



From Critical Perspectives to Media Reform: A Review of Three Books

Des Freedman, **The Contradictions of Media Power**, London, UK, and New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, 179 pp., \$29.95 (paperback).

James Curran, Natalie Fenton, and Des Freedman, **Misunderstanding the Internet**, 2nd ed., London, UK, and New York, NY: Routledge, 2016, 209 pp., \$39.95 (paperback).

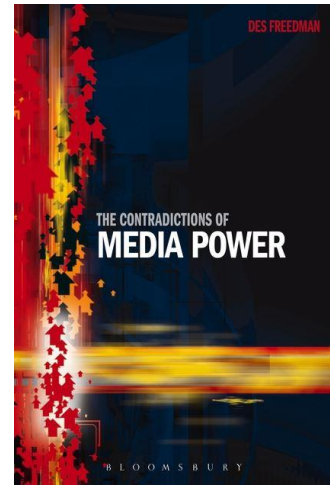
Des Freedman, Jonathan Obar, Cheryl Martens, and Robert W. McChesney (Eds.), **Strategies for Media Reform: International Perspectives**, New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016, 304 pp., \$125.00 (hardcover).

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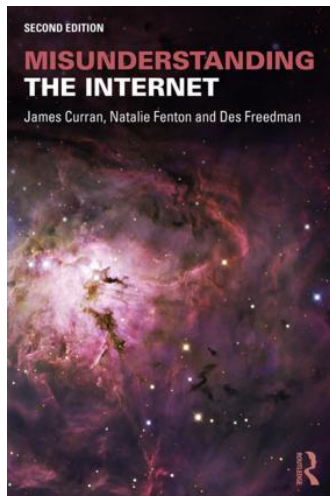
The 2015 decision by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to reclassify broadband Internet services and pass network neutrality rules marks a major media reform victory in the United States. Media and communications policy in the United States has traditionally been dominated by industry interests (Freedman, 2008; McChesney, 1990; Pickard, 2015), and this FCC decision put the public interest over that of major U.S. Internet service providers. While the victory is a testament to the advocacy efforts of U.S. media reform organizations, left unclear is the degree to which it will open up possibilities for greater structural reform, which, for the three books reviewed here, is of paramount concern.

These three books bridge critical perspectives on media and communications policy by investigating the labor of media reform advocates. The second edition of *Misunderstanding the Internet*, coauthored by James Curran, Natalie Fenton, and Des Freedman, demonstrates how the structural foundations of the Internet limit its capacity to be a transformative force and instead allow it to perpetuate existing power structures. *The Contradictions of Media Power* by Des Freedman provides a theoretical lens for understanding media power in the UK and United States and illuminates how existing power structures can be challenged. *Strategies for Media Reform: International Perspectives*, edited by Des Freedman, Jonathan Obar, Cheryl Martens, and Robert W. McChesney, brings together chapters from 33 scholars and activists who provide contemporary examples of methods used for achieving media reform. These books share a common frame, drawing from Rosa Luxemburg's distinction between reform versus revolution, and argue that shifting media power from commercial actors to the public interest requires structural reforms that address industry dominance of political processes.

In *The Contradictions of Media Power*, Freedman contributes to the political economy tradition in communications studies by developing an analytic lens for understanding and challenging media power. Drawing from Steven Lukes' three faces of power, including the "hidden" faces of power in ideology, Freedman argues that media power can be conceptualized through four paradigms: consensus, chaos, control, and contradiction. The contradiction paradigm, which frames the analysis of most of the book, sees media power as an extension of the contradictions inherent in a Marxist perspective of capitalism. Media power, Freedman argues, "is irreducible to any single place or person or text that it is instead organized more like a force field—the meeting point of institutions and individuals in defined context struggling to dominate creative and symbolic production" (p. 146). Contradicting interests between elites at these points can create windows of opportunity for media reform.



Freedman approaches media power as both relational and material, and across four chapters he investigates the role of media ownership and media policy, the extent social media redistributes power, and strategies for challenging media power, all of which positions this book as a valuable resource for media reform researchers and practitioners alike. His third chapter, which examines media policy and activism, is particularly insightful for developing strategies for structural reform. Freedman discusses "media policy silences"—"a strategic decision taken by elites that the best way to promote hegemonic interests and to naturalize foundational values is through a particular role for the state" (p. 74)—in which policy makers delegate regulatory decisions to market forces. Freedman cites the years of FCC inaction on network neutrality as one specific example of a policy silence—and argues that challenging this silence is a critical first step toward policy change.



