An Ethics of Care for Infrastructural Repair
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In a 2013 essay, Steven Jackson issued a moving call for "rethinking repair." Jackson argued that we inherit a broken world, and therefore need to recognize and value the hard, continual, and often mundane work of sociotechnical repair necessary to create stability. In this short essay, I build upon and extend Jackson's ideas about the importance of repair, explicitly linking them to various strands of normative theory on the 'ethics of care' and the 'capabilities' approach to development. I argue that we need an explicitly normative and relational ethics of care and capabilities underlying our efforts at repair to provide a framework for determining which infrastructures should be the objects of our collective efforts to maintain them, and how to prioritize among them. Fundamentally, our work of maintenance and repair needs to be guided by a care ethics that privileges infrastructures that people rely upon to exercise their capabilities.

I briefly show what is at stake with respect to the adoption of this normative approach by drawing on my empirical work conducted over the past decade, which reveals how U.S. electoral politics is characterized by 'fragile infrastructures' that are the continual object of repair by practitioners, yet often break down given a lack of resources and institutional arrangements necessary to maintain them. A narrow focus on technological innovation (see Vinsel, 2015), especially in the context of data and analytics, has overlooked the importance of maintaining basic electoral infrastructure and the consequences of failures to do so, especially with respect to failures to develop and support the capabilities and positive freedom to vote among those who often stand to

benefit the most from public policy. The infrastructures we should maintain include not only voting technologies, but as importantly the formal organizations, institutional arrangements, and technical systems that connect people to institutional politics and mobilize them to vote.

An Ethics of Infrastructural Care

In "Rethinking Repair," Steven Jackson (2013, 221) argues that repair is the proper response to a "broken world," and poses the question of "what happens when we take erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points in thinking through the nature, use, and effects of information technology and new media." Our world, Jackson argues, has increasingly revealed its natural, social, and technological limits, and we need to normatively value the people who practice the "subtle arts of repair" of the technologies that sustain our lives, and the hard and often mundane work that it entails (222).

Jackson's powerful essay suggestively links repair and maintenance to an "ethics of care" articulated by the feminist scholar Carol Gilligan (1982). Here, I wish to go deeper into Jackson's question of "why should we care about care?" (231), and take up the idea of care in support of democratic capabilities. There are a number of different feminist approaches to ethics, including numerous strains of work that address various aspects of 'care.' Broadly, they all share common roots in being concerned with the relationship between the self and others and the world. As Gilligan (1982) emphasized in her classic work, the care approach to morality is fundamentally about relations and responsibilities (as opposed to dominant approaches to rights and justice). Care relates to

people's capacity to be aware of, empathetic to, and ultimately directed towards the needs of others, which requires contextual and socially embedded knowledge and feeling.

Virginia Held connects care ethics explicitly to public life, arguing that care as a set of practices and as a value is more fundamental to human societies than justice, given that it precedes complex forms of law and social organization. For Held (2006), care is fundamentally a relational practice where both parties have an interest in each other's well-being. Practices of care involve things such as responding to and meeting needs, whether they are emotional, psychological, or social. These practices create and strengthen relations through the cultivation of things such as trust, a foundational element of society, making care a social value, not an individual disposition. Indeed, care fundamentally characterizes *relations* between people: "both men and women should acknowledge the enormous value of the caring activities on which society relies and should share these activities fairly" (Held, 2006, 43). As human beings, our relations are interdependent, not independent.

In sum, Held argues that care creates the social ties between people upon which durable institutions can be built. For Held (2006, 27), these social ties should be premised upon "good caring relations," as opposed to relations that are "dominating, exploitative, mistrustful, or hostile." In the context of democratic institutions, drawing on Jane Mansbridge's specific critique of "adversary democracy," Held (2006, 152) argues that we should think about democracy in terms of shared goals and interests, and care ethics being essential for creating the emotions and ultimately understanding that underpins civil life. It is on this ground that Held argues that we can understand care as a value in much the same way that we hold justice as a value in terms of fairness and equality (see

Alexander, 2006 for an argument about justice being at the heart of the moral logic of the civil sphere).

