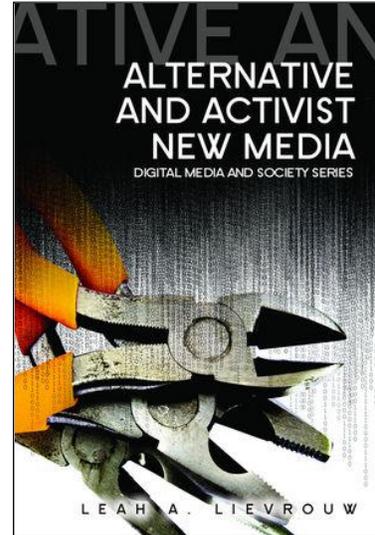


Leah A. Lievrouw, **Alternative and Activist New Media**, Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011, 200 pp., \$15.39 (paperback).

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Growing out of the shadows of the first financial catastrophe of the 21st century, the year 2011 was marked by energetic, resolute waves of social and political unrest. Sweeping across the globe from Morocco to Manhattan, communities came together to challenge authoritarian regimes, political and religious oppression, and extreme economic inequality. Indicating the seriousness of our times, these uprisings toppled governments and rekindled the radical imagination, forecasting the emergence of a new cycle of sociopolitical resistance. Many novel characteristics personify this upsurge of political struggle, from the horizontal general assemblies of Occupy Wall Street activists to the leadership of young people throughout North Africa and the Middle East. One of the most widely celebrated attributes of this contemporary groundswell of resistance, however, is the critical role of the Internet, social networks, and new forms of activist-produced media. This crystallized in Egypt when President Hosni Mubarak attempted to “shut off” the Internet, and once his regime had collapsed, commentators made rash claims that this was the world’s first “Twitter revolution.”



As scholars attempt to make sense of the changing face of social movements, there are a growing number of books that focus on the intersection of new media and social change. One such offering is *Alternative and Activist New Media*, written by communications scholar Leah Lievrouw. The book, which is pitched toward an advanced undergraduate readership, explores the importance and diversity of activist new media projects in the “information age.” As Dr. Lievrouw states, “disputes about what new media are for, who gets to use them, and who decides have set the stage for the current rise in alternative and activists new media projects.” She adds that “this book explores these contending views by highlighting several major families or genres of contemporary new media projects that have adopted an explicitly alternative, activist or oppositional perspective” (p. 3). To undertake this assessment, the author develops a valuable five-part typology for the different genres of media activism—culture jamming, hacktivism (which she calls *alternative computing*), participatory journalism, mediated mobilization, and commons knowledge. In successive chapters, she offers an analysis of each of these categories through the use of case studies that bring to the fore the core principles and underlying logics of the different types of media-based activism.

An ancillary aim of the book is to make an argument for a theory of mediation as a conceptual tool for studying the fluid interaction between communication and social change. As Lievrouw explains, “mediation comprises an ongoing, mutually shaping relationship between people’s use of communication technology (reconfiguration) and their communicative action (remediation) that produces social and

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technological change" (p. 231). She goes on to argue that mediation is an advance over other frameworks because of the focus on social relationships, experience, and process, which moves us away from static concepts of "the media" and the seemingly opposed frameworks of mass versus interpersonal communications or administrative versus critical media studies.

The effectiveness of *Alternative and Activist New Media* comes from the author's profound understanding of and dialogue with media and communication theory. This allows her to pose useful definitions of nebulous terms such as *new media*, while developing meaningful categories through which to organize the book and the larger genre of alternative and activist media. Moreover, the definitions she offers and the categories she creates are done in dialogue with the larger theories of communication and media studies in mind, which gives the book new insight into forms of activist media, as well as offering the work a rich texture.

The strength of the typologies Lievrouw creates, as well as her ability to offer cogent definitions that put this work in dialogue with media and communication studies, is, however, tempered by a lack of deep engagement with social movement studies or the intersections of art, media, and activism. The balance of her political theory is developed in the second chapter of the book, "The Roots of Alternative and Activist Media." Here, Lievrouw focuses on two art-based political movements—Dadaism and the Situationist International (SI)—along with the new social movement theory (NSM). She offers a short historical background and, at times, some definitions or key components of the different fields. She contends that the two movements (Dadaism and SI), as well as NSM theory, were the forerunners of alternative and activist media today.

At one level, the chapter feels extremely uneven and disjointed, as it is hard to compare two artistically driven political movements with a body of theory about contemporary social movements, based on the concept of postindustrial or informational society. Further, while the discussion Lievrouw presents regarding Dadaism, SI, and NSM is interesting and certainly offers a great deal to our understanding of activist media, she does not give a cogent or compelling rationale for their selection over other theories of social movements nor does she relate histories of the use of art and media in social change. This is compounded by the fact that these three histories/fields do not necessarily hold together, as there does not seem to be a red thread connecting Dadaists and Situationists on one hand and NSM theorists on the other. The outcome is that while Lievrouw is able to guide the reader through sophisticated explorations on the intersection of activist media that complicate communication theory, we are not afforded the same ability to challenge social movement theory, instead accepting NSM as a fully articulated body of thought.

The strengths and weaknesses of the book are exemplified by the chapter "Breaking through the Information Blockade," which focuses on participatory journalism. Here, Lievrouw offers a window onto the transforming landscape of journalism today, which is impacted by the power of new technologies and the failure of the business models of traditional journalism. Building on this context, she looks closely at the birth and expansion of the indymedia movement to understand how activists are attempting to create new journalistic media practices and alternative channels of communication. Lievrouw asserts that indymedia is an important form of media activism to learn from, but one with some important shortcomings to keep in mind as we attempt to understand participatory journalism. Mirroring the

strengths and weaknesses of the book overall, the chapter helps readers to understand the role of participatory journalism as a new form of alternative media that helps activists make an end-run around the information blockade. At the same time, without a more developed theory around contemporary social movements we are left without a thoroughgoing analysis of the failures of indymedia and how this project is situated amongst other social movement formations in the contemporary landscape.

*Alternative and Activism New Media* is an ambitious project, which aims to offer a framework for students, activists, and scholars to understand the wonderful cacophony of media-based activism that has emerged in the last few decades. As a communication scholar, Lievrouw does an excellent job, using activist new media to build rich concepts around media and communications. Unfortunately, however, her engagement with social movement theory is less defined; therefore, her contributions to that literature are less clear. In balance, though, Lievrouw does the field an important service by taking new forms of activist and alternative media seriously and showing how they are in constant dialogue with the larger field of media and communications studies.