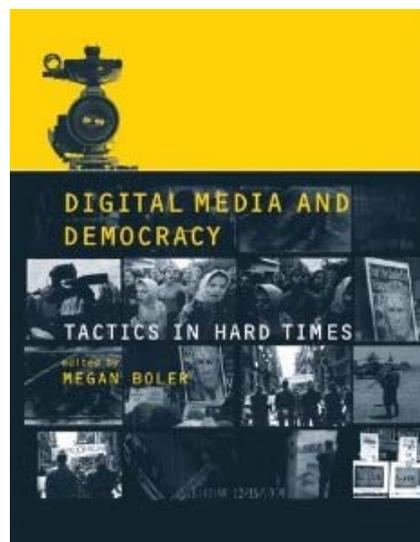


Reviews

Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times. Megan Boler (ed.). MA: MIT press. 2008. Hardcover: 464 pages. £28.45. ISBN: 978-0262026420. English.

The volume *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times* problematises the potential for democratic communication enabled by new media. As the editor, Megan Boler, states in her introductory chapter that the publication intends to ‘spark further interrogation and intervention precisely around the question of whether and how diverse types of media interventions challenge dominant media, what new forms tactical interventions take in these hard times, and where precisely lies public interest and its representation in media in the face of oligarchies and media moguls’ (p. 10). The collective work brings together established media scholars from various fields (political theory, social movement theory, semiotics and cyberculture studies) with media activists, artists and journalists. Some of the chapters contain interviews with media figures such as Amy Goodman of Democracy Now!, Robert McChesney of Media Matters, and Hassan Ibrahim of Al Jazeera English.



The nineteen chapters are arranged under three sub-sections: ‘*The Shape of the Publics: New Media and Global Capitalism*’, ‘*The Changing Face of News Media*’ and ‘*Tactics in Action*’. They gradually progress from conceptual frameworks on media, power and politics, via more specific issues of changes in journalistic practice, to critical studies of social web practices and tactical media (TM) and their potential in shaping political and social movements. Some chapters are theoretical, while others position themselves within a practice-oriented paradigm of the pursuit and/or evaluation of new media-enabled activism and utilise their own jargon (e.g. Richardo Rosas, Ch. 14). The volume covers different forms of media ‘interventions’: media policy reforms, media watchdogs, alternative media channels (media outlets and spaces such as community radio, blogs, etc.). The affective component is an important part of the publication. The emotional reflections about media and democracy oscillate between pessimism (e.g. Jodi Dean in Chapter 3; Ron J. Deibert in Ch. 5; R. Sophie Statzel in Ch. 18) and optimism (e.g. Alessandra Renzi in Ch 2; Trebor Scholz in Ch. 15).

The volume also raises awareness of how one's own biases and positions are influenced by media and in turn affect the analysis and/or production of media (e.g. M. Boler in Introduction; A. Renzi in Ch 2; Chris Atton in Ch. 8).

The insights into the mediations of democracy include an analysis of the role of media as the fourth estate (Susan D. Moeller, Ch. 6) and a call for a careful and 'multiperspectival' (p. 224) conceptualisation of alternative media practices (Chris Atton, Ch. 8). Alessandra Renzi (Ch. 2) classifies 'different levels of interactive zones, created by/for TM' (p. 89) and explores how they redefine the semiotic space of alternative political action. Graham Meikle (Ch. 16) and Megan Boler (Ch. 17) suggest that tactical media can challenge the conventional axis of institutionalised power and intervene in dominant media structures/representations of the 'real' via various subversive techniques (the remix aesthetics, political satire, etc.). The role of art as a mechanism of subversion is demonstrated by Richardo Rosas' description (Ch. 14) of the practice of *gambiarra* or recombination technology (it is close to 'makeshift' in English and means 'any improvisation of an expedient substitute when other means fail or are not available', pp. 343-344). Shaina Anand (Ch. 13) shares her experience of various tactics involving a DIY video on-site television production and other forms of autonomous media productions (installations, etc.). The issue of access to media such as the social factors of access to new media or *digital divide* is mentioned by Deepa Fernandes (Ch. 9).

