Media and Communication Activism

Wolfgang Sützl and Theo Hug (Eds.), **Activist Media and Biopolitics: Critical Media Interventions in the Age of Biopower**, Austria: Innsbruck University Press, 2012, 209 pp., €27.90 (paperback).

Lawrence R. Frey and Kevin M. Carragee (Eds.), **Communication Activism Vol. III: Struggling for Social Justice Amidst Difference**, New York: Hampton Press, 2012, 478 pp., $39.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Micky Lee
Suffolk University

Activist Media and Biopolitics: Critical Media Interventions in the Age of Biopower and *Communication Activism Vol. III: Struggling for Social Justice Amidst Difference* both address how citizens and activists employ communication tactics and information technologies to effect social change—by empowering sex workers with poetry and phone technologies, intervening social practices through performance and community programs, stopping factory farms from polluting the environment, and challenging the biotechnology industry. Though both titles concern grassroots activism, the perspectives and theories that inform the essays are different. This difference reflects that the boundary between applied communication studies and media studies is hard to transgress—a point that will be elaborated after an assessment of select chapters from both titles.
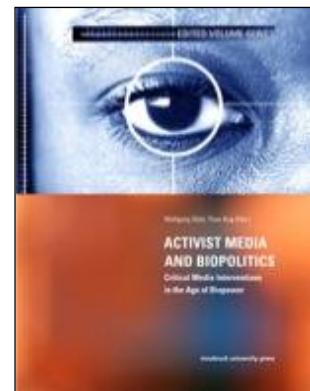
Activist Media and Biopolitics

The essays in this volume were first presented at a conference of the same title that was organized by the Innsbruck Media Studies research group in 2010. As editors Sützl and Hug explain in the introduction, political power (to Foucault) "has long articulated itself as subjection, as constructing its own bodies" (p. 8). The power exercised on the bodies is biopower and the politics imposed on them is biopolitics. For example, a census is a technique that documents what the population is like in terms of race, gender, and age. In this volume, media are broadly defined to include mass media (television, radio, film), new media/new information and communication technologies (cell phone, locative media, software), arts (performance arts, installation arts, video arts), and biology (skin, cells, tissues). The inclusive definition of media begs the question: What may not be the media?

The essays are categorized into four groups: beyond tactical media, borders and boundaries, politics, and biotech. The editors eloquently explain how each essay fits into its assigned category, although most could fit under another two or even three headings. The first group of essays looks at the application of post-tactical media (roughly understood as the use of communication technologies to counter political and military hegemony in the post-9/11 world). They address how immigrants use

locative media to cross the United State-Mexico border ("Mobile Bodies, Zones of Attention, and Tactical Media Interventions"); how sex workers use a telephony-based social software system to form communication networks ("X_MSG: Unfolding Histories of Sex Work and Software in Invisible Activist Machinery"); how a virtual street theatre group kidnapped a commemorative cow to be a political prisoner of sorts to protest against the Austrian government for rewriting national history with a right-wing agenda ("Biopolitical Interventions in the Urban Data Space").

The second grouping of essays, borders and boundaries, looks at how activists challenge the artificiality of borders. The first essay in this group, "Off Limits: Elastic Border Regimes and the (Visual) Politics of Making Things Public," examines three resistance movements that question the "plasticity" of border regimes. The second essay, "Sexual and National Mobility and Visibility Regimes in Israel/Palestine and How to Cross Through Them," looks at how ethnic and sexual minorities negotiate mobility and visibility in the public. The third essay, "Sk-interfaces: Telematic and Transgenic Art's Post-digital Turn to Materiality," looks at telematic and transgenic arts that use the human skin as a medium. Both types of arts question the boundary between arts and sciences. While telematic arts recognize that science has transformed arts, transgenic arts employ science in arts.

The heading for the third group of essays, politics, is located in a more familiar terrain for communication scholars. The first essay here, "Virtual Suicide as Decisive Political Art," discusses virtual individual and collective suicide movements that protest against social networking sites that collect users' information. The second essay, "Right Wing Activism: The Next Challenge for Alternative Media Scholarship," questions if the current understanding and definition of alternative media can be applied to right-wing groups. The third essay, "Media Activism in Search of 'Truth'? Questioning the Mission to Restore Sanity," affirms that the media are still capable of motivating the mass. The last essay in this section, "Reclaiming a Story: Recasting the Cherokee Image through Melodramatic Narrative," argues that a historically oppressed group is able to use storytelling to justify its oppression toward its own marginalized members.

