



**Democratic Communications: Formations, Projects, Possibilities.** James F. Hamilton. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008. 335 pp. ISBN: 0739118668.

*Democratic Communications: Formations, Projects, Possibilities* critically explores Anglo-American historical and cultural traditions and alternative media practices, or what author James F. Hamilton prefers to call democratic communications. A major goal of the book is to highlight new ways of thinking about and practising democratic communications. Hamilton argues early in the preface to the book that “a substantial barrier to practicing democratic communication is difficulty in conceiving new possibilities” (p. vii), and a primary premise of the work is to dismantle the notion that democratic communications or alternative media require an immense amount of time and money to be successful and effective.

The book is influenced, in part, by a 2001 special edition of *Media History* that focuses specifically on alternative media, and it follows from Hamilton’s extensive work in this field. As he notes, various components of the book have been previously published as journal articles.

The author’s standpoint is provocative and refreshing, advancing the field of alternative media scholarship with a meticulously researched, dynamic analysis that expands the historical context for which such discourses and debates frequently take place. Exposing the shortcomings and limits of certain media outlets that claim to be “alternative,” and much of the scholarship that reports on them—limits that include vanguardism, essentialism, and technological determinism—Hamilton advocates the use of new frameworks and conceptual tools for considering alternative media and/or democratic communications. Hamilton is careful to introduce and commend some of the recent literature that is wary of such restrictive premises in the field, although he stresses the need for “a cultural and historical investigation of the formative conditions of practice relied upon by the dominant and the oppositional,” in order to effectively suggest “ongoing possibilities for alternative media and democratic communications” (p. 15).

Challenging the view that successful alternative media must be widely practised or broadly distributed with professional aesthetics and prominence, Hamilton instead emphasizes media practices and the ways in which groups and individuals participate with, and engage in, media composition. He highlights numerous similarities and relationships between so-called alternative or oppositional media institutions and practices, and the commercial or mainstream media. For instance, he draws links between “commercial ventures that seek a large and/or lucrative audience for advertisers” and those “alternative media practitioners that seek a large or active audience for mobilization,” arguing that “the intentions of each are not simply neutral or technical matters” (p. 79). Within such formations, democratic participation is limited as “serving the public becomes a replacement for enabling it” (p. 80). Tangible examples of contemporary relevance are used effectively to exemplify this line of argument, such as Al Gore’s assertion that youth are empowered by telling their own stories with video. Gore, however, is making this point in reference to Current TV, a “commercial cable-

television and Internet company that accepts video programming from viewers in exchange for payment” (p. 1). This example illustrates popular participation in media creation and invites a surface-level reading of this system as *democratic*. However, Current TV is intrinsically tied to the same market system as commercial or mainstream content, emphasizing the necessity for new conceptual frameworks to evaluate democratic participation in media and communications.

Numerous historical examples enforce and underscore Hamilton’s arguments. His third chapter’s exploration of Anglo-American “Philanthropy, Professionalization, and Social-Reform Communications” deconstructs the binary between the “noncommercial” and the “commercial,” illustrating strong connections and similarities between the two. Hamilton demonstrates how the conditions that shape, and have shaped, the emergence of commercial and non-commercial media systems essentially links them. As an example, Hamilton describes how the “cultural imperatives of Protestantism” in eighteenth-century America, along with “the hybridization of commercial means with spiritual ends ‘provided an enduring institutional framework for social mobilization’” (p. 98). A similar conceptual context is used to evaluate community-based critiques of capitalism in Chapter 4, positioning these standpoints within systems of respatialized/global capitalism (p. 135).

The work of Raymond Williams is largely influential in the book, and it is widely cited throughout. Williams is prominent in the seventh, and final, chapter, “Democratic Communications as Critical, Collective Education,” where Hamilton makes a case for “direct autonomous composition”—a term borrowed from Williams—which extends beyond “greater popular participation” (p. 236). This conception, Hamilton explains, emerges from the way that Williams “regards communications materially and dialectically, as the making of meanings, values, and practices that in turn constitute the world, society, and ourselves” (p. 238). Thus, *direct* and *autonomous* access to the means of creating and composing media content are central to Hamilton’s notion of democratic communications.

Scholars and readers familiar with alternative media scholarship that centres on commonly covered examples and case studies, such as the Internet, digital video, and ‘zines, might find the depth and breadth of the case studies in the book slightly complex, requiring time to digest. Hamilton’s careful attention to the detailed examples he provides is not without purpose, however, as he is working toward expanding the historical and conceptual context through which to consider democratic communications. Additionally, the book is nicely organized into three separate sections—“Market Formations,” “Struggling Against the Market,” and “Toward New Formations”—setting up a robust historical framework that engages the subsequent methods and ideas for considering democratic communications in both the present and the future. The book’s seven chapters each focus on a particular topic that connects to the other chapters, supporting the overall trajectory of the work. The book is well structured with a good positioning of ideas, helping to organize and position the significance of the numerous examples deployed by Hamilton.

*Democratic Communications* makes a strong contribution to alternative media studies, critical historical/cultural scholarship, and interrelated fields. In the Afterword,

Hamilton “rehabilitates” *utopia* and *inspiration*—two terms that he claims are helpful for challenging “the acceptance of present conditions as natural, stable, and interchangeable reality” (p. 266). The reader is ultimately encouraged to apply Hamilton’s ideas to the field of alternative media scholarship, and help address the need for re-constituted practices of democratic communications.

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