



Political acclamation, social media and the public mood

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Abstract

This article approaches social media from the theory of the religio-political practice of acclamation revived by Agamben and following twentieth-century social and political thought and theology (of Weber, Peterson, Schmitt, Kantorowicz). It supplements that theory by more recent political-theoretical, historical and sociological investigations and regards acclamation as a ‘social institution’ following Mauss. Acclamation is a practice that forms publics, whether as the direct presence of the ‘people’, mass-mediated ‘public opinion’, or a ‘public mood’ decipherable through countless social media postings. The article surveys issues of differential geographies of access, weighting of posts, value-creation, orality and gesture, algorithmic governmentality, and Big Data and knowledge production. It argues that social media constitute a public from a mass of individualized, private postings. It concludes that they make possible forms of political calculability and action, yet are continuous with ritual and liturgical elements of political life. This study contributes to an analytics of publicity.

Keywords

acclamation, algorithms, Big Data, political theology, public, social media, democracy

In 1928, some five years before he joined the National Socialist Party, the jurist and political theorist, Carl Schmitt (2008: 274), made the following extraordinary forecast:

It is fully conceivable that one day through ingenious discoveries, every single person, without leaving his apartment, could continuously express his opinions on political questions through an apparatus and that all these opinions would be automatically registered by a central office, where one would only need to read them off. That would not be an especially

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intensive democracy, but it would provide proof that the state and the public were fully privatized. It would not be public opinion, for even the shared opinion of millions of private people produces no public opinion. The result is only a sum of private opinions. In this way, no common will arises, no *volonté générale*, only the sum of all individual wills, a *volonté de tous*, does.

We know of course today that these ‘ingenious discoveries’ that allow us to do this without leaving our homes are called by names such as the Internet or the web, and are imagined to exist in a ‘cyberspace’ (Graham, 2011). We can evaluate and express opinions on ‘political questions’ and any other topic, not only at home but also by devices we carry around in our pockets. This capacity has indeed changed the nature of the public and public opinion and given rise to an imaginary in which the aggregate of all these opinions can be recorded and read off immediately, not only by a central governmental agency but also by large corporations, and shared among users. Big Brother is at least partially displaced by Big Data, its algorithms and its metadata, with their promise and threat (Andrejevic and Gates, 2014; boyd and Crawford, 2012). We know too that the geographies and spaces of what the Vice-president of the USA, Joe Biden, called a ‘new realm’ are more diverse than Schmitt imagines, and that they are not available in the same way to ‘every single person’ due to multiple digital divides (Graham, 2013). Nevertheless, this new realm – and we might wish to accent the *political* character of that term, – particularly that part called social media, still contains all sorts of claims and imaginings, mythologies and theologies, dreams and nightmares, not least of a political nature. So much is this so that we have only just begun exploring the means we have to address it. Here I use one perspective afforded by the concept and social practice of ‘acclamation’, to which Schmitt was a major, if flawed, contributor, which can be compared to two other, rather more influential perspectives, around issues of political communication and surveillance.

The first concerns the increased capacity for political communication and dialogue in the public sphere and by movements located in civil society (Bohman, 2004; Gimmler, 2001). In recent years, social media have been viewed as a threat to authoritarian regimes (Shirky, 2011), and a key facilitator of the uprisings of the Arab Spring (Howard et al., 2011; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012) and the Occupy Movement (Juris, 2012; van Dijck, 2013: 74–5). The abatement of the Occupy Movement and the immediate outcomes of the Arab Spring have more recently tempered these enthusiasms. The sophisticated strategies for use of social media by the terrorist organization and self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL) have raised some alarms about the political-communication potential for social media (Farvell, 2014).

More recently, the use of social media has been discussed in the less sanguine terms of the ubiquitous accumulation of data and surveillance (Andrejevic and Gates, 2014). Here the revelations of Edward Snowden about the collection of ‘metadata’ by the National Security Agency and other intelligence services have increased public awareness of the implications of the posting of personal material on social media sites such as Facebook. This discussion is conducted in terms of ‘datafication’, ‘dataveillance’ and ‘life-mining’ through ‘digital trails’ (van Dijck, 2014: 198–200). Data is collected in advance of knowing whether and how it will be used, hence forming a post-panoptic extravagant ‘surveillant assemblage’ (Andrejevic and Gates 2014: 186–90).

This more skeptical approach to Big Data reveals its ‘ontotheology’ (Papacharassi, 2015: 1097) and the faith that users have in social media companies. It raises not only issues of privacy and state surveillance, but also changes in the status and accuracy of knowledge, its ethics and the creation of digital epistemic divides (boyd and Crawford, 2012). There is the discussion of algorithms in relation to subjectivity-formation, such as in ‘recommendation’ systems (Reigeluth, 2014; Seaver, 2015), and the discovery of a veritable ‘algorithmic governmentality’ in which individuals and populations can be governed and govern themselves according to their digital traces, such as in predictive policing and new quantitative self-techniques (Reigeluth, 2014: 251).

