# Reviews

Emerging Practices in Cyberculture and Social Networking. Daniel Riha and Anna Maj (eds.) Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2010, 195 pages, no indication of price, ISBN: 978-90-420-3082-4, English.

In the field of new media studies and digital anthropology, research is constantly 'on the run' because of the development of new technologies, and it often finds itself surpassed by the emergence of new tools and realities that undermine most recent findings. Moreover, technological developments in their turn depend upon their use because it is through everyday practices of users that they continue to function or become obsolete. It is in this social and technological context of rapidly aging research, that the volume *Emerging Practices in Cyberculture and Social Networking* sets itself the humble task of exploring present challenges, and – with the progress of technological development and human appropriation of technology – one day to 'become the record of our times, interesting from anthropological or archeological reasons' (p. x).
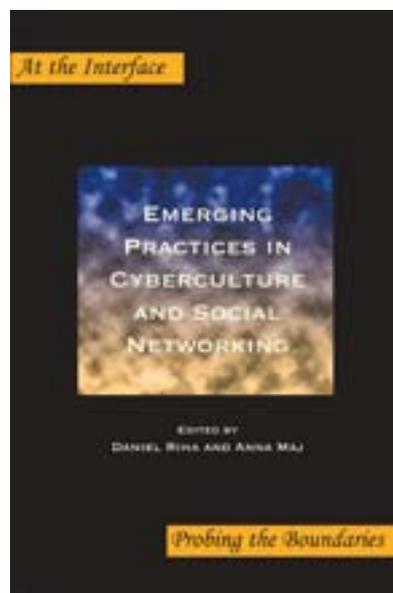
The book is divided into four parts: 1) Access, Power, and Social Marginalisation in Cybersulture; 2) Cyber-Governance, Cyber-Communities, Cyber-Bodies; 3) New Concepts in Education and Entertainment; and 4) Web 2.0 and Social Networking. The articles in the volume address a variety of research problems, for example, the question of access, which is treated through the prism of the 'digital divide' but also through the 'competence gap'; viral marketing and, hence, viral politics; the democratizing potential of new communication tools; online communities; and the ways in which young people use Web 2.0 to construct identities and build their social capital. In the introduction, the editors define cyberculture as a 'contemporary dominating cultural paradigm' (p.vii), and ten articles in the volume present the results of topical research in the field, which is situated at the intersection of 'philosophy, psychology, sociology, cultural ,media and game studies, IT studies, engineering, design and law' (p.vii).

The articles included in the volume will be presented here in three groups, each addressing a common theme: a) the potential of new media for democratization and the question of accessibility; b) the formation of online communities; c) game studies, gaming experience and its application in the learning process.

Nils Gustafsson's 'This Time it's Personal: Social Networks, Viral Politics and Identity Management' explores political implications of communicating on social networking sites and ideas of viral marketing/viral sharing as utilised in the spread of political news and discussions. The practice of viral sharing transforms the concept of audiences of mass media, by creating the feeling that news or advice comes from somebody you know and trust, and thus the receiver is no longer an anonymous part of a larger audience, but is involved in a network of personal ties. In the political domain, this communicative style could have more impact on commitment and could incite political action. The author introduces the notion of temporal elites as 'a partly novel group of highly skilled people in the network society' (p.11) who become influential thanks to viral politics. Gustafsson compares this notion to Robert Putnam's classical model of political stratification and to Karl Deutsch's concept of the 'opinion cascade' (Putnam 1976: 8-15). These temporal elites might have only limited influence in a specific field or at a given moment. Their effectiveness and impact on policy outcomes, as the author claims, is highly unpredictable. A study of Swedish *Facebook* users and their engagement in political events is cited in support of these claims. The notion of temporal elites, as well as of viral politics, might explain the changes in the democratic process, provoked by small groups of unorganized activists.

Anna Maj and Mihai Derda-Novakowski address the issue of accessibility in their article entitled 'Anthropology of Accessibility: Further Reflections on the Perceptual Problems of Human-Computer Interactions'. In the tradition of McLuhan, the authors claim that technological tools are extensions of mind and body. For people without disabilities, the result is augmented perception; for people with disabilities, specifically designed interfaces reduce the perceptual deficiency and provide sensory substitution (p.36).

A different approach to political effects of social networking is taken in the article by Christina Neumayer, Celina Raffle and Robert M. Bichler, entitled 'Politics and Social Software: Recommendations for Inclusive ICTs'. The authors provide a comprehensive review of literature, including the contributions in the volume, on the debates around four major topics: community building in cyberspace, the real-virtual divide, digital inequalities and the global virtual sphere. The discussion of these areas of research concludes with the assumptions that 'global use of ICTs for political participation, social movements and political activism needs alternative concepts that foster cooperation on a global scale, as well as empowered citizens in the real space' (p.52).

