Publicking/Privating: The Gestural Politics of Digital Spaces

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Abstract

The distinction between public and private spheres has become increasingly blurred in the digital age. As more aspects of life move online, where information is potentially visible to anyone, traditional barriers dividing public and private realms dissolve. This creates a default condition of publicness for much online activity. In response, Internet users have developed novel ways of demarcating contexts as more public or more private through "gestures" (Vilém Flusser) that range from literal bodily movements to highly context-dependent and media-specific signs. This essay argues that in digital environments, the notions of "public" and "private" take on active, performative dimensions as verbs — "publicking" and "privating." Users engage in ongoing yet subtle negotiations to establish "spaces of appearance" (Hannah Arendt) and signify communication as directed toward distinct audiences. The essay criticizes classic theories of the public sphere as inadequate for digital life. It proposes recasting the distinction as fluid and gestural rather than stable and institutional. Although overlooked as trivial, micro-gestures of publicking and privating enable users to perform publicness and privateness in a time in which the public has become an act rather than a place. Studying these fleeting yet meaningful gestures provides insight into how users resist the default publicness of contemporary digital life.

Keywords Public sphere · Internet publics · Teleconferencing · Social media · Gestures

Introduction

Crises often act as catalysts — of technologies and public policies, but also of adjustments in the everyday habits of private social interaction (Winner 2020, chaps. 1, 2). In the 1970s, the oil crisis not only changed the USA's strategy in the Middle East, it also led to the use of smaller motor vehicles and the practice of car-pooling, turning cars from private spaces into ad-hoc collectives — at least until fuel prices reached a new low in the mid-1980s, vehicles got bigger again, and Americans drove alone once more (Ferguson 1997). The Covid years, too, can be expected to have profound effects on public policy, technology, and social behavior. If the return of the Keynesian, activist state was, to the dismay of many on the left, only a temporary occurrence, the pandemic fast-tracked the development of mRNA vaccines. As a concept, they predate the

pandemic, but only Covid created the right conditions of urgency, funding, and large-scale testing opportunities to quickly develop and distribute them (Dolgin 2021).

It is less clear where on this scale — from fleeting to lasting impact — the social practices of remote work and videoconferencing fall. Analysts from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that between April and December 2020, half of paid work hours in the USA were supplied from home, up from 5% before the pandemic (Barrero, Bloom, and Davis 2021). While these numbers went down again in the last two years, follow-up research suggests that remote work has gained broader acceptance and looks set to persist, though its full-time adoption is rare and unevenly distributed between high- and low-skilled jobs (Hansen et al. 2023). At the same time, what philosopher Hubert Dreyfus has called "disembodied telepresence" (Dreyfus 2009, 49) also comes with serious psychological downsides.

The unclear balance of the advantages and disadvantages of remote work makes it hard to assess whether it is here to stay. But another reason for that difficulty is that, although increasingly normal, remote work and other practices of digital life defy some of the sociological categories by which we traditionally order our interactions with the

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world — the *private* and the *public*. It is quite possible that the Covid pandemic has played the role of catalyst here as well, perhaps not creating but certainly exacerbating and accelerating shifts in lifeworld dynamics that were already underway (see e.g. Furedi 2020). Among these, I argue, is the intensification of a *liminal publicness* — a state suspended between being public and being private that has been described as "context collapse" (Davis and Jurgenson 2014) — that is inscribed into contemporary digital social interaction. With the heightened disconnect between virtual and actual presence, and this is the hypothesis of this paper, the notions of publicness and privateness encompass not only adjectives and nouns (*public/the public, private/privacy*) but also verbs (*publicking/privating*). Especially in digital and online spaces, this distinction has moved further from having the quality of a place or state to that of an action — a *gesture*. Gestures, as I understand them here, are subtle actions that are perceived as meaningful by an audience and that may range from literal bodily movements to highly context-dependent, preverbal, and media-specific signs. A gestural making-public and making-private, which I call "publicking" and "privating" respectively, seem to me to be better able to capture current practices of social interaction than the most common theories of the public/private distinction.

In what follows, I will first present some characteristics of classic theories of the public/private distinction as well as attempts at adapting them for a digital context. I will then make my case for reconfiguring this distinction as gesture rather than place or state. Finally, I will close with a brief discussion of three cases of publicking and privating: web-based publishing as both business and artistic practice; the phenomenology of queer online and locative self-presentation; and the "disembodied telepresence" of Zoom. In all these cases, I claim, one can observe new models of navigating the frustration of the classic public/private distinction in the digital through gestures of *marking* a context *as* public or private.

Classic Theories of the Public

Theories of the public have had difficulties adapting to the reality of digital media. In this section I will briefly show how attempts have been made to tackle this problem by recourse to the theories of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas respectively. Arendt, who models the public on the *agora*, and Habermas, who develops it according to the model of the *reading public*, highlight synchronous and asynchronous, physically present and mediated, and one-to-one and one-to-many interactions respectively. Such theories run into difficulties when different temporal, spatial, or relational configurations are concerned, as is the case in digital communication.

Arendt and Habermas were certainly not the first to theorize the public. In his 1927 book *The Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey philosophically explored the concept, defining actions as private or public based on the reach of their consequences (Dewey 2016, 69). Yet where Dewey used the term for naming a *group*, they adapted it to designate a *space*. Arendt's "public realm" and Habermas's "public sphere"[1] become sites of activity that, while products of the actions of people, are not identical to them.

Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1998) is probably the most forceful articulation of the public as space imbued with transformative powers — not only politically, but also epistemically. For her, the notion of the public is embedded in a phenomenology of human activities: labor, work, and action (Benhabib 2003; Canovan 1992; Passerin d'Entrèves 1994). If labor is about the continuation of the species, an activity that leaves no traces, and follows a circular temporality — cooking or fieldwork — work has a beginning and an end, giving some duration to the world — building a house, making art (Arendt 1998, 7–22; 2003). Action, Arendt holds, is the only activity that is not directly engaged with material goods, be they permanent or ephemeral, but is pure relationality. Starting a series whose outcome is uncertain, it establishes relationships between plural human beings, and as such is the genuine activity of politics.

Speech among equals in the mode of action constitutes the space Arendt calls the public realm. It has a decisively epistemic dimension by being instituted through what she describes as a "space of appearance" (Arendt 1998, 199; see also 1978, 72). The space of appearance is the ground against which the public realm can appear, preparing the stage not only for the *agon* of politics but also for the presentation of the individuals' proper self, and it is even responsible for the intersubjective confirmation of reality (Arendt 2003, 179, 50; see Bajohr 2011, chap. 3). This strong epistemic function of the public goes far beyond what both Dewey and later Habermas theorize, and marks Arendt's as the most demanding interpretation of the public.

If action is in its relational form immaterial, the realm of the public is a composite of immaterial and material elements. It is made up of the intangible relationships between humans founded in action, but these relationships can only appear if they are enacted within a concrete, material site. At its most basic, the public realm requires the physical proximity of human bodies, but Arendt extends this reliance on the material to the actual locale of the political encounter (Markell 2011). While the laws and even the state can be the result of public

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[1] Both Habermas and Arendt speak of *Öffentlichkeit* (German, "the public, publicness"); that this term has been translated differently has been a source of confusion for some readers.

action, these institutions are not enough to keep the public realm alive. Only the actual presence of actual people in a specific place can create the space of appearance that is predicated on the act of leaving the private and entering into the public; it is both a concrete spatial site and a frame of meaning that emerges through interaction.

Jürgen Habermas in many ways continued Arendt's line of thought but rid it of its impractically lofty and partly metaphysical ballast. He also *dematerialized* it to a large extent. In what is undoubtedly the best-known critical social theory about the public today, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, originally published in 1962, Habermas turned Arendt's melancholy and concrete notion of the public (Benhabib 2003) into a normative and more abstract concept useful for a modern mass-democracy. Unlike Arendt, Habermas historicized the public sphere as a specifically bourgeois phenomenon that had developed after the Enlightenment but which was now under threat. The book, by Habermas's own admission his "most successful to date" (Habermas 2022, 145), examined this emergence of a reading public in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and described the bourgeois public sphere as a space for rational debate and critical discussion centered around literary circles, coffee houses, and print media. Premised on the ideal of universal access and participation, the public sphere is a strongly normative concept, which gives the book's ending its gloomy tone: the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere in the "welfare state mass democracy" of the present comes with the domination of commercial media and advertising, undermining the public's central role as place of collective will-formation for a functional deliberative democracy (Habermas 1991, 208).

Habermas, too, thinks of the public as a site — not, as Arendt, as a physical one requiring the presence of people, but as an abstract *publicum* of discursive participants. Such a public on the one hand mediates between society and the state, holding the latter accountable through "public opinion" in the form of a free press and free speech. On the other hand, however, the public is itself a site of rational deliberation with a legitimizing and stabilizing function for the polity. In this telling, the public sphere no longer refers to Arendt's space of appearance in which an individual can show their unique character and the group may assure itself of the unity of the world. Instead, the public sphere now is a purely virtual space of discourse and debate among private individuals. Its epistemic function is the more prosaic but at the same time massively ambitious "people's public use of their reason" (Habermas 1991, 27) — the actual site of what he would later term "de-transcendentalized reason," the only useful conceptualization of reason in a post-metaphysical world (Habermas 2001). Most importantly, it no longer requires the face-to-face interaction of the ultra-republican model Arendt espoused but is distributed through different channels of mediated debate. A useful concept for the public in a digital age? As it turns out, it's not so easy.

The (In-)Adaptability of Theories of the Public to Digital Lifeworlds

Since the rise of the Web, theorists have struggled with adapting theories of the public to the realities of digital communication, including Habermas's. In 1995, Mark Poster rejected his conception of the public sphere for the "Internet as a political domain." Since Habermas still assumed stable identities as well as the homogeneity of the public sphere, his theory was useless for a virtual space in which agents with "cyborg identities" acted in a much more fluid and decentralized way (Poster 1995a). For Poster and other early political theorists of the Internet, the potential of the new medium was its ability to disrupt existing hierarchies and empower individuals; the Internet, it was hoped, could open up possibilities for new forms of politics and identity formation that break from modern frameworks.

However, already in 1997, Irene Ward questioned some of these more optimistic assumptions: While the Internet does allow social leveling to some degree by obscuring status and allowing anonymity, there are likely limits to the number of people who can engage in substantive debate at once. And while there are no institutional barriers to Internet access, significant economic and cultural barriers remain, limiting true general access. Finally, she noted, the Internet's sound-bite nature may not lend itself well to the complex, reasoned debate central to Habermas's public sphere (Ward 1997). One year later, Saskia Sassen warned of commercialization threatening the democratic potential of the Web as a "private appropriation of a public space" (Sassen 1998, 548) that has since become truer than the early critics could have imagined.

