Book Review/Compte rendu

Adrian Athique, *Digital Media and Society: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, 304 pp. $26.95 paper (9780745662299)

Digital Media and Society is an introductory textbook which aims to "provide a relatively accessible and succinct account of some of the major areas of sociological concern" regarding the digitization of social life, with an emphasis on media and communication (p. 1). Its author, University of Waikato Senior Lecturer and Chair of Arts Adrian Athique, has focused for many years on India's media economy with recent publications such as *The Multiplex in India: a Cultural Economy of Urban Leisure* (with Douglas Hill, Routledge, 2010) and *Indian Media: Global Approaches* (Polity, 2012). With *Digital Media and Society* he offers a didactic approach directed at undergraduate sociology and communications students, introducing them to the social repercussions of "the powerful combination of mechanical calculation, electronics, binary code and human language systems" (p. 1).

The book's premise is that almost every aspect of our everyday lives is increasingly mediated through various forms of digital content — among others, access to knowledge, cultural expression, interpersonal relationships, work, politics, and commerce. In introducing some of the most significant — and often conflicting — sociological approaches that have tried to shed light on this eclectic collection of issues, the objective is two-fold: foster critical engagement with the subject, and underline the interlinkage between the multiple facets of digital media. Digital media are studied as the defining technology of our times, one of the most complex and profound phenomena contemporary sociology must engage with.

The volume is organized in four parts, each comprising four chapters. In Part I, Athique historically establishes the advent of the digital society, from Charles Babbage's analytical engine to today's economic crisis of "undue complexity." Fundamental historical events and concepts such as the rise of personal distributed computing and the Internet, technological determinism, the evolution of the "user" concept and its typology, and audience and community representations are each situated in their respective sociohistorical and academic contexts. Manuel Castells' *The Information Age* volumes, Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and Sherry Turkle's *The Second Self* are drawn on as significant textual resources.

Part II addresses individuality, theories of the self, and subjectivity in the context of the mobile and personal computing revolution, computer games, and the new electronic social networking tools. The new "radically individualized" form of mass communication created through these tools is introduced in the context of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories. These are followed by a discussion of virtual reality and a brief overview of electronic pornography. The author then grounds the subject of media representation, notably through Jean Baudrillard's concepts of simulacrum and hyper-realism, while the online dating phenomenon and the rapid rise of social networking websites are explained through the lens of Herbert Blumer's work on symbolic interactionism and Erving Goffman's notion of self-performance.

Part III seeks to "situate the digital technologies within the economic process" (p. 127). Having first established the Marxist, Keynesian, and neoclassical political economies and ideologies which informed American futurism and the advent of the postindustrial society, Athique describes the profound impacts of the digitization of communication services and media content, especially on property rights, music creation, and distribution. Henri Jenkins' convergence model, coupled with an explanation of the economic convergence of the "new media industries" lead the way to Lawrence Lessig's and Alvin Toffler's ideas about cultural reappropriation and a presentation of the electronic shopping behemoths that have become Amazon and Ebay. The "knowledge economy," "creative industries," work-related networking and outsourcing are each introduced in the section's last chapter, completing this overview of the new digital economy's central issues.

Finally, Part IV touches on the many political implications — positive and negative — brought forth by computerization and digitization: a renewed hope for democracy and its mechanisms of representativeness, open publishing and participatory journalism, but also state surveillance and cybercrime. Jürgen Habermas' public sphere concept, Michel Foucault's and David Lyon's surveillance models, as well as Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* provide most of the academic background of the last section. A typology of cybercriminality, Web 2.0 considerations, and a discussion on crowdsourcing initiatives such as Wikipedia illustrate the discussion with current, concrete examples.

The preceding list of content and sources, far from exhausting the many issues and ideas the book discusses, is provided here with the only intent of introducing some of its major topics and areas of interest. It is in fact *Digital Media and Society*'s main strength to provide a concise and eclectic yet satisfactorily rich and well contextualized account of digital life. Athique successfully situates this complex, multifaceted subject

with the same proficiency he showed in his explorations of India's media culture, at the crossroads between cultural practice, economic development, and geopolitical struggle.

In agreement with the stated objective of encouraging critical engagement with the content, academic perspectives are always followed by alternative points of view. For instance, McLuhan's technological determinism is immediately followed by Raymond Williams' social shaping of technology approach; a discussion on the Internet's potential to facilitate democratic deliberation gets followed by consideration of the pressing issue of the digital divide. A list of related questions, books, and websites is also provided at the end of every chapter, facilitating further student engagement with the material.

While the book succeeds in its main objectives, there are some limitations. First, its rather dense account of numerous issues and conflicting perspectives becomes difficult to follow at times, to the detriment of the argument's flow and narrative. Some elements, though important, seem to be out of place or expressed too wordily for an introductory textbook. Part IV in particular, jumping from the blogosphere to cybercrime and the cloud, could have been better focused and streamlined. Second, though *Digital Media and Society*'s central focus remains sociological inquiry, it would have benefited from more in-depth, technical explanations of the discussed electronic devices, frameworks, and mechanisms. The Internet's infrastructure, far from being the open, decentralized "network of networks" implied as the premise of many sociological perspectives presented in the book, is in fact constituted from a network of cables, most of which are the property of a small number of telecommunication companies, and at the intersection of which filters and chokepoints can be and are effectively put in place by economic as well as political actors. The notion of algorithm as well could have been better defined and developed throughout the book. Although certainly complex, as the engine behind all computation it silently shapes the digital society in all its manifestations. A deeper overview of Alexander Halavais' already briefly mentioned *Search Engine Society* or a mention of Lawrence Lessig's *Code* could have better established this important subject.

Reservations aside, *Digital Media and Society* remains a great didactic tool to introduce sociology and communications students to the advent of the digital society. The author's ability to situate the complex, interconnected issues and perspectives at stake will without any doubt encourage those students not only to critically engage but also to continue exploring this new indispensable field of sociological inquiry.

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