

Jeffrey Boase, **The Digital Bind: Constant Connectivity and the Reconfiguring of Family, Work, and Friendship**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 220 pp., \$125.00 (hardcover).

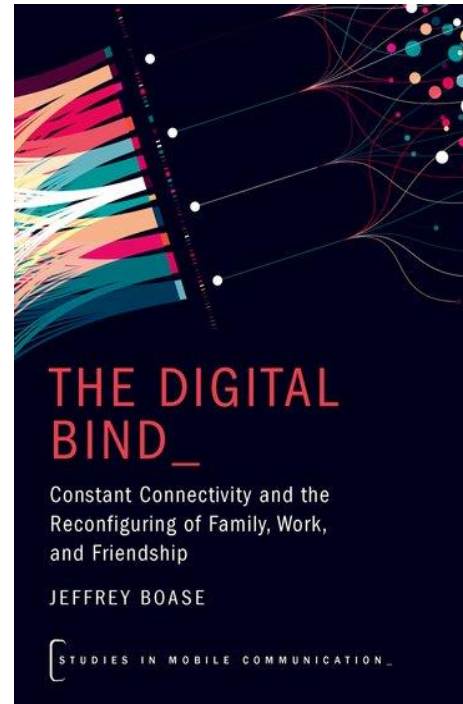
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In *The Digital Bind: Constant Connectivity and the Reconfiguring of Family, Work, and Friendship*, the author, Jeffrey Boase, argues that technology is not composed of neutral devices. Instead, it possesses a form of agency and functions as an active player in peoples' social lives. In the book, Boase writes about mobile phones or smartphones, in particular, as technology and is successful in explaining the complex relationship between technology and our social lives. Beginning with the theorization of the "configuration approach," the book effectively shows how these social and technological arrangements have moved beyond simple utility to become inseparable from human interaction.

Boase then provides a comprehensive look at how constant connectivity has moved from a convenience to a social necessity. He structures this summary of modern life around a historical look at how we reached this level of complexity and an empirical study of daily habits. By tracing the evolution of communication from industrialization to the smartphone era, he demonstrates that our digital habits, or what he calls "practices of connection" (p. 5), are not just personal choices but are forced upon us by the complex technological and social arrangements of the 21st century.

Ultimately, Boase achieves his purpose by proving that the "digital bind" is now a precondition for modern life. He notes that if our digital infrastructure fails, as seen in real-world network outages, our social and professional lives do not just slow down; they effectively stop. The book gradually shifts the focus from individual screen time to a broader systemic vulnerability. By the end, Boase leaves the reader with a sobering realization: We have woven technology so deeply into our social fabric that we have created a bind that is increasingly difficult, and perhaps almost impossible, to undo.

A significant portion of Boase's success in this book stems from a detailed historical account of how social and technological configurations have grown increasingly complex since the Industrial Revolution. He argues that the digital bind did not appear out of thin air with the invention of the iPhone. Rather, he traces a trajectory where human expectations of availability have steadily intensified. During industrialization, the separation between work and home was physically defined by the factory gates. However, as communication technologies evolved from the telegraph to the landline telephone, and finally to the "very smart" smartphone, these physical boundaries began to dissolve. Boase illustrates that each new technological



affordance added a layer of social expectation. By the 21st century, the arrangement of our lives had become so technologically dense that “unplugging” is no longer a simple personal choice, but a move that requires significant social and professional negotiation. This historical context is vital because it reframes our current digital exhaustion not as a personal failure to manage screen time but as the logical conclusion of a century-long trend toward total connectivity.

In situating *The Digital Bind* within the broader field of media ecology, Boase’s work acts as a sophisticated evolution of “Social Construction of Technology” (SCOT) (Pinch & Bijker, 1984) and “Actor-Network Theory” (ANT) (Latour, 2005). While earlier scholars like Bruno Latour argued for the agency of nonhuman objects, Boase grounds this abstract theory in the mundane, lived experiences of the 21st century. He moves beyond the technological determinism that often plagues popular critiques—the idea that smartphones simply addict us—and instead aligns with the “sociotechnical” tradition. By focusing on the configuration, he echoes the work of scholars like Manuel Castells (Castells, 2000), yet he provides a more intimate, empirical look at the household and workplace levels. Where Castells looked at the network society as a macrostructure, Boase looks at how that network feels when one is trying to decide whether to text or call a grieving friend.