This article addresses an aspect of both the production and the use of social media data, which is reducible neither to its potentials for communication nor intensified surveillance and self-surveillance: that is, its *acclamatory* character. It differs from the critical literature on Big Data, which is concerned with social media as a socio-technical assemblage and the nature, objectivity and legitimacy of its knowledge *outputs*. The acclamatory character of activity on social media raises, in contrast, the *political-ritual* practices that are the *inputs* of social media, which make possible the formation and detection of public sentiment, affect, or mood. While these inputs yield large amounts of data, often held by the companies which enclose it to be superior or at least complementary to interviewing or polling, the concern here is less epistemological and more about the formation or simulation of collective emotions. The approach taken here is historical and theoretical, and privileges the ‘social institution’ of acclamation over the data that is produced and used, although the latter remains important. It is more concerned with non-rational features of collective affect and ritual than with either reason-based opinion and deliberation or the new forms of data, information and knowledge made available. The term *public mood* is chosen because it is used by social media companies themselves, such as Twitter, and it best reflects the unsettledness, evanescence, and changeability, and the variability of affects that might compose and disturb it. In the conclusion, I will revisit this concept to suggest how it might be conceived as effecting a particular kind of closure.

Specifically, this article builds upon my earlier use of Agamben’s brief discussion of acclamation (2011: 168–75, 184–94; see Dean, 2013: 203–8) to develop an *analytics of publicity*. In Agamben’s account, he draws upon the history of imperial, religious and political acclamations found in the interwar political theology of Erik Peterson (2011) and Ernst Kantorowicz (1946) and the jurisprudence of Schmitt (1985, 2008). To refer to this literature is to examine social media from the perspective of the historical series of the different ways in which various publics are formed, as we saw in Schmitt’s quote above. An analytics of publicity addresses the practices first of all through which publics are formed and, second, made governable and manipulable (Dean, 2013: 222–7). Such an analytics examines the gestures, images, statements and symbols through which something becomes obvious, taken-for-granted or simply common sense and thus forms public opinion. That social media can be understood from the perspective of acclamation and the formation of publics and as a part of an analytics of publicity constitutes the core claim of this article.

The next part of the article surveys the social and political theory of acclamation and argues that it should be characterized as a social institution in a Maussian sense, with

different religio-political sources in Ancient Greece, imperial Rome, cultic practices and early Christianity, and that it continues to survive in everyday and political practices in contemporary societies. The final part then situates acclamation in social media as a third form of political acclamation, in addition to the acclamations of 'the people' as an 'assembled public', and of 'public opinion' formed and known through the mass media and opinion polls. By contrast, what is variously called virtual, digital or social media creates countless opportunities to express opinions in a virtual public domain in real time and anywhere through the visual iconography of acclamation. Considering questions of its differential geographies and access, its exploitation for value and profit, algorithmic governmentality and new forms of orality and gesture, this section concludes that a new public has been constituted that, given the virtual co-presence of participants, is not quite as 'fully privatized' as Schmitt imagined. Two themes are stressed. First, the formation of this new public mood places us on the threshold of the emergence of a new domain of politico-technical calculability and manipulation based on the aggregates of digital data produced and recorded on social media. Second, the religious, ritual and liturgical elements of acclamation remain eminent on social media, even if they have jumped platforms (from public assembly to the Internet) and domains (from the sacred to the profane).

Acclamation

We can broadly define acclamation in its classical form as a public rite with both oral and gestural performative elements. It is an exclamation of praise, triumph, or disapproval accompanied by the waving of flags or handkerchiefs, applause, or the raising of hands (Agamben, 2011: 168–9). Its more ritual expressions concern a desire for victory, long life, good health, strength and salvation. For Peterson, it acquires a juridical value in the expression of the people's consensus (Agamben, 2011: 169). In its simplest form, as in the voicing of approval, with or without the raising of hands or clapping them together, it is an expression of a form of collective assent. The latter form is still extant within everyday human groupings and is a common procedure of professional and academic associations and on executive boards of companies and other organizations. More elaborate forms survive in music concerts and at the theatre, and especially in the sporting arena, as well as at political assemblies and demonstrations. Acclamations have been witnessed recently in the Occupy Movement and continue to be used by guerilla forces, such as the Columbian FARC.

After Marcel Mauss and Paul Fauconnet (2005: 10), we might describe acclamation as a social institution in the sense of 'a grouping of acts and ideas already instituted which individuals find before them and which more or less imposes upon them'. Nicolas Mariot argues (2011: 208–11), following this, that an acclamation is an institution in the sense that it does not require its participants to form an idea of its meaning, to believe in the cause acclaimed, or to fully partake in the jubilation they suppose others must feel, for them to join in and perform it. To applaud, stand up and shout 'bravo' in the theatre does not require an individual to experience an inner feeling of approval and then seek to find a way to express it. It is simply enough to perform the gestures and make the sounds of an existing, established practice – a social institution – to join in the public expression

of joy, happiness or approval that is shared with other members of the audience. To participate in acclamation is to participate in a public rite that itself expresses a collective affect rather than search for an appropriate vehicle for individual or private feelings. As Mariot concludes:

The private investment of the participants can be quite variable, not necessarily consciously formulated, without calling into question, weakening, or reinforcing the social meaning conferred upon the event: this meaning does not depend on the reflexivity or degree of internalization of any participant in particular. (2011: 210)

The presence or absence of personal feelings in any individual will not therefore change anything – a point relevant to the range of personal investments of various social media posts.

