

Comment Sections as Public Space

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Abstract:

Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre's *The Making of Public Space* examines online comment sections as key sites where politics emerges through news politicization and infrastructural constraints. The review highlights the book's focus on lifeworlds, moderation, and partial anonymity, while questioning whether such participation yields political power or remains symbolic catharsis.

Kommentarbereiche als öffentlicher Raum

German Abstract:

Luc Boltanski und Arnaud Esquerre's *The Making of Public Space* untersucht Online-Kommentarbereiche als wichtige Orte, an denen Politik durch die Politisierung von Nachrichten und infrastrukturelle Zwänge entsteht. Die Rezension legt den Fokus auf Lebenswelt, Moderation und partielle Anonymität und hinterfragt, ob diese Partizipation politische Wirksamkeit entfaltet oder symbolische Katharsis bleibt.

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Comment Sections as Public Space

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Boltanski, Luc and Arnaud Esquerre, *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Polity, 2024. 304 Pages, 23,65 EUR. ISBN: 978-1-509-56279-4.

When we post a comment beneath a news article, we enter a kind of proxy political space that is both visible and invisible: The comment appears publicly on the page, but how algorithms and moderators handle it, and who really sees it, remains hidden from us. In *The Making of Public Space: News, Events and Opinions in the Twenty-First Century*, Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre investigate this digital terrain, asking how politics actually becomes “inscribed in people’s lifeworlds” (p. 94). Their answer, grounded in analysis of over 128,000 comments from French digital spaces, suggests that public space is less a forum for deliberation than a stage where people perform political identity amid infrastructural constraints they rarely recognize.

Boltanski and Esquerre conceptualize public space through two interrelated processes: the selection and presentation of events as current affairs, and their politicization. According to the authors, politicization designates the “processes by which facts hitherto treated as singular are brought together and placed in a series, so that they are considered as a ‘public problem’” (p. 65). This conceptual precision reveals how, in their view, mediation does not simply report political reality but instead constitutes it. Their focus on the lifeworld relates to earlier work by Boltanski and Thévenot on justification and critique, where they sought to understand how actors navigate social disputes (Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot: *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Princeton, 2006). Read together, these works trace a longer project of showing how ordinary people make sense of competing claims.

The empirical strategy is methodologically distinctive: Rather than relying on interviews and surveys (research situations in which participants often adjust responses because they know they are being observed), they focused on ‘naturally occurring’ online discourse. Their dataset

comprises 120,000 comments beneath *Le Monde* articles (September–October 2019) and 8,300 comments on YouTube videos from the National Audiovisual Institute (January 2021). By combining close and distant reading, they trace semantic patterns and discursive strategies. As they argue, this allows them to observe political expression as it unfolds in everyday digital environments, rather than in artificial research settings.

Like any method, this one carries limitations the authors acknowledge but do not fully theorize. We cannot determine who exactly left comments – whether these are ordinary citizens or organized actors. We cannot evaluate commenters’ intentions: Were they sincere, performative, or deliberately provocative? The authors mention trolls later when discussing opinion dynamics, but they do not directly address their potential presence in the corpus or consider automated and coordinated activity. From my perspective, this raises a more fundamental question about what kind of ‘public opinion’ such datasets can be said to represent.

One striking finding is readers actively disputing news production itself. Commenters interrogate journalistic selection by questioning what counts as ‘newsworthy.’ Boltanski and Esquerre position readers as participants in meta-journalistic debate, though they provide little insight into why journalists select what they do. Where Pierre Bourdieu (*On Television and Journalism*. London: Pluto Press, 1998) has emphasized the structural pressures – profit, speed, professional hierarchy – that constrain editorial decisions, Boltanski and Esquerre show how these decisions become objects of public dispute. Their analysis suggests that newsworthiness is not only decided within the journalistic field but also negotiated through public contestation.

Critically, the book does not examine economic and technical pressures that make certain content disproportionately visible. News organizations prioritize content attracting engagement, and negative, catastrophic events generate substantially higher engagement than constructive reporting. *Le Monde’s* subscription model theoretically reduces pressure for clickbait, but even subscription models rely on metrics and subscriber growth. The book does not explore this tension: Does *Le Monde’s* economic structure genuinely reshape content circulation, or merely reframe the same attention economy?

A central contribution of the book is its account of how public space is currently organized through digital networks. As Boltanski and Esquerre argue, comment sections emerge as polarized, socially stratified spaces, structured by gendered expectations and unequal symbolic authority. Political disagreement here rarely takes the form of calm deliberation; it appears instead as sharp boundary-drawing and defensive positioning. Read alongside Jeffrey C. Alexander's understanding of journalism as civic meaning-making (*The Civil Sphere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), the moderation practices described by Boltanski and Esquerre appear as fragile attempts at civil repair – efforts to keep conflict publicly visible while containing it within limits that platforms and newsrooms can still manage.

Crucially, technical infrastructure – content management systems, algorithmic visibility, moderation processes – shapes which voices gain audibility. In September and October 2019, 16.9% of comments submitted to *Le Monde* were rejected before publication (p. 124). Even if most submissions do appear online, this proportion is high enough to indicate that platform operators, and not just journalists, exercise real editorial power. The book does not theorize content management systems in detail, but its empirical material invites a reading in terms of a problem of 'partial anonymity': Commenters can appear under pseudonyms on the website, while institutionally their identities are easily traceable through subscriptions (comments are available only to subscribers). In such a setting, speech is shielded from immediate social sanction in the lifeworld but remains vulnerable to moderation and oversight.

Seen from this angle, moderation and platform design tend to present decisions about what may be said as neutral or technical, even though they have clear political consequences. In Boltanski and Esquerre's account, this infrastructure reshapes how dissent appears, encouraging commenters to rely on coded language, allusions, and irony. What remains unresolved is whether such coded speech should be read as a form of resistance to moderation or as a sign that users have begun to accommodate and internalize its constraints.

Another striking finding that receives only limited elaboration is the prevalence of disputes over family, gender, and sexuality (p. 175). These issues are often coded as belonging to a 'private sphere' and have long been marginalized within formal political debate. Their prominence in the comments suggests that many readers experience them as deeply political, even when

institutional politics treats them as private concerns. Rather than being surprising, this points to a long-standing tension: When questions of gender and family appear in the news, they unsettle learned distinctions between what counts as personal and what counts as political. From my perspective, this helps to explain the intensity of many reactions in these threads.

Comment sections may therefore function, at least in part, as substitute political arenas or as spaces for identity negotiation, precisely because institutional channels feel increasingly disconnected from meaningful outcomes. This cannot be empirically confirmed within the book's research design, but it helps to make sense of the emotional intensity and persistence of such participation. Elections often fail to deliver desired changes, policy demands meet structural resistance, and traditional activism requires time and resources that precarity does not permit. Leaving a critical comment on *Le Monde* thus becomes, for many, one of the few available forms of political expression that carries minimal risk to social and familial relationships and symbolic capital. In this sense, the intense emotions circulating in comment sections may function less as a source of political power than as a controlled outlet for frustration.

The *Making of Public Space* advances our understanding of how political space is constituted within people's lifeworlds – through fragmented, affectively saturated, and infrastructurally constrained participation. The book's strength lies in documenting how power operates through technical infrastructure, how journalistic selection shapes what becomes political, and how ordinary people contest these processes. Its significance lies in paying attention to contested digital spaces, which for many represent more meaningful sites of political engagement than parliaments and manifestos. The book leaves unresolved a more unsettling question: whether such participation reflects genuine democratic engagement or represents a retreat into symbolic gesture when actual institutional channels feel closed.