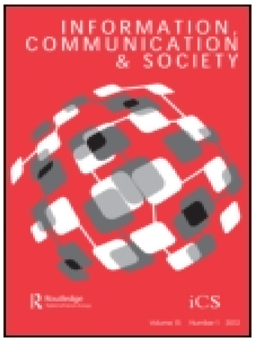

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Digital methods

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historical contingency, asking pertinent questions of his approach to freedom and revolutionary action.

Following the philosophical engagement with Žižek in Part 2, the essays in Part 3 attempt to demonstrate the wide application of Žižekian thought in quantum physics, media studies, ecology and post-colonialism. But far from being limited to these topics, what the authors in fact achieve is a demonstration of the utility of Žižek's theory to illuminate some of the pressing issues in contemporary society. With their vibrant and eclectic reading of his theory, what the authors of *Žižek now* demonstrate best about 'Žižekian' thought is its complete applicability to social theoretical investigation.

After reading this book, I felt like I had never had a clearer understanding of Žižek's philosophy. In fact, the experience of reading *Žižek now* could itself be expressed in Žižekian: because one's 'history' of reading his work is retroactively altered in the 'act' of reading it (thereby demonstrating the contingency of past understanding on the present 'act' of reading of the book). The authors excel in 'spelling out' Žižek's finer points without sounding condescending or overly simplistic. However, I nonetheless think it is a pity that even after we learn in the acknowledgements that Žižek supported and collaborated on the project, his own concluding chapter is not actually a meeting with the well-made criticisms in the text. Rather than arguing against or clarifying certain potential limitations of his theory (as he has done elsewhere, such as the fantastic *Contingency, hegemony, universality* (2000, Verso) with Butler and Laclau), instead we only get Žižek producing an essay on Hegel, containing ideas that can be found in some of his other more recent work (such as *Less Than Nothing*, 2012, Verso).

Having said that, the other essays more than outshine this drawback, and *Žižek now* consistently allows the reader to truly get to grips with 'the most prolific and widely read philosopher of our time' (2013, p. 1) allowing his theory to be met critically and therefore making it more applicable to contemporary social theoretical research. This is not just a book for newcomers to Žižek's thinking – although it would serve this role perfectly – but also I think a book for both those who have a fleeting knowledge of his work and want to flesh out their understanding, *as well as* those who are familiar with his work and want to recap some of his main interventions.

Žižek can provide social theory with a renewed impetus to question the status quo and take a different (parallax) view on society. His defining attribute – which I believe, if taken seriously, could radicalise the social sciences – is in considering the conditions of *impossibility*, and, as Khader argues in the introduction, 'it is in this new field of (im)possibilities that Žižek's work opens up for us that we should seize this Žižekian moment, now or never' (2013, p. 14).

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Digital methods, by Richard Rogers, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2013, 274 pp., US$35.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-262-01883-8

This book sets out a detailed account of the ways in which 'digital objects' – the hyperlinks, updates, tweets, hashtags, likes, comments, platforms, searches, tags, status updates and so on that are an intrinsic part of the software of the internet and the activities of its users – may be analysed. Richard Rogers is the director of the Digital Methods Summer Schools held each year in Amsterdam and the Digital Methods Initiative website. He states from the opening sentence that he is not setting out to provide a toolbox of techniques for analysing digital media (and indeed there are now several books by other authors that perform this function). This book is not designed as an introductory textbook, but rather presents a collection of previously published accounts of Rogers' and colleagues' research, setting forth detailed accounts of how the research projects were undertaken and their findings.

Rogers has been a central figure in promoting the idea that web culture has its own ontology that is distinct from as well as related to other sites of sociality. His expressed aim for this book is to explain how the 'natively digital' elements of Web 2.0, or its pre-existing features written for a particular system (as opposed to material that has been rendered into digital form following its initial creation), can provide insights in the social, cultural and political aspects of online use. These features, he contends, can be repurposed and combined in new ways for social research.