With important exceptions (Mariot, 2011; Schwartzberg, 2010), the social institution, in this sense, of acclamation is today only rarely addressed by sociologists and political scientists. Part of the reason may be found in the way in which acclamation is viewed as antithetical to our ideas of democratic processes as deliberative and rational ones. Following Hannah Arendt's (1963: 125, 145) comparison of the processes of Constitution-making after the French and American Revolutions, Andreas Kalyvas (2008: 183) finds acclamation normatively deficient compared to democratic procedures such as discussing, deliberating and voting, to the point where the 'idea of acclamation as a type of direct rule is unsustainable, even laughable'. In this respect, theories of democracy that focus on collective discussion and deliberation as prior to decision-taking regard notions of acclamation as antithetical to democratic practice.

This stands in marked contrast to the work of Max Weber (1978: 1125–7), who regards acclamation as central to what he calls the 'routinization of charisma'. The general problem he addresses is how a charismatic community selects successors to the charismatic leader. Here we find a process that has two stages. The closest and most powerful followers of the leader first designate who shall be the successor. However, because charisma must be recognized not only by the powerful associates of the leader but also by the followers, this designation is succeeded not by an election in the modern sense but by charismatic acclamation such as would occur in the case of a king or a pope. Weber further observes (p. 1126) that 'charisma is not alien to all modern, including all democratic, forms of election' and cites plebiscitarian rulership and the official theory of French Caesarism as examples where 'the plebiscite is not an "election", but the first or the renewed recognition of a pretender as a personally, qualified, charismatic ruler'. Gradually acclamation by the ruled recedes 'behind the charismatically determined right of prior election by clerics, court officials or great vassals, and ultimately an exclusive oligarchic electoral agency comes into being, as in the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire' (p. 1127). However, Weber then immediately suggests that 'the reverse may also happen', that is, acclamation might remain a public process. For instance,

Acclamation by the ruled may develop into a regular electoral system... As far as the election of the supreme ruler is concerned, only the United States went all the way – and

there, of course, the nominating campaign within each of the two parties is one of the most important parts of the electoral business.

Here Weber indicates that, like charisma, acclamation is not at all alien to systems like the presidential nomination and election processes in the United States.

The neglect of the practice of acclamation also stands in contrast to Carl Schmitt, who argued in 1926 that acclamation is the original, pure form of democracy when compared to the voting mechanics of liberalism, which he identified with voting ‘in deepest secrecy and isolation’ (1985: 16). In contrast, he argues that:

[The] will of the people can be expressed just as well and perhaps better through acclamation, through something taken for granted, an obvious and unchallenged presence, than through the statistical apparatus that has been constructed with such meticulousness in the last fifty years. (Schmitt, 1985: 16)

While modern voting is performed alone and in secret, acclamation is performed collectively and in public. In it, what is at stake is a matter not of individual liberal reasoning but of collective feeling so that ‘dictatorial and Caesaristic methods not only can produce the acclamation of the people, but can also be the direct expression of democratic substance and power’ (p. 17). Schmitt thus postulates a strong relation between acclamation and democracy that reduces popular democratic sovereignty to ‘sheer acclamation’, thus sidelining ‘voice, discussion, judgment and deliberation’, as Kalyvas has pointed out (2008: 125).

The problem with Schmitt’s account of acclamation is that this theoretical overreach obscures its analytic potential. His various claims that acclamation is the ‘original democratic phenomenon’, that there is no ‘people without acclamations’, or that it ‘is the natural form of the direct expression of the people’s will’ (Schmitt, quoted in Agamben, 2011: 171, 172; Schmitt, 2008: 131) risk an impoverished view of the origins and practice of democracy that confuses it with demagoguery (Kalyvas, 2008: 124–5). It is not necessary, however, to grant acclamation a constitutive or exclusive role in founding popular sovereignty or a political community, to insist that it remains central to the practice of politics in really existing liberal and other kinds of democracies. Acclamation can form a ‘people’, but that people need not be a *demos*.

One aspect of the discussion of how we can think about the relationship between acclamation and democracy concerns the historical sources of acclamation. Both Weber and Schmitt (the latter, largely implicitly) regarded the Greek *polis* as an example of the use of acclamation. However, while Schmitt would identify acclamation as the original or natural democratic form, Weber viewed the *polis* as a form of authority based on the ‘charisma of rhetoric’ of secular demagogues, and thus refused to see it as a democratic association (Kalyvas, 2008: 71, n. 33; Weber, 1978: 1129–30).

Jacques Rancière (2007) and Melissa Schwartzberg (2010) help us clarify what is at stake here. Schwartzberg implicitly addresses Schmitt’s claim that acclamation was the original democratic phenomenon, when she notes the use of *thorubus* or clamor from Homeric times and only the late and partial emergence of vote-counting amidst an ever-present concern, by the time of classical Athens, of the outbreak of *stasis* or civil war

(2010: 3–4). She argues that while the aggregation of individual votes gradually supplanted acclamation in Athens, acclamation and the closely related estimation of waved hands in *cheirotomia* still ‘constituted the key means by which Athens as a political community could speak, as it were, univocally’ (p. 17). Given its origins in aristocratic bodies such as the Spartan *gerousia* (council of elders), in which individual judgment was valued, she concludes that there is nothing intrinsically democratic in aggregation and that acclamation retained a place in democratic decision-making.

