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Presentation

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Digital technologies are powerful catalysts of cultural change—this is a trivial observation in our present circumstances. The past decade has seen cultural innovation on a massive scale, from the virtualization of group networks and social identities to the digital convergence of text and audiovisual media. Although it is tempting to see technological change as an independent driver of this process, there is powerful reciprocity at work: New technologies take hold only in the context of accompanying cultural innovation as their latent possibilities are explored. This interdependence means that technologies are not merely received but, through processes of adoption, socially defined and, eventually, socially embedded in new collective and institutional practices. Social construction, in turn, feeds back into processes of technical innovation, shaping research priorities and design. In the end there is no simple causality: no chickens, no eggs.

Although this observation has deep roots in technology and media scholarship, the creative dimension of these sociotechnical encounters has not always been readily visible. A post-WWII generation of media scholarship, especially, consolidated around the idea that sociotechnical encounters ran one way: that the culture that mattered was mass culture, and that the media technologies that defined it were tools for controlling information and opinion.¹ Such perspectives were grounded in early experiences with the broadcast media, which privileged—even if they never fully realized—a model of centralized production and “passive” consumption that cast individuals as consumers, rather than as participants in culture or as citizens. By the 1980s and 1990s, a newer generation of scholarship had rehabilitated these sociotechnical encounters on a number of fronts, finding creative dimensions in reader and audience experience, in unpredictable user and consumer appropriation, and ultimately in challenges to the broader instrumental terms in which we think about the boundaries between persons and technological artifacts.

Today, such perspectives are increasingly mainstream, grounded not primarily in academic theory but in new, online, large-scale collaborative practices. In a few short years, open source software production and social Internet applications like Napster, Wikipedia, and YouTube have created digital media communities with millions of participants, for whom sharp distinctions between production, distribution, and consumption no longer map to everyday experience. Such platforms, in turn, have become touchstones for a wave of accounts of digital culture that emphasize its participatory dynamics

and, sometimes as a corollary, the obsolescence or at least discomfiture of older cultural industries. This perspective shift has been sharpened by the seemingly endless series of high-profile conflicts between new and old cultural intermediaries: YouTube versus media companies, Wikipedia versus traditional encyclopedias, Napster (or Grokster or iTunes) versus the recording companies, or Google versus publishers, to name only a few. These conflicts have highlighted the social and legal construction of digital culture in ways that, for older technologies, were comparatively settled or slow moving. In a few short years the convergence of experiential critique, institutional conflict, and new intellectual entrepreneurship has fostered an explicit and often contentious public debate about the organization of culture and the nature of cultural authority in the digital era. This book is part of that debate.

Because legal conflicts between new and old culture industries receive a lot of media attention, and because their outcomes can have sudden impacts on user communities, it has become conventional to view these as the main dramas in digital culture. But legal battles are, almost by definition, the most condensed and formalized moments of cultural change. There are vast new areas of social practice, creativity, and subjectivity that rarely cross the threshold of visibility to law, or that are oblique to it in important respects—the everyday practices of community making in online worlds provide an example, or the role that search engines play in organizing human experience. Others reside in the gray areas where law lacks effective or (sometimes) conceptual reach, such as the vast transnational copy culture that shadows global media.

This diversity of practices is magnified by the global diversity of cultures and states. Cultural change is never frictionless, uniform, or isolated in its effects. In contrast to some early views of the social impact of information technology, we do not live in an increasingly smooth, homogenized global digital culture, but rather in a lumpy one that facilitates some kinds of mobility, social networking, and representations of the world while marginalizing others. No one would dispute, for example, that electronic communication has brought the privileged citizens of global cities into closer contact. But its impact on the social distance between financial districts and poor neighborhoods *within* cities is less clear. No one doubts that search engines provide powerful new representations of the world that allow people to leverage more information than before, but those representations also compete with and transform other social technologies for visualizing, navigating, and

understanding the world, from the local library to the spatial concentration of commercial districts. Digital technologies are powerful forces of *deterri-territorialization*—of disembedding knowledge and culture from existing institutions, practices, and geographies—but they are also tools of continuous social and political *reterritorialization*, as borders are redrawn, new institutions and structures emerge, and new forms of control are established.

Structures of Participation in Digital Culture does not offer a singular account of this process, but rather a collective (and inevitably diverse) effort to bring these patterns, roles, forms of power, and opportunities for creative practice into sharper focus. The book's title emphasizes our shared view that the contemporary role of research is not just to assert or rehearse the new forms of cultural agency, but also to understand their production at the intersection of changing institutions, practices, and forms of subjectivity—to analyze their underlying “structures of participation,” in other words. Our focus on practices—on the things people do with and in relation to new technologies—provides an empirical contribution to discussions that are often dominated by legal and technology scholarship and by their disciplinary strengths and weaknesses. Our volume offers a shift in perspective, not avoiding law and technology but displacing them so that we can see other features of our rapidly changing digital culture.

