



Sarah Sobieraj. *Soundbitten: The Perils of Media-Centered Political Activism*. New York: New York University Press, 2011. xi + 223 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-4136-8; \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-4137-5.

Reviewed by Stephen Pimpare
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Soundbitten: The Perils of Media-Centered Political Activism

Through 125 interviews with reporters and members of some 50 activist groups that were organizing around the Democratic and Republican nominating conventions of 2000 and 2004, Sarah Sobieraj discovers that most activists were directing their energies at mass media and that the overwhelming majority of those efforts not only failed, but also failed rather spectacularly. For 39 of those groups, the only convention-rated activities they held were public demonstrations, not the kind of community-building activities—workshops, conferences, debate parties, discussion groups, and so on—that Sobieraj might have expected. As she asks, “Why was demonstrative activity *the* story instead of just *part of* the story?” (p. 35).

Even more puzzling, perhaps, is that fewer than a fifth of the groups she examined for the book participated with a specific attempt to address the parties or affect the election: their self-identified goals were more typically to use the spectacle of the convention to draw attention to their own issues, or simply to vent their own frustration at their perceived powerlessness. But that still begs the question: why so much focus on mass media strategies, with so few efforts to exert other kinds of leverage? And why the belief in what it seems fair to characterize as a naive notion of the likelihood that their march, demonstration, puppet show, or other performance would get media coverage and then drive some larger debate or turn a news cycle?

What she discovered is that most organizations expressed a general distrust of and frustration with both parties, policymaking, and electoral politics in general. Thus they directed their energies “outward” and paid little attention to the work of the conventions themselves. Simultaneously, they came to believe that the conventions were galvanizing political moments of media attention that provided singular opportunities for them to communicate to a broader audience, thus their failure to pay more attention to local audiences in the “real” world around them.

They were, perhaps, doomed to fail. *Soundbitten* shows that most reporters—except for a few writing generic stories about convention protests that name checked the kind of organizations and issues that presented and highlighted some of the more colorful and imaginative performances—were interested in “authenticity.” That is, reporters knew that *they* were the intended audience, and therefore resisted the clever tactics designed to lure their cameras. They were working hard not to be manipulated. While Sobieraj cautions that we not find this ironic, I do, given that the failure to resist elite manipulations and “spin” forms a key element of the critique against modern journalism. Reporters will allow a campaign to tell their story, even if they know it is inauthentic (or even downright false), but will not often grant those without status or much real power the same credulity.

Sobieraj writes that it is not quite right to think of this as ironic, however, because the skepticism with which reporters approach protesters may in fact be the consequence of reporters having been manipulated by elites for so long. But if not ironic, then it is even more deeply an indication of how invested national political reporters are in maintaining access to those with power, and how little they feel they risk by treating others with suspicion or with the disdain that seems so often to accompany coverage of mass protest, strikes, and other kinds of popular disruptions. Throw in Sobieraj's finding that reporters were interested in personal and emotional stories of why people were participating in protest rather than in activists' political or policy analysis, and we can see even further how seemingly fruitless activists' ambitions were.

The critique of the activists is just as thoughtful, rooted especially in Sobieraj's observations about how activists passed up opportunities to communicate with, and perhaps even persuade and educate, others physically present at the convention site in vain pursuit of the elusive national audience. They were engaging, in another irony, in closed, one-way communication that shut off opportunities for genuine dialogue and debate. This is nicely captured in Sobieraj's description of the demonstrator-performers who, when approached by a

bystander trying to initiate discussion, handed him a card and suggested that he visit their Web site to learn more. Perhaps part of the problem is limited substantive knowledge possessed by so many of the activists she speaks with, she suggests, and the thinness of their analysis, although I would want to see a more representative kind of sample before conceding that point. Hovering throughout the book, sometimes explicitly, sometimes more subtly, is a frustration at the kinds of opportunities that were lost for genuinely democratic dialogue and engagement. It is hard not to share that wistfulness, especially given how the more recent Occupy movements have created spaces for just those kinds of Habermasian engagements.

Soundbitten offers up an insightful and useful series of snapshots of activists and journalists working in and around quadrennial national conventions. It reveals the ways in which efforts to communicate to a broad audience not only fail to do that, but also in the process pass up perhaps more productive opportunities to speak with a smaller but potentially receptive group of fellow citizens. It is surely not surprising, in a media-saturated culture, that media-focused activism becomes a default strategy for so many, but Sobieraj's account reminds us that other forms of less visible civic engagement might be more successful, given how closed off mass media can be to the claims of activists and protesters.

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