As Jackson suggested, we can extend this ethical notion of care to infrastructure. Infrastructure underpins much of our communal lives. The form and work of infrastructure encodes particular forms of politics and provides the shared backdrop upon which we enact social life. Following Held, we should value infrastructure in the context of its ability to support the "good caring relations" that underpin civil life – even as we, in turn, need to care for the infrastructure that supports these relations. One way to prioritize the infrastructure that is worth our care is to evaluate the democratic 'capabilities' that it potentially affords. To-date, much of the capabilities literature has been oriented towards evaluating individuals' opportunities to achieve well-being in the context of what they value. However, writers have also suggested that the approach extends beyond an individual's capability to achieve their well-being and encompasses considerations of the social arrangements that facilitate opportunities (*see* Nussbaum, 2001).

The idea of opportunities sets the capabilities approach apart. Scholars are concerned, in essence, with positive freedom (MacCallum, 1967) – freedom to achieve well-being defined in broad terms as human functionings that span everything from physical health to employment and family (Sen, 2004). Although I am unaware of the link being drawn previously, there is a tradition of media theory that argues normatively for a similar conception of capability specifically with respect to discourse, particularly in the context of positive readings of the First Amendment. This work focuses on what democratic publics have the positive ability to do with or gain from media, rather than be prevented from doing by the state (Ananny and Kreiss, 2011; Meiklejohn, 1948).

Theorists have built from positive conceptions of the First Amendment to argue for the

public's right to hear and access media. For example, recent scholarship has moved

beyond the mass journalism paradigm and has considered the role that infrastructure

plays in positively producing particular kinds of democratic publics. Journalism scholar

Mike Ananny (2012), whose work has long built from positive theories of the First

Amendment, develops a particularly novel understanding of "press-public collaboration

as infrastructure" in the context of technical work:

> A third type of collaboration is qualitatively different from the first two and
> involves the press acting as a public infrastructure, creating and sustaining
> the conditions under which public spheres function. Historically, this has
> meant protecting principles of free speech in court cases (Bollinger, 1991),
> structuring the institutional design of commercial broadcasting spaces
> (Streeter, 1996), or sponsoring studies of the press (Commission on
> Freedom of the Press, 1947; Knight Foundation, 2009). Today, this means
> designing not only news workflows to manage online conversational spaces
> (Domingo, 2011; Reich, 2011) but also more-experimental steps to reveal
> to publics how the press distributes reporting resources or decides story
> topics (e.g., consider the Guardian's "Open Newslist" experiment showing
> how reporters are assigned stories; "An Experiment," 2011) or shares with
> other media organizations and citizen journalists responsibility for creating,
> fact-checking, or disseminating news (e.g., consider CNN's "iReporter,"
> NewsTrust's "Truthsquad," the Huffington Post's "Off the Bus" initiatives,
> the Washington Post's "Social Reader" Facebook app, or Lavrusik and
> Cameron's [2012] guidance for driving web traffic from Facebook to news
> sites).
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> Essentially, this model collaboration entails the press working with publics
> through systems out of which public interests might emerge. The press's
> role is more procedural (Habermas, 1996): Its focus is not on representing
> the reader to himself or herself or on explaining power to readers for
> unspoken public benefit. It is instead on creating, debating, and sustaining
> the systems, norms, skills, and regulatory regimes underpinning particular
> understandings of the public sphere.

In essence, in Ananny's formulation journalistic infrastructure creates and

supports publics' capabilities to develop their own communicative practices and discover

a sense of themselves and their interests. Care and capability come together here through

journalistic infrastructure – journalists care, through their technical work, about what publics and communities of people collectively have the capability to do through infrastructure. And, in Ananny and other scholars' formulations, infrastructure's scope is properly expansive. While much work and public discourse focuses on information systems or large-scale projects such as the electrical power grid, Paul Edwards (2003, 3) stakes out an expansive definition of infrastructure in arguing that "Not only hardware but organizations, socially-communicated background knowledge, general acceptance and reliance, and near-ubiquitous accessibility are required for a system to be an infrastructure in the sense I am using here."

