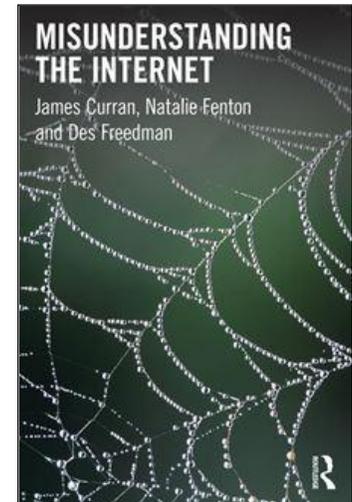


James Curran, Natalie Fenton, and Des Freedman, **Misunderstanding the Internet**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2012, 194 pp., \$30.64 (paperback).

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In contrast to much literature that celebrates the development of Internet technology and digital media as a radical revolution in economy, politics, and society, **Misunderstanding the Internet** presents a general overview of the critical perspective rooted in the research tradition of political economy of communication. Three scholars from Goldsmiths, University of London—James Curran, Natalie Fenton, and Des Freedman—go beyond the techno-optimistic approach to emphasize the economic and societal context in which the Internet operates. In their well-argued text, based on in-depth research, they suggest, skeptically, that digital media have caused only marginal changes in the communication environment, which is continuously led (mainly) by large corporations and their profit-oriented interests. Of course, many would argue against this Marxist approach, which is usually presented as “the undoubted truth” and therefore—replacing one myth by another one—falls into the same trap as the “new digital age” prophets do. Nonetheless, the book’s title offers a thought-provoking (and in this way very useful) guide to an alternative understanding of the contemporary role of the media within society, a topic that certainly should be taken into account.



The book is divided into three parts along different central topics—each written by one of the authors—with a conclusion authored by all three. In his “Overview,” James Curran first disproves various optimistic expectations associated with new ways of communication and then develops an alternative narrative of history of the Internet. According to Curran, the main mistake of all scholars who believe the Internet to be the cause of a revolutionary change is their conviction that “the internet<sup>1</sup> is the alpha and omega of all technologies, an agency that overrides all obstacles” (p. 3). On the contrary, he states that the Internet is “just another tool,” which is adapted and shaped by preexisting social relations that are determined by the distribution of power among certain segments of society.

In this interpretation, the Internet has not raised the “New Economy,” where the influence of various intermediaries diminishes, and new interconnections among suppliers, producers, and consumers are established. Curran pays attention to the contribution of the Internet to the economy as a whole, realizing that it plays just a marginal role. Moreover, instead of being composed of flourishing middle-sized or small entrepreneurships, the Internet market is characterized rather by large corporations and concentration of resources. In addition the global understanding of the Internet is challenged when the

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The authors do not capitalize the first letter of the word “Internet” in their book.

communication barrier is emphasized: There are many differences in cultures, beliefs, and interests between nations that impede international dialogue. The relation between the Internet and democracy is discussed in detail. For Curran there are many possibilities for civic activists to use the potential of the Internet to attempt to influence their governments, but these represent just one specific group of people (e.g., low income groups are less politically active online). To add more: "[A]n enhanced ability to communicate at low cost should not be equated with being heard" (p. 14). Curran also doubts the idea of the renaissance of journalism, stating that the overwhelming majority of journalistic work remains connected with the "old" media structures and that the loss of advertising revenues increases competitive pressures on newsrooms and leads to tabloidization of news production.

This reevaluation of the role of the Internet in contemporary society is supplemented by a rethinking of its history. Using some examples from Arabic countries, China, and India, Curran tries to de-Westernize the traditional view. He suggests that the Internet was not developed as a communication tool for open public use. Rather it was strongly influenced by the U.S. military and academics and after them, in the 1980s, by the countercultural movement. In the early 1990s, the idea of the Internet as public service was incorporated in Berners-Lee's World Wide Web. However, for the current state of the Internet, it was its commercialization—starting in the 1980s and definitely mushrooming in the late 1990s—that played a decisive role. The Internet was transformed into a technology of mass surveillance. Personal data became the most valuable commodity with which to help target advertising and, consequently, to "sell" users to certain providers. The potential of open access movement and user-generated content is seen as limited, as is the supposed contribution of the Internet to both reduction of gender inequalities and democratization of authoritative regimes. In his analysis of the Arab uprising, Curran concludes that digital technologies contributed to better organization of dissidents, but they did not instigate these uprisings.

