

we don't know jack!

democracy's pornographic public

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MC120 Publicity & Surveillance : Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

Given the abundance of evidence to the contrary, it's hard to believe we cling so tightly to the mutually agreed-upon fiction that the power of politics remains beyond the reach of the power of sex.
(Lily Burana, *Salon.com*)

In 2000 and 2001, investment banker *cum* high-school teacher Jack Ryan petitioned a judge to seal court documents pertaining to his recent divorce and custody proceedings contra *Star Trek: Voyager* and *Boston Public* star Jeri Ryan. In May 2003, he announced his candidacy for an open Illinois senate seat, entering a Republican primary which he officially won on March 16, 2004. Salacious rumors about Ryan and the confidential records had to be squelched several times during his campaign — most notably days before the primary vote when a staffer for one of his opponents claimed to have seen them — stimulating increasing concern on the part of the Illinois GOP brass about the potentially embarrassing contents of the files. The *Chicago Tribune* and the local ABC television station subsequently sued to have portions of the documents released; in June, this suit was granted by the same LA judge who originally sealed the records, and they were opened to the public on June 21 (facsimiles of the salient pages are archived at thesmokinggun.com). Four days later, deserted by much of his party amidst mounting scandal, Jack Ryan withdrew from the senate race.

What did Jack in were Jeri's charges that, on three occasions, he coerced her into visiting sex clubs and pressured her to "perform a sexual activity on him" while others watched. These sections of her 2000 legal declaration paint a titillating picture of "mattresses in cubicles,"

“cages, whips, and other apparatus hanging from the ceiling,” and her tearful response to “People... having sex everywhere.” Jack denied her claims at the time, and demurred to comment further when the story broke, though he was quick to point out that “There is no allegation, as you know, of breaking any laws, no allegation of infidelity, no allegation of breaking any marriage vows” (ABC). As ABC News paraphrases, his censorious position regarding the debacle was that “the media’s focus on candidates’ personal sex lives serves no public purpose and is harmful to democracy.” Public sentiment, at least on the part of editorialists, seems to concur: in *The Village Voice*, Tristan Taormino opines that “A person’s alternative sexual identity or practices should not matter at all when it comes to running for office”; political blogger Juan Cole reckons that “it is crazy for the American public to want its politicians to be saints... Why should we care where he takes his wife?... I think politicians should be permitted wide latitude in their private lives, as long as they are good at their jobs”; and for *Salon.com*, Lily Burana writes that “Desire isn’t partisan, kink knows no party line, and neither is germane when it comes to gauging one’s leadership potential.” The *Tribune*, on the other hand, maintained that “Ryan’s belief in the secrecy of the files was a fundamental miscalculation betraying a basic misunderstanding of the modern political era” (6/27/04) — an era characterized, apparently, by the meddling of news outlets like themselves who approach the search for profitably sordid scoops with virtually boundless zeal.

How might we map the landscape of this “modern political era,” then, in which the disclosure of a run-of-the-mill kink, as orchestrated by the mass media, can crush a political career, in which the sober attention to “issues” that voters, candidates, and reporters alike profess to crave seems everywhere contaminated by the spectacularizing imperatives of the entertainment industry — an era, in short, in which Jeri Ryan’s television character “Seven of

Nine could help throw the Senate to the Democrats” (Coles)? In this paper, I explore the aporetic affinities between two supposedly divergent economies: democracy’s rational, sovereign public and the scopophilic impetus of the mediasphere. I embark from Jodi Dean’s striking analysis of democracy and technoculture in her book *Publicity’s Secret*, alongside her theoretical heritage in Habermas’s influential work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Dean maintains that the ideal of the public serves to camouflage its constitutive coupling of democratic governance and “communicative capitalism,” along with their corresponding subjective modalities of obsessive suspicion and compulsive exhibitionism. I argue, furthermore, that the enduring alignment of the public with knowledge (as Dean outlines it) entails and encodes an equally fundamental intimacy with sexuality and its transgressions — as the Ryan fiasco demonstrates, in the most literal and extreme terms. In other words, rather than positioning Jack Ryan’s trajectory as an exceptional object lesson in all that good politics isn’t, I assert that this profligate brouhaha is a materialization of the pornographic underbelly that has been the dirty little secret of democracy all along.

