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Introduction

Properties of Technology

Phillip Kalantzis-Cope

Our aim in bringing together this collection of papers is to uncover ways in which “the digital” is at once encroaching, reformulating and creating social spaces. Indeed, at times the digital may even reconfigure what it means to be social. In order to capture the complex dimensions of this digital shift we have included a comprehensive range of disciplinary fields—politics, sociology, science, philosophy, informatics, public policy, communications and media studies.

The notion of “properties” serves as the central conceptual tool of the collection, the binding element that ties together the disparate disciplinary perspectives and empirical contents of this book. There are three dimensions to the notion of “properties.” The first sense of “property” is reflected in the book’s structure. Each thematic area represents one aspect of the social transformations occurring around digital technologies, identified in order to present a comprehensive account of the spectrum of social issues arising from digital technologies. Within this context we have selected a mix of big picture theoretical analysis for the lead anchor chapters in each section, followed by detailed examples of the diverse effects of each general transformation in the accompanying case studies. The second sense of “property” is embodied in the expositions of the emergent and unique “properties” of digital technologies in general. The third sense of “property” emanates from the framing of digital technology within a longer continuum of action and thought associated with technological development in general. Each of our contributors, in their own particular way, addresses one or more dimensions of these properties.

Robin Mansell leads the first part on Digital Communication. Her chapter provides a thorough exploration of whether or not, as is often argued, information communication technologies (ICTs) can be tools for emancipatory social change. This chapter challenges our thinking to consider whether a global one-size-fits-all approach to technology is appropriate for the socially disparate web or for people who share and communicate through these technologies. Mansell also asks us how, and in what ways, the new

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technologies themselves communicate a social vision. Three case studies then provide striking and differing insights into the forces shaping digital “communication” technologies. Ilhem Allagui, in his snapshot of Arabic websites, illuminates how the nation-state continues to play a role in shaping digital content. Alfonso Unceta introduces us to e-participation in the Basque country of Spain and the ways digital networks may or many not aid political, social or economic participation. Completing this part, Jennifer A. George-Palilonis and John Belcher present the ways ICTs can facilitate collaborative learning processes.

Part II, “Defining New Media,” is anchored by Carlos Elias, who frames the current digital shifts within a broader structural transformation in the dominant hierarchical order of knowledge creation. He focuses on how Web 2.0 technologies and the rise of a “convergence culture” are transforming the profession of journalism. He questions the nature of “credible” news, and the emerging boundaries between amateur and professional reporting. The case studies that follow illustrate the general issues raised by Elias in a variety of ways. Reisa Levine presents us with a glimpse of community engagement in digital production within the Canadian film industry. Nathan Angelo investigates Barack Obama’s use of Twitter and the way in which new media technologies reflect the changing nature of political communication. Seth Thompson explores how digital technologies are reshaping the relationship between “object and audience” in the museum.

Part III, “The Texts of Digital Publishing,” begins with John B. Thompson’s chapter on the ways digital technologies are shaping the future of academic publishing and university presses, hitherto stalwarts in the knowledge production industry. This detailed overview of the publishing industry provides the base from which we can examine the digital transformation of “information” production, workflow and dissemination. John W. Warren’s case study throws light on the emergence of free online textbooks, and the benefits of the open access publishing business model. Yasmin Ibrahim highlights the emerging cultural and political economy of digital book production. José Morillo-Velarde’s case study reveals a temporal shift in the production of text, from periodical to instantaneous artifact.

In Part IV, “Digital Citizenship,” Timothy W. Luke leads the discussion, focusing on the ways digital networks are encroaching and reshaping traditional boundaries of “rights” and “duties.” This, he argues, suggests a transformation of both the definition of “citizenship” and the spatial boundaries of political membership—the “what,” “where” and “who” of “digital citizenship.” How asks whether our connectedness shapes the way we participate. The case studies that follow demonstrate the “political” uses of digital technologies and networks. Christopher Wilson highlights the use of Facebook in political activism in Egypt. Julie Uldam explores how social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube can be used to facilitate global grassroots political movements. And Mario Toboso shows us how

ICTs can help people to cross boundaries of political participation, facilitating a “functional diversity” within digital society.

David Lyon anchors Part V, “Power, Knowledge, Surveillance.” In this chapter Lyon details how our individual and collective digital information trails are not simply used to track personal preferences within social and economic networks, but are also representative of a broader logic of surveillance in the information age. In the first of the case studies, by focusing on the tactics of the New York Police Department (NYPD), Brian Jefferson demonstrates how digital technology maps criminality and political subjectivity. Yasmin Ibrahim maps the range of “participants” in what has been called the “surveillance society”—from CCTVs to citizen journalists. Finally, Joseph Ferenbok illuminates how even our face becomes a site of digital identification (digital signature).

