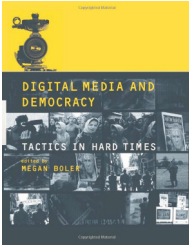


Reviews



Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times. Edited by Megan Boler. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008. 464 pp. ISBN 0262026422.

“We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality,” explains an unnamed Bush administration official. This quote sets the tone for a new edited collection reflecting on the role of the media in constructing reality. The lack of a “truth” does not quell the public demand for one, as Boler aptly points out in her introduction: “The desire and longing for truth expressed by the public demands for media accountability is in tension with the coexisting recognition of the slipperiness of meaning” (p. 7). Media, then, in all their forms, become a central battleground for forging meaning and shaping reality. “Media are the most powerful institutions on earth,” Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now* claims, “more powerful than any bomb, more powerful than any missile” (p. 199).

This series of interviews and articles explores how incumbent powers and media activists compete to produce and reproduce their versions of reality through the media. The contributors use the format to discuss the tenuous relationship between media and democracy and the changing role of the news media, as well as to present examples of tactical media. The resulting collection provides an excellent introduction to the current, troubling media landscape and its tactical opportunities.

Times are dark indeed. The book’s subtitle, “Tactics in Hard Times,” gives a nod to the book’s context: the twilight of the Bush administration. Boler does not shy away from reflecting on this monolithic media landscape. The awareness of the problematics of the media sustains a highly reflexive discussion of the challenges for media activism when media are tools of both oppression and resistance. Ronald J. Deibert documents the increasing sophistication of state and corporate control over the circulation of Internet content. This closing of democratic fissures corresponds with the adoption of tactical media campaigns by counterdemocratic forces. Stormfront, as R. Sophie Statzel explains in her chapter, has created a counterpublic space online for White supremacists to share and cultivate racism. The success of the group points to

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a troubling reality: “the communicative and political implications of the current economic order may facilitate easier political mobilizations for antidemocratic aims which are organized specifically around sentiments and subjective attachments” (p. 408). Statzel’s concerns echo Jodi Dean’s troubling discussion of the fetish of communication under communicative capitalism, where the myth of digital democracy obfuscates the troubling lack of any democratic dialogue. The adversities depicted in these chapters provoke a search for and celebration of ways to remake media—to see the media itself as a system in need of re-imagining.

The context of “hard times” refreshingly provokes a sustained engagement with tactical media, a form of media activism based on provisional and mobile uses of media, deployed to critique and disrupt incumbent power (Critical Art Ensemble, 2001; Garcia & Lovink, 2001; Lovink, 2002; Meikle, 2002). The concept, while prevalent in many accounts of media and democracy, has never fostered much of a literature. (Perhaps the literature has taken its temporal definition too seriously). This edited volume dispels these shortcomings with an improved definition of the concept and a greater attention to its manifestations. Alessandra Renzi offers the following definition of the term: “TM’s avoidance of essentialized identity is a manifestation of a differentiating minoritarian position that allows groups to exercise critique of the system as well as self-criticism—with the aim of developing new experiments” (p. 72). Renzi redefines tactical media as a self-reflexive form of experimentation or re-imagining. Shaina Anand provides an inspiring account of re-imagination when she discusses her experiments with the electrical grid. She states, “[E]lectricity is fundamentally ‘open source’ ... a switch could potentially trigger anything, breach boundaries, share networks, offer more participation, posit other informal utopian states” (p. 331). Her experiment translates open source into electricity, and her excitement echoes across the book. The innovative tactical appropriations of media demonstrate a reflexive interest in the opportunities found within the shifting landscape, rather than a faith in the innate emancipatory potential of media. The lesson is that tactical media innovates by seizing on the temporary fissures in power regimes to find new experiments for democracy—allowing tactical media to be at once critical of the media and its replication of power and excited about its possibilities.

However, the emphasis on tactical media does not reflect enough on the changes to the mediatization of political action. How have digital technologies created new audiences or publics? The one example in the book, the paper on the White supremacist site Stormfront, offers an excellent line of inquiry not taken up by other cases. The book emphasizes the way media carry alternative information, typically through modulations of the journalistic practice, without recognizing the limits of thinking of media only as a transitive tool. Trebor Scholz identifies the shortcoming of this definition: the “belief that information will alter the way things are, has in fact, with few notable exceptions, caused little concrete change” (p. 356). The book misses an opportunity to delve into the publics and counterpublics forming online. Social media, as witnessed in the sudden outbursts on Facebook (Geist, 2007) or the explosion in views of politically relevant viral videos (Infoscape Research Lab, 2008), offers some hope that the everyday practices of publics have changed as they have become re-mediated by the Internet. Media activists have already recognized the potential in this

fissure, as Graham Meikle and Trebor Scholz only touch upon. As such, the book would have profited from an in-depth case like that of The Pirate Bay, which has harnessed P2P file sharing to create a “grey commons” (Sengupta, 2006) of digital goods shared freely among home computers. The Pirate Bay celebrates its membership in a networked public of pirates, repeated in its chorus, “We’re all the Pirate Bay” (The Pirate Bay, 2009). Expanding on the relationship between tactical media and new online publics would have improved this book’s contribution to the literature.

The collection, despite some minor shortcomings, offers an ideal introduction to tactical media. The community of tactical media practitioners will no doubt be familiar with many of the ideas introduced in the book. All the chapters come from academics and activists who have made significant contributions to the field. Their insights come from their years of experience in media activism. The editing of the collection excels at putting these authors in dialogue, often referencing and responding to each other’s ideas. The reflexivity of the book opens up more questions than it answers—exactly the task of a book that will be a great inspiration for the next wave of media activists.

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