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**Analytic Activism: Digital Listening and the New Political Strategy by D.Karpf, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, 224 pp., ISBN 9780190266134, $24.95 (paperback)**

The digital tools of activists and social movements have generated a steady stream of scholarship over the last ten years. David Karpf's Analytical Activism is a welcome addition to this body of work, not in the least because it is decidedly different. Most scholarly attention to digital advocacy and civil society explores the dynamics of voice - how new affordances and channels of communication impact the underlying logic of political expression and contestation. This book, on the other hand, addresses listening, the communicative flip side of voice that has demanded almost no research interest otherwise. Analytical Activism thus makes a tremendously important contribution, but it does not live up to the scope promised by it's title, and ambiguity regarding the types of organizations under study complicates some of the book's key conclusions and conceptual distinctions. Maintaining a mental caveat about the the project's more restricted scope, however, allows a highly compelling and entertaining read about some of the most novel and exciting consequences of digital information for contemporary advocacy.

That the book is both compelling and entertaining is worth noting, because Analytical Activism also succeeds in format. It is a concise and thoroughly readable book; it's 224 pages free from both tortured academic prose and the conventionally clunky bookends of introduction and conclusion that so often belabour main points for readers that would rather skim. The book instead breezes narratively through six focused chapters, which alternate loosely between empirical cases, conceptual sketches and anecdotes that demonstrate the rich and dynamic social universe in which his case studies take place. Throughout, the text is well-grounded in relevant literature, but maintains a conversational tone that makes for clear argumentation and pleasant reading.

Karpf opens by defining analytical activism as an "approach" to politics, distinguishable in organizations that are inclined to test, to listen, and which can access large-scale data on their constituencies. As such, activist movements like Occupy Wall Street and hacktivist groups aren't representative of analytic activism, because they lack the organizational structure and infrastructure to analyse and strategically respond to data on their constituencies (2-3, 134-135). Described as a general practice, enabled by organizational and technical factors, and available to a broad scope of activist organizations, this conception of analytical activism resonates strongly with hype and ethos of the "data revolution," in which civil society organizations around the world now find themselves encouraged to measure their advocacy, mobilize the crowd, and tap into the vast (if uncertain) potential of open data for social change. It is in this context that the idea of analytical activism is most exciting, as a first step to understanding one way in which data's uncertain potential might be mobilized. This is precisely why the ambiguity of scope for Karpf's project is problematic.

Karp claims to take "political organizations as the central object of analysis" (162), but already in preliminary chapters, readers will begin to suspect that this isn't quite right. Karpf's

research objects are simultaneously more restrictive and less precise. Analytical activism is not explicated as a practice for and by activist organizations per se, but rather membership organizations specifically (be they non-profit or profit-seeking), defined by their capacity to mobilize user data in the production of highly shareable internet content. This is initially apparent in the book's first empirical discussions (chapter 3), where Karpf compares two e-petition platforms (one an advocacy organization, the other a profit seeking organization), and follows up with a chapter (chapter 4) discussing comparable analytical practices in Upworthy, an internet amplification business that might be described as a "social good company," but certainly not an activist group.

These three organizations are hardly representative of activist organizations per se, and it's a distinction with a difference. The e-petition and Upworthy cases lead Karpf to propose two sets of boundary conditions for analytical activism, the analytical floor and the analytical frontier, which in turn imply a number of heuristics and risks for analytical activism as a practice. The analytical floor is a condition according to which an organization must have enough data (internal data on members that is) to enable meaningful and insightful analysis, which makes this a game for large membership organizations. The analytical frontier is a condition that limits the kinds of insights one can actually draw from data on member preferences and user habits (the kind of internal data that Karpf's case studies are collecting will quickly indicate what kind of content will get the most traction on social media, but will not readily translate into high level strategic insights about how to pursue social justice objectives).

