Review of "Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice"

Published in New Community Quarterly, Vol II, No II, 2004

Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice, 
Martha McCaughey, Michael D. Ayers (Ed) 
Routledge, 2003

Reviewed by Lev Lafayette

"Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice" certainly comes with an impressive array of authors. Among the thirteen chapters (including introduction and epilogue) one finds seven assistant and associate professors and additional five doctoral students or PhD graduates. This does not however, include major recognized authors in the field and one also finds a number of new contributors to the field of "cyberculture". Notably - and this becomes a telling point - none have made significant contributions to information or communications technology.

The text is broken up into three parts with the first, "cyber-social movements emerging online", consisting of four chapters. The second part, "theorizing online activism", consists of a further four chapters and the final part, "cautionary readings of community empowerment and capitalism" consists of three. As will be illustrated these subheadings are somewhat imprecise. The introduction states the purpose of the book is a multidisciplinary scholarly and political response to the increasing commercialization of the Internet and to resolve questions such as whether the Internet can be used for political activism rather than supplementing "real life" struggles.

The first chapter, by Laura J. Gurak and John Logie is a positive start. In reviewing the online protests against Lotus Marketplace (consumer database) and the U.S. government "Clipper Chip" (surveillance tool) and the more recent "haunting" of Yahoo! geocities sites (following changes to their intellectual property terms of service), an excellent cultural anthropology is provided which highlights three successful protest movements against corporate and state initiatives, albeit with the amusing description that the first two represent "two of the earliest Internet-based protests", whereas both actually occurred in the early 1990s.

In the next chapter Dorothy Kidd argues, with a review of indymedia.org, that comparisons can be made with the enclosure of the commons in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. This is fanciful at best, and Kidd's review isn't helped by the lack of discussion of other alternative online media sources (e.g., usenet, "blogging" software) or criticisms of indymedia's methods (e.g., anonymity, lack of moderation, quality control etc).

In Sandor Vegh's contribution, "Classifying forms of Online Activism", a useful distinction is made between (i) awareness/advocacy, (ii) organization/mobilization and (iii) action/reaction. With a concentration on the
latter, three well known "hacktivist" activities are reviewed and analyzed; namely the Zapatista/Electronic Disturbance Theatre, the "cyberwar" between Chinese and U.S. hackers in 2001, and the World Bank protests also of 2001.

The final chapter of the first part by Larry Elin is a character study of political activist Zeke Spier who makes substantial use of, and is charged by, online activities and resources. Whilst there is no doubt of Spier's commitment to political action (he has been jailed a number of times for engaging in non-violent civil disobedience), it is difficult to discern exactly what contribution this chapter has to "online activism theory and practice".

The second part of the book opens with a chapter by Lee Salter which attempts to use Habermas' theory of the public sphere and the system/lifeworld distinction to analyze new social movements on the Internet. The description of Habermas' theory, Internet applications and institutional bodies is fairly superficial, although there is a promising moment when the transfer of domain-name authority from IANA to ICANN is raised. Whilst the conclusion is clearly in the right direction, it cannot possibly be described as a rigorous theoretical perspective of the system/lifeworld debate in reference to the Internet.

Michael Ayers subsequent chapter, "Comparing Collective Identity in Online and Offline Feminist Activists" raises theoretical and practical questions of concern, the theory is fleeting and the empirical sample size is so small that it is well within the range of statistical error - even if it does confirm previous studies suggesting that online culture has libertarian and individualistic orientations.

Maria Garrido's and Alexander Halavias' contribution on mapping networks of support for the Zapatista movements through analysis of hyperlinks is something that one would surely consider to be more of an empirical rather than a theoretical question. This aside, the history of the online and offline activities of the Zapatistas and their supporters is well covered, and the use of Lin Freeman's distinction between "closeness" and "betweenness" is cleverly applied. Not surprisingly, the conclusion notes close links between the Zapatista's and Latin American information services and human rights organizations.

In the final chapter of the second part, Wyatt Galusky reviews examples on how the environmental anti-toxins movement, through freedom of information legislation and the World Wide Web, has led to citizen empowerment. Better attention is paid in this chapter to theoretical issues, and Galusky promotes the important concept that a citizen represents an informed and active participant in civil society. There is however an overemphasis on the role of community NGO's rather than participation in government legislation and their institutional bodies and this affects the conclusion which promotes an avoidance strategy of dealing with "technocratic" decision making procedures.

The third part opens with Joanne Lebert reviewing positive and negative experiences of Amnesty International's International Secretariat with contemporary information and communications technologies. This is a fairly comprehensive overview although the issues raised are relatively trivial, universal to any organization that deals with information, media and response in modern society. The author certainly deserves kudos for raising the issue of access on an international level, although double-checking their research when citing empirical claims is recommended in the future. Some (like the claim that 80% of the population has never made a telephone call) are destined for the urban legends bin.

Steven McLaine's contribution, "Ethnic Communities Online" compares particular online communities for Afro-, Asian- and Latin-Americans, differentiating between the profit motive between the providers of these communities and their stated purpose. Of particular theoretical interest to this reviewer is the fact that the Afro- community was homogenized along the mythic category of race, whereas the Asian community was ethnicity heterogeneous recognizing widespread divergence within the general categorization. The
conclusion, highlighting a campaign following a perceived stereotypical advertisement suggests that online atomized communities are prone to populist collectivism, although the author maintains that the debate is between profit and purpose rather than between particular and universal interests.

The final chapter by Joshua Gamson, looks at collective identity based on gay sexuality and concerns raised following the commercial merger of PlanetOut.com and Gay.com. Gamson recognizes that this should hardly be expected: "The folks at PlanetOut and Gay.com, like those in many other businesses targeting marginalized groups, likes to dance at the wedding of doing good and doing business and there is no reason to doubt their sincerity". Gamson correctly argues that this is simply business as usual and that alternative sexualities form a pseudo-ethnicity (a marketable group), which is simply par for the course. The important aspect instead of course is the political rights for the group.

David Silver's epilogue notes the relatively new discipline of Internet studies and recent publications on the relationship between the Internet and political change and reviews each chapter present in the text (one would normally expect this from an introduction rather than an epilogue). Silver's conclusion that 'Cyberactivism' provides "activists and scholars alike a blueprint for future political engagement and academic research" simply cannot be sustained. 'Cyberactivism' is primarily a cultural anthropology, with particularly weak contributions to both theory and empirical data, and it certainly isn't a handbook for political activists. It has its uses, as this review has indicated, but it certainly isn't destined for greatness either.

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This review was written at Ruxcon 2004, Australia's IT security conference.

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