Book Review

Miller, Vincent,
Understanding Digital Culture[1]

Oscar Diamante

Vincent Miller begins with the notion of 'technological enablement' by clarifying the issue between technological determinism and social determination of technology. Technological determinism asserts that the society and culture are transformed by the new technology. *Time Magazine's* headline 'How Twitter will change the way we live', for instance, manifests technological determinism. The opposite view, the social or economic determinism asserts that technology is a passive partner in the culture-technology relationship whereby "social conditions creates environments in which technologies are seen as either necessary by-products of social processes or, were *inevitable*, given the correct set of social conditions." However, the book argues for a third approach that avoids putting technology and society as separate and isolated entities. The approach of technological enablement captures the interrelatedness of technology, society and culture. This view finds technology as something "looked for" because of the need and intention, and the use or application of technology and its innovations, in turn, set up certain conditions in the future that may enable novel cultural forms. To illustrate, the invention of the light bulb by Thomas Edison was motivated by a problem within the particular context of financial concern (profits). Edison definitely had a vision that his invention could shape the future but it was beyond his purview what other uses and effects would develop from it. It is in line with this approach that Miller discusses the various topics on information technology and digital culture throughout his book.

Miller aims to make a critical account of the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of the information society. He tries to situate the developments of the information and communication technologies within the sociological debates around globalization, individualization and consumerism. The issues on inequality, power, identity, community, the body and belonging are examined in view of the challenges posed by the rise of information society.

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[1] Los Angeles: Sage, 2011. 254 pp.

Miller groups his topics into three sections. The first section (Chapters 1-3) deals with the technological and economic contexts from which the innovative elements of digital culture emerge. The 2nd section discusses the sociological questions of inequality, politics, privacy and how these are problematized in the information age. The 3rd section focuses on "culture" in the information society, examining identity, community and the body in relation to networked digital information technologies.

In the first section the author explores the key elements of digital media through the ideas of authors such as Lev Manovich, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard. Taking off by asserting the dynamic, active and innovative characters of the new media (which is based on the bi-directional 'internet model'), as compared with the old media (which follows the uni-directional 'broadcast model'), Miller brilliantly lays out the key elements based on three themes: the **technical process** which involves being digital, networked, interactive, hypertextual, automated and databased; the **cultural form** which involves the context, variabillity, rhizomic character and continual process; and the **immersive experience** through telepresence, virtuality and simulation.

The development of the new digital technology should be viewed in the context of the era of globalization and capitalism. Picking up the ideas of Kondratieff and Schumpeter, the author argues that innovations occur at intervals following the long waves, and surmises that the digital revolution must have occurred during the fifth long wave. He also argues that the innovations that replace the old ways are acts of "creative destructions" that "create conditions for new forms of cultural, social and economic practices." The complexity of the economic production and organizational coordination in the global, post-Fordist era calls for innovation that the development of information and communication technologies could provide. One of the most important developments of ICT is the transformation of our society into a networked society. The network society through the ICT corresponds to economic globalization and the concepts such as the 'space of flows' and 'timeless-time', coined by Manual Castells, describe the new ways of production and cultural practice in overcoming the spatio-temporal limitations. While the 'space of flows' allows for simultaneity of social practices without territorial contiguity, "timeless time" *desequentializes* social action. Accordingly, like the digital money transfer through mobile phones, the movement of money and information is "unrestricted" in the global scale. Similarly, the rise of mobile technologies enables the "networked worker" to cater to clients across the globe in different time zones, thereby enabling him to be 'always on.' Conducive to this network structure is the proliferation of 'weightless' commodities, commoditized knowledge and intellectual property.

The power of digital technology has been so pervasive that we are now moving toward convergence. Being an integral part of the information society and

digital culture, convergence gathers together various materials, strategies and organizational structures to facilitate marketing in a globalized economy and provide new forms of media experience. Miller describes *technological convergence* as the movement of almost all media and information to digital electronic formats, e.g., from analogue to digital and networking of different media devices. The *regulatory convergence* refers to the deregulatory strategy in the media and telecommunication industries adopted by the governments of many industrial economies since the mid-1990s, e.g., the Telecommunications Act in 1996 in the US, which abolished barriers to expand to other related industry. The *media industry convergence* becomes the trend of many media and telecom industries characterized by merger and expansion (horizontal and vertical). Due to the creation of converged media industries a new form of media experience comes to the fore. This forms the *convergence of media culture*, which blurs the distinction between producer and consumer. For instance the term 'produsage' captures the idea that the product is 'prodused' in a networked communal environment and where such product is not finished product owned and controlled by an author, but communally owned, unfinished 'processes.'

