Rethinking Democratic Subjectivity Through the Digital

From the Disembodied Discursive Self to New Materialist Corporealities

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Abstract: As democratic subjectivity is reconfigured through digital communication, this essay asks: Who are we in digital democracy? It revisits the poststructuralist inspired debate about cyberdemocracy in the 1990s, which conceptualised the democratic subject as disembodied self, reifying through textuality in cyberspace. In contrast, current debates on new materialism offer novel perspectives with attention to the body and the materiality of things. Traces of digital new materialism can be found in early writings on the internet, but insights about digital embodiment and its effects on democracy have yet to be incorporated by democratic theory. By discussing three cases of political online participation, in which users materialise their bodies as classed, raced, queered, and nationalised subjects, this essay contributes to a novel understanding of embodied democratic subjectivity through the digital.

Introduction

In just about two decades, digital communication has become a central, yet invisible factor in current societies. The fact that we are surrounded by screens of smartphones, tablets, smartwatches, laptops, smart TVs, electronic check-out counters in supermarkets etc. goes almost unnoticed and lets digital communication become a naturalised part of our social interaction. As we immerse in big data clouds of the internet of things, the dynamics not just of social but also of political interaction change. While terms like “online sit-in”, “electronic voting”, “digital forms of disobedience”, “online demonstrations”, and “e-deliberation” copy terms of analogous practices of political participation, these forms of digital engagement often differ quite significantly from their offline counterparts. What has been dismissed as “clicktivism” by some, is in my view part of a complex and deep reconfiguration of democratic subjectivity through processes of everyday cyborgization (Asenbaum 2017). Online and offline spheres of interaction are not separate, but integrate and converge (cf. Gerbaudo 2012).

If the spread of online communication – not only around the globe but also within societies – affects ever more of our daily lives, from politics, to work, friendships, sexuality, and romantic relationships, how does this affect who we are and how we see ourselves and other around us? And how do these reconfigurations of the self affect the political? How is democratic subjectivity reconfigured in the Information Age? To date, democratic theory is mute about
these questions. While in media and communication studies vivid discussions are led about the
democratic subject in and through new forms of digital participation, these discussions and the
topic itself has yet to be acknowledged by democratic theory.

Social scientists in the 1990s explored these questions. In the context of early enthusiasm about
the possibilities of online communication, filled with a pioneer spirit, poststructuralist thinkers
conceptualised the subject in what they termed cyberdemocracy as disembodied being existing
only by the words it uttered. The textuality of online communication appeared to realise
poststructuralist imaginations of the self as constructed through discourse. The anonymity
provided by the solely textual exchange was seen as a possibility for leaving the boulder of
the body, tainted with exclusion, hierarchy, and discrimination, behind.

While cyberdemocratic thought contributed a lot to understanding novel reconfigurations of
subjectivity through the digital, it also proves problematic since members of marginalised
groups in society are made invisible and thus cannot claim their identity and their equal rights
through visual presence (cf. Kolko et al. 2000; Nakamura 2002). Moreover, recent
technological developments of an increased visualisation of online communication enabled by
broadband internet combined with an almost total commercialisation, commercial data
collection, and government surveillance, outdate the cyberdemocratic vision.

A rather recent debate in social theory emerged around the term new materialism, drawing
attention to the materiality of things and the body of the subject. Rather than describing the
world as social and linguistic construction, new materialists describe it in terms of vibrant
matter, drawing on natural sciences to reconceptualise the ecosystem and humans acting within
it. Applying these theories to reconfigurations of subjectivity in digital democracy reveals that
internet users are all but disembodied. They visualise their bodies in social media, dating sites,
pornography, health advice groups and political engagement on the internet. While insights
from new materialism have made their way into media and communication studies, they have
hardly been acknowledged by democratic theory. And how embodiment and re-embodiment
comes into effect in digital democracy remains entirely unexplored. By drawing on discussions
of new materialism and its application in media and communication studies, this paper
generates a novel understanding of embodied democratic subjectivity in the Information Age.

Answering the question: Who are we in digital democracy?, it refutes the disembodiment thesis
and shows how affectivity and agency is transmitted through and generated by digital
corporealities.

This paper will first thoroughly revisit poststructuralist conceptions of the disembodied self in
cyberdemocracy. It will then investigate new materialist thought and its notions of materiality,
embodiment, and agency. Then it will turn to discussions in media and communication studies
and explore the roots of what I call digital new materialism and show that the idea of digital
corporeality predates discussions of cyberdemocracy in conceptions like Donna Haraway’s
cyborg ([1985] 1991) and is also prevalent in today’s conceptualisations of online subjectivity. In the final step, it will connect insights of digital embodiment to democratic politics and political engagement. It illustrates along three cases how bodies materialise online in radical democratic politics as classed, raced, queered, and nationalised. In the conclusion, major findings and both advantages and disadvantages of new materialist perspectives are discussed.

**The cyberdemocratic self: Revisiting the poststructuralist disembodiment thesis**

Personal computers and internet access rapidly spread in the Global North of the 1990s. The spatial metaphor of cyberspace in which users navigate, soon dominated the everyday understanding of digital communication. This socio-technological development was paralleled by increasing popularity of poststructuralist thought. With Judith Butler’s theory of performativity adding to and actualising the thought of thinkers like Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida and increasing the interest in these continental European discussions in the US, poststructuralist thought acquired an almost hegemonic position in social theory. The linguistic turn also affected democratic theory now moving from discussions of realist, pluralist, and participatory democracy to deliberative (e.g. Dryzek 1995) and agonistic democracy (e.g. Mouffe 1993).

