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► **To cite this version:**

Des Freedman. Introduction to Revolting Media Introduction to Revolting Media: Why manifestos?.
Media Theory, 2018, Standard Issue, 2 (2), pp.240-244. hal-02047770

HAL Id: hal-02047770

<https://hal.science/hal-02047770>

Submitted on 25 Feb 2019

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Introduction to Revolting Media: Why manifestos?

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Media Theory
Vol. 2 | No. 2 | 240-244
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<http://mediatheoryjournal.org/>

Keywords: manifesto, voice, commitment, social change, neutrality

This is a time for manifestos: declarations that identify the faults and fissures of a divided world and that propose strategies to put things right, narratives that evoke a spirit of optimism and the possibility of social change, rhetorics that both diagnose and mobilise.

Our governing neoliberal economics has been widely discredited and its zombie form stumbles on with fewer and fewer supporters. Inequality and instability, discrimination and disillusion are rampant across much of the world and environmental disaster lurches ever closer. Public life has been hollowed out – increasingly administered by private companies and in thrall to a blinkered market logic – while the dream of a digital nirvana appears to have turned into a cesspit of corporate blandness and global bickering. Our systems of communication are presided over by unaccountable oligopolies deploying agendas and algorithms whose operations are shrouded in mystery. Our universities are debt machines and our systems of government are opaque to populations for whom direct democracy exists largely as a fairytale from Athenian times.

In response to the breakdown of what was always a fragile political consensus, we are now seeing both worrying levels of nativism and xenophobia as well as a much-needed enthusiasm for more radical and progressive solutions. A rising tide of racism

and authoritarianism coincides and clashes with an appetite for collectivist solutions and social justice.

And what form of writing is better placed to host imaginative and purposefully resistant writing than the not-so-humble manifesto, the choice of groundbreakers, revolutionaries and iconoclasts [for just over 500 years?](#)

Many radical political movements, artistic currents, anti-colonial struggles and liberation campaigns have both used and, in part, been constituted by manifestos that proudly declare their provenance. [Communism](#), [surrealism](#), [dadaism](#), [futurism](#), [vorticism](#), [situationism](#), [nationalism](#), [feminism](#), [slow tech](#) and [open access](#) – all have used the manifesto form as a launchpad and weapon of choice.

It's not exactly in the spirit of a renegade literary form to attempt to systematise its formal properties but nevertheless some features stand out.

- The manifesto has to be **visionary** and to imagine a future that is fundamentally different to the present. [‘Any manifesto worth reading demands the impossible.’](#)
- The manifesto has to be an **organisational tool** and to provide a means to move beyond the immediate situation. As [Alvarez and Stephenson](#) argue: ‘Highly caffeinated manifestos are resolutely activist...They itch to translate their ideals into reality, to be, to become, to make themselves manifest.’
- The manifesto is **partisan** and makes visible that which is all too often hidden though never entirely absent from polite society: the taking of positions. The manifesto cracks open the veneer of the specious neutrality of so much quasi-scientific discourse and deploys language in order to move the audience to action. It is neither disinterested nor dispassionate but, unlike much ‘common sense’ that revels in an alleged impartiality, the manifesto is clear about its commitment to change.
- The manifesto must be **vocal**: it ought to express discontent, represent those whose voices have been suppressed or ignored, and articulate new forms of speech.

- The manifesto is **performative**: it attempts to enact a future through its very enunciation. As Jane Birkin argued in her [article](#) in the opening issue of this journal, a manifesto is always both ‘an affirmation and a declaration’ that seeks to produce the very reality it conjures up through discourse.

Many of these features are directly counterposed to traditional academic language and, in particular, to tried and tested forms of academic assessment that require students to jettison notions of [affiliation and commitment](#) and instead to adopt ‘impersonal’ and ‘scientific’ forms of knowledge.

This has been a significant challenge for the graduate students at the Annenberg School, University of Pennsylvania, whose manifestos form the basis of this special section of *Media Theory*. Not because they are reluctant to admit to holding particular affiliations and positions (far from it) but because the academe – and in particular its publishing wing – often frowns on public displays of advocacy. I have the feeling that some students took the class on [‘Revolting Media’](#) precisely because it was assessed via a manifesto while others were rather more nervous about adopting such an unfamiliar discursive style.

There is also a more deep-rooted explanation for any ambivalence students (and readers more generally) may have towards the manifesto form in the 21st century. Buffeted by the legacy of the postmodern turn against grand narratives and historical certainties, [some academics](#) believe that we may be in a ‘post-manifesto era’ that has superseded the ‘heroic voice’ of an earlier ‘golden age’ of manifesto writing. Others, including myself, continue to believe that contemporary challenges will require the urgency and confidence of a form that refuses to accept contingency and relativism as a structuring feature and that is not afraid to make sweeping statements and to adopt grand proposals.

Indeed, the highly unstable political conjuncture that I sketched out above suggests we ought to be living in a boom time for manifesto writing. Of course, in reality, this involves not just the radical calls for political and cultural change that have marked the narrative history of the manifesto form but competing, and far less radical, types

of discourse: after all, we now have manifestos produced routinely by mainstream political parties, individuals and, increasingly, corporations. Condemning commodification, as many [manifestos have done](#), does not in itself inoculate the manifesto form against commodification – witness the growing number of passionate [‘mission statements’](#), breathless [corporate social responsibility strategies](#) and [‘inspiring brand manifestos’](#) that litter the commercial world.

Despite this kind of cultural appropriation, I continue to see the value of the manifesto as a potential technology of liberation. On the other hand, I also recognise the difficulties of producing work that is both intellectually informed and analytically coherent *and* also politically partisan and actively transformational. There is an understandable tendency in the academe always to studiously adopt competing frameworks rather than to align with a single position; to serve the god of nuance and to frown on the vulgarity of the ‘clarion call’; to avoid assertions and generalisations (such as the ones I used at the beginning of this introduction when characterising the fractured state of the world) and, instead, to back up every claim with sound evidence from accredited sources.

Of course, this kind of studied neutrality can simply be one of the ways in which academic research serves power instead of confronting it. This supposedly ‘disinterested’ form of scientific research is often deeply embedded in dominant agendas and ideological frameworks and simply cloaks its own assumptions and preferences in the language of ‘balance’ and ‘evidence’. As [John Holmwood](#) has argued, this is ‘Social Science Inc’ in which ‘objectivity [is] derived simply from the naturalisation of power relations, not from being outside them.’

In that sense, the manifesto can be a particularly effective means of stripping away false neutrality and producing both knowledge and action in the service of particular causes, movements and rationalities. The manifestos that now follow do this impressively: alerting us to the dangers of environmental destruction (Morris), the university’s role in gentrification (Jolly), the unaccountable power of big tech companies (Popiel), the collusion of journalists in Trump’s rise to power (Henrichsen), the social injustices of Indian society that are intensified by linguistic division (Prasad), the false allure of technological solutions to entrenched problems

of political organisation (Remensperger) and the impact on young people of a growing addiction to smartphones (Beren).

Readers will judge for themselves whether each contribution lives up to the performative, partisan, visionary, vocalising and mobilising potentialities of the manifesto form. I can vouch for the fact that writing these manifestos was no easy task for these accomplished emerging scholars and that a traditional academic essay would have been far more straightforward and comforting. But the situation we face – of a rising tide of insecurity, discrimination and inequality – demands that we interrogate our customs and our practices and adopt new tools to face up to our challenges. And who knows: the carefully researched, imaginatively crafted and highly motivated manifesto may yet become the preferred discursive form of a galvanised and militant academic population.

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