These conditions are explored in detail, and Karpf is careful to note that they are not absolute, presenting six shorter cases that illustrate the ways in which they can be tested and expanded (chapter 5). Here too, however, attention to  e-petition and membership organizations dominate. Missing is a discussion of how other types of activist organizations might use internal data, such as organizations that provide direct services, collect primary data for campaigns, or facilitate monitorial democracy or citizen reporting. They have the organizational characteristics that would presumably enable analytical activism, unlike the leaderless organizations that Karpf explicitly excludes from this study, but lack formal membership structures or websites with online petitions. Similarly missing is a discussion of how activist organisations without constituency data, such as lobbying or public awareness organizations, might make use of alternative types of data, or how public private partnerships might contribute to such analytical activism (the absence of that last bit is particularly conspicuous, given the prominence of private companies in Karpf's explication of the concept).

These omissions are problematic because there is an opportunity cost to not considering a broader scope of actors and activity, but it also leads to questionable claims. The assertion that "with a few notable exceptions [...] small organizations simply cannot make use of internal analytics" (39) begs a host of questions about what constitutes "internal data" for activist organizations operating at the intersection of primary and open data, about what those exceptions are and when they apply, and about whether the distinction between internal and external data even makes sense in an information landscape where advocacy so regularly and easily interoperates the two.

Similarly, Karpf proposes that there are three modes of activism (mobilizing, organizing and campaigning), and asserts that it is more difficult to measure the organization of members

than the mobilization of members, because organizing members is more art than science (136). This assertion makes a lot more sense when modified to apply only to petition and campaign driven organizations, than if one poses it to the universe of activist organizations more broadly. Making such implicit modifiers explicit would make the entire project move more smoothly.

Comparable caveats ought to be applied to the risks that Karpf associates with analytical activism. A significant portion of the second, fifth and sixth chapters are spent asserting how "messy" activism is, and suggesting the ways in which conclusions drawn from simple metrics can be misleading. This is certainly true, but at a level of abstraction that makes it less useful than it could be. Similarly, the four associated dangers he proposes (loss of beneficial inefficiencies, listening without conversation, perverse measurement incentives, and analytic astroturf) are all inevitably manifest in radically different ways for activist organizations working in different contexts and with different types of data. While the broad warnings Karpf offers might be immediately and simply relevant to US-based campaigning organizations whose primary audiences are online, it is unclear how they would manifest for other types of analytical activism.

To answer this question requires careful analysis, and it's ok that Karpf's short book doesn't tackle it. But to frame the analysis as broad as he does, without opening the door and providing a foundation for such questions, he does the field to which he contributes to a disservice.

At bottom, Karpf is likely guilty of the same availability bias of which accuses the academy more generally. In drawing conclusions for academics at the end of the book, he notes that

> "It is easy to gather Twitter data. It is harder to navigate the Facebook terms of service, and even harder still to cobble together a comprehensive email dataset. As a result, both academic journals and academic conferences feature mountains of Twitter papers, molehills written about Facebook, and an awkward silence regarding email. We study the kinds of social media that we can access, regardless of their relative importance in political life" (174).

A similar dynamic might be at play here. Petition and case data from Move On and Change.org are indubitably more accessible than the myriad accounts of how small and disparate activist organizations around the world are leveraging the data they generate, the data they find and the data they secure. But such examples merit just as much attention. From a scholarly perspective perhaps even more, since their contexts are often more constrained, their strategies so much more novel. One wonders about Brazilian open data intermediaries assessing portals' user metrics to inform public service advocacy, about slum mapping initiatives in Kenya whose lists support anti-violence campaigns, about free legal aid campaigns in Arab states, whose metrics are used to design judicial capacity development programs. Do these qualify as analytical activism? It's hard to say without looking closely, but the distinctions and heuristics Karpf proposes would almost certainly have a different flavour if such examples were considered.

Of course, nothing in *Analytical Activism* precludes such study. At bottom, the opportunity cost of this ambiguity, the failure to anticipate a broader universe of research, and the lack of useful foundations for such research, might represent a small price to pay for such a

momentous and shareable piece of scholarship. But it is worth noting that the ways in which the book's concepts and structures are road tested and adapted in other contexts may very well be the source of this work's greatest impact. In this sense, the book, like the practices of digital activism it aims to document and understand, represents a fledgling effort, pushing at the boundaries of what is possible and what is known. It is admirable as such. Like analytical activists, this book might not "have all of the answers. [It is] just finding better ways to ask the right questions" (24).