Inspired by concepts of linguistic reality construction, identity performance, and the discursive power of knowledge, textual online communication detaching the speaker’s body from the uttered word appeared as the realisation of poststructuralist thought. All being consisted of text. Virtual reality in cyberdemocratic writing is often compared to hallucination from drugs or travel to outer space. Disembodied democratic subjects perceptible only by textual expression moved in cyberspace as a parallel world separated from “RL, real life”. Cyberspace conceptualised as detached from the outer world raised hopes of deliberative democrats for the practical realisation of a sphere free from domination (e.g. Bohman 1998). These poststructuralist discussions are today perceived as classic ideas of cyberdemocracy.

Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* (1993) is usually cited as the most influential and most characteristic book of the 90s discourse on cyberdemocracy. Already in 1991 in the essay “The Great Equalizer” Rheingold described the internet as democratising force shifting the power balance between citizens’ grass roots movements and governments. In *The Virtual Community* he is more cautious. The chapter “Disinformocracy” (p.276ff) extensively elaborates the dangers of commodification and government surveillance. The focus of the book, however, are Rheingold’s personal experiences of the WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link), one of the oldest virtual communities with discussion forums on different everyday topics. Anonymity appeared as a core feature of this kind of textual interaction:

Mask and self-disclosures are part of the grammar of cyberspace, the way quick cuts and intense images are part of the grammar of television. The grammar of CMC media involves a syntax of identity play: new identities, false identities,
multiple identities, exploratory identities, are available in different manifestations of the medium. (Rheingold 1993, p.147)

According to Rheingold, this kind of identity play needs to be differentiated from intentional deception (ibid., p.164ff). Rheingold tells a story that became a central narrative in cyberdemocratic discourse. An online character called Joan in some accounts (Poster 1997, p.222f; Rheingold 1993, p.164f; Turkle 1995, p.228f) and Julie Graham in others (Stone 1991, pp.82ff; Wajcman 2004, p.68) claiming to be a New York psychologist who had been paralyzed and muted in a car accident, had won the trust of several women in online communities, sharing intimate details about themselves. As it later turned out that Joan/Julie really was Alex (Lewin in Wajcman 2004), a psychiatrist with curiosity for women’s private lives, many users felt betrayed and exploited.

In Life on the Screen, psychologist Sherry Turkle tells the same story. She observes how internet users “use the anonymity of cyberspace to project alternate personae” (Turkle 1995, p.209). These online personae are not perceived as fake but living a true aspect of the self, which is hidden in common public interaction. Thus “donning a mask, adopting a persona, is a step toward reaching a deeper truth about the real” (Turkle 1995, p.216).

Through qualitative interviews and ethnography Life on the Screen investigates MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons/Domains) – online spaces for synchronous textual role play, where users collectively create an interactive story. As in analogous role play or improvisational theatre, participants can investigate and experiment with sides of their personality which are usually hidden. Some users even claim that their online identities feel more real than their analogous identities: “I am not one thing, I am many things. Each part gets to be more fully expressed in MUDs than in the real world. So even though I play more than one self on MUDs, I feel more like ‘myself’ when I’m MUDding” (cited in Turkle 1995, p.185). Turkle investigates online role play as therapeutic activity, in which hidden and underdeveloped qualities can be practiced and eventually carried over into analogous interaction (ibid., p.189ff).

Turkle’s notion of the decentred, multiple self is deeply rooted in poststructuralist thought. The rhizomatic structure of the internet itself embodied the fragmentation of the online self. Turkle illustrates this by the curious digital object called a “window”.

This kind of cycling through MUDs and RL[real life] is made possible by the existence of those boxed-off areas on the screen, commonly called windows. Windows provide a way for a computer to place you in several contexts at the same time… [W]indows have become a powerful metaphor for thinking about the self as multiple, distributed system… The life practice of windows is that of a decentred self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time. (Turkle 1995, p.13f)
The arguably most elaborate attempt at developing a poststructuralist theory of new information and communication technologies is presented in the work of media theorist Mark Poster (1990, 1995, 2001). In *The Second Media Age* (1995) Poster moves from German post-Marxist thought of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas to French poststructuralism by Foucault, Baudrillard and others. Putting these theories in relation to new media allows him to develop a critical theory for the information age. His main focus lies on novel subject constitutions through computer-mediated language characterised by decentralised, horizontal interaction.

[T]he mode of information enacts a radical reconfiguration of language, one which constitutes subjects outside the pattern of the rational, autonomous individual. This familiar modern subject is displaced by the mode of information in favour of one that is multiplied, disseminated and decentered, continuously interpellated as an unstable identity. At the level of culture, this instability poses both dangers and challenges which, if they become part of a political movement, or are connected with the politics of feminism, ethnic/racial minorities, gay and lesbian positions, may lead to a fundamental challenge to modern social institutions and structures. (Poster 1995, p.57)

The modern subject of the Enlightenment period is constructed as autonomous, individual thinker with a critical distance to the object of communication: the written word on paper. As producer of communication this subject has sole control of its well reflected expressions as it ponders in isolation. The subject as reader, on the other hand, is powerless regarding the content of the communication. Upon receiving the written word – again in isolation – it critically interprets the content, striving for correct interpretation in accordance with the original meaning. Thus, senders and receivers of communication are stable entities positioned in time and space through words which function as clear representation of intelligible reality. Senders call upon readers as subjects through their sole authority – thus author – via the word. This configuration drastically changes through digital communication: while the spatial distance between senders and receivers remains consistent – the temporary difference is eliminated. The rhizomatic structure of hypertext alters the representational character of the word. Text takes on a performative character continuously resituating both senders and receivers in a mutual process of interpellation and self-construction (cf. Landow 1992; Lanham 1993). Thus, “the subject can only be understood as partially stable, as repeatedly reconfiguring at different points of time and space, as non-self-identical and therefore as always partly Other” (Poster 1995, p.59).

