Defiant Publics: The Unprecedented Reach of the Global Citizen.

Daniel Drache’s *Defiant Publics: The unprecedented reach of the global citizen* is sure to spark lively discussion and debate. On the one hand, Drache describes the intersections of communication technologies, activism, and new forms of democratic engagement in a way that is digestible for undergraduate students and for newcomers to such topics who are seeking an overview of these issues. On the other hand, the ellipses in his argumentation and a lack of engagement with his central concept—publics—are sure to frustrate scholars who have invested time and effort in analyzing what Drache describes as a “great reversal” in which “digital technology reallocates power and authority downwards from the elite few towards the many” (p. 7).

Overall, Drache argues that new communication technologies, coupled with the “free flow” of people, culture, and information have enabled the development of spaces and publics without historical precedent. Indeed, *Defiant Publics* hangs its hat on the argument that “technology transfers a great deal of social power to those with the ability to use it” (p. 8) and “offer[s] citizens a unique set of opportunities to engage in public participation and advocate bold strategies for social change” (p. 8). As the book progresses, so too does Drache’s enthusiasm for new communication technologies. The book is peppered with declarations about the power of these new arrangements: they hold the promise to “shift the power of communication down the social pyramid” (p. 43), can determine “economic well-being and social improvement” (p. 44), possess the potential to usher in “the closing of the last great intellectual divide” for “people in the poorest countries” (ibid.), and “represent a break with previous ways of thinking and acting” (p. 99). As such, the book argues that communication technologies are fundamentally transforming how democracy and politics occur by virtue of their proliferation worldwide.

We have some excellent books awaiting your review to be published in CJC.
All it takes is a quick email to get started. Reviewers can be either faculty or graduate students. Dale Bradley can provide you with a list of publications received and available for review. Or, if you are keen to review a particular title that you have encountered and feel would benefit other readers, he can request a review copy for you from the publisher. Dale also wants to hear from authors. If you have a publication that you think the CJC should review, please contact him. Email: review_editor@cjc-online.ca.
As a case in point, Drache directs the reader’s attention to the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) program, which is described as a project with the capacity to shrink the “digital divide,” with the “cumulative effect” of an “exponential democratization of communication” (p. 63). But on the African continent, where literacy rates are the lowest in the world (Richmond et al., 2008), Drache’s “cautious optimism” (p. 63) would seem to be unfounded. Moreover, pointing the reader’s attention to the OLPC as proof of “exponential democratization” without critically questioning this “NGO” is a problematic turn, given that the OLPC has been laden with controversy since its inception. Specifically, by omitting mention of allegations that OLPC hardware and software have built-in restrictions, tracking, and surveillance as well as being subject to intense corporate pressures (Mullins, 2008; Barras, 2008), Drache’s arguments not only come across as unjustified, but also naïve.

Another key argument made in Defiant Publics that demands further analysis is that “new technology encourages opportunities for social action and amplifies the voice of the activist” (p.15). While there is no doubt that new technologies have ushered in new forms of democratic participation, what Drache fails to critically engage with here are some of the most troubling and decidedly non-technological trends in contemporary citizenry: for example, the declining participation of citizens in elections. Excluding the recent anomaly of increased voter participation in the normally apathetic U.S. in 2008 presidential election, the “engaged angry citizen qua voter” (p.3) that Drache valorizes here is in fact turning out less and less in the voter booths. This is certainly true in Canada, where the percentage of voters has reached a historic low (Heard, 2008). Indeed, these trends are echoed across Canadian provinces, including Québec, where near-record lows of voter turnout were reported in the provincial election of October 2008 (Montreal Gazette, 2008).

Whereas Defiant Publics informs an understanding of how social activism has changed with the advent of new technologies and adequately describes the shifting terrain of democratic participation, it fails to present a balanced argument that critically considers how new technologies also have the potential to promote apathy, quell social action and, in the last decade, to even quash some social movements. No case better exemplifies this than Reclaim the Streets New York, a direct, non-violent street-reclaiming project. Part of an international network of performative anti-globalization activists, the group’s main organizing tool, its listserv, was suddenly shut down post-9/11, after the FBI had classified them as a “potential threat” (Floyd, 2001). Indeed, the flipside of the “unprecedented” form of global citizenry described here—the dark tracking and surveillance that subtends new communication infrastructures—is not considered in this book, let alone mentioned.

As such, where Drache argues that “civil society and social movements are developing their capacity to innovate and create new political forms and practices, a fact that has become strikingly apparent since the ‘battle in Seattle’ in 1999” (p. 20), what he fails to interrogate in these arrangements is how the “digital technologies that [are] a lynchpin of popular protest and mass dissent” (p.63) are the very same technologies that, post-9/11, are increasingly being used to track dissent and, at times, to classify some anti-globalization activists as de-facto “terrorists” (Bigo, 2001). Indeed, given Drache’s constant cheerleading for the new activist publics and global citizens who are
emerging through the use of new technologies (he stops just short of declaring a full-blow n communications revolution), together with a lack of criticism on voter apathy and the surveillance dynamics inherent in these arrangements, Dra che’s arguments and this book have a decidedly techno-deterministic and utopian feel.

References


Kenneth C. Werbin, Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford Campus