



# Book Review: DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media, edited by Matt Ratto and Megan Boler

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Contributors to this volume examine DIY activism, describing new modes of civic engagement that include Harry Potter fan activism and the activities of the Yes Men. They consider DIY making in learning, culture, hacking, and the arts, including do-it-yourself media production and collaborative documentary making. **Brian D. Loader** is impressed by this exciting and innovative read.

**DIY Citizenship: critical making and social media. Edited by Matt Ratto and Megan Boler. MIT Press. 2014.**

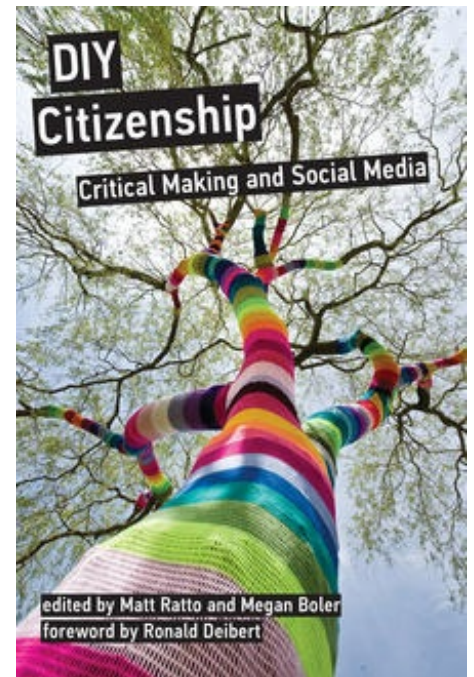
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The contention that citizens in late modern societies are increasingly ‘making themselves up’ and breaking free from prescribed rules and practices of citizenship has been gaining intellectual purchase for the past couple of decades. Whether in the guise of the ‘reflexive individual’, ‘everyday-maker’, or the ‘networked young citizen’, the political self is seen as emerging through the very diverse lived experience of social groups as they respond to the rapidly changing contexts of globalization, multiculturalism, climate change, social inequality and a new media ecology. Matt Ratto and Megan Boler in this excellent edited collection make a valuable contribution to this perspective by inviting a number of academics, artists and activists to critically explore examples of citizens-in-the-making primarily through a focus upon digitally mediated forms of ‘critical-making’.

*DIY Citizenship* begins with an introductory chapter by the editors which helpfully sets out the main themes and tensions explored throughout the book.

As they acknowledge, the term ‘DIY Citizens’ is usually associated with John Hartley who used it to describe how television audiences were fragmenting into self-determining producers as well as consumers of cultural content. Borrowing this framework enables the contributors to the book to examine how practices of citizen-making are fostered by critical interactions through new forms of media, social groups and skills, in ways which challenge or disrupt conventional systems of authority and power.

In all there are some twenty-eight short chapters covering an assortment of short vignettes stitched together to form a patchwork picture of DIY citizenship. It is not possible to do justice to them all in this short review but for those unfamiliar with the idea of DIY citizenship the chapter by Henry Jenkins, exploring fan communities, makes an excellent place to begin. Jenkins has a long association with the study of fan communities, which are one of the most oft-cited cases of self-determining identity groups. Here he discusses the *Harry Potter Alliance* which provides a clear example of the affinity between the forms of cultural engagement needed for membership of fan communities (knowledge, deliberation and activism) and those required for participation in democratic politics. Burwell and Boler in their chapter exploring fan bloggers of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* further reveal how digital makers perform citizenship in ways which “might include elements of emotion, enthusiasm, participation, and sociability (p.125).” All dimensions which are frequently absent in political science literature but all too evident in the everyday actions and feelings of citizens themselves.



The flexibly interpretive nature of DIY citizenship is captured in Red Chidgey's examination of citizen-making through the form of DIY-Feminist zines. Here a collaborative space for mutual learning and support between feminist activists is contrasted with the DIY neoliberal agenda that valorises an impoverished privatized and individualised version. Ian Reilley's discussion of the Yes Men's creative use of hoaxing to expose to the public otherwise hidden corporate or political practices provides another way of thinking about how DIY citizenship can manifest itself. Moving beyond their famous earlier culture-jamming critiques Reilley reports how the Yes Men have set up the Yes Lab where they "are now training and mentoring groups to participate in the creation of media spectacles designed to highlight social injustice issues and political struggles of great importance" (p.134). Again a learning space of a different kind provides the opportunities for DIY citizens to develop the skills and networks necessary for political hoaxing.



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I particularly enjoyed Kate Orton-Johnson's chapter explaining how social media networks fuse 'domestic' and public spaces to enable craft communities of knitters to form and express citizenship identities through wider self-determining formations beyond geographical locations. Conventional political science sceptics may be drawn to ask if such communities of 'crafties' are no more than a hobby group armed with a website and blog? Yet such responses ignore the potential of these digitally mediated spaces to provide genuine opportunities for new forms of connective engagement to emerge that counter the pessimistic trope of civic decline and apathy.

Through their self-realization DIY citizens are neither consumers nor producers of digital media but rather reveal themselves to be a blend of the two – the familiar 'prosumers'. The consequences of this are considered by several contributors. Carl DiSalvo and Mike Annay in their chapters for example, consider how the once bounded professional domains of scientists and journalists are being opened up to citizens to engage in co-construction. DiSalvo looks at how publics can be engaged through processes of speculative design to discuss issues of ethical and social concern about science and technology. Annay examines the trend towards do-it-yourself news. Both provide cautionary questions to disclose the tensions inherent in DIY citizenship between experts and lay people whether they be politicians and grassroots activists, professionals and novices or individuals and communities.

The premise of this collection is that participatory politics is founded on a conception of politics as cultural practice. It is a playful depiction of a myriad of individuals and groups who are self organizing and expressing their sense of citizenship through a range of small, localized cultural practices that challenge, question, and disrupt dominant

discourses and authoritative practices. Social media networks enable this patchwork of community-based citizenship to be scaled up and transgress the borders of the state. Doing it yourself citizenship has become a prominent political theme in the face of rising disillusionment with politicians to act effectively on behalf of citizens. For those with an interest in how a conception of citizens (particularly young ones) as 'makers' of their own destiny might manifest itself, I would recommend the instances provided in this wonderful book.

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**Brian D. Loader** is a political sociologist at the University of York, UK. His academic interests are focussed around social relations of power in a digitally mediated world including social media and citizenship participation. He is the founding Editor of the international journal *Information, Communication and Society*. Recent books include *Young Citizens in the Digital Age* (Routledge, 2007); *Social Media and Democracy* (Routledge, 2012) and *The Networked Young Citizen: social media, political participation and civic engagement*, (edited with Ariadne Vromen and Mike Xenos), New York: Routledge (2014).

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