[Judge] Schnider, acting on a request to unseal the [legal] documents by the Tribune and WLS-TV, said the public’s right to know, including a compelling public interest stemming from Ryan’s candidacy, outweighed the couple’s concerns for privacy. (*Chicago Tribune*, 6/19/04)

Since, as we learn here, the scandal that precipitated Jack Ryan’s withdrawal from the senate race was enabled by the juridical authority of “the public’s right to know,” a detailed exploration of the principles and assumptions behind said right (as counterpoised against “privacy”) is in order. According to Habermas’s genealogy, the dissemination of knowledge and information is the nucleus of the very conception of the public, which began to germinate in “the traffic in news that developed alongside the traffic in commodities... From the fourteenth

century” (16). The role of the media in producing an informed populace is critical to democracy’s founding tenet of universal inclusivity, as embodied in a “public of all private people... [who] as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion. The issues discussed became ‘general’ not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility: everyone had to *be able* to participate” (37). Dean’s critique of the right to know as the ground of democratic politics embarks from this “fantasy of social unity” that posits “a collective subject capable of self-governance”: she argues that preserving this fantasy necessitates “render[ing] as a contingent gap what is really the fact of the fundamental split, antagonism, and rupture of politics” (9). Performing this ideological function is the “secret”: that perpetually missing information that “promises that a democratic public is within reach — as soon as everything is known” (10). This schema orients political action toward “revealing, outing, and uncovering what has been concealed or withheld from the public” (46), sustaining the belief that this unified collective subject would be fully actualized if only it had access to all the data. Thus, the inevitable incompleteness of knowledge in circulation provides an alibi to the permanent deferral of the ideal public. The right to know, in other words, is laden with some of democracy’s most fundamental baggage.

For Dean, one of the principal travesties of the pervasive and well-meaning political fixation on the public’s right to know is its collaboration in capitalist domination. Most simply, “To know, one has to consume information and the media and technologies that provide it” (143-4). Following from this material reality is the troubling tendency wherein “Democratic potentials are thereby collapsed into increases in access and information. Democratic governance becomes indistinguishable from intensifications in the circulation of information” (151). Such conflicted yet essential entanglements of democracy and capitalism should come as

no surprise to one versed in Habermas. He emphasizes that this novel form of specifically bourgeois sovereignty was founded on an ideological sleight of hand “in which the interest of the class, via critical public debate, could assume the appearance of the general interest” (88), “based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings” (56). It is, in fact, the “presuppositions” of liberal economics — rational self-interest, free competition, the equilibrium of supply and demand (86) — that buttress the imagined inclusivity of the public by making it appear that “each person [has] an equal chance... to attain the status of property owner and thus of ‘man’” (86-7), thereby evacuating any acknowledgement of entrenched power, inequality, and antagonism from discourses of politics. Because the ostensibly universal availability of access to informed debate (codified in the public’s right to know) is crucial to the fantasy of democratic parity, it was precisely when “the news itself became a commodity” (21) in the seventeenth century that the “public sphere of civil society” (23) first began to congeal. So, while Dean certainly has cause to be alarmed when “Our deepest commitments — to inclusion, equality, and participation within a public — bind us into the practices whereby we submit to global capital” (151), this paradox (while indeed escalating in the context of contemporary “technoculture,” perhaps) is ultimately nothing new.