The second section examines the sociological issue of digital inequality, privacy and information politics, subversion and cyber warfare. The digital divide, within the context of broader social and economic inequalities, is just one more way of being marginalized in contemporary culture. It involves more than just a question of 'access' and 'technology'; it also involves skills, motivation and actual constructive uses of technology. The more intense issue that accompanies the rise of information technology is privacy and surveillance. The concept of privacy involves the notions of solitude and autonomy. Surveillance is an act that can affect, both extrinsically and intrinsically, the exercise of the right to privacy. Our increasing use of and dependence on digital communication technologies have led to greater sophistication of the surveillance system that is utilized not only by the government but more so by the private corporations. Thus the goals of collection of information of persons are not only control and security, but also commercial and organizational strategies. The extrinsic and intrinsic effects of hypersurveillance lead to what others called digital panopticism.

The development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) coincides or jives largely with the decline of public participation in the mainstream political parties and the individualism that is getting more manifested by people. New social movements have emergeed and they comprise the wide variety of entities, including social interest organizations, non-governmental organizations activist groups, single-issue campaigns and coalition, and civic networks. Their emergence and sustained existence draw support largely from ICTs. Castell's description of a network society provides good view of how politics are virtually ICT-enabled. New social movements (NSM) and even ideological

parties like the Zapatistas can utilize ICT to improve visibility, strengthen organization and mobilization. People brought to certain level of awareness, coordination and mobilization through the use of ICT - the cellphones and internet (e.g., facebook) - could be formed into "smart mobs". The best example of which is the People Power II in the Philippines in January 2001. In reaction to the collapse of the impeachment trial of President Joseph Estrada, as many as million people, receiving and forwarding text messages on mobile phones, gathered at one major site of the capital, Manila. "Such large scale display of antipathy towards the president was one reason that he resigned four days later." Activism in the information society takes the form of digital disobedience and *hacktivism*.

Networked ICTs have an ambivalent liberating potential in the sense that through its decentralized communication system, power can be distributed to its nodes (individuals), but can also concentrate it by way of effective information gathering, profiling and surveillance. So, the Janus-faced nature of information technology suggests that the relationship between the society and IT in the future is still undeterminable.

The third part the book dwells on identity, community and the body. Theories on online identity relate with different forms of self-presentation available in digital media. The post-structuralist view of identity relates with the decentered nature of online identity. However, there is also a trend that shows the re-centring of the individual. The personal webpages that become common practice in late 1990s, provide the argument that "the 'identity' is still indeed grounded in embodied, offline life and that web users generally had a desire to maintain a coherent sense of identity in the online sphere." Miller exemplifies cybersex as a new form of intimacy reflexively revealing the value of online identity formation. He mentions intimacy, self-esteem and satisfaction, infidelity and adultery. He also mentions studies that concern about online pornography, sex addiction and sexual 'marketplace;' however he does not elaborate significantly on them.

The notion of community in relation to networked ICTs may be deemed ambiguous due to the understanding that community is related to specific spatial context in which face-to-face interaction dominates. Instead, what is now becoming apparent is what Dijk calls 'networked individuals,' helped in no small way by online communication and increased mobility. Through microblogging, email, text messaging, mobile phones, and wireless technologies, people keep in touch with others; but in the process technologies often 'stand in' for real people who maintain only a 'connected presence.' Furthermore, language is viewed as a means of communication whose main aim is to cultivate sustained relationships through *acknowledgment*. However this 'fragile' role of language leads to what is called a 'phatic' communication where a communicative gesture does not inform or exchange any meaningful information or facts about the world. The purpose of

phatic exchange is to maintain sociability, but lacking in meaningful informational content.

Finally, the discussion focuses on the issue most propounded by posthumanists. Post-humanism is concerned with the problem of the body and its present and future relationship with technology. Its main streams of thought are: cyborg constructions, extropianism and technological embodiment (or bioinformationalism). Overall, based on the assumption that human thinking is analogous to computer program, posthumanism advances the idea that the future of human being is to go beyond being human by incorporating the power of machine (computer) both physically and mentally. This could be the most exciting issue in information technology if only because it sounds fictional and we know how what once considered a fiction before now becomes a reality. Without expressly countering the posthumanist view the book presents a view of the relationship of technology, embodiment and the view of man as *'homo faber.'* This last section, citing the phenomenologically-inspired approach of Don Ihde, presents the hermeneutic view that holds that tool-making and tool-using are integral part of what humans do when they are being humans. The main point in this discussion is that "it is through technological embodiment relations that humans exist in and perceive the world around them." By using the mobile phones, human persons achieve intimacy with them as they themselves alter the persons' sense of being in the world through these embodiment and hermeneutic relations.

Though understandably not exhaustive, the book presents a wholistic and incisive sociological, and also phenomenological, study of the digital culture. While it deals with culture, one exclusion is the lack of mention of religion and religious beliefs. The author gathers extensive key sources and has organized them well to build his discussions and arguments, but does not create strong contrast even between those views that are opposite to each other. He is not definitively conclusive in some occasions when he presents several positions without defeating one or the others. The book does not overcrowd with plenty of specific technological examples, which is prudent considering they often easily become obsolete in a short time.

Department of Philosophy, University of Santo Tomas, Philippines