Fenton. Natalie. (2016). *Digital, Political, Radical.* Cambridge: Polity Press. ISBN 978-0-7456-5086-9. Paperback: 29.95 CAD. Pages 232.

Reviewed by Aziz Choudry

A reticence to critically interrogate claims that digital media are 'democratizing' politics and societies is commonplace in many circles. So is their frequent conflation with organizing, activism and emancipation--and condescension towards those who question assumptions made about progressive social and political change facilitated by the 'new' media.

Natalie Fenton, professor of media and communications at Goldsmiths, University of London, has written an important, engaging and timely book of great relevance to academic and activist audiences alike. In seven chapters, she suggests that '[c]laims for the extension and reinvention of activism through digital media need to be considered in the context of the material social and political world of inequality, injustice, corporate dominance and the financialization of everything." (19). And, as she reminds us, for all of the hype, Internet access and online (political) activity are marked by deep inequalities, across and within societies. Moreover, the digital realm is routinely subject to state censorship, filtering, mass surveillance, and the suppression of dissent.

Digital, Political, Radical avoids simplistic, over-determined or totalizing political-economic approaches to understanding digital media in an age of global capitalist imperialism. Rather, the book carefully reviews and critically engages with ideas and arguments arising from sociology, media and cultural studies, and social and political theory that are frequently cited in upbeat narratives about digital media and social change. For example, Fenton examines Habermasian perspectives on the public sphere and media institutions which depend on the notion of liberal democracy, and which, she contends are not up to the task of rethinking and strengthening radical politics. Likewise, she challenges Castells' optimistic (and influential) views on social movements, oppositional politics, networked communication and impact on actual political social change.

Indeed, Fenton questions whether liberal pluralism, increased information and communicative freedom in the age of the Internet and social media contribute to building serious counter-power and transformative change to confront the power of capital, as many assume or imply. She discusses the problem of losing sight of social and political critiques when analyses and explanations start – and end - with technology. Her book highlights the importance of social, political and economic transformation, collective struggles and solidarity which go beyond – and indeed may be different from – the phenomenon of individuals' increased participation in communication and "a politics of visibility that relies on hashtags, 'Likes' and

compulsive posting of updates that hinge upon self-presentation as proof of individual activism" (44).

Techno-utopianism, alongside broader obstacles to remembering histories of earlier progressive struggles, can distort our understandings of what it takes to bring about change by overstating the role of the Internet, social media, and other uses of technology and downplaying or rendering invisible the crucial, often slow, organizing work, the politics that informed them, as well as the knowledge and learning that they generated (Choudry, 2015). As Fenton discusses in reference to recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, a dominant analytical frame often overestimates the role of digital media and is accompanied by a tendency to overlook or misunderstand the significance of longer histories and particular forms of social and political protest and organizing in these contexts. Analysis drawn from what and who can be found online, and associated assumptions about what this represents, can have consequences for both the rigour of academic inquiry and the practice of radical politics. In a sense, this resonates with Robyn Rodriguez's (2010) observation about scholarship on migrant worker organizing, that research on social movements which relies too heavily on the Internet to find actors runs the risk that we can be "too readily taken in by the technological savvy of NGOs who can occupy significant space in the virtual, if not always the sensate world" (p.65), reminding us that for many organizations and movements, the Internet is not a primary mode of organizing. For Fenton:

> [w]hile the politics on offer online hides behind the thin veil of the 'social' in social media, it also deflects attention away from human association – the dense sociality that comes from democratically self-governing groups, collectives and organizations; the kind of sociality that puts lived content back into politics; the kind of sociality where democracy becomes something that is done by us rather than something that is done to us (178).

In asking what it means to 'be political' in a digital age, Fenton tackles key questions of the relationships between organizational form, political action and radical movements, arguing for repoliticizing the economy by returning wealth distribution to the centre of politics, and resocializing the political through understanding the social as the building blocks of the political. In doing so, Fenton also ponders the negative impacts of the speed-up of communications for today's activism, while acknowledging the urgency and gravity of contemporary ecological, economic, social, and political problems. She warns that:

> in the race to respond, there is a danger that the movement runs roughshod over the slower process of political organization, which also built the capacity to deliberate, establish close relations and trust between participants, and consider long-term objectives, strategies and tactics – all of things that political activism requires to collaborate effectively….The trade-off between speed and long-term

> organizational capacity-building also threatens to diminish the slow burn of skills development of activists who help push a protest politics towards being a political movement (127).

This book is a welcome intervention in discussions often dominated by ahistorical, politically naïve, and decontextualized treatments of digital media and mediated progressive politics which place technology in a saviour role in advancing social, political, economic, and educational change. Natalie Fenton has made a major contribution to studies in media and communications, and social and political movements. *Digital, Political, Radical* deserves to be read widely, inside and outside of academia, hopefully spurring and informing critical debate and further research, while providing socially relevant and much-needed ideas for today's struggles for radical change.

References

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