Dean laments that, due to the propensity of democracy’s affinity with knowledge to devolve into the “reduction of freedom to a freedom of information” (12), “the standards of a finance- and consumption-driven entertainment culture set the very terms of democratic governance today” (4). The Ryan spectacle — media outlets derailing a senate campaign with a juridical incursion into “private” affairs, with one of our political system’s most sacred ideals as their alibi — certainly illustrates this condition quite baldly. Dean wryly remarks that, within

this ideological topology, “Corporations and activists can all support expanding discussion and increasing access” (112), because “changing the system — organizing against and challenging communicative capitalism — seems to require strengthening the system: how else to get out the message” (4). Above and beyond such inadvertent complacency, one of the most troubling aspects of grounding a politics (whether mainstream or progressive) in the right to know is the concomitant disregard for the obvious inadequacy of knowledge as a progenitor of action and justice. Dean offers quotidian examples of this phenomenon: being pleased to use a store discount card in spite of the fact that “I’m not deluded into thinking that the store really wants to save me money” (5); being “impressed by publicity, even when we know that it is generated by press agents” (6); being convinced by the democratic process, even though “everyone knows that winning an election is directly tied to how much money is spent” (143). Thomas Keenan explores a more epically tragic instance of the inefficacy of increasingly open and instantaneous communication in the humanitarian response to the Bosnian genocide: visiting Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger commented that “there are no secrets. There are journalists here, from here pictures are transmitted, there are satellite communications, all of this is known... and nonetheless it all continues to happen.” Keenan’s critique unpacks the ways that “Humanitarian action seems not simply to take advantage of the media, but indeed to depend on them, and on a fairly limited set of presuppositions about the link between knowledge and action, between public information or opinion and response.” Such potentially catastrophic faith on the part of transnational movements parallels a domestic reluctance to recognize, as Dean argues, that “the gaps and failures pervading democracy are problems of neither knowledge nor information” (42).

Dean explains the confounding inadequacy of knowledge with recourse to the Zizekian spin on the operation of ideology. In her interpretation, “The Zizekian concept of ideology

draws attention to the persistence of these actions that fly in the face of what one knows... in Zizek's account... actions and belief go together. They stand apart from knowledge. Actions manifest an underlying belief that persists, regardless of what one knows" (5). In Zizek's terms, this constitutes a "fetishistic disavowal" (7), and Dean follows in this psychoanalytic vein in indicting the right to know as a pathological as well as ideological trope. Given that the contemporary formulation of democratic deliberation is situated in "a world in which more information is always available, and hence, a world in which we face daily the fact that our truths, diagnoses, and understandings are incomplete" (47), knowledge is "configured through and as a never-ending process of searching, linking, and (re)producing information" (115). This everlasting deferral of gratification corresponds to the psychoanalytic conception of desire as inherently unfulfillable. Desire is "hysterical," ultimately more a "desire for desire" (116) itself or a "desire for dissatisfaction" (117) than a straightforward desire for the object. The democratic public is, in effect, produced within this perverse "circuit": "At the same time that it promises the realization of democracy once nothing is hidden... The secret designates that which is desired to be known... In so doing, it presupposes a subject that desires, discovers, and knows, a subject from whom nothing should be withheld. The public with a right to know is thus an effect of the injunction to reveal" (10-11). The public is transposed, in Dean, from a rational agent to a pathologized conspiracy theorist.

Habermas, too, understands the public sphere as a matter of subjectivity as much as of governance or sovereignty. He writes that "the rational-critical public debate of private persons with one another flowed from the wellspring of a specific subjectivity. The latter had its home, literally, in the sphere of the patriarchal conjugal family" (43). The constitutive perversion of the Habermasian subject is not so much hysterical desire for the unattainable as, again, a disavowal

