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## Book Review 2

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*Democratic Communications: Formations, Projects and Possibilities.* By James F. Hamilton. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008, 335p. (cloth, \$80.00) ISBN-10: 0739118668; ISBN-13: 9780739118665

The intersection of readily available high quality digital video cameras and non-linear video editing software with Internet websites such as YouTube/Google Video and countless blogs has created unprecedented opportunities for individuals to create and share media products. Some people might think this explosion of media making potential is the gateway to democratized media and a major new tool in the arsenal of media reform. James Hamilton is not so sure. In his new book, *Democratic Communications: Formations, Projects and Possibilities* (2008), James Hamilton cautions us about accepting a “vanguard perspective” that “fetishizes media products” while “decontextualizing the processes of their making” (p. 13). Hamilton is responding to what he sees as “essentialism” and “technological determinism” in much of the emerging scholarship on alternative media. Instead, Hamilton has produced a “cultural and historical investigation of the formative conditions of practice relied upon by the dominant and the oppositional” (p.15). Drawing on extensive and interdisciplinary references and tracing a sweeping historical arc, Hamilton has written the most comprehensive theoretical analysis of the intellectual foundations of democratic communications.

Dividing the book into three parts – *Market Formations*, *Struggling Against the Market* and *Toward New Formations*, Hamilton begins by reaching back to early modern England and the precursors to capitalism. A recurring theme is the notion of truth and how credibility and authenticity are established through media. Hamilton begins by tracing the complexities of “providentialism” as a source of religious authority and social control. By going back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Hamilton reveals the long legacy of complex social formations that have been used “to challenge the dominant as well as the oppositional” (p.36). By the 1600s, “rationalist empiricism” emerged along with new concentrations of economic and political power,

offering people new forms of knowledge about the natural world, at the same time that data “unsullied by human intention” became the celebrated form of truth. These two cultures of truth are argued to be central forces in shaping modernity and the rise of capitalism and serve as historical markers pointing to the enduring influence of religion and markets that both enable and constrain possibilities for change.

In the second section, *Struggling Against the Market*, Hamilton details the power of markets to rationalize opposition. Bringing us in to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Hamilton unpacks the tensions embodied by a series of social reform media projects, revealing the adoption of “forms of professionalism which work against democratic practices” (p.97). The process of professionalization - “defined as the social production of expertise and the resulting social and cultural division between experts and lay people” (p.97) – is noted for its influence on news, objectivity and the construction of truth through an increasingly corporate media system. Hamilton argues that the social reform media with the most thoroughly professionalized workforce (i.e. WGBH Boston) are consistently the most financially stable and the largest recipients of private grant money with the result being “an instrumentalist view of the purposes of a social movement and the devaluation of (unmanaged) popular participation” (p.112).

Hamilton then works to problematize popular conceptions of localism and many of the formative assumptions behind community media projects. FCC policy and the struggle over low power FM become sites where localism is said to reduce community to isolated, geographically bounded entities, unconnected from larger social processes that “bring about the needs and problems in the first place” (p.141). In as much as localism is central to the dominant liberal critique of consolidated media, Hamilton reminds just how conceptually limited this idea is and how continued emphasis on geographically bounded communities serves to fragment a diverse interconnected network. A second major concern for Hamilton is the rise of “critical modernism” and the resulting ubiquity of spectacular market capitalism. Although he acknowledges the potential for protest movements to mimic corporate media and draw on the immediacy of spectacular imagery to attract audiences, he also notes “a corresponding skepticism toward the mimetic claims of representation” as a common response to the daily barrage of advertising, propaganda and image saturated hyper reality.

In the final two chapters of the book, Hamilton uses case studies to provide greater detail about an emerging “market radicalism” that is challenging “productive relationships that have constituted communications industries in the West for 150 years” and at the same time “serves as the primary means by which progressive projects are reincorporated into the dominant” (p.201). From citizen journalism to user-generated content, new forms of media participation are emerging and Hamilton examines these practices in the context of market forces that in many ways create these new possibilities and at the same time work to contain them. Hamilton takes up a familiar political economic position when he emphasizes the potential negative market forces embodied in the advertising driven, for-profit efforts such as Current.com. By highlighting the negative influence of market forces, Hamilton disabuses any utopian dreams of an alternative media revolution and instead details the complexities and contradictions embodied in numerous

for-profit businesses that rely on the free labor of individuals contributing user-generated content.