One of the issues, raised in Neumayer, Raffle and Bichler's artciles, namely that the virtual and the real need not be regarded as two distinct realms, finds corroboration in Donata Marletta's article 'Hybrid Communities to Digital Art Festivals: From Online Discussion to Offline Gatherings'. Though online communities are undoubtedly an example of 'the appearance of new forms of virtual social ties' (p.87), there is a complex interplay between online and offline, the author claims, when 'moments of attachment' experienced online and virtual belongings become face-to-face interactions and infuse our experience of the real. After a detailed review of literature on online communities, the author concludes that there is 'a clear need among participants to meet face-to-face, during scheduled or more spontaneous meetings' (p.89), and documents this hypothesis using examples of two digital art communities—Rhizome and <nettime>—and five real-life festivals—Mutek and Elektra, Ars Electronica, Transmediale and Club Transmediale—where people, who have been previously in contact

online, meet face-to-face; 'the planet could be seen as simultaneously connected through wires and through people' (p.90).

One of the most interesting articles in the volume is devoted to youth culture and the ways in which they connect through digital technology to construct identities, experiment with romantic relationships and enhance social capital ('Youth Connecting Online: From Chat Rooms to Social Networking Sites' by Natalia Waechter, Kaveri Subrahmanyam, Stephanie M.Reich and Guadalupe Espinoza). Two cases are presented in a comparative perspective: the use of chat rooms by the 14-16 year old living in Vienna and Los Angelis; and the use of social network sites by college students, aged 19-28, based at the Department of Psychology of the UCLA. The first case, based upon qualitative data collected through participant observation and analysis of chat room discussions, demonstrates how teenagers experiment with flirting and addresses two major challenges: identity building and the presentation of self in online environment, and development of intimacy through online connections with potential romantic partners. The conclusions are that these are short-lived connections that rarely surpass the threshold of face-to-face meetings. The second case uses quantitative data collected through (paper-and-pencil and online) survey with 110 colleges students. The findings of this second survey revealed that young people's online and offline social networks overlap, that communication via social networking sites affects offline relationships (especially causing troubles with romantic partners), and that profiles in SNS, same as interactions in chat rooms, provide opportunities for exploring identity building and the presentation of self.

Another group of four articles deals with the experience of participating in online simulation games (virtual worlds), or using machinima in different learning environments. Two of the articles are more theoretical. Melissa de Zwart and David Lindsay's article 'Governance and the Global Metaverse' treats issues of regulating virtual worlds. It addresses the questions of governance and control under specific legal acts, such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, or the EULA/Terms of Service contracted by the end users. The other theoretical article—'Playing Games as an Art Experience: How Videogames Produce Meaning Through Narrative and Play' by Jef Folkerts—compares the experience of gaming to the aesthetic experience; the argument is based on an analysis of the role playing game *Fable, The Lost Chapters*. The two other articles in this group are empirical studies and deal with applications of gaming and machinima for information gathering and learning. Daniel Riha's 'The 3-D Virtual Library as a Value-Added Library Service' presents a technology that creates a virtual 3-D library, where information resources can be accessed with the help of a virtual librarian or other simulated figures, thus transforming the process of information gathering into a gaming experience. Theodoros Thomas' 'Learning New Literacies Through Machinima' describes a university course that uses *The Movies* game engine for the creation of student films, thus developing basic skills of participatory culture (Jenkins 2005).

The last chapter in the book provides a subtle ethnographic insight into the lived experience of users suffering from eating disorder (Chand Somaiah's 'Cybergrace Among Eating Disorder Survivors in Singapore'). The stories of seven 'survivors', as the author chooses to name them, are presented to illustrate the problems of marginality, of spoiled identity and self-censorship, and of opening up. In the beginning, the study addresses ethical issues of online ethnography and reveals the researcher's consideration about the 'survivors'. It also broadens

the horizon of the studies in the volume from the Euro-American context to another part of the globe.

To conclude, the book is rich in theoretical perspectives as well as in discussions of practical applications of digital technologies. It addresses key issues, such as the enhancement of grassroots activism, accessibility by people with special needs, digital natives and their experience of identity building and social ties, the complex relationship between virtual and real, where virtual can be both online and/or simulated. Though the book starts by setting itself the humble task of being 'a record of our times' (p. x), it achieves more by formulating the concept of 'the temporal elites' (p.11), exploring gaming experience, providing detailed accounts of young people's use of SNS, and entering the highly sensitive and difficult terrain of treating psycho-somatic disorders. In doing so, the book demonstrates the huge potential of the concept of 'cyberculture', which is still 'vivid, paradoxical and hybrid' (p.x). In the past, the trend was to focus research on specific domains or fields of study, and integrate studies of online communication into the studies of political, professional or everyday leisure practices (offline), thus creating a myriad of research cases and fields of study and progressively abandoning all-encompassing concepts like 'cyberculture'. The book demonstrates the actuality of such a synthetic approach, though it may seem outdated. 'But cyberculture will never become old; it will rather disappear or evolve to a different form of culture'(p.x).

Works cited:

Jenkins, Henry et al. (2005) *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. Available at: <http://mitpress.mit.edu/books/full_pdfs/confronting_the_challenges.pdf>, 02.03.2012.

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