

Social Movements' Media: Evaluating Fresh Perspectives

Bart Cammaerts, Alice Mattoni, and Patrick McCurdy (Eds.), **Mediation and Protest Movements**, Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2013, 280 pp., \$34.03 (paperback), \$22.00 (Kindle).

Nicole Doerr, Alice Mattoni, and Simon Teune (Eds.), **Advances in the Visual Analysis of Social Movements**, Bingley, UK: Emerald Press, 2013, 260 pp., \$118.70 (hardcover), \$101.96 (Kindle).

Jesse Drew, **A Social History of Contemporary Democratic Media**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2013, 236 pp., \$107.41 (hardcover), \$102.00 (Kindle).

Ingrid M. Hoofd, **Ambiguities of Activism: Alter-Globalism and the Imperatives of Speed**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2012, 148 pp., \$107.29 (hardcover), \$110.00 (Kindle).

Clemencia Rodríguez, **Citizens' Media Against Armed Conflict: Disrupting Violence in Colombia**, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 336 pp., \$67.50 (hardcover), \$22.50 (paperback), \$17.00 (Kindle).

Sidney Tarrow, **The Language of Contention: Revolutions in Words, 1688–2012**, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 262 pp., \$40.40 (hardcover), \$25.19 (paperback), \$14.49 (Kindle).

Reviewed by

John D. H. Downing

Southern Illinois University, USA

The study of social movements in general has grown considerably over the past 30 years, but research has been dominated by political scientists and sociologists, very often those working within the Rational Social Actor paradigm. Mediatic—or, more generally, communicative—cultural, and, until recently, even emotional dimensions have rarely played a significant part in the stories these scholars tell, with the curious effect of reducing social movement activism to mute pieces on a chessboard of calculative moves. Movement activists are *very* rarely mute or any more rational than the rest of us, so the result is to produce a stick-figure/mime version of social movement process. In the meantime, media studies researchers have been exceptionally active over the past decade and a half in generating a slew of work on social movement media, community media, tactical media, and alternative media.

Events since 2008 in Greece, Iran, Thailand, Chile, and elsewhere—most notably the Arab region—in addition to the Occupy movement and the *indignados* movement, have compelled the hitherto reluctant communication academy to engage to an unprecedented degree with the protean phenomena variously termed *alternative media*, *community media*, *citizens media*, *tactical media*, *social movement media*, or still other sobriquets. Since 2011, a particular focus has been on digital connective media (social media), which are certainly of major interest, but have often been taken out of their societal and mediatic

context and elevated into techno-magic. Presentations on Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen at an April 2014 conference¹ on Arab region cultural activism demonstrated again and again how limited that optic has been.

This review evaluates half a dozen recent contributions² to debate on media generated within social movements. Let me begin with Nicole Doerr, Alice Mattoni, and Simon Teune's collection on visual dimensions of social movements, *Advances in the Visual Analysis of Social Movements*. The five main contributions here focus on the contrasted Facebook images of Khaled Said in Egypt's antiregime movement; the gendered contrast between activist website images of demonstrators in Finland and France; the images generated by groups protesting state surveillance in Germany; the deployment of fetal images by Australian antiabortion activists; and the use in social movement mobilization of images of individuals murdered by the police at demonstrations. There is also an introduction by the editors, a brief think piece by Donatella della Porta (a major Italian sociologist researching social movements), and two other essays unconnected to visuality issues.



The five studies address aspects of social movement media that are more often tackled by engaged art historians and commentators. Their value across the board is in suggesting a series of methodological approaches to the analysis of visual images, which could be very helpful to researchers venturing into this realm of social movement study. Thomas Oleson (Århus University) particularly emphasizes the powerful contrast generated by a family photo of Khaled Said juxtaposed on Facebook with a photo taken of his battered head and face after the Alexandria police had clubbed him to death. A total of 1.3 million joined the Facebook page *We Are All Khaled Said*.