In Part VI, “Digital Property,” I contextualize the unfolding debates and visions for social justice arising from “digital” intellectual property rights, and the broader question of the ownership of intellectual goods in general. The case studies that follow present reference points for understanding the global dynamics of this digitally propelled social transformation. Roberto Feltrero points to the emergence of the free and open source software movement and peer-to-peer production as “ethical” statements within the digital domain. Mikkel Flyverbom explains the intersection of intellectual property rights and Internet governance in order to illuminate the emerging modalities of global governance. And Rubeena Aliar, through a case study of health traditions in rural India, provides insights into how property regimes that privilege the individual owner displace cultural forms based on collective ownership.

John Willinsky anchors Part VII, “The Digital Commons.” In this chapter he explores open source collaborative knowledge production—the fundamental logic of the digital commons—through a study of Wikipedia. He presents us with a clear example of the ways in which such approaches to digital technology can promote “openness” by pointing to the diverse make up of participatory actors in the commons. Aloka Parasher-Sen follows, with a case study of a digital mapping exercise in Southern India, exploring the new ways of mapping space, culture and identity. David Yates and Anas Tawileh draw our attention to the digital divide in rural Africa and urban North America, arguing that this divide is not simply a case of the developed versus the developing world, but one that creates a new cartography based on differing access patterns, thereby forcing us to think about what is “common” about the “commons.” Elena Moschini illuminates the demands and possibilities of “information literacy,” based on the emerging new “common” language of the digital.

Karim Gherab-Martín anchors Part VIII, “New Infrastructures of Science,” exploring the intersection of Web 2.0 technologies, the open source movement and the specific character of scientific knowledge. He presents us with a way to navigate the challenges of “digital” scientific endeavor based on

the idea of “open reuse.” The case studies that follow provide grounded reference points for understanding the contours of technology and scientific endeavor. In their example of approaches to water management, Khosrow Farahbakhsh and Benjamin Kelly force us to think outside the “digital box,” in order to grasp the cultural dynamics of scientific development in general. Julio E. Rubio, through an examination of the issues surrounding transgenic corn in Mexico, illuminates the need to contextualize the digital within the broader transformative effect of scientific research—for example bio-engineering and the interactions among stakeholders in the validation of scientific endeavor. Finally in this section, Manuel González Villa highlights the displacement at times of traditional models of scientific knowledge validation in digital knowledge communities, specifically the mathematical community.

Part IX, “Digital Aesthetics,” is framed by Sean Cubitt’s chapter, which uses the concept of “fabrication” as an historical and social process, and examines the relationship between the aesthetic experience of digital technologies and the material world. John Byrne then asks what the digital reveals about “radical art.” What pushes the boundaries of the aesthetic experience? Melissa D. Milton-Smith examines the boundaries of “art” and “new media” and Tamsyn Gilbert presents us with the i-phone application Art Beat, which demonstrates the relationship between art and function in new digital technologies.

Part X, “Digital Labor,” is anchored by Eran Fisher’s analysis of the emergence of “prosumption,” a hybrid of production and consumption, a mode of work characterized by networked “digital” labor practices. The meta-argument of this chapter is that this shift in labor practices reveals a “new spirit of capitalism” throwing into question the emancipatory potential of digital network technologies. The three case studies then provide us with differing examples of the spaces, practices and dynamics of “digital” labor. Owen Darbishire illuminates the emergence of an economy of servicing the digital with the UK telecommunications industry. Madeline Carr details how the US government has approached its digital labor force and its relationship to “national interest,” and Suriyani Muhamad sheds light on the ICT job market in Malaysia.

David Hakken and Maurizio Teli anchor Part XI, “Technology, Culture, and Society.” Their chapter examines the balance between a purely technological base for computing studies, and what they call a “socially conscious computing” or “technosocial” approach. At the core of this chapter is the question of who participates in the processes of technological development. The three case studies then explore this question in various ways. Anjali Gera Roy presents the global digital network of Bhangra production and dissemination, making the case that the digital, rather than simply being the conduit for the voice of the “mainstream,” also can “globaliz[e] the voice of the margin.” Amareswar Galla deals with the digitization of museum artifacts, focusing on how we collect, protect and open access to intangible

heritage, balancing questions of whose voice is included, who is collecting and who retains ownership. William James Stover presents a classroom setting where virtual modeling and simulation can encourage critical thinking by taking political questions and “digitally” abstracting them, in order to solve real world issues.

