

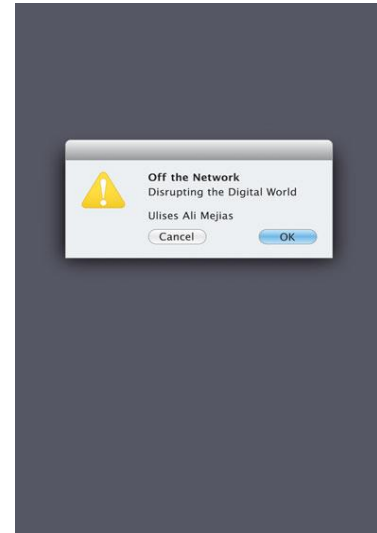
Ulises Ali Mejias, **Off the Network: Disrupting the Digital World**, Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, 193 pp., \$22.50 (paperback).

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In the recent past, scholarship on digital media and social media networks has focused on the ubiquity of the Internet-enabled platforms in political, social, and business communication. There is scholarship on the digital divide, digital access, and digital labor, but in his book **Off the Network: Disrupting the Digital World**, Ulises Ali Mejias departs from the more common narrative of the advantages of the platform and emphasizes the commercial and capitalist characteristics of the Internet. The book is divided in three parts: "Thinking the Network," "Unthinking the Network," and "Intensifying the Network." In the first part, Mejias introduces the functioning of the network, and in the second part, he unpacks the strategies to disrupt the framework of the network. In the third part, Mejias focuses on diminishing the boundaries between digital and nondigital networks to create a successful network of communication.



Scholars have previously discussed the existence of a power structure in social media networks, and identified the economic function of the Internet. It might be naïve to assume that no power structure exists in social media networks (Castells, 2012; Kahn & Kellner, 2012). The author adds a note of caution that the Internet is just a democratic and participatory platform that has a robust commercial and economic function.

In the nine chapters, split into three parts, Mejias starts the introduction with the concept of *network*. The concept of network is frequently used by communication and technology scholars, and the focus remains on digital networks, but Mejias makes a distinction between online and offline networks and focuses equally on the merits of offline networks.

The four chapters in the first part are on the commercialized character of the Internet and other Internet-enabled socializing tools. Mejias, at the very outset, explains that critiquing the way the Internet functions should not be misinterpreted as an antagonistic outburst, but rather as utilizing this critique to make the Internet a democratic space. The recurrent theme in this book is how digital technologies increase socioeconomic inequalities and commercialize the apparently egalitarian space. He focuses his discussion on the oppression emerging from digital networks and the alienation of activists and individuals from the digital space due to digital inequalities. At the same time, Mejias makes the effort not to alienate his readers by focusing on the relevant and popular themes of Internet and network scholarship such as digital privacy, activism, commercialization of the digital space, and counterinsurgency networks. The author engages with his readers to show that they are trading their privacy in exchange for participation

in the digital network. He gives an important example of how antiterror digital surveillance can also be used for surveilling citizens and activists domestically.

Mejias gives a robust theoretical analysis of the concepts he proposes. However, there is a notable omission in the discussion of commercialization of the Internet. The news media have been at the receiving end of the commercialized Internet, and Mejias ignores a discussion on the issue of the commercial news media and its engagement with the audience. It cannot be overlooked that the commercialized paywall in the news industry has not been profitable; in particular, the newspaper industry is in decline. There is an increasing trend for journalists to engage with their audiences on social media networks. This could be an interesting point of discussion in the first part, "Thinking the Network," in the section on the dominant market structure of participatory media (p. 30). Since he discusses the manifesto on old and new media, this would be an appropriate place to discuss audience interaction on news media platforms and the impact of a commercialized network on the interaction. Another notable omission in this book was the exclusion of discussion on a hybrid media system and how grassroots-level activists would function in a hybrid media system or even a hybrid political campaign. Mejias does discuss hybrid constructivism, but the discussion of a hybrid media system is neglected.

Mejias is inclusive of diversity in his discussion of the Internet's influence on time and space. He shares the story of an individual working for an IT team in New York City, but who telecommutes from Chennai, India; although the individual does not stay in the U.S., he is cognizant of the cultural and work ethics of a country of which he is not a resident. Other examples of activists from Egypt and Syria discussing their online activism personify inert digital networks. The discussion engages the reader in getting involved in the digital and real-life experiences of people around the world.

Mejias is articulate in putting his theoretical framework in the context of commercialization of the Internet. He heavily refers to the Deleuzian philosophy of essentialism and to Marxist theory. He further incorporates the Hegelian philosophy of the similarities and differences from the surface (p. 89). In chapter 5, Mejias introduces and recommends various ideas on disrupting the network and the Internet to make it a more democratic space. But the question of feasibility remains. How reasonable and realistic is it to disrupt the network without disrupting our real lives? In particular, he discusses the thin boundary line between the two in his stories about technology professionals and activists.

Mejias asks a pertinent question about the effectiveness of networked activism. He sounds rather cynical when he asks, "By reducing activism to information sharing through prosperity network technologies, do we further freedom of speech or simply strengthen the authorities [*sic*] control over channels of communication and means of action?" (p. 104). However, he does acknowledge that the social media platforms are an effective way of organizing movements and aggregating information for the movements. I strongly feel Mejias questions the sustainability of network-exclusive movements.

In the last few chapters, he talks about the overprivilege of networked activism and alienation of activists from the real movement. Although he does not delve much into the idea of "slacktivism," it is a pertinent concept in this regard. There is scholarship on the pacification in individuals in using social networks to participate in activism; they perceive themselves as important participants in activism (Glenn,

2015; Harlow & Harp, 2012. There is a clear case of disassociation between real-life activists and activists trying to bring about change and revolution through social network sites, and Mejias rightly points out the concept of liberation technology, which is focusing primarily on the contribution of digital media for activism and excluding digitally challenged activists. Democracy is an imperfect system, and to expect that networked democracy will be a perfect system is hardly realistic.

Finally, Mejias ends on a positive note, underlining the benefits of social media networks and focusing on the need to change and disrupt the network to bring about a socialist and egalitarian space. However, Mejias does not deal with the ethical challenges of a disrupted network. Mejias touches on the algorithmic discussion of consent and democracy. He accuses the digital network of managing dissent by algorithms and homogenizing consent. However, I disagree with Mejias when he proposes that the network subdues dissent and gives an example of Wikipedia. The various Wikipedia edit-thons have created spaces and knowledge for marginalized individuals and societies. Yes, there are community guidelines that need to be followed, but to my understanding, it also lists the edits.

This book would be a great read in the current situation, when social media networks were used to wrongly predict the result of the U.S. presidential election. At the same time, we are experiencing a resistance movement, digital surveillance of citizens and activists, and the rise of fake news on the Internet. This book has the answers to all of the above-mentioned issues; there could not be a better time to read it. The book could give emerging scholars insight into how social media platforms are based on commercial and market demands, which is one of the reasons for fake news and surveillance. This book brings forth the profitable market side of the Internet and network and how it works. Scholars of Internet-mediated communication and technology should read this, since it challenges the popular framework of the Internet.

References

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