of evident conditions. Specifically, of the originary incoherence of the public/private segregation on which democracy turns. As I referenced above, for Habermas, public sovereignty is dependent on a conception of the citizen as a free and independent participant in the market. This fiction is stabilized by the carefully fabricated “intimacy” and insulation of the domestic space. In other words, “it was a private autonomy denying its economic origins... that provided the bourgeois family with its consciousness of itself” (46). The family was, in reality, imbricated in the economy materially as well as ideologically: “It played its precisely defined role in the process of the reproduction of capital” (47). Moreover, Habermas argues that “the subjectivity of the privatized individual was related from the very start to publicity” (50), via eighteenth century personal and literary correspondence and later the “domestic novel,” which were the initial “experiments” (49) that enabled this new form of subjectivity to coalesce by “communicating with itself” (51). While Dean is more concerned with the tendency of “a spatial model of a social world divided between public and private spheres” to obscure “the system of distrust, the circuit of concealment and revelation that actively generates the public” (44) (than with its capitalistic investments per se), she does point out that everything from contemporary “networked communications” to the now clichéd axiom “the personal is political” (45) belies the paradigm of separate spheres that inspires such defensive furor to this day. We should be wary of ideological pitfalls, then, whenever “privacy” is invoked in opposition to the “public interest,” as it was in Jack Ryan’s case above.

Dean explores the subjectivity proper to publicity in greater detail than Habermas. Crucial to her account is a sort of Zizekian pivot within the desire characterizing the “conspiring” subjectivity that defines the public with a right to know — an oscillation that, I maintain, is not unrelated to the treacherous interpenetration of publicity and privacy as I have

just outlined it. In Dean's rendition of Žižek, the perpetual unfulfillment of desire is inexorably transformed into the repetitive "loop" of surplus pleasure that is drive: "the reflexivity of drive relies on a failure to achieve satisfaction that then becomes itself [a] sort of satisfaction insofar as the gestures taken toward the goal become themselves the goal" (117). According to Dean, the drive stimulated by democracy's pathological obsession with knowledge is manifest when "one is driven by the sense that one is known combined with the unbearable excess of ways in which one might be known repeatedly to make oneself visible, accessible" (124) — a subjective matrix she terms "celebrity." Steeped in the ideology of the right to know, "People's experience of themselves as subjects is configured in terms of accessibility, visibility, *being known*. Without publicity, the subject of technoculture doesn't know if it exists at all... Publicity in technoculture functions through the interpellation of a subject that makes itself into an object of public knowledge" (114). In a transference reminiscent of the mutual instability of subject and object in Foucauldian archeology, "The knowing subject... is first interpellated as a known subject" (115). And, by extension, we are thereby caught in the ubiquitous paradox of mounting simultaneous alarm over the "death of privacy" (81) and over the corruption of democratic publicity: "On the one hand, we can never have publicity. On the other, we can never escape it" (129). Thus, the right to know is not alone in positing and preceding its corresponding subject: "celebrity is a form of subjectivization that actually produces our sense that there is a public. That we understand ourselves as known is what makes us think that there is a public that knows us" (122). Again, this parallels Habermas's hypothesis that "Subjectivity, as the innermost core of the private, was always already oriented to an audience" (49).

In other words, the subject of democracy is essentially exhibitionist. The ideological necessities shackling the market's autonomous, self-interested agent to democracy's private

citizen to the universalizing category of human being privilege freely accessible knowledge as the keystone of the overarching architecture. A knowledge that, inevitably reflexivized, devolves into knowledge of knowledge of oneself in an auto-epistemological circuit. Dean doesn't probe the libidinal connotations of her psychoanalytic framework of desire and drive, but she does suggest that further investigation of the "pleasures" and "enjoyments that may accompany the sense that one is known... is crucial for any analysis of the contemporary production of the democratic subject as the consuming subject of communicative capitalism" (13). Other theorists invoke more strongly the affinities of such gratifications with the pornographic.