Similarly, Tina Askanius (Lund University) explores the death images of Carlo Giuliani, Alex Grigoropoulos, and Ian Tomlinson, who were killed in demonstrations in Genova (2001), Athens (2008), and London (2009), respectively. She suggests that there is an emerging "YouTube-ification" process in cross-national mobilizations in which political martyrs and bereavement rituals play a key role: "YouTube becomes a shrine to be remembered, revisited, responded to, continuously added to, and altered" (2013, p. 127). With allowance for a little hyperbole in her writing here, there is a difference that Askanius is right to underscore, which is the potential for international open-archiving—always contingent on language skills—of rebellious upsurges and their cultural expressions.

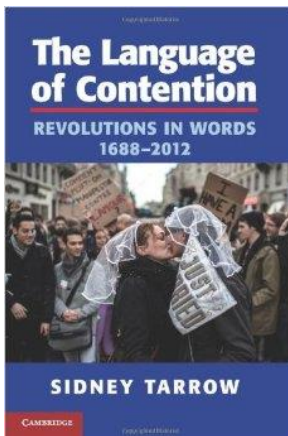
¹ *The Revolutionary Public Sphere*, organized by the Project for Advanced Research in Global Communication at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School. A book version is forthcoming.

² Having myself been active in this field for more than three decades, inevitably a number of the authors reviewed are known to me personally. Nonetheless, I shall maintain appropriate distance in what follows.

However, neither Oleson nor Askanius venture into the riot-porn debate. This term refers to coverage that was routine in, for example, Indymedia sites' news postings in the network's earlier years: namely, news of demonstrators battered and bloodied and pepper-sprayed at the hands of the police. The argument from Indymedia contributors was usually that they were making clear the ruthlessness of the state in defense of capital. While that intention in itself was appropriate, and certainly filled a typical gap in mainstream news coverage, it presumed that more activists would be galvanized, inflamed with outrage at the images in front of them. Yet it could equally be argued that an incessant diet of such images, unleavened by others, would accentuate precisely the numbing fear that police repression is intended to instill. Furthermore, the stimulus of intense physical drama might risk edging out the issues at stake.

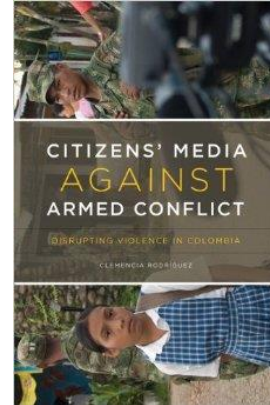
Kirsty McLaren's (Australian National University) study of Australian antiabortion activists' visual tactics has several pluses. Its focus, like the other essays, is on emotive issues (its title is "The Emotional Imperative of the Visual"), but McLaren insists that "the fetus is a complex icon, a repository of a multiplicity of ideas, both scientific and religious" (p. 93) and proceeds carefully to tease their strands apart. But her contribution has also the virtue of not confining itself to leftist social movements. At this point in time, not least in Europe, extreme Rightist and neopopulist social movements are having a heyday. They need much more critical attention.

Sidney Tarrow (*The Language of Contention*; Cornell University) is a U.S. doyen of social movement studies, who cut his researcher-teeth on the tumultuous social movements in Italy in the late 1960s and 1970s. The book's title suggests a study of the rhetoric of social movements and could easily imply a welcome shift in focus by this major sociologist toward analyzing the communicative dimensions of social movements. Courses on that topic are quite common in rhetoric programs. Tarrow veers away from that, however, focusing instead on a sizable scatter of transitions in politically charged words and wording: occupy; revolution; sabotage, strike, boycott; terror, terrorism; Negro, Black, African American; birth control, male chauvinism, sexual harassment; and still others. The book often makes for an interesting read, although at times it suggests lecture notes edited for publication a little too fast. The frequent fact of transitions in meaning in situations of social and political contentiousness is the book's connecting thread.



Indeed, one of the more recent currents in social movement research is the so-called Contentious Politics school. Which politics are *not* contentious is unclear to this humble reviewer, any more than which media are *not* social, but the pragmatic payoff of these fuzzy descriptors in the academy—and for the commentocracy—is beyond dispute. The New Social Movements school descriptor, with its normal disinterest in social movements outside Western Europe and the United States, and its implicit dismissal of the labor movement, along with many dimensions of feminist, peace, and ecological activism, is another tiresome academic buzzword, along with the so-called Affective Turn, which tidily sterilizes emotions into 'affect'.