Like Turkle (1995), Poster explains anonymity as contributing to equality among participants in online discussions (ibid., p.35, 71). In the essay “Cyberdemocracy: The Internet and the Public Sphere” Poster (1997) elaborates:
On the Internet individuals construct their identities, doing so in relation to ongoing dialogue, not as an act of pure consciousness... [This] does connote a ‘democratization’ of subject constitution because the acts of course are not limited to one-way address and not constrained by the gender and ethnic traces inscribed in face-to-face communications.” (Poster 1997, p.222)

Poster illustrates these new possibilities of identity constitution with the example of online gender representations. On the one hand, analogous hierarchies are reconstructed online through harassment and insult, on the other, new possibilities of gender experimentation, swapping, mixing and neutralising, emerge. The mere fact that gender has to be actively chosen and can be completely rejected by opting for neuter characters, provides space for resistance to analogous gender binaries and hierarchies:

Internet communities function as places of difference from and resistance to modern society. In a sense, they serve the function of a Habermasian public sphere, however reconfigured, without intentionally or even actually being one. They are places not of the presence of validity-claims or the actuality of critical reason, but of the inscription of new assemblages of self-constitution. (Poster 1997, p.224)

The poststructuralist discussions of democratic subjectivity in digital communication by Rheingold, Turkle, Poster and many others (e.g. Holmes 1997; Saco 2002; Strate et al. 1996) could be characterised as classical or the golden age of cyberdemocracy. Their pioneer studies have contributed a lot to understanding the effects of the internet on democracy. Cyberdemocrats realised the significance of online communication early on and rightfully predicted the great influence digital media would have on politics and political engagement. Social media are crucial both to social movements and common party politics today (cf. Gerbaudo 2012, 2017; Kavada 2015). Discussions on cyberdemocracy have unfairly been portrait as naïve. While they indeed raised hopes regarding the participatory and equalising prospects of digital communication for democracy, they also extensively elaborated the dangers of government surveillance and commodification. Both Turkle (1995, p.233ff) and Poster (1995, pp.68f, 78ff), like many other cyberdemocrats, refer to Foucault’s metaphor of the Panopticon developed in Discipline and Punish ([1975] 1979). The “unequal gaze” from the tower that potentially observes all inmates of a prison at all time lets the inmates internalise this disciplinary control and adjust their behaviour accordingly, without physical threat or force. Through the surveillance of online behaviour, visits of webpages, and buying habits a profile of the subject is constructed which is reflected back to the subject through computerised algorithms by targeted advertising, order of web search results etc. The subject is thus called upon in certain ways serving mostly economic purposes.

While cyberdemocrats thus carefully positioned their thought between optimism and pessimism, their most important contribution consists in their sensible exploration of the
reconfiguration of democratic subjectivity and identity through digital interaction. Early online communication was indeed characterised by experimentation with and exploration of the multiple aspects of personal identity.

Nevertheless, cyberdemocratic accounts are problematic: They tend to imagine the subject as bodiless being in a realm cut off from “real reality”. Turkle, for example, claims that by employing digital communications “[w]e are able to step through the looking glass” (Turkle 1995, p.9). Employing the metaphor of Alice’s Wonderland characterises virtual reality as unreal, as a dream from which one can wake up, a separate space one can enter and exit. Elaborating her thesis of the multiple self Turkle (1995, p.14) cites an interviewee: “Why grant such superior status to the self that has the body when the selves that don’t have bodies are able to have different kinds of experiences?” thus characterising the body as separate from the mind. Similarly, Poster’s notion of the digital public sphere, which facilitate inclusion by concealing physical embodiment, negates the continuation of analogous to virtual inequalities and tends to approve hiding instead of actively claiming subjugated identities. In sum, cyberdemocrats’ deep entrenchment in poststructuralist thought has led them to underplay the role of the body and partly overlook the continuation of structural inequalities rooted in the materiality of capitalist societies.

The materialist turn: Why bodies matter

Recent discussions focusing around terms like new materialism, object oriented ontology, speculative realism, material feminism, posthumanism, and the like offer a different perspective. They shift attention from discursive construction and the reification of reality through text to the materiality and vitality of things. The democratic subject appears as embodied and mortal, as physical being mutually acting upon and being acted upon by the material world. New materialism – a term coined simultaneously by Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, p.93) – criticises the poststructuralist sole focus on discourses as all powerful, thus obscuring the role of materiality and the body: “We need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit. Focusing exclusively on representations, ideology, and discourse excludes living experience, corporeal practice, and biological substance from consideration” (Alaimo & Hekman 2008, p.4). Moreover, new materialists, inspired by Marxist historical materialism, shift the focus back to structural inequalities in society. The unequal distribution of resources – as a matter of materiality – has been neglected by poststructuralist thinking:

From this materialist point of view, it is ideological naïveté to believe that significant social change can be engendered solely by reconstructing subjectivities, discourses, ethics, and identities – that is, without also altering their socioeconomic conditions or tracing crucial aspects of their reproduction to the economic interests they unwittingly serve. (Coole & Frost 2010, p.25)
The poststructuralist focus on words, ideas, meaning, and representation and its neglect of physical materiality appears particularly troubling when considering the history of Western thought which continuously privileged the mind over the body: first, through the Christian duality of body versus mind – corporeal suffering and spiritual salvation – chastising the body by fasting and suppressing sexual urges; and second through the humanist conception of reason, civilisation, science, politics, and art in opposition to emotion, irrationality, brutishness, nature, savagery, and the wild. This split, of course, goes hand in hand with a conception of masculinity associated with enlightened, rational subjects in the public sphere and femininity associated with irrational, sexual, embodied objects in the private sphere. This analysis and the attempt at overcoming such dualisms (Connolly 2013, p.399f; Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, p.85) characterises new materialism as an inherently feminist ontology (cf. Pitts-Taylor 2016, p.2).