Aligning with Dean's notion of a postmodern celebrity subjectivity, Ursula Frohne confirms that the "compulsive desire to attain telepresence, to verify and validate one's own existence... under the gaze of the media society... is characteristic of contemporary media narcissism" (256). Frohne takes a pessimistic and, again, pathologizing view of the operative precept "I am seen, therefore I am" (262), interpreting this economy as perversely narcissistic and "hysterical" (275). Certainly, "sexual acts that are staged and reenacted" (273) are a privileged version of such exhibitionism, within a more diffusely indecent context where "In order to obtain the longed-for recognition in the gleam of the media, contemporary individuals rule out no means of self-spectacularization, no infamous act against themselves and others" (276-7). Such desperate displays epitomize the "general impoverishment of the ability to experience" (273) characteristic of our "narcissistic self-victimization" and "de-humanized existence" (277). This rather gloomy outlook seems to be inspired by a dubious nostalgia for the insulated zones of privacy problematized by Habermas: Frohne writes that "a new readiness to give up one of the fundamental principles of civilization — that of the legally protected private

sphere and personal intimacy — plays a central role... ‘A new market of attention is generating narcissism, exhibitionism, and voyeurism in new playgrounds of the mass media’ that puts no limits on the sale of the private sphere” (260-1). While I am wary of the impulse to extol the virtues of an ostensibly vanishing privacy that was in fact always contaminated by patriarchal capitalist publicity, Frohne’s perspective is useful in further demonstrating the intersection of the deviances of Dean’s celebrity subject with perceived threats to the integrity of the public/private boundary — specifically the threat of the public exposure and concurrent tarnishing of sexual intimacy, the most cherished core of the private sphere. The realization of this charged anxiety, of course, was precisely the inassimilable transgression that brought down Jack Ryan.

As an alternative to psychoanalytic schemas, the Foucauldian axiom that the modern yen for knowledge is fundamentally entangled with sexual confession and classification might also illuminate the penchant of the perverseness of the public’s right to know to mutate into pornographic spectacle. Rendering this movement in reverse, Linda Williams applies this theory to early film and pornography, arguing that “hard core... obsessively seeks knowledge, through a voyeuristic record of confessional, involuntary paroxysm” (49). Given that “discourses of sexuality have functioned as transfer points of knowledge, power, and pleasure” (35), one might postulate not only that the scientific impetus of cinema is primordially infused by prurient pleasures, as Williams does, but that all the knowledges that traverse power relations are likewise perilously entangled with sex — including and perhaps especially the trope of knowledge that grounds the operation of democratic sovereignty. This approach offers a distinct perspective on the seductive pleasures of celebrity subjectivity: rather than aligning such contorted figures of desire with perversion, a Foucauldian would view normative and pathologizing discourses themselves as equally implicated in the circuits of domination.

Peter Weibel straddles this variance in an essay on the contemporary condition wherein “The pleasure principle of the voyeur, to see everything and the pleasure principle of the exhibitionist, to show all, have shifted from the fates of private drives to social norms” (208). Tweaking Foucault’s panopticon, he writes that, in the prototypical case of reality TV, “the panoptic principle is felt as neither a threat nor punishment, but, rather, as amusement, liberation and pleasure... In the field of surveillance the panoptic pleasures of exhibitionism and voyeurism, or scopophilia, unfold” (215). He concludes that “Two models of explanation can be offered for this transformation in the reception of the panoptic principle... a psychological explanation; new forms of voyeurism and exhibitionism have formed under the new conditions of the gaze in the technical age” (218), or alternately, the “development of new forms of desire and the gaze serves for conforming to future social relations... To avoid civil revolt against the future surveillance state, the population is acquainted with, and adapted to, progressively increasing doses through the entertainment media” (219). Whether the phenomenon is understood under a rubric of domination or perversion, though, it is clear that all these scholars share with Dean a concern about the political repercussions of the myriad interfaces of power, desire, and knowledge.

although the intimate relations of private personhood appear to be the realm of sexuality itself, allowing ‘sex in public’ to appear like matter out of place, intimacy is itself publicly mediated (Berlant and Warner, 358)