In the time since, a panoply of similar critiques has been leveled against the adaptability of Habermas's concept to the Internet. Many focus on the fact that not *one* public but *multiple* fractured publics exist (Keane 1995; in regard to social media, see Fuchs 2014), which do not compete positively towards the "participatory parity" Nancy Fraser hoped for in 1990, when she introduced the term "counterpublics" (Fraser 1990, 66), but rather stay separated in mutually oblivious or self-radicalizing filter bubbles. Further, the prevalence of trolling, harassment, and uncivil discourse online undermines the conditions for rational debate (Pariser 2012; Garcia et al. 2015; Nagle 2017; Bright 2018; Winner 2020, chap. 11). What is more, data privacy concerns permeate these discussions about platforms that treat their user's private data as a commodity (Fuchs 2014; Zuboff 2019). In his recent update of his 1962 book, Habermas accepted this sobering diagnosis, stating that "the centrifugal expansion of simultaneously

accelerated communication to an arbitrary number of participants across arbitrary distances generates an ambivalent explosive force" (Habermas 2022, 158), but in the end offered as a solution only the healthy media structures of old.

More recently, two conceptual axes central to earlier notions of the public seem to have been particularly problematic: the first is the separation between material and immaterial aspects, the second is the very distinction of public and private itself. For the longest time, it seemed that Arendt's notion of the public was hopelessly outdated: the ideas of a concrete site and of face-to-face interaction appeared laughable compared to Habermas's disembodied, distributed public as pure discourse. However, the idea of the nineties that networked publics are *purely* relational and virtual — that is, as immaterial as the topological graph depicting their structure — has come under attack (Starosielski 2015; Gillespie 2013; Gabrys 2011). Bernard Geoghegan summarizes these critiques thusly: "The drive toward informatic disembodiment belongs to a liberal ideology that promises equality through the technological suspension of geographic, linguistic, ethnic, and class differences" (Geoghegan 2023, 10).

Unlike Habermas's, Arendt's notion of publicness is not purely immaterial, but mixes immaterial and material aspects; particularly the "space of appearances," combining both, seems useful when describing how groups come together online to present themselves. The same goes for the effects of Zoom conferencing, which have nothing to do with Habermas's asynchronous debate of a reading public and more with the presence of rhetors on the *agora*. Arendt's complex interweaving of material and immaterial aspects seems to warrant a comeback for her as theorist of online publics.[2]

However, a more serious point is the question of whether the public/private dichotomy still holds at all. This means not only the talk of a "post-privacy" condition (Han 2015), in which users care little about their data if in exchange for it their lives are made more convenient by Internet behemoths like Amazon or Facebook. Rather, the question is whether the private and the public still exist in the ontological distinction that Arendt had claimed for them. In fact, Arendt herself deplored the fact that the clear separation between public and private was in retreat in modern capitalism; the all-permeating, amorphous realm that took over she called "the social."[3] But while she understood this term to mean the public organization of the formerly private matter of subsistence, we may be forgiven for connecting "the social" as exploding the private/public distinction with contemporary

social media and networked communication in general. Thus, Axel Bruns can argue that there is no longer a clear distinction between public and private spaces for communication; the contemporary media environment contains many spaces that combine public and private qualities in complex ways, and the Internet merges multiple audiences and makes private behaviors public (Bruns 2023).

In this respect, the early theorists of the Internet captured something that easily slips out of sight. For even though there is no single, world-spanning public sphere today, but instead a multitude of different bubbles and micropublics, *publicness itself* has very much become the norm and promise of the Internet, as Mark Poster claimed already in 1995 (Poster 1995b). Redeeming Bertolt Brecht's early "radio theory" (Brecht 2003) — the dream that every receiver may be a sender — many theorists describe this situation as publicness being the dominant mode of existence, and thus also a source of anxiety. In her book *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, Danah Boyd argued ten years ago that social media in particular has collapsed contexts and made personal information simultaneously public and private so that concepts of "public" and "private" are no longer applicable in the same way online; instead, there is always an extra effort necessary to mark something *as* private (Boyd 2014; see also Baym and Boyd 2012).

Both with recourse to and in disagreement with Arendt, we can thus say that, first, in the digital world, the separation between public and private has not so much collapsed into the social, rather, *the social realm has assumed publicness as its form*. Under the conditions of the digital and the ubiquity of networked communication, most of our representations, utterances, and actions, since they are potentially accessible to everyone, are public by default, *even if* they are private; real privacy is, if available at all, always only the secondary, de-privileged option.

For the purposes of this essay, this means that rethinking the public in light of the digital requires moving beyond models reliant on physical co-presence, synchronicity, or print media; but it also means leaving behind models that simply virtualize and disembody users into nothing but discursive nodes. Taking up Arendt's cue of the "space of appearance," I want to suggest a type of publicness (and privateness) that is neither synchronous and immediate action (the model of the *agora*) nor asynchronous mediated interaction (the model of the bourgeois public), but a type of mediated presence that operates through gestures. Such gestures afford Internet users ways to *reinscribe the difference between privateness and publicness into the default publicness itself*. In other words, where everything is public, insisting on a specific situation *as* public or *as* private is a strong communicative act. In this situation, the concept moves from noun to verb, from thing to gesture: the *site of the public* is now increasingly conceived of as the *act of publicking*.

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[2] Salikov (2018) is making a similar and useful case for Arendt, but highlights the agonistic nature of Arendt's concept of the public sphere, which I do not dwell on for the purpose of this paper.

[3] See, for a classic analysis of "the social," Pitkin (1998).

The Gestures of Publicking and Privating

I take my inspiration for the term "publicking gesture" from media theorist Alessandro Ludovico, who has tried to explain how digital publications mimic traditional publishing by performing a "publishing gesture" that gives it legitimacy (Ludovico 2012, 68–69). What Ludovico overlooks in his analysis is that this gesture is not at all limited to what is traditionally called publishing. In fact, these gestures permeate all online conduct that has to negotiate default publicness with the marking of something as public or private. For this reason, I think it would pay to extend his concept. Instead of the "publishing gesture," then, I suggest the "publicking gesture." Publicking goes beyond publishing. It can pertain not only to works but to any act, image, role, practice, or framework that we want to be marked as public. All publishing may be publicking, but publicking is much more than publishing. This section will flesh out this intuition by providing the publicking gesture with a more solid theoretical footing.