Many who have struggled with the poststructuralist paradigm imagining the body, physical objects, and reality itself made up of words, text, culture and socialisation will agree with new materialist approaches claiming: “It is difficult to imagine how psychic and sociohistorical forces alone could account for the production of matter. Surely it is the case – even when the focus is restricted to the materiality of ‘human’ bodies – that there are ‘natural,’ not merely ‘social,’ forces that matter” (Barad 2008, p.128). This approach inspires new materialists, situated in the humanities and social sciences, to draw on empirical work in the natural sciences. Freed from the limits of poststructuralists’ sole focus on discourse analysis, new materialists reinterpret empirical findings from biology and physics in terms of philosophy and social sciences (Alaimo & Hekman 2008, p.5; Coole & Frost 2010, p.6). Feminist new materialists, for example, turn to neurosciences that have so long been the sole domain of those who want to prove the essential difference between the sexes (Pitts-Taylor 2016, p.8).

The focus on materiality, reality as physical, and the recourse to natural sciences might give the impression that new materialism is nothing but old materialism accompanied by its association with positivism and realism. This is, however, not the case as new materialism criticises and distances itself from the core positivist assumptions just as much as it criticises poststructuralism (cf. Alaimo & Hekman 2008, p.6):

New materialists are interested in exposing the movement, vitality, morphogenesis, and becoming of the material word, its dynamic processes, as opposed to discovering immutable truths. New materialism sees a physical and biological world operating not according to fixed laws and blueprints, but rather one teeming with dynamism, flexibility, and novelty. Such a world is not determined; rather it is constantly in the process of its making. (Pitts-Taylor 2016, p.4)

It situates itself in equidistance to positivism and poststructuralism, both criticising and creatively building on their foundations. From positivism, it takes the focus on the body and
material objects but rejects its assumption of an empirically measurable and quantifiable objective reality, thus privileging reason over affectivity. From poststructuralism, it takes the notion of relativity of subjective few points, the mutability, and contingency of things, while it rejects its sole focus on words and textuality and the notion of all powerful discourses determining reality.

It overcomes the binaries produced by both positivist and poststructuralist assumptions between words/ideas/reason and the material/body/flesh, between representation and the represented, with a simple concept: the vitality of all things (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, p.107). New materialism declares everything – even thought and abstract concepts – an object. And declares all objects alive and carrier of agency. This way it revokes the core dualism between object and subject. Things are not fixed, opaque, explorable, and definable entities, rather they are always active in continuous processes of materialisation, they are always becoming: “Matter is a substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity” (Barad 2008, p.139). New materialism thus describes the world in procedural terms as in constant flux. It observes “objects forming and emerging within relational fields, bodies composing their natural environment in ways that are corporeally meaningful for them, and subjectivities being constituted as open series of capacities or potencies that emerge hazardously and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes” (Coole & Frost 2010, p.10).

This mutability of things does not only stand in contrast with positivisms fixed reality but also with poststructuralisms all powerful discourse. Unlike the discursive subject as trapped in a tight corset of words and meanings, like in Judith Butler’s (1993) citational performativity, new materialism’s agentic object/subject navigates in a world of meaningful matter and material meaning (Connolly 2013, p.400; Coole & Frost 2010, p.8ff, 26f; Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, pp.97, 107). Primarily, however, new materialism is not to be understood as the negation and rejection of other scientific traditions and ontologies but in their creative incorporation and continuation (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2010, 2012, p.89): “The strength of new materialism is precisely this nomadic traversing of the territories of science and humanities, performing the agential or non-innocent nature of all matter that seems to have escaped both modernist (positivist) and postmodern humanist epistemologies” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, p.100f, emphasis in original).

**Tracing digital new materialism**

The emerging ontology, while not in full opposition to poststructuralism, still opens up entirely new perspectives on democratic subjectivity through the digital. In contrast with the cyberdemocratic discourse of disembodiment and a public sphere separate from the outside world, it draws attention to online embodiment, digital things and reconfigured perceptions of
the body, and the self through the digital. These ideas, which could be termed digital new materialism, were articulated already in the 1970s and 80s and thus predate the poststructuralist inspired cyberdemocratic discourse. In other words, long before theories of second selves, hypertext, and inclusion through anonymity emerged, foresighted theorists focused on the materiality of computers, their physical hardware, and the embodied subjects using them. Often this materialist thought is more implicit and has to be carefully extracted from these pioneer text about online communication, as these writings far predate the materialist turn around the turn of the millennium. They nevertheless lay the foundation for an understanding of digital embodiment.

_The Network Nation_ by Starr Roxanne Hiltz and Murray Turoff published in 1978 – eighteen years before Castells’ _Network Society_ – proves incredibly foresighted. On more than 500 pages the book provides detailed empirical work on computer conferencing – comparable to current synchronous online chats. Hiltz and Turoff’s political and empirical analyses are in line with current debates – almost 40 years ahead of their time. In contrast to this currency, their descriptions of the use of computer networks oddly stands out:

> Imagine that you are seated in front of a computer terminal, which is like an electronic typewriter, with either a long scroll of typed output (‘hard copy’) or a TV-like screen (a cathode-ray tube, or CRT) for display, or both. The terminal is connected to an ordinary telephone. (Hiltz & Turoff 1978, p. 7)

The unfamiliarity of the addressed audience of the book with electronic technology prompted the authors to give detailed accounts of the surface of the computer, realizing the electronic tool as material object of interaction. These material objects wield agency as they are calling upon users.

> [The system] tells you that there have been 14 messages entered for you. In addition, you see the names and numbers of those now ‘on line’ with you, who could receive material immediately. It reminds you that you belong to two ‘conferences’, which are like written group discussion on a specific topic. (Hiltz & Turoff 1978, p.8)

The character of the computer as agentic object becomes even more apparent, when Hiltz and Turoff reject the notion of computer systems as Frankenstein’s monster – both an object of creation and a subject emancipating itself from its master – in exchange for the metaphor of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, an autonomous actor, who has both a good and a bad side (ibid. p.30).

