Next Steps in Digital Studies, Resignifying Culture, Community, and Code

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REVIEW ESSAY

Next Steps in Digital Studies, Resignifying Culture, Community, and Code

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For those of us who participated, studied, and lived through the early, heady days of the Internet and the dot-com boom, it is certainly hard to forget the great power wielded by popular magazines like *Mondo2000* and *Wired*. The glossy pages of these lavishly illustrated journals heralded fantastic new opportunities for work, for play, and for all types of social practices afforded by global, digital networks. In these pages and in other forums, writers such as John Perry Barlow, Howard Rheingold, George Gilder, and others trumpeted the dawning of a new age of social togetherness, a utopic time when the problems of hierarchical organizations, structured media institutions, and passive consumption would be a thing of the past. Some early academic work contributed to this discourse, describing the positive aspects of the fluid identities afforded by online existence, digitality, and “screen cultures” (e.g., Benedikt, 1991; Lanham, 1993; Turkle, 1996), while often downplaying or relegating negative ramifications to concluding remarks. Other scholars and a few popular writers focused on these negative aspects, noting the possibilities of surveillance, the strengthening of power relations between rich/poor, and the probability of “islands” of unconnected individuals and cultural groups, (e.g., Stoll, 1996; Bogard, 1996; Castells, 1996, 1998).

To call into question the arguments of what Benedikt called “first steps” (Benedikt, 1991) is to forget the contribution these authors made—without these initial forays, scholarship on digital media, on information, and on contemporary sociality would not be where it is today. The three books reviewed in this article reveal how far scholarship has come. Each in its own way addresses concerns that have followed from new types of communication technologies and focuses on particular issues of social life and technology. Importantly, each author engages with aspects of these older arguments, working to historicize and understand both the issues of digital technologies and social life that are their particular concern, but also their own place as scholars in the larger trajectory of research on digital information.

Mark Poster’s book *Information Please; Culture and Politics in the Age of Digital Machines*, for example, uses controversies from popular media to acknowledge the novel forms of collectivity and politic unity (and disunity) that have been fostered by the internet and other forms of global media. His detailed tracking and analysis of “evil Bert” is particularly illustrative in the way it mediates previous claims about digital identity and social networks. Poster uses the movement and transportation of reworked images of the *Sesame Street* television character Bert to reveal his key point, namely, that unlike previous communication technologies, the Internet encourages the development of cultural practices involving resignification (pp. 78–79). Poster describes how Dino Ignacio, on his web page “Bert is Evil” (no longer online), used photoshopped to create images of the character with Hitler, with the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and, most importantly, with Osama bin Laden. While photo-manipulations have become commonplace on the Internet (see, for example, the vast number of them involving George W. Bush), this story took on a new twist when these images were either accidentally or
deliberately used by protesters supporting bin Laden in Bangladesh.

The ways in which the image of “evil Bert” has played out on local and global landscapes is revealing of the simultaneous ways these technologies allow for a bringing together and a separating out of cultures and states. Poster’s most important contribution here is his critique of postcolonial authors such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Frantz Fanon, and his extension of theories of of empire and globalization, in particular the work of Hardt and Negri (2000). While strongly sympathetic to these positions, Poster sees a lack of direct attention to media, and to “networked digital information and human assemblages” (p. 64), as resulting in problematic limitations.

The real joy in reading Poster is the way he leverages examples from popular media in order to critique, expand, develop, and blend various social theories. Other scholars do this, but Poster’s particular skill is in the weave of forms, of identities, and of discourses—from Spielberg to Descartes in just a few paragraphs (pp. 73–75), and from an advertisement for a bank to a painting by Magritte in as few words (pp. 96–97). The strength of this mode of writing is its approachability. While Poster’s text is definitely not entirely for a popular audience, his conceptual explorations are brought home to the reader through examples familiar to many of us in Western cultures. It is part of his argument that these examples, while still somewhat bounded by the domains of Western culture, are becoming increasingly global. “Evil Bert” points to some of the interesting disjunctures with this and reveals that in addition to the cultural imperialism of Western media previously noted by scholars such as Schiller (1981) and Postman (1993), new possibilities of use and reuse are emerging.

