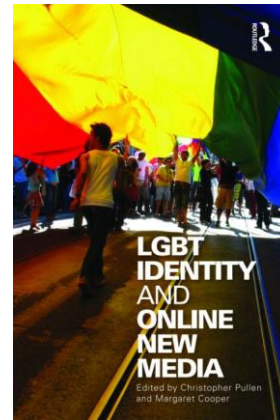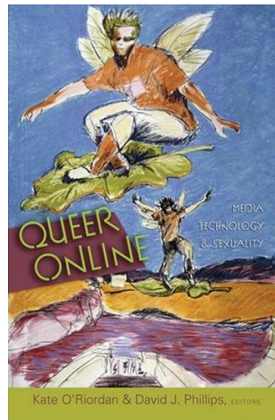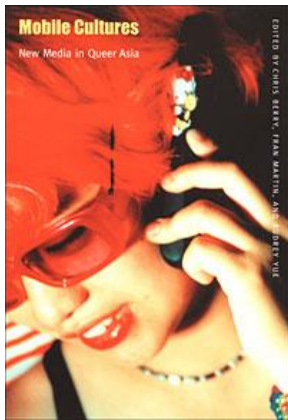# The Geography of LGBTQ Internet Studies

Chris Berry, Fran Martin, & Audrey Yue (Eds.), **Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia,** Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, 312 pp., $23.70 (paperback).

Kate O'Riordan & David J. Phillips (Eds.), **Queer Online: Media, Technology & Sexuality,** New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2007, 244 pp., $37.95 (paperback).

Christopher Pullen & Margaret Cooper (Eds.), **LGBT Identity and Online New Media,** New York, NY: Routledge, 2010, 312 pp., $45.95 (paperback).

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) Internet studies have grown exponentially during the last 10 or 15 years. Apart from original book-length contributions by single authors (Campbell, 2004; Enteen, 2010; Fox, 2012; Gray, 2009; Kuntsman, 2009; Mowlabocus, 2010), a number of special journal issues (Alexander, 2002; Comella & Sender, 2013; Fotopoulou & O'Riordan, 2014; Kuntsman & Al-Qasimi, 2012), and edited books (Berry, Martin, & Yue, 2003; O'Riordan & Phillips, 2007; Pullen & Cooper, 2010) have all contributed to the advancement of our knowledge of this diversifying field. In this short article, I offer a review of three edited books, recognizing their important collective contributions to LGBTQ Internet studies. The three volumes are surely not the very latest publications in the field and they have already been reviewed by a number of scholars (e.g., de Ridder, 2012; Erni, 2009; Hamming, 2008; Scott, 2008). However, in this review I would like to take one more look at the articles published in those books with a particular focus on what contexts they are anchored in and to what extent they acknowledge the importance of the contexts. In doing so, I aim to critically reflect on the geography of LGBTQ Internet studies.

In general, LGBTQ Internet studies can be characterized by the predominance of U.S. (or Western) perspectives. This is evident in the focus of major single-author books in the area: three of them deal exclusively with U.S. cases (Campbell, 2004; Fox, 2012; Gray, 2009) and one with exclusively U.K. cases (Mowlabocus, 2010). Two notable exceptions are Jillana Enteen's *Virtual English* (2010), which provides a postcolonial perspective on gay websites in Thailand, and Adi Kuntsman's *Figurations of Violence and Belonging* (2009), which focuses on a portal for Russian-Israeli LGBTQs. Similarly, the edited books reviewed here favor U.S. cases. *Queer Online* provides five articles anchored in the United States, two in the United Kingdom, one in Finland, and one about the Russian diaspora in Israel. *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* is almost entirely devoted to U.S. cases with at least 16 of 21 chapters anchored in the United States. The book additionally provides one chapter based on a U.K. case and one on the popularity of Japanese Yaoi comics in the West (for some articles, it is impossible to identify their context). *Mobile Cultures* is the only exceptional volume in this respect. The book focuses on "New Media in Queer Asia" and provides four articles about Japan, single chapters about Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and South Asia as well as one chapter about Malaysia and Singapore, and one about Taiwan and South Korea. An additional notable exception is a recent special issue of the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* on "Queering Middle East Cyberscapes," edited by Adi Kuntsman and Noor Al-Qasimi (2012).