For Schwartzberg, acclamation and estimation persist in situations where collective affirmation and consensus are required. More critically, Rancière (2007: 12, 31–2) distinguishes between the *demos*, for whom division and dissent are always possible, and the *ochlos*, understood as the common rabble of turbulent individuals united only by their passions – often involving the excluding of others or enmity towards them. In this respect, one alternative to the Schmittian thesis is that acclamation is not constitutive of democracy but of *ochlocracy*, the rule of the mob, or, that acclamation effects a sacralization of the *ochlos*.

In contrast to the thesis of the linkage between the *polis* and acclamation, Peterson’s dissertation on acclamations based on the expression *Heis theos* (One God) traces their origins to ‘obscure foundations’ in Christian expressions that overlap with pagan imperial acclamations, Orphic rituals, exorcisms and mystic cults (Agamben, 2011: 169–70). For Peterson, while acclamation is neither simply a ‘religious’ nor a ‘political’ phenomenon, it can have a ‘juridical meaning’, such as troops according a triumphant commander the title of *imperator* in the Roman Republic or later investing him with the name of Caesar. He insists it is not a shorter form of electoral procedure but expresses the people’s *consensus*. In this sense, the public ceremonial, or liturgy (*leitourgia*, literally, public service) of the Mass contains acclamations in which the people (the *laos* or, today, the laity) and the priest express the public and juridical character of the Church. In his later study of angelology, Peterson (2011: 106–8; Dean 2013: 201–3) locates acclamations (in hymns and doxologies) as a form of constituent political action of the earthly Christian assembly (*ekklēsia*) and the celestial city. Peterson thus indicates not only the indeterminate ‘religious’ and ‘political’ origins of Christian acclamations but also how hymns of praise (such as *Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*) of the angels, and the humans who join them, give voice to the political and public character of the Church.

Kantorowicz (1946: 13–64) also bridges the divide between religious-cultic and political-democratic genealogies in his study of the praises or *laudes*, such as *Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat* (Christ conquers, Christ reigns, Christ commands), that spread to the whole of Europe from the Gaulish-Frankish Church in the eighth century, and which had its antecedents in the imperial coronations in the Latin West and Byzantium. In a final chapter, Kantorowicz (1946: 180–6) goes on to compare the Benedictine and Roman Catholic revival of the *laudes* with the acclamations of right-wing and Fascist movements in the twentieth century and the mutual borrowing and contestation between the two. The latter example confirms what the literature seems to suggest: a constitutive undecidability of whether acclamations have an original political or religious character.

If we were to summarize and conclude from the existing literature on acclamation, we might say that it is a social institution and more particularly, a public rite with oral and

gestural performative elements. It can be observed in a variety of social practices, and in different forms of social association. Much of the existing literature has observed its presence in early 'political' and 'religious' sources, its association with ancient Greek political assemblies, ancient imperial and recent authoritarian forms of rule, and a genealogy that runs through Christian liturgy and worship. Historical interpretation and normative judgment seem to mesh on the question of the relation of acclamation to both ancient and modern forms of democracy. Following Schwartzberg, there is evidence for a role of acclamation in the Athenian *polis* that nonetheless is less than the democratic-constitutive one Schmitt might claim. Indeed, we might note that Schmitt's political assembly indeed draws upon Peterson's Christian *ekklēsia* more than the Athenian one, and that what we witness is less the formation of a *demos* than a *laos* in Peterson's sense. Acclamations would then accomplish a 'laicization', if one likes, of an *ochlos*, a turning of the unformed people into a publicly assembled laity or *laos* of a Church. Nonetheless, even if acclamation is not Schmitt's 'original democratic phenomenon', it has a close association with early forms of political association, was featured by twentieth-century authoritarian regimes in Europe and elsewhere, and continues to exist within democratic and republican political practice. As Schwartzberg concludes (2010: 19) her study of Ancient Greek voting practices, whether acclamation is democratic or not depends on how we imagine democracy. If democracy concerns the dignity and value of each individual's reasoning, then the aggregation of individual votes is warranted as a 'means of coordinating and assessing the judgments of individual citizens'. If, however, we imagine democracy as a self-governing community threatened by political division and *stasis*, then acclamation might be more appropriate in given circumstances. 'Acclamation enables us to decide and to act *qua* community, rather than via appeal to the majority of the citizens who comprise it' (Schwartzberg, 2010: 19). In certain groups today, it is easy to observe its function. In executive boards, cabinet government, and university departments, acclamation functions to express enough unanimity to prevent destructive partisanship and factionalism. In other contexts, such as the national presidential conventions of the major political parties in the USA, acclamation not only ratifies and confirms earlier electoral procedures but also unites the party behind their nominee.

