

BOOK REVIEW

***DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media*, edited by Matt Ratto and Megan Boler. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014. 450 pp. \$30.00 paper. ISBN 9780262525527 (paper).**

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DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media, edited by Matt Ratto and Megan Boler, explores the diverse forms of civic engagement and political participation in a wide range of digitally enabled do-it-yourself (DIY) activities. The collection of essays that make up *DIY Citizenship* is the result of a 2010 conference in Toronto, Canada, at which participants comprised of scholars, activists, artists, designers, and programmers convened to discuss how new modes of engaged citizenship have emerged in social and digital media environments that penetrate our everyday lives. Together, they produced such compelling discussion regarding the changing relationship between new information and communication technologies (NICTs) and citizenship that the editors decided to compile the current research into a book.

In contrast to traditional research that positioned DIY practitioners as passive receivers or consumers of mass media and popular culture, the notion of DIY citizenship signals a shift in the possibilities of civic and political participation in which citizens assume active roles as social interventionists. The term *DIY citizenship* appears to have been first articulated by Hartley (1999), who suggested that “citizenship is a choice people can make for themselves” (178). Here, it is (re-)defined by Ratto and Boler, the editors, as “a twenty-first-century amalgamation of politics, culture, arts, and technology that in turn constitutes identities rooted in diverse making practices” (18) with an emphasis on “critical making,” that is, a practice straddling hacking, making, DIY, and DIT (do-it-together) that reverses the engineering of technologies for social change, as Man discusses in detail in his essay (Chapter 1). Throughout the book, although *DIY Citizenship* as a guiding concept takes on slightly different definitions with each author (some more political/

interventionist than others), each contribution invites us to (re-)consider how and when individuals and groups act in creative ways that question existing systems of authority and their corresponding power differentials that have been built into our technologically mediated society.

DIY Citizenship is organized into four sections according to different arenas of cultural production, ranging from activism and media design to arts, education, community building, and news production. The first section, “DIY and Activism: New Modes of Civic Engagement and Participatory Politics,” sheds light on the intersections of DIY culture, civic engagement, and participatory politics. By examining hybrid modalities of activism, hactivism, and making, this section submits that emergent forms of digitally mediated DIY activities such as fan activism, blogging, and zine production can in fact enable new modes of civic engagement and political participation. To illustrate, Jenkins’s essay on fan activism (Chapter 3) and Burwell and Boler’s essay on fan blogging (Chapter 7) demonstrate how fan activism and communities evolve their own models of civic and political participation drawing on each group’s particular fan or popular culture. Also, through a study of the media hoaxing practices pioneered by the Yes Men, Reilly’s essay (Chapter 8) shows “how DIY activist communities can reinvent otherwise tired, worn, and static modes of political and civic engagement” (127).

The second section, “DIY and Making: Learning, Culture, Hacking, and Arts,” deals with the role of DIY activities in civic learning and development. In this section, while some authors discuss how a growing “maker culture” empowers individual citizens to engage with larger cultural groups and communities (Chapters 9 and 10), others argue that DIY making with new media

assists students in developing autonomy and agency for future participation (Chapters 12 and 13). One of the merits of this section (and of the sections that follow) is that it includes not only essays that entail the potentials of digitally enabled production, but also those that acknowledge the problems and challenges in DIY making and learning.

The third section, “DIY and Design: Opening the Black Box and Repurposing Technologies,” contains work on design practices that serve to create new publics or bring new voices into public debate. Within this section, DiSalvo’s study of participatory “speculative” design practices (Chapter 17), Light’s case of the Geezers Club (Chapter 19), and McSwiney and Michaud’s historical analysis of *Les Amis du Champ des Possibles* (Chapter 20) all demonstrate how design and material engagements offer novel means for civic intervention and thus provide lucid examples of DIY citizenship. This section does not shy away from the tensions and contradictions in DIY designs either. Murphy, Phillips, and Pollock’s essay on “cloud computing” (Chapter 18), for instance, exposes the fact that many DIY activities are built upon corporate infrastructures that may delimit the potentials of these practices.

The last section is entitled “DIT and Media: Redistributing Authority and Sources in News Media” and is comprised of essays dealing with social and new media practices that reshape the landscape of media production and journalism. In one of the most interesting essays, “Alternative Media, the Mundane, and ‘Everyday Citizenship’” (Chapter 25), Atton addresses the capacity of individuals and groups who are normally excluded from media production to take part in creation and dissemination. By examining fanzines, social movement media, and perzines, Atton stresses the power and significance of everyday culture to produce communities for wider social participation through individual actions. In contrast, Ananny’s analysis of DIY news (Chapter 26) and Bissonette’s essay on iReport (Chapter 28) push back against the easy romanticizing of “citizen journalism.” As Ananny observes, “Although the field of journalism looks significantly different than it did even five years

ago and involves individuals with new types of agency, news still largely emerges from institutional forces that are beyond the meaningful influence of self-determining individuals” (360).

Although this collection of essays contains compelling analyses, some key elements are missing. First, with the editors’ frequent mentioning of the importance of critical making and social media in the so-called “new hybrid social movements” such as the Los Indignados Movement in Spain, the “Arab Spring,” and the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) Movement in the introductory chapter, it is surprising that there is no essay locating digitally enabled DIY activities in any of the aforementioned movements. This leaves readers questioning the role and effect of social and new media practices in empowering the direct civic and political participation of individual citizens. Also missing are analyses of digitally enabled DIY activities outside North America and Britain. In fact, all the essays in this collected volume concentrate their empirical materials on Canada, the United States, or the United Kingdom. Given the absence of research on other regions, future research should examine “critical making” with social media in other parts of the world to see whether digitally enabled DIY activities play a similar role in promoting creative and active citizenship.

These shortcomings aside, this edited volume is an incredible resource and essential reading for students interested in the notion of DIY citizenship. Also, with its constant engagement with numerous ways in which citizenship is enacted and performed with NICTs, this book will be sure to serve as a definitive foundation for future research exploring the role of social and digital media in civic and political participation.

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REFERENCE

Hartley, J. 1999. *The uses of television*. London, UK: Routledge.