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D E M O C R A T I C C O M M U N I Q U É

Editor's Note

Media of Crisis, Criticism, and Opposition: Tactical Media in the Struggle for Social Change

Rhon Teruelle & Jesse S. Cohn

Tactical media, as “media of crisis, criticism, and opposition” (Lovink & Garcia 1997), grow out of a long history of advocates for social change finding creative ways to poach on and produce media. From the use of mainstream television by the anti-war movement in the Sixties to the Zapatistas’ innovative use of the Internet in the mid-1990s, the use of social media during the Arab Spring in 2010 and 2011, the Quebec student strike of 2012, and the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong in 2014, examples of the tactical use of media in struggles for social change abound. While on-the-ground activity was instrumental in all of these movements and moments, the positive impact that various media forms had on these events cannot be discounted.

This issue of *Democratic Communiqué* focuses on the analysis and investigation of the tactical and political use of media in struggles for social change. We asked our contributors to reassess older theorizations of “tactical media” — a concept first formulated in the era of Web 1.0, after all, long before the rise of corporate mega-platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube — and to reevaluate its possibilities and limitations in the global present. The contributors took up this challenge, raising new questions about the role of tactical media in contemporary struggles for social change. The variety of articles certainly highlights the interdisciplinary scope, as well as the global implications and timeliness of our Special Issue.

The “tactical” aspect of tactical media emphasizes their orientation to the immediate and practical realities of action, hence to the “[h]ere and now,” the “temporary” (Garcia & Lovink 1997). While David Jackson embraces this tradition, he notes that “in a time of fake news and information saturation, tactical media has lost some of its progressive and activist edge and in some ways has itself been subverted by an alt-right form of tactical media that creates outrage, critiques mainstream media coverage, [and] pranks and hoaxes public figures.” Here, Jackson sounds a keynote that will be echoed by other contributors to the issue. What role might tactical media play in a long-range strategy for fighting an emboldened and globalized ultra-right with unprecedented power over communication? How can tactical media help to construct (and destroy) widely shared agreements about what is true or false, to be desired or feared? Tanner Mirrlees’ contribution, weighing the progress of the battles being “played out across Facebook and other [social media] platforms,” investigates how social media can be utilized to challenge the alt-right movement in North America. Mirrlees emphasizes the need for the left to build a “united front” in cyberspace, as well as on the street, as an effective tactic against the alt-right. In a similar vein, our own contribution showcases the tactical use of social media by the survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, not only to take on a highly organized and well-heeled political group, the National Rifle Association, but to change broad public attitudes toward guns and to redefine the boundaries of discourse around them. Likewise, Teruelle’s study on the Quebec student strike of 2012 focuses on the tactics that the students used, paying particular attention to their effective use of social media to facilitate patient, long-term, coordinated movement around a “unified front” and “common goal[s]”. Jackson finds in the Ultra-Red collective’s artistic interventions a promising tactic that “disposes of the relational recognition required by speaking truth to power,” circumventing rather than engaging the State, and perhaps also circumventing the problem of “truth” as such, “replac[ing] it with the imposition of a new ambience, or a new way of affectively experiencing space.”

Some are not so optimistic about the possibilities of tactical media in the present moment. Carlos Figueiredo offers a sobering assessment of the rout suffered by the Brazilian left in the struggle

for hegemony, finding that tactical media's prioritization of spontaneous "mobility" did not enable them to wage a long-term "War of Position" — nor to respond to the "Underground War" waged on them by far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro. Another pessimistic evaluation likewise comes from the global periphery: Temitope Yetunde Bello's piece problematizes how social media has been used by vigilantes in Nigeria to enact "jungle justice," using tactics similar to those of the Bolsonarists: both take advantage of social disorganization (the disorganization of the left in Brazil, the disorganization of State institutions in Nigeria) and use viral content to whip up public outrage and justify violence. Accordingly, Figueiredo and Bello look to traditional modes of organization such as the Party and the State to establish truth and justice. By contrast, Michael Krieger's contribution argues for the inclusion of new means of production, new modes of distribution, and new agents in determining the truth and practicing justice, while Ian Reilly suggests that even the seemingly antisocial force of the "hoax" can be deployed on behalf of the social good, challenging the reigning mythologies and "prefigur[ing]" a better world.

We hope that this Special Issue provides you with a cohesive semblance of how tactical media is understood, imagined, and practiced today. Although it is far from comprehensive, we believe that these eight articles offer a productive overview of the use of tactical media. We sincerely thank *Democratic Communiqué* for the opportunity to be involved with such a fabulous project. We would like to thank the contributors for their excellent work and editor, Jeffrey Blevins, for his invaluable feedback.

Reference List

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