Culture Digitally: Digital In/Justice

Nick Couldry , Mary L. Gray & Tarleton Gillespie

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Nick Couldry and Mary L. Gray
with Tarleton Gillespie, organizer

Culture Digitally is a collective of scholars, gathered by Tarleton Gillespie (Cornell University) and Hector Postigo (Temple University). With the generous funding of the National Science Foundation, the group supports scholarly inquiry into new media and cultural production through numerous projects, collaborations, a scholarly blog, and annual workshops. For more information on projects and researchers affiliated with Culture Digitally, visit culture digitally.org or follow @CultureDig).

On occasion, we invite two or more of our participants to engage in an intellectual back-and-forth, on a theoretical point of interest that emerges from discussions at our meetings, around blog posts, or based on evident, shared interests. In these dialogues, they are encouraged to grapple with theoretical questions, but to do so quite a bit faster than the glacial pace of publishing typically allows.

We imagine them as the digital equivalent of the scholarly exchange of letters between pre-eminent scientists. The thinking is meant to be raw and provocative, a chance for the dialogue participants to prod each other beyond their own certainties.

Nick Couldry *(Ph.D., University of London, Goldsmiths) is professor of Media, Communications and Social Theory at the London School of Economics. His most recent books are* Ethics of Media *(Palgrave 2013) and* Media Society World *(Polity 2012).*

Mary L. Gray *(Ph.D., University of California, San Diego) is a senior researcher at Microsoft Research and associate professor of Communication and Culture, with affiliations in American Studies, Anthropology, and Gender Studies, at Indiana University. She draws on an interdisciplinary background in anthropology and critical media studies to study how people use digital media in everyday ways to shape their social identities and create spaces for themselves.*

Tarleton Gillespie *(Ph.D., University of California, San Diego) is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at Cornell University. He is the author of* Wired Shut: Copyright and the Shape of Digital Culture *(2007, MIT Press) and co-editor of* Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Mediation, and Society *(2014, MIT Press, with Pablo Boczkowski and Kirsten Foot). His current research examines the policies and enforcement mechanisms being established by social media platforms around contentious content.*

Inspired by an exchange between Mary and Nick in the parting moments of our first workshop, an exchange they continued since then, I asked if we could use two paragraphs from Nick's latest book as the opening salvo in a dialogue about how to think about injustice in a mediated, networked environment.

Tarleton Gillespie, co-organizer of Culture Digitally

Nick Couldry:

Where exactly might justice and injustice lie in relation to media? Rawls' theory of justice would have us first develop a full model of the deliberative processes that might generate, as Sen (2009) summarizes, ''a perfect set of *institutions* ... that determines the basic structure of a fully just society.'' But, as Sen notes, we are likely to wait a very long time before perfecting that model, let alone building institutions that embody it! Instead, in a move away from Rawls' maximalist approach, Sen argues pragmatically that we can begin to fill in the conceptual space of justice by foregrounding specific cases of injustice: an approach to justice guided not by ''transcendental institutionalism'' but by ''realization-focused comparison.'' For Sen, the task is through comparison, first, to identify specific injustices that need correction because they involve denying to specific groups the opportunity to use the full range of their human capabilities, and second to identify specific institutional means for correcting those injustices.
    How then can we think rigorously about the justice, or injustice, of institutions including media that mediate between individual voice and institutional action? This deep problem is hardly superseded by the proliferation of ''mass self-communication,'' that is, the ability of individuals and groups to ''broadcast'' their voice directly without passing through the gatekeepers of media institutions. For these self-communications do not stop mass media circulating, nor do they influence the degree to which mass media are even-handed in their representation of the social world: nor, given the difficulty of becoming visible online, do they necessarily have any wider effect beyond the momentary satisfaction of expression. However, relieved by Amartya Sen of the need to construct a large-scale theory of media justice, can we more pragmatically list some types of media injustice that might require correction? (Excerpted from *Media, Society, World* [2012])

Mary L. Gray:

  Before turning to your query, I want to tease out two tweaks to the premise of your argument:
  (1) Amartya Sen critiques Rawls' faith in a deliberative process to perfect societal institutions because, ''we are likely to wait a very long time before perfecting that model, let alone building institutions that embody it!'' But I think there is an equally important critique of Rawls here that is central to this discussion: Rawls also presumes that, with enough time, institutions and the power they generate can be disentangled from individual agency. I disagree. I would argue that collective actions, agency, and relationality, arguably, co-construct institutions and individuals. Rather than presume that a deliberative model could stand separately from

the institutions we build, I suggest we think about how communicative ideologies, including those that attach themselves to media, enframe (maybe remediate) and circulate through the deliberative process itself. (I'm thinking of theorists like James Carey [1982], Raymond Williams [1974], and, more recently, Tom Streeter [2010] and Fred Turner [2008] on communicative ideologies—not their term, but one that resonates with their arguments, I think.)

