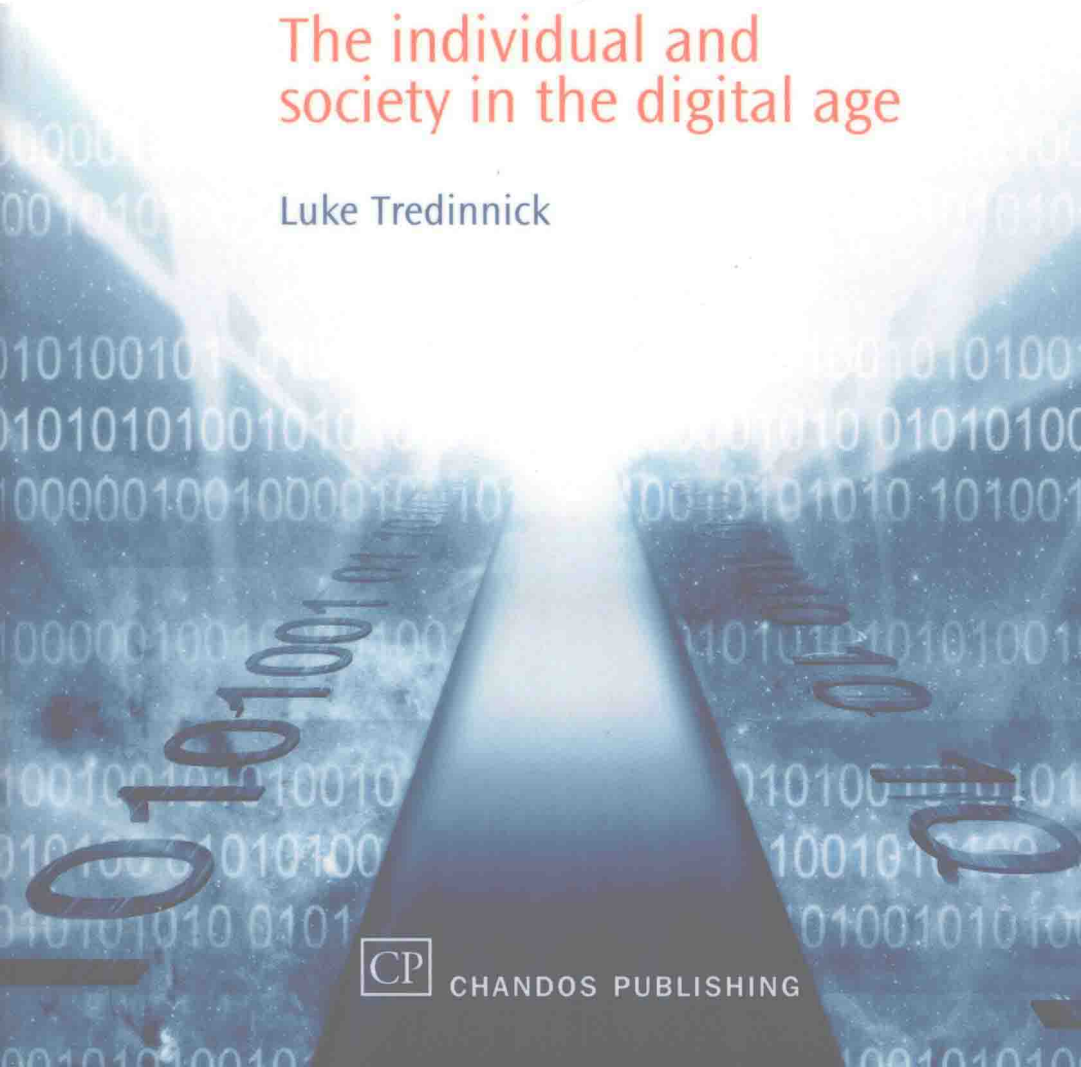
Chandos Internet Series

# Digital Information Culture:

## The individual and society in the digital age

Luke Tredinnick



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# Digital Information Culture

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For Elizabeth

# About the author

Luke Tredinnick is a senior lecturer in information management at London Metropolitan University and course leader for the MSc on digital information management. He specialises in digital information management and the social and cultural impact of computing technology. His other published works include *Why Intranets Fail (and How to Fix Them)*, published by Chandos in 2004, and *Digital Information Contexts*, published by Chandos in 2006.