What is meant by "gesture" here? Philosopher Vilém Flusser understands a gesture to be "a movement of the body or of a tool attached with the body, for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation" (Flusser 2014, 3). Gestures, burdened with "epistemological overdetermination" (Flusser 2014, 162), go beyond the mechanical operation of physical laws and are expressive carriers of meaning. In this, they are not monocausal events but what one could describe, in the language of data analysis, as high-dimensional phenomena that have multiple features or explanatory dimensions. Only in intersecting clusters, but not on their own, do they produce meaning. The gesture of writing, for instance, has not only a causal, that is, physiological, but also a functional, psychological, cultural, economic, etc. dimension.

My suggestion is to conceive of a gesture as a data point in a high-dimensional feature space, where each dimension represents a different explanatory factor. Flusser seems to say that these dimensions are not immediately obvious and have to be extracted via the interpretation of an observer, thus constructing the coordinate system through this analysis in the first place (Flusser 2014, 11, 162). Interpreting the gesture of writing, for instance, would not only take the process of linearly putting words to paper through tool use into account, but also the organization of thoughts, the application of the rules of a language, the history of its writing implements, the expression of the "virtuality hidden" in the one writing, and so on (Flusser 2014, 22). By analyzing, and hence producing, the explanatory dimensions of gestures such as writing, speaking, and painting (but also shaving, destroying, and telephoning, among others), Flusser presents a thick description of symbolically coded movements and interactions that allow interpretation in order to "'decipher' the way we exist in the world" (Flusser 2014, 142) — without ever being able to claim that all its dimensions have been exhausted.

I want to take up this notion of "gesture" as feature space but flip the coordinate system, as it were. Staying with the metaphor of computational data analysis, we can say that Flusser picks out a main feature, a first "principal component" (Elliot et al. 2016) for these multidimensional clusters he calls gestures. In all his examples, the gesture's *function* is the main feature — the gestures of writing, destroying, and telephoning get their names from the effect they produce. However, since by his own admission no feature should be the exclusive main component, and since the process of interpretation can always unearth new components, the gesture space can be transformed to produce new groupings or clusters along different dimensions. Among them are, for instance, the qualities of the doer's communicative intent. Writing, destroying, and telephoning can, to varying degrees, be about the engagement with, or the self-disclosure of myself to, others. While I usually do not telephone without wanting to say something, I can write both for myself or to a receiver, and the gesture of destroying may be purely utilitarian or a warning to others. A different "rotation" would thus produce a new set of guiding principal components — directly expressive, indirectly expressive, non-expressive — that traverse and reorder Flusser's gestures.

Since all identified features may be made up of several subfeatures, it is always possible to refine the dimensionality of the gesture space thus construed. The indirectly expressive communicative features, it can be argued, may be classified according to whether their communicative intent includes the intent to mark the context of communication as private or as public. This marking-as can be conceived of as instances of what Paul Grice has called "implicature" (Grice 1989), that is, the inference that occurs when a speaker conveys additional meaning beyond the literal or explicit content of their utterance. Grice distinguished different types of implicature. While "conventional implicature" (Grice 1989, 25) refers to more fixed implicit meanings that arise from specific words or expressions based on linguistic conventions, "conversational implicature" (Grice 1989, 26) is more context-dependent and emerges dynamically during an ongoing conversation. The latter relies heavily on shared background assumptions between agents that allow the receiver to make the appropriate inferences about implied meanings from a sender's utterance in its conversational context.

While Grice is still very much concerned with linguistic utterances, Charles Taylor points out that gestures, too, have an expressive-pragmatic dimension that can be subsumed under implicature; they, too, can be conventional or novel:

"new gestures can express by enacting new ways of being, and make visible new significances that things can have for us. The necessary condition for this innovation is that we and our teachers [the ones introducing the new gesture, H.B.] in each such case are familiar with a certain 'vocabulary' of gestures and meanings, against the background of which these new meanings emerge" (Taylor 2016, 29). Conversational implicature can, then, be included as a feature dimension contextualizing gestures; and some of the meanings these gestures take on place the situation in which they occur across the private/public spectrum.

This framework explains how seemingly the same gesture can imply different meanings, and how not only linguistic but also non-linguistic markers can be involved. Reading Flusser's "discourse of gestures" (Flusser 2014, 2) with an eye to its publicking features understood as an aspect of implicature, then, allows us to proclaim "publicking" and "privating" as gestures of their own.[4] The point the metaphor of feature dimensions gets at is that there is no *one* gesture — conventionally understood, i.e. writing, destroying, etc. — that publicks, but that all such gestures can have publicking *features*; only sorting them according to this axis produces the publicking gesture. The publicking gesture, then, refers to any act, expression, or performance — no matter how small or fleeting — that aims to mark something as public or reaffirm its public nature. Publicking gestures create a temporary public space of appearance through the gesture itself; they *perform* publicness. The privating gesture does the reverse by marking a context as private, as non-public.

Publicking and privating gestures permeate digital environments where publicness itself has become a default so that *explicitly* public acts have to be marked, and private acts have to be asserted against this default. Publicking and privating gestures are ways in which users reinscribe the difference between privateness and publicness into the default publicness itself. The reaffirmation of something as public can, I believe, hide in the most minute factors, which may not register with anyone but the publicker. I will give more in-depth examples in the next section, but to mention only a few instances: renaming a file to be more easily comprehensible to a reader in a GitHub repository, which is used for storing and sharing programming code, can imply the publicking gesture; so can spell-checking a social media post (especially if one normally does not worry too much about orthography); even straightening one's posture on Zoom is to make a minute publicking gesture. Conversely, cropping the face from a picture on an online dating platform; sharing a photo of a private nature on Facebook; or using fleeting formats like Instagram Stories or Snapchat Snaps are potentially acts of privating.