While Poster’s book provides insights on a variety of topics related to digital media, globalization, and individual and state identity, overall the book represents his attempt to trace out a shape of digital sociality, one that remains liminal and open to shifts, but also allows action, response, and the making of choices in relation to the new interleaving dynamics of human–machine. This is a book that is a necessary read for scholastic communities interested in topics of digital media and sociality, but also for readers interested in larger social and political theory. Whether or not you agree with Poster’s arguments, he clearly states the need for social theory to engage with media and with networked technologies. And that in itself is a great contribution.

Similarly, Michele Willson, in her book Technically Together; Rethinking Community Within Techno-Society, addresses issues of community and digital technology. The topic of digital community is of course, a well-worn issue within studies of digital culture. The strength of Willson’s contribution lies mostly in her detailed articulation of a variety of social thinkers on issues of community, sociality, and technology. She surveys such diverse scholars as the aforementioned Mark Poster, Jean-Luc Nancy, Charles Taylor, and many others, and in doing so provides brief introductions and linkages between critical theory, the philosophy of technology, continental philosophy, and media studies.

Her critique of a group of scholars she terms “virtual communitarians” (p. 177) is particularly important to her argument. Willson describes these scholars as connected through a common interest in virtual communities and in the importance of enacted identity within them. She includes Mark Poster in this group (she analyzes Poster’s writings until 2002, so the book that is part of this review is not included,) critiquing what she highlights as the strong separation Poster describes between “real (traditional and modern) communities [that] entail fixed stable identities, while virtual (postmodern) communities consist of fluid or transient identities” (p. 179). Relying on previous arguments by writers in the Australian journal *Arena* and articulated through the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy and Charles Taylor (among others), Willson recognizes that these are analytic distinctions and therefore do not adequately represent the diverse ways the individual, virtuality, and the intersubjective intersect in contemporary life.

Again, the strength of this text is in the detailed ways Willson compares and relates a diverse set of scholars. As such, like Poster’s book, Willson’s provides a much needed corollary to the often theoretically limited and ahistorical writings that make up such a large percentage of work on digital media. While the work would benefit from greater attention to the technologies she mentions but never fully articulates, and from more extended examples of the dynamics of community and identity that are her focus, a close reader will find much to learn from Willson. Slightly more academic in tone than Poster’s text already described, this book would be a good extension for PhD-level courses in information studies, communication, and media studies.

Adrian Mackenzie takes something of a different tack. While addressing some of the same concerns as Poster and Willson, Mackenzie, in his book *Cutting Code; Software and Sociality*, narrows in on the particular material form of software and the many social processes that are facilitated, resisted, and maintained by it.

The richness of Mackenzie’s work is in his constant movement between the specificity of code as a material object, concretized in the algorithm and embedded in particular hardware, and code as practice, as community, and as “collective imaging” (p. 138). This deliberate vacillation allows Mackenzie to paint a detailed picture of the textures, dynamics, fixity, and the mutability of the relations between software and sociality. It also creates something of a problem for the reader, who must follow Mackenzie through a variety of forms, between descriptions of
ethnographic and organizational observations of software communities, through analyses of algorithms and code fragments, and into the resultant rearticulations of terms like agency, virtuality, and performativity. However, a patient reader benefits from what is probably the most clearly drawn image of the materiality of code, the ways in which different “culture-objects” such as Linux and Java result in different kinds of performed realities, arrangements of social–technical clusters, the congregations of architectures and idealizations that are themselves, as Mackenzie puts it, “perpetually undercut by contestations of coding work” (p. 179). Mackenzie’s writing demonstrates how code is both law and something other, a complex “between-space” that perturbs straightforward understandings of both structure and agency and thus constitutes or at least makes visible new contestations of mediation.

These three books represent the level of sophistication and depth of analysis that have been emerging with the converging fields of communication, sociology, and art theory on digital technologies. While not the only books recently published to convey the richness of thinking and writing on digital technologies (Massumi [2002] and Hanson [2004] also spring to mind), each text, in its own way, explores an aspect of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and, by simultaneously focusing in and widening out, reveals novel insights about how political institutions, social organizations, and individual behaviors are reorganized by the inclusion of new technologies of communication and production. Most importantly, by incorporating and addressing current and past scholarship on these topics, the authors manage to steer a productive path through the twin claims of utopic and dystopic digitality that mark so much of this ongoing conversation, without leaving the reader in the untenable, nebulous position of “both/neither.” Each book thus represents a step forward in our understanding of contemporary and future sociality. That they do so through the object of digital technologies speaks not of technologically determinist positions, but of the importance of these technologies in our communicative, social-building, and information-seeking lives.

REFERENCES