The pioneer study by Hiltz and Turoff anticipates many crucial discussions about novel digital subjectivity today. So does Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto”, written in 1983 and published two years later. Haraway’s essay, which still is highly influential in current discussions and counts at a central source of inspiration for new materialism, strikes an entirely different tone conceptualising democratic subjectivity through new technologies in feminist
and neo-Marxist terms. The cyborg as configuration of human-machine, organism-technology, mind-software appears as liberating subject in a world confined by hierarchical identity formations. “Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism” (Haraway [1985] 1991, p.155). Identity categories have been constructed as binaries defining one as superior and the second as the inferior Other, such as male/female, civilized/primitive, and mind/body (ibid., p.177).

The cyborg as monstrous and ironic agent breaks out of this dichotomous thinking by overcoming the divides between animal/human, human/machine, and physical/non-physical. It does not, however, reconfigure those binaries into a new unity, a synthesis as in Marxist historical materialism, but rather leaves the riddle unresolved. The irony of the cyborg is constituted by plurality, dissolving unity into permanent contradiction. Haraway encourages giving up the struggle for simple dichotomous thinking and indulge in the pleasures of the cyborg – the pleasures of unresolved riddles, friction, and disorientation. This includes the reconfiguration of binary gender codes and traditional models of sexuality and family into unknown and undefinable formations resulting in “partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves” (Haraway [1985] 1991, p.157).

The figure of the cyborg as the material reconfiguration of human machine, which is left purposely unspecified and ambiguous in Haraway’s writing, is explicated in more clarity in Sherry Turkle’s Second Self (1984) – without using the term “cyborg”, however. While in descriptions of cyberdemocratic thought Turkle’s Life on the Screen (1995) is cited frequently, her eleven-year older book goes mostly unnoticed – even less noticed are its cyborgian conceptions. The computer as agentic object calling upon users, which can be found implicitly in Hiltz and Turoff’s text and Haraway’s obscurely ambiguous cyborg, is explicated in Turkle’s explanation of computers as evocative objects.

In her psychological study relying on ethnography and qualitative interviews, Turkle observes the effects, tensions, and fusions resulting from the use of computers by children and young adults. Turkle carefully avoids technological determinism by paying close attention to both determining effects of computers and individual determination in their use (Turkle 1984, p.12). Accordingly, computers appear both as tools, as objects and at the same time they appear as agents, which call upon users in different ways: “We search for a link between who we are and what we have made, between who we are and what we might create, between who we are and what, through our intimacy with our own creations, we might become” (Turkle 1984, p.2). Users can employ computers as tools to create their own individual worlds. As soon as they enter these worlds, they are affected by it, they become the object of the computer’s creation as “computers enter into the development of personality, of identity, and even of sexuality” (Turkle 1984, p.6). Not only do users humanize computers as “friends” that “are stupid” at times or need to “rest for a while”, but also do humans start to perceive themselves in
technological terms as they might not “function well” or something forgotten is perceived as being “erased from the hard drive” (ibid., p.7).

According to Turkle, computers function as mirrors for the individual self. While the metaphor of Narcissus explains the use of computers well, it has been misinterpreted in the past. Narcissus did not fall in love with himself out of vanity, but seeing his reflection in the water he perceived himself as someone else, thus falling in love with the self as other. Computers provide mirrors to see the self as reconfigured other. It objectifies the self, resulting in a representational object vis-à-vis the self (ibid., p.156f). The purpose of this objectified other/self is, however, not vane self-love. It rather serves the anxious search for the self, as reassurance of our own existence, stability and unity (ibid., 319). Turkle makes the complex notion of the cyborg, as something beyond a human with an electronic prosthesis, more comprehensible by describing the affective use of computers and the agency of computers calling upon and co-constructing the human subject.

Because they stand on the line between mind and not-mind, between life and not-life, computers excite reflection about the nature of mind and the nature of life. They provoke us to think about who we are… The effect is subversive. It calls into question our ways of thinking about ourselves: most dramatically if mind is machine, who is the actor? Where is responsibility, spirit, soul? There is a new disorder… Where we once were rational animals, now we are feeling computers, emotional machines. But we have no way to really put these terms together. The hard-to-live-with, self-contradictory notion of the emotional machine captures the fact that what we live now is a new and deeply felt tension. (Turkle 1984, p.320f, 326)

**Digital new materialism today**

The writing of Starr and Turoff, Haraway, and Turkle illustrate that the poststructuralist disembodiment theses was not the original perspective in theoretical discussions of subjectivity in online communication. Rather, it was predated by emerging and yet not self-aware new materialist approaches emphasising digital embodiment, the materiality of digital things and the hardware, and the agency of computers as objects-subjects. These early discussions employing digital new materialism were amplified around the 2000s by the general materialist turn in social sciences. Today’s conceptualisations of subjectivity through the digital are clearly characterised by new materialist perspectives. This is also due to the development of online communication from sole textual to visualized and audible communication. The embodied subjectivity and the agency of materiality is the central focus of these writings.

In *Configuring the Networked Self* Julie Cohen (2012) starts her discussion of reality, space, and the body online with a critique of both liberal conceptions of the disembodied autonomous subject and constructivist notions of the disembodied multiple self in cyberspace. The notion
of digital disembodiment is closely related to the concept of cyberspace as a separate, alternative world – a notion blind to material inequalities and their digital effects and replications. Instead, Cohen claims, digital space is intertwined and enmeshed with analogous space. Both are only perceptible through the organic body (cf. Gies 2008, p.312). Brophy (2010, p.932f) adds that online communication is based on material prerequisite: the body, its physical and cognitive capabilities, the material infrastructure (hardware), and financial resources (digital divide). By adding perspectives from cognitive science (positivist inspirations) to ideas of discursive and performative creation of space (poststructuralist inspirations), Cohen explains space as result of embodied perception. Images, sound, and smell are ordered in relation to the specific location of the individual subject. Cognition, and thus the knowledge of space, is radically relational. It is perceived differently from each perspective and through each body. It is thus not objective as the conception of the empty space in the Western Enlightenment tradition that can be measured and explained in numbers, but mutable and subjective. Reality is fixed, but perceived differently from each standpoint and through each body (Cohen 2012, p.36ff).