Any online behavior, then, can become an opportunity for performing publicness and privateness — for *doing* public and privacy rather than *entering* into them. In this sense, publicking and privating refer not just to the dissemination of information but to the temporary establishment of a space of appearance enabled by the gesture, or to the marking of the absence of such a space. Although often overlooked or at best dismissed as trivial, these small acts ultimately contend with the context collapse in digital environments. They allow users to continue to establish publicness, however simulated or fleeting, in a time in which being public is the new default.

Publicking and Privating Across Different Digital Contexts

In 2011, which now seems like the Neolithic of the social media age, Walther et al. suggested "a potential hybrid of mass and interpersonal messaging" (Walther et al. 2011, 32) in their discussion of the "Facebook wall," from an earlier stage of the platform when personal posts could be left on a user's profile page rather than being part of a conglomerated "timeline." The authors describe the predicament of this communicative infrastructure in a way that is still useful to consult:

> Person A, who Person B has specified in the system as a "friend" (a person with privileges to see and contribute to portions of Person B's profile) can post an interpersonal verbal message (accompanied by Person A's photo, by default) to Person B's profile wall. These postings often appear to express interpersonal affection, comment on some mutual event in the past or future, or proclaim relational status (among best friends forever!). However, it is also known to all involved — posters and profile-owners — that such messages can also be read by all the other people connected to Person B's social network of friends. It is, by definition, a public message, bordering on being broadcasted (or at least, narrowcasted within the social network) for others to see. … Are such wall posts "mass" messages or "interpersonal" messages? (Walther et al. 2011, 33)

The answer is: they are both. Or rather, they have to be marked in each case to indicate to which category they are meant to belong. Such is the basic condition of online interaction in networked publics: while there are indeed spaces that are inaccessible — for instance password-protected servers, forums that operate by invitation only, or private peer-to-peer messages — most users have to contend with the situation that a majority of utterances are there for potentially all to see. This situation is exacerbated in social media,

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[4] The word "publicking" is not my invention but an archaism. The OED notes that "public" indeed was once used as a verb, both in the sense of "to publish" but also in the broader sense of "to make public" ("Public" 1989). The opposite, "privating," does not exist and has been formed homologously.

as Walther et al. describe in their Facebook example, where privacy only exists as an opt-out possibility that requires a conscious effort to enact. The current Facebook feed has reconfigured the nature of such communications, which are now broadcast to all friends rather than being directed at individuals (although this is still possible), but the situation is virtually the same. When Walther et al. suggest that there are codes in such mass-personal communications that allow users "to communicate meaning to the friend or to signal exclusivity to others," we can now identify these codes as publicking and privating gestures.

Indeed, social media contexts are full of such gestures. As Liu and Kang observe, "users can define their communication context by manipulating a message's publicness and directedness, leaving behavioral traces for observers to interpret" (Liu and Kang 2017, 70). Most of us are familiar with the contextual hints that mark a post as private or public. Consider a user sharing two posts in quick succession: a photo of their cat and a poster of a conference they are attending as a speaker. While public for anyone who follows this user — and for even more people on platforms where no prior "friending" is necessary — it would be clear to the potential readers of these posts that the first is a privating, the second a publicking gesture; the first suggests an audience of friends and family and shares feelings of homey coziness, the latter is directed at professional peers and directly calls on them to network.

However, this not always the case. What makes such gestures highly ambivalent is that they are exceedingly contextual. The talk could be interpreted as a professional achievement that is nevertheless to be celebrated by friends, while the cat photo may be used to create a sense of familiarity in order to humanize otherwise overly professional accounts — a strategy best known from politicians who hope to seem more relatable if they are shown in private settings. On social media, this gestural politics of publicking and privating has been adopted by people who are not public figures but navigate publicness-by-default. And it is, in most cases, understood by an audience that has now been trained on this amorphous publicness and can — indeed, must — interpret these gestures.

Social media are a relatively straightforward case, however, compared to other digital contexts; with Walther et al., we can say that the codes navigating private and public have to be constantly renegotiated.[5] Publicness-by-default on the one hand and the gestures of marking something as public and private on the other abound in very different digital spaces. This last section gives three quite different examples of such spaces and such gestures.

Digital Publishing

For Habermas, the public sphere has mostly existed as a "publishing sphere" made up of books, papers, and journals. Here, being public means being published, and being published means being widely available in the medium of print. This close identification of printed medium and public status became troubled with the rise of digital publications on the Web (Frömming and Stanitzek 2020). At the height of personal blogs, many prophesied the demise of traditional publication channels that acted as gatekeepers — to such a degree that media theorist Florian Cramer stated in 2012: "In the age of homepages, blogs and social networks, the classical distinction between non-published personal writing and published writing is moot, and with it the distinction between everyday communication and publishing. … If there ever has been a clear divide between amateur and professional writers at all, now it has collapsed completely" (Cramer 2012).

Cramer identifies the distinction between professionals and amateurs with the distinction between personal, that is private, and published writing, and thus expresses a sentiment that has since proved at least overblown. His position underestimates the reach of publicness-by-default, in which publishing has become a matter of course, as this situation provides its own dilemma: where everything is public, not everything has the same potential significance to count as published.[6] It makes a major difference *who* publishes *what* in *which context*, so that gatekeepers are still very much in existence. The question now becomes: how to signify something as published, even if it is already public?