While the book familiarises the reader with a variety of TM, it also gives a warning about the danger of 'just creating more empty signs' using TM (Garcia and Lovink, 1999). Indeed, there is a possibility that the proposed interventions turn into an *online struggle* when the online activism becomes detached from off-line activity. Jodi Dean (Ch. 3) talks about a 'fantasy of participation' (p. 109) that arises with new technologies (the activism is superficial, limited to groups of like-minded people or those already committed and engaged). This issue features prominently in current debates on the topic. Morozov (2011) in his latest book, for instance, warns about 'slactivism' (politically futile digital activism such as signing online petitions, which makes one think one is doing world-changing activist work) and 'managed' participation. That is, forms of resistance involving subversive mechanisms can be used not only by the public but by the (semi/authoritarian) states that are becoming more adept in utilising them (Index on Censorship, 2011; Morozov, 2011). Finally, the emerging culture of infotainment with its abundance of information online encourages disengagement with real world political practices and turns a user from a producer into a passive consumer.

One of the important issues raised in the volume is the influence of political economy and the *corporate nature of media industry*. For instance, the issue of ownership and monopolies of media structures features in the interview with Amy Goodman, who is concerned with media consolidation and concentration (Ch. 7, p. 210). D. Travers Scott (Ch. 11) urges for the need to subvert marketing models in order to ensure that people 'encounter tactical media' (p. 291). While interviewed by Megan Boler, Robert McChesney discusses the possibility of an alternative, networked information economy (Ch. 1), as well as raises another important topic of *policy-making*. Ron Deibert (Ch. 5) links two themes of corporatism and regulation in his discussion of corporate accountability and transparency, especially the protection/sharing of information with regimes which violate human rights. Deibert analyses the changing architecture of the Net (an increasing and more sophisticated censorship, filtering,

surveillance online, hacktivism, etc.) and draws our attention to how ‘pressures from the security and commercial sector’ alter the Net’s ‘basic material framework’ and thus threaten to undermine global civic networks. The latest examples from media world—Wikileaks—and scholarly publications (Dutton et. al., 2010) confirm these concerns about the direction of ongoing revisions of new media regulations by corporations and governments.

Similarly, other issues raised in the book remain topical. For instance, the recent events of the so-called ‘Arab spring’ or ‘Twitter riots’ in the UK call for further research on TM. The role of Al Jazeera during the uprisings in the Middle East was crucial as it mediated between traditional and new media on the ground, as well as provided the most informed and up-to-date account of the events to the rest of the world. This particular role of the broadcaster is discussed by Hassan Ibrahim, a journalist for Al Jazeera English in Chapter 12. According to him Al Jazeera’s institutional framework is beyond the reach of Western corporate influence; it values diversity (‘multi-cultural platform’, p. 304), authenticity and adheres to the principle of ‘double-sourcing’ of any news item. As a result it provides a good counter-example of an alternative media, which examines issues and opinions that are often subordinated or ignored by other media sources.

The examination of alternative forms of media, which are articulated on the ground and away from powerful media institutions, provides a productive insight into the processes and logic of not only well-established (like Al Jazeera) but also marginalized producers. Thus, Deepa Fernandes talks about the idea of a ‘hyperlocal’ community radio (Ch. 9) and clarifies the tactics for getting diverse perspectives onto the public agenda. However, as some of the authors demonstrate, the digital environment can be used by groups with various agendas. Sophie Statzel’s examination of white-supremacist websites (e.g. Stormfront) provides a good example of hate speech online. This and other ongoing cases of mainstreaming extremism online (e.g. the events in Norway and the case of Brevik’s manifesto) ‘problematize the common assumption that resistance to dominant modes of power is intrinsically connected with the democratic principles and practices or desires for liberation’ (Ch. 18, p. 407).

