



Do-It-Yourself Democracy: The Rise of the Public Engagement Industry

Caroline W. Lee

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Citizen participation has undergone a radical shift since anxieties about "bowling alone" seized the nation in the 1990s. Many pundits and observers have cheered America's twenty-first century civic renaissance-an explosion of participatory innovations in public life. Invitations to "have your say!" and "join the discussion!" have proliferated. But has the widespread enthusiasm for maximizing citizen democracy led to real change?

In *Do-It-Yourself Democracy*, sociologist Caroline W. Lee examines how participatory innovations have reshaped American civic life over the past two decades. Lee looks at the public engagement industry that emerged to serve government, corporate, and nonprofit clients seeking to gain a handle on the increasingly noisy demands of their constituents and stakeholders. The beneficiaries of new forms of democratic empowerment are not only humble citizens, but also the engagement experts who host the forums. Does it matter if the folks deepening democracy are making money at it? How do they make sense of the contradictions inherent in their roles?

In investigating public engagement practitioners' everyday anxieties and larger worldviews, we see reflected the strange meaning of power in contemporary institutions. New technologies and deliberative practices have democratized the ways in which organizations operate, but Lee argues that they have also been marketed and sold as tools to facilitate cost-cutting, profitability, and other management goals - and that public deliberation has burdened everyday people with new responsibilities without delivering on its promises of empowerment.

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