

Book: *Interface://Culture—The World Wide Web as Political Resource and Aesthetic Form.*

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The internet in itself cannot change power relations. But the internet changes the conditions of communication for all – individuals, civil society, companies, and authorities. Those who use the internet will have a communicative advantage over those who do not. (p. 79).

Just as it is hunger or anxiety or sexuality that drives an organism's selection of visual information from its environment, it is the needs of an individual or a culture that will guide their uses of media technologies. For a theory of needs – the medium is not the message. (p. 67).

An email sent to a friend in the north-eastern United States from my office computer in the Pacific, arrived a day before it was dated – something that a decade ago was conceivable only in science fiction. Internet, a medium with a unique set of 'spatio-temporal biases' that allow for interactivity that can be, 'synchronous and asynchronous' and whose scope is 'in abstract terms, unlimited throughout global space, back in time to archives, and forward in time to other users (p. 85),' is truly free of space-time restrictions that the previous media are limited by, in one way or another. The freedoms that the internet allows the user with regards to interactivity and accessibility are unprecedented and limited only by the user's creativity.

Interface://Culture commemorates a decade of internet's existence as a public virtual space that revolutionized interaction between human beings and computers. The subtitle of the volume highlights a three-way process of media, agency and structure, which is an underlying theme throughout the book. Together, the chapters in this edited book highlight the interactive nature of the internet – not just in terms of its use but also in its evolution in that the internet, its uses, and its byproducts (in the form of services and new power relations) are influenced by the ways in which it is utilized by publics.

Rooted in constructivist theory, the articles in the book argue that the medium alone does not determine the message and therefore its impact on the society. Two decades ago Marvin (1988) brought our attention to the reverent attitude towards any new technology and how its innovators and early adopters hail its liberating potential. *Interface://culture*, a product of Media and Democracy in the Network Society (MODINET) project in Denmark, reminds us that despite reservations that scholars have concerning accessibility to the net, its interactive nature prevents a one-way influence on a society. Instead, the development and evolution of the internet is a cyclical process, driven by public use.

Overall, the book is not claiming anything new, but expanding on McLuhan's maxim of 'medium is the message' as it declares the one-directional view of technological determinism an incomplete model in media-society relationship.

This is one in a series of seven books and is divided into two sections of eight chapters. The book briefly traces the history of the internet and details its strengths and weaknesses. The introduction describes the chapters and provides theoretical background for readers. The first section sets the foundation with a brief history and sketch of the current state of the Internet. The second section covers five case studies that demonstrate the various ways in which the internet has been used for socio-political-cultural purposes.

The introduction is a composite chapter that reviews both the literature related to the internet and approaches used to study the web: as a medium, (computer technology), as a text (content) and as an institution. It lays the groundwork for a book that examines the web as a political resource and as an aesthetic form.

Challenging both medium and structuration theory (Giddens), the chapter outlines how an interactive medium – due to its technical capabilities – allows users to both resist some preconceived effects and/or invent new ways of using it which in turn guides the creators of the web in devising new avenues to meet public demands. A distinct characteristic of the digital media is "a unique message developing into a general norm or a functional feature through repetitive use" (p. 69). In essence, the interactive-ability of the internet encourages interaction among users, between web content and users and most importantly between web designers and users. For example, weblogs, Napster, and chat rooms are all a result of the public's need to express, consume and share, and interact, respectively, but without the inherent flexibility of the web as a medium it would not be realized.

In this regard, the book claims McLuhan's predicament – that an introduction of a new medium initiates “a whole environment (medium) of services and disservices” and these side effects “impose themselves willy-nilly as a new form of culture” (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988) – can be realized in new additions to our vocabulary (netizens, netiquette, weblogs) and new ways of communicating with website owners, web designers or other users – implying a new culture, a new direction for society.

Section one is divided into two chapters and traces the history of the introduction of computers into our everyday lives through the development of the Internet. More than merely providing the theoretical foundation for the book, the section also elaborates on the inherent cultural and technical grammar of the internet which allows its “biases and affordances” (p. 67). *Biases* and *affordances* refer respectively to the inherent properties in the medium and purposes of using a medium that allow for its disabling or enabling capabilities.

One of the major arguments of the book, and expounded in the introduction itself, is that the web challenges earlier power structures because, “the readers are empowered on par with authors to co-produce, and enrich, and multiply meshes of meaning” (p. 26). This aspect is explored through the case studies presented in the second section of the book. The section looks at the web as a political resource, with an immense potential to support political communication and mobilizing the public and as aesthetic forms that articulate human experience through text, visual and audio forms, in ways that replicate, replace, or complement traditional media.

The book is very successful in establishing that the web allows a culture to reflect its own nuances, strengths and aspirations back to itself, through the developments that take place on the web and the level of complexity embedded in the website.

One limitation of the book is that although it engages cursorily the web's power to transcend national boundaries, it does not elaborate on this. The introduction does mention the transnational presence of the web and its potential use by Diaspora communities to break geographical barriers. However, none of the chapters engage the issues that may restrict the creation of truly international (virtual) public spaces for political discourse – something that is presently possible only through the web.

Although the web is considered ubiquitous, several issues raised concerning the developing world regarding information flow in the 1970s and 1980s remain valid. For example, two issues that limit the scope of the power of web are digital divide and over representation of English language websites. The digital divide – not just between developed and developing world, but also within a country between people of different socio-economic groups, and the under representation of most languages of the world – restricts the empowering influence of the web, especially in the developing world. The web, as discussed in the first section of the book, is a powerful tool that encourages public participation in political discourse, but that power is rendered useless in the light of limited access and the initial investment cost of using the web before it is accessible.

The book serves as a good supplement for graduate classes in all courses related to new media, including media effects, and media and society. Since the book is grounded in theory, the general audience for this book will be academics. Although because of the wide scope of the web's social, cultural and political impact, the book will also appeal to students and scholars of political science, sociology, and psychology.

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References

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