A distinctly different note is struck by Clemencia Rodríguez (University of Oklahoma) in ***Citizens' Media Against Armed Conflict: Disrupting Violence in Colombia***, a study of three community radio stations and their roles during Colombia's civil wars, conflicts that, while now hopefully receding a little, go back a number of decades with deep roots in extremely unequal land ownership. Over a period of seven or eight years, Rodríguez revisited her native Colombia for substantial periods of time and tracked the developing situations surrounding these local radio and digital media projects. The organizers of the projects had quite often been in considerable danger, caught between contending militaries—the army/paramilitary units organized by rich landowners/armed guerrillas/"narcos"—all demanding loyalty and information on their opponents.



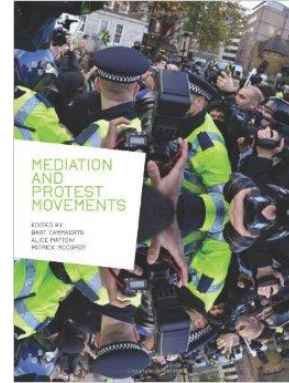
When people think of community radio in the United States or other stable countries, concerns such as armed conflict, terrorization, the generation of suspicion of neighbors, the impact on farming, the effect on children's psychic health in particular, and the need to stay indoors away from public spaces are a million miles away, in another galaxy. Radio in the United States and similar countries has become primarily a medium for promoting recorded music sales. How can community radio projects operate, and how can they operate constructively, in the midst of long-drawn-out political and social mayhem? For those with no such experience, it takes a sustained effort of will to imagine oneself there. Some radio activists lost their lives because they were interpreted by one or another military squad as favoring their opponents.

Rodríguez's book is not an alternative to going to Colombia, to being there. But what it does provide is a series of longitudinal case studies of very different projects, and a look at the series of challenges, of towering obstacles, that confronted the radio activists. There was a vast need for the gradual restoration of community trust, after long periods when almost everyone feared that their neighbors, under pressure from one or another military forces, might inform on them or produce lies about them to avoid suspicion themselves or just to be able to "give" their ruthless interrogators "something." Regaining trust could not be accomplished in any kind of a hurry.

One of the surprises in Rodríguez's research, a dimension that her pro-collective leaning had not prepared her for, was the pivotal role often played in these stations, whatever their other differences, by particular individual leaders of exceptional talent and tenacity. She insists on a further reframing: Assuming these stations *could* provide "comprehensive journalistic coverage" was utterly out of touch with reality on the ground. Operating in these conditions as a conventional fact-gatherer was liable to be suicidal. But even without the danger dimension, Rodríguez calls on readers to put to rest the presumption that communication practice should be for persuasion and "one-way dissemination of information." She insists that we need to engage with "the potential of media technologies as tools to foster horizontal communication . . . grassroots leaders' communication competence, dialogue between citizens and local governments, networking, and endless opportunities to resignify life worlds" (p. 233).

Finally, Rodríguez emphasizes that Colombian conditions, where “social movements have normalized grassroots participation in political and economic decision-making for almost a century” (p. 236), cannot be expected to replicate themselves in other locales. Even the three stations she researched were different. She disavows any notion that she is assembling a how-to cookbook for community radio in violent scenarios, for the elementary reason that traditions of participation vary widely and initiatives can only stand a chance if they are locally grounded.

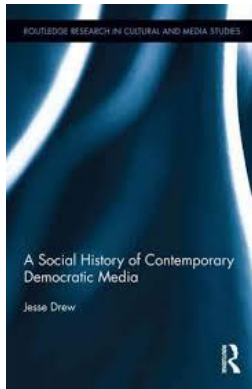
The studies in *Mediation and Protest Movements*, edited by Bart Cammaerts, Alice Mattoni, and Patrick McCurdy, range across transnational movement media in Los Angeles and the Mexican state of Oaxaca; Gandhism’s international historical diffusion (and dilution); video activism at the very heavily policed 2009 UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen; cross-media activism in a postearthquake disaster scenario in L’Aquila, Italy, including a G8 summit held on the spot; German activists’ communication tactics regarding the hugely shielded 2007 G8 Heiligendamm summit; and movement media activism in the Philippines, a critically dangerous country at present in which to practice fearless journalism.



