

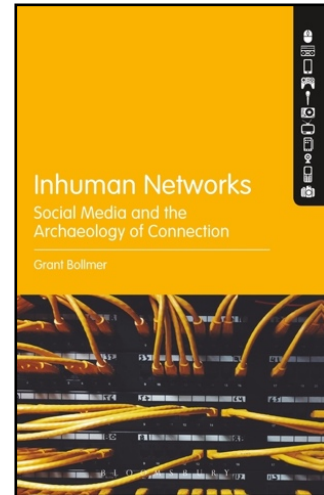
Grant Bollmer, **Inhuman Networks: Social Media and the Archaeology of Connection**, 2016, New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016, 275 pp., \$39.95 (paperback).

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In ***Inhuman Networks: Social Media and the Archaeology of Connection***, Grant Bollmer builds upon his previous works which, among other things, have looked at social media life after death (2013) and the production of human agency in relation to the material structures of the digital age (2015). Here, he presents a critical account of our networked society wherein social media drive us toward a nodal form of citizenship. The author's definition of social media is broad, as he uses the term to signal far beyond the limits of Facebook and Twitter; for Bollmer, social media is a "dispersed set of technologies and discourses" (p. 6) that serve as a rationalizing apparatus, normalizing social practices based around ideas of connectivity and flow. To support this argument, Bollmer traces the roots of our modern fascination with networks to medicinal literature (dating back as far as the 1600s) that discursively produce the body as a system of networks to be maintained.



The book levels its critique in the contemporary moment, where human subjects are judged on their practices of "good" connectivity—and those who remain or become disconnected increasingly fade toward invisibility. The book undoubtedly leans more toward social theory and conceptualizations of personhood than traditional media studies by deemphasizing modern platforms (which might come as a shock to those expecting a book about "social media" in its common usage). Instead, the book reemphasizes how social interactions are changing in a networked age (it might be compared to recent work by Skeggs and Yuill (2016), which has similar ambitions though different methodologies). The book finds focus in discourses of everyday life that drive social relations, while offering a critique to simplified positivist inclusion and participation narratives (for example, the work of DiMaggio and Garip (2011, 2012) is left with much to respond to). The book comes in three parts: network archaeologies, nodal citizenship, and beyond social media (a world without people). I will briefly discuss these in turn before switching attention to a few points of critique that can be applied across Bollmer's approach. With the final words, I will reflect more generally on the question of the text's contribution and to whom it might appeal.

In the first of the book's three sections, Bollmer utilizes Foucault's discursively centered approach to pull together a media archaeology of networks. By turning the reader's attention to anatomical conceptualizations of networks, he shows medicine as a means to regulate and promote the active flows throughout the body. Bollmer then interrogates this idea further and beyond the body, to talk of railroad development and the networked growth of industrial capitalism. The critique Bollmer poses begins emerging as he argues that "the biases of the technological would unevenly distribute and disperse goods, solidifying differential relations, making some spaces poor while enriching those that controlled the means of

transportation" (pp. 48–49). Already, it becomes clear that the normative promise of technological and capitalistic progression embedded into ideas of network and flow are both the product of, and reproductive technology for, inequalities. This critique crystallizes with a discussion of money and the emphasis within the American zeitgeist upon flow of money as a solution to societal problems, putting into context the contemporary emphasis on the notion of economic growth. Overall, Bollmer uses the first section as an attempt to pull together the medicinal with the railroad and the banking system—drawing discursive ties between a vast array of cultural texts to showcase a gradual process, privileging the doctrine of connectivity. However, due to methodological uncertainties (Why these examples? Why not others? Do counter examples exist?) and rather loose connections between the extremely different examples given, it is not altogether clear what Bollmer is trying to say in the first section beyond a descriptive recounting of a few examples that support his argument of privileged connectivity and flow. Increased methodological rigor or reflexivity could have provided a more clarifying read.