Media and acclamation

What has this got to do with social media? One clue is provided by Schmitt's development of the notion of acclamation in his *Constitutional Theory*, published in 1928. Here Schmitt discusses a second type of acclamation, alongside the acclamation of the assembled public. Liberal democracies rest upon a new type of acclamation: public opinion. '*Public opinion is the modern type of acclamation*', he asserts (Schmitt, [1928] 2008: 275, emphasis in the original), while admitting it is 'a diffuse type' that 'arises and exists in an "unorganized" form'. Schmitt is aware that the 'bearer of public opinion . . . always remains somewhat mystical' (2008: 277) because it assumes a homogeneity of views that may not exist under, for instance, conditions of class consciousness. Nor is he naïve about public opinion: just as the assembled public can be manipulated by speakers and demagogues, so there is always the danger of the manipulation of public opinion in 'the press, film and other methods of psycho-technical handling of great masses of

people'. Nevertheless, he does not share Arendt's later pervasive skepticism towards public opinion, when she argues (1963: 225) that 'the rule of public opinion endangers even the opinion of those few who may have the strength not to share it'. It is precisely this ability of liberal democracies to 'manufacture consent' that, for Schmitt, makes public opinion the unifying equivalent of the acclamations of both the Greek and the Christian *ekklēsiae*.

If we allow, furthermore, that public opinion has been and continues to be shaped by the mass media, and the public relations and propaganda apparatus that has grown up in relation to it, then we have a clearer specification of the modern liberal-democratic public sphere as one no longer dependent on the direct presence of an acclaiming people but on the more diffuse and invisible presence of the people (whether as *demos* or *ochlos*) in this domain of public opinion – with all its attendant manipulations, suppressions and exclusions. Public opinion is thus not simply the outcome of rational and open discussion, but exists, at least partially, as a second form of political acclamation.

Yet there is a further step that Schmitt foresees when he makes the extraordinary forecast with which we began this article: the possibility that a third type of acclamation, and hence new forms of public, is made possible by 'an apparatus' on which private individuals can register their opinions without leaving their apartments. It is the contemporary equivalent of this on which we now focus.

Today, the social media sites and applications that allow the user to acclaim go by a proliferating variety of names. There is no doubt that these participatory sites and blogs can contain the full complexity of human experience and reasoning, although some (such as Twitter, at least until now) limit a posting to a small number of characters, including spaces. However, they have a function that can reduce complexity even further. This function is whether one wants to 'like' or dislike something, and 'friend' or 'follow' someone. In other words, as well as the more or less complex, deliberative and rational considerations that social media might allow, there stands a function that permits the simple expression or withdrawal of approval or even disapproval. And while this might appear to be 'fully privatized' in Schmitt's sense, it retains a public form of a practice or rite in which the individual can join with others or not.

This function of social media shares with acclamation another feature: the production and shaping of affects by a social practice, in this case, a social-technical one. José van Dijck (2013) argues that the 'social' in social media conflates 'human connectedness' with 'automated connectivity' and that 'liking', 'friending' and 'following' clump together strong and weak relationships, intimates and strangers, neutrals and devotees, in the indiscriminate accumulation of acclamation. Moreover, this acclamation is driven by the 'popularity principle': 'the more contacts you have and make, the more valuable you become, because more people think you are popular and want to connect with you' (van Dijck, 2013: 13). When a topic is 'trending', it receives large aggregated acclamation within a short time. 'Liking', 'friending' and 'following' share with acclamation that they are pre-existing social institutions that produce and shape affect, they allow for a wide variety of inner states that are irrelevant to their cumulative effect, and they have a kind of circular and self-fulfilling character in that the formation of liking/acclaiming collectivities fosters increased liking/acclaiming. In this sense, social media exist in a public space that is also paradoxically 'fully privatized'. They promise access and

participation for everyone, and partially fulfill that promise with respect to its billions of users. But they are also multiply stratified in a manner similar to a capitalist public sphere, with the dominance of giant corporations and media professionals, and with different navigational geographies and obstacles for different users, according to public and private censorship, language and cultural capacities, and the simple exclusion of billions of others (Graham, 2011, 2013).

In fact, the Like button itself, symbolized by the ‘thumbs up’ icon, warrants some reflection. It was introduced on Facebook in May 2010, as ‘a feature that lets users express their instant approval of a specific idea or item and share it’ (van Dijck, 2013: 48–9). The Like icon, however, now appears on many other sites: if a user discovers something and ‘likes’ it, it then appears on the user’s Facebook friends’ news feeds. Within three months of its introduction, over 350,000 external websites had installed the Like button. Merely by ‘liking’ something, the user’s information, including their Internet Protocol (IP) address, is routed back to Facebook. As van Dijck puts it (p. 49): ‘Underneath the user-centered rationale of connectedness is the owner-centered logic of connectivity.’ The latter is at least partially hidden from the user on the interface and a very specific notion of ‘sharing’, which now includes sharing with third parties, primarily but not only for profit, has become an industry norm.

Something of these competing logics for the development of social media can be observed in the discussion of the testing of a ‘dislike’ button on Facebook (Goel, 2015) and the introduction in 2016, in place of such a button, of an expanded menu of ‘Reaction’ animated emojis, including Love, Haha, Wow, Sad and Angry. On the one hand, the company was forced to respond to users’ longstanding request for ‘a way to express negative emotions or empathy with something sad or tragic posted on the social network’. On the other, ‘a dislike button could also be disconcerting to marketers, who prefer their messages to be surrounded by happy emotions’ (Goel, 2015, n.p.). With Facebook, the social institution of acclamation has been harnessed to the harvesting of data that can be sold to companies for advertising revenue. A defining feature of social media is thus the close relation between the accumulation of capitalist value and the accumulation of acclamation. Nevertheless, the new emojis indicate that acclamation also includes possibilities such as declamation, lamentation and awe, and seek to balance the gestural requirements of acclamation with Facebook’s business model.