While this quantitative dominance of studies anchored in the United States (or the English-speaking world more generally) should surely give us pause, it is not the sheer number of these works which I find most troubling. To explain my point, let us first have a look at the chapter titles in the three edited books reviewed here. Interestingly, out of 33 articles published in *Queer Online* and *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*, excluding the introductory articles, only three specify in their titles the contexts they are based on (Hollywood, United States, and the West). The authors of other articles seem to write about such general topics as "Computer Cross-Dressing," "Lesbians Who Are Married to Men," and "Gay Men's Use of Online Pictures in Fat-Affirming Groups." In contrast, in *Mobile Cultures* all authors but one mention the context of their inquiry in the titles of their respective articles, usually by indicating a particular country of interest (eight chapters), but also a city and region (one chapter each). Similarly, all five articles in the special issue on "Queering Middle Eastern Cyberscapes" include in their titles the name of a particular country (three articles) or city (two articles). Consequently, those authors seem to write about such specific topics as, for example, "*Malaysia*'s New 'Cyberlaws,'" "Queer Voyeurism … *in* … *Japanese* Pornography," and "… A 'Digital Closet' *in Turkey*" (emphasis added). Of course, my point is not that all authors should indicate in the titles of their articles the geographical location on which their cases are based. Instead, I want to indicate that the article titles in major publications in LGBTQ Internet studies seem to confirm the assertion of Gerard Goggin and Mark McLelland (2009), expressed in their introduction to *Internationalizing Internet Studies*, that U.S.-based studies are presumed to be primary and general while non-U.S. studies are framed as particular and secondary. As Renata Salecl once put it in relation to feminist studies:

> If, for example, Western feminists speak about feminism, they can discuss such abstract issues as "women in film noir," "the notion of the phallus in feminist theory," etc.; but someone coming from Eastern Europe must speak about the situation of women in her own country. (1994, pp. 1–2)

In some cases, it is not only the article titles, but the articles themselves that fail to mention the research context. For example, in their contribution to *Queer Online*, Debra Ferreday and Simon Lock analyze identity narratives on cross-dressers' blogs, yet nowhere in the text do they specify where the blog authors are located. The blogs' URL addresses suggest that the majority of them are British (the URLs end in .co.uk), but the authors also refer to three blogs which use the .com extension. In the end, readers cannot be sure whom this article is really about. Similarly, when Margaret Cooper writes in *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* about an MSN group called Lesbian Town (LT), which was directed at lesbians who were married to men, she provides little information about the location of this group or its members. Although she does mention that "[t]hose who belonged to LT represented a range of ages and geographical locations" (2010, pp. 76), she never clarifies what this range of geographical locations really means. Does the author imply that the group used to gather lesbians from all over the world, or rather, from different geographical locations in the United States only? Further in the text we learn that one group member lives in Kentucky. A careful reader may also notice that the member names are all English or at least are reported as such in the article (e.g., Alice, Connie, Sherry, Susan, Vicky), which suggests that the article is only about English-speaking, if not only U.S.-based lesbians who are married to men.

To be sure, there is no need to question the importance of the works described in the previous paragraph. In fact, with their focus on understudied groups, they make invaluable contributions to Internet studies. At the same time, it is important to remind ourselves of the tendency of U.S. scholars writing about U.S. cases to ignore (at worst) or take for granted (at best) their research contexts in LGBTQ Internet studies. The consequences are serious. To ignore the context of one's research means to follow utopian imaginations of the Internet as a deterritorialized cyberspace, which only obscures rather than explains the social role of the Internet. To take the context of one's research for granted means failing to address one's non-U.S. colleagues, who may be unfamiliar with the context, as well as working against the commitment to internationalize media studies, as demonstrated by the largest communication associations, including the International Communication Association, which originated in the United States. Finally, the hegemonic U.S. bias also creates academic inequalities since it is usually only non-U.S. researchers working on non-U.S. cases who are required to contextualize their studies, even in short articles in which they may lack the space to do so.

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