In this context, technological change alters embodied perceptions of reality. Just like the use of cars alters relations of time and space, so does digital communication. These new perspectives reflect not just on the perception of reality and space online, but on the perception of reality in analogous society at large. The digital subject thus does not consist merely of a digital body, but results in the reconfiguration of analogous democratic subjectivity and the perception of physical bodies. This is even more true in the age of the internet of things, in which digital communication is not mediated only through single immobile computer screens but through numerous mobile devices, multiplying interfaces around the subject:

- Data flows escape the obvious bounds of the networked computer and cross into and out of homes, cars, personal accessories, and public spaces by many avenues...
- Networked space is neither empty nor abstract, and is certainly not separate; it is a network of connections wrapped around every artifact and human being. (Cohen 2012, p.46f)

In contrast to earlier cyberdemocrats, today’s discussions incorporate new technological developments like the internet of things and broadband connections, which are identified as the prime reason for the emergence of new digital corporealities (Daniels 2009; Gies 2008). While writers like Turkle (1995) and Rheingold (1993) investigated text only digital spaces, broadband connections enable uploading and sharing or live streaming images, videos, and sound. The formerly textual body becomes visible and audible. Thus, current online communication is far from being characterized by disembodiment. Rather the most prominent topics discussed and visualized online revolve around the body: sexuality, pornography, and online dating being one, health, disease and peer support another, and fitness, fashion, and nutrition a third. Even primarily not somatic purposes for online communication, like the connection and everyday communication with friends, family, and colleagues through social
networks attain a focus on embodiment through the increasing prioritization of visuals via platforms like Instagram, Flickr, YouTube, and Snapchat.

This focus of online embodiment is illustrated in the literature by several empirical examples. On pro-anorexia websites, mostly young girls suffering from anorexia exchange diet and self-starving tips and share pictures of skinny female bodies as “thinspiration” (Daniels 2009, p.112ff; Gies 2008, p.321). Other websites serve communities of obese men to positively affirm their body image and reinterpret mainstream conceptualizations of fatness (Monaghan 2005). And websites of transgender communities give advice on physical body transformations, hormone therapy, surgery etc. In relation to pro-ana and trans groups Daniels argues:

Instead of seeing cyberspace as a place in which to experience the absence of the body… these girls and self-identified women use digital technologies in ways that simultaneously bring the body ‘online’ (through digital photos uploaded to the web) and take the digital ‘offline’ (through information gleaned online to transform their embodied selves). (Daniels 2009, p.117)

Anorexic girls and trans people strive to transform their physical bodies through the digital and fat men attain a positive image of their physical body in the analogous world. Like Cohen, Daniels makes the point that the digital reconfigures perceptions of analogous reality and the body. Reminiscent of Turkle’s (1984) computer as evocative objects both Cohen (2012, p.46) and Brophy (2010, p.938) describe technological apparatuses as calling upon the democratic subject in certain ways by affording possibilities for performance of the self while restricting others. Like everyday performances of the self through physical bodies, clothes, body language, make-up etc., digital identity performances rely on material devices. Through Judith Butler (1993) and Elisabeth Grosz (1994), Brophy explains the body as material process constituted by performance, rather than opaque measurable unit. The digital body thus is constituted through the performative act of going online and simply extending common communicative performance through a different medium (Brophy 2010, cf. Gies 2008, p.314).

**Materialising classed, raced, queered, and nationalised bodies in digital democracy**

But what do new materialist perspectives with their focus on embodiment contribute to understanding democratic subjectivity and new forms of participation in the digital age? While poststructuralist cyberdemocrats of the 1990s were eager to relate their concepts to democracy, this step has yet to be undertaken for new materialist writings on the internet. In this section, I will contribute to a new materialist understanding of digital democratic subjectivity and radical democratic politics. Three cases will illustrate how bodies are reified and reconfigured through the digital in political participation. These examples show how digital bodies both mirror analogous bodies and are thus subjected to material inequalities and discursive power structures outside digital communication yet at the same time reconfigure and change as they defy such
external power relations through their agentic qualities. Digital bodies prove to be both mutable and solid. The three examples further demonstrate how digital bodies materialise as classed, raced, queered, and nationalised. The first example tells of the selfie meme “I am the 99%” as part of the Occupy movement, in which people struck by poverty materialise their bodies as classed subjects of protest. The second example tells the story of an online-swarm forming on the image board 4chan that reified raced bodies as African-American avatars in an online video game to protest racism. And the third example tells of the use of filters on social media profile pictures to materialise queered and nationalised bodies.

Case 1: The classed bodies of the 99 percent

In August 2011, just a few weeks before the first major protest in New York’s Zuccotti Park erupted, an Occupy activist going by the name of Chris created a Tumblr blog entitled “We are the 99 percent.” On this blog, he invited people to tell their personal stories of hardship caused by austerity politics through selfies: “Let us know who you are. Take picture of yourself holding a sign that describes your situation… Below write ‘I am the 99 percent’” (We are the 99 percent blog). Within weeks the blog was being flooded with around 100 selfies per day of people telling their stories. These images walk a thin line between self-exposure and anonymity. Individual self-portraits of people holding up hand-written signs which cover their faces either completely, partly or not at all both reveal and cover physical embodiment. Some are signed with first names or pseudonyms, but most carry no name at all (cf. McDonald 2015, p.976ff). While this gives some credibility to the poststructuralist disembodiment thesis, many participants also claim embodiment, materialising their bodies both through visuals and text.