This raises the question of how we are to think about this relation of orality, gesture, and affect in respect to social media. Papacharissi (2015) has provided an opening by distinguishing between three types of orality with regard to questions of form, texture and tonality. Primary orality, as in traditional storytelling, relies on a shared physical presence with a ‘sounding out’ of the words, while secondary orality locates storytelling in the written word and, as in journalism, relies on the objectivity and distance of the narration. With ‘digital orality’ she finds an interpersonal but mass form that affirms voice, like primary orality, but as the multiple voices of atomized and pluralized subjects. Here she discovers something analogous to Schmitt’s ‘fully privatized’ public in social media acclamation: rather than the consensus expressed through the tonality of voice in assembled publics (sometimes in response to oral narration), or the circulation of opinions through the mass media to form a unified public opinion, we have an affirmation of voice but no longer as a unified public. In its place, we have the voices

of a collection of plural and atomized subjects, who nevertheless exist in a virtual public co-presence. Perhaps this atomization of subjects on social media provides a way of understanding how the self becomes the object of its own acclamation, with, for example, the ubiquitous postings of one's own picture or 'selfie'.

In regard to gesture, Agamben (2000) points to politics as a sphere of gesture, understood as a pure means or 'mediality', that is neither Aristotelean *poiesis* (or production which seeks an end other than itself) nor *praxis* (or action as an end in itself). A gesture marks the statement that accompanies it and places it within a distinctive realm: certain gestures (hand on the Bible and right hand raised palm facing out, or a closed fist or hand on heart) reveal oral statements to be, for example, an oath in a presidential inauguration or court of law or a pledge of allegiance to nation or country, and other gestures (raising of arms at certain angles, waving of flags, banners, or handkerchiefs) reveal other statements to be an acclamation. We should not take for granted the social media invention of proxies for human gestures; the fact that they have been invented, despite the difficulty of doing so divorced from the tonality of voice and corporeal presence, requires scrutiny. Perhaps the difficulty of conjuring up an equivalent of the relation of gesture and voice in practices of acclamation makes the affective character that is produced often so ambiguous. Not only do liking and friending express a wide range of relationships but support for personal, political or social causes can be undertaken with minimal effort and simply for the sake of one's own self-esteem or good feelings, such as in the case of 'slacktivism'. The innovation of emojis is an indicator of the difficulties of individualized emotional expression in the social media. Nonetheless, this does not prevent social media platforms from trumpeting their capacity to track public emotion, sentiment, or mood. By viewing acclamation as a social institution, however, we can take into account and make intelligible *both* the wide range of affective states of atomized subjects on social media *and* the formation of a collective or public mood from the forms of orality and gesture they make available.

The micro-blogging site, Twitter, presents itself as a kind of *agora* of the digital age, the ideal of an open and free space of public dialogue, or a kind of 'echo chamber of random chatter, the online underbelly of mass opinions where collective emotions are formed and where quick-lived trends wax and wane in the public eye' (van Dijck, 2013: 69). This description alerts us to its proximity to the practice of acclamation in at least three ways: (1) that it claims to be a public space, albeit virtual; (2) that it is a kind of 'barometer of emotions and opinions' (p. 82); and (3) that it often deals with relatively evanescent emotional responses. Nevertheless, this public space – the 'twitterverse' – is not a neutral or equal one. We have already mentioned the differential geographies of access to such a space, including those excluded or self-excluded from it. In the service of making the information flow an exploitable resource, specific algorithms apply filtering mechanisms so that not all posts – 'tweets' – are weighted equally, and some users and their contributions are more valued than others (p. 68). The algorithmic push for intensity (number of tweets per second or TPS) over quality results in short periods of heavily circulated messages that are called 'trending' (p. 77). Trending may signal 'content-massages' aimed at pushing a message to go 'viral' and jump platforms and forms of media.

The paradoxes, or even contradictions, between viewing this site as a kind of virtual public space and another source of user-based value production for the accumulation of capital, do not prevent it from having a particular affinity with certain political uses and functions. First, a ‘haphazard inventory’ found on Wikipedia of its notable uses includes ‘campaigning, legal proceedings, education, emergencies, protest and politics, public relations, reporting dissent, space exploration and opinion polling’ (p. 73), thus reinforcing an impression of affinity of this platform with formal politics and direct political social action and protests. Second, it has been regarded both as a liberating vehicle of political protest that enables communication and propaganda that circumvents government and news organizations *and* as something open to the manipulation of the most influential senders, including politicians, journalists and conventional media organizations (p. 75). These are both political uses. Third, and most importantly, its focus on trending ‘could be regarded as emblematic for the platform’s divergent ambitions to simultaneously measure, engineer and mobilize the public’s mood’ (p. 78).

In regard to the latter, we could then compare the ‘tweet flow’ to mass media such as programmed television and mass circulation newspapers. While the latter relied on the scientific or rational measurement of public opinion through opinion polls and ratings surveys by which opinion or habits can be elicited, registered, aggregated, and published at some later time, the former closes – or promises to close – the temporal gap between event, reaction, its registration and its measurement. The ‘tweet flow’, then, can be conceptualized by the platform as ‘a *live* stream of uninhibited, unedited, instant, short, and short-lived reactions’ and ‘a *real-time* undercurrent of opinions and gut feelings’ (p.78, emphasis in original). In this sense, it claims to have the immediacy of the direct presence of the acclaiming people in public assemblies, and the scale of the formation of public opinion through the mass media measured in the tens and hundreds of millions of participants. The fact that, like both these other forms of acclamation, not all participants are equal and that the resultant ‘public mood’ is subject to actual or potential manipulation, should not obscure its status as a new practice to which the social institution of acclamation has migrated.

