There is tremendous value in maintaining online public spaces

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By allowing interaction between people of diverse backgrounds, online social tools have come as close as possible to overcoming the structural limitations of physical spaces and are central ingredients of a deliberative democratic state. For this reason, **George Iordanou** *argues that online public spaces should receive no less scrutiny or be subject to no less regulation than physical public spaces.*

On July 1st, Google Reader, a feed aggregator – a program that allows users to get automatic updates from websites — will be 'retired'. Technologically speaking this is not a big loss since there are many other companies that provide identical services which are available for free, in the same way as Google Reader is. The problem with Google Reader is the loss of the vibrant community that has been built around it. The discontinuation of Google Reader is a good opportunity to raise the issue of online public spaces and their value.

First some history. Google has been trying to enter the social media industry for some years now. Initially with Orkut, which was never popular in the West, then with Buzz which was discontinued in 2011 and now with Google+. The latest effort, is an 'all in' attempt by Google to compete with Facebook and Twitter, which are able to keep visitors in their sites for longer. If Google+ is successful it will become the centre of Google's universe of applications.

Google Reader has been a victim of this expansion. Initially its social capabilities were deactivated. In the past you could share a link to your followers, who could comment under it. This created interaction and dialogue between users and created communities of similarly minded people. The social aspect of Reader was important because it enabled both social interaction and crowdsourcing. Not only people could exchange views on various issues, but they could also rely on the circle of their trusted friends for filtering the news stories that were worth their attention.

Google Reader will be discontinued next week on July 1st because it is scarcely used, Google says. The one million user-base that Google cited is small for the company's size, although not necessarily an accurate figure, since competing services like Feedly recorded increase of millions in their user base right after Google's announcement of Reader's retirement. Why is the 'retirement' of Google Reader important you might rightfully ask. After all, it was a private service developed and maintained for free by a private corporation. Well, the fact that it was maintained by a private firm is not necessarily enough to render it beyond public scrutiny. Pubs are privately owned, yet they are subject to tighter regulations because they provide a public space for communal interaction.

Online public spaces should receive no less scrutiny or be subject to no less regulation than physical public spaces. In fact, they should be even more protected. Let me explain why: In real life, the concept of public space and public discussion is a largely artificial construct that is only realised in the idealised theories of political philosophers. Physical spaces reinforce already existing barriers — education, socioeconomic status, class, culture — making 'public dialogue' either an ideological construct or plain old wishful thinking. After all, a banker working in the city will never find herself in the same table with an industrial worker from Coventry.

Online social tools have come as close as possible to overcoming these structural limitations. Although the situation is far from ideal, online public spaces maximise the chances of a chat between the Coventry industrial worker and the banker working in London's financial centre. If public spaces and public discussion (or 'exchange of good reasons' per the academic jargon) is necessary for a just democratic state, then there is tremendous value in maintaining these online infrastructures of communication.

In order to fully grasp the importance of these services, we need to think about the distinction between the public

and the private. Although according to the rather outdated legal interpretation of the distinction, these services are beyond the grasp of the courts because they are private and immaterial, we need to understand that today public spaces are not only created by public institutions (i.e. the state) but are also created by private corporations and need not be physical in order to perform similar functions. In fact, it was Larry Page, Google's CEO, who said that laws need to catch up with technology .

At the same time, our engagement with these services cannot be strictly classified as either a public or a private interaction. I might choose to share the pictures of my family and I with a few selected friends, or I might engage in a political discussion that is open to everyone. The private vs public dichotomy is outdated because it relies on similarly faulty binaries, such as state vs private industries and personal vs communal spaces.

These services should be approached as public tools. Imagine an agricultural society where everyone shares tools for different purposes. Without these tools, individuals will not be able to work in their fields. The fact that they do not own the tools is not enough of a reason to restrict regulating their usage. Some other justification can be given — besides ownership — that can protect the public use of these tools. In the case of the agricultural society it is the fact that they are means of sustaining families and social cohesion. In the case of online tools in today's societies, what renders them indispensable is their capacity for facilitating social interaction and communication and which are central ingredients of a deliberative democratic state.

But to force these private industries to sustain services that they no longer want to sustain, or services that are internal competitors to their other products, would be paternalistic. What the state could do, is to require them to provide the necessary tools for these services to continue elsewhere, like they did with Google Wave which was released under a 'free' licence and was hosted on Apache servers. This admittedly inelegant solution, is not important. Solutions will be discussed after the value of these online public spaces is realised. Until then, we will keep hitting the wall of the private and public dichotomy, all the while public spaces are destroyed.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy before posting.

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