I may be able to upload a document to a server where it is in principle accessible to all (which is German *öffentlich* in the most basic, etymological sense, Hölscher 1978); but the same document, uploaded by a publisher — even if for free, as in the case of open access publishing — nevertheless "stages" the work in a way that explicitly marks it as published, even if its basic publicness does not depend on it (Bajohr 2018). In this situation, the publicking gesture expresses itself as the "publishing gesture," as Nat Muller and Alessandro Ludovico have described it: "Located

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[5] Danah Boyd has pointed out that notions of privacy change, so that things that appear public for an older generation may not feel that way to a younger one and vice versa; the point is that notions of private and public *exist*, even if their scopes are not universally agreed upon (Boyd 2014, 56).

[6] Political groups have exploited the gray area where documents published on publicly accessible but obscure websites remain practically private. This allows them to share information with the candidates they support without officially coordinating with them, circumventing legal restrictions on such communication. In August 2023, such a ruse came to light when the *New York Times* uncovered strategy papers from Republican governor Ron DeSantis's super PAC on a public but hard-to-find server, which were swiftly removed after the story ran, indicating that the group had never intended to *publish* what was nevertheless *public* (Swan, Goldmacher, and Haberman 2023).

between the realm of discourse and the material act," the publishing gesture is "something preceding the action, and therefore signifies motion and agency of the most expressive and potent kind, precisely because it is so wrought with intentionality" (Muller and Ludovico 2008). The publishing gesture confers the impression of an intended — rather than an occasional and arbitrary — publishedness. Although Ludovico leaves the term relatively vague, we can find an example of a publishing, and thus publicking, gesture in a unexpected place: the media format of digital publications.

French economist Olivier Bomsel coined, in a similar vein to Ludovico, the notion of the "publishing protocol" (*protocole éditorial*) that surrounds and supports the process of turning a private text into a published object. Bomsel suggests this transformation (he even speaks of "transubstantiation") is only possible through a complex symbolic process that involves a variety of agents in which a primary "accumulation" (of writing) is then combined with a "display" (*monstration*) that has similarity to Ludovico's publishing gesture; however, the publishing protocol is a historical dispositive that can change over time (Bomsel 2013).

Current publication techniques often incorporate the PDF — rather than, say, the text file or the HTML document — into their publishing protocol to bestow a sense of legitimacy to a publication even in the absence of print. Here, the simulation of the page of a printed book the PDF performs is part of a complex publicking gesture. Media scholar Lisa Gitelman has shown how the PDF, as a digital document format, carries with it certain material connotations of the print world: despite its digital nature, the PDF retains features such as pagination, fixed layout, and visual resemblance to a printed page, thus invoking a familiar publishing protocol — and making the act of publishing more perceptible, legitimate, and real (Gitelman 2014, chap. 4) — all while creating a new one.

One example in which the PDF performs a publicking gesture is open access publishing (OA). OA promises "a paradigm shift in academic publishing, from a system based on scientific publications 'hidden' behind pay-walls to one in which scientific content is freely available over the internet" (Kunz 2020). However, for a long time, OA suffered from the fact that its venues were new and not yet part of the symbolic economy of h-ranks and citation counts (Green 2019). Thus, a task is to find ways for "promoting the credibility and legitimacy of one's research and expertise" (Roche et al. 2022) when publishing in these venues. Apart from stressing peer-review as a sign of seriousness, it is the PDF as a format that plays a central role in mimicking the conventions of older print publications (and digital for-profit journals), but also in insuring citability — individually numbered pages signal scholarliness more than numbered paragraphs (a format some venues have tried out); this, too, is publicking.

Another example for publicking gestures in publishing would be the field of experimental poetry that has rallied around print-on-demand books in the last fifteen years (Gilbert and Bülhoff 2023). Often, the printed book remains entirely virtual, as users simply download the PDFs these books are based on. But since the print-on-demand services are also open to private users, these "publishers" do nothing an author with a minimum of technical acumen could not have done themselves. They are "infrathin" agents (Bajohr 2018) that confer publicness to a PDF or print-on-demand book simply by performing Ludovico's "publishing gesture." They enact a set of conventions derived from the traditional publishing protocol that includes designing a cover or placing a colophon; indeed, the simple fact *that* there is an intermediary between writer and reader is a publicking gesture and ensures no one mistakes this public publication for a private publication (the very distinction Cramer denied). Perhaps because publishing has been and still is so much about conveying a sense of legitimacy to a document, it offers a whole spectrum of publicking gestures, ranging from linguistic markers — such as the assurance of peer review — to nonlinguistic markers, such as the layout of a PDF, down to this very file format itself.

Marginalized and Locative Social Media

Closest to the case of publicking on general-purpose social media platforms are services that are specific in two ways: they address marginalized and subcultural groups, and they are locative, thus complicating the notion of an "online public" as a relational phenomenon by adding a site-specific aspect. Publicking and privating gestures play a special role for marginalized communities, first, because they have to make a space for themselves when their existence is not acknowledged in digital environments, and second, because they can plausibly fear societal resentment or political persecution for their identities.

An example for the first case is given by Buss et al. (2022) in relation to trans users of traditional social media platforms. While such networks enable trans users to express themselves and connect with communities of support, they must do so strategically due to the public and widely networked nature of social media. The authors find that trans users employ strategies to claim private or semi-public spaces within public platforms. They can do so by choosing platforms and accounts suited for self-disclosure and limited from people in their daily life that are unaware of their identity (Fitzpatrick and Birnholtz 2018). Hence, the fact of whether users express their gender identity at all may be an instance of privating; conversely, publicking in these cases can occur when a trans user's online self-presentation retains their assigned gender identity.