(2) Relatedly, how do we "think rigorously about the justice, or injustice, of institutions including media that mediate between individual voice and institutional action?" I absolutely agree that seeking out the injustices that deny specific groups "the opportunity to use the full range of their human capabilities ... and to identify specific institutional means for correcting those injustices" gives us a place to dig into the deliberations that might be the most meaningful for justice. Rather than focus on specific institutions, such an approach helps us seek out where institutions and the quotidian collide and collude to privilege some at the cost of others. But I also want to make sure that we consider: Can we even say that institutions and individual voices stand separately as mediators in a digital context? At the root of my question is a sneaking suspicion that we can't presume digital media, any more or less so than mass media, buttress the "ability of individuals and groups to 'broadcast' their voice directly without passing through the gatekeepers of media institutions." Part of reckoning with sites of injustice may call on us to surface the algorithmic automation of these gates (I don't think the "keepers" need to hang around any longer). We can trace the fallout of policy debates like the ones that surrounded "net neutrality" and the Google Books lawsuit to see how market interests and privatization shape what even constitutes "individual voices" in digital media. If that is the case, then the Internet is an example, *par excellence*, of an infrastructure that organizes gatekeeping in ways we typically don't call out. It produces, circulates, and amplifies the centers and margins of cultural production and consumption.

With those two thoughts in mind: For me, your provocation to theorize what injustice means in the context of digital media, by "listing the most pressing injustices that require our attention, some proposed injustices, and some reasons for having to think about them anew" frames injustice as not (just) a matter of the presence or absence of technology, but identifying the institutional forces in play even as we shift away from a broadcast model of communication. Ringing in my ears are questions about digital inequalities.

Paul DiMaggio and Eszter Hargattai (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001) provide some great places to begin a search for cases of injustice. Specifically, they argue that "digital inequalities" are "not just ... differences in access, but also inequality among persons with formal access to the Internet" (DiMaggio et al., 2001, p. 2). They go on to identify five dimensions of digital inequality: equipment access (quality, not just presence/absence); autonomy of use (can you expect "privacy?"); skill (do you have cookie & cache know-how?); social support (will someone help you search for the information that matters to you?); validation of technology use (do you have assurances that it's

ok to type keywords like "gay" or "queer" or "safer sex," for example, without consequence?).

In my own work (Gray, 2009) studying the lives of LGBTQ rural youth, two of these dimensions carry particular consequences for justice:

Equipment access (here, quality broadband speed, beyond availability): In Southeast Appalachia, broadband access isn't available to 44% of the residential population, even if they wanted and could afford it. For those who can access it, it's roughly 30% more expensive than the same data rates and services found in urban centers; less than 28% of households have access in rural counties (not to mention that only 60% of homes even have a personal computer).

Autonomy of Use: Schools are wired with broadband but they come with filtering and keystroke monitoring software mandated by state and federal funding.

These two dimensions, not to mention the others outlined by DiMaggio, Hargittai, and colleagues, give media scholars committed to the ethnographic investigation of everyday uses of digital media, and theorists invested in the pragmatics of injustice, a place to start our query.

Nick Couldry:

We're clearly approaching this question of media justice/injustice from within a similar framing. On the first "tweak," clearly we need institutions of some sort, but I agree that it is a mistake to conceive of deliberations about justice as "pure" process. We certainly do have stakes in particular reifications of resource, authority, legitimacy (we could call them "institutions" too), and those institutional entanglements raise their own forms of injustice—indeed my own original interests in researching media stem from concerns with the problematic nature of the large-scale mediating institutions that we still rely on largely to present to us the world of action, identity, and resource. (Couldry, 2006; Couldry & Curran, 2003). So absolutely, questions of in/justice must also be turned back onto the institutional starting-points from which we make particular framings of in/justice. On the second "tweak," I also agree that digital media don't automatically "solve" issues of voice—Castells' (2011) term "mass self-communication" certainly needs interrogation, and the issues of informational politics that Richard Rogers' (2006) school of research in Amsterdam develops are fundamental here.