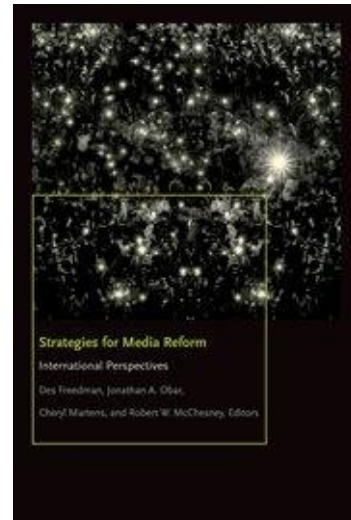
Misunderstanding the Internet offers a political economic analysis of the Internet. Two chapters penned by each author, and a coauthored conclusion, provide evidence to explain why the Internet has not lived up to the early forecasts of a technological-driven shift toward a more equal society. In the first two chapters, Curran argues that the Internet, rather than transforming power relations in society, is a reflection of existing power structures. Curran's second chapter, a history of the Internet from government-backed research project to capitalist enterprise, is essential reading for students seeking a critical perspective on the development of the contemporary Internet. In chapter 3, Freedman challenges the claims that the digital economy encourages competition and diverse content and shows that evidence instead documents monopolistic behavior, blockbuster media, and profits from unpaid labor. In chapters 5 and 6, Fenton analyzes the relationship between networks and democratic change while making different claims on the link between network openness and democracy. In chapter 5,

Fenton argues that “network openness does not lead us directly to democracy” (p. 166) while in chapter 6, she claims “the [I]nternet does not contain the essence of openness that will lead us directly to democracy” (p. 196). The conclusion is brief, and the three authors suggest pushing for tax policies to support publically owned journalism, communication data, infrastructure, and content. However, while these are laudable goals, the authors present their vision as a wish list without the depth of analysis present in the remainder of the book. This book is empirically driven and positions the Internet as an extension of society rather than a politically-neutral transformative technology. Accordingly, it provides valuable reading for students beginning research on media policy, markets, or communications.

Where the first two books offer critical perspectives, ***Strategies for Media Reform: International Perspectives*** offers successful advocacy campaigns that are insightful for researchers and practitioners of media reform seeking to learn from global examples. In their introduction, Freedman and Obar frame the material as addressing the concentration of media resources, positioning the book with the work of other critical media policy scholars including McChesney (2007) and Pickard (2014). Part 2 provides examples of how Internet activism has contributed to media reform, part 3 offers narratives on successful media reform efforts, and part 4 positions media reform more broadly as democratic reform.

A significant contribution of this volume is making visible the labor of media reformers in more than 25 countries, and the commentaries from media reform organizations are particularly valuable in providing firsthand perspectives on successful efforts to block the Stop Online Piracy Act in the United States (Reitman, chapter 6) and efforts to reform media in West Africa (Karikari, chapter 16). Strategies documented include the role of strategic litigation, such as in the work of the Mexican Association for the Right to Information (Abraham-Hamanoiel, chapter 10), and the need for media policy literacy to engage in public policy processes (Lentz, chapter 2). Several chapters argue that successful policy advocacy requires grassroots engagement. Pickard describes the need for popular support in order to challenge dominant commercial interests, an analysis echoed in chapters by academics and advocates alike, including Obar and Shade (chapter 3) and Sassaman and Tridish (chapter 14). In chapter 7, Aaron and Karr describe how Free Press used an “outside-in” approach to leverage grassroots organizing for influencing the FCC on network neutrality. The importance of grassroots strategies for influencing public policy debates described in *Strategies for Media Reform: International Perspectives* reflects a methodological implication Freedman highlights for media policy researchers in *The Contradictions of Media Power*. In *The Contradictions of Media Power* Freedman describes how the official fora of a policy debate does not always reflect the voices of those whose first challenge is to gain access to policy makers requiring qualitative interviews “with a range of people beyond traditional ‘insiders’” (p. 75).

In *Strategies for Media Reform: International Perspectives*, McChesney describes media reform as a growing area of research. These three books complement McChesney’s work documenting media industry dominance in policy making in the United States (McChesney, 1990), strategies of successful



grassroots-driven invention in policy-making processes (McChesney, 2004), and the necessity for structural reform as the keystone for a long-term reform agenda (McChesney, 2007). The protection of network neutrality alone does not constitute a structural reform, and in chapter 4 of *Misunderstanding the Internet*, Freedman keenly positions network neutrality as one grassroots-driven victory of the public interest over commercial interests while falling short of addressing the market concentration of Internet companies in the United States. Structural reform, Freedman argues, requires regulating the Internet as a public utility. The authors in these volumes explicitly state their vision for media policy that serves the public interest. Freedman writes in *The Contradictions of Media Power*: "We need an approach to media policy that is ideological as opposed to administrative, interested as opposed to disinterested, and committed to delivering social justice instead of serving the interests of either state or private elites" (p. 86). As evidenced by these volumes, critical communications research coupled with research on public policy advocacy can contribute to this ideal.

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