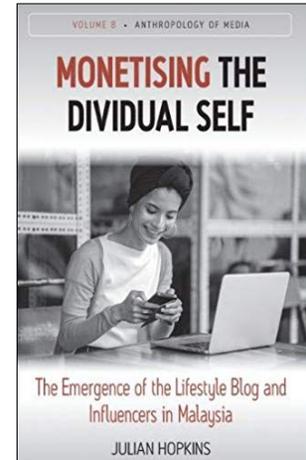


Julian Hopkins, **Monetizing the Dividual Self: The Emergence of the Lifestyle Blog and Influencers in Malaysia**, New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2019, 221 pp., \$90.00 (hardcover).

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The figure of “the influencer” has become ubiquitous on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, which have emerged as sites where users construct and perform “the self” as entrepreneurial subjects through their knowledge and authority of a range of lifestyles and interests. There are those among these users who have risen to the top of the cultural economy. Some, such as Instagram user Paris Hilton (considered one of the original influencers) and Kylie Jenner (of reality TV’s Kardashian family), started their paths with the advantage of having already been famous. Others have come to prominence largely on their own accord, such as the controversial PewDiePie, a Swedish influencer who has earned millions by uploading recordings to YouTube of himself playing video games.



Beyond these high-profile users, influencer identifications and practices have been diffused throughout the online environment to include those who marketing specialists have deemed “micro-influencers” and “nano-influencers.” In contrast to the “macro-influencers” cited above, users in these categories are ordinary people who use their personal accounts to promote brands and create brand networks. They act as grassroots entrepreneurs by developing their own brands, those of their peers, or brands that are looking for advertisement in exchange for free products, deep discounts, or cash payments.

What are the origins of these practices, and how can “influencers” be understood in relation to culture, society, technology, and the production of subjectivity? In ***Monetizing the Dividual Self: The Emergence of the Lifestyle Blog and Influencers in Malaysia***, Julian Hopkins joins Theresa Senft (2008), Crystal Abidin (2018), and a collection of interdisciplinary academics (Abidin & Brown, 2019; Archer, 2019; Dippner, 2018; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Sinanan, Graham, & Jie, 2014) in contributing to the literature focused on answering such questions about bloggers, influencers, and microcelebrities.

The introduction to *Monetizing the Dividual Self* opens with Hopkins’ explanation of how he became interested in the Malaysian blogosphere as a research site, and his anthropological approach to studying blogs and blogging as a practice through online participant observation and offline interviews at “blogmeets.” This is followed by the first chapter, which sets out the development of his theoretical framework from its beginnings in actor-network theory (ANT) and Bourdieuan field theory, and their applicability to studying blogs and their affordances, to the incorporation of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983, 1987) assemblage theory, with the latter allowing Hopkins to analyze agency as it was “distributed” in the “interaction of the textual and technical components of blogging activity” (Hopkins, 2019, pp. 26–27).

In the ensuing chapters, interpretive and qualitative analysis are deployed with “thick description” from his digital ethnography to explain the rise of personal blogs and their transformation into monetized lifestyle blogs. Within this process, Hopkins argues that “dividuals” were produced through the human-machine entanglement of blogs, bloggers, and their audiences. Marking what he saw as a shift from a Foucauldian “disciplinary society” to a digital “control society,” Deleuze (1997) proposed the flexible, ever-modulating “dividual” subject, to counter Foucault’s molded, unitary “individual” subject. For Hopkins’ dividual subjects, their “selves” were composed and recomposed through the technical affordances of the blog, the actual practice of blogging, and the bloggers’ relationships with those among their larger blogospheric network of fellow authors and readers.