The question of such repercussions points back to the contradictory messages about publicity and privacy, smut and democracy, that characterize the Jack Ryan debacle. Political sex scandals are continually positioned as exceptional, as derailments of an otherwise rational system of governance that is functional as long as it remains properly focused on “issues.” This permanent state of exceptionality serves to efface the underlying pornographic logic of

democracy's most sanctified tenets, maintaining the ideological illusion that politics and erotics (much like publicity and privacy) are segregated from each other. If, as a public, we're enjoined to know about the candidates in order to make informed decisions, this will to knowledge can hardly help infiltrating the private domain of sexual relations that is the Rosetta stone of modern subjectivity. If democracy's capitalistic investments surface in its dependence on the commercial mass media, so do the exhibitionistic and voyeuristic pleasures of media consumption that furnish its libidinal economy. And if Jack Ryan was forced out of the senate race because his desire to have public sex was exposed, it is perhaps not because his kink is at odds with democratic politics, but because it's uncomfortably intimate with it. The true scandal of sex scandals is that they literalize democracy's structuring principles, not that they contravene them.

On May 21, a spokesperson for the Ryan campaign apologized to his Democratic opponent Barack Obama for invading his "personal space." Ryan had hired a staffer to trail Obama constantly, waving video cameras in his face and recording his "private" phone calls to his family (*Tribune*, 5/23/04). Before the apology, however, the Ryan campaign's flippant response to criticism of their overzealous surveillance was "If he's running for public office, he should expect public attention" (Finke). Commenting on the karmic irony of the eventual outcome, Juan Coles writes, "Ryan tried to create what French philosopher Michel Foucault called a 'panopticon,' as a way of intimidating his opponent... Now Jack Ryan is going to be the one followed around by cameras, into whose private life strangers are going to poke relentlessly." While Coles, as is typical, is nevertheless disgusted by the tropism of mediated politics toward invasive scrutiny and smut, he also invokes the durable parallels between personal and political behavior when he remarks that Ryan "treated Obama just the way he

treated Jeri.” Amidst this troublesome confusion about the appropriate relationship of public and private dealings within the mediasphere, columnist Eric Zorn claims that Ryan’s pitfall was “the notion that he could have it both ways — as Jack Ryan private citizen whose alleged kinks nobody cares about, and as Jack Ryan candidate for high public office whose life automatically becomes an open book.” Apparently, the operation of politics both reinscribes and collapses its inaugural distinction between private and public domains, rational and libidinal economies.

What is perhaps most remarkable about Ryan’s downfall is that, when the painstakingly concealed files were compulsorily unsealed, his office seemed convinced that the resulting rumpus would be no big deal. ABC News reports that “Ryan said he and his campaign advisers thought the controversy would die down quickly. ‘I was told by almost everyone I spoke to this is a two-day story, this is not a crusher for a campaign.’” How could the same media-savvy candidate who recorded his opponent’s cell phone calls with his wife be so oblivious to the devastating fallout of his own marital indiscretions? In addition to the internal party machinations that Ryan apparently fell foul of, Lily Burana speculates that “The Triple-X factor that takes this peccadillo over the top is that Ryan is a politician... For such a sex-obsessed populace, Americans are oddly prudish when it comes to politics.” Certainly, our simultaneous sober denunciation and insatiable consumption of salacious Beltway gossip is precisely the sort of symptomatically paradoxical position that Dean associates with the constitutive aporias of democracy itself. But Ryan and his cronies perhaps also underestimated the frisson of public sex in particular as a revelation: it was his desire to bridge the schism between Habermas’s insulated “patriarchal conjugal family” and a covert but nonetheless audience-oriented sexual space that brought Ryan down — precisely by publicizing his marital relations in an analogous fashion. Ryan’s problem, then, was behaving too much like a politician in the bedroom (or as it were, out

of it), rather than too little. Burana asks, with rhetorical disapproval, “How political can a personal life become?... Is it only a matter of time until every horny IM, cam-photo and e-mail is snared for future torpedo power? It’s as if the PATRIOT Act and the Meese Report [on pornography] got together and had a nosy little baby.” I’d argue that this genealogy is backwards, and it’s these particular government initiatives that are the offspring of the more elemental interpenetration of knowledge, sexuality, capitalism, media spectacle, and democratic politics.