Edwards argues that the idea of "infrastructure as invisible, smooth-functioning background 'works' only in the developed world" (ibid), but in my work in U.S. politics I have found many cases where this background is in a continual state of disrepair, falls apart, and even disappears. In a decade of research I have conducted on politics, my conclusion is that the infrastructures of politics are fundamentally *fragile*. In my forthcoming book, *Prototype Politics*, I show how the technical artifacts, knowledge, practices, skills, and many of the organizations that constitute the infrastructure for politics are especially fragile. This includes not only the voting machines and ballots that have been the object of much attention in public conversation and the academic literature, especially since the 2000 cycle, but also those formal organizations, institutional arrangements, and technical systems that connect people to institutional politics and mobilize them to participate in elections or vote.

In terms of democratic organizations, institutions, and systems, there are a number of factors that render political infrastructures fragile. Campaigns are highly temporal

organizations that have to scale rapidly in the face of often uncertain resource flows. They are quickly assembled, often involve people from many different fields and with limited work experience, and have to draw and fit together many different resources from more enduring organizations such as parties and consultancies. Meanwhile, people walk away from campaigns the day after the vote, and while parties have longevity, they struggle to retain technical talent and maintain technologies after elections. Technical development within parties is often subject to the waxing and waning of resource flows, the competing demands of many different stakeholders, and the decision-making of party chairs. Finally, many consultancies face the same ebb of resources in off-election years, and apart from the investments of comparatively well-resourced presidential campaigns and parties, there are seldom the large institutional clients that will make significant improvements to existing infrastructure, especially, practitioners roundly argue, on the Republican side of the aisle.

While these organizations (i.e.: campaigns, political parties, unions), institutions (such as arrangements between secretaries of state and state parties that enable the latter to gain access to voter data), and technical systems (including voter files and analytics databases that lay at the heart of all contemporary campaign activity, from broadcast advertising to field campaigning), are less well-known, these infrastructural elements of electoral politics have outsized import for people's capabilities to participate in electoral politics. People need to be taught, and mobilized, to care about institutional politics and connect their political interests and identities to choices at ballot boxes. People rarely have these capabilities otherwise, as a century of movements that have organized around

electoral politics have recognized, from the union and civil rights movements and farm workers to the LGBT movement.

For example, scholars such as Michael Schudson (taking the longer view) and Rasmus Nielsen (in a more contemporary vein) have revealed how changes in culture and the organizing abilities of parties – specifically in terms of their capacity to mobilize people – contributed to vast declines in political participation over the last century. More critically, historian Michael McGerr (1986, 30) writes of what happened when parties lost the capacity to help people "translate their political concerns into the act of voting" and with it a spectacular politics premised on the "visible assent of the governed":

> Before the Civil War, partisan display had taken shape from the different needs of newly enfranchised workers and farmers, on the one side, and party leaders and local upper classes on the other. Spectacle, played out by these groups, became an intricate dance of accommodation between candidate and people, between rich men and poor men.

We have lost our "cultural infrastructure" (Turner, 2008) for imagining politics in this light, and with it the cross-class forms of assent McGerr both details and values. That does not absolve us, however, from the need to think about the infrastructures we *do* have (crumbling though they may be), how we may better care for and extend them, and the capabilities for democratic renewal they potentially can afford. We have the responsibility to care for our fragile infrastructures of politics, specifically towards the ends of enhancing democratic capabilities. This care extends to cultivating the organizations, growing the institutions, and maintaining the technical systems that support participation in democratic life, particularly among those who are not well represented organizationally and technically in contemporary democracy. The questions that we must ask ourselves in the context of democratic life are: Does our democratic

infrastructure support mutual well-being, or does it serve exploitation or domination? Does infrastructure meet and respond to the needs of citizens and further their capabilities to participate in institutional politics? Does infrastructure support the empathy, trust, and emotional understandings that care creates and democratic life is ultimately premised upon? Does our democratic infrastructure live up to care as a value and a practice? And, what forms of care must we practice to maintain our democratic infrastructure to support the democratic relations for the world we desire?

  I believe the answers to these questions are ultimately the challenges of contemporary democracy. We need to invest our attention in, and direct our care towards, those organizations, institutions, and systems that will renew democratic life. This is not the mass media infrastructure of demagoguery, so clearly on display in 2016, but the organizations, processes, institutions, and systems we have, must maintain, and need to re-invent towards the ends of connecting people to politics and helping them translate concerns into votes, as the parties of old did.

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