The dimensions of digital inequality highlighted by DiMaggio et al. are certainly useful starting points in thinking about digital in/justice. And in their fine detail they raise some interesting conceptual issues for thinking about in/justice: e.g., how would we weight the social support that people may, or may not, have for their digital practices? How would we weight the (conditional) constraints that come from limited "autonomy of use" (e.g., through state surveillance)?

Inequalities in what you call "validation of technology use" are particularly interesting: for most individuals and groups, "validation" of their digital usage is automatic and so invisible. But where a group's social recognition is drastically

curtailed, as with the young LGBTQ people you write about in *Out in the Country* (2009), then the otherwise merely implicit space that validates people's digital agency becomes visible. If the basic signature of your (physical and digital) existence is deemed not valid by wider social or political forces, in advance, then the metric of digital in/justice is greatly complicated.

This gets us to the heart of the difficulties of thinking about digital in/justice. Two questions emerge for me, which I'll formulate for further discussion, borrowing on some language from your recent book:

(1) In a context where identity formation is "mediation all the way down" (Gray, 2009, p. 167)—i.e., irreducibly involves the use of some external interfaces for communication—how should we conceptualize the often contrasting needs that people have of large-scale media and smaller-scale platforms? Clearly this is more than a simple matter of (a) having the effective opportunity, at least in principle, of being able to speak up in one's own name somewhere, and (b) seeing others like oneself represented in large-scale media. What are the other ingredients of a "just" digital configuration that supports an individual's agency in the contemporary world?

(2) How should we understand the role of "spaces" of identity-formation and expression (Gray, 2009, p. 174) that are antecedent to actual expression before wider publics, i.e., as Mimi Ito (2009) puts it, spaces for just "hanging out?" I like the emphasis in your book on the collectively produced spaces and contexts from which we access digital media, and your insistence on thinking beyond the contents of digital media themselves. This helps to de-centre media analysis a little bit more, but it also raises difficult questions, about (a) the way a wider digital injustice can stem from *lacking* secure contexts for existing in public, and (b) the specific contribution to in/justice of *digital spaces* (which are both accessible and governable from many sites and at many times, unlike the public square or other paradigmatic public spaces).

It's clear that, in beginning to explore these questions, we have already gone some way beyond Sen's own reflections on media in his work on injustice, but this extension in unavoidable in the digital era when media's contribution to in/justice itself involves much more than establishing whether there are trustworthy news institutions. How much more it involves is, I think, a surprisingly difficult question that I hope we can tease out.

Mary L. Gray:

I want to linger on our shared conviction that "digital media don't automatically 'solve' issues of voice."

In many ways, I hope the discussion of digital in/justice helps move work on information and technology access (including my own) beyond an imperative that prioritizes concern for the voices of individual actors. Yes, cutting off access to an individual's capacity to contribute to cultural dialogue and deliberation is, arguably,

a case of injustice. But this formulation presumes or, at least, prioritizes individual autonomy and agency as the (pre-public? pre-mediated?) source of voice.

If negotiation and articulation of the self are in fact collective acts, then the greatest injustice is not the loss of individual access to media as sites of personal narrative and expression. A more pressing injustice is that such a loss forecloses the use of media as processes of contribution, deliberation, contestation, and play in the *social* construction of the self—from the well of possibilities it can provide. Simply put, I'm interested in prioritizing information and technology access as a precious cultural resource for queer relay (drawing on Lisa Henderson (2008) here)—a cultural process of "catching and passing on across the divides of . . . difference and capital" (Henderson, 2008, p. 1). I do not see media access as a route to individual representation (being), so much as a relay of collaborative production (doing).

How would we weight the social support that people may, or may not, have for their digital practices? And how would we weight the (conditional) constraints that come from limited "autonomy of use" (e.g., through state surveillance)? I think one way I want to dig into these issues is to mobilize data visualization, ethnographic data, and computational methods to map the landscape of the relative autonomy of use and quality of access, in the regions that interest me right now (western Massachusetts; western Maine; and my old field sites in southeastern Appalachia). This might look like focusing specifically on the youth involved in creating the Massachusetts Gay Straight Alliance Network and how they negotiate use of digital media in that group as a way of measuring the five dimensions that DiMaggio, Hargittai, and their colleagues outline.

