

Activist Encounters with New (and Old) Media Technology  
Christina Dunbar-Hester

In this paper, I contextualize the discourses surrounding information technologies and new media technologies, using ethnographic fieldwork to examine activism around “independent media” technologies. The actors under consideration are members of a left-wing activist group who have historically chosen to focus their efforts on low power FM (LPFM) radio--an old, low-tech communication technology--in spite of the range of media technologies available. I follow the group members’ activities as they cautiously negotiate expanding their activist efforts to encompass community wireless networks, while trying to retain the vision, flavor, and organizing strategies from their LPFM campaigns. I trace the tensions felt by the actors as they critically consider the implications of this shift for their emphasis on a “grassroots mandate”, for their policy work versus hands-on technical work, and for their identification with FM radio technology versus the inclusion of computer and wi-fi technologies in their conception of their work. These actors’ work with LPFM, and subsequently community wireless networks, is significant as a site at which technical skill, identity work, and political beliefs and expression are performed together, not always without strain. STS has recently trained its eye on “the user”; this study contributes to user studies by providing insight into activists’ mediating role as they work out their strategies for critically embracing and resisting technologies, against the backdrop of a shifting technopolitical media landscape.