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Past Issues

□ Terranova, Tiziana:

Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age

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A Review by Lizzie Jackson

Network Culture draws together theory previously explored by Manuel Castells, but gives new insights, in particular on informational cultures, network dynamics, the notion of 'free' labour, and the control and nature of networks. The subject under consideration is both the Internet and the network or networks; complex interconnecting structures which interweave information, communication and culture. The book foregrounds analysis of the mechanics, structure and control of networks over the users of networks and content mediated by networks. It is structured in five sections on informational cultures, network dynamics, free labour and the digital economy, control systems and the future potential of networks.

Readers are likely to draw from the book arguments and ideas to use in their own disciplines about the way the Internet has influenced both the media and communications. Sections four and five include interesting ideas on computing as a more biological activity influenced by, for example, artificial intelligence and user interactions controlled by the retina, voice or synapse, which will obviously introduce elements of chance.

Network Culture largely draws back from the utopianism which sometimes characterised early studies of the Internet, taking a position of distance in order to obtain an overview. Terranova admits she has "privileged process over structure and non-linear processes over linear ones" when setting out her analysis. This is a deconstruction from a technical and conceptual point of view.

The study looks at the Internet and networks in isolation; examining networks as entities in themselves obviously assists clarity, but, as it is increasingly the case that networks are interconnected with the mass media, and also with mobile and sentient media I feel the book could have devoted more space to the potential networks might have been offering to linear media in 2004. Rheingold, who is cited in *Network Culture*, says in his latest book, '*Smart Mobs: the next Social Revolution*':

"Information and communication technologies are starting to invade the physical world...shards of sentient silicon will be inside boxtops and dashboards, pens, street corners, bus stops, money, most things that are manufactured or built, within the next ten years. These technologies are 'sentient' not because

embedded chips can reason but because they can sense, receive, store, and transmit information.” (Rheingold, 2002 p: 85)

Information theory is used to show the ‘informatisation’ of culture from hand-crafted processes to data bytes exchanged at speed. Information is defined as being anything – a sound, image, colour, text. Information flows, forms, re-forms and redistributes; the suggestion is that, rather like the darkened masses of migratory birds, this flocking could be said to offer a new type of mass media. The Internet is portrayed as a spectrum of varying degrees of meaningfulness versus ‘noise’; too much information, reducing meaning. The noise of the Internet, it is suggested, includes repeated advertising, slogans and the “mutually reinforcing resonance of self-help manuals and expert advice” (p: 14).

Network Culture foregrounds the idea of an Internet which is not able to be censored as the network treats censorship as damage. In recent years, however, since 2004 when the book was written it has become obvious it is possible to manipulate the network, for example the recent reduction of Internet access in Myanmar during demonstrations by monks. Some Internet service providers offer a ‘selected’ Internet, influenced by payment to move up the search ratings or by the need for a ‘walled garden’, for example for children’s web content. Terranova describes the network as a mediated environment with the mediators being either journalists or communication managers. At the time of writing *Network Culture* citizen media was still in its infancy and blogging was not so common therefore the balance of ‘produced’ versus user-generated content may have been tipped towards the producer in some instances, however Usenet offered comment mediated only by the user-interface itself.

The structure and cohesion of the Internet, it is also suggested, is brought about through the audience/user’s shared understanding of process and procedure as they move through the user-interface. *Network Culture* believes it is the audience/users that create the links between content on the Internet as well as the producers of web pages, interactive services, immersive environments, or social networks. The audience/users are therefore positioned as creating the culture of the network in partnership with professional content makers, however, the idea of an active audience is not pursued, information theory, being perceived as being a better method to examine the nature of networks as (Terranova says) the concept of ‘the audience’ is now outdated.

I see the audience as increasingly engaging with media, in fact as always having been active. There has been an explosion of audience/user engagement with audiences beginning to move between the different delivery platforms of branded media such as ‘Big Brother’ (linear broadcasts and a website) and ‘The Archers’ (broadcasts, and a website with contextual content and a very lively, creative, online community). In 2004, however, there was less quotation of linear media within the Internet, few media consoles such as the Channel Four media player or BBC iPlayer had launched, streamed video was expensive and impractical and there were few podcasts. Since 2004 a participating audience and citizen media of significant size, breadth, and importance has developed;

however this was in gestation long before that; for instance the BBC's online community launched in 1997.

At the time of writing *Network Culture*, it may have been the perception that the concept of 'the audience' had little relevance to the network because pursuing audience-like behaviours on the Internet was not yet possible. Livingstone commented in her extensive study on the way young people use media that:

“...the multimodal nature of new media contents brings together multiple forms of engagement hitherto considered distinct forms of production (writing, drawing, designing) and reception (reading, listening, viewing, learning), as well as activities commonly distinguished from the reception of mass media (playing, talking, researching, performing).” (Livingstone, 2002 p: 221)

As an ex-producer and manager having worked across both 'old' and 'new media', the term 'network' had, for me, many different meanings. In the US the term 'the networks' refers to commissioners of television content, in digital media 'networks' are non-linear structures. Shannon and Weaver's (1949) model of communication described an essentially linear two-way sender/receiver relationship between the producer and audience, in 1953 Theodore H. Newcomb produced a non-linear, triangular, model expressing communication systems which enabled social communication and social relationships, described via an 'A', 'B' and 'X' triangle.

My own research examines what happens when broadcasters add non-linear networks to the linear sender/receiver model; communication is possible between the broadcaster and audience, audience and broadcaster, and between audience members. Examples of this changed relationship can be clearly seen in brands such as 'Big Brother' which offers broadcast content (a primary transmission and secondary analysis programme), a website with a social network, merchandising; and finally a distributed presence, for example linear content posted on 'You Tube' and comment facilitated through blogs.

Network Culture suggests the Internet is not merely a medium but a general figure, symptomatic of the principals driving the globalisation of culture and communication. Section Two of the book suggests the domain name systems of the Internet offer a notion of geography incorporating continents such as Yahoo, MSN, Google, CBB and the BBC. The network is described as being powerful enough to locate and place any object, large or small, if it is allocated an Internet protocol address.

The book contains interesting insights into the way the Internet is run at its deeper levels including governance such as The Internet Architecture Board, The Internet Society and the Internet Engineering Task Force. There are good definitions of the differences between Freeware, Shareware and the Open Source movement. *Network Culture* acknowledges there are issues of rights in the digital age, specifically the right to own and copy information. A particularly strong section of the book is on the notion of free labour and how the gift economy could be said to power the digital economy. It is suggested that

the digital economy is simply a new phase of a long history of economic experimentation and that organisations should encourage internal and external engagement with networks and knowledge flows in order to keep pace with change.

In summary, *Network Culture* provides useful and detailed historical and analytical context on the Internet and of networks; the emphasis is on structure, over content and audience. I found one or two chapters rather overwritten and a little repetitive, but the book presents interesting arguments on the regulation of the Internet itself and the regulation and balance of the network economy in general. There is a recommendation for future research on the relationship between culture, power and communication.

References

Livingstone, S (2002) *Young People and New Media: Childhood and the Changing Media Environment*, Second Edition, London, Sage

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