The fourth group of essays, which comprise the biotech category, sees biology as a medium that both challenges and reinforces hegemony. The first essay, "Tweaking Genes in Your Garage: Biohacking between Activism and Entrepreneurship," discusses the hacking biology movement in which amateur scientists challenge institutional science by promoting open knowledge. The second essay, "On Creating Life and Discourses about Life: Pests, Monsters, and Biotechnology Chimeras," looks at biomedia—a hybrid between information technology and biological components and processes—and argues that life sciences are political sciences. The last essay, "The Cerebral Subject in Popular Culture and the 'End of life,'" examines how popular culture and arts question the lines between life and death, as well as between the human brain and the thinking machine. I will discuss the merits and shortcomings of *Activist Media and Biopolitics* after reviewing the next volume on activism.

Communication Activism Vol. III: Struggling for Social Justice Amidst Difference
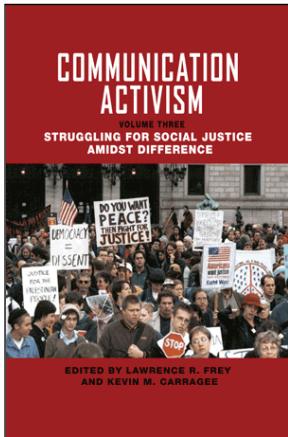
The third edited volume of *Communication Activism* highlights the salience of difference as intersected by gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, and immigration status. Editors Frey and Carragee state in the introduction that it is only recently that the concept of "activism" has been associated with "scholarship" and "research." Their viewpoint is shared by the editors of *Activist Media and Biopolitics*, who suggest that media activism is a new subject in media studies. Communication activism scholarship is grounded in rhetorical and applied communication studies. The study of activist individuals, groups, and organizations is mostly done from a third-person perspective in which the researchers "stand outside the stream of human events and observe, describe, interpret, explain, and . . . critique what occurs, as well as . . . offer suggestions for what could or should occur" (p. 7). The editors, on the other hand, advocate for a first-person perspective from which the researchers are activists themselves. Applied communication research that adopts a first-person perspective is similar to action research (Greenwood & Levin, 2003), which is defined as "research in which the validity and value of research results are tested through collaborative insider-professional researcher knowledge generation and applications processes in projects of social change that aim to increase fairness, wellness, and self-determination" (p. 145). The trusting and collaborative relationship between the researchers and the subjects is one of the nine tenets of activism research laid out by the editors of *Communication Activism*. They emphasize that the researchers are scholar-citizens; they do not step into a new terrain to study the natives. Instead, they study the communities to which they belong. Activism scholarship emphasizes learning and applying local knowledge, even though "the efficacy of local activism is linked to . . . its engagement with broader social movements" (Frey & Carragee, 2012, p. 21).

Each of the volume's 10 chapters presents a case study. Chapters 1 and 2 cover the two overseas case studies: the former about facilitating a dialogue between Greek and Turkish Cypriots after a confrontation and the latter about launching a foundation to counter human trafficking in Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Mexico. The other chapters are devoted to cases based in the United States and discuss campaigns that include the resignation of a Rhode Island politician who battered his domestic partner, the closing of an Ohio factory farm, the sparing from execution of an African American inmate, a dialogue about race relations in the workplace, the provision of job opportunities for poor people in Ohio, and the intervention of substance abuse among Native Americans in New Mexico. Each of the chapters provides a discussion of how theories inform activism and vice versa; a detailed account of the design, implementation, and outcome of the campaign; and lessons learned from communication activism, including how activism has reflexively transformed the researchers into scholar-citizens.

Activism for Sex Workers

To discuss the merits and shortcomings of both volumes, two essays are compared: Jönsson and Hammett's "X_MSG: Unfolding Histories of Sex Work and Software in Invisible Activist Machinery" from

Activism Media and Biopolitics and Carey's "Negotiating Dialectical Tensions in Communication Activism: A Decade of Working in the Countertrafficking Field" from *Communication Activism*. By no means were both essays chosen because they are the best or the most representative of their respective volumes. Instead, they were selected because of my research interests in women, gender, and technologies.

Jönsson and Hammett, as scholar-citizens, designed a telephony-based program that permits foreign sex workers in the UK to form social networks with low cost. The telephony network allows for anonymity and the localization of multiple languages. Although half of the chapter is written in highly technical language about the software program, the authors situate sex work in a historical context of gender and technology. The authors argue that women telephone workers and sex workers have been made invisible and that switching centers and brothels are unexplored cultural sites, yet it is the women who control the telephone and sex exchange. The authors explicate how "sex-work technologies, telecommunication technologies, and software technologies intersect in a web of manufactured control through media systems and thereby integrate the operation of telephony switchboards, telephones, software, looms, and other networked ecologies" (p. 30). Wajcman (1991) asserted that gender and technology mutually constitute each other; technology is not a "thing" that is merely appropriated for use. Jönsson and Hammett have demonstrated the fluidity of gender and technology by seeing the telephone as a form of exchange more than as a thing.

