

Todd Wolfson, 2014, *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left*. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press. (248 pp., \$30 paperback)

Reviewed by **Gino Canella**

Todd Wolfson approaches his analysis of social movement media and the Global Social Justice Movement as a scholar and ethnographic researcher, but what truly informs *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left* is Wolfson's experience as an organizer, activist, and co-founder of the Media Mobilizing Project (MMP) in Philadelphia. A non-profit, community-media center housed in West Philadelphia, MMP grew out of Wolfson's "disquiet with the logic of the Cyber Left" (p. 8) and produces activist campaigns that focus on public education, labor rights and media policy. In coining the term "Cyber Left," Wolfson draws a connection between the organizing structures and ideologies of the popular uprisings of the 1960s and 1970s – often referred to as the New Left – with the digital technologies and communication tools utilized by recent movements like Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and Black Lives Matter. While recognizing the potential benefits these new forms of networked communications provide for democratic participation and social change, Wolfson complicates several aspects of the "Cyber Left," and these complications are discussed below. Wolfson's time studying and working with indymedia allows him to provide not only a detailed and critical analysis of the "Cyber Left," but offer practical solutions and guidance for contemporary, networked social movements seeking to navigate this somewhat new digital landscape.

After providing a historical review of social movements and the evolution of the New Left in part one of the book, part two of *Digital Rebellion* describes three key elements to modern social movements' "Logic of Resistance": Structure, Governance and Strategy. Defining this "Logic of Resistance" serves as a blueprint for how Wolfson's alternative community media hub, MMP, connects its messages of social justice, through media, to activism and advocacy that is built on (1) relationships with poor and working-class communities, (2) the development of movement leaders, and (3) political education of its staff. By working with local neighbourhood groups and community organizers on long-term campaigns that resonate with the public, MMP seeks to influence and pressure government officials with the ability to reform policy. The organizational structure and campaign strategies employed by MMP create a situation where the leaders are held accountable for their decisions – a major pitfall Wolfson sees facing the "Cyber Left."

Wolfson grounds his historical review of the Global Social Justice Movement from 1994-2006 in political-economic and networked communication theories and focuses on his fieldwork with indymedia – both in the United States and internationally – to present a convincing critique of the "Cyber Left." *Digital Rebellion* problematizes and champions social movement media by seeking a

theoretical space between what Jodi Dean (2009) refers to as “communicative capitalism” and Laclau and Mouffe’s views that socialist ideals are “in crisis.”

Wolfson challenges the notions that a review of materialist economic conditions is reductive and the hope that social change can be generated from the working classes is a “Marxist fiction” (p. 156). Dean defines communicative capitalism as the “participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism” (p. 2). Inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis and Slavoj Žižek’s work on the decline of symbolic efficiency (1998), Dean’s argument is centered on the notion that an overwhelming amount of news and information available online leads to “a mistrust of what is said in favor of what can be detected” (Andrejevic 2009). Dean cautions online activists about the personalization of politics that may be exacerbated by Web 2.0 and other participatory communication networks. Wolfson, while not going so far as Dean in his analysis of the “Cyber Left,” reviews the strategies of the labor movement, New Left and other movements of the past because, he says, “to understand a specific period of resistance, it is vital to look at historical antecedents as well as the current socioeconomic environment” (p. 185).

The “Cyber Left,” according to Wolfson, emerged out of the logic of the New Left movements of the 1960s and reflects similar characteristics, such as horizontal, non-hierarchical structures that operate with leaderless governance and “radical democratic revolution[ary]” approaches towards social change. These characteristics are foregrounded by an account of the strategies employed by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) of Chiapas, Mexico that proclaimed in 1994, “One NO to neoliberal capitalism, many YESES” (p. 18). While several autonomous actors can indeed unite under this banner, seek to reject neoliberal capitalism, and support issues ranging from labor rights to environmental activism, Wolfson highlights here a critical aspect of the Zapatista’s story that is often missing from the “Cyber Left’s” discourse and strategies and one that is essential to understanding this movement: the on-the-ground organizing and shared messaging that occurred between the Marxist urban revolutionaries and the Mayans that allowed the organization to develop “dialogue, patience, and community” (p. 33).