I'm intrigued by your point that "[i]f the basic signature of your (physical and digital) existence is deemed not valid by wider social or political forces, in advance, then the metric of digital in/justice is greatly complicated." Perhaps, in what is cordoned off as "inappropriate" or "invalid" uses of technology, we can see what is considered normative and therefore legitimated—any methodology that can get at assessing the norms of use should cast a shadow of what's beyond the pale.

I deeply appreciate the productive move away from a rights discourse when it comes to information and technology access, but I wonder if we need to see different types (platforms?) of media access as contrasting scales or needs? If social recognition is a deeply mediated process that happens unevenly everywhere all the time, then what we need are concepts and practices of media that allow for ongoing contestation/open-endedness of that interpretative practice. Rather than see mass media as large-scale, hegemonic spaces of representation (thinking of the power of documentary here) and social or digital media as small-scale platforms that provide individual voices (thinking of the "It Gets Better" campaign here), what might come of seeing media as interlocking articulations/echoes of hegemonic discourses of who we "really are" or "what's really going on"? With this formulation in mind, how might we build a media praxis that invites deeply contextual representations that can't stand in for what's universally true or authentic—or, at the very least, ask us to see what's presented as a partial, possible truth? A cacophonic media?

Perhaps we could conceptualize (drawing on some collaborative work with Mike Ananny) digital media as a "space of possibles" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 234). Digital media are part of fields of "positions and position-takings" that relay/index other key "contexts for existing in public." Digital media cannot stand in for those other contexts as much as they can signal the healthy exhale and inhale of them. This framing of digital media doesn't foreclose using them as part of a practice of expression that questions what we take for granted, but it does require that justice demands they not stand as the only site imagined (or called upon) to circulate this play and contestation.

I feel like a key part of the work ahead is addressing, explicitly, the privatized conditions through which we experience digital media.

Nick Couldry:

This really takes us further into some of the difficulties in thinking about digital justice, that is, the evaluation of digital injustices. It is very helpful, I think, to reframe questions of voice (however much they have as their reference point each individuals' possibilities of giving an account of herself) within social processes of producing, sustaining, and valuing voice. My book *Why Voice Matters* (2010) had exactly this emphasis.

So, from the start, we have agreed to move questions of digital injustice beyond mere measures of how many individuals do or not have some defined level of "access" to a particular digital infrastructure. What is at stake, as you say, is a "relay of collaborative production" which can ground and authorize individual voices, but is not reducible to a simple aggregate of all acts of individuals speaking. This step beyond a liberal individualist framing of digital injustice is important, since neoliberal visions of consumerism (and democracy, imagined as extended consumerism) precisely fall short of seeing voice as such a collective process or "relay."

I'll come back to that notion of relay in a moment, since I think there is more to be unpacked here. But your comments, in turn, pose two new questions, first, about how we understand media, not as "large-scale hegemonic spaces of representation," but as "interlocking articulations/echoes of hegemonic discourses," a "cacophonic media" that allows multiple partial glances at collective "truth"; and, second, about whether we can understand the specific contribution of digital media as "relaying/indexing other key contexts for existing in public."

I see in this the same dialectic in debates on justice that Nancy Fraser (2000) explored, between a justice of resource distribution and a justice of recognition. For Fraser, justice cannot be reduced to the just distribution of material resources among relevant citizens, because that ignores the hidden injustices of recognition that shape who is seen as a relevant recipient of resource distribution; yet equally, justice cannot be reduced to the giving of recognition to everyone, since long-term injustices of resource distribution generate new possibilities of failed recognition.

As I read it, you both want to emphasize the importance of processes of recognition, and the digital possibilities of collective voice that enable new forms of recognition, and to point to the problem of "the privatized conditions through which we experience digital media." Why are those "privatized" conditions a problem? Is it only because they undercut possibilities of mutual recognition and collective production? Or is it also because they undercut the possibilities of collectively seeing certain injustices in the overall distribution of social resources?