In the second section, Bollmer shifts gear to focus on nodal citizenship—but he takes on a wide remit here and does so with hefty ambitions that might not be as well developed as some readers would like. He begins by building out from his previous work (see Bollmer, 2013) to talk of death and the notion of living forever on social media. He develops, also, the argument that in a social media world, your data are the real you and that your body is extraneous—a grand claim in need of many clarifications. Further, he speaks of the increasing delegation of labor to autonomous bots and changing class relations and the reduction of political struggles to struggles over connectivity and flow. This is understandably a lot of ground to cover and many arguments to develop. It is therefore relatively easy to pull apart some of the strands of thought advanced in this section as being simplistic or generalizing. Further elaboration would have been useful. An example of this is his argument that "political struggles are . . . reduced to nothing more than struggles over connectivity and flow" (p. 173). While Bollmer provides some convincing evidence for this argument, he doesn't elaborate much on what this actually means for social relations and power—it disappointingly never develops into a comprehensive social theory. Overall, this section presents intriguing and engaging analytic headlines rather than a deeply contextualized analysis. But there is a great deal of promise here and plenty of points of departure for future work.

The final section draws many of the arguments of the book together. As Bollmer describes, it interrogates how the norms of connectivity and networked logic "are enacted beyond social media, presenting us with a world in which humans exist to be corrected or excluded as failed citizens of a networked society" (p. 175). Examples of obesity and AIDS are given for understanding how discourse emphasizes individual failings and self-responsibility as part of a responsibility for the collective in a networked society; we are living in a moment where "personal health is coextensive with the health of the totality of the network, and thus the management of both personal and totalized collective health is rendered equivalent" (p. 202). This analysis works well and brings about a powerful critique of discourse in the contemporary moment. However, some might wish to see a deeper interrogation of the identity-based power relations involved, especially with regard to AIDS, which disproportionately impacts black and homosexual communities. There is, for example, a specific history of stigmatizing persons with HIV and AIDS that is deeply rooted in racial oppression and the "personal failure" of being gay that should not be omitted (Parker & Aggleton, 2003).

Although Bollmer draws attention to class and neoliberalism as a central marker of the networked society, writing that “the disconnected individual is one who fails in the same tasks as the neoliberal subject” (p. 179), his approach will fail to satisfy all. Those interested in applying a more direct political economy conceptualization of power will find the media archaeology approach limiting. Bollmer challenges the notions of value inherent in connectivity, but his analysis doesn’t explain in any detail the economic and political struggles over value that have caused us to arrive at this current moment. Those building upon Marxist frames of reference will find Bollmer’s narrative too passive and indifferent to the actors who have knowingly used power in particularly exploitative and dispossessive ways. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) argue, there is a need for critique to connect the good fortune of some with those others who “pay” for it. A reader interested in theorizing the reframing of society toward forced market participation might find Wacquant’s (2012) work more contextualized, as it proposes the neoliberal moment as an articulation of state, market, and citizenship. In so doing it creates a more nuanced proposition of neoliberally networked personhood while simultaneously breaking free from the confining edges of some liberal readings of governmentality; instead it interrogates wider political dynamics and exploitative difference in social relations.

Likewise, claims made throughout the text that data have their own agency should face more scrutiny. The examples given point toward human agents using data through the construction of prescriptive algorithms rather than data somehow acting of its own accord. It is human disinterest in possible harm and exploitation caused by algorithms (usually with interest in profit or cost cutting) that operates data and algorithms as *mediations* of social relations. Therefore, the agency remains in human hands. This argument becomes increasingly problematic when Bollmer discusses a confused idea of data-driven labor as a value-producing process online; as Skeggs and Yuill point out, “it is not the amount of time or quality of input (liking, sharing, etc.) that gives value to a person’s data but how a person’s connectivity relates to an aggregate value of advertising space” (p. 387). The profit in social media still originates from activity elsewhere in the economy—mobilized through the selling of advertising space in front of human actors who have the theoretical right to own, buy, and sell. If there is no human to exploit or extract profit from, then the mediating data on social media websites lose value. It is for this reason that social power relations between persons remain key and that data cannot embody their own agency in the ways that Bollmer suggests.

While I have maintained a rather critical tone throughout the review, I do wish to clarify that Bollmer’s contribution is nonetheless engaging, intellectually rigorous, and thought provoking. My critiques originate from a scholarly stimulation that *Inhuman Networks* provides, which is a testament to the contribution that the book makes to debates surrounding the networking of society and its subsequent impact upon personhood. The text will be particularly useful to scholars putting forward narratives of social and digital inclusion, as it promotes a vital and underdeveloped reflection on how inclusivity and participation might not always mean empowerment. Still today, many narratives of beneficial network inclusion go unchallenged. What we now need is a comprehensive framework for understanding and interrogating these dynamics of power and an understanding of what empowerment might mean in a networked society.

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