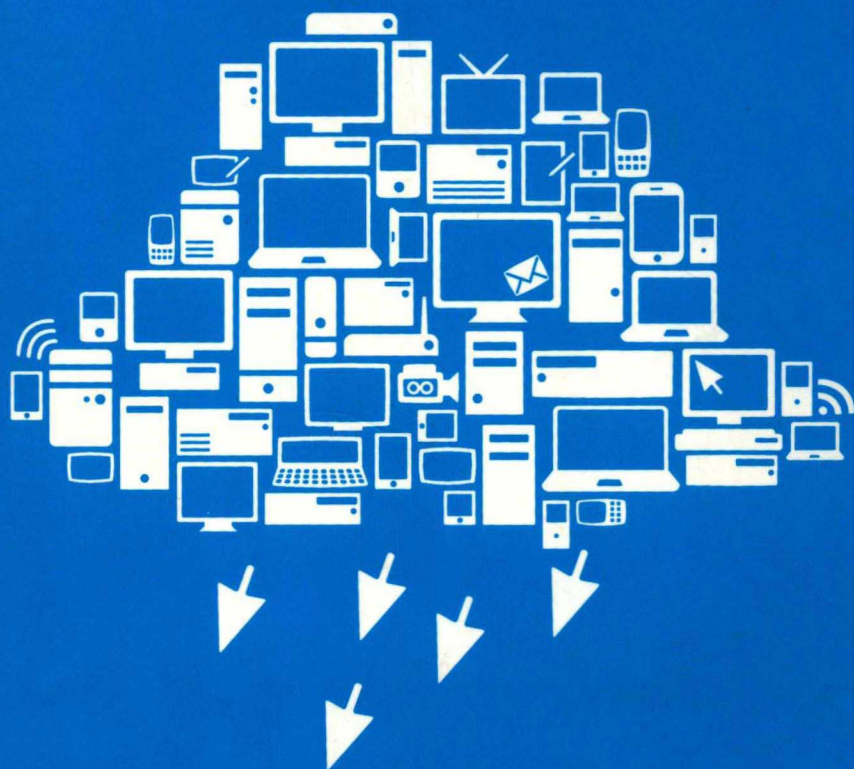
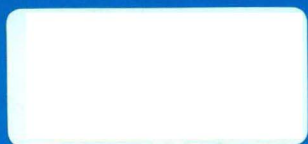




Understanding Digital Culture

Vincent Miller



'This is an outstanding book. It is one of only a few scholarly texts that successfully combine a nuanced theoretical understanding of the digital age with empirical case studies of contemporary media culture. The scope of this book is impressive, ranging from questions of digital inequality to emergent forms of cyberpolitics. It is essential reading for students and seasoned academics alike.'

Nick Gane, University of York

'This is a terrifically wide-ranging and interesting dissection of the main causes, characteristics and consequences of increasingly all-pervasive digital cultures.'

John Urry, Distinguished Professor, Lancaster University

This is more than just another book on internet studies. Tracing the pervasive influence of digital culture throughout contemporary life, this text integrates socio-economic understandings of the information society with the cultural studies approach to production, use and consumption of digital media and multimedia.

Refreshingly readable and packed with examples – from profiling databases and mash-ups to cybersex and the truth about social networking – *Understanding Digital Culture*:

- Crosses disciplines to give a balanced account of the social, economic and cultural dimensions of the information society
- Illuminates the increasing importance of mobile, wireless and converged media technologies in everyday life
- Unpacks how the information society is transforming and challenging traditional notions of crime, resistance, war and protest, community, intimacy and belonging
- Charts the changing cultural forms associated with new media and its consumption, including music, gaming, microblogging and online identity
- Illustrates all the above with contemporary, in-depth case studies of digital culture.

This is the perfect text for students looking for a full account of the information society, virtual cultures, sociology of the internet and new media.

Vincent Miller is Lecturer in Sociology in the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent.

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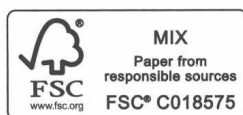
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Top of the list, I have to dedicate this to Kate. Thanks for putting up with this.

I also dedicate this to my mother.