Here, the internet is positioned as a site of research in its own right, and the ways in which people use the internet are viewed as demonstrable through the records of digital data archives. Thus, for example, search engines such as Google Search and Bing possess what Rogers (p. 97) refers to as 'algorithmic authority' and act as 'socio-epistemological machines': they exert power over what sources are considered important and relevant. From this perspective, the results that eventuate from search engine queries are viewed not solely as 'information', but are social data that are indicative of power relations. These investigations can reveal how topics, events, organizations and individuals achieve prominence in public debates and framings of some issues over others and how social relationships and power relationships are constituted and maintained.

Rogers' approach might be characterized as part of the literature evident in the 'software turn' in digital social research. Unlike the type of internet research that dominated in the 1990s and early 2000s, where surveys, interviews and ethnographic observations sought to study elements of the user experience, this approach to digital methods focuses on digital data and the architecture of the web to address a different dimension of web use. Underpinning this research is the idea, rapidly gaining acceptance among digital media researchers, that software is not only a part of but also actively configures social life.

Rogers uses the term 'web epistemology' to describe how the internet constructs knowledges on topics and gives priority to certain views over others as part of users' interactions with it. A crucial dimension of web epistemology as laid out by the author is the awareness that the experience of internet use is different for each user now that searches and hyperlinks are customized for each individual based on the archiving and algorithmic manipulation of her or his previous searches. As a result, search engine results are 'co-authored by the engine and the user'; or in other words 'the results you receive are partly of your own making' (p. 9). The types of digital methods advocated by Rogers therefore bring together a focus on both the user and the software, viewing them as a digital assemblage of content creation and re-creation.

Rogers is also interested in tracing the history of internet sites, including cultural change as it occurs over time on these sites, and the methods that can be employed to do so. Thus, for example, he and his colleagues made a collection of Iraqi websites stretching back to some years to determine the types of information that had been available on Iraqi society that differed from official government accounts. They also compared Wikipedia articles on the fall of Srebrenica, the Srebrenica massacre and the related genocide written in Dutch, Serbian and Bosnian. They examined the edit history of these articles over six years as outlined on the entry pages and the sources used as a means of tracing the political nature of knowledge generation and manipulation on Wikipedia. Such genealogies of websites are important ways of tracking and identifying how issues come to the fore, whose voices are given prominence and which individuals, political parties or organizations are ignored or censored.

This book, in the wealth of details it provides on the studies Rogers and colleagues have carried out, will appeal to those researchers who are interested in the specific type of approach they employ. These readers will no doubt find the book a source of inspiration, while other readers may become bogged down in the detail. Nonetheless, this is an important and groundbreaking book for several reasons. Rogers' overarching argument, as outlined above, is integral for a broader conceptualization of what digital social research should attempt to achieve. Rogers' research provides a much-needed perspective that goes beyond the often UK/US-centric focus that digital scholarship published in English provides.

The realization I was left with after reading the book, above all, was that of the sheer scope and size of what lies before digital social researchers who are interested in how users and digital objects mutually constitute each other, the politics of software and the historiography of the web.

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The Digital Rights Movement: the role of technology in subverting digital copyright, by Hector Postigo, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2012, 248 pp., $32.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-262-01795-4

Hector Postigo's *The Digital Rights Movement: The role of technology in subverting digital copyright* presents a commonly raised debate concerning the scope of copyright and the narrowing of fair use; it is a story of control and contest over cultural production. Postigo concentrates his critique of US copyright law through the prism of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) 1998. This legislation introduced punitive measures for transgressing systems for digital right management (DRM) and access control and pitted rights holders against consumers, hackers and scholars mobilized via various social movement organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation and ad hoc online communities founded around various causes. There is an ongoing contest between copyright and fair use, between content producers and content consumers, but as Postigo points out, consumption trends have changed due to digital technologies, and 'Technology speaks a certain kind of language about cultural production – a participatory ethos and its politics' (p. 177).

The first half of *The Digital Rights Movement* offers a detailed analysis of the history and politics of the DMCA, presenting a process that, at the behest of private corporate interests, largely