In our volume, this terrain includes emergent forms of personal agency and authority, from our changing relationship with the digitally mediated past, to the expanded scale of interpersonal networks, to the emergence of new systems of trust and credentialization. It includes new powers for surveillance and for tacit, system-level control of behavior exercised by corporate actors and states. It includes the roles that different technical architectures play in conditioning and distributing these new forms of power, authority, and sociability. It requires, finally, attention to the differential effects of flows of information, culture, and technology around the world, as these interact with patterns of structural inequality and distinctive social histories. The interplay between these registers is the recurrent subject of this volume—its central and enormously rich sociotechnical encounter.

The volume is loosely divided into three sections dedicated, respectively, to (1) looking at digital convergence as a process that transforms history, subjectivity, and global media flows; (2) exploring the richness and complexity of user practices in relation to the new social technologies; and (3) reconnecting these themes to questions of law, technical architectures,

and corporate power. The volume is further divided into “dialogues” between several of the longer chapters and shorter companion pieces. The short pieces offer counterpoints to or, more often, recontextualizations of the themes in the longer chapters, designed to deepen and extend our collective inquiry. More than just a record of this conversation, the pairings reflect the authors’ commitment to a pluralistic and interdisciplinary form of inquiry into digital culture, and to the testing of problems across different geographies, perspectives, and methods.

Part I, “Alternative Geographies,” offers a different set of starting points for a conversation about digital culture and emerging cultural intermediaries. The first two contributions, by Geoffrey C. Bowker (Chapter 2) and Gregory Crane (Chapter 3), explore the effects of what Bowker calls “the databasing of the world” on our relationship to the personal and collective past. Bowker asks what happens as databases introduce a “regime of memory” that is more flexible and comprehensive than that of the era of paper records. He characterizes this new regime as the era of “potential” memory—of a ubiquitous, constantly expanding, and infinitely configurable archive divorced from the spatially-anchored technologies of museums, libraries, or monuments—so many *lieux de mémoire*. Crane draws out two further consequences of this deterritorialization: the diffusion of the library back into its spatial referents, as location-based technologies permit the historical record to be remapped onto places themselves, and the (complementary) growth of responsive learning tools (talking books) that can maximize our finite capacities to search and experience the human record.

Ravi Sundaram (Chapter 4) and Brian Larkin (Chapter 5) transpose this concept of a virtualized culture archive to contexts in which the modernist social compact and its technological ambitions no longer hold—here India and Nigeria, but by extension many other developing world settings as well. They describe the fraying of a social and political order rooted in a narrative of modernization and rationalization of urban life. In these contexts, digital culture signifies neither high-bandwidth networks nor ubiquitous digital services but rather the continuous circulation and transformation of media, especially through nonlegal networks. Piracy is a fluid and often irrelevant distinction in this larger scene of copying, borrowing, remixing, and remaking cultural goods—of “copy culture,” in Sundaram’s terms. Sundaram and Larkin explore these dynamics in detail, from the social practices that shape this economy, to the way local industries play both sides of the moral dichot-

omy of ownership, to the role pirate infrastructures play in enabling “licit” market development.

Mizuko Ito’s contribution (Chapter 6) opens Part II, “Public Lives of Users,” which focuses on ethnographic accounts of emergent sociotechnical practices. Her chapter relocates the theme of recombinant media practices and global cultural flows to the context of global media products like the children’s cartoon/card game *Yu-Gi-Oh!* (and its analogs, *Pokémon* and *Digimon*). *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is a *media mix*, that is, a product shaped by carefully orchestrated deployment across many media types: comics, card games, cartoons, video games, movies, and so on. Ito’s chapter focuses on the practices of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* players and collectors—primarily Japanese children—as their own systems of circulation and valuation diverge from those of *Yu-Gi-Oh!*’s corporate owners. For Ito, the ability of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* collectors to scale these practices into sizable subcultures and alternative commodity economies is the sign of a new condition of *hypersociality*, produced at the intersection of childhood, commodity capitalism, and communication technologies.