To summarize so far: social media practices constitute a new form of acclamation that is conducted in a virtual public space of differential geography in which all participants are (potentially) co-present to one another, although many are either silent or excluded. Its status as a public space coexists with both unequal access to it and its use for the production and accumulation of capital. We have noted the similarity of the language and iconography of social media to that of acclamation, with its ‘liking’ and ‘following’ and its thumbs up and down buttons, and, in the case of Twitter, starring and ‘retweeting’. However, the specific forms of orality and gesture affirm the voice of atomized and privatized subjects and render the expression of affect ambiguous and opaque, and much more difficult to discern than, say, the mood of a public assembly. Like other forms measuring it, social media falls somewhat short of its ideal of a real-time barometer of public mood, which contracts to near zero the temporal gap between the expression, registration and aggregation of these expressions. Further, the public mood that is produced is shaped by an algorithmic governmentality that weights expressions differentially according to users and favors intense brief periods of intense circulation. Nevertheless, despite these limitations in relation to its own claims to be the *agora* of

our own time, a new acclamatory public is being formed through social media. If the formation of 'public opinion' with the mass media is indeed a form of acclamation, as Schmitt claimed, we can say the formation of collective affect, social sentiment or what we call here public mood, through social media, is equally a form of acclamation, even if its source is an aggregation of private expressions.

The implications of the analysis, however, do not stop there. Let us conclude by stressing two important ones: (1) of political manipulability; and (2) of the religious or liturgical character of social media acclamations. In respect to the former, social media bring us to a new threshold of political governability. Just as the formation of public opinion is inseparable from public opinion polls and the expertise they make possible in the fields of public relations and political manipulation (with their 'spin doctors'), so the formation of this public mood is equally a domain of knowledge, expertise and manipulation. For example, in 2012, Twitter launched the Twitter Political Index or Twindex in partnership with a search engine, Topsy, and a bipartisan pair of opinion pollsters. *The Twitter Political Index* report (Twitter, 2012, n.p.) spoke of analyzing 400 million real-time tweets a day and applying a 'social sentiment' analysis on two million each week concerning that year's US presidential candidates. This was done by 'sentiment scoring', which gives a number by which a term ('obama', 'romney', '@barackobama', '@mittromney') is more positive than all other mentions on a single day. It also boasts that the huge numbers of tweets it deals with allow it to properly classify informal language including negation, colloquialism, abbreviations, acronyms and sarcasm and notes that state-wide analytics is made available through GPS geo-tagging of the posts. The report also charts the relationship of its scoring to that of Gallup polling and finds the Twitter index to be a leading indicator for Gallup approval ratings.

Now while we might want to maintain skepticism about some of the claims of this report, recalling both the unequal weight given to different users and acknowledging that the demographics of Twitter do not match the demographics of the general population, even in countries such as the United States, the production of such data gains a legitimacy of its own. Conventional news media, such as the news agency Reuters, reported on the social media impact of the speeches at the political conventions by candidates and their spouses (Serjeant, 2012) and the *New York Times* reported on the arrival of Twindex as 'an additional real-time view of the nation's feeling about candidates as they appear in the news' (Bilton, 2012). Underlining its popular-acclamatory character, commentators analyze the rhetorical devices used by populist political candidates on Twitter, such as Donald Trump in 2016 (Hess, 2016). Academics add further legitimacy by studying live-tweeting in primary debates and such issues as the relative influence of citizen and elite users (Hawthorne et al., 2013) or young people's 'social watching' behavior (McKinney et al., 2013).

What appears to be emerging then is a new domain of knowledge derived from this form of acclamation that can be subject to comment in other forms of media, used to assess the performance and statements of political candidates and those associated with them, and become an object of scientific inquiry. Just as the mass media opened the possibility of an extension of the public sphere in liberal democracies that gave rise to new possibilities of propaganda and manipulation, so these new forms of social media do much more than facilitate communication and the exchange of information and ideas in a

virtual public sphere. They open up a whole new domain for the practice of acclamation beyond, but in conjunction with, the acclamations of the assembled people or public opinion of the mass media, and they make possible a form of knowledge that promises new forms of political use and manipulation. The 'Big Data' promise here is of a knowledge of such a scale as to be as or even more reliable than one based on the representative sampling of a population, that charts an emotional authenticity based on real-time reactions of people and that can be produced extremely rapidly. This knowledge of the 'public mood' will not only be able to predict the more considered course of the fluctuations of 'public opinion' but also become a knowable and potentially manipulable domain in and of itself. This is the political threshold to which social media have brought us.