I assume you mean the latter. If so, some really interesting issues for the digital realm are raised by a more recent Fraser (2012) piece. While insisting—against Rawls and like Sen, who we noted as a reference point earlier—that debates on justice must start from specific forms of injustice, rather than an attempt to fully specify justice, Fraser retrieves from Rawls the important insistence that "the primary subject of justice is the basic structure of society [that is] ... the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation" (referencing Rawls, 1971, p. 7). All rather abstract you might say, but as Fraser (2012, p. 51) points out, this challenges from the start the neoliberal claim that "structural inequities" are just "personal problems."

When considered from the point of public discourse, this insistence on the reference point of "social structure" raises a fundamental new point, directly relevant to the organization of digital space. As Fraser puts it, drawing on the notion of the public sphere (in some form at least: Fraser (1992) has of course critiqued and extended various aspects of Habermas' original notion), "organized opposition to injustice depends on the availability of discursive resources and interpretative schemes that permit its [i.e., injustice's] articulation and open expression"; correcting for this requires "broadening the terms available for naming social problems and disputing their causes." (2012, p. 51)

Is this where privatized conditions of digital discourse—that you note, and as feared by Cass Sunstein (2001) and many others—bite most, in undercutting the common spaces of debate where claims of social injustice might be made, heard and recognized, and by distributing unequally access to the discursive resources that enable some to command general attention? If so, then I would like to add to your interesting conception of digital media as a "space of possibles" the idea that such a space must allow to be heard and register claims for the redistribution of *actuals*.

I read your use of Lisa Henderson's notion of "relay" as calling for effective processes for groups and individuals to recognize themselves and each other in the face of wider "social structure," that is, to recognize each other not only for their intrinsic worth (important though that is), but (your words) as "existing in public," Bourdieu also writes (I think in the *Pascalian Meditations*) on the unequal distribution of access to "the universal," that is, the closely guarded possibility of speaking to and for all.

I think we start to get to the heart of questions of digital injustice, when we notice the difficulties of genuinely achieving such visibility "in public," as Matthew

Hindman's (2008) work among others has brought out. If the proliferation of new opportunities for visibility and expression (taken one by one) obscures the disappearance of *common* spaces of visibility, and the massively unequal distribution of access to those spaces that remain, this must be, if not a digital injustice in itself, at the very least a digital roadblock to other injustices being effectively named and claimed.

Mary L. Gray:

We started with a goal of moving ourselves to specific articulations of injustice, and landed on some concrete possibilities for pursuing them. And I absolutely agree with Fraser's point: the ability to articulate injustice rides on a collective capacity to voice and interpret injustice through ''open expression''—to make something visible one has to have the capacity to call out its erasure in the first place.

But I don't want to forget the privatization of the infrastructure that undergirds digital media, as a platform for open expression and organized opposition in the face of injustices. As part of our work, we must include the capacity for people to see the people laboring to make iPads or those living in the shadow of server farms feeding cloud-based services. I think what I mean here is that attending to the privatized conditions that, in part, produces our digital media experiences—knowing the cost exchange in e-waste, public sector energy output, and the premium placed on me entering my email address to create an account that allows me to use a service ''for free,'' all generate a series of moments to consider how my individual act of media engagement is also a shared, distributed draw on resources that I am not asked to consider (I would argue that I am expressly guided to ignore) in that moment.

So I would say that the privatized conditions of digital media engagement as a strategy for addressing injustices are a problem on two fronts. We experience digital media as a thing we produce—a chat, a series of emails, a photo posted to Flickr—as a moment of individual expression that produces mediated ephemera I might call ''mine.'' But those bits are the residue of collaborative exchanges and social interactions. Our conversations in a pub, away from this blog, belong to both of us, in the moment. If I write you a letter, I have the experience of that writing, you might save its material form as a keepsake, and neither of us would be incorrect in claiming that the letter belongs to us. But the privatized conditions of digital media experience, circulated through proprietary networks and software, frame our exchange as something divisible from us. They also obscure the fact that these technologies do have laborers putting them in place. As some press accounts have noted, the conditions for the average worker producing the devices that personalize our digital media engagement are far from just. With this note of caution, I am still optimistic that tending to voices, particularly the possibility of a broader range of voices contributing to the refrain through digital media, gives us a strategy for moving our goals of challenging injustice forward.

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