LibrarianShipwreck

Libraries, Archives, Technology, Impending Doom

Broadcasting Resistance – a review of Low Power to the People by Christina Dunbar-Hester

In trying to build a different tomorrow, activists find themselves using the tools of today. And quite often the tools of yesterday as well. The choice of which tools to use and how to use them often winds up shaping the narratives around a given cause or social movement as events dubbed “Twitter Revolutions” or “Facebook Revolutions” attest. While some activists may treat various techniques and technologies merely as means to achieving their movement’s ends, some activists see the ends manifested in those technological means. Therefore the matter of which technologies to use, and how they are used, may be anything but an idle concern for some activists.

This question, of the intersection between technology and activism, is at the core of Christina Dunbar-Hester’s book *Low Power to the People: Pirates, Protest, and Politics in FM Radio Activism*. The book focuses on a group of activists, affiliated with the Prometheus Radio Project, who looked to the past to find tools to help them realize their vision of the future. Contrary to the spirit of digital utopianism the activists portrayed in *Low Power to the People*, see the “old” medium of radio as better aligning with their vision of an egalitarian future.

The Prometheus activists promoted low power FM stations (LPFM), which Dunbar-Hester describes as “transmitters that operate using between 10 and 100 watts…enough power to reach a few square miles from the site of transmission” (4). Drawing upon a mix of anthropological observation and participation in the movement, Dunbar-Hester creates an evocative image of the work conducted by these activists, the challenges they face, the way the activism impacts their construction of identity, the gendered politics of activism involving technology, and the importance of radio technology for the purpose of achieving activist ends. *Low Power to the People* is not a “how to” guide for building a LPFM, but it represents an important contribution to contemporary discussions around technology and activism that too often place an adoring focus upon digital technologies.

*Low Power to the People* begins by unpacking the history of radio activism in order to provide context for the Prometheus Radio Project. Prometheus’s push for LPFM stations appears as a response to actions by the FCC that limited LPFM availability while allowing for increasing consolidation by large radio corporations (such as Clear Channel Communications). Activists
interested in democratizing the media responded to such consolidation and control through varying means including setting up illegal “pirate” radio stations, as well as by pushing for regulatory change. Though some of the activists involved with the Prometheus Radio Project had previously been involved in “pirate broadcasting,” Prometheus was created to bring new LPFM stations on the air legally. Notable amongst Prometheus’s tactics were “barnraisings,” where activists would spend a weekend launching a new LPFM, while still advocating for regulatory change. In 2003 the Prometheus Radio Project sued the FCC over pro-consolidation laws, while arguing for more spectrum allocation to LPFM stations. Insofar as there was space available for LPFM stations, Prometheus worked to ensure that these opportunities would not be squandered.

The activists involved with Prometheus – some of whom were paid staff members – “sought to demystify technology and thus to engage users politically” (22). The intersection of technical practice and activist praxis was particularly evident in the “barnraisings” wherein the Prometheus staff, along with volunteers, would help a new LPFM to start broadcasting. Barnraisings, which usually took place over a weekend, allowed community members to be closely involved with the work of launching their radio station, a process that allowed participants to feel as though they had truly been involved in “making” their radio station a reality. Thus barnraisings were community-building exercises that also imparted a “Do-It-Yourself” ethos, such practices “transformed a mere hobby into media activism” (84). Yet, the barnraisings were not the only settings in which Prometheus activists tried to open the “black box” of technology – another instance described by Dunbar-Hester involves the Prometheus activists attempting to repair two large radio transmitters. While the work was ultimately unsuccessful the more important element for participants was that “the work related to activist goals” (82) simply by demystifying the transmitters.

Beyond the technical work of setting up radio stations, soldering transmitter boards, holding workshops, and tinkering with technology the Prometheus activists were also engaged with the construction of their own identities as activists. Though Dunbar-Hester treats the radio activists as scions of the 1960s’ “new communalist” and “appropriate technology” movements – the individuals involved with Prometheus seem cognizant of many of the weaknesses of earlier activist movements. Their practice bore the subtle imprint of “anarchist and Marxist traditions” (184) not simply the mark of the 1960s counterculture. Key to the character of the Prometheus activists is that radio activism was not simply a lifestyle, but was treated as an active means of socio-political engagement. And yet “the activists’ desire to propagate egalitarian technical participation was difficult to implement” (75).

The Prometheus activists were forced to balance clear differentials in technical ability, and though Dunbar-Hester emphasizes that the activists were always attempting to teach new people the relevant skills there were instances in which a reliance on expertise seemed to replicate the very hierarchies the activists sought to dismantle. Further complications confronted the Prometheus activists as they wrestled with the way in which “the complex and nuanced relationships between selfhoods constructed around technical practice and gender were thorny and not easily overcome by good intentions” (54). The matters of gender, race, class and other facets of identity construction were never out of mind for the Prometheus activists, nor were such matters treated
as ignorable trifles, but even so, this did not stop their work. Even when the activists had to tone down their rhetoric and don “business attire” – in order to participate in lobbying Congress – they held fast to the egalitarian ethos that was the lodestone of their activism.

