Leslie Haddon (Ed.), **The Contemporary Internet**, Berlin: Peter Lang Publication, 2011, 210 pp., $57.95 (hardcover).

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The Contemporary Internet is one in a series of volumes on the effects and consequences of the new communication technology. Over the last few years, COST (European Cooperation in Society & Technology) has been sponsoring international conferences to examine the uses of the new media, in particular the Internet and broadband. While these conferences generally deal with European examples, they also include research beyond Europe. The theme of this volume, the third of the series, is culture.

While the concept of culture is increasingly being challenged by anthropologists and sociologists for its vagueness and broadness, no other term can capture the need to refer to notions of value and meaning encountered in everyday life, from representations and identities to practices and material goods. It seems that contemporary life is characterized by an excess of meaning even if most of us can make little sense of it. The global condition and the new communication technology exacerbate this paradoxical situation, where culture is a free-floating signifier rather than located in concrete and meaningful experiences. This volume examines how the new communication technology is embedded, entwined, and intercalated within cultural factors in various European countries.

Editor Leslie Haddon does an excellent job of contextualizing the diverse articles by pointing out how, in significant ways, these are all related to cultural norms. For example, there seems to be less concern in the mainstream media about the dangers of child pornography in Nordic countries. There may be several reasons for this relative lack of concern, but it may also be related to a more tolerant Nordic attitude toward sexuality. Certain national cultures such as the Netherlands, with its emphasis on individual expression, may encourage more creative and generative uses of broadband services than might a society like Spain, with its greater emphasis on collective interactions and media-consumerist practices. These differences in the uses of the new media indicate that cultural factors affect how the new communication technology is described in the mainstream media, adopted by particular users, and developed by appropriate agencies.

To claim that culture is significant for the use of the new technology is not to deny other equally significant factors such as education, class, gender, age, and even politics. Haddon points out that structural factors such as the so-called digital divide often conflate cultural and noncultural elements, making the concept too porous for explanatory purposes. Moreover, spatial, technical, and cognitive factors also determine access to the new media. Hence, rural areas may be disadvantaged over urban
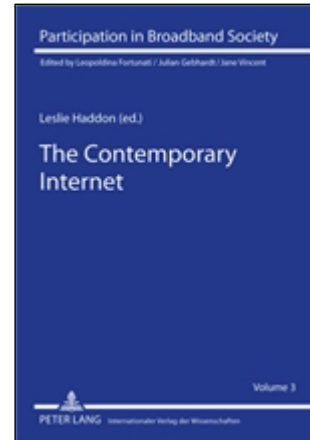
centers in that only dial-up (instead of broadband) services may be available in certain areas while advanced and creative uses of the technology are only possible if users are appropriately skilled. As others have pointed out, the use of the new communication technology depends not only on the material infrastructure available but also on motivational elements of which culture is a significant factor. Finally, to properly identify what determines the use and development of the new media, comparative studies both within and outside Europe are necessary. While this volume only covers the European experience, sufficient indicators are provided that can easily be compared with countries outside Europe.

The book then moves on to discuss particular cases. Chapter 2 details how young Italians are increasingly mixing or combining the new with the older media, generating particular cross-media convergences. The Italian experience illustrates how the youth, while using the new media in creative ways, are often primarily concerned with building up or consolidating personal relationships. In later chapters, we discover how persistent their enthusiasm must be, given the relative low speeds available to these youth. Older Italian users may not be so interested in exploiting the possibilities of the new media, attending to other priorities in their free time.

Chapter 3 looks at how the adoption of Web 2.0 is related to cultural or national elements. This capacity to receive and transmit large information packages lends itself to more creative uses, often encouraging a cultural efflorescence. This cultural usage depends on factors such as trust, individual preferences, global orientations, social openness, and other cultural norms favoring creativity and experimentation. The chapter compares countries such as the Netherlands, with a strong element of social exploration, to others such as France, which favors cultural consumption or Spain, with its preference of intense interpersonal relations. All of these cultural factors affect the use and participation in the broadband media.

Chapter 4 changes focus and examines how the mainstream media report and comment on the use of communication technology. The importance of the older media, while complemented by the new technology, retains its basic importance. Thus, its treatment of the new media is crucial in influencing the latter's use and development. Others have earlier noted how the mainstream media generate attitudes toward technological innovation, moral panic, or the risks for children. While most of the countries examined here share basic approaches to reporting on the Internet, some such as the UK reveal a strong commercial endorsement of the new media. This example illustrates the difficulty of isolating cultural from structural factors.

Chapter 5 deals with technical factors that affect the quality and speed of Internet access. This raises the issue of the digital divide—what differences in Internet use are due to such technical factors as the speed of uploading and downloading files, videos, or music. While no longer concerned with whether users have access to the Internet, the shift now refers to the quality of access. This quality varies in different European countries, even within countries and at different times. Hence, quality of access may also determine user practices, whether one mostly downloads files or shares videos and music in various social networks. For example, both Switzerland and Germany allow Internet users to accomplish online practices in half the time that it would take users in Austria or Italy to do so. This difference in access

discourages symmetric exchanges between users in high- and low-speed countries. The chapter alerts readers to important noncultural or structural factors affecting internet practices.

