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Review: Remaking Media: The Struggle to Democratize Public Communication. By Robert A. Hackett & William K. Carroll.

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Remaking Media: The Struggle to Democratize Public Communication. By Robert A. Hackett & William K. Carroll. New York: Routledge, 2006. xiv + 235p. (paper) ISBN 10: 0-415-39468-6. (U.S.)

This book is a second major intervention into analysis and debate on the themes of media reform by Bob Hackett and a co-contributor within the space of two years (see Hackett & Zhao, 2005). That text contained a series of international studies by

various authors and to a considerable degree spanned the globe. This one is rather more conceptual in character, and mostly focuses empirically on Canada, the USA and Britain. (In the interests of frank disclosure, let me note up front that the authors quite frequently cite favorably two publications by this reviewer.)

After an introductory chapter outlining eight facets of what the authors term the “democratic deficit” in mainstream media, chapters 2-4 engage with conceptual debates, firstly concerning the relation between media and power, then about the relation between media and social movements, and thirdly over various ways of defining media democratization, focusing especially on the People’s Communication Charter. Their discussion includes evaluative critiques of conservative and market-liberal definitions of media functions within democracy.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus, respectively, on the history of two advocacy groups for media reform, Media Alliance in the San Francisco Bay area, and the British-based Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom. Chapters 7 and 8 review and evaluate obstacles to, and opportunities for, media reform activism. Chapter 9 summarizes the responses of fifty-plus Vancouver media activists and social activists, more or less evenly divided between the two categories.

In chapter 10, the authors argue, on the basis of their empirical studies as well as their conceptual discussions, that media reform activism needs to see itself as a service pivot of social justice activism across the board, or as they term it, a “nexus” of a variety of progressive political campaigns and struggles. In their concluding chapter, the authors take that thought some steps further, visualizing media activism as “a point of articulation between movements, transforming and lending coherence to the broad field of movement activism as a counterhegemonic formation” (p. 199). (They explicitly deploy the term “counterhegemonic” in opposition to a post-modernist “anti-hegemonic” frame, in other words to denote a commitment to the potential for relatively integrated, rather than culturally fragmented, activism.)

Without question, this book is a significant contribution to current movements for and their debates concerning media reform. It definitely deserves a wide readership. In my judgment, its insistent plea for the integration of media activist strategies with social justice movements is crucial. Its empirical sections are certainly informative and original, and are made good use of in the overall discussion.

That said, let me voice a couple of points at which I would distance myself from this work. Firstly, although the authors refer from time to time to issues such as media literacy and the internet, their principal focus in “media reform” is on mainstream broadcast, print and cinematic media, and movement-media projects. Yet the media reform movement also embraces issues of surveillance and privacy, net neutrality, digital exclusion, code, and the politics of electronic spectrum, and if it did not, it would need to.

A second issue is the conceptual analysis, particularly in the early chapters. The arguments, in my judgment, are soundly and carefully constructed, but the language of the discussion is very condensed at a number of points, succinctly alluding to a great variety of terms and authors rather than always elucidating them for those readers whose range of sources does not encompass the considerable variety of the authors’. Fewer citations and allusions might have enabled the argument to have

more bounce, without losing anything crucial in the process. I would recommend that the authors consider producing an abbreviated cadet version of their book as a webpage monograph that could be widely diffused and discussed within global social justice movements.

Lastly, let me conclude with a point for debate. On their final page, the authors approvingly quote a Canadian activist attacking many media reformers' focus on de-regulation, commercialism, foreign ownership, public access, alternative media, and content diversity as producing "de-contextualized red herrings" (p. 209), rather than taking social justice as the basis for everything else. That social justice must be the linchpin of media reform activism, and that media-centrism is both politically naïve and sociologically silly, seem entirely obvious to this reviewer. The point that worries me, even conceding the demands of rhetoric, is the claim that the specificities the Canadian critic lists are no less relevant to social justice than detailed and expert knowledge of public housing, immigration, or health care rules and procedures. Irritation with the dull specifics of social justice leads fairly quickly to the armchair.

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Reference

Hackett, Robert A. & Zhao, Yuezhi, eds. *Democratizing Global Media: One world, many struggles*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.