

THE ROLE OF ALTERNATIVE AND ACTIVIST NEW MEDIA FOR DEMOCRACY

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Alternative and Activist New Media by Leah A. Lievrouw¹ published as part of the Digital Media and Society Series by Polity Press seeks to “provide a rich and accessible overview of the ways in which activists, artists, and citizen groups around the world use new media and information technologies to gain visibility and voice, present alternative or marginal views, share their own DIY information systems and content, and otherwise resist, talk back to, or confront dominant media culture” (the back cover). In addition to the introduction, a general chapter on the roots of alternative and activist new media and a more general closing chapter, there are five specific chapters dealing with particular “genres of contemporary new media projects” (p. 3): culture jamming, alternative computing, participatory journalism, mediated mobilization and “commons knowledge”.

Being a social psychologist and not an information studies professor as the author is, I was interested less in alternative computing and more in participation and mobilization, and being a scholar immersed in questions around knowledge production and accessibility, I was interested more in the commons knowledge projects than in culture jamming. Thus I should warn you from the beginning—perhaps I was not exactly the kind of audience the author had in mind when writing the book. Perhaps that is also the reason why I had to restart reading the book three times and even then could not read it from cover to cover but had to start with the more intriguing chapters and then “struggle through” the rest with some real effort. This short review will focus on the parts of the book which were more interesting from my viewpoint.

Due to my own research interests in the way organizations, loosely structured initiatives and active individuals use the new media to foster participation, I was mostly interested in the chapter about *mediated mobilization*. I was looking forward to learning more about new media being used for mobilization purposes in the social movements I had heard so much

¹ Lievrouw, L. A. (2011). *Alternative and activist new media*. Cambridge, UK – Malden, MA, USA: Polity Press.

about recently (in the mass media and on the internet), from a scholarly perspective and with detachment and an attempt to speak neutrally about emotionally laden issues. To be explicit here, I mean mainly the Arab Spring (2010-2012), the Istanbul protests (2013-2014), the London riots (2011) and the longer lasting demonstrations in Spain (2011-2012) and Greece (2010-2012). I have read some interesting articles and books on these topics (e.g. Passini, 2012; Reicher, Stott, 2011) and had listened to some intriguing conference presentations (mainly by political psychologists), and was eager for more, for instance, for news on the critical discussion about how the same new media used in the same way were celebrated by western scholars as the main tool of democratization during mass demonstrations in non-western societies but condemned as a tool for encouraging civil disobedience and civil unrest in western (democratic) societies (see Passini, *ibid.*). But alas, here I discovered both how naïve I was in my expectation that very recent events can make it into and be thoroughly explored in a monograph appearing only a few years later, and how a relatively new book (from 2011) can actually be out of date in some respects only three years later particularly if it deals with such a fast evolving area as the new media.

In the chapter on mediated mobilization (chapter 6) it is defined as being concerned “with the nature and distribution of power in communities and societies, and the promotion of radical and participatory democracy” (p. 145). The author further explains that mediated mobilization uses new media to mobilize social movements where people together participate in the attempted social change. She shows how the theoretical thinking about social movements has changed over time and that the most recent theories emphasize “the movements’ heterogeneous, decentralized or ‘swarming’ network structures” (p. 153) as well as “the use of digital media technologies to create, sustain and reorganize network ties among loosely affiliated alliances of movement participants” (p. 153). Using many citations of other scholars’ views, she builds up her claim that many of the traditional binaries connected to mobilization must now be reconsidered: individual and collective action, the symbolic and material aspects of it, global and local sites of action, interpersonal communication and mass media—all these distinctions become blurred and are not applicable generally. I liked this argumentative frame, my expectations were high and I was looking forward to finding it applied in detail to at least some of the recent social movements that were famous for using new media. But in the practical, case study section each chapter in this book has, she dealt with the very beginning of the “online movements” era: the protests accompanying the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999. The author went on to explain why this is considered to be the first transnational online movement and the very start of global activism, how digital technologies use was responsible for the leap to the global level, and that they have been important ever since during similar events like G8, G20, WTO or World Bank summits. There was no analysis of more recent events like those I mentioned I was interested in earlier, nor was there anything on the use of specific new media in organizing or spreading information about such movements, for instance the use of Facebook or Twitter.

Only then did it dawn on me—because it takes generally really long for a monograph to be published, the book, despite being published in 2011, is essentially pre-Facebook and pre-Twitter! I checked the index first and then all four places in which Facebook and Twitter were each mentioned—they were mainly mentioned together, just in a list with other social media, once explaining about the blending between personal webpages, instant messages and

media content sharing, another time they were given as an example of what people think of when they hear “Web 2.0”. There was even one brief mention of “mobilizing a G8 protest via Twitter” (p. 178), but nothing about the specifics, about how exactly either of the services can be or was used for mediated mobilization, to get people onto the street or to gain support worldwide, etc. Unfortunately, in my opinion the participation scene has changed so much with the massive entrance of Facebook and Twitter that the analysis of mediated mobilization before this is mostly of historical interest only.

Being a scholar and thus being interested in the issues around knowledge in general, I was also very curious about the chapter on “*commons knowledge*” (chapter 7). It is titled “Challenging the experts” and that is exactly one of the main viewpoints offered—the discussion pivots around questions such as whether collaborative knowledge projects, open-source and crowdsourcing can challenge expert projects in different aspects and if so, how exactly it is done. As a great deal of knowledge is enthusiastically shared online today, one of the things I thought very important was her cautious remark about the fact that the ease and speed with which information is searched for and retrieved online encourages information seekers to search only online and to forget or neglect other sources. It is only one easy further step to assuming that all the important information is available online, and if it is not available, then it is not important. I remember always telling my students that this is not the case.

It should come as no surprise to find that the example of commons knowledge which is analyzed is *Wikipedia*. I agree with the author that the growth rate and popularity of Wikipedia is enormous and I was very curious about what she had to say on the usual topics of its credibility, accuracy and validity. She cites Wikipedia’s article on itself where it states there is more than 15 million articles in over 270 languages. In December 2014 as I write this, the statistics claim 31 million articles in 285 languages (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>). However, since my native language is Slovak and not a “world language” I would be more interested first of all in the different scopes being covered in different languages (here I mean mainly the role of English—4 667 689 articles in December 2014 compared to small languages, e.g. Slovak—196 785 articles!), and second in the differences in the same topic in different language “mutations” (here I mean e.g. English versus German or French). I have sometimes tried to search Wikipedia on the same topic in different languages and have repeatedly realized how staggeringly diverse the information you find can be. The author is more concerned with the reliability of Wikipedia (presumably of its English version) and cites an interesting experiment from 2005 when *Nature* asked expert reviewers to blindly compare pairs of articles from Wikipedia and from the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Apparently they have found a comparative low number of serious errors in both sources and more minor errors of fact, omission or misleading information in Wikipedia. But Wikipedia’s potential for quick amendment and correction should, in their view, eventually outweigh the inaccuracies. With respect to vandalism and the deliberate insertion of erroneous information, she cites research projects by IBM and MIT which showed that repairs are carried out rapidly, sometimes in the course of minutes.

To sum up, the book is an interesting read but I would recommend combining it with scientific articles dealing with more recent developments in the field. As I compared my attitude with the (assumed) attitude of the author, it left me thinking even more than usual

about the extent to which my social psychological background makes me sensitive to some kinds of questions and viewpoints and completely insensitive to others. And that was a very good and useful exercise for the mind.²

References

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