Chapter 6 continues the discussion of the digital divide in reference to narrow and broadband access. This divide may indeed refer to broader processes of social exclusion such as wealth, location, or skills and may indeed be compounded by unequal access to the new communication technology. Those with better quality access to the new media often also use it more creatively. They produce as much as they consume new media—from being mere consumers, they become "prosumers." The chapter presents data from a range of European countries, such as the UK and Cyprus. But these national comparisons are often problematic, as they do not always measure the same thing. Hence, the UK has among the highest number of Internet users, including those with broadband, but using the Internet to make phone calls in the UK is much less common than it is in Portugal, despite that country's lower Internet access. Moreover, comparisons are risky because many factors enter into determining Internet use. Thus, Cyprus and Ireland have among the lowest participation in web page creation, but have higher rates of participation in other Internet practices, such as phone calls or file sharing. The only reliable general conclusion one can make about the narrow versus broadband divide is that the latter use the Internet for more varied purposes. Whether this is the cause or the consequence of new media infrastructure investment requires further research.

Chapter 7 continues the discussion on the nature of the digital divide. As some, including Oakley in this volume, have argued, 'The Digital Divide is not digital; it's the social and economic divide which is reinforced by technologies that exacerbate the potential to exclude people" (p. 142). This issue is raised in relation to e-government.

Given existing inequalities, does e-government alleviate or accentuate these inequalities? Should governments initially address the fundamental causes of inequality before embarking on making e-access essential for government services? For those with ready access and necessary skills in using the Internet, e-government is certainly advantageous. Most European governments now provide extensive services and information online, and, in some cases, they even make it difficult for people to access these services by visiting relevant agencies. While the benefits of the computerization of data and administrative structures is now beyond doubt—except for cases of excessive surveillance and power failures—the question of e-government will remain contentious until the sources of basic inequalities are seriously addressed. Often, governments use the provision of online services as an excuse to reduce face-to-face interactions. The chapter deals with both the advantages and disadvantages of e-government. Given the earlier discussions about the digital divide, one must be cautious in accepting the rhetoric of e-government. Presently, only a minority of people extensively use online government services even if this percentage may be expected to increase. More interestingly, the development of 2.0 e-government, with its capacity for virtual worlds based on Second Life, opens challenging opportunities for e-democracy. But one hopes that these realities will not be limited to virtual worlds.

Chapter 8 deals most directly with a conventional understanding of culture, in this case, music. While advances in data transmission have made information virtually limitless, the easy availability of music and other entertainment genres since the advent of Web 2.0 has made a qualitative leap from

earlier days. While music remains a commodity easily purchased online, the new media has transformed this commodity into a service. As Vieira writes in this volume,

> After coming to the London School of Economics for my study visit I worried about bringing with me "some" music. I looked at my iTunes. Roughly 16GB of music. This is equivalent to 40 days of non-stop music playing in a small and portable laptop or digital player. Is that enough? . . . But I also know that if I am in the mood for a particular listening experience that I do not currently have on my hard disk, I can almost certainly access it easily and quickly online. (Haddon, p. 155)

What earlier might have been a collection of vinyl records, cassettes, or compact disks is now replaced by an online service. This dematerialization of culture is appropriate for music, as well as for other expressions of identity. What initially required copresence for music to be experienced has gradually been replaced by an experience that can be reproduced anywhere, anytime, and all the time. The chapter mainly discusses how music 2.0 is accessed in Portugal, where the youth are particularly central to its circulation. As in earlier examples, access to this service depends on Internet skills, as well as on broadband speed, indicating that as often as technology makes certain practices possible, it also precludes those who are unable to harness the technology.

The last two chapters are primarily concerned with methodological issues related to broad comparative studies. Chapter 9 discusses the issue of large comparative studies such as EU Kids Online, covering 27 countries. The new technologies invite cross-country studies, but the noncommensurability of primary data often makes these comparisons problematic. Just because national data are available, such as Internet participation rates, does not mean that they measure the same thing. Chapter 10, the concluding chapter, raises similar questions in relation to the digital divide. Much data referring to this divide are not necessarily comparable; if they are, the time span of their collection may vary. Changes in the technology, as well as rapid adoption rates, often make measurements of the digital divide difficult to properly assess. Further quantitative, qualitative, or ethnographic studies need to be conducted to understand the true meaning of the differential access to the new technology and its consequences for social inclusion.

The Contemporary Internet is a useful addition to the growing literature on the impact and significant of the new communication technology. While much of the information in its chapters may be brief—consider their origins as conference presentations—the broad coverage and extensive reference list give the interested reader sufficient material for further research. Haddon has done well in choosing the chapters and presenting its results in a coherent form. The volume is recommended for both undergraduate and general readership.