
If there has been one constant in the emergence and development of the Internet, it is its critical theorization by Mark Poster. With The Mode of Information (1990), The Second Media Age (1995), What’s the Matter with the Internet? (2001), and now Information Please: Culture and Politics in the Age of Digital Machines (2006), Poster’s legacy has been the critical theorization of electronically mediated communication involving the conceptualization of new media as cultural object. And if there is one thing that is certain about Mark Poster’s theoretical contributions, at once vaunted and derided by scholars, it is that they never fail to raise hackles and spur discussion, all the while pushing forward debates over new media, the Internet, and networked computing.

In this new work, Poster continues his investigation into the relations of humans and information machines—what he calls “humachines”—suggesting that this book is really The Mode of Information (1990) “Version 4.0.” Poster declares from the outset that his objective here is not the articulation of a new theory explaining “the cultural significance of the migration of information from humans to machines” (p. 4), but rather revolves around interrogating and probing new configurations of media and culture; “defining and clarifying the significant questions to ask. . . has been and continues to be my chief concern” (p. 5). Indeed, Poster attempts to contribute to our comprehension of the emergence of “humachines”, or what he later clarifies as “assemblages of networked digital information and humans” (p. 48), by interrogating how information operates as a cultural object today, migrating from humans to machines, mediating relationships and fostering bonds, enabling new political formations, and ultimately producing both dire and utopian possibilities and implications. Examples he explores along the way include the emergence of “Evil ‘Bert’ Laden” (of Sesame Street fame) on the Web and in political protests in Afghanistan in 2001; the rise of fears over identity theft; how the Teletubbies “structures a scene of fusion between the child and the machine” (p. 49); the increasing pervasiveness of peer-to-peer file sharing and open source content; and finally a discussion of the prescience of Philip K. Dick’s (1969) classic sci-fi novel Ubik. Ultimately, through such examples, Poster would like to consider the possibilities that networked digital information and human assemblages produce for “reducing the burdens of domination,” (p. 4) synthesizing pertinent theoretical contributions and suggesting future directions for research through his questioning along the way.

postcolonial theory and its supposed limitations in terms of understanding networked digital information and human assemblages: “I summarize by saying that the migration of non-Westerners to the West, the massive penetration of Western commodities into the non-West, and the exchange of cultural objects between the West and non-West all introduce relations between peoples around the globe that do not fit easily into the categories of colonizer and colonized” (p. 32).

The mere suggestion that postcolonial theory reduces to a binary category of colonizer/colonized (which Poster repeatedly suggests), while convenient in an effort to synthesize the boundaries of a theoretical field, will certainly be cause for some to slam the book shut. Further, where Poster elegantly and succinctly summarizes Foucault (1980), Deleuze (1992), and Hardt and Negri’s (2000, 2004) profound work around power, control, empire, and multitudes respectively, he attacks major elements of all of their work as “undertheorized” in terms of their relations and applicability to networked digital information and human assemblages, but then fails himself to explore the relations and applicability of biopower to networked communication in his subsequent analysis of Napster, peer-to-peer file sharing, open source content, and the United States’ Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998, opting instead to engage in a strict Marxist political-economic analysis and critique. Moreover, this strain of his theoretical analysis is nested among a series of reductive questions pertaining to the obscured and blurred relations of producers, consumers, and ownership of cultural objects in a world increasingly marked by transnational flows of networked digital information and human assemblages. Even Judith Butler (1993) is not above his reductive reproach: “Arguments of the 1990s that the body is shaped, in part, by culture appear quaint and understated when confronted by somatic alterations on the horizons and already being put into practice” (p. 161). It is precisely this kind of pompous theorization that has raised the hackles of some of his readers since The Mode of Information was first published in 1990.

But rankling readers has never been Mark Poster’s intended objective. “Rather, my purpose is to raise the questions of the general role of media in culture and the particular role of new media, to point to the importance of the linkages of humans with machines as the cornerstone of possibly new planetary cultures” (p. 24). And raise such questions he does, at times elegantly and insightfully, and at times with the facile aim of moving along to his next theoretical interrogation and analysis. If there is any constant in Mark Poster’s work, it is that it is at times infuriating and at times enlightening, but all the while it reminds us of the crucial theoretical elements that need be considered in new network theory.

References


*Kenneth C. Werbin*

*Concordia University*