The book also contains a rare study of an activists’ evaluation process, retrospectively, of the communicative dimensions of a successful campaign in Rhode Island, in 2010–2011 during the fiscal crisis, to roll back the state governor’s decision to cancel all funding for affordable housing. As lead author Charlotte Ryan (University of Massachusetts-Lowell) rightly notes, media and other activists rarely get to conduct these self-studies, partly through sheer overwork and lack of time. Yet many more of these evaluations and self-evaluations are needed in order to build up practical knowledge of a range of media projects and the circumstances of their successes and failures.

The other essays in the volume consist of a reflection on movement media and democracy (by della Porta); three studies on the media practices and understandings of movement activists (by Alice Mattoni, Patrick McCurdy, and Anastasia Kavada); and a final reflection by Dieter Rucht, a well-known specialist on cyber-activism and antiwar media at the Freie Universität, Berlin. The overall quality is strong and cross-national, and engages with Mexico and the Philippines, not just the Global North countries. A number of the chapters address Internet dimensions, yet a particularly interesting chapter is Sean Scalmer’s (University of Melbourne) examination of the transnational diffusion of Gandhian political philosophy, long before the Internet, within major social movements in a number of nations. Many of the contributors to this volume have been involved at one time or another in the Community Communication Section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research, perhaps the foremost international forum for research in this zone.

Jesse Drew’s (University of California-Davis) *A Social History of Contemporary Democratic Media* draws on a remarkable personal history of labor, antiracist, and media activism, largely in California, stretching back three to four decades. His acknowledgments list reads like a roll-call of activist organizers. His evident passion is for what he calls DIY—do it yourself—media, such as zines, low-power



FM radio, microcinema (screening/discussing a film in a small location), street art, community networks, guerrilla video, and culture-jamming, where access costs are low to zero. These methods are surveyed in Chapter 2. The author effortlessly straddles the fence between doing social movement media and analyzing them.

However, Drew is keenly aware of the transnational dimensions of contemporary social movements in particular, and in Chapters 3 (“Networking the Global Community”) and 4 (“Labor Communications in the New Global Economy”) he addresses a whole raft of examples under each of these headings. A large chunk of Chapter 3 is taken up with comments on the Zapatista movement’s contributions to inspiring network activism transnationally and to the galvanizing moment of the four-day-long anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle in 1999. The Indymedia network emerged from those influences, and thereafter those impulses soon translated themselves into using YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter platforms, no doubt to the profound surprise of their founders and owners. Drew is also careful to underscore the historical contribution of the debates of the 1970s and early 1980s, under UNESCO auspices, in favor of a New World Information and Communication Order, to this communicative globalization from below.

In chapter 4, on labor, however, Drew addresses less familiar ground, even to many who engage with movement media issues. He provides Mexican and Canadian as well as U.S.-based information about the forms of organizing, especially the communication strategies, used to protest against the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) of 1994, including those used in the years leading up to its enactment. He also probes the democratizing currents within often authoritarian labor unions and examines how groups such as Teamsters for a Democratic Union and Miners for Democracy have deployed communication technologies in their struggles against their rigid leaderships and their often unimaginative policies. The chapter concludes with a discussion of migrant and precarious labor and uses of ICTs in those particularly vulnerable sectors.

Drew’s fifth chapter takes on other crucial dimensions of the contemporary struggle over communication, namely intellectual property regimes and the privacy/ surveillance issue. All too often these are assumed to be distinct from social movement communication, insulated topics for policy wonks. It is to Drew’s credit that he makes them a central part of his argument about the current state of play in anticapitalist and social justice movement media.

Sometimes the information comes very thick and fast and just a tad breathlessly in this text. It is certainly not a book to be polished off at speed. Also, Drew’s argument that there is a cosmic shift underway from top-down media formats to horizontal ones is not unfamiliar—and it is to some degree plausible—but it is provocatively techno-optimist. However, the book provides a remarkable conspectus, not least for students, and it is to be hoped that, along with some of the other excessively priced volumes reviewed here, it will be released in paperback soon.