Part XII, “Digital Identities,” is anchored by Marcus Breen, who analyzes Internet pornography, exploring the ways in which the formation of identity on the Internet is a reflection of deeper social transformations within our shared cultural landscape. This chapter compels us to think about the forces and boundaries of “digital” identity formation. The three case studies that follow provide insights into the very different ways in which “identity” is formed, advocated and distributed on the Internet. Emily D. Arthur illuminates bisexual chat rooms and personal web diaries as forums to explore sexuality, presenting them as windows to the world and into one’s own experience. Jan Lüdert unveils the development of the “UsMob” website, as a dialogue between an indigenous Australian community and the “digital social”—indigenous and non-indigenous people. Finally, Verónica Sanz sheds light on the gender disparities of those receiving computer science degrees.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse anchors Part XIII, “Information Globalism.” This chapter takes a critical look at the logic of “information communication technology for development” and its relationship to the spread of “digital capitalism.” The three case studies then delve into the issues of digital global interconnectedness. Robert Bichler takes us to Malawi, where the cost of a telephone line is triple the cost of the Internet service. Mili Kalia’s study on dot.com marriages in India illuminates not just the effects of a material class order, but also a status order within Indian society that is being recreated in emerging “virtual matrimonial” networks. Charles C. Chiemeké, while noting the effects of the digital divide, provides an example of a Bangladesh Village Voice project “that provides loans to women borrowers for phone equipment and subscriptions to cellular services.”

In Part XIV, “Reading Machines,” Jean-Claude Guédon’s anchor chapter outlines the social and technological ecologies around e-readers, focusing on the flow of documents and information across information communication technologies—specifically through the iPad. In the first case study, José Luis González-Quirós draws our attention to the cultural dynamics of the e-book market in Spain. José Antonio Millán critically addresses the future of the e-reader and John W. Warren outlines the distinct affordances of the “digital novel.”

Through its excursions into a broad range of digital spaces and social practices, this book aims to identify the specificities of the digital moment—the emergent and unique “properties” of digital technologies in particular, and the novelties and continuities of these technologies in the wider frame of reference of technological development in general. In the analyses of the

book we find that solutions to “virtual problems” are windows onto broader social contestations. Untangling the digital requires an untangling of the social, too. In other words, it is not possible to separate meaningfully the digital from the non-digital space.

Digital technologies can “open” new modalities of social, economic and political practice. However, at the same time the social can “close” emergent social transformations through the matrix of social practices that are built on foundations laid in digital networks. So, the argument that historic relations of power around race, gender, class and identity might be in some ways transcended in digital spaces might in fact be a utopian hope, painfully unrealizable as the digital becomes a new space for their reproduction. In this perspective, nothing changes fundamentally with the advent of the digital. In another perspective, though, as we are drawn together in new, digitally mediated social spaces, an inevitable increase in participation could emerge, which in turn might be taken to constitute enhanced “civic” belonging. Furthermore, in such a context, the integration of “civic” and “citizenship” produces a feedback loop of expectations and practices built on consent and participation. This may have flow-on effects into the material world. The new openings for participation in digital spaces, however, suggest that parallel openings are required in the world of social and material resources.

In order for there to be a productive conceptual and practical interaction between the “digital” and the “material,” we need to take into account the spectrum of social transformations underway, as reflected in the “properties” of this book. For example arguments around labor practices need to be in conversation with culture, surveillance with participation in open source production, the digital divide with notions of citizenship, and so on. We also need to critically address emergent “properties” of digital technologies, as conduits for social transformation. Then we need to contextualize these “hopes” and “visions” of transformation within a broader historical and technological vision.

This book seeks to propose that we need to think more critically about the properties of new technologies, the cultural content that flows through them, and the social forms new technologies both reproduce and disrupt. This is the concretely social of our “digital future,” the effects of technologies-in-use. The trap of technological determinism, at a fundamental level, is born out of misrecognition of the social nature of technological development and should therefore be eschewed. Likewise, technological development cannot be regarded as unidirectional, acultural or apolitical. Rather, the evolution of new technologies provides us with insights into the multifaceted, historically located, transformative dynamics of social agency.

Our aim in this book is to explore the properties of digital technologies in order to discern a range of cultural, social, economic and political trajectories or explanations of effects. In addition, we want to prompt readers to think

constructively and strategically about the alternative pathways and transformative possibilities that the properties of technology allow for our social futures. We hope that this collection provides an overview of recent thinking about these matters, and that this in turn might suggest an agenda for new intellectual work and provide inspiration for practical action.

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