EMOTIONS IN THE MEDIA: A PARADIGM SHIFT IN THINKING ABOUT PUBLIC DEBATE

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Western civilization long regarded emotions as the enemy of rational public discourse. Emotions belonged in the private sphere, rationality in the public sphere. This was a common truth for scientists, academics and politicians, as well as theoreticians and practitioners of public affairs. It was also true for ordinary people, not to mention the media professionals (writers, publishers and broadcasters) informing, educating and entertaining newspaper, radio and television audiences. Over a hundred years ago, the very first rules of professional media production and the first codes of ethics for journalists were based on the principle that what was published had to be true, and facts were to be separate from values, and news distinct from commentaries. These and later measures to raise the quality of media professionalism were taken in pursuit of rationality. In the offline world of the traditional newspaper, radio or television broadcast, the right (i.e. appropriate, correct, respected, appreciated) mass media meant rational mass media. A media that kept emotions at bay.

Today, however, the world’s most important news medium is not a traditional publisher or broadcaster, but Facebook. And in the online environment, private and public are one and the same, while emotions and rationality exist side by side—even rational online information is processed through pure emotions. That means that it is selected, sorted, created, disseminated, preserved or rejected through public mobilization and the expression of private emotions. Compared to the online media, the traditional publishers and broadcasters with their rational political views and correct use of language are boring and untrustworthy. Although they are often accused of exaggeratedly sterile opinions, they are also labelled as having intentional editorial bias. Social conventions do not play an important role in the online space. Emotional authenticity has overtaken rationality.

In the 21st century the new societal demands regarding the content, form and visual side of published texts, sounds, images came to the attention of Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, a Professor of Journalism, Media and Communications at Cardiff University (UK). She has conducted extensive research into emotions in public life, including in the media, and she maintains that the “centrality of emotion in directing the architecture of Facebook shows a paradigm shift in thinking about public debate as it takes place through social media” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 165). In short, social media do not keep emotions at bay, and may even directly support them, search for them, and make them the most visible and audible part of the message (status, blog, vlog, picture, etc.) before disseminating them across networks all over the world. They take no social responsibility for maintaining the rationality of traditional media.

The book reviewed in this paper—Emotions, Media and Politics by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen—is based on the key idea that “emotions are central to our social and political lives, and to the ways in which we make sense of ourselves and the collectivities and communities we inhabit—a process which increasingly takes place through the media” (p. 1). Wahl-Jorgensen recognizes that emotions are part and parcel of the daily routines and everyday (unconscious even banal) practices of media professionals and the media audiences who co-produce online media content. Hence, she guides the reader towards understanding “the institutionalized and systematic ways in which emotions are constructed and circulate through forms of mediated discourse as pivots of public life” (p. 1). The book is divided into seven chapters (not including the introduction and conclusion):

1. In Taking Emotion Seriously: A Brief History of Thought (pp. 20-36) Wahl-Jorgensen demonstrates the central position emotion occupies in public life, which is almost entirely mediated. She shows that the relationship between politics and popular culture is becoming blurred, that the previously strict border between them is no longer clear, that personal and emotional narratives play a growing role in public life and that we live in the era of the “informalization” of political life (pp. 35-36).

2. In Emotions are Everywhere: The Strategic Ritual of Emotionality in Journalism (pp. 37-65) she points out the paradox that while laws and professional ethics require professional journalists to act rationally—separating objective facts from subjective emotions—in the case of award-winning journalism, emotion is everywhere: Pulitzer Prize-winning stories rely heavily on emotional storytelling, deploying what has been referred to as the strategic ritual of emotionality. This latter is constituted by tacit rules of practice – ones that are rarely discussed or made explicit” (p. 64).

But it is emotional storytelling that renders key societal issues visible, as it “elicits compassion in audiences” (p. 65).

3. In Authenticity, Compassion and Personalized Storytelling (pp. 66-89) Wahl-Jorgensen further analyses personalized emotion-based storytelling and looks more closely at the consequences of that emphasis. She gradually builds up her argument that “the telling of personal and emotional stories in the public sphere is seen as a guarantor of authenticity, and therefore as a means of cultivating compassion” (p. 65).

4. Towards a Typology of Mediated Anger (pp. 90-109) and (5) Shifting Emotional Regimes: Donald Trump’s Angry Populism (pp. 110-128) both deal with anger as an emotion
that is “vital and dangerous in political life” (p. 89). The typology of mediated anger, developed through the media’s routine coverage of protest shows that “anger is always-already a political emotion which serves to explain and sometimes justify the actions of protesters, and that this anger is frequently described as legitimate because it comes about as the result of collective grievances” (p. 89). In the chapter about Donald Trump and his angry populism Wahl-Jorgensen introduces

anger as a mobilizing emotion in explaining the rise of Trump. It has demonstrated a shift in the ‘emotional regime’, represented by media discourses […] In particular, it has argued that media coverage suggests a shift towards an emotional regime of angry populism. The new emotional regime heralds a broader change in public discourse and the terms of public life (p. 127).

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that even if we usually consider anger to be a negative and dangerous emotion, we cannot ignore its positive and mobilizing aspect. “But this alone does not offer a way out of angry populism” (p. 128).

(6) In The Politics of Love: Political Fandom and Social Change (pp. 129-146) Wahl-Jorgensen draws attention to positive emotions and their role in mediated politics. This chapter therefore answers the question “what happens if citizens are driven by love” (p. 129). The key concept here is political fandom. The nature of these and the role they play in public life is hard to grasp, since “fandoms articulate in diverse ways, shaped by the affordances of the media platforms on which they circulate, and the broader communities to which participants belong” (p. 129). However, this chapter provides us with the insight “that the position of the political fan creates a distinctive subjectivity that both facilitates and legitimates political engagement” (p. 129).

(7) The Emotional Architecture of Social Media (pp. 147-165) is an examination of the interdependence of the content and form of the media message (what should be expressed and how) and its location (where it is expressed). “It considers the case of Facebook’s reactions emoji, which exemplifies the ways in which the emotional architecture of social media contributes to the shaping of public debate” (p. 147). The results of this investigation highlight “the commodification and marketization of public emotion […] In particular, the privileging of pro-social positive emotion has coincided with the colonization of the public sphere by corporate interests” (p. 165). However, she states that corporations are “more interested in targeting and tailoring content to interested consumers than in creating the conditions for a diverse public debate” (p. 165).

In conclusion, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen calls for systematic research into emotions, media and politics in public life and offers nine propositions that would enable a reconceptualization of the issue: emotions matter to mediated politics, emotionality and rationality are not mutually exclusive, mediated emotions are performative, emotions are everywhere in mediated politics, emotional storytelling may cultivate authenticity and compassion, anger is the essential political emotion, love motivates us to engage in politics, the circulation of emotion is shaped by the affordances and architectures of platforms, research agendas in media politics must consider the role of emotion (pp. 166-174).

The contemporary online media world is more complex than the traditional offline media system. The former tends to be more emotional, touchy, and personally or politically
incorrect, whilst the latter was supposed to have a propensity for rationality, objectivity and political correctness. The demand for non-emotional media content seems to have been eliminated by the information-and-publication self-service its former audience engages in (today the author, producer and consumer are one). Rational arguments have been replaced by emoji and emoticons and these express not only human emotions, but also ideas. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen has grasped the issue in all its complexity and her monograph provides a comprehensive insight into the current method of public policymaking through media content. This is the main reason why *Emotions, Media and Politics* is a must-read, not only for philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, journalists and media researchers but for anyone with a general or specific interest in mass media communication in the online era.

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