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# Prologue

This book is intended as a companion to *Digital Information Contexts*, published in 2006. *Digital Information Contexts* sought to critique the existing theoretical assumptions of the information profession, and their appropriateness in the digital age. It also sought to map out new theoretical perspectives that could be applied to the understanding of digital information and digital technology. That earlier book provides most of the methodological and theoretical foundation for this work. As a consequence, except where drawing on aspects of theory unaddressed in that previous work, this book is light on theoretical baggage. Although it is not necessary to have read *Digital Information Contexts* to understand this book, where appropriate endnotes allude to chapters in that work which support the arguments presented here.

This book can be broadly placed within an interpretivist paradigm – which is to say that it treats phenomena as things that are given value and meaning through their interpretation within social contexts, rather than as things that possess objective values and meaning in their own right. This is particularly the case when it addresses aspects of the cultural world, such as texts, artworks, films or audio recordings. It will be argued that the values on which we draw in creating meaning from cultural objects reflect a kind of negotiation between those objects, their context and their audiences. This book can also be placed within a critical tradition: it seeks to *persuade* and not to *demonstrate*. Much of the literature about the impact of digital technology on society and culture tends to root itself in empirical evidence, and often in quantitative evidence to support a conjecture about socio-cultural change. The value of these studies is measured against the real world that they seek to reflect and contain. There is no harm in that approach, but it is not what this book is about. Where it draws on empirical studies they are intended as illustrative rather than demonstrative. Much of the theoretical background for this work belongs in the post-structuralist tradition. But the book also draws on ideas from post-modernism, particularly in its treatment of historical objectivity and the idea of objective truth.

# Contents

# Part I
# Culture and technology

# The meaning of culture

This is a book about the influence of digital information technology on the way we live our lives in the early twenty-first century. To call a book *Digital Information Culture* is to make a tacit assertion: that digital technologies have had, or are having, a transformational effect on cultural values. Such an assertion encloses a set of basic assumptions that are worth detailing. The first of these is that 'culture' furnishes us with the kind of concept that can be subjected to analysis. Culture has been called one of the two or three most complex words in the English language (Williams, 1983: 87). It is also, perhaps, one of the most politicised. This chapter will explore how the idea of culture has developed during the past century and a half, and what this means for the tacit assertion enclosed in the title of this book.

## Reflexivity, performativity and culture

In 2001 the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization defined culture as 'the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, [that] encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs' (UNESCO, 2001). While as bland as it is inclusive, this definition emphasises several points that will be touched on in the current chapter. Firstly there is the idea that culture broadly encompasses three elements: social relations within a social system ('lifestyles, ways of living together'); idea systems that mediate social practices and social relations ('value systems, traditions, and beliefs'); and the material products of social and cultural practices ('art and literature'). With the latter of these can perhaps also be included the desire or drive informing their creation, itself suggesting some seemingly essential quality of human aspirations (maybe what Fukuyama (1992)

terms *thymos,* or the drive for recognition).[1] Secondly we can note that to be considered aspects of culture, such material products, social relations and idea systems must be 'distinctive', in this case 'of a society or a social group'. Not any old ideas, practices or relations will do, only those that are characteristic of, and perhaps unique to, particular social groupings and their identity.

UNESCO's declaration clearly aspires to define culture in ways both non-contentious and inclusive, but to this end it perhaps unwittingly incorporates tensions central to the development of the idea over the past two centuries. While on the basis of this definition almost anything can be included among the 'spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or group', almost nothing seems entirely distinctive enough of any particular society or social group either. When culture counts as almost everything on the one hand, and next to nothing on the other, we find ourselves with a kind of irresolvable tension between that which is significant enough and that which is too significant by far. Also of interest is the way in which the three elements of culture contained by the definition are coordinated within it. 'In addition to art and literature' are these other things, at one and the same time a kind of addendum to the statement yet also central to it, afforded more emphasis by being outlined in greater detail. Literature and art may be the starting point of the definition, but they are not its particular focus, describing what is least contentious about the idea of culture to be mentioned in passing only as a means of establishing a more comprehensive, inclusive and perhaps democratic overview. Once the given aspects of culture are dispatched, the definition can move to throw light on its more intangible components.