That radio is an “old” technology never seems to trouble the Prometheus activists, and though they, at times, seem guilty of fetishizing the medium they remain aware of the problems such romanticizing can cause. The activists celebrated and advocated for radio precisely because they saw it as a medium largely in sync with their values. A key strategy of the Prometheus activists “was to teach people to build and use technical artifacts” (170) and this was much more doable with radio technologies than with the “complex and essentially black-boxed” (171) technology of computers. The relative simplicity of radio technology and the ease of teaching the requisite technical skills made radio seem to the Prometheus activists like an ideal technology for advancing their political vision: it allowed for the distribution of both technical artifacts and expertise.

The affection for radio shown by the LPFM activists has a certain utopian sheen to it, and yet in remaining aware of the politics inherent in all technological forms the Prometheus activists recognize that any utopia will be shaped by the tools used to construct it. Radio activism for these activists was not an end in itself but a means to egalitarian ends that extended beyond radio, as the Prometheus member identified as Brian explains in reflecting upon his work with the organization, “What I hope people can take from the barnraising is that they can extrapolate the DIY attitude to everything else in their lives…I’ve come up with a number of different ways to get people to just put their hands on the tech, just try it. Once they try it, it’s not that complicated” (40).

*Low Power to the People* is an important contribution to contemporary discussions around technology, politics and activism. By immersing herself in the culture and activities of the radio activists Christina Dunbar-Hester is able to demonstrate the complex layers of ambitions and ambiguities involved in radio activism (and activism more broadly). The portrait that emerges of the radio activists is one that pointedly recognizes the shortcomings of the group – their fetishization of radio, inability to fully overcome socially entrenched gender, racial and class hierarchies – while still retaining a focus on the ways and the whys that the activists have chosen to focus upon radio as opposed to another medium.

In recent years their have been a number of books that have explored a similar nexus of technology and activism; however, where titles like Astra Taylor’s *The People’s Platform*, Manuel Castell’s *Networks of Outrage and Hope* and Gabriella Coleman’s *Coding Freedom* seemed to glorify the potential of digital technologies, *Low Power to the People* stakes out an important contrarian position. It is one that asks whether the Internet (and the mountains of high-tech devices associated with it) is truly the best technology for advancing egalitarian aims. While Dunbar-Hester refers to many of the radio activists (using their own terminology) as “geeks” and “nerds” – these radio geeks “resisted what they perceived to be unbridled and uncritical enthusiasm for what digital utopianists claimed to be the inherently emancipatory properties of computers and the Internet” (192). Though this does not mean that Dunbar-Hester is explicitly endorsing the radio activists vision over that of digital activists – the example of radio activism still functions as an important retort to contemporary debates that often seem shaped by the claims of “digital
“Indeed, though the radio activists may fetishize radio, this reinforced, instead of diminished, their political commitments – as these radio activists remained “critical of computer hackers and free and open source software (FOSS) developers” whom, they thought, “tended to not be politicized enough” (178).

The LPFM activists discussed by Dunbar-Hester are described as carrying forth the tradition of “appropriate technology,” and though the tools used by the radio activists are small scale and easily distributed the political vision advanced by the activists seems like a demonstration of the opposition Lewis Mumford drew between “authoritarian” and “democratic technics.” Mumford’s claim was that “those who are concerned with maintaining democratic institutions” need to recognize “that their constructive efforts must include technology itself” (Mumford, 7), and this ethos is powerfully manifested in the work of the Prometheus activists for whom the work of maintaining and expanding democracy entails a serious focus on “technology itself.” For the activists in Low Power this focus has involved recognizing which technologies are more attuned to “democratic” values – though the Prometheus activists do not express it in such terms it is clear that they see radio as a “democratic technic” while they remain wary of the “authoritarian” potentiality of more complex technologies. Indeed in confronting the raft of new high technologies the Prometheus activists demonstrate that when confronted with the “new” it is often worthwhile to re-investigate the “old.”

A layered and complex image of radio technology and the activists involved in its propagation emerges in Low Power to the People – even as the book acknowledges, “there are real risks in fetishizing technology as a platform for egalitarian politics” (xvi). While the ragtag activists from the Prometheus Radio Project attempt to overcome these challenges even as they hold fast to their platform of choice what Dunbar-Hester deftly demonstrates is the risks entailed in uncritically combining technology and activism. Nevertheless, the activists described in Low Power to the People stand out not only for their level of political engagement (and critical self-awareness) but for the technology they have chosen to utilize – and their activities foreground the question of what technologies are the best means for advancing egalitarian ends.

Dunbar-Hester’s book is not a manifesto for the LPFM movement, but the book functions remarkably well as a corrective to the numerous books about digital activism that read primarily as propaganda for digital technology. Low Power to the People is an important reminder that digital-utopianism, is not the only ethos to which activists, and scholars, can tune their receivers.

The Book Reviewed:

Low power to the People: Pirates, Protest, and Politics in FM Radio Activism

Christina Dunbar-Hester


Other References

More Book Reviews

My Favorite Books from 2015

The People’s Platform by Astra Taylor
Pressed for Time by Judy Wajcman
The Glass Cage by Nicholas Carr
Future Shock by Douglas Rushkoff

About TheLuddbrarian

"I won't explain myself because I hate common sense." librarianshipwreck.wordpress.com @libshipwreck
View all posts by TheLuddbrarian ➞
This entry was posted on April 28, 2016 by TheLuddbrarian in Activism, Books, Reviews, Technology and tagged Book Review, Christina Dunbar-Hester, radio, Radio Activism, Wplongform.
http://wp.me/p38S12-A9
Previous post
Next post
Create a free website or blog at WordPress.com, The Suburbia Theme.