Peter Dahlgren, **The Political Web: Media, Participation and Alternative Democracy**, Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 195 pp., $28.00 (paperback).

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        The opening scene of Peter Dahlgren's newest book is one that went largely unnoticed in the American news media. In January 2013, the central European country of Slovenia was rocked by nationwide anti-government protests, protests that, within five weeks, forced the resignation of the country's prime minister and the formation of a new government. Although these momentous protests did not get much attention further west, the story of the Slovenian protests is now a familiar one, echoing similar citizen movements springing up all over the world. These movements, Dahlgren argues, do not succeed or fail on their own. Both organizers and governments alike rely on digital media to drum up support and mobilize populations. Mainstream journalism coverage, of course, also plays a crucial role, as do the high-profile public intellectuals who lend their voices to these causes. The roles these actors play, and how new media has profoundly reshaped those roles, are the focus of Dahlgren's account.
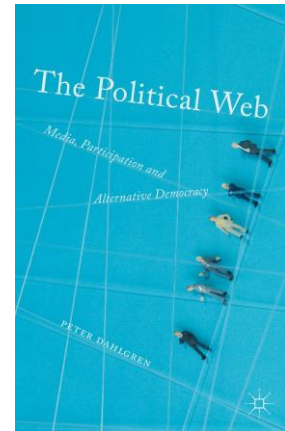
        The Political Web is about new online practices and the structures that afford them, and about the citizens, professionals, and social movements navigating these changes. Finally, self-reflexively, it is also about the scholars working to make sense of them. The book not only provides fascinating case studies and a dense theoretical repertoire with which to examine them, but also spends time considering the broader social importance of such critical analysis. By combining these various lines of thought, this work serves multiple purposes: a thorough literature review for any scholar of emerging digital media and social practices, a detailed application of current theory to recent events, and a relevant discussion of the place of critical academic work.

        Dahlgren moves deftly from topic to topic in tightly organized chapters. Part I of the book, "Politics and Participation on the Web," is an overview, first of politics and participation, and second of the various force fields of the Web in which those practices can be found. Part II, "Evolving Forms and Practices," presents a series of case studies: Occupy Wall Street, online public intellectuals, and Web journalism. Finally, Part III, "Critical Approaches," is an argument for the applicability and importance of critical methods.

        Throughout, Dahlgren makes clear his commitment to discourse analysis as a primary method for making sense of a shifting, subjective world. He establishes this at the very beginning; when discussing political engagement—which "will always in part be conditional, shaped by shifting contingencies in the social world" (p. 26)—he suggests that, in order to "elucidate (collective) subjectivity," scholars would do

best to examine discourses, as they "operate in and define specific social contexts, which we could say makes them the carriers of the meanings that are in circulation in society" (ibid.).

Readers see discourse analysis in action in chapter 3, in which Dahlgren details the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe before applying it to the case of the U.S. social movement Occupy Wall Street. In order to understand the necessarily contingent nature of a movement struggling to develop and express its identity, Dahlgren examines the media produced during Occupy Wall Street's first six weeks. This includes not just the media produced by the movement itself, but also the mainstream news media that worked with and against the movement's attempts at identity formation. Using discourse theory, Dahlgren identifies the nodal points of the Occupy Wall Street movement, and how these discursive points were used to "create chains of equivalence with allies within the Occupy movement across the U.S. as well as abroad" (p. 81). He argues that by using nodal points that resonated broadly with citizens around the globe, the Occupy movement wielded a double-edged sword of wide popularity coupled with vague goals. This combination resulted in the eventual collapse of the more high-profile parts of the movement, he says, while still allowing for its fundamental message of alternative democratic possibilities to take root in the popular imagination. Dahlgren also notes that by focusing on these and other discursive strategies, academics studying this and similar movements can develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of social movements in a digital age.

Dahlgren sees discourse analysis—in particular the aforementioned discourse theory based in the theoretical work of scholars like Laclau and Mouffe (as well as other forms of critical discourse analysis)— as performing a unique and necessary function within communications theory. In his final section examining the history, trajectory, and rationale for critical approaches to media and democracy, Dahlgren identifies four common themes in theoretical perspectives: rationalism, reflexivity, transparency, and contingency. Discourse theory, he argues, is particularly applicable to the theme of contingency; taking discourse as a jumping off point allows scholars to explore the social and material practices that pilot and generate the subject (p. 149). A discourse approach also addresses the recent retreat within communication theory of the (oft-repaired) concept of "ideology." For Dahlgren, "[d]iscourses can serve to help engender and sustain social order—as well as to challenge it—by solidifying patterns of meaning. Thus, discourses are more than just text; they are manifestations of (collective) social practice" (p. 173).

The emeritus professor is at his best in this volume when guiding the reader through the various theoretical approaches to media and communication studies, using his many years in the academy to draw clear connections through different eras and schools of thought. In this way, the book is of particular value to those new to the field. Moreover, it is easy to read without being oversimplified. Even when digging into the nuances of the evolution of Marxist theory or describing new approaches to cultural critique, Dahlgren writes with such precision and clarity that the book will be accessible even to new students in the field of media and communication studies. As such, the book would be useful in many other fields as well— anthropology, sociology, and political science, to name a few.

At a brief 177 pages, not including the extensive references and index sections, Dahlgren speeds through his chapters. The case studies feel rushed; Dahlgren skips any detailed discussion of his research methods, and often does little to situate his case studies within their respective contexts. However, the

purpose of Dahlgren's book is not a detailed consideration of any one topic, but is a call to arms for the reconsideration of a number of pressing issues. The expanding world of new forms of political participation, emerging technologies, and alternative media practices all require new theoretical approaches. Dahlgren convincingly argues that the most versatile tool for this new world is a thorough examination of the discourses these new systems and practices produce—an approach which can adapt to and account for constant changes in subjectivity, citizenship, and community. In this way, *The Political Web* is exceptionally timely: It offers scholars not yet another singular knowledge to impress upon the world, but a new approach to producing knowledge that could go on to change it.