Finally, we need to address social media acclamation from the perspective afforded by religious and cultic genealogies. We noted the overlaps, and indeed 'indistinction', between the genealogies of religious and political acclamations, observed throughout the literature surveyed in the previous section of the present article. At least one strand of research, associated with political theology (Peterson, Kantorowicz), links the origins of political acclamation to religious liturgy. Does this mean that social media acclamations have a religious character or at least carry on a practice with a religious and ritual genesis? To establish the 'religious' character of social media acclamations, we could undertake the task of analyzing the form and content of individual postings. We might note that the liturgical praises analyzed by Kantorowicz often take the form of a tricolon such as *Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat*. Many direct political acclamations in liberal democracy take a similar form: 'Four More Years, Four More Years, Four More Years', 'O-BA-MA, O-BA-MA, O-BA-MA', or, as a staple of street protests, 'The People, United, Will Never Be Defeated'. Similarly, a common Occupy Wall Street chant in 2011–12 was 'One, we are the people! Two, we are united! Three, the occupation is not leaving!' Certainly, a study of the relationship between poetic, metric and tonal qualities of religious liturgies and political protests would be revealing. Similarly, certain substantively profane postings on social media may convey an experience of the sacred. As one example, a report (Serjeant, 2012, n.p.) on social media reaction to Michelle Obama's speech at the 2012 Democratic National Convention quotes the posting by actor and comedian, Chris Rock: 'I'm ready to vote NOW dammmmit! Where's the ballot? What day is it? Where am I? Who am I? Michelle OBAMA ladies & gentlemen. wow.' While this does not immediately reproduce the structure of the tricolon, it does speak of an enthusiasm of an almost religious character. Moreover, it addresses and problematizes three dimensions of the user's everyday or profane existence. 'What day is it? Where am I? Who am I?' could be regarded as egocentric reflections or versions of the narcissism of social media posts. However, they also speak of a removal from a profane location in time and space and an assumed personal identity to enter a sphere of public emotion that is similar to that removal and communion achieved in the sacred praises of liturgical acclamations. Given the volume of postings, it might be difficult to offer principles of selection of individual ones. This should not, however, deprive the qualitative analysis of their form and content of its legitimacy.

We shall return to this issue of the religio-political character of acclamations in the conclusion. The best hypothesis would seem to be that social media acclamation

continues to be marked by the character of previous acclamatory practices that do not permit a clear distinction between sacred and the profane, or the religious and the political, and that, on occasion, allows a movement between one and the other. Just as the acclamations of the assembled public at a political inauguration are key elements in the elevation or accession of the elected or nominated individual to the office itself (for instance, the president-elect to the presidency), so social media acclamations have the capacity to transport the acclaiming individual into a different and separate affective realm similar to that of the sacred. What appears as the narcissistic self-obsession displayed by many users of social media could just as well be described as a sacralizing of one's self, body, relations with others and activities. The extent to which the sum of these privatized expressions of approval – the public mood – can constitute a 'collective will', a *volonté générale* as Schmitt put it, is an experiment contemporary politics is currently conducting.

Conclusion

The current article has offered a non-exhaustive perspective on social media but one that nonetheless sought to provide a novel insight into them. It argued that key aspects of social media could be placed in a series with religio-political acclamatory practices. By doing so, it viewed social media from the perspective of the different practices of the formation of publics, in which the formation of public mood was akin to the creation of the manifest will of an assembled public, or of public opinion by the mass media and opinion polling. The acclamations of social media share the scale of mass media and the immediacy and co-presence (albeit virtual) of individuals, and even the (imagined) iconography of its classical form as a public rite. However, an account of the formation of new publics through social media needs also to register their shortfalls in relation to many of the claims for a digital politics, and thus investigate differential geographies of access, links to capital accumulation, the algorithmic steering of affect, and new forms and relations of orality and gesture. These temper the ideal or imaginaries of a new participatory *agora* or public, or a real-time production of knowledge about the public mood, but they do not erase the formation of a domain of affect production, which is open to both new domains of scientific knowledge and political calculation and manipulation.

The article adds to, rather than displaces, existing understandings of social media and contributes to our understanding of acclamation in contemporary liberal democracies. The latter does not mean, however, that there is a linear series of forms of acclamation that replace one another. Rather, it makes us aware that a single event such as a candidate's speech at a political convention can invoke the direct acclamation of the assembled public (the waving of banners and chants, etc.), enter the cycle of public opinion formation through its broadcast on television and reporting in newspapers, and be subject to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of acclamatory responses through platforms such as Twitter.

The term 'public mood' has also been used to indicate the changeability and opacity of what is produced by social media acclamations. It could be conceived as an entire 'economy of emotions' or a veritable 'free sea' of opinions and reactions. But there is

another feature that bears further exploration: the kind of closure they entail, and the success of simplified populist postings. It is in this sense that we might say that social media acclamations transform the unformed people (the *ochlos*) into a *laos* (the people affirming the assembled unity of the Church) rather than a *demos* that is always capable of problematizing such a unity through discussion and truth-telling (*parrhēsia*).

This observation returns us to the issue of the religio-political character of acclamation. What we can conclude is that even our most technologically advanced forms of communication include aspects of political ritual, ceremony or liturgy and make available something other than rational deliberation and decision-making, something with a strong family resemblance to the awe created by public religious worship, the fervor of the public assembly or demonstration, or even the excitement of the sports arena. But this something – which even its promoters call social sentiment or public mood – while immediate and even evanescent, can be known and acted upon just as the enthusiasms of the plebeians, the voice of the people, or the vagaries of public opinion were centuries before it was imaginable.

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