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Mercedes Bunz and Graham Meikle, **The Internet of Things**, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018, 192 pp., $22.95 (paperback).

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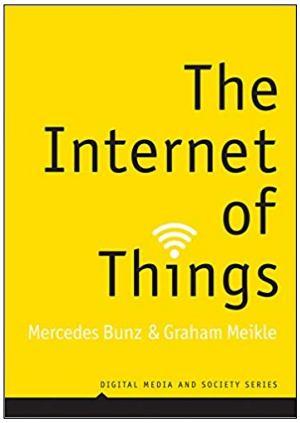

The capacity for "things," nonhuman objects, to sense, speak, see, track, and circulate information—that is, communicate—brings with it an abundance of new complexities that administer the increasingly ambiguous relations between humans and things. In ***The Internet of Things***, Mercedes Bunz and Graham Meikle address these intricacies brought forth by the Internet of things with the central question, "Who benefits?" (p. 125). The authors examine how objects equipped with sensors and network addresses are able to make meaning and circulate recorded information independent of users' intentions (chapters 1 and 2). They also historicize conversational technologies such as Siri and Alexa in philosophical debates of the human voice as a defining quality of "humanness," thereby bringing attention to the ways certain agendas can be advanced and existing discourses can be congealed through the successful and persuasive anthropomorphizing of things (chapter 3). And finally, in their most compelling chapters (4 and 5), the authors unpack the built-in politics of things that gain agency with their ability to see and track—"Whose reality gets technically assisted and whose gets ignored?" (p. 88). Employing methods of historical analysis and critical discourse analysis, the book thus not only provides a robust historical account of the Internet of things but also critically scrutinizes the power relations that police the enterprise.

Despite the accessible and composed tone in which Bunz and Meikle deliver their argument, their stance toward the increasing capacity for things to sense is unambiguously anxious and critical. For instance, in speaking of Fitbit, the popular wearable technology advertised to help with tracking health performance, they write:

> The user's entire life is enacted in a kind of neoliberal gymscape, in which both sleeping and drinking glasses of water become target driven KPIs [key performance indicators], while sitting and walking become spreadsheet rows to be targeted and monitored, tracked and analyzed. (pp. 106–107)

By understanding data as not something that is used by users to assist in their everyday lives, but rather as active agents that regulate them, the authors draw upon Foucauldian concepts of "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1988). In this way, they enlist into the faction of contemporary media scholars such as Lupton (2016) and Nafus (2016), who are concerned with the quantified self and the increasing potential for data to be employed as a disciplinary mechanism. Furthermore, as its critique of Fitbit indicates, the book also consistently operates within a critical framework that understands the enacting forces of capitalism and neoliberalism as systems that invest in the creation of such data-producing technologies and thus also push their own ideological agendas through those technologies. In so doing, the authors dabble between

the notions of technologies as autonomous agents, albeit without intent (p. 21), and as political tools that are predisposed with systematic incentives in their various affordances.

Elaborating further on the politics of things, Bunz and Meikle also draw directly from Stuart Hall's (1997) understanding of media representations in elaborating upon the importance of media recognition (p. 69). By bringing our attention to historical examples such as Hewlett-Packard's Media Smart computers failing to recognize Black faces (p. 89) or the Google Photos app that successfully tagged White people as humans but mistook Black people for gorillas (p. 90), the authors also engage with critical race theory and voice their concerns over technologies that further crystallize racist discourses. They respond to the Google and HP cases: "By not optimizing their visual technologies for black skin tones, they indirectly declared them irrelevant" (p. 91).

The strengths of Bunz and Meikle's book are thus explicit. There is a lucid thoroughness with which they dissect this technological phenomenon, for which they temporarily give the "transitional name" (p. 24), "the Internet of things," via critical methods and theories. They make sure to acknowledge the progressive possibilities of networked sensing things, but they are still hesitant about adopting an overly democratic and sanguine attitude toward them. This positionality is appropriately supported through their engagement with capitalist and neoliberal critique, critical race theory, and epistemological concerns raised in fields such as cultural studies, all of which shed light on the problematic complications that arise not only from the increasing datafication of our world but also from the increasing personification of data. Despite these many salient positives, there are still segments of the book that could benefit from more detailed elaborations.

One such aspect in which *The Internet of Things* comes relatively short is its surprising lack of engagement with discussions that center around posthumanism and disability. What does it mean to be human in a world that increasingly renders our technologically unmediated bodies insufficient? The authors write that "humans have believed their direction-giving assistants more than their own eyes" (p. 63), shedding light on our deepening reluctance to believe our own technologically unmediated senses, as we increasingly relegate our sensory capacities to technological assistants. The authors persuasively develop this argument in the direction of the intelligent machine, but their work could also benefit from including a discussion around the disabled human. How does the GPS navigation system create the conditions for human blindness? If we are in the age of the cyborg, as Haraway (1991) champions, and "communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies" (p. 164), what becomes of the noncybernetic human? Can we still exist as a noncyborg? Is the age of the cyborg concurrently an age of human disability? Similar to the way in which the disability scholar Jonathan Sterne (2003) historicizes the stethoscope as constructing the conditions for "mediate auscultation" (p. 102), which simultaneously both transformed the possibilities of examining the body and also rendered our bare ears deaf to newly audible and crucial bodily sounds, the authors' discussion of the increasingly reflexive relationship between the corporeal human body and the Internet of things might also be enriched when explored through the lens of disability.

That being said, the lack of engagement with disability studies and posthumanism does not take away from Bunz and Meikle's otherwise profoundly rigorous historical and theoretical grounding of this ever-salient topic in *The Internet of Things*. Here, I borrow the driving question that the authors ask to conclude

my own review: "Who benefits" (p. 125) from reading this book? For the academically inclined, the book hinges its argument both on robust theoretical frameworks with a particular focus on critical theory, unpacking the inherent politics that underlie our technologies, as well as rigorous methodological examinations primarily employing the tools provided by historical analysis and critical discourse analysis. Thus, scholars broadly working within the fields of critical information studies, communication technologies, cultural studies, digital media and society, political economy in the digital era, critical race studies, surveillance studies, and cultural history, among others, would find the arguments in *The Internet of Things* particularly useful. For the general public, the accessible language in which the arguments are conveyed allows anyone who is interested in the changing technological landscape, and thus also the world, to acquire a more lucid understanding of what it means to live in such an environment.

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