An obese man, probably in his 30s, with his naked shoulders, arms, and chest revealed, holds up a sign close to his face that reads: “I play World of Warcraft naked 40 hours a week. I eat mostly McDonald’s. I am probably unemployable. I am the 99%” (We are the 99 percent blog). Another naked man with a noticeable scar on his chest holds up a sign narrating his history of cancer, precarious work, unemployment, and difficulties getting health insurance. Similarly, a picture revealing a pregnant belly with only the lower part of a female face. Her sign reads: “At 21 years old I am… about to become mother to a baby whose illness has gotten us booted off gov’t health insurance… at 9 months pregnant… Scared for our future. I am the 99%” (We are the 99 percent blog).

These images and texts materialise classed bodies protesting their precarious conditions, poverty, and being let down by the state when they need support most. In these examples, subjects decide to perform their vulnerability. They reveal their precarious, crises-stricken bodies to regain agency. This act reconfigures their material bodies as digital objects. In this process, they both reify their bodies as firm substance that replicates their “real life” self. At the same time, however, they have control over the angle and the lighting of the picture, what they wear, how much of their bodies is covered or revealed, how much of their faces and bodies
is visible within the frames of the image, and not least how they depict their bodies in the textual narration. Their bodies prove both fixed and mutable. It is not only the text, it is the body and the image itself that speaks and thus wields agency.

**Case 2: The raced bodies of anti-racist raiders**

In 2006, users of the social networking page Habbo Hotel, which facilitates social interaction between mostly US-American white teenagers in a hotel setting, repeatedly faced difficulties navigating in the virtual outdoor hotel areas. The entrance to the virtual pool and other entrances were blocked by African-American avatars with big afros in black suits. When the almost exclusively White avatars attempted to enter the pool, the Black avatars shouted: “Pool’s closed due to AIDS.” The repeated raids of Habbo Hotel were the work of an online-swarm originating on 4Chan, the birthplace of the online collective Anonymous (Asenbaum 2017). The image board providing a completely anonymous space to share and comment on digital pictures, gave rise to a subculture characterised by a mix of doing things “just for the lulz” (pluralisation of lol, laughing out loud), sharing sexual and violent shock images, and political motivations mostly concerning free speech (Bernstein et al. 2011, Beyer 2014). The online-swarm had formed in response to rumours that the moderators of Habbo Hotel would discriminate against Black avatars and as protest against the overrepresentation of White avatars. As moderators started to block Black avatars and automatically impede their registration in order to regain control, the online protesters charged them with racism. These “online-sit ins”, mimicking peaceful protest tactics employed by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, were repeated on Habbo Hotel and other sites. Manuals instructing protestors how to design the uniform Black avatar and how to avoid or circumvent deletion by moderators were circulated. In a follow-up action on World of Warcraft, Black avatars were marched to a virtual market place to be sold as slaves (McDonald 2015, p.974). Memes inspired by the raids like the slogan “Pool’s closed” spread via social media. The memetic protest action even materialised outside the internet as White people dressed in black suits with afro wigs formed a swastika out of their bodies in front of the headquarters of Habbo Hotel’s mother company Saluke in Finland.

This example illustrates how means of digital body production can be used for radical democratic politics. Like in the example of the classed bodies of the 99 percent, digital media are used to materialise subaltern bodies, to draw attention to inequality and injustice. The digital embodiment actively performs subjugation. Black avatars are design in a stereotypical fashion with afros both bringing attention to racial prejudice and at the same time citing the Black revolutionary spirit of the 1970s expressed in slogans like “Black is beautiful.” The most significant difference in contrast with the example of the 99 percent, however, consists in the identity-crossing, the performance “as” Black characters by majority White people. The digital reification of bodies through avatars allows for the swapping of identity markers, in contrast
with the use of selfies. This swapping of race is, however, not a serious attempt at deception, but rather an obvious parody both mocking opponents prejudice and joyfully embracing positive aspects of Black Power.

Case 3: The queered and nationalised bodies of pro-gay rights and anti-terrorist advocates

Every year in the early summer months many users of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social networking sites used a transparent rainbow filter on their regular profile pictures, replicating the colourful flag of the LGBTIQ movement. Annual Pride demonstrations and celebrations remind of the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, in which queer people publicly and partly violently claimed their equal rights. Today even many who define themselves as heterosexual use the rainbow filter. By queering their image, they do not proclaim a homosexual identity, but they claim the possibility of living queer desires in a diverse society. They perform a political progressive identity that rejects heteronormativity. It claims sexual indefiniteness and promotes alternative sexual norms, family, career and life models.

The meaning of the rainbow filter for profile pictures is context-dependent however. It was also used in the wake of the 2016 mass shooting inside a gay nightclub in Orlando, USA, in which 49 were killed and 58 wounded by a terrorist claiming affiliated with the Islamic State. By altering their digitally embodied appearance social media users performed support for the victims of the attack, made a political statement against homophobia, and claimed values of a pluralist and open society. In contrast with the use of the rainbow filter in Pride season, both the meaning and the image itself changed, however. Rainbow flags were now often depicted as transitioning into the US-American flag. Claims for a pluralist society and against homophobia were framed as “American values” in opposition to Islamist terrorism or Islam itself. Queered digital bodies suddenly appeared simultaneously as nationalised. Queerness, patriotism, and islamophobia were closely related.

Like in the example of the Habbo Hotel raids, the use of colour filters, ribbons, and collective profile pictures on social media, a phenomenon thoroughly analysed by Gerbaudo (2015), allows users to redefine their bodies. While the raced avatars, however playful, performed a full transition to another digital body, coloured filters only facilitate limited transitions. Like in the example of the classed bodies in the Occupy movement, the materialisation of the digital body by Pride supporters is tied to the physical analogous body. Like in both examples of classed and raced bodies, this example telling of queered bodies too reifies the body of the subaltern. It claims solidarity with a historically suppressed identity. Orlando partly tells a different story though. While aspects of solidarity with the subaltern prevail, allegiance with the hegemonic US-American identity is performed as well. Recently, whenever a terrorist attack happens many profile pictures on social media appear behind the filter of the national flag of the respective country, be it France, Brussels, or Russia. Here digital bodies materialise
as national, which performs support of hegemonic state power and carries aspects of nationalism.