This relationship-building enabled the movement to proceed with a cohesive and effective strategy, but, because the EZLN used a combination of old and new media to broadcast and promote its oppositional messages in its struggle with the Mexican army, the focus of many scholars and activists has wrongly centered on the technology’s role in the movement. In detailing the community relationships the Zapatistas developed, Wolfson demonstrates how new communication technologies utilized by social movements can benefit activists, but also how these tools distract researchers and journalists interested in understanding these organizations from the social, political and economic conditions affecting the production and distribution of the movement’s messages and the labor of the activists involved. Secondly, and more importantly, by emphasizing the relationships the Zapatistas built with the

Mayans, Wolfson is highlighting the organizing efforts and messaging strategies needed to develop and maintain long-term campaigns for social justice and connect them with poor and working-class communities.

Wolfson also details the rise and eventual successes of the Seattle Indymedia Center (IMC) during the 1999 World Trade Organization protests to describe the potential advantages networked communications have when utilized by activists who are mobilizing and uniting union leaders, community organizers and others. While the open-publishing platform used by Seattle IMC was essential to its distribution of news about the protests, Wolfson makes a deliberate effort to avoid falling into a techno-deterministic analysis. The horizontalism of indymedia, and the “Cyber Left” more broadly, is what accelerates rapid growth in the number of participants – similar to that seen by Occupy Wall Street and the protests of the Arab Spring – and allows more voices to feel connected and empowered by the movement. This structure and the digital media and new communication technologies that come with it, as Wolfson points out, also tend to privilege those with more social and cultural capital to reach positions of authority – typically upper-middle-class, well-educated, tech-savvy young men. Online activists working from remote locations are also placed at a physical distance from those the campaign is aimed at helping, which creates a barrier between them and the poor and working-class communities they are supposedly supporting. For these reasons, Wolfson shares Žižek’s concerns about the “Cyber Left’s” long-term viability and potential to connect its online activism to on-the-ground support. If movements are to utilize these technologies in any sort of shared struggle, it is essential for scholars and activists to return to a critique of capitalism and class, develop leaders who can be held to account for the movement’s long-term campaign strategy and decisions, and promote political education training within social movement organizations.

Digital Rebellion offers tangible advice for building, strategizing, and sustaining durable, networked movements and is a useful and accessible resource for scholars, activists, and community organizers working within the Global Social Justice Movement. Wolfson’s measured analysis of social movements and the media they utilize is useful because there tends to be either an uncritical celebration by those eager to credit new technologies for their role in promoting social justice or vilification by others who only see these movements and their media-making activities as servicing Western capitalism. *Digital Rebellion* offers scholars and activists theoretical and practical frameworks that situate social movement media within historical and socioeconomic contexts. What I would have appreciated more of, however, was a further exploration of the Mayans’ appeal for sensible dialogue. At a time when many social actors appear to be shouting down their opposition and reasoned debate and consensus-seeking seems lost, realizing how and where the Mayans found common ground with the Marxist revolutionaries is a critical place for contemporary movements to begin working towards policy reform. Detailing the work of activists who are producing and distributing messages of social justice in concert with community

leaders, politicians, the public, and other activists, while focusing on the labor that is required to build and maintain these relationships, is critical for understanding social movements operating within networked communications fraught with (symbolic) inefficiencies. Perhaps Occupy Wall Street's introduction of the "99 percent" into the public consciousness was a success.

For others, new legislation or policy reform is the only metric for success. The "Cyber Left," and the movements Wolfson would say are associated with it, has been panned for offering radical messaging in the form of slogans, catchphrases, or hashtags, which disappear from the public discourse within months. Encouraging social movements to follow the community-centered strategies the Mayans shared with the Marxist urban revolutionaries in Chiapas, Mexico is an opportunity to rethink how sensible "dialogue, patience, and community" can foster consistent, inclusive messaging and lasting social justice.

References

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About the review author

Gino Canella is a Ph.D. student of Media Studies in the College of Media, Communication and Information at the University of Colorado – Boulder. His research interests include collaborative and participatory filmmaking for social justice. In addition to his academic work, Gino is a video journalist and documentary filmmaker. He can be contacted at gino.canella AT colorado.edu