The heart of the book’s empirical evidence is found in Boase’s identification of three specific practices of connection. The first, media situatedness, describes the constant mental labor individuals perform to match a social situation with the correct technological medium. If a friend is grieving, do we text, call, or leave a voice note? If a colleague is late, is an SMS more respectful of their time than a phone call? Boase argues that these are deeply social decisions made within a complex technological configuration. He points out that if we did not have so many competing media options, these social rules would not exist.

The second practice, the division of media, highlights how we use technology to perform the difficult task of social compartmentalization. Boase observes that individuals often use specific apps or platforms to keep different parts of their lives separate. For example, one might use a specific messaging app exclusively for a tight-knit group of family members while using another for professional networking or casual acquaintances. This practice reveals that the digital bind is not just about being “ON” all the time; it is about the active management of social distance. Interestingly, Boase notes that this division sometimes happens organically, meaning that we find ourselves bound to a specific platform simply because that is where our specific social ties have migrated. This practice underscores the book’s thesis that we are navigating a sociotechnical landscape where our relationships are literally mapped onto different digital infrastructures.

The third practice, the maintenance of temporal boundaries, is perhaps where the digital bind feels most restrictive. Boase describes how individuals use digital artifacts—like asynchronous text messages or voice memos—to avoid the constant interruption that constant connectivity threatens to impose. This practice is a response to a hallmark of contemporary social life where we must juggle multiple engagements simultaneously. By choosing a text over a call, we are attempting to respect a temporal boundary, yet this very act reinforces the digital bind. We are using technology to solve a problem that technology created. Boase’s empirical study shows that these boundaries are fragile and constantly negotiated, particularly when power dynamics come into play.

This brings us to one of the book's most critical interventions: the relationship between power and communicative autonomy. Boase theorizes that when we have the autonomy to freely engage in these practices of connection, the technology often fades into the background. However, tensions arise when that autonomy is stripped away. In professional environments, for instance, workers often lack the power to enforce temporal boundaries, leading to a vulnerable feeling of technology's presence as a tool of surveillance or exploitation. The same is true in family dynamics, where children may struggle to exercise autonomy from parental digital oversight. Boase argues that the tightness of the bind is directly related to one's position of power; those with less autonomy feel the weight of the digital bind much more heavily than those who can choose when to disconnect.

In the final chapters, Boase explores the long-term implications of this deep integration, suggesting that the digital and social have coevolved. Drawing on Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration, he argues that our daily practices—like checking a phone the moment it pings—continually recreate the very social structures that demand our attention. This is a "mutual binding" where humans and technologies act in unison. Boase warns that we have woven these technologies so deeply into our practices of connection that we have created a high-stakes dependency. To illustrate this, the book concludes with a sobering reflection on the fragility of our digital infrastructure, citing the 2022 telecommunications disruption in Canada. This event demonstrated that in a digitally bound society, an infrastructure failure is a total social paralysis. Banking, emergency services, and basic human coordination effectively ceased to function. Boase suggests that as climate change and global instability threaten these physical networks, our digital bind may prove to be a significant vulnerability. While it is theoretically possible to live without digital mediation, Boase argues it has become "extremely rare and impractical" (p. 188) for the majority of the population.

Overall, *The Digital Bind* is a landmark contribution because it refuses to offer simple solutions or moral panics. Instead, Jeffrey Boase provides a rigorous, multilayered account of how we reached this state of entanglement. By combining theory, history, and empirical study, he proves that technology is not a neutral addition to our lives but a fundamental reconfiguration of what it means to be social. The book serves as a vital mandate for scholars and practitioners to protect the availability and privacy of these networks, lest the digital bind become too tight to bear. It is an essential read for anyone seeking to understand the complex, messy, and inseparable relationship between the gadgets in our pockets and the people in our lives.

### References

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