These gestures can even involve "hacking" the interface itself: before Facebook increased its gender options from 2 to

58 in 2014, some non-binary users were able to remove any gender designation from their profile, as Bivens (2017) reports. Again, such gestures are highly context-dependent: whether the omission of a usually standard text field like gender can be seen as publicking or privating must be interpreted by a situated observer in a specific context. In states that penalize non-normativity, the empty text field may be a discreet shibboleth only readable by other group members; in more permissible societies, it might be read as a public and proudly defiant protest against a platform whose gender politics is seen to be lacking.

An especially interesting case of online publicking and privating is that of geolocative services aimed at potentially discriminated-against subgroups, such as Grindr or Scruff, for men who have sex with men. Such services enact a publicness that is highly circumscribed by the actual location and movement of the user (Batiste 2013; Renninger 2019). This does not make the app private, but rather interweaves a limited online and offline visibility as an influence on behavior. As de Souza e Silva and Frith note, such "locational privacy" — "the ability to control the context in which one shares locational information" — is especially important for vulnerable groups (de Souza e Silva and Frith 2012, 129). At the same time, within these specific locations, the app makes users visible to all other users, constituting a free-floating public insofar as the app allows them to find each other, but also makes them traceable in return (Elmer 2010; for a forensic analysis of another geolocative app, see Mata, Beebe, and Choo 2018).

Negotiating this liminal publicness includes a sense of risk awareness, because the localizability can lead to penalizing abuse: in 2017, Egyptian police used Grindr to arrest members of the LGBT community for violating "debauchery laws" (Khalife 2017). And even if there is no fear of state violence, users who are not out (or simply do not want to be associated with using such an app, which is true for services like Tinder, too, see Lutz and Ranzini 2017) might chose to opt for a more limited visibility. This makes geolocative services especially precarious and dependent on privating and publicking gestures.

Numerous studies about the user interaction on Grindr have noted that the choice of the profile picture sends the most significant message to other users, even before any conversation has taken place. With Blackwell et al. (2015), one can speak of a curated "impression formation," which also includes publicking and privating gestures. Penney (2014) finds that there are three standard types of profile photos that all act as "affect images," that is, cathectic symbols that prime a user's desired interactions: a visible face; a headless (usually bare) torso; or a blank profile (or sometimes a photo of something entirely else, like a landscape; explicitly sexual images are not allowed on profiles but can be exchanged in private conversation). As Penny notes, others get a sense of

the user's lifestyle and physical desirability through these images. As one user interviewed by Blackwell et al. put it, portraits connote a wish for a genuine connection, torso pictures signal "secrecy and physical priority," and blank pictures may be read as the user not being out (2015, 11). Here, the act of choosing a type of photo is a marker not only of the sort of interaction users wish for, but also of whether they want to highlight public visibility as openly (mostly) gay men, or signal a more private status due to fear of societal pressure. These gestures facilitate the creation of local counterpublics where queer desires and relationships can develop under conditions tailored to different levels of being out.

Again, such uses are highly dependent on context: Pinch et al. (2022) report that Grindr users in India that come from more traditional contexts experience tensions around needing to share personal information to appear authentic and to build trust with matches versus limiting visibility to avoid being outed or threatened if recognized. They state that a majority use either fake or stand-in face photos and quickly move conversations onto other platforms. A very different case is described by Renninger (2019), who discusses the use of geolocative apps in New York City; he reports an interesting entanglement of digital and analog interactions, in which the publicking effect of Grindr and similar apps relies on the copresence of online and offline spaces: Grindr is used at gay bars for starting conversations and connecting with those one has chatted with online — the use of the app itself becomes a publicking gesture.

Disembodied Telepresence

Hannah Arendt suggested that the space of appearance the public realm opens up is to a large extent about disclosing one's self to others. However, a great part of her theory, standing in stark contrast to the idea of the online "curation of the self" (Márquez, Lanzeni, and Masanet 2023), is that the disclosure of who one is can only be partly a conscious act; rather, "the 'who,' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimōn* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters" (Arendt 1998, 179–80). The need to retain control over one's appearance while being ultimately incapable of this control is a tension that arises in the public realm; and it does so even more when this realm is itself a fleeting digital space of appearance.

This is maybe most apparent in the case of Zoom meetings. Much more than social media, which is asynchronous and text-based, Zoom is predicated on synchronous, face-to-face interactions in which the "naturalness" of physical presence is technologically simulated as "disembodied telepresence," which for philosopher Hubert Dreyfus may provide a modicum

of mediated access but cannot replace embodied interaction (Dreyfus 2009, 49). Drawing on the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Dreyfus argues that our sense of reality is bound up with the presence of actual things, and thus "for there to be a sense of presence in telepresence, one would not only have to be able to get a grip on things at a distance; one would need to have a sense of the context as soliciting a constant readiness to get a grip on whatever comes along" (Dreyfus 2009, 56).

