Understanding digital cultures

Jack Qiu & Brian D. Loader

Published online: 20 Oct 2015.

Submit your article to this journal ⬧

Article views: 910

View related articles ⬧

View Crossmark data ⬧

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

INTRODUCTION

Understanding digital cultures

We live in a world of rapid cultural turns and even more rapid technological change. So rapid that few researchers could do justice to the ephemeral phenomena of transforming digital cultures. It was with this observation that we decided to organize a conference in Hong Kong entitled 'Understanding global digital cultures'. The eight articles that comprise this special issue arose from more than 50 submissions we received for that conference, which took place in April 2015. It would have been impossible without generous sponsorship from the Worldwide Universities Network, the Faculty of Social Science and the School of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. We selected the papers based on their excellent content presented at the conference, the follow-up reviews and feedback, and as a result, each paper was fully revised.

We take an inclusive approach to 'understanding digital cultures' beyond any single discipline or research tradition, while avoiding the usual focus on privileged social groups in advanced economies. Yet this does not mean we take whatever is on offer and call it 'culture'. Rather, as the articles in this special issue demonstrate, despite their methodological differences – from quantitative questionnaire survey and qualitative case study to digital methods and online ethnography – there are at least four connective tissues that help tie together the eclectic scholarship from different parts of the world, which is, after all, a reflection of diversity in both academia and the world of things digital.

First, at *information, Communication & Society* (*iCS*) we understand that there is always a political dimension in cultural formations, which is often expressed most intensively, creatively, and consequentially, through social movement action. The 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, like versions of Occupy on other continents, was one such moment when digitally equipped citizens rose up to challenge the dominant powers. But exactly how did the digital media usage patterns among protesters relate to their modes of social movement participation? Francis Lee and Joseph Chan address this question rigorously using their onsite survey data, which complements while also informing interesting dialogue with existing studies of digital media and Occupy movements around the world.

Analysing two incidents of contentious politics among the Indigenous people of Australia, Tanja Dreher approaches the same question of political power and participation through digital media but from a very different viewpoint, focusing more on the policy-making authorities. Like Lee and Chan, Dreher does not equate technological diffusion with better democracy. Extending concepts of voice, expression, and mediatization, she provides an imperative critique against the discourse of digital political participation. Yes, there are indeed more opportunities for Indigenous media in cyberspace. But that does not necessarily mean politicians would listen to Indigenous voices, especially if they are voices of dissent.

One factor Dreher identifies is the persistent role of mainstream mass media, which does not disappear with the spread of digital technologies. The new connections between traditional media and Internet and mobile communication channels are a second dimension of the digital cultures that we are trying to grasp. Some old cultures do decline. But others survive. Still others thrive and become cornerstones of new digital formations such as the two Italian radio stations discussed in Bonini and Massarelli's article. With an explicit aim to re-energize audience studies in a digital era, this article presents an interesting and ambitious study that deploys social network analysis and some of the latest digital methods *a la* Richard Rogers in analysing Twitter communication among two rather distinct publics of radio listeners.

On a similar note, Denemark and Chubb examine how traditional media and Internet usage shape the political opinion of Chinese citizens differently with regard to a prolonged territorial dispute between Japan and China. Using survey data from five Chinese metropolis, they demonstrate how online media facilitate the expression of more diverse opinions among Chinese netizens. Yet, it is erroneous to ignore the impact of state-controlled mass media. In theory, digital cultures may foster cosmopolitan 'citizens of the world'. But in practice, in countries such as China, it is at least equally likely for digital media users to fall back into the old shafts of nationalism, racism, and xenophobia. This is part of the cultural reality we have to confront as well.

Thirdly, social divisions such as age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability continue to be reflected through digital cultures. Using representative survey data from Finland, Taipale scrutinizes the differences in Internet usage patterns not only between the so-called digital immigrants and digital natives but also among the first- and second-generation users within the digital natives population. He found that the differentiation among generations is most manifest when it comes to the use of synchronous versus asynchronous digital services, the latter of which is also highly gendered with significant policy implications for information management.

In their article, Corneliussen and Prøitz focus upon the intersectionalities of age and gender, as well as rural–urban inequality, when they examine the Norwegian Kids Code initiative that teaches rural children coding/programming skills through play activities. Their approach is poststructuralist with feminist perspectives of critique. Demonstrating gender imbalances at the code club as well as the diverging viewpoints of children, volunteers, parents, and instructors, this study makes clear recommendations on ways to foster more inclusive and egalitarian digital cultures for future generations beyond the teaching of technical skills.

The fourth aspect to emphasize is the emerging nature of digital (sub)cultures, a hallmark that can be traced back to the very beginning of computer clubs many decades ago. Digital cultures enable alternative business models, even clandestine societies, in ways unimaginable in the not-too-distant analogue past. One prime example is crowdsourcing, which has gained much currency among IT professionals and certain segments of the general public. The most famous crowdsourcing platform is probably Kickstarter, which is the main subject of analysis in Davidson and Poor's contribution to this special issue. Looking into four categories of Kickstarter projects, this article develops a model trying to predict whether or not a creator would launch a second project on Kickstarter, which is likely to apply in the cases of similar crowdsourcing platforms.

Maddox's digital ethnography study exposes a defunct cryptomarket in the 'dark web' where illegal drug dealing took place. Analysed through the concepts of prefigurative politics and constructive activism, the choice of this illicit online subcultural community is peculiar and provocative, evoking memories of the earliest computer subcultures being closely associated with anarchy, cyber-libertarianism, and other forms of radical politics. This is, however, far from a utopian world as we can see from Maddox's in-depth analysis of the discursive practices of the members, their strong internal friction, and ultimate closure of the cryptomarket.

Social movements and political cultures; mass media, digital media, and cultural publics; internal differentiations of age and gender; emerging (sub)cultures – these are the four threads that connect the eight articles of this 'understanding digital cultures' *iCS* special issue. Whilst not encompassing all aspects of digital culture, we believe that it is very likely that these dimensions will continue to shape the debates, opportunities and challenges presented by digital media communication. It is our hope that you will enjoy reading and engaging with these articles as much as we have benefited from their presentation in Hong Kong.

Jack Qiu and Brian D. Loader