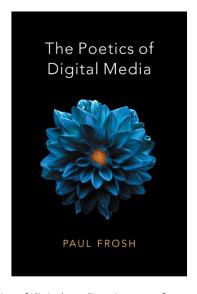Paul Frosh, **The Poetics of Digital Media**, Medford, MA: Polity, 2019, 240 pp., $24.95 (paperback).

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The usual connotation of *poetic* implies beauty, elegance, and artfulness that, at first glance, might seem to be a rare thing in the digital media landscape of 2019. But in his densely theoretical volume, **The Poetics of Digital Media**, Paul Frosh distinguishes the aesthetic form and practice of poetry from the generalizable world-making function of poetics that it performs. It is this latter definition that underlies Frosh's exploration of the subject, drawing from the work of scholars ranging from Aristotle to Roman Jakobson, as he states, "[media] perform poesis; they bring forth worlds into presence, producing and revealing them" (p. 1). While this concept may not be an especially novel one for media studies (see, for example, Hepp & Krotz, 2014), the book's framing of that process aligns it more closely with the everyday flourishes of language that, like poetry, entail or allude to other experiential worlds. Frosh uses two primary devices to illustrate this quality of digital media: vignettes from his own life and close readings of commonplace digital moments that exemplify the poetic. He incorporates these into a theoretical framework with the potential to be applied to any medium—although some of his examples come together more cleanly than the others.

Frosh has an engaging writing style that sometimes conflicts with the complexity of the ideas he conveys; more lyrical phrases propel the reader forward, only for a particularly tricky sentence to stop them short. Almost every page is rich with theoretical threads and citations, yet Frosh manages to deftly weave them together. A few key ideas appear in the first two chapters and repeat throughout the book: the roles of attention and indifference, the contrast between world construction and disclosure, and above all the argument that digital media have caused "the radical intensification and extension of the possibilities for witnessing . . . which implicate[s] us more than ever in the companionship of strangers" (pp. 32–33). Frosh lays out the foundations of this phenomenon and traces the production of linked personal experience through a wide-ranging history of (primarily visual) media. The evolution of media consumption and ways of viewing the world reflect the ebb and flow of inattention that he is concerned with; rather than focus on the affordances of media, what they can enable, the author outlines their poetic operations, that is, what they actually enact.

At the book's core are four individual case studies. In chapter 3, Frosh begins with screenshots, pointing out that they "aspire, so to speak, to the photographic condition—linguistically, sensuously, and taxonomically" (p. 74), using the lexicon of photography to show how they borrow from some of that older medium's discursive authority. The screenshot becomes a documentary "proof" of some event that crosses the user's screen; it creates a free-floating, well-defined portal that reflects the lifeworld of the producer. (A screenshot of Donald Trump's infamous "covfefe" tweet serves as the entry point to this discussion.)

Chapter 4, in turn, explores the "tag" as a poetic practice. With every iteration, it reinforces the association between name and visible body, producing and disclosing a world where an individual is ever more constrained into the image of him- or herself. Frosh does not directly address the potential for these practices to act as a form of control or self-censorship, as Marwick and boyd (2011) do in their work on context collapse. He seems to be more concerned with the construction of knowledge that follows from them, and their implications for his theory of poetics. Yet the subtext is still there when he poses questions like, "Why privilege reduction *to* the name rather than propagation and proliferation [of identities] *from* the name?" (p. 106). Social networks, of course, have yet to fully answer.

Frosh turns to the selfie in chapter 5, arguing that its existence is more a product of the smartphone than the network, generating a new photographic code of angles, framing, and embodiment. Here, his examination of how media *in toto* are captured by and incorporated into discourse becomes more critical, such as when he mentions Chouliaraki's (2017) work on migrant "arrival selfies." Like tagging, selfies have become a universal practice, but the permission to take them and the context that surrounds them are loaded with meaning. This higher level consideration of media transitions into chapter 6's focus on the "interface," considered in terms of standard graphic user interfaces (GUIs), but also through an installation project that displays holographic interviews with Holocaust survivors. Frosh returns here to the strongest expression of his point about attention: When media disclose worlds, they foment witnessing to different degrees. If digital media's mechanical affordances are complemented by social affordances (Parks, 2011), they can be further enriched by moral affordances, for "witnessing involves the transformation of experience into discourse for others" (p. 145). The book concludes with a return to the first two chapters' heavy theory, but overlaid with this sense of urgency and responsibility that arcs through the remaining chapters.

Much as the density of Frosh's theories can sometimes get lost in the reader's enjoyment of his style, his attempt to link the examples to broader social concerns is somewhat lost in the theories. Still, it is a noble effort; in truth, the book would probably benefit from being significantly longer, to more fully articulate the ideas, situate each medium, and give room to some of the truly virtuosic turns of phrase. At one point, Frosh describes how tags "[wrap] symbolic and figural flesh onto informational bones" (p. 112). He may want to minimize the usual aesthetic connotation of poetics, but there's a missed opportunity for him to show off its impact through his own writing. The extensive bibliography—roughly 400 works drawn from various disciplines, in a book whose main text is not quite 200 pages—means that it is sometimes difficult to parse where other theorists' ideas end and Frosh's begin. For example, his ideas of attention versus inattention, and the digital reformulation of photography, seem to owe a lot to Bolter and Grusin's (2000) ideas on hypermediacy, immediacy, and remediation, yet they only receive a single citation. There are also a few lacunae that deserve some attention, such as the discussions of embodiment (particularly with relation to smartphones) that assume a contestable level of access and ability (compare with Goggin, 2017).

The absence of more complicated cases and counterexamples is certainly noticeable. However, this poetic reconsideration of digital media serves as a starting point for other investigations, not the final commentary. How does the popularity of the FOMO (fear of missing out) acronym or #tbt (throwback Thursday) hashtag fit into Frosh's schema, with the mediated worlds they suggest? What about the mimicry/remixing potential of memes (Shifman, 2014) or, following the book's take on Twitter screenshots,

the motif of pairing contradictory tweets by individual public figures? And at the time of this review's writing, the FaceApp craze is sweeping Facebook with its popular aging algorithm, creating amusement, but also ostensibly providing its creators with improvements to facial recognition technology. This is a quintessential example of digital media producing another world, for the name tied to the digital body—yet at what cost to privacy? Frosh only briefly addresses some of the social and material issues that surround these media, in stark contrast to his optimism about the witnessing they might engender. But given the myriad platforms out there (the "manifold," to use his term), the sheer volume of content being created, and the speed with which the media landscape evolves, no doubt there will always be positive and negative moments of poesis to analyze. Frosh's contribution is a theoretical lens that applies to both, an approach to media that describes one of the fundamental aspects of what all of them are intended to do.

This book is certainly valuable for media studies scholars, but has applications for a wide variety of associated disciplines: mass communication, visual design, information science, and others. Paul Frosh tackles a huge subject—what is actually happening when information is spread through media—and the result is about as thorough as one could hope for in a single volume. While his ideas require careful reading, they are presented in an engrossing way, and the breadth of knowledge he draws on to shape them is astonishing. As researchers continue to refine their theories, they would do well to remember the poetic effects of media, and the power that function has over our perceptions of the world.

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