Grant Bollmer, **Inhuman Networks: Social Media and the Archaeology of Connection**, New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016, 275 pp., $39.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
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Grant Bollmer's book, *Inhuman Networks: Social Media and the Archaeology of Connection*, proposes an analysis of an evanescent object, alternately termed a "utopian project" (p. 97), a "dream" (p. 117), an "ideology" (p. 231), and a "set of assumptions" (p. 178), about the proper ways for citizens to behave in a connected world. It reconstructs this from professional publications, texts of technological prophets, popular culture (especially movies), and also the work of fellow academics, some of whom would be surprised to be described as servants of said ideology (e.g., Castells, reduced to a "popular interpretation of social complexity as the 'wisdom of the crowd,'" p. 225). I will use the term "ideology," which the author qualifies, reminding us that "ideologies are real" (p. 231), express themselves, and are expression in social organizations. However, as the book is about discourse(s), the term "ideology" seems appropriate.
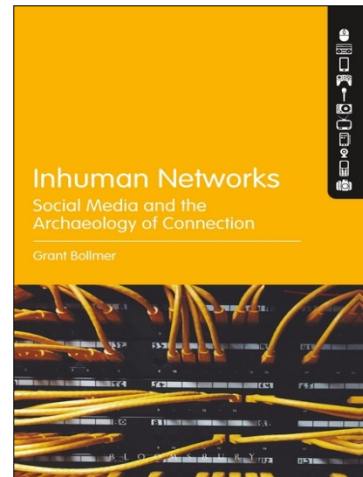
Despite the presence of the phrase "social media" in the subtitle, the book is not about Facebook or Twitter. Bollmer "expands the meaning of the term" in order to draw "our attention to how a specific apparatus often serves as a material and metaphorical model for countless other assumptions about proper social relations and well-governed subjects" (p. 15). In other words, social media "should refer not to a technology, but a context and conjuncture" (p. 178). The author does not really explain how we can move from the technology (itself not clearly defined) to the contemporary context for which it provides a "material and metaphorical model."

The first part traces various uses of the notion of network, starting from the 19th century, in three chapters about biology, society, and economics. The chapter on society is the most ambitious, trying to integrate the rise of technological networks—the railway, the telegraph—with that of "threatening networks" of Communists and Jews in the 19th century, suggesting that "from the very possibility of social connectivity through technology proceed an unimaginable threat to individual autonomy" (p. 47). The chapter on economics starts from the Great Depression as a key moment, as "disconnection apparently led to the Great Depression." This would have led to a praise of (banking) networks for ensuring a continuous flow of money (as illustrated by an analysis of two of Frank Capra's movies). The "coda" to the first part makes the link between the different networks, which eventually united "under the supposed universal of information as implemented in the network of networks which is the Internet" (p. 175).

The second part leaves history and analyzes how "data and information, not human beings, are the privileged actors on social media" (p. 175). The first chapter deals with death, or rather his negation as personal data can "live forever" on social media; the second deals with work that can be performed by data

independently of humans; and the third and final one analyzes how identity has to be performed online with a correspondence with offline identity (which actually reintroduces a disciplining of actual human beings and shows that the ideology reconstructed by Bollmer may not be that coherent).

The third part proposes to move "beyond social media," to a further stage, an "aftermath of neoliberalism," in which the very possibility of constituting the "social" and the "political" is "transferred to technological tools assumed to function better than humans" (p. 203). This evolution is supposed to derive from the fact that nodal citizens may behave as "bad citizens" who do not use connectivity as they should (the epidemiology of obesity providing the major illustration). As elsewhere in the book, the passive voice ("the very possibility . . . is transferred"), leaves us curious about the agents who perform such a transfer: the tech giants, the media industry?

The book offers interesting comparisons and analyses of textual material (especially filmic), but it suffers from weaknesses, mainly a lack of focus and a wobbly theoretical basis. The term "network," which the title of part one grandly claims to be "the other of Western modernity," is used in various ways, with a kind of strange nominalism, as if tracing the variegated uses of a word is enough for reconstructing a whole coherent ideology (or even only a perspective). At some points the discussion of the network ideology seems to be conflated with the imperative to connect through means of communication (which the author insists upon) but this is not the same as connecting *through a network* (and especially a digital, global network). As we know, "the notion that communication, exchange, motion bring to humanity enlightenment and progress, and that isolation and disconnection are the obstacles to be overcome on this course, is as old as the modern age" (Schivelbusch, 2014, p. 197).

The specificity of the network (versus connection) is mentioned only in passing, for example when the author proposes (without elaborating): "Networks, while ostensibly non hierarchical, produce a hierarchy based on a subject's willingness to connect and flow" (p. 157). The link with neoliberalism is alluded to, but overall, we see the author's networks grow and converge in an almost autonomous manner. Books who tackle the relations between capitalism and the digital world more directly offer a stronger analysis, if less ambitious and more limited in time scope (e.g., Fisher [2010] or Griziotti [2018]).

Within communication studies, the book belongs to the historical and (mainly) philosophical essay genre. It claims to diverge "from much research on social media, the claims of which often depend on social scientific methodologies and anthropocentric epistemologies" (p. 161). However, the author's thesis could have benefited from much "social scientific" research. For example, the notion of "ambient presence" online proposed by anthropologist (horresco referens?) Madianou (2016) could have, among many, enriched the discussion of the "nodal citizen."

Bollmer's frame is media archeology, more precisely the Foucauldian version of this approach (see Natale, 2012, for the various branches of this field). There is a problem with this, however. For Foucault (1972), "archeological comparison does not have a unifying but a diversifying effect" (p. 159). Tracing the history of a specific notion (like the network), in an (even involuntarily) teleological manner, with a very "unifying effect," is quite un-Foucauldian. Foucault invites us not to look for any historical roots or origins

or precedents of a notion or a phenomenon, but for considerable "systems of transformation." This the reader will not find in *Inhuman Networks*.

What the book does confirm is that the polysemic notion of network has become central to various disciplines, way beyond media studies, whether it is used as a tool or criticized as an ideology or, simply, as a confusing term. As Borgatti and Halgin (2011) write in *Organization Science*: "Publications referencing 'social networks' have been increasing exponentially over time. The interest in networks spans all of the social sciences and is rising even faster in physics, epidemiology" (p. 1168), with a considerable interest in management, too. For all this, there exists "a considerable confusion" (p. 1168) about the notion. Here, *Inhuman Networks* reflects a trend, at least as much as it offers some tools for understanding this trend.

References

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