

Introduction

To say that we inhabit a digital world is an understatement. In recent years the Internet and other information technologies have transformed many fundamental parts of life: how we work and play, how we communicate and consume, how we create knowledge and learn, even how we understand politics and participate in public life. Smart machines, smart houses, and smart cards exist in a world of cyberbodies, cybercities, and cybercash. It is nearly impossible to make it through a day without encountering a computer, a digitally mediated image, or a news report about the current “digital revolution.” The ubiquity of digital data storage, computation, and telecommunication have made us profoundly dependent on computer networks (whether we realize it or not), enveloping society in what might be termed a “digital culture.” Indeed, mediation and invisibility have become defining characteristics of an age in which cyberspace has transformed much of material culture into a vaporous cloud of signal and code.

Reading Digital Culture addresses the changes evinced by emerging communication technologies and the way we think about them. The use of the term “reading” in the title is intended to suggest a critical approach to the rapidly growing digital media field. Such scrutiny is needed at a time when novel technological phenomena frequently are accepted without question or naturalized as neutral occurrences. The term “culture” is meant to accent the human dimension of this anthology. It is a book primarily about people, not technology in isolation. If *Reading Digital Culture* has a point to make, it is that technologies emerge from specific contexts and serve particular interests. Yet the interrogation of these contexts and interests remains a blind spot in most discussions of cyberspace and digital media.

Celebrating the new computer era is a massive discourse in both mainstream media and academic literature in which the figure of utopia looms large. Evoking traditions of technological determinism and free-market boosterism, the denizens of information technology have promoted digital culture as the culmination of the Enlightenment project and the economic panacea of the post-industrial world. All of this is equated with a narrative of humankind’s ever advancing march of progress, as information technology is touted as the ultimate vehicle of mastery and

transcendence. Indeed, to some this technology is seen as the key to overcoming the limits of material existence – an “extension of man” through which we become “posthistorical” and “posthuman.”

In mainstream media, this cyberenthusiasm becomes manifest in tendencies to periodize the digital era as a radical break from anything that came before it, or to exceptionalize it as a moment in which the logic of mathematics has enabled society to overcome human irrationality and failed communication. This overwhelmingly positive view of the information age is driven in a narrow sense by the very computer and software industries that have created the wealthiest and most powerful corporate infrastructure in human history, and more broadly supported by the enormous “information economy” of content producers, merchandisers, and other ancillary services of the digital industrial complex.

This utopian enthusiasm has been met by a less ubiquitous, but frequently vociferous, measure of resistance from a myriad assortment of critics, skeptics, and conspiracy theorists – ranging from those who despair the threats of genetic engineering, computer surveillance, and cybercapitalism, to the countless peoples and nations who stand on the wrong side of the “digital divide.” As Bill Gates and Steve Case proclaim the global omnipresence of the Internet, the majority of non-Western nations and nearly 97 percent of the world’s population remain unconnected to the net for lack of money, access, or knowledge. This exclusion of so vast a share of the global population from the Internet sharply contradicts the claims of those who posit the World Wide Web as a “universal” medium of egalitarian communication.

In the context of such disagreements and intellectual cul-de-sacs, digital culture finds itself without a unifying set of principles or an overarching sense of purpose. The “consensual hallucination” of cyberspace has proven as difficult to explain as an acid trip – in large part due to the growing ability of technological tools to enable human subjectivity and expression in unfamiliar ways. In cyberspace considerably more is at stake than the mere representation of a putative reality, as regimes of communication that “reproduce” data, images, and cognition are supplanted by systems that “simulate” consciousness, agency, and desire. Hard-edged certainties of industrialization, Enlightenment empiricism, and modernity have given way to more malleable concepts of postindustrialism, technoscience, and postmodernity.

Despite the exponential growth of web sites, magazine articles, journal issues, books, and television programs about computer media, readers of digital culture find themselves confounded by a destabilizing war of positions that often exhibits more contradiction than coherence. Discussions in academic circles have fragmented into a myriad of camps that all too frequently privilege hyperbole and polemic over complexity and dialogue. Writers and theorists have situated themselves on one side or another of the utopian divide, or they have analyzed a particular aspect of digital culture. Books with optimistic titles like *e-topia*, *Internet Dreams*, and *The Road Ahead* are answered by less sanguine works like *Flame Wars*, *Data Trash*, and *Cyberspace Divide*. Lacking a stable language to describe this seemingly new world, writers reach for neologisms or cling to tired metaphors like the nervous system, the highway or the post office.