While Dreyfus falls prey to the notion that the Internet is pure disembodiment and would be subject to the criticism that can be leveled against this assumption, his position is useful as a heuristic in discussing Zoom meetings. Together with the inability to completely control one's self-presentation that is at issue in all public settings, the constant need to "get a grip" on a reality as mediated presence plays a role in what has been described as Zoom fatigue. In this last example, I want to interpret Zoom fatigue as the labor of publicking particularly in professional telepresence settings. What Mark Andrejevic (2002), more than twenty years ago, still figuratively called the "work of being watched" — the comprehensive monitoring of consumption habits, the first inklings of the panopticon of data surveillance — has now, with Zoom, become a literal phenomenon.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous studies have been conducted that measure the effects of remote work via Zoom on productivity and well-being. Employees working from home during the pandemic reported substantially lower subjective productivity linked to the "forced interaction" of video conferencing (Okabe-Miyamoto et al. 2021) because employers demanded the use of video. The lack of nonverbal cues, constant self-observation, having to be "on" all the time, and an increased cognitive load lead to a mental strain often described as "Zoom fatigue" (Karl, Peluchette, and Aghakhani 2022; Bergmann et al. 2023; Döring et al. 2022). Zoom fatigue refers to the exhaustion that results from feeling constantly on display before others in a virtual space while having to simulate the conventions of face-to-face self-presentation that is not always achievable: it is, for instance, impossible to make eye contact over Zoom — looking into your eyes on my side of the screen means not looking into the camera; not looking into the camera means not looking into your eyes on your side of the screen. Likewise, the disconnect between public and private acts in the fleeting public of Zoom can be a stressor: Karl et al. (2022) identified eating in front of the camera during business meetings as an act that appeared as disrespectful to others, indicating a general expectation for publicking that is frequently not met. The relation between feeling forced on video calls and social stress held even when controlling for feeling forced in face-to-face meetings, suggesting the effect was specific to video conferencing (Okabe-Miyamoto et al. 2021); publicking requires energy.

Publicking also heightens awareness: the sense of tension that results in Zoom fatigue can be used to increase engagement, as Maimaiti et al. (2021) note in the context of remote learning, when students are required to turn on their webcams. The authors, however, also acknowledge the higher stress level of the situation and suggest the frequent use of breakout rooms and the chat function, which we can interpret as privating reprieves for students. Interestingly, Zoom fatigue is limited to settings in which publicking is institutionally imposed; for private purposes — staying in touch with friends or family during the pandemic or pursuing hobbies — the experience of mediated telepresence is much more positive (Hacker et al. 2020).

It seems clear that the similarity to physical interaction makes video conferences a fertile ground for publicking and privating gestures: acts as small as checking one's camera angle, tidying one's background, or choosing an appropriate username are all opportunities for publicking gestures. They allow users to shape the space of appearance before others, facilitating a public interaction. The choices in these meeting spaces — however minute — determine how users unfurl before audiences of coworkers, colleagues, students, or friends. As with other contexts, telepresence also provides opportunities for counter-gestures that push back against constant visibility and disclosure. Choosing audio-only calls when video is not necessary, blurred or virtual backgrounds, an anonymous avatar picture, or hiding self-view during calls represent efforts to reclaim privacy within a sphere of prolonged publicness. Privating gestures attempt to transform video conferencing back into a more disembodied medium, while publicking gestures reaffirm a social setting in which professionalism is as important as the attempt to control one's *daimōn*.

Conclusion

In the Greek ideal-type Arendt articulated in *The Human Condition*, the public sphere and the private realm were strictly separate, so that it took "courage" to cross "the gulf between the sheltered life in the household and the merciless exposure of the polis" (Arendt 1998, 35). For us, virtually no such gulf, and no such step that crosses it, exists anymore when it comes to digital environments. In the digital age, the distinction between public and private has become increasingly blurred. As more of our lives move online, where information is potentially visible to anyone, the traditional barriers between public and private spheres dissolve. This publicness-by-default creates a predicament for Internet users who still wish to demarcate contexts as more public or more private. In response, publicking and privating gestures have emerged as ways to temporarily establish spaces of appearance and mark communication as directed toward distinct audiences. These

fleeting yet meaningful acts allow users to perform publicness and privateness amidst digital liminality. With them, the public has shifted to the level of performativity, and the distinction between private and public is no longer bound to particular institutions, spheres, roles, or clearly identifiable frameworks, but has shrunk to highly context- and media-dependent gestures. These gestures allow users to temporarily mark contexts as public or as private, and enable them to perform publicness and privateness rather than just to enter into an already existing public realm or to retreat from it. As this essay has demonstrated, such gestures permeate a variety of online contexts, from social media platforms to video conferences. They represent a novel social competence required to navigate contemporary techno-social environments.

Arendt could not have envisioned such a shift from entering the public to performing the publicking gesture. Yet her work reminds us why facilitating genuine spaces of appearance and action remains so crucial, even and especially when they are so ephemeral and performative. Overall, this essay has aimed to extend Arendt's — and, to a lesser degree, Habermas's — concepts to capture how users establish publicness in a time in which the public has become gestural. This may sound like the diagnosis of a dire situation in which the panopticon of the digital, "taking up tasks without being burdened by the processes of democratic deliberation" (Maschewski and Nosthoff 2022, 60), has become total. But I think there is a more hopeful interpretation in the analysis of publicking gestures. For as fluid and hard to capture as they appear, this is exactly their strength; the gestural politics of publicking and privating serve as ways to navigate the "surveillance-capitalist biopolitics" (Maschewski and Nosthoff 2022, 59) of big tech. Their context-dependency serves as a source of resistance, carving out pockets of agency within digital panopticons.

These practices are certainly very recent; we have not yet had the time to hone them in the same way as being a member of the reading public has, over the last two hundred years, collectively been practiced. It is neither likely nor desirable that these gestural politics replace reasoned debate. Yet they constitute a valid way of producing spaces of presentation and withdrawal. As long as the impulse remains to selectively disclose oneself before others, these gestures will continue to evolve alongside new socio-technical configurations. Studying publicking and privating reveals that the urge toward public action persists even in ephemeral, performative forms. While classic theories struggle to adapt the public/private distinction to digital spaces, recasting it as an ongoing negotiation enacted through mundane yet meaningful gestures may offer a promising path forward. As liminality becomes the norm, the politics of everyday social media use, publishing tactics, and videoconferencing warrant greater scholarly attention; a focus on the micro-gestures comprising online interaction is just one way to enrich our understanding of contemporary techno-society.

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