Jodi Dean’s recent book, *Publicity’s Secret*, is an unsettling and necessary contribution to discussion and debate surrounding the relationship between new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and democracy. Her basic argument is that recent excitement regarding the democratic potential of new ICTs fails to recognize the various ways in which the technologies, agents, and practices of digital democracy underwrite the power relations of contemporary capitalism. “The expansion and intensification of communication and entertainment networks,” she claims, “yield not democracy but something else entirely—communicative capitalism” (p. 3). Together, she writes, “the deluge of screens and spectacles” that passes for contemporary mediatized politics and “the speed, simultaneity, and interconnectivity of electronic telecommunications networks” “undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world’s peoples” by producing massive distortions and concentrations of wealth, disciplining governments, and sensationalizing politics (p. 3). According to Dean, the real significance of digital democracy lies in the role played by citizens as consumers of an ever-expanding array of new ICT hardware and software and the infotainment products and services they deliver. As such, her argument confronts cyber-democracy enthusiasts of various political stripes—from cyber-liberatarians to discursive democrats and technologically savvy social movements—with the unsettling charge that digital democracy implies “a model of political life that would work just as well as a motto for Microsoft or AT&T” (p. 14).

Central to Dean’s argument is the concept of *publicity*—the idea that democracy rests on unfettered access to information on the part of citizens—which she identifies as simultaneously constitutive and destructive of American public life. Today, thanks to new ICTs, practically everything that is known can now also be rendered public knowledge. As citizens, we have the opportunity to collect, process, and consume enormous quantities of information. It is this aspect of cyber-democracy, in particular, that has been so enthusiastically embraced by proponents of digital democracy such as Lévy, Barlow, and Rheingold. According to Dean, this predilection to equate democracy with increasing quantities of and access to information has deep roots in American democratic theory and political culture. One has only to recall James Madison’s famous remark: “A popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy: or perhaps both.” Habermas’ influential work on the public sphere has also reinforced the tendency to view democracy as inevitably bound to the revelation, proliferation, and public discussion of information. The Madisonian and Habermasian views find expression in contemporary debates about the virtual public sphere, which, while lively, seldom question the utility to democracy of publicity itself. Herein lies the value of Dean’s book. Although not unique in its skepticism regarding the necessary relationship between democracy and information, her book offers a sustained and welcome critique of the pervasive “Habermas-ochism” (p. 34) informing so much work on democracy and the virtual public sphere.

Democratic theory and capitalist technoculture converge on this point—the necessity of publicity to democracy (p. 15). Seeking to challenge the presumed indispensability and innocence of the public sphere, Dean’s book traces “the ways publicity functions as technocultural ideology” (p. 36).

To be sure, Dean acknowledges the democratic utility of knowledge/information. “It would be stupid to claim that technologies, practices, and norms of publicity never make valuable contributions to democratic politics. Suspicious inquiries into potential wrongdoing often uncover real crimes and produce significant reforms” (p. 160). On the other hand, such contributions must be weighed against the fact that “the vast networks of news and entertainment that enable contemporary practices of democracy also threaten demo-
ocratic forms of life” (p. 160). The same technologies and practices that uncover injustice and wrongdoing have also contributed to the sensationalization and trivialization of politics and political news coverage, bringing us the media frenzy surrounding the Clinton/Lewinsky affair, the political triumph of Arnold Schwarzenegger, and CNN’s round-the-clock coverage of the “war on terror.” Practices long identified with the exercise of democratic citizenship (unearthing, disseminating, and assimilating information) blur with those of media consumption (watching, clicking, linking, etc.). Under the current conditions of heavily mediatized and sensationalized politics, Dean suggests, “the presumed value of information...morphs political action into compliant practices of consumption: Good citizens must have magazines, televisions, Internet access” (p. 35). Rather than potentially destabilizing technocapitalist power relations, the presumed centrality of publicity to democracy compels us to consume informational products and services provided by the very media and ICT industries helping to cement the former. Thus, she claims, “our very interpellation as citizens installs us in practices of consumption” (p. 144).