On the whole, the papers in this collection adopt a critical position about the democratising potential of new media. Megan Boler acknowledges ‘the contradictory nature of viral communications’ (p. 24) and ‘overtly hyped fantasy of democracy through the Internet’ (p. 17). Similarly, Jodi Dean (Ch. 3) warns against conceptualising the internet as inherently democratic, inclusionary and participatory. Introducing the notion of ‘communicative capitalism’, she contextualises the new practices within a more familiar economic order which impacts the logic of their development.

However, the book does not escape the dangers of technological determinism. In some cases the inclination for deterministic understating of new media is declared as a conscious stance. For instance, Geert Lovink (Ch. 4, p. 127) states that the architecture of technologies will dictate the form of organisation and the type of practices which people develop. Undoubtedly, the technological change will foster new forms of thinking and understanding, new ‘collectivities’ (p. 89) and creative activism. At the same time, the socio-political component is important as mediatisation may display different dynamics and consequences in different socio-cultural contexts.

First of all, the collection is based on the assumption that the alteration of patterns of communication in the digital age will inevitably lead to a more robust form of democracy. So

far it is not clear whether new media, even in consolidating democracies, fosters a gradual and organic accumulation of grassroots initiatives into a more civically engaged networked public space. Secondly, the book predominantly grounds itself within a North American context. Only three of the nineteen chapters deal with places outside of the 'North' (such as Ch.10 by Alex Bruns on the South Korean example of successful tactical media and an interview with Shaina Anand in Ch. 13 about media interventions and art practices in India). Most cases involve English-speaking US-oriented audiences (one of the book's recurring themes is the media coverage of WMDs in Iraq), which somewhat limits its scope. This also evokes the question of what is understood by democracy (other than the US-inspired model of democracy).

The book operates on a variety of notions such as tactical media, macromedia, independent media, social web, participatory web, counterpublic, contact spaces, temporal media labs, etc. This reflects the ongoing construction and clarification of terminology in the field. As face to face (during conferences, such as the Oxford Internet Institute Symposium held in September 2011) and recorded discussions in academic press demonstrate, the field is characterized by a multiplication of terminology covering similar/overlapping issues (such as small media, new media, etc.) and ongoing attempts to conceptualise new phenomena evoked by digital landscape (memes, etc.). Additionally, the plurality of terms indicates geographical and methodological divisions as well as multidisciplinary of the field, as academics in various parts of the world use different conceptual frameworks to talk about the same phenomenon (e.g. while the notion of 'deliberation' is used in various chapters of the book, the work of the British academic Stephen Coleman (1999) is not mentioned).

Finally, the perennial issue of representation, reality and 'truth' is a thread that runs through the book, starting with the *Introduction* in which it is linked to the major challenges of media and power. While the multiplication of sources and voices in the digital era makes the construction of reality a more complex phenomenon, academic literature on the subject, including this volume, faces difficulty in maintaining consistency and bridging the gap between theoretical understanding of 'reality' and 'truth' and the practice of mediatization and representation. At times it is not clear whether the contributors to the volume treat media representations as a mirror of reality, a window to the 'real' or as something else whereby the public can resist dominant meanings, develop multiple readings of the same phenomenon and *co-produce* their own.

As any book dealing with the digital media landscape, this one is in danger of becoming outdated soon after its release. Moreover, a paper version of any inquiry of this sort would lack interactivity and fluidity of the multi-platform medium it interrogates. Nevertheless, the book adds to our understanding of ongoing changes within the modern media institutions and their effects on political realities. It is quite successful in problematising the issue of 'how media as a space for access to representation, communication, and distribution can be shared by diverse voices and visions and not dominated by media conglomerates' (p. 33). It creates a platform for an otherwise unlikely exchange between academics and activists about opportunities for new kinds of political activism. In general, it constitutes a good interconnected discussion on digital media, democratic processes and media activism in the Global North.

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