One of Dean’s primary concerns about the ideal of the public, as it operates in contemporary politics, is the way that “the pressure to know, to find out for oneself, to be informed, sucks the life out of political action. Action is postponed until a thorough study is undertaken, until all the facts are known. This postponement is a permanent deferral. All the facts can never be known” (163). She traces such disquieting effects of democracy’s imbrication with knowledge back to nineteenth century theorist Jeremy Bentham (architect of the original panopticon). A Benthamite public, according to Dean, is invisibly split into a “public-supposed-to-know” and a “public-supposed-to-believe” — an elitist system predicated on the assumption that only the upper echelons of society have the capacity for good governance. Everyone else (the believing public) is supposed to put their trust in the sagacity of the knowing public, rather than presume to govern themselves. In Dean’s terms, the secret, with its orbits of concealment and disclosure, is the cathected machine that sutures these two publics into an apparent unity: it “fills out the gap and conceals the inconsistency between the public-supposed-to-know and the public-supposed-to-believe. It holds open the reassuring possibility that the judging public will judge correctly” (21), if only the necessary information is freely available. If this structure “marks the important place of social ties rooted in trust” (20), it is inspired as much by our baser

instincts: as Dean interprets Bentham's 1821 essay, "[publicity's] threat to reveal only exerts a pressure insofar as it can transform the transgressive secret enjoyment of some (the malefactor, the tyrant, the indolent) into the spectacular public enjoyment of others" (22). Belief and prurient pleasure, then, are inextricable cohorts of the public with a right to know from its inception. One might speculate that these volatile resonances also contributed to the unexpectedly disproportionate consequences of Jack Ryan's improprieties.

Moreover, this condition complicates Dean's provisional efforts to model an alternative approach to progressive political action, one not corrupted by a misguided faith in the fantasy of the knowing public. She points out that, even today, "the reality of an inclusive public sphere, a sphere in which there is no difference between those who know and those who believe, conjures up anxieties around truth and trust" (73). Bentham's formula, wherein the ideological manifestation of a unified public deflects attention from its underlying division(s), is still very much in force — and Dean surely doesn't mean to suggest that this inequitable, disingenuous framework is the superlative scaffolding of democracy. At the same time, however, she bemoans the disintegration of belief in our mediated society, in terms that sound suspiciously like nostalgia for the complacent credulity of Bentham's believing public: "the system of publicity is supposed to convince the public-supposed-to-believe in the public-supposed-to-know. Information can't solve this problem because the problem is one of belief, not knowledge. And the collapse of this belief is what's at stake in contemporary technoculture" (40). Counterintuitively, technologies that expand access to information only further corrupt democracy by contributing to a Zizekian "decline of symbolic efficiency" wherein "we don't know who to believe, whom to trust, or the criteria with which to decide questions of trust and belief" (132). The trouble with the discourse of the knowing public, then, is ultimately that

“When everyone is supposed to know, when everyone has a right to know, no one has to — or should — believe” (11).

The requisite response to this challenge, evidently, would be to endeavor to reconstruct political collectivities of trust that aren't undermined by the elitism of Benthamite democracy or by a compulsive drive to expose every secret. In her tentative gestures toward progressive evolution, Dean focuses on networked geographies of political mobilization “configured through contestation and conflict” (170), but she remains silent about how such incipient “neo-democracies” might address the problem of belief that she has identified as a pivotal difficulty of democracy in contemporary technoculture. I would argue that this oversight is in part due to the troublesome reality that belief is as much dependent on media consumption as knowledge is. If (as Dean puts it) “For the sake of democracy, it is time to abandon the public” (175), and if what we're really pining for is (as Taormino puts it) “the time... when a candidate's sex life just won't matter anymore,” whatever architecture we begin to assemble for this emergent time must first and foremost provide a structure that can productively incorporate the primordial intimacies of democracy, capitalism, spectacle, belief, knowledge, pleasure, and sex.

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