

POWER

It has been argued that “knowledge is power.” This short essay in two parts will review looking at ideas about power through the lens of Hannah Arendt, we hope to offer some thoughts about how *actions* and *words* inform the way power manifests. In particular, about the way that power in reproducing knowledge can be aided by design that shapes intentions in action, choosing either to assist democracy or to erode it.

In her book *The Human Condition* Arendt suggests that power is temporary, existing only in action and speech between people in proximity. She calls this human configuration the *space of appearance*, the space within which politics, and hence power, is enacted. For Arendt, power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. Therefore participation is a prerequisite for power:

whoever, for whatever reasons, isolates himself and does not partake in such being together, forfeits power and becomes impotent.¹

Power, dependent as it is on the togetherness of people, is bounded by the plurality of human beings with all their subjectivities, knowledge, and interests and also the potential for contestation. Power is ultimately bounded by agonism, a process of argument and contestation. Agonism denies omnipotence.

So, the *space of appearance* is an “agonistic space.”² Agonism serves not to dissipate power but to distribute it. In this way, the power that Arendt defines is what Mary Parker Follet earlier described as *power-with people* (rather than power-over people). According to Parker Follet,

- 1 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, [1958] 1998), 201.
- 2 Chantal Mouffe, “Art and Democracy,” *Open: Art as a Public Issue* no. 14 (2008): 6–15.

Genuine power can only be grown, it will slip from every arbitrary hand that grasps it; for genuine power is not coercive control, but coactive control. Coercive power is the curse of the universe; coactive power, the enrichment and advancement of every human soul.³

For Arendt there is only coactive power, realized through the speech and action of people in proximity. The power Arendt describes is both process (power) and product (action and speech), “the product is identical with the performing act itself.”

Conversely, coercive power, power-over people, which manifests politically in the subjugation of the complexity of a *political issue or problem* and the ignorance of the diversity of peoples’ perspectives and denial of their articulation and argument (whether in pursuit of a “solution” or out of ideological simplification), is not power but violence. This is important because violence, Arendt writes, will ultimately destroy power:

“In a head-on clash between violence and power, the outcome is hardly in doubt.” She adds, “Nowhere is the self-defeating factor in the victory of violence over power more evident than in the use of terror to maintain domination, about whose weird successes and eventual failures we know perhaps more than any generation before us.”⁴

The true performance of power—agonistic debate in pursuit of resolution—according to Arendt, is literally an “end in itself.” The process matters as much as the result. She suggests “in these instances of action and speech the end (*telos*) is not pursued but lies in the activity itself which therefore becomes an *entelecheia*, and the work is not what follows and extinguishes the process but is imbedded in it; the performance is the work, is *energia*.” According to Rittel and Webber “societal problems

3 Mary Parker Follet, *Creative Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1924), xiii.

4 Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970).

are never solved only re-solved—over and over again.”⁵ According to Arendt, “Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential *space of appearance* between acting and speaking men, in existence.” In this way power is a necessary response to wickedness.

Totalitarianism and tyranny close the debate, eradicate the space of appearance, and, we would argue, foreclose on wicked problems. In presenting wicked problems as tame problems, by eradicating the dissenting voices and arguments that define agonistic discourse, the protagonist moves from a state of power to one of violence.

Rittel and Webber recognize the abhorrence of this scenario. They argue that it

becomes morally objectionable for the planner [politician/tyrant] to treat a wicked problem—a problem with no clear definition and no clear resolution—as though it were a “tame” one, or to tame a wicked problem prematurely, or to refuse to recognise the inherent wickedness of social problems.⁶

The switch from power to violence aims to subjugate dissenting voices so as to “tame” wicked problems. Power becomes violence as the protagonist forgoes legitimate resolution in an attempt to force a solution by subjugating human plurality. In doing so the tyrant protagonist reaches for omnipotence through eradication of agonism—substituting power for violence in the process of destroying the space of appearance and disabling participation of the dissenting voices. Across the twentieth century, the rise of media enabled power-by-terror to be also conducted through the apparatus of the “culture industry.” Propaganda became one of the clearest tools of power-as-violence.