T. L. Taylor (Chapter 7) extends this reflection on the changing conditions of “play” by examining the two-way interaction between game players and game designers in computer gaming cultures. Increasingly, the game play is just one instance of a larger set of participatory practices that run from massive player participation in the production and testing of games, to “modding” and other forms of player production of game content, to ongoing forms of player community commentary, documentation, and derivative media. We are still in the early stages of this new integrated commodity form, in which play has been reconverted into labor but also vested with new creative power. The question of who owns or controls this player production, and to what extent, is a fundamental one for Taylor and for this volume.

danah boyd (Chapter 8) explores another story of play and (lost) control—in this case in the context of the online social networking tool Friendster. Friendster was developed initially as a dating service but rapidly evolved into a platform for a wide variety of identity practices and performances among early-adopter groups. Unlike the “magic circle” of games, which traditionally posit a separate world as a condition of play, Friendster and other social networking tools try to map real-world social relationships in ways that extend users’ capacities to visualize and manage social networks. In practice, boyd argues, tools like Friendster achieve this only by radically flattening the textures of social worlds and by reducing the capacities of participants to set,

recognize, and navigate social boundaries. Efforts by users to reintroduce these forms of texture, and by the designers to control the range of user behaviors, provoked a conflict that undermined the positive, self-reinforcing Friendster dynamic as rapidly as it had emerged.

Friendster's sudden popularity is an example of "contagious media," to use the term that Jonah Peretti (Chapter 9) introduces here—media spread primarily through interpersonal networks, via email, file sharing, and other distributed communication channels. Contagious media successfully exploit the "power law" characteristics of networks—their capacity for exponential growth. In a typical social network, one person has connections to many others, and each of those persons is connected to many more. Information can spread very rapidly through such a system. The fact that this process depends on the behavior of the nodes themselves (in social networks, on voluntary communication between individuals) is one of the reasons why networks have gained currency as a way of talking about publics. The history and utility of this analogy is the subject of Warren Sack's contribution (Chapter 10).

Shay David (Chapter 11) takes up a different set of problems associated with social software and large-scale, open-ended online communities: specifically, the challenge of legitimating knowledge produced within such communities, both for the community members themselves and in relation to external, often more traditional, sources of authority. Although questions about the reliability of Wikipedia have drawn the most recent attention to these issues within self-organizing knowledge communities, Wikipedia is only one of a number of new digitally mediated models of knowledge production, authority, and community. David's chapter works toward a typology of these models as well as a broader account of the transformation of knowledge production as educational institutions, especially, lose their monopoly on processes of credentialization and the production of expertise.

Robert F. Nideffer's contribution (Chapter 12) opens Part III, "Corporate Architectures." These chapters resituate earlier accounts of creative practice within a discussion of technical systems and culture industry agendas. Nideffer's piece explores the spatialization of digital technologies from a new direction—not libraries and history, as in Crane's account, but rather games as a leading application of "ubiquitous computing." Nideffer's research terrain is marked by the diffusion of networked devices into the material environment, which is rapidly eroding the clearly demarcated experiential boundary between online and offline. The history of networked gaming

is central to this story because it is recurrently a history of exploration of new forms of sociability, with debts to a hacker ethic that privileges creative control over digital tools and the digital environment. For Nideffer open networks—networks that privilege interoperability between systems over proprietary barriers and corporate “walled gardens”—are both an ethical condition of this creative control and, increasingly, a practical requirement of ubiquitous computing. Doug Thomas (Chapter 13) picks up one of Nideffer’s main cases, the game *Diablo*, to examine a different form of transfer between the material and the virtual—the emergence of mass movements (in this case, anti-Korean xenophobia) within the game world itself.

The concluding chapters by Joe Karaganis (Chapters 14 and 16) and Tarleton Gillespie (Chapter 15) extend the argument that the growth of a user-centered concept of cultural agency has depended on both deliberate and serendipitous conditions of open networking and imperfect control. Karaganis first discusses the dependence of the major culture industries on tightly controlled commodity chains, and the threat to these commodity chains posed by open networks and general-purpose computing. He focuses on the corporate consensus about the need to reinvent basic principles of networked computing in order to secure culture as an industrial commodity. Gillespie examines the almost limitless potential for price discrimination as this more controlled environment enables detailed customer surveillance and preference tracking. In Chapter 16, Karaganis looks specifically at the technologies of this emerging cultural order, from filtering, to digital rights management, to the more ambitious effort to lock down the networked environment known as “trusted computing.”

Digital culture, in our account, is not just about new forms of collaboration or about corporate control, although these features are central. It is also about the transformation of what it means to be a person or a cultural actor located within a vast and growing reservoir of media, data, computational power, and communicative possibilities. Of these aspects, communication may be the most familiar dimension and the easiest one to study and understand. In contrast, we have fewer tools and models for understanding the power of databases, network representations, filtering techniques, and other new architectures of agency and control. We have fewer accounts of how these new capacities transform our shared cultures, our understanding of them, and our capacities to act within them. Advancing this account is the goal of this volume.

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notes

- 1 This position is identified most strongly with the Frankfurt School theorists of mass culture, but visible more generally in the vast literature on “media effects.”

