

Alternative and Activist New Media. Digital Media and Society Series. By Leah A. Lievrouw. USA/U.K: Polity Press, 2011. 294 pp. ISBN-13: 9780745641843 (pkb).

The contemporary political unrest flaring across North Africa has made Leah A. Lievrouw's recent book, *Alternative and Activist New Media*, essential reading for anyone attempting to conceptually frame the dynamic role that communications technology plays in activating popular dissent. Seismic shifts currently rupturing this region's geopolitical landscape are, essentially, examples of Lievrouw's discussion of "mediated mobilization" in action.

As hundreds of thousands of Egyptians in Cairo's Tahrir Square celebrated the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011, some of those assembled held up cellphones to snap photos of the crowd, while others sent Twitter messages to their friends and a few carried signs proclaiming "Thank you, Facebook." Currently, across Algeria, Jordan, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, Iran, Bahrain, Morocco, and elsewhere, young activists are calling for marches and rallies using both online media and more traditional forms of communication. Technology in itself did not cause this upheaval, which has fed on widespread and long-festering political and social grievances, but activists in Egypt, as in nearby Tunisia, have been able to use their access to new social media tools to call for demonstrations and win support from broader sectors of the population. Lievrouw reminds her readers that in "mediated mobilization, political and cultural activists employ the internet and digital media to overcome informational, geographical, and cultural limitations of conventional social movement organizing" (p. 176) to create more effective and fluid forms of resistance to global-scale economic and social power, and forces for social change. Although her discussion of "mediated mobilization" focuses on the anti-globalization movements of the 1990s, her theoretical principles may nevertheless be readily applied to events unfolding across North Africa today.

Lievrouw, Sudikoff Fellow for Education and New Media in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA, weaves a theme of cultural resistance through her compelling survey of new media activism. Digital activism as cultural remediation, directed toward blocking the smooth flow of dominant sociocultural discourses, threads the five genres of new media activism she surveys: culture-jamming, alternative computing, participatory journalism, mediated mobilization, and commons knowledge. By surveying the activities at the fringe, Lievrouw hopes to better understand the dynamics at the institutional centre.

The study is arranged like an "hourglass scheme" (p. 27). It begins with a broad overview of the history and theory of remix culture, rooted in Dadaism and the Situationist International, and closes with a consideration of mediation as a useful way forward for theorizing empirical research on the dynamic relationships between communication and technology in society. It is the theoretical underpinning that will lend longevity to this study, even if the specific case studies discussed may fade

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from the contemporary activist scene. The case studies include Napster music sharing (<http://www.napster.com>), Indymedia independent media centre (<http://www.indymedia.org>), and ARK[®] (pronounced “ARTMark”), an activist collective that subverts the corporate persona protecting U.S. corporations (<http://www.rtmk.com>).

Lievrouw is concerned with attempting to classify activist media genres, and the five case studies she discusses are paradigmatic of this process. She defines these genres by their “scope,” “stance,” and “action.” All five examples are small in scale. Even the perceived international sprawl of Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>) betrays a small cohort of active members involved in day-to-day site management notwithstanding internationally diverse content production.

All five genres discussed use irony to probe the perceived hypocrisy of dominant cultural discourses, often in imaginative ways. For example, Indymedia takes on the discursive mantle of professional journalism to legitimize its citizen journalism campaigns. Often the activist movements adopt the form of established discourse in order to be inherently subversive. Although Wikipedia is the least overtly subversive of the five examples chosen for analysis, its form mimics the encyclopedic classification of institutional knowledge in its purpose to engender a participatory and collaborative knowledge exchange. While it is acknowledged throughout the study that alternative and activist media is flexible and adaptive to change, critics nevertheless point to its inherent ephemerality. This may be seen in the prevalent folksonomic metadata structure of social media sites like Wikipedia. This inherent instability has been used by educational institutions to question the site’s mediation of knowledge and its legitimacy to authority.

In teasing out the historical unfolding of new media, Lievrouw acknowledges the inherent contradictions and discrepancies between new media and print culture. The origin of new media is enmeshed in telephony, thereby explaining its dispersed, networked, and participatory nature. In contrast to print culture, where production and consumption are strictly hierarchical in form, new media facilitates production by consumers and is thereby intrinsically participatory in nature. This is the crux of Lievrouw’s exposition of new media activism rooted within its unique history.

Conspicuous by its absence from Lievrouw’s chapter on culture-jamming, “Monkeywrenching the Media Machine,” is the “iRaq” poster culture jam, which depicts a hooded and wired Abu Ghraib prisoner in the style of Apple’s iPod advertising campaign and appeared in New York City during the summer of 2004. With its tagline, “10,000 volts in your pocket, guilty or innocent,” this guerrilla street-level spoof on the ubiquitous advertisements for Apple computer’s immensely popular portable MP3 player is as politically activist as it gets. In his latest book, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9–11 to the Present* (published in January 2011 by the University of Chicago Press), W.J.T. Mitchell gives a lengthy analysis of the image of a hooded Abu Ghraib prisoner with outstretched arms connected to electrical wires. Mitchell credits the viral distribution of this photograph partly to its “uncanny resemblance” to Christian iconography. The figure of the terrorist captured and brought to justice turns into a kind of composite of a sacrificial Christ, an *ecce homo* (“behold the man”) figure, standing on a pedestal exposed to public derision.

In the context of digital cultures, mediation, Lievrouw predicts, will continue to be an ongoing, mutually shaping relationship between personal uses of communication technologies (reconfiguration) and their communicative action (remediation) that will continue to inevitably produce social and technical change, thereby constituting new experiences and new social relationships. *Alternative and Activist New Media* is a useful addition to any course on new media and society, and will prove to be essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the theory and practice of new media activism.

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