Only recently have commentators come to acknowledge the history of such technological discussions or the vast diversity of approaches to them. *Reading Digital Culture* presents a collection of texts that offer a critical conversation about these issues. While acknowledging various debates surrounding digital media, *Reading Digital Culture* does not seek to ameliorate such disagreements. Deferring this impulse for closure is difficult at a time when unresolved tensions in the discourse of information technology seem to demand foundational principles and groundrules. In resisting these tendencies, *Reading Digital Culture* seeks to promote a multiplicity of avenues for addressing this interdisciplinary field. In this spirit, *Reading Digital Culture* is organized into six overlapping sections.

- I. *The Machine in the Garden*. Digital culture did not emerge from a vacuum. Like any historical phenomenon, it is the product of past and present thinking, material relations, and social contexts. And like other moments, the information age is brimming with speculation about future possibilities. This section contains essays from a range of humanists, artists, and scientists, who have grappled with the implications of digital media inside and outside of their disciplines. While referencing major debates in the history and philosophy of technology, these writings focus on the particular questions posed by digital media.
- II. *Knowledge and Communication in a Digital Age*. Digital culture is distinguished by the myriad definitions, interpretations, and metaphors it has evoked in the minds of futurists, scholars, net surfers, audiophiles, e-merchants, communitarians, voyeurs, and pioneers of the “electronic frontier,” among countless others. Various seen as a catalyst for innovation, a doorway to human spirit, or a shortcut to the stock exchange, digital media have become a veritable “rosetta stone” for translating the desires of speakers into prescriptions for the good life. This section engages that process of translation in the various ways that digital media organize, store, transmit, and transform meaning into digits and code.
- III. *Living in the Immaterial World*. Digital culture inhabits an existing world of physical objects, economies, and geopolitical institutions. It also creates a “virtual world” in its relationship to what others perceive as “real.” As elsewhere in this anthology, considerable disagreement exists over the extent to which computers, software, and network technologies contribute to the world as it exists or that they enable changes in that world. Essays in this section address topics ranging from globalization, commercialization, and militarism, to issues of education, labor, and research.
- IV. *Performing Identity in Cyberspace*. How digital media change the way we think about our personal and collective identities is of central importance to cyberculture. This section examines how engagement with computers affects subjectivity and agency, as well as the ways digital media highlight or obscure identities and social groupings. Of special importance in this section is the way the body is produced, replicated, and inscribed by literal and figurative technologies. Equally significant are the circuits of power that inhere in technologies of

identification and social ritual. These issues are profoundly important, since they will shape the very character of what it means to be human in the twenty-first century.

V. *Searching for Community Online*. Benedict Anderson's now-famous formulation of the "imagined community" holds special significance in digital culture, as a means for people dislocated in space and time to form groups and engage each other.¹ Again the relationship of "virtual" to "real" worlds becomes an issue in debating the efficacy of computer-mediated social relations. Similarly, the much-celebrated assertions that the Internet will instill new forms of democracy and global unity cry out for critical scrutiny. Topics in this section include access to technology, designations of social class, demarcations of public and private space, education and information policy, community organizing, and democratic practice.

VI. *Reading Digital Culture*. Given the youth of the discourse surrounding digital culture, much of the writing that emerges shares a certain unselfconsciousness. This becomes apparent in tendencies toward ahistoricity, a lack of context, or simply an entrenched determination to say something "new." During the last decade cultural critics have begun to comment on this discourse itself as a form of meta-analysis. *Reading Digital Culture* concludes with some representative examples of these "readings" of digital discourse.

Reading Digital Culture is intended to speak to many audiences. Written by an eclectic assortment of the field's most widely read commentators, *Reading Digital Culture* addresses topics ranging from virtual reality, Internet commerce, and computer art to the effects of new technology on work, leisure, and community. In stressing a multiplicity of perspectives, *Reading Digital Culture* seeks to move beyond the tired dualisms and polemics that have characterized so much thinking of the past millennium – and that have dogged the more recent discourse on digital media. As William Mitchell has stated, "we will do far better to sidestep the well-known trap of technological determinism, to renounce the symmetrical form of fatalism proposed by booster-technocrats and curmudgeonly techno-scoffers," and to move forward with whatever degree of criticality and self-consciousness is possible in a postmodern age. "Our job is to design the future we want, not to predict its predetermined path."²

While acknowledging the problems often entailed in canon-building and the impossibility of authoritatively mapping such a rapidly changing field, *Reading Digital Culture* presumes a measure of prescription in emphasizing the imbrication of technological and social relations. As cyborg consciousness erodes the boundaries between human and machine, it becomes all the more important to bring an element of awareness – and ethics – to digital culture. No one could have predicted the speed and ferocity with which an obscure network for exchanging research findings could have evolved into the most powerful economic force in human history. We are only beginning to understand the consequences of this phenomenon, and the responsibilities it has brought with it.

Notes

- 1 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
- 2 William J Mitchell, *E-topia: Urban Life, Jim – But Not as We Know It* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 12.

