

• *Book Reviews* •

Personal Connections in the Digital Age. By Nancy K. Baym. [Digital Media and Society Series.] (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010. pp. viii + 184, index of names, general index.)

Nancy Baym's book *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* is a must-read for anyone studying the effects of communications technology on culture and society. While Baym's personal stance is clearly pro-technology; despite her statement that the book tries to avoid both "exuberant accounts" and "cautionary tales" (2), she devotes much time to a careful consideration of the historical and contemporary criticisms and concerns that scholars and the general public alike have voiced about the increasing presence of technology in our interpersonal relationships.

Baym opens the book with a summary of the main concerns that people have about communications technology: that communication has become more shallow, that we are increasingly not present in our physical spaces, that we are losing a sense of what it means to be real. She also notes that these same concerns have cropped up in society with the advent of every new communications technology, including the telegraph, the radio, the telephone, and the television. Baym's historical contextualizing of this very modern subject is one of the strengths of the work.

In chapter one, Baym presents seven key concepts with which to understand and distinguish different types of media. Looking at the various ways in which different technologies allow for interactivity, create temporal structure, provide

social cues, allow for storage and replicability, reach different audiences, and enable mobility helps support Baym's point that "technology" cannot be treated as a single concept. All scholars studying digital media would benefit from applying Baym's conceptual tools to the medium with which they're working.

The second chapter presents another useful tool: four theoretical frameworks for understanding the "causal flow" (24) between technology and society. Baym initially presents readers with the common perspective of technological determinism, which posits that technology alters people by unavoidably imprinting upon them. She points out how this can be seen as both good and bad—technology can either save us or doom us—but according to this perspective, it's people who are affected by technology. In the next perspective, the relationship is reversed. According to the social construction of technology, humans are seen as the causal factor; technology is a result of social factors rather than a cause of them.

The third perspective that Baym presents is the most balanced, and is the one that Baym espouses. The social shaping perspective says that influence travels in both directions, that "the consequences of technologies arise from a mix of 'affordances'—the social capabilities technological qualities enable—and the unexpected and emergent ways that people make use of those affordances" (44). One example is mobile phone text messaging; the phone technology initially presented the capability, but as people used it more and more for unexpected purposes, the technology was adapted to better suit those needs.

Baym caps off the first chapter with a final perspective that she refers to as the domestication of technology. One a technology is so common and familiar that people barely consider the communication that happens through it to be mediated, it can be considered domesticated. Baym makes the important distinction that this shift in perspective does not mean that the technology no longer has an impact, but that society has generally set aside concerns about that impact. Baym's analysis of technological topics in advice columns from the 1990s and 2000s is a great illustration of this; the Internet, which was prominent as a problem in itself in early columns, becomes a background setting for questions and problems in later years.

In the third chapter Baym discusses the various ways that communication can be made meaningful and useful in mediated contexts. She reviews the typical concerns—that mediation filters out important social cues, that asynchronicity leads to a lack of quality or intimacy in interaction—and highlights some of the ways that the social shaping of technology has worked to overcome these limitations. Examples here are especially folkloric; the development of online folk speech and symbolic iconography are important components of presenting rich communication in a text-based setting.

Chapter four deals with the idea of community, and Baym does a nice job of openly side-stepping the challenge of “proving” that online groups and networks can be genuine communities and instead simply seeking to explain why so many Internet users choose to emically apply that term to their groups. Here again we see

a number of folkloric elements; Baym cites Alan Dundes in her section on “communities of practice,” noting that shared customs and speech patterns are qualities that both online and offline communities use as evidence of insider status.

Chapters five and six deal with the creation and maintenance of online relationships, and the ways in which “real” relationships develop and grow in mediated contexts. Baym manages a nicely balanced perspective here, noting that despite issues of trust that occasional high-profile cases of misrepresented identity generate, most people are generally trustworthy online as much as off. She also points out that while many people are using digital communications to generate new relationships in their lives, most people are simply managing or enhancing existing, face-to-face relationships, or are taking better advantage of online access to offline latent social ties. Her demystification of the social processes of the web is refreshing, as is her insistence that people are people, regardless of mediation. As she says, “However we meet, we form relationships by communicating with each other. Our messages are the tools with which we build and tinker with our connections, and the mirror through which we see them” (125).

Baym’s work is well-written, insightful, and well-presented. It will also lend itself especially well to a classroom setting. The theoretical concepts that are set out in the early chapters are revisited at the end of each subsequent chapter and contextualized within the new information that has been presented. The work clearly and intelligently builds on itself, culminating in a coherent summary chapter that lays out how such work will continue to be useful in the future.

In the end, Baym emphasizes that just as with past technologies, digital connections are neither utopian nor dystopian. Our ability to understand the ways in which they affect our lives, however, is as important as ever, and this book goes a long way toward enabling scholars to accomplish that goal. Baym's pro-technology stance is reinforced in her closing speculations about the future of mediated communication studies; she leaves readers with the optimistic view that whatever the future holds, "we will navigate our way through innovation without losing hold of one another" (155).

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