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where the internet and the world wide web have, in the matter of only two decades, shifted from being at the forefront of a new frontier of communication technology, to being for most people an incredibly unremarkable part of our culture and daily life. Many once held an optimism that the internet would, for example, revolutionise work and office life, and create active, engaged citizens instead of the passive subjects of the broadcast media age (Poster, 1995), or lead to the creation of alternative communities, worlds and even identities free from the prejudices of offline society (Rheingold, 1993).

However, as the internet has become something used by the majority of the population in advanced economies, that population has brought with it all of the habits, inclinations and prejudices which are endemic to society as a whole. As a result, much of this early optimism that the internet would radically change our culture in some sort of knowledge revolution has begun to fade in light of the realisation that our culture has perhaps transformed the internet more than vice versa.

The internet has now become a major part of work, leisure, social and political life, for most people in advanced economic nations. It is no longer its novelty, uniqueness, or potential to transform life, but its mundane nature and pervasiveness that now gives the internet its significance. Not in the sense that it has profoundly 'changed' the world, but in the sense that it has become enmeshed within the enduring structures of our society. As such, the online sphere is no longer a realm separate from the offline 'real world', but fully integrated into offline life.

This integration has only been enhanced by the massive popularity of mobile technologies, particularly mobile phones, the latest generation of which allow almost perpetual contact to the world wide web, as well as to our friends, relatives, bosses and significant others. As a result, digital culture now involves more than merely sitting at a computer terminal, and studies of the information age are moving on from the preoccupation with 'internet studies' to consider the pervasive use of mobile phones and other wireless Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). What this means practically is that this is not simply a book about 'internet studies', but a book that considers many wider forms of digital culture, including mobile communications technologies, gaming and technological bodies (to name a few) within and beyond the internet, to demonstrate how digital technology in a broad sense is used within the wider contexts of everyday life.

REVOLUTIONARY TECHNOLOGIES?

In 1975, roughly two decades after the rise of television as a mass medium in Britain was ushered in by the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 (the same time as 'the golden age' of television in the United States), acclaimed cultural theorist Raymond Williams wrote *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, an investigation into the cultural influence of television as a form and practice in British and American cultural life. He begins by introducing a set of statements that were representative of how television was seen as 'changing' the world:

- i Television was invented as the result of scientific and technical research. Its power as a medium of news and entertainment was then so great that it altered all preceding media of news and entertainment.
- ii Television was invented as the result of scientific and technical research. Its power as a medium of social communication was then so great that it altered many of our institutions and forms of social relationships.
- iii Television was invented as the result of scientific and technical research. Its inherent properties as an electronic medium altered our basic perceptions of reality, and thence our relations with each other and with the world.
- iv Television was invented as the result of scientific and technical research. As a powerful medium of communication and entertainment it took its place with other factors – such as greatly increased physical mobility, itself the result of other newly invented technologies – in altering the scale and form of our societies.
- v Television was invented as the result of scientific and technical research, and developed as a medium of entertainment and news. It then had unforeseen consequences, not only on other entertainment and news media, which reduced in viability and importance, but on some of the central processes of family, cultural and social life.
- vi Television, discovered as a possibility by scientific and technical research, was selected for investment and development to meet the needs of a new kind of society, especially in the provision of centralised entertainment and in the centralised formation of opinions and styles of behaviour.
- vii Television, discovered as a possibility by scientific and technical research, was selected for investment and promotion as a new and profitable phase of a domestic consumer economy; it is then one of the characteristic 'machines for the home'.
- viii Television became available as a result of scientific and technical research, and in its character and uses exploited and emphasised elements of a passivity, a cultural and psychological inadequacy, which had always been latent in people, but which television now organised and came to present.

- ix Television became available as a result of scientific and technical research, and in its character and uses both served and exploited the needs of a new kind of large-scale and complex but atomised society. (Williams, 1990 [1975]: 11–12)

The reason I have quoted this passage at length is because I find it fairly striking how all of the characterisations of the effects of television on society Williams lists (apart from perhaps point viii) are today levelled at the internet, two decades after it was popularised through the invention of the world wide web (WWW) in 1991. In fact, many of these statements speak directly to the content of some chapters within this book. This highlights the point that perhaps we have been here before, many times. New technologies always breed anxiety about their consequences, and certainly the internet and mobile phones have bred both anxiety and optimism in their potential to shape the future. However, like television (but perhaps more so) it is important to realise that the internet, the web, and mobile digital technologies are more than just ‘technologies’, they are a set of social relations which incorporate the use of technologies with various results.