Monetizing the Dividual Self offers a rich conceptual and methodological lens through which to view blogs in their cultural, social, and technological significances. The use of Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage to link ANT with an analysis of affordances permitted Hopkins to move beyond previous literature that was limited to positing the blog as an aesthetic assemblage (Sinanan, Graham, & Jie, 2014), and expand this notion to include the larger network of people and machines within specific historical, cultural, and geographic contexts. Moreover, he was able to advance a theory of the self that can help with understanding control society subjects, agency, and contemporary “influencer culture.” Therefore, this book should be appreciated for its analysis of blogs, the practice of blogging, and the construction of the self from the perspectives of media anthropology, sociology, and science and technology studies.

However, a reader may be left with some questions, specifically in relation to the economic terrain upon which the bloggers were operating and whether or not they were responding to its demands. First, along with other developing nations, Malaysia has long been restructuring its economy according to neoliberal norms and values, which requires the production of appropriate subjects (Mazumdar, 1991; Park & Lepawsky, 2011; Tedong, Grant, & Aziz, 2015). Second, Hopkins’ research was conducted during the run-up to and through the Great Recession (2007–2009). Although Malaysia was not as affected by the downturn as the countries within Europe and North America, its manufacturing sector and capital markets saw significant drops (Azrai & Zeufack, 2011). Moreover, the Asian Financial Crisis (1997–1998) had taken place only 10 years earlier and had taken a toll on the Malaysian economy (Wee, 1999).

Considering these conditions, Hopkins’ subjects were blogging in a (post-) recessionary neoliberal environment organized through structural adjustment policies. Other scholars of blogging and microcelebrity have recognized neoliberalism as governing socioeconomic rationales and practices in the activity of blog authors and Internet influencers (Archer, 2019; Bishop, 2019; Dippner, 2018). Throughout *Monetizing the Dividual Self*, those elements were bracketed out of Hopkins’ conceptualization of global capitalist deterritorialization, “particular and contingent” technical and social assemblages, and the role of these factors in the composition of subjectivity. This disconnection of the subject from the local economy was a clear result of Hopkins’ purposeful departure from Foucauldian disciplinary society and the unitary subjects that it has been thought to produce, such as *homo economicus*.

Nevertheless, this choice was not bound by theoretical constraints. As David V. Ruffalo (2008) has argued, Deleuze’s “dividual” subject is a result of the rapid global “deterritorialization of institutions” such as the school or the workplace, through which “individuals” (such as the worker or student) have been

"collapsing into each other in order to reflect the demands of neoliberalism." Addressing the recessionary contexts, Maurizio Lazzarato (2015) has invoked Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) concept of "state capitalism" to illustrate how recoveries from financial crises have been harnessed by an assemblage of central banks, the International Monetary Fund, and intergovernmental organizations to fully integrate and govern states, markets, politics, economies, societies, and capital via neoliberal constructs.

In the case of Malaysia, anthropologist Laura Elder (2015) has demonstrated how neoliberal rationales and practices have entered discourses of recovery in the wake of both the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2007–2009 Great Recession, which provides an explanation of how neoliberal policies can be understood in their application in semidemocratic states. In the final chapter of *Monetizing the Dividual Self*, Hopkins referred to his subjects as "entrepreneurs of the dividual self" and rehashed the emergence of the Malaysian blogosphere, lifestyle blogging, and monetization while reducing the bloggers' entrepreneurial practices to those that were responding to affordances and parasocial relationships, as opposed to their own place in the market, economic conditions, and needs—which are inherent to the performance of "entrepreneurialism."

These concerns aside, *Monetizing the Dividual Self* is an insightful book that will be of interest to those across the disciplines, from media studies and communication, to philosophy, anthropology, sociology and science and technology studies. Hopkins' unique theoretical underpinnings, methodological approach, and "thick descriptive" accounts of his digital ethnography offer readers a way to grasp the quotidian techno-social composition of dividual subjectivities through self-authorship and digital interfacing within complex networks of people and machines. This work is important, as not only is the figure of the influencer a contemporary subject of economic significance, but in line with Moore's Law, the capacities for algorithmic governance will continue to become exponentially more powerful and sophisticated, leaving scholars and publics to question, once again, in the face of technological advancements, the limits of their agency in everyday life.

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