And who could begrudge UNESCO its apparent coyness? Art and literature imply an old-fashioned idea of culture as the sum total of human intellectual and aesthetic attainment, an idea that we would possibly rather leave behind. But this reluctance to confront the tacit valorisation of certain privileged forms and traditions conceals a sleight of hand. These two material aspects of culture – literature and art, and everything that is implied by them – are only two kinds of cultural product among many, but nevertheless the only two that have been furnished with a particular status through their explicit inclusion, even if only in passing. They are the nucleus of the definition into which other aspects of culture can be incorporated only 'in addition'. This suggests a number of questions: why literature and art, and not other tangible aspects of culture, such as film, television, architecture and digital computing? Why their special status in the sentence, their conspicuous

isolation in a subordinate clause? What is literary about literature and artistic about art, anyway? Is *The Origin of Species* also literature and the Acropolis also art, and if we accept them to be so, is their real cultural value as literature and art rather than as science and architecture? Or do we otherwise have to find a place for these things elsewhere in the definition? This crucible of culture into which we can pour things 'in addition to art and literature' seems established on the idea that these two privileged forms are themselves a kind of catalyst, the seeds out of which social relationships and idea systems are grown, or perhaps a dominant cultural mode through which these other and additional things are mediated.

The manner in which UNESCO's definition unravels reflects the tricky nature of the concept it is seeking to contain. Enclosed by it are tensions that reflect both the history of our understanding of culture and its political bite. Eagleton (2000: 1) has commented that culture 'charts within its semantic unfolding humanity's own historic shift from rural to urban existence, pig-farming to Picasso, tilling the soil to splitting the atom'. The very idea of culture reminds us of the rapid changes in social life through the industrial and post-industrial periods. And this brings us to a further point about our preoccupation with culture emphasised by UNESCO's declaration: that whatever the merits of any particular definition, the attempt to articulate an understanding of culture is most importantly an assertion of the centrality of the concept to the way in which we understand ourselves and our social situation. The declaration functions as a kind of *performative* gesture, asserting a particular idea of culture not only through what it says, but also through the act of stating it.[2] How we understand culture is also a measure of our cultural values; it encloses a reflexive anxiety about our own ways of life, traditions and beliefs – a point which will be raised again towards the end of this chapter. Not just culture, then, but also the very idea of culture saturates our whole sense of self.

This perhaps goes partway to explaining why culture has become such a preoccupation of the modern age; because the importance of the idea of culture during the past century and a half is difficult to deny. It is, furthermore, something that we should want to explain if we are to understand the changes of the digital age. To do so, we need to explore how culture developed its peculiarly reflexive action. This chapter will trace the emergence of different ideas of culture through the industrial and post-industrial period. It does not pretend to present an exhaustive overview of a word that has had more written about it than almost any other,[3] but it will draw out some themes of particular interest to this book.

## Aspects of culture

The modern connotations of *culture* have, in T.S. Eliot's words, 'not a long history' (1948: 21). Deriving from the Latin word *colere*, it originally described the tending of natural growth in husbandry and agriculture (Eagleton, 2000). By the sixteenth century its meaning had been extended to human development, resulting in the habituation of the term in its application to humans and its increased abstraction towards general, rather than particular, processes of growth (Williams, 1983). But although used in something similar to its modern sense in prior ages, borrowing its metaphorical bite from the jaws of nature put under till and plough, it was in response to the industrial revolution that culture developed its peculiarly reflexive action.

The work most associated with this change was Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. Culture became for Arnold a means of confronting industrialisation's dehumanising effects. In part this concerned the social consequences of industrial machinery; Arnold (1869: 54) attacked the 'idolatry of machinery' and complained that 'faith in machinery [...] is our besetting danger' (ibid.: 16). But the work also reflects an anxiety at the pace and extent of social change following in industrialisation's wake, identified with the growth of a 'strong individualism' antithetical to 'the idea of perfection as an harmonious expansion of human nature' (ibid.: 15). Arnold stressed culture's relationship with the refinement of particular traditions centred on a limited ranged of social practices, institutions and forms. Culture became 'a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know [...] the best which has been thought and said in the world' (ibid.: vii). This definition encloses two elements: the rarefied products of the intellectual tradition set in opposition to the products of industrialisation and mass publishing; and a coming to knowledge of that tradition through reflection, criticism and discrimination. Culture was not for Arnold merely a collection of privileged cultural forms, but a particular relationship with the past drawing on 'all the voices of human experience that have been heard' (ibid.: 13). It played an active part in lived experience; 'not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming' (ibid.: 13) developed through 'disinterested and active use of reading, reflection and observation' (ibid.: 221). With its pursuit therefore also came a moral imperative: the desire to make the best of the intellectual tradition prevail, through which its 'moral, social, and beneficent character [...] becomes manifest' (ibid.: 12).