The final text³ to be considered is Ingrid Hoofd's (University of Singapore) detailed polemic against crucial flaws she proposes in current common understandings of alter-globalist activism. With her highly committed background in projects such as Indymedia and The Next Five Minutes media activism, conferences that used to take place in Amsterdam and her still resolutely feminist, anti-racist, and anti-corporate views, Hoofd nonetheless vigorously argues that these flaws terminally vitiate progress toward a socially just planet. In *Ambiguities of Activism: Alter-Globalism and the Imperatives of Speed*, her sights are set on three spaces: digital media activism, especially Indymedia; no-borders activism with reference to migrant workers and refugees; and climate activism.



Her argument, reduced to—she might well say, cheapened beyond—its core, is that current activism in all three of those spaces, compulsively yet unawares, frames itself according to what it seeks to challenge, namely, the domination of transnational capital moving at a dizzying pace to penetrate every pore of planetary life. Throughout the book, Hoofd's master term for this process is what she calls, inspired by Paul Virilio, "speed-elitism." This, she asserts, is a way to capture the essence of contemporary transnational capital. But in her argument, activists currently are all too often voluntary victims of *and missionaries for* speed-elitism's deepest logic.

To mount this case, she leans very heavily indeed on Derrida. The principle of immanent critique, and of acknowledging our inescapable burial as critical thinkers in the given dynamics of human society, is central to her argument, as is the absurdity of thinking we can somehow transcend that fact by an act of the will. In that sense, as she reiterates throughout, her plea is not to go home and stop agitating, but to engage in auto-critique in the certainty that without it we are lost. In the current era, this means a radical rejection of the fascination with *speed* that she perceives in activist practice and theory. The absorption with forms of rapid mobilization enabled by high-tech communication tools, the notion of the Migrant as the instantaneous Dissolver of Borders/Herald of the Frontier-Free Future, and the urgency with which drastic ecological intervention is insisted upon despite the inexorable complexity of successful intervention are all instances of the fetishization of speed. Hoofd in response calls for a metaphorical *slowing down* to enable actual debate and dialogue well beyond the favored circles of intellectuals who write about and discuss constructive social change.

With some of her critique, at intervals, I find myself in agreement, especially in Chapter 3 on how the figure of the Migrant features in some contemporary political theory and also with her scorn for Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's quasi-mystical *pronunciamentos* about the tide of history in *Empire*

³ New offerings continue to emerge all the time. Here I can only flag three other recent ones: Svetla Turnin & Ezra Winton, eds., *Screening Truth to Power: A Reader on Documentary Activism*, Montréal, Canada, cinema politica.org, 2014; Stefania Milan, *Social Movements and Their Technologies*, London, UK, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Katie Moylan, *Broadcasting Diversity: Migrant Representation in Irish Radio*, Bristol, UK, Intellect, 2013.

and **Multitude**. But (unfortunately, for this reviewer), Hoofd seems to feel the most pressing need is to attack the problem on the terrain of post-structuralist theory. Having myself in a recent seminar suffered a right derrida (lower-case "d" as intended) to the jaw from one of Jacques's advocates, who seemed to think that simply mentioning a piece by his hero would be enough to flatten or at least shame me, at present I might be thought unduly sensitive in this matter. Perhaps the only way critically to unsettle activist worshippers at the Hardt and Negri shrine, and those of Italy's post-*operaismo* school, is to menace them with even more senior deities such as Derrida. Hoofd's sense of the empirical realities of the migrant worker experience, for example, do come through from time to time, but somehow play second fiddle to getting the authentic theoretical formulas right. And her defensive insistence on the legitimacy of critiquing "progressive" conceptual panaceas becomes repetitious, especially in the first chapter.

There is, in other words, a worthwhile and important argument about contemporary activism, including Internet activism, made by Hoofd, but the hoops it is made to jump through risk obscuring it. The obligations of instantaneity and always-on mobilization do threaten to mirror the velocity of global capital flows and to draw attention away from the messier, far less exciting, and sometimes turgid process of trying to move the planet forward equitably—not by G8 or G20, but by a mass of local-to-transnational fora operating over time, supported and fed by all kinds of cultural activism.

Reference

Askanius, T. (2013). Protest movements and spectacles of death: From urban places to video spaces. In N. Doerr, A. Mattoni, & S. Teune (Eds.), *Advances in the visual analysis of social movements* (pp. 105–133). Bingley, UK: Emerald Press.