Having spent the better part of the book detailing the history of English speaking democratic communications, Hamilton makes the unlikely choice of going all the way to Korea to document *OhmyNews*, as a model of citizen journalism and commercial media business. While this is a highly popular and influential organization among the Korean media, the historical and cultural formations outlined in the previous chapters do not appear to easily graft on to the Korean case. Hamilton then briefly compares the Korean example with a few sites in the US, noting an expanding focus on a business model that emphasizes harnessing the power of user-generated content as a new form of commercial media. This model is seen as capital's attempt to contain market radicalism and rationalize the potential influence of increasingly democratized media production. After detailing all the ways that markets are working to contain the possibilities of these new media projects, Hamilton offers some limited hope when he describes "such projects and the provisional openings they assert maintain the possibility of a continued democratic extension and remaking of media practice" (p.221).

In his final chapter, Hamilton makes linkages with media literacy and the need for critical education. Hamilton takes us back to U.S. migrant labor camp newspapers from the 1930s Dust Bowl years to explore Raymond Williams' conception of direct autonomous communication. As a way out of the dead end academic debate about whether or not these newspapers lived up to the theoretical ideal posited by Williams, Hamilton seeks to "historicize direct autonomous communication rather than essentialize it" (p.245). This new level of analysis allows us to see these newspapers as embodying detailed evidence of a struggle, "not simply as the transparent expression of a unified culture outside history" (p.246). Cultural forms of association rooted in social and historical processes, coupled with the availability of technology are said to create the possibilities of participatory democratic media. Hamilton concludes this chapter with a critique of the dominant trends in media literacy, noting a predominant emphasis on an "inoculation paradigm" where students are taught how to interpret and resist the onslaught of advertising as opposed to how to teaching students how to use media as a means of expression and collaboration. Instead of teaching students to create media that would result in larger systemic reform, much of the current media literacy discourse is said to teach students to "decode" media, yet another example of a piece meal response to the dominant presence of corporate media.

Throughout this text, Hamilton provides careful analysis that builds a dense theoretical argument, sometimes at the expense of detailing the culturally specific, historically rooted, technologically enhanced democratic media projects he ultimately seeks to advance. Though he makes it clear he is not attempting to ask reality to fit the theoretical formulations of Williams or others, Hamilton spends a great deal of time negotiating the limitations of democratic communications projects and explaining how they do not fully realize any number of theoretical ideals. In an explicit attempt to resist technological determinism, Hamilton avoids the significant technological changes that are accelerating a whole host of cultural and material practices that are operating within the limitations and confines of a for-profit media

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system. This slow (and maybe reformist?) pace of change is largely avoided, often replaced by what can feel like a grand vision of social change. Hamilton is not interested in the technologies or “organizational and capital necessities” and instead wants to focus on “the more crucial task of producing new, open forms of collaboration and collective composition through which new kinds of social movements and new kinds of institutions and politics can arise” (p.234). The tensions between reformism and radical restructuring echo across many academic debates and Hamilton is clearly committed to keeping his eye on the big prize. Instead of scanning the horizon for “new kinds of social movements,” Hamilton might consider the social movements that are currently experimenting with new democratic media possibilities, albeit within the confines, cracks and complexities of a market system. Similarly for Hamilton, the somewhat reactionary trope of market determinism – a more nuanced base superstructure argument - seems to taint all media where people get paid as somehow compromised. While Hamilton goes to great lengths to unpack the cultural formations that shape alternative media projects, there is recurring attention to the barriers, limits, and compromises found in the case studies. Despite these obstacles, Hamilton closes with a call for democratic media to transcend the confines of media effects, persuasion and movement messaging and instead seek to harness the power of inspiration as a way toward a more utopian democratic communication.

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