
The second volume of Making Our Media, published as a Euricom Monograph by Hampton Press, takes on the timely issue of examining a range of national and global initiatives and efforts by civil society organizations to democratize communication policy and practice. Co-editor of the volume, Laura Stein states in the introduction

what began with concerns about specific issues areas, such as mainstream media content and conditions of access, has metamorphosed into a multifaceted approach to communication policy activism that incorporates issues of rights, economics, and regulation across the broader communication sector. (p. 3)

While the editors acknowledge that this is a relatively new and emerging area of social activism, the assumption grounding both volumes (the first volume covered grassroots communications projects) is that this is a vital and yet neglected area of study deserving of greater empirical and analytical inquiry. This second volume, divided in three sections, provides eleven rich case studies from a wide range of scholars, media producers and activist researchers delivering grounded empirical analyses as well as analytic insights into “opportunities and challenges facing activists” (p. 17) in the contemporary context.

The first section of the volume offers three compelling accounts of “national democratic initiatives” in Latin America. Although the editors do not provide much rationale for why the national or local case studies are located in Latin America, one could presume that it might have some relationship to the so-called “pink-tide” or the resurgence of a new Left in power and the importance of new social movements in the region. As Clemencia Rodriguez argues in the introduction to this section, all three chapters emphasize the participatory turn in progressive politics as experienced in many cases of political change in Latin America. Rodriguez claims, “the new millennium is witnessing more egalitarian movements in which everyone has a voice—and not just the enlightened leadership of social justice movements and parties” (p. 24).

Chapter One by Dodaro et al historically locates how “militant cinema collectives intervened in the political imaginary,” especially during the “political opening” (p. 43) of 2002-2004 associated with the cycle of protest resulting from the Argentine financial crisis. This chapter, along with Chapter Three by Porras, regarding online deliberation in the well-known case of participatory budgeting in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, shows how movements targeting media and technology are deeply embedded in existing political institutions and rooted in specific socio-cultural contexts. In other words, the deliberative effectiveness of participatory budgeting would be difficult to assess without first understanding why citizens of Porto Alegre “participated actively in governance and determine[d] collectively the solutions to public problems” (p. 74).
contrast, “Chapter Two” by Alfaro Moreno documents the experiences of Veeduria Ciudana de los Medios (Citizens’ Media Watch), a collective launched in 2001 that promotes media reform and citizens’ participation in Peru’s unequal and undemocratic media landscape. In this case, the author concludes by stating that media reform is only possible if “media autonomy and citizens’ rights” become part of “the political agenda of future electoral candidates” (p. 61), which remains an uphill battle in Peru.

The second section of the volume turns to the transnational arena of civil society intervention in communications policy reform, with three distinct chapters on the UN sponsored World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). A final chapter in some sense provides a counter-example of WSIS civil society engagement through the Minga Informativa, once again returns to Latin America. In the introduction of this section, Laura Stein argues, that in the transnational arena,

Civil society actors are vocal proponents of a role for information and communication as a fundamental human right and resource, as well as a foundational building block for democratic citizenship. As such, they are a foil to those who would allow the distribution of communication resources to be determined predominantly by market processes. (p. 78)

Chapter Four and Chapter Five examine the tensions that belie the positioning of civil society as an effective check to the concentration of power by institutions of global and corporate governance in the two chapters. In studying the many limits of civil society participation in the WSIS, Cammaerts and Hadle and Hintz collectively demonstrate that, in practice, what passed as legitimate civil society engagement ultimately “acceded to the neoliberal discourse and its commercial version of freedom of speech” (p. 114) enhanced by “an elaborate Web site and a light form of consultation” (p. 99).