**Conclusion**

The examples of classed, raced, queered, and nationalised bodies in online engagement demonstrate that bodies do matter in digital democracy. New materialist perspectives draw attention to agentic and affective bodies online, refuting the poststructuralist inspired, cyberdemocratic notion of the disembodied self. From a new materialist perspective, public spheres online are characterised by a continuation of offline inequalities. It draws attention to the unequal access to the material infrastructure allowing for online communication (digital divide). This unequal distribution of (material) resources offline is mirrored in digital hierarchies between those creating, structuring, and gaining financial profits from online spaces on the one hand and those who just use them on the other.

These inequalities are also linked to physical bodies and their visual identity markers of class, race, gender, age, able-bodiedness, sexuality, beauty standards etc. The examples above illustrate that these body markers play a crucial role in digital democratic engagement. It proves much harder to change embodiment online than cyberdemocrats suggested – and this is not only due to the change from textuality to visuality as earlier critique of cyberdemocrats illustrate (Kolko et al. 2000; Nakamura 2002). Those engaging online often choose to extend their offline identity markers online through selfies or colour filters on social media profile pictures. And if they change embodiment through avatars this is done as parody. Their digital bodies do prove mutable to a certain extend however, as they gain control and wield agency by determining the angles, lighting, and frame of selfies, whether and which colour filter to use on their profile pictures, and which protest avatar to build.

In contrast with the poststructuralist notion of hegemonic discourses restricting and even controlling subjects’ words, thoughts and actions, the new materialist perspective provides a much more positive outlook of agentic bodies and indeterminacy. The examples of the Occupy movement, the anti-racist raid of Habbo Hotel, and the engagement for gay rights with rainbow filters on social media profile pictures illustrate how users materialise their bodies as agentic and affective. This entails both, expression *through* bodies (as medium) and expression *by* bodies. Not only the verbal articulation of political content via the body counts, but also the mere presence of the body as a materialised political claim. The assemblage of a Black avatar in a White dominated online game, for example, marks an intentional political intervention. The digital body has agency without even uttering content verbally. Here the digital body proves more agentic than the physical one as it has been constructed intentionally. In the example of the selfies of the 99 percent, already the physical body itself, not the message written on signs, expresses agency, in its digital replication when it is depicted in a way
intentionally drawing attention to problems of precariousness and poverty, thus materialising as classed object of protest.

Thus, new materialist perspectives contribute a lot to understanding the reconfiguration of democratic subjectivity through the digital. At the same time, some assumptions of new materialism need to be questioned and need further elaboration. New materialists claim to achieve both, overcoming the dualisms between object and subject, representation and the represented, and at the same time not committing the mistake of poststructuralism consisting in focusing only on one of the two. New materialist theory struggles, however, to achieve this. While some declare everything matter and thus on the one hand overcome the criticised dualism but on the other achieve this only by focusing on one of the two poles (cf. Barad 2008, p. 136), others claim to link mind and body, word and materiality, which does pay attention to both, but does not overcome the dualism (Coole & Frost 2010, p.26f; Pitts-Taylor 2016, p.7).

The attempt at overcoming this dualism by declaring all things agentic leaves unanswered questions. I agree with Connolly (2013, p.400) that agency of humans, animals, robots, computers, and other objects like tables, books, shoes etc. is a matter of degree and must be differentiated. What does it really mean to say a chair, for example, has agency? It surely does not mean that the chair has a will or desires that it expresses. It rather means that the chair makes its users sit in a certain way. The chair is affective, but it has no intention. The danger I see with declaring all things vivid is that it might obscure the intentions of those who actually made the chair. These humans, with surely a different degree of agency than the chair, made the chair to affect its user in a certain way. The political implications of this reasoning become evident, when thinking about those constructing computer programs, especially those who profit from their revenues. They are the ones with agency, interests, and intentionality that influence online programs, like social networks, to affords certain use and not other. The same is true for poststructuralist discourse theory. Here often the discourse itself is described in agentic terms, while it would be much more plausible to pay attention to discursive actors and their intentions, interests, and desires. In short both notions, the agency of things and the agency of discourses, might function to obscure the agency of people.

Notwithstanding its open questions regarding the specific nature of the agency of things and its partly exaggerated criticism of poststructuralism, new materialism opens new perspectives for democratic theory in general and democratic subjectivity in the Information Age in particular. The democratic subject as physically embodied being with all its limitations and its mortality, affectivity and emotionality, its biology, genes, hormones, flesh and blood stands in contrast with the deliberative conception of the rational, truth-seeking subject dominating current discussion in democratic theory. Coole and Frost (2010) suggest “that this emphasis on bodily processes and corporeal capacities… is indispensable to any adequate appreciation of democratic processes” (p.19). And Amanda Machin (2015) undertakes a first investigation of the significance of physical corporeality in “Deliberating Bodies”.
As the discussions above show, the exploration of embodiment in relation to democratic theory and political participation is altered through digital communication. Processes of everyday cyborgization materialise the democratic subject as human-machine hybrid. The emergence of cyborg subjects (Garfield 2016), digital citizens (Isin & Ruppert 2015), and cyborg activists (Asenbaum 2017) online, offline and in the liminal sphere generated by clouds and the internet of things raises the question who we are in the Information Age. In this essay, rather than giving a definite answer, I have generated a point of departure for this discussion in democratic theory. We need to find theories, concepts, and terms to guide empirical research and to reflect upon the rapid changes in democratic politics current societies are undergoing. Or else these processes will go unnoticed and escape our attention and influence.

References


