Book Review: Digitized Lives: Culture, Power, and Social Change in the Internet Era

Reed, T.V. New York: Routledge, 2019 (2nd Ed.). ISBN: 978-1-138-30954-8. Chapters 11; Pages: 311. Price: $49.95.

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Reed poses intriguing questions exploring the cultural effects of digital technology in this

second edition of *Digitized Lives: Culture, Power, and Social Change in the Internet Era.*

Moving beyond the overplayed conversations of cultural and societal change precipitated by a

connected world, Reed pulls back the curtain to explore the foundations of digital technology

and its implications beyond its users and uses. Perhaps most beneficial in the volume is the detail

in which Reed describes and evaluates the seemingly invisible layers of digital technology from

inception, to production, to environmental implications. This is particularly important for the

newest generation of communication students: digital natives that may take for granted the

connectivity of their universe.

From the outset of *Digitized Lives* Reed rejects technological determinism, presenting a

technocultural approach to understanding digital culture. This approach recognizes the symbiotic

relationship of technology and culture, and thus establishes the basis of many of Reed's

conclusions throughout the volume. Rightly, Reed recognizes the temporality of his topic, and

challenges the reader to apply the discussed concepts to further digital culture developments.

The first two chapters of the book serve as a thorough introduction to the study of digital

culture and digital technology, first by describing in detail the theoretical and methodological

approaches most common to scholarship in the field while situating the author's position and

focus. Reed challenges, defines, and describes key terms that students will most certainly find

necessary for further exploration and deep understanding of the topic and of communication

studies in general. After establishing this baseline knowledge Reed zooms out, giving the reader

a macro view of the development of digital technology, the issues of its production, and

implications for social and environmental justice. Reed uses this opportunity to discuss

hegemony and the proliferation of power structures that serve some while leaving most behind,

including the lack of female and minority developers, the exploitation of workers that produce

the technology, and the disproportionate burden of adverse environmental effects felt by regions

whose use of energy associated with digital communication technology pales in comparison to

more powerful and wealthier regions. These are the layers of effects that are hidden from view

by those of us who are privileged enough to use our smartphones, laptops, tablets, streaming

services, and smartwatches throughout the day without worrying about where they came from,

how to pay for them, how to pay for their use, and how to pay for the energy to keep them

usable.

Reed then dives into the effects of digital technology on society writ large, doubling

down on the technocultural perspective by asserting that "[w]hile there are few if any areas of

cultural life solely or wholly created or determined by digital media, there are few if any areas of

cultural life that have not been reshaped to one degree or another by digital media" (p. 53). One

of these areas is the creation of "cyberspace," which seems ethereal to users, but as Reed argues,

cyberspace is very much material (due to cords, routers, cables, servers, towers, and the like that

make up the infrastructure of cyberspace) and not entirely virtual. Reed challenges the virtuality

of cyberspace by asserting that the online world reflects (although not perfectly) the offline

world. The exploration of this online/offline relationship forms the structure of the remainder of

the volume as Reed interrogates several topical issues in digital culture, including privacy,

equality, sex, politics, gaming, eduction, the digital divide, and artificial intelligence.

In each chapter, Reed blends foundational theories, contemporary research, relevant key

terms, and thoughtful anecdotes to guide the reader through both sides of the seemingly simple

question, "Is digital technology good or bad?" The answer that Reed repeats throughout the

volume is that digital technology is not either good or bad, but it simply *is*. Digital technology is

what we make of it, it has the power that we give to it, and it affects society in sometimes

surprising and sometimes utterly predictable ways. Like any trendy object of study (Caffeine!

Cannabis! Carbohydrates!), the research can tell conflicting stories; the answer is probably

somewhere in the middle.

This is a letdown for readers seeking definitive conclusions, but the purpose of *Digitized*

Lives is not to be definitive. Its purpose is to engage cross-generational readers in a dialogue

about the relationship of digital technology and culture. Although Reed does not offer

groundbreaking arguments, he does provide a thoughtful and thorough overview of current

controversies and research by introducing foundational knowledge about the fields of

communication studies, media studies, and cultural studies and by drawing upon scholarship

across each of these fields. *Digitized Lives* is an engaging volume that would enhance the reading

list for upper-level undergraduate or graduate-level courses.