Furthermore, Dean contends, the ideology and practice of publicity produces a certain kind of political subject for communicative capitalism—the “suspicious subject”—who, rather than being empowered, is depoliticized by torrents of sensationalized and often conflicting information (pp. 16, 163). Under the rubric of democratic publicity, the ever-expanding networks of news, information, and entertainment “produce searching, suspicious subjects ever clicking for more information, ever drawn to uncover the secret and find out for themselves” (p. 16). Haunted by the sense that her information is never complete because her supply of news and information is inexhaustible and in need of continuous updating, the suspicious subject defers judgment indefinitely. “The speed of networked communications, for example, gives many of us the sense of being forever behind, of forever lacking what everyone else has. The promise of information gives us the sense of being always uninformed, unsure, never quite certain…” (p. 148).

Following Levi-Strauss and Zizek, Dean designates this process, whereby the current excess of information becomes lack of information, as “the decline of symbolic efficiency,” a process in which the technologically enabled excess of information leads to the erosion of trust and belief in language and communication (pp. 129-132). “Most people in wired cultures,” Dean claims, “experience this uncanny excess and lack of meaning with ever-increasing frequency: we get conflicting information from non-stop multiple media;...we don’t know what to believe, whom to trust, or the criteria with which to decide questions of trust and belief” (p. 132). “We’re so attuned,” she continues “to deception, pretense, manipulation and plausibility that we are reluctant to believe. Instead, we try to find out for ourselves, even as we suspect that we won’t be able to hit on anything certain” (p. 133). Thus, contra the Habermasian view that expanding information and communication increases the likelihood of achieving discursively generated societal agreements, Dean argues that information and communication technologies threaten to erode the very basis of trust and belief upon which such discursive agreement might be based.

Finally, citing work by political economists such as Sassen, Hardt, and Negri—Dean reminds us that the communications revolution has also played an important role in exacerbating the profoundly antidemocratic socioeconomic conditions of global capitalism: economic polarization and exclusion.

Is there any possibility for the democratic redemption of new ICTs in the face of communicative capitalism? Somewhat surprisingly, Dean thinks so. While the Web, for example, is increasingly tied into the circuits of commerce, it is still a fruitful realm of non-commercial networked interaction and a place for articulating and enacting new democratic practices—or what she calls “neo-democracies” (p. 166). Such practices rest on setting aside the cherished values of publicity (inclusivity, equality, transparency, and rationality) in favour of “neo-democratic” values like duration, hegemony, decisiveness, and credibility.
Two examples of “neo-democracy” Dean provides are (1) the various online “issue networks” studied by Richard Rogers and Noortje Marres, which are characterized by their participants’ long-term engagement and commitment around contested issues (p. 173); and (2) the networked social movements that have succeeded in disrupting the proceedings of major organizations (WTO, G-8, and so on) that manage communicative capitalism globally (p. 174). Such movements attempt to break out of “endless reflexive circuits of discussion” through decisive action in the hopes of affecting outcomes.

What makes Dean’s book such a useful and necessary intervention is its unstintingly critical approach to the phenomenon of publicity and its presumed (by most scholars in the field) indispensability to democracy. Communication scholars and graduate and advanced undergraduate students interested in debates about ICTs and democracy need to come to terms with her bracing and provocative thesis, if for no other reason than that it is useful on occasion to revisit and test foundational concepts and assumptions, especially those as widely embraced as that which equates publicity with democracy.

Let me conclude by warning prospective readers about a couple of the book’s limitations. Stylistically, I found Dean’s prose excessively dense and convoluted at times. Her numerous discussions of Zizek, and how his work sheds light on the subject, were particularly obscure and would be unhelpful to anyone not already familiar with him. Substantively, the book draws largely from the American experience, which, while providing ample support for her thesis, also limits its generalizability to other liberal and non-Western forms of democracy where the media and political trends she identifies are less apparent or pronounced.

Graham Longford
University of Toronto