational ordering devices’ and ‘fundamental constituents of organization’, and ‘[d]igital media revive ancient navigational functions: they point us in time and space, index our data, and keep us on the grid’ (Peters, 2015: 19, 7). On a ‘media theory of organization’, see Beverungen, Beyes and Conrad (2019), Beyes, Conrad, and Martin (2019) and Beyes, Holt and Pias (2019). As concerns the public sphere as a principle of organization, see especially Negt and Kluge’s ‘organization analysis’ (Negt and Kluge, 1993 [1972]).
3. The original title of Koselleck’s *Critique and Crisis* was *Dialektik der Aufklärung (Dialectic of Enlightenment)*, yet Horkheimer and Adorno got there first (Neugebauer-Wölk, 2003: 9).

4. In this way, even such different (and allegedly anti-Habermasian) approaches as radical-democratic and ‘thing-political’ theories affirm the ideal of the public sphere: whether to argue – in the name of antagonistic, plural, and diverse publics – for the creation of platforms for previously uncounted and unseen subjects and concerns; or whether – in the name of a more expansive concept of agency – to find forms of representation for various matters of concern.
5. Walters (2021) demonstrates how the flat ontology of making things public, and thus tracing its human and non-human mediators, needs to be expanded towards the covert practices and materialities of making things secret.
6. Turning to premodern notions of secrecy, as I am suggesting here, is close to theorizing algorithmic control as a machinic update of pastoral power, enacting an ‘economy of souls’ (Foucault): ‘The anticipatory techniques undergirding the software-mediated conducting of souls thereby extend and intensify the twin pastoral concerns to produce obedient servitude and foreclose upon the human will’ (Cooper, 2020: 40).
7. Elective affinity cuts both ways. Weber generalized that secrecy had become a central element of bureaucratic rule: ‘The concept of the “office secret” is the specific invention of bureaucracy, and few things it defends so fanatically as this attitude’ (Weber, 1978 [1921]: 992). And the administrative history of the media technology of files demonstrates how filing constituted a bureaucratic arcanum (Vismann, 2008 [2000]).
8. In practices of disconnection, interruption, temporary hiding, and silence, it is perhaps possible to identify a new theory of prudence. When is it beneficial to pause, interrupt, be inactive, hide? In this regard, it would also be fruitful to investigate in greater depth the ‘newly developing structure of privileges that allows one to withdraw from the imposition of public communication [. . .] and in fact choose one’s interactions in a highly selective manner’ (Demirović, 2005: 47; transl. by author).

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