Writing about the experience of two dozen grassroots community organizers representing the North American Media Justice Delegation, Arevalo and Benfield argue in Chapter Six that despite obstacles to real policy change at the WSIS, it provided a “movement building outcome (p. 135)” to enhance transnational civil society organizing in this area. In contrast to these three pieces focused on the technocratic terrain of the WSIS (which, as Cammaerts correctly states, received almost no public attention), Leon et al document the development of “a social agenda in communication” (p. 150) through the Minga Informativa emerging out of the very different context of the World Social Forum (WSF). This takes us back once again to Porto Alegre, Brazil, the site of the first several WSFs beginning in 2001. What is striking about this chapter is that although the decentralized network of activists involved in this organization provide technical training and online resources highlighting the importance of information and media outreach, they emerge out of “the convergence of Latin American social movements” (p. 144) that significantly expand a conventional and often very narrow understanding of media reform movements.

The final section of the volume takes on the globally convergent legal terrain, which shapes claims for rights in the sphere of communication. Chapter Eight and Chapter Nine by Schweidler and Costanza-Chock and Lee, respectively, focus on organized (e.g., the Free and Open Source Software movement) as well as spontaneous forms of opposition. These include opposition to the dominant trade-based intellectual
property rights (IPR) regime at the transnational level, as well as in the specific national case of South Korea. Both chapters argue that, despite the “enclosure of knowledge” (p. 177) by a legal regime defined and enforced by the interests of transnational capital, “e-resistance,” and “constructive counterprojects” are becoming more widespread. Whereas Schweidler and Costanza-Chock acknowledge that “resistance movements” face a number of resource-based as well as organizational challenges that have to be considered, Lee makes a bolder argument in the case of South Korea, where he claims that “netizen” organizing since 2004 is representative of the multitude, a new electronic generation” that resists “capitalist commercialization of culture” (p. 204).

The last two chapters of the volume bring to the fore the experiences of the Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) movement. Communication rights, defined in this movement, critique the narrow definition of the right to free speech and instead propose a more expansive and positive set of rights having to do with political empowerment and collective action. Cunningham contrasts the normative alternative of the CRIS vision of rights against the neoliberal reforms, which shaped the discourse of “digital divide” in US communications policy leading up to the WSIS in the 1990s. In the final chapter of the volume, Padovani and Pavan locate the CRIS understanding of rights in earlier UN debates over the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). These authors conclude that the “WSIS process has been the occasion for a collective exercise in framing a communications rights discourse” based on the “core principles” of inclusion, freedom, diversity and participation (p. 236). Returning to questions raised about the limits of civil society intervention in fora of global governance in the second section of the volume, the authors here argue that the multi-stakeholder process of negotiation at the WSIS allowed for a “partial yet meaningful instance of wider mobilization ‘out there’” (p. 324). The authors conclude by calling for more network-based research tracking the complex transnational dynamics of civil society organizations promoting the progressive communication rights framework across a variety of global institutional settings.

Overall, the chapters in this volume make a compelling case for the need to pay closer attention to the role of civil society organizations in shaping global communications policy and practice. In the spirit of moving this conversation forward, however, I would raise a few questions that appear across many of these chapters that might suggest some theoretical limitations and possibly tensions worth considering further. First and foremost, several of the chapters in the volume demonstrate the limitations of a framing definition of civil society as “the realm of collective social life that exists apart from both markets and the state” (p. 2). What might have emerged from an analysis that did not assume the exteriority and autonomy of these civil society organizations and instead examined the ambivalence, interdependence and messiness of this necessarily contested relationship? Related to this point, is the assumption that activism, as imagined through Habermas’ envisioning of the public sphere, is a rational activity aimed at fostering an autonomous communicative space separate from the state and the market. In practice the dominance of the Habermasian normative vision often lends itself easily to technocratic capture, as was evident in some of the discussions of WSIS and other national and transnational policy arenas discussed in this vol-
ume. Finally, there is the issue of the historical specificity of the formation as well as promotion of seemingly neutral concepts like democracy, civil society, or even individual or collective rights. In this sense, some accounting of the colonial and post-colonial legacies of these formations would likely enrich this politically forward-looking discussion of social movements and their larger political and cultural relevance contesting dominant institutional interests in the media and information fields.

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