
Interface://Culture is one of a series of volumes arising from a Danish research project in which scholars were asked to comment on the relationship between a particular media (in this case, the Internet) and politics in a broad sense, namely, “what people practice in a range of social context, where they conceive of themselves as citizens, consumers, and cocreators of culture” (p. 7). To meet this challenge, authors in this collection of eight articles have sought interpretations of the Internet and websites above and beyond the three traditional and separate approaches of Web scholarship: the computer as a technological means of communication; the exploration of discourse in a hypertext environment; and the Internet along with other media as forming a societal institution.

The authors build on two areas of research: briefly, structuration theory which explains the way that agents both reflect and are constitutive of society and societal practices, and medium theory which argues that the important concepts and ideas of any given time is informed by the media dominant at that time. As editor Jensen explains, “medium theory helps to address the shifting relationship between structure and agency in different historical settings” (p. 21). By incorporating these theoretical bases in their work, the authors in this text can build on previous media research and, thus, extend the reach of Web scholarship to include the mediated communication perspective of the social sciences and the discursive perspective of the humanities. In this way, the Internet can be studied as both a political resource and an aesthetic form.

This broadening of research horizons contributes to the strength in this collection, namely, new approaches to investigating websites that, in turn, lead to new insights about the ways in which the Web intersects with our lives, reflects our practices, and expresses our creativity. Thus, for example, Petersson discusses the development and handling of a “surplus profit” of knowledge in an initiative of the Royal Library of Denmark, the Kulturatlas, which has the public contribute to the building of an archive of historical photographs; Walther analyzes the website for the TV series 24 as a location through which users can vicariously experience issues of real-life geopolitics, and Hansen, in examining John Kerry’s website when he was a presidential candidate, examines the ways in which the website acts as a “digital autobiography,” designed to construct the Kerry persona as eminently electable.

While some articles in this collection have a micro-level analytical focus on particular websites, others have a macro-level, theoretical approach to the Web as a medium. For example, Jensen and Helles shift from using Innis’ concept of media having a “bias” toward space or time in classic medium theory to studying the Web through functionalities or “affordances,” for example, the potentials of a technology and how they are actualized. Using content analysis of a variety of different types of websites, the authors find that there is a “politics of interactivity” at work in the Internet such that functionalities are more limited for the public in some genres than has been assumed in previous Web research. Finnemann’s article, also based on the concept of affordances, outlines a “cultural grammar” for the Web that provides a way to explain why certain aspects of the Internet are being realized differently in a variety of cultural and political settings. Interestingly,
Finnemann argues that the concept of convergence (network, terminal, market, or service), which has been key in recent Web research, is “out of touch with ongoing developments” (p. 83) because the Web is, in fact, a medium for differentiated communication with users offered a wide variety of customized media and contents/services via an increasing number of terminal types.

Ironically, however, the strength of this collection—new ways of investigating digital media—also contributes to its weakness. Authors who have ventured beyond traditional Web study into multidisciplinarity risk incomplete theorization. For example, postmodernism is not mentioned in this collection, although one might posit that the Internet is the most postmodern of all media. Thus, Hansen’s discussion of the Kerry website with its pastiche of auto/biographical forms fails to address issues that concern the construction of the postmodern self. Hansen concludes that the website presents Kerry with a single persona and life narrative, yet does not explain how the website resisted or subverted the postmodern trend toward multiple selves—a topic of interest for the many scholars who study the social agent in a pluralistic public sphere.

Methodological work is also at risk when moving beyond one’s discipline. Nielsen analyzes the ethical stances of two Danish corporate websites using discourse analysis based solely on the work of Norman Fairclough, and while Fairclough is a major theorist in critical discourse analysis (CDA), he is not a major methodologist. Nielsen’s analysis thus proves to be far too thin for a substantial understanding of how moral meaning is made through online text, multimodality, and interactivity.

Interface://Culture—The World Wide Web as Political Resource and Aesthetic Form is a mixed bag, ambitious in scope and, yet, not always rising well to the challenges inherent in that scope. Arguably, the only article in this collection that did not raise more questions than it answered is Jørgensen and Udsen’s “From Calculation to Culture: A Brief History of the Computer as Interface.” Moreover, there is a sentiment throughout this collection, articulated by Finnemann, that requires serious consideration on the part of its editor, authors, and readers: “One may safely conclude that the Internet has already become the medium offering the most comprehensive, versatile, and accurate reflection of human existence in modern society” (p. 81). As Jean Baudrillard reminds us, however, a mediated world of symbols—images and words—creates a hyper-reality that may be far more exciting and interesting than reality itself. Caution is advised.

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