Determinisms

It is almost inevitable that any significant new technology will be predicted to transform society, or at least to embody the potential to transform society, for better or worse. It is often said, especially in the initial stages of the adoption of a particular technology, that the technology will generate social change based upon the implicit values, virtues, or vices possessed by that technology. This line of thinking is often referred to as *technological determinism* and, in this respect, the development of networked ICTs is no exception.

Raymond Williams (1990 [1975]) defined technological determinism as suggesting that new technologies set the conditions for social change and progress. In such a view, technology is seen as a law unto itself, in the sense that technological innovations are seen as drivers in the ‘progress’ (or sometimes ‘decline’) of society and culture. When *Time* magazine produces a headline such as ‘How Twitter will change the way we live’ (Johnson, 2009), they are engaging in a form of technological determinism which suggests that, in the relationship between technology and culture, culture is the passive agent and technology the active one: culture and society ‘react’ to technological developments in a cause-and-effect manner.

Implicit in this view is the vision of technology as something separate and independent of society. Inventions can merely ‘happen’, and then society has to deal with the consequences of that happening and the new ways of life that follow. Or, one can see science and technology as following some sort of inevitable path or autonomous logic (what Bimber (1990) refers to as a ‘logical sequence’) in which new technologies are part of a process that not only directly effects change on society, but also sets in motion the direction for future technological changes, as well as the necessary altering social forms and organisation. So the invention of the incandescent electric light bulb by Thomas Edison

in 1879 can be seen as the inevitable next stage in development from the gas lamp, and both inventions created fundamentally new ways of being to which people, businesses, and governments had to organise themselves around.

On the surface, technological determinism seems to make sense, and indeed as Mackenzie and Wajcman (1999) (from whom I borrow the light bulb analogy) suggest, it contains a partial truth. No one would argue that the invention of the light bulb was not a significant event in terms of the following consequences: extending our days, influencing the design and structure of buildings, revolutionising transportation, shaping the development of entire cities to sizes never thought possible, changing our work patterns and leading on to further innovations in lighting and electricity more generally.

Within the context of digital culture, technological determinism has been rife, especially in the early days of internet studies (Bingham, 1996). Many authors that are seen as central in this book, including Karl Marx, Marshall McLuhan, Manuel Castells and Mark Poster have been accused, rightly or wrongly, as following this logic. For example, in Chapter 1, Poster is quoted:

Electronic culture promotes the individual as an unstable identity in a continuous process of multiple identity formation.
(Poster, 1995: 59)

Poster here is promoting an anti-essentialist view of identity, but in doing so, could also be accused of technological determinism, by insinuating that identity formations are directly linked to technological developments in ‘electronic culture’ and encourage the formation of multiple identities, or a certain *kind of person*. It is important for the reader to be critically aware of such logic when it is at work.

The social determination of technology

Putting Edison’s invention of the light bulb into a social context reveals another view of the relationship between technology, society and culture which might be called *social* or *economic determinism*. Extreme ends of this view would characterise technology as the passive partner in the culture–technology relationship, and is referred to as ‘symptomatic technology’ by Williams (1990 [1975]). This refers to a form of determinism whereby social conditions create environments in which technologies are seen as either necessary by-products of social processes or, as early sociologist of technology William Ogburn argued, were *inevitable*, given the correct set of social conditions (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999: 8). From this perspective, new technologies *become necessary* at certain points of cultural development. So in the case of the light bulb, its invention becomes a symptom of wider social changes. Given what was going on in society at a particular time and the general march of ‘progress’, the light bulb *had* to happen.

This view is not particularly prevalent in contemporary popular or academic writing, but it arguably does make an appearance on some of the arguments of extropian posthumanism (see Chapter 9). Futurists such as Ray Kurzweil often make