

Book Review

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TJ Billard

Voices for Transgender Equality: Making Change in the Networked Public Sphere

New York: Oxford University Press, 2024, £18.99 pbk (ISBN: 9780197695432), 264 pp.

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There has been significant attention placed upon transgender (trans)¹ rights across political strata and media spheres, primarily through the hard work of activists in the contemporary trans movement. However, as recent literature attests, this increased visibility has been met with fraught discourse on trans rights in North America, and further afield. Amid these ‘culture wars’, TJ Billard describes, innovative media activism is flourishing; and understanding these methods is vital in the struggle for trans equality.

Voices for Transgender Equality is based on an ethnographic study of the National Centre for Transgender Equality (NCTE), a trans rights organisation based in Washington, DC. The book builds upon sociological and communications scholarship and examines how social movement organisations make change in the networked public sphere. Billard describes how, during the first two years of the Trump administration (2017 to 2019), NCTE successfully influenced political narratives about trans issues by engaging in what Billard terms the ‘politics of flows’: the management of evolving information across the domains of mass media, local and community media, and social networks. Each chapter analyses a component of the ‘chimaeric’ communications system, using examples of the NCTE’s organising to demonstrate how the team were able to influence the political information environment: from maintaining relationships with journalists in the increasingly freelance-dominated mass media, to the use of social media events to influence other parts of the communications network.

One such strategy, outlined in Chapters 4 and 5, was NCTE’S *Voices for Trans Equality* (VTE) and *Families for Trans Equality* (FTE) projects. Through these initiatives, almost one thousand ‘community storytellers’ were given media training, so they could be on-the-ground respondents to news stories on behalf of the NCTE. Through this, local people in support of trans rights could be made visible through mass media sources but, as Billard argues, the training also equipped the storytellers with the knowledge, resources and confidence to have conversations in their local communities and strengthen their own activist approaches. This ‘centralized decentralization’ (p. 160) enabled NCTE to influence interpersonal networks in a way that seemed organic and truthful.

Although the presence of the VTE and FTE projects do suggest a more participatory approach to the NCTE’s work and activism, Billard highlights how the organisation

marginalised people of colour, stating that ‘the norms of white professionalism and hierarchical power structures’ (p. 43) were what helped the NCTE first to thrive, then to collapse. This critical analysis of the NCTE serves as an important case study but leaves the reader wondering: if social movement organisations are to manage the flow of political information within hierarchical institutions, would this require adherence to their norms? And if so, who is likely to be left behind?

Throughout the book, Billard notes the characteristics of NCTE that enabled the organisation to instigate the methods of activism described. For example, access to financial resources helped to maintain a paid staff, and the organisation’s engagement in national political arenas was facilitated by geographical proximity to central government offices. As such, further research could expand upon *Voices for Transgender Equality* through the exploration of other organisations working within the trans movement that do not employ the same recourses. Moreover, it would be interesting to explore the potential of coalitional work within, and beyond, the trans movement. As Billard acknowledges, influencing political information across the communications network is ‘a tall order for short-staffed, overworked social movement organizations’ (p. 7), and although the trans movement may be autonomous in relation to the wider LGBTQIA+ movement, there is a significant overlap of interests: not only within the sphere of queer rights, but within feminist, Black, Indigenous, disability, environmental, and anti-carceral activism (to name a few).

What Billard’s book presents is an astute analysis of day-to-day campaigning in an increasingly digitalised media environment. It uses communications scholarship to describe the challenges that activists face when attempting to influence media narratives and public policy. Although the book focuses on the North American public sphere, Billard’s detailed ethnographic analysis provides helpful insight for activists and scholars working in a variety of contexts.

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Note

1. In Anglophone contexts, ‘transgender’ or ‘trans’ are most often used as umbrella terms to refer to individuals whose gender identity is different to the one assigned to them at birth, or persons for whom the gender binary is insufficient to describe their relationship to gender.