In our times, fake news is the new propaganda. It seeks to deny the citizen the information necessary for participation in debate and in so doing is an act of violence. It consists of

5 Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* vol. 4, no. 2 (1973): 155.

6 Ibid.

deliberate misinformation (differing from satire or parody) in its intention to mislead. It also constitutes a form of violence that is damaging to belief in truth or the ability to trust and therefore undermining democracy. Fake news destroys the space of appearance by intentionally seeking to fabricate information and mislead audiences. In the case of the 2016 U.S. election, BuzzFeed, for example, found that the top twenty fake news stories leading up to the election received more engagement on Facebook than actual news.⁷ While it is impossible to categorically point to the outcomes of such developments, their threat to democracy is being taken seriously and addressed in different countries in different ways. In 2017 in the UK, MPs concerned about the way voters were targeted over Brexit launched their own inquiry/responses into fake news.⁸ Taiwan went further and announced media literacy education courses to help raise awareness.⁹ Across the world different countries are investigating the best way to implement algorithmic changes that could prevent the spread of fake news without encroaching on democracy.

Ultimately, ethical and responsive design has a role to play in either perpetuating and/or preventing fake news. There is an opportunity to be seized for designers and technologists to be a force for change. Human-centered service design could shape the future, by providing the design of truth checking system for information to reach the audience, allowing them, through user-centered design, to clearly understand the source of the content and decide whether or not to trust what they read and watch. Design has a role to *play* in facilitating this and in

- 7 Juju Chang, Jake Lefferman, Claire Pedersen, and Geoff Martz, "When Fake News Stories Make Real News Headlines," *ABC News*, November 29, 2016, <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/fake-news-stories-make-real-news-headlines/story?id=43845383>.
- 8 Mike Wendling, "Solutions That Can Stop Fake News Spreading," *BBC News*, January 30, 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-38769996>.
- 9 Nicola Smith, "Schoolkids in Taiwan Will Now Be Taught How to Identify Fake News," *Time*, April 7, 2017, <http://time.com/4730440/taiwan-fake-news-education/>.

enhancing the agonistic qualities of the space of appearance where all words and actions can have free reign without subjugation to violence. These tenets are particularly realized in the practice of participatory design. Participatory design is “a political process, giving priority to human action and people’s rights to participate in the shaping of the worlds in which they act.”¹⁰ It is democratic and emancipatory; with a commitment to ensuring everyone’s voice is heard in the decision-making processes that will affect them. Robertson and Simonsen describe “genuine participation” as the change in the users’ role from being informants in the design process to being “legitimate and acknowledged participants” in it.¹¹ From news algorithms to the staging and scripts of human encounter, design, and participatory design in particular, has something to contribute to the preservation of the space of appearance and the *power* of participatory democracy.

Designers often eschew power and are unsure how to deal with it; never knowing whether to oppose it or kowtow before it. Not only practice but theories and models of participatory design are often evidence of this. But Arendt is emphatic that we need power—*in order to counter and balance violence*. As we go forward this might be a very important lesson for design. Or as Arendt puts it in *The Human Condition*,

Power preserves the public realm and the space of appearance, and as such it is also the lifeblood of the human artifice, which, unless it is the scene of action and speech, of the web of human affairs and relationships and the stories engendered by them, lacks its ultimate *raison d’être*. Without being talked about by men and without housing them, the world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things to which each isolated individual was at liberty to add one more object; without the human artifice to house them, human affairs would be ... floating, ... futile

10 Jesper Simonsen and Toni Robertson, eds., *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4.

11 *Ibid.*

and vain. And without power, the space of appearance brought forth through action and speech in public will fade away [and with it] trust in the world as a place fit for human appearance.¹²

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See also

ACTIVISM, ALIENATION, CITIZENSHIP, EVIL

12 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 204, adapted quotation. It comes from Arendt's discussion of "Power and the Space of Appearance," §28, 199–207.