Focusing on political economy of digital media, Freedman starts his section of the book with an unyielding critique of the literature that celebrates the transformative power of the Web. These (as he terms it) "zeitgeist" titles prophesize fundamental changes in business, education, and socialization or public affairs conduction, creating an atmosphere of enthusiasm. In Freedman's view, there is no reason for such optimism. Of course, many "new," flexible niche-oriented and network-based enterprises emerged, but they create only one sphere of the Internet. The other, dominating one, is constituted by highly concentrated, huge corporations, whose production is based on standardization and certainty rather than on creativity. This part of the book refers the most to Marxism, mentioning Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* and their claim that every revolution of the capitalist system is made just for replication and endorsement of this system. Freedman applies the Marxist concept of unpaid labor, for instance, when noting how the work of bloggers is used by "classic" mass media for attracting audiences. He also describes the importance of concentration and accumulation even for such revolutionary-looking companies like Google or Facebook.

This revelation of anatomy of digital economy is then related to the changes in Internet regulation. Freedman focuses here on two main points. First, he follows the tendency to nongovernmentalize Internet regulation, which is supported by the argument of global character of the Net, so that it is not within the competence of national governments to set regulative rules. The problem is that the so-called independent international organizations tend to adopt the ideology of the free market

and therefore satisfy the needs of large corporations, not to mention that, in fact, they hold quite a weak position. The second object of Freedman's interest is a countermovement, that is, the governmentalization of the regulation. Citing the WikiLeaks affair in which U.S. embassy cables were compromised, Freedman remarks that the national legislature can still play a crucial role. He then suggests that regulation of digital media has to be seen as a complex issue, where state and corporate interests merge with the interests of the public, with the relationship between the public and the other two players being worryingly imbalanced.

In the last part of the book, Natalie Fenton tackles the role of social media in relation to political involvement of citizens, contrasting its exalted potential with a less brilliant reality. She points out that participation in social networks should be motivated by many different purposes, and the effort to take part in governance is only one of them. To elaborate, social networks offer a psychological impression of belonging rather than of space for serious public debate; there are also crucial differences in the use of these networks by various groups of people. Fenton describes the environment of social media as "mass self-communication," where self-presentation is at least as important a principle as is the opportunity to share information. Simultaneously, the self-promoted interests of the users are (often with their unsuspected consent) misused for commodification of their activities.

Perceiving the Internet as a part of very complex societal and political change, Fenton also discusses the role of social networks in the political fragmentation and formation of radical political movements. The era when political opposition was organized mainly along class lines and established doctrines is gone; now the affiliation to a certain group is based more on various personal beliefs. Political activism became transnational and high speed, but is it also more efficient? On the one hand, social networks increase the possibilities to create counterdiscourses; on the other hand, they do not contribute to the production of political consensus. As Fenton writes, "If there is a new politics emerging in new media it is a politics of non-representation; a politics of affect and antagonism. It includes a multiplicity of experiences that are contradictory and contingent" (p. 169).

In the conclusion of the book, the authors suggest some interventions to the functioning of the Internet that should be done to create a real "new" (and better?) society. They propose strengthening the role of the public versus the current position of private corporations and the state. Although this seems like a reasonable idea in general, the specific aims are exaggerated and half-baked, and the proposal to introduce Internet taxes is only wishful thinking.

Nevertheless, such controversial parts also make *Misunderstanding the Internet* an inspiring title that requires further reflection. It is a comprehensive introduction to political economy of the Internet and digital media. It summarizes a great volume of sources and presents them in new, sometimes unexpected contexts. Therefore, it helps to understand not only the digital communication environment but also our society as a whole.