

Gino Canella, **Activist Media: Documenting Movements and Networked Solidarity**, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022, 172 pp., \$29.95 (paperback).

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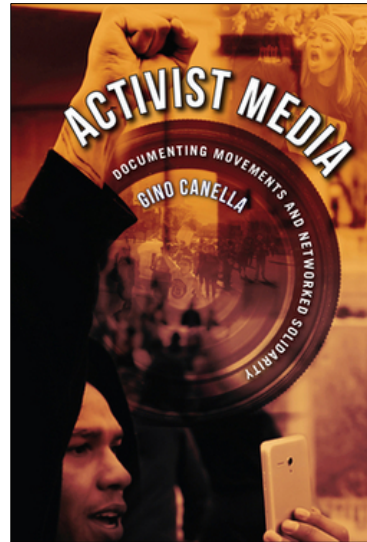
Gino Canella's **Activist Media: Documenting Movements and Networked Solidarity** offers an auto-ethnography of the author's experience making media with a labor union (a Service Employees International Union [SEIU] local) and a Black Lives Matter (BLM) local chapter. Bolted on is a theoretical discussion on media as a tool in social movements.

Makers' arguments about social activist audio-visual media have been going on about as long as it has been being made, which is about as long as film has existed. The debates about its effectiveness are as old as those about what its strategic goals are (education/awareness? political reform? revolution? disruption?). If you want a head-spinning historical tour of passionate disagreements about how to approach social-action filmmaking, there's a hefty book of manifestos for you (MacKenzie, 2014).

Communication scholars, as well as other social scientists, have followed, participated in, and analyzed left-wing media movements of all kinds (e.g., guerrilla video [Boyle, 1997]), public access media (Howley, 2010), human rights documentaries (McKee & McLagan, 2012), and communication policy campaigns (Gangadharan, 2013). Scholars have looked intensively and empirically at how media and democracy intersect, including Sandra Ball-Rokeach's decades-long collaborative project on community communication patterns and community agency, the Metamorphosis Project (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). Contrasting fact-grounded and emotionally-grounded news environments, using quantitative methods, an interdisciplinary team looked at implications for democracy of polarized news ecosystems (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). Political scientists have analyzed how social movements and nonprofits employ media to recruit and leverage membership (e.g., Karpf, 2012).

As the field has burgeoned with the increasing use of screens more generally, so has the sophistication of research around effects and effectiveness. Much of this work is led by scholars in strategic communication, who have employed techniques that range from surveys to polls to real-time eye tracking to quantitative analysis of social media to do so (Borum Chattoo, 2020; Diesner & Rezapour, 2015).

At the same time, conservative, right-wing, fascist, and White supremacist social movements and political parties have become ever savvier in employing the same activist tools. Scholarly work on these efforts has burgeoned under the umbrella of dis/misinformation studies (Bennett & Livingston, 2021).



Gino Canella, an experienced journalistic filmmaker, a self-described White leftist, and now a professor, has apparently not been following these trends much, but he has paid real attention to theories and theorists about the relationship between media and democracy, as well as the literature on what was once called “alternative” media, sometimes “community media,” and in some places now “activist media.”

The guts of this book are in the documentation of his process working, sometimes simultaneously, with SEIU and BLM. These two groups, as he points out, have different political objectives. The union counts success as winning workers more rights at work within the current terms of capitalism, while BLM attempts to change Black people’s place in American society generally, and by extension disrupt current systems of power. He carefully chronicles his work in preproduction, postproduction, and distribution.

The core of the story is about his own transformation in the process of this work, moving to a place of greater empathy with people who, whether working class, BIPOC, women, or more/other, do not live within the same habitus as he does. The author discovers and recognizes the value of genuine collaboration, and wrestles with related problems. Does taking money from the people you make media about compromise your credibility? Does collaborating directly with participants cross a journalistic ethical standard? Do the expectations of movement work and academic work clash? When is it collaboration, and when are you merely providing technical skills? These are good questions to grapple with, and the field of communication has a history of wrestling with them (Napoli, 2009; Waisbord, 2019). They are also the subject of an ethical framework for documentary filmmaking (Aufderheide et al., 2022), which was created in the same moment of social turmoil that Canella worked in.

This chronicle seems aimed, in part, not at fellow scholars but at fellow left-wing media makers. But Canella’s working situation seems familiar. He has decided to work for hire, albeit without pay or much of it in these instances, for people who need a particular kind of advocacy media to accomplish their goals. Seeing his work as client-centered strategic communication creates interesting other avenues to explore. Are his learnings about activist media applicable to all activist media, including, say, the Federalist Society and Heritage Foundation’s long game in changing frames around core Constitutional issues? Does working with movements for expansion of citizen or human rights entail a different kind of relationship with the client than for purely commercial projects? Or than other explicitly ideological projects? Are assessment tools now widely available of use to social justice movements the way they are for other movements?

The auto-ethnography here is heavy on the “auto.” Canella immediately accepted that he could not, as a White man, join the BLM local leadership. He does not share anything he might otherwise have gleaned, even at second hand, about the issues and tensions in that leadership, or their choices for how to engage with him. Similarly, we learn almost nothing about how SEIU actually works on the ground, what the internal issues organizers there faced in doing their organizing or development of communication strategies, or what kinds of debates or discussions occurred within the (very real) SEIU hierarchy about what kinds of media to encourage with Canella or others.

So we cannot learn some of what Canella charts out as his task. He wants to “explore the social relationships embedded within media to understand how the production and distribution of documentary discourse illuminates the micro-practices of democracy” (p. 2), and “to examine the social relations

embedded in activist media and to understand what these social relations reveal about democracy” (p. 135). This lofty goal is not reached, partly because of the lack of analysis of the larger patterns and processes. In fact, it is not even clear what democracy looks like to Canella, other than active participation in social movements. His analyses of particular campaigns do not accomplish that higher goal either. For instance, he concludes, about the BLM #BlackIsBeautiful social media campaign, “Although a Facebook photo series will not alone dismantle patriarchy, white supremacy, and racial capitalism, the project represents important ideological work that movements conduct through the distribution of activist media” (p. 121). Is the work “important” for democracy? We have no evidence. The qualifying clause demolishes a straw man.

The interdisciplinary literature review features classic names among democracy scholars and activists, critical communication scholars, and Black feminist scholars. The discontinuity, though, between the different theoretical approaches and between the theorizing and the ethnography is marked. For instance, he writes, “Transforming reality occurs during moments of rupture—what Gramsci called the ‘interregnum,’ or the gap. Activist media’s creative and experimental methods help organizers navigate rupture and study rapidly evolving social and political phenomena” (p. 131). But he does not identify what he thinks might be moments of rupture in his own experience, much less give us a discussion of how that worked.

Experiences like Canella’s are worth recording and learning from. As well, future media activists can benefit from the complex history of media work as social activism, in ways that allow for more contextualized analysis.

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