
Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice, a collection co-edited by Emerson College professors Eric Gordon, the founding director of the Engagement Lab and professor in the Department of Visual and Media Arts, and Paul Mihailidis, the Founding Graduate Program Director of the MA in Civic Media: Art and Practice and professor in the Department of Journalism, brings together an expansive assemblage of chapters and case studies exploring the terrain of civic media. In their introduction, Gordon and Mihailidis define civic media as “the technologies, designs, and practices that produce and reproduce the sense of being in the world with others toward common good” (p. 2). “Civic” thus encompasses the “process and potential” as well as the outcomes of civic engagements that allow communities to imagine connectivity to build and enhance the common good.

The collection provides an ample road map to diverse issues and practices in civic media, encompassing 42 chapters divided thematically into six sections: 1) the “big picture” of civic and communicative activism; 2) “systems + design”; 3) “play + resistance”; 4) “learning + engagement”; 5) “community + action”; and 6) “research + funding”. While organized in a usefully sequential fashion, each section of the book can also be read individually.

The collection begins with several key chapters to provide conceptual frames for civic media. Peter Levine discusses digital media and democracy related to social inclusion and collective action, while Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg outline their logic of connective action and the role of personal action frames. Ethan Zuckerman develops a model to understand multiple forms of civic participation that consider costs, potential benefits, and outcomes. Stefania Milan’s chapter provides a rich texture of historical dynamics in emancipatory communication activism.

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Technologies and modes of civic media engagement that are explored throughout the chapters in the book include data visualization to crowdsourced civic data (Sarah Williams); open data and “grand challenges” to champion open government (Beth Simone Noveck); generative design, described by Beth Coleman as “algorithmic production of unique variation in forms [of civic media] such as sounds, 3D models, etc.,” creating a “productive relationship between user and ICT application” (p. 269); hackathons such as Code for America that contribute to “algorithmic citizenry” (Andrew Richard Schrock, p. 217); mobile technologies (the California Report Card created by CITRIS Connected Communities); and the use of environmental sensing technologies (Jennifer Gabrys, Helen Pritchard, Nerea Calvillo, Nick Shapiro, & Tom Keene). As a site of civic engagement, social media platforms are widely used, including case studies that describe feminist responses to sexism through the Australian #destroythecrown campaign (Jessica MacLean and Sophia Maalsen), the It Gets Better project for LGBTQ youth (Laurie Honda) and the use of Weibo to connect immigrant residents to local news and communication with the Alhambra, California, police department (Daniela Gerson, Nien-Tsu Nancy Chen, Sandra Ball-Rokeach, & Michael Parks).

Civic media designs for political organizing are examined. Examples run the gamut from on-the-ground protest (Erhardt Graeff’s description of the strike debt movement) to David Karpf’s analysis of designs to bridge partisan technology gaps, notably change.org, which allows users to create petitions for social change, and meetup.com, a site to organize online groups for in-person meetings and events. For policy formulation, Dmitry Epstein and Cheryl Blake describe the (now defunct) RegulationRoom, a platform designed to foster public participation in the government rule-making process. Innovative forms of open policymaking are exemplified by Better Reykjavik, a citizen-centred website for the public to submit and debate municipal policy proposals (Derek Lackaff). Molly Sauter details DDoS (distributed denial of service) attacks, a creative method for civic disobedience. Youth activism is highlighted in Elisabeth Soep’s chapter describing tactics for youth-led participatory politics comprising mobilizing, catalyzing, and sharing; and Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson, and Neta Kligler-Vilenchik illustrate how the iconography of the superhero genre has been taken up by youth activist groups to envision the “civic imagination,” which they define as “the capacity to imagine alternatives to current social, political, or economic conditions” (p. 300).

An opportunity and challenge identified by many of the authors in the collection is the development of civic and data literacies for a myriad citizenry. Renee Hobbs discusses the formation of civic education and civic agency for young people and how they are positioned as capitalists, consumers, and communicators of stories; Paul Mihailidis and Roman Gerodimos describe pedagogies of civic media. Data literacy is defined by Sarah Williams as “the ability to work with, analyze, and make arguments with data” (p. 179), with effective use of open data for civic engagement needing to go beyond the purview of “geeky citizens” (p. 153).

The final section of the book focuses on research and funding. Benjamin Bowyer and Joseph Kahne outline diverse methods to measure civic participation via surveys and indicators developed throughout the years. Marcus Foth and Martin Brynskov,
who use the example of the smart city to advocate for participatory city making, promote qualitative methods for assessing civic efficacy, notably participatory action research. Writing from their experience with the MacArthur Foundation, Valerie Chang and Beth Gutelius discuss the role of U.S. philanthropic organizations in funding civic innovation initiatives and the challenges for sustainability given the dynamics of institutions and the introduction of new technologies.

Challenges for civic tech include the commercialization of the online platforms that are used, in many instances, for civic engagement. For instance, meetup.com, originally designed for Howard Dean’s 2004 political campaign, was reportedly purchased for $200 million USD by WeWork, the “startup” real estate company that has quickly amassed a global network of co-working offices and apartments valued at $20 billion USD. Civic inclusion for fostering democratic processes and social change is key, as many authors, notably Caesar McDowell and Melissa Yvonne Chinchilla, write. Issues of governance, privacy, data autonomy, and inclusivity are central for civic media endeavours.

While the focus of Civic Media rests primarily on case studies in the U.S., the collection still serves as a useful handbook for Canadian scholars and activists working in civic media. Local initiatives include the civic tech movement in Canada, digital and data justice initiatives, debates over governance of smart cities (exemplified by the controversy of Sidewalk Toronto), open government initiatives (e.g., the 2018–2020 National Action Plan on Open Government), and the federal push to develop a digital and data economy strategy.

Leslie Regan Shade, University of Toronto