In "Negotiating Dialectical Tensions in Communication Activism," Carey documented his trajectory from being a well-paid lawyer in Chicago to founding The Daywalka Foundation, which provides help, assistance, and education to sex workers in Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Mexico. The foundation offers programs such as vocational training to trafficking survivors, judicial awareness and training, scholarship programs, and trafficking awareness training for religious leaders. Carey prefers a dialogical/dialectical approach to international development. As informed by Marxist thought, a dialogical/dialectical approach emphasizes contradictions, totality, processes, and praxis; working through tensions is integral to such an approach. Carey cited the tension of privileging local over external knowledge as a challenge of activism work. Imposing external knowledge on local actors isolates and marginalizes the community; hence, it is imperative to translate local knowledge into a language that international development funding agencies understand.

The strength of Carey's essay (along with others collected in the volume) lays in the reflexivity of the author; not only did his activism work change the practices of a local community but it has also changed him and how he approached future work. In this sense, the essays in *Activism Media and Biopolitics* lack the reflexivity aspect valued in activism scholarship. For example, although both Jönsson and Hammett describe themselves as media practitioners and creative tinkerers who explore the potential of software in activist movement, it is unknown how both have come to work with open source software. Also unclear is how they may have changed after engaging with activism. Jönsson and Hammett's essay is one of the few that is written from a first-person perspective. Other essays adopt a third-person perspective to interpret the world rather than to change it (as paraphrased from Stanley Fish, whose opposing stance of scholars being activists is discussed in the introduction of *Communication Activism*). However, these questions exist—if scholars should engage in activism and if they are qualified to become ones.

The strength of Jönsson and Hammett's essay lies in their fluid conceptualization of the relationship between gender and technology. In mentioning Ada Lovelace, one of the earliest software programmers, Jönsson and Hammett write that she "became a switch point for histories of infection [for being the only legitimate child among all children of her father], poetical science, single mother, and futuristic software machine" (p. 31). Most essays in *Activist Media and Biopolitics* challenge the perceived boundary between reality and virtuality; the discursive and the material; the private and the public; and life and death. By challenging these boundaries, they allow for the existence of a gray and ambiguous area—a problematic area that is not necessarily a problem. In contrast, the essays in *Communication Activism* have few areas of ambiguity, and they seldom question the boundary. For example, Carey mentions the effectiveness of creative writing in helping trafficking survivors to develop self-esteem. If poetry has changed the survivors, have the survivors changed poetry as well? From the essay, it seems that poetry is more like a tool or a tactic appropriated to achieve an end. The dialectic ideal that Carey mentions seems to apply more to the tension between local and external knowledge, and between the process and outcome of the campaign. The dialectic ideal does not apply to the relationship between gender and technology (here as poetry-writing). In fact, in this volume, communication—be it through the media, performance, or education—is seen as a tool that, if used locally and thoughtfully, can effect social change. In this sense, the conceptualization of communication by activist-scholar-citizens has not moved too far away from the modernization discourse in which technology is believed to cure all ills (Melkote & Steeves, 2001).

Is Studying Activist Media a Kind of Communication Activism Scholarship?

Activist Media and Biopolitics anchors itself in the field of media studies while *Communication Activism* is grounded in applied communication studies. Are media studies and applied communication studies both subfields of communication? Or has media studies become too interdisciplinary that it shares no common ground with applied communication studies? The relation between media studies and applied communication studies has been unclear. In the teaching of communication in North America, media is seen as one type of communication, along with interpersonal, group, and organization. However, with the rise of mobile and information technologies, it can be argued that almost all kinds of communication are mediated . The convergence of the form and technology of media, however, is not reflected from the scholarship showcased in both these volumes. Not only are the perspectives and theories that inform both volumes different but the prose styles are as well. A reader familiar with the European school of critical and cultural theories (such as those by Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Slavoj Žižek) may not be immediately taken with a chapter on how to design a public relations campaign for local activism. Similarly, a reader preferring unambiguous and factual writing may not find dense theoretical writings an easy read. Despite the different readership of both books, reviewing both volumes has led me to imagine a dialogue between the editors and contributors of both volumes. The overarching concerns are easy to identify—local and global social justice, grassroots movements, and community engagement—but the ways to study them are multiple. Because of this, the dialogue should be an interesting one.

References

Greenwood, D. J., & Levin, M. (2003). Reconstructing the relationships between universities and society through action research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues* (2nd ed.) (pp. 131–166). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Melkote, S. R., & Steeves, H. L. (2001). *Communication for development in the Third World: Theory and practice for empowerment* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Wajcman, J. (1991). *Feminism confronts technology*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.