

*Digital Technologies of the Self* edited by  
Yasmine Abbas and Fred Dervin.

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David T. Macknet (University of Glasgow)

*Digital Technologies of the Self* is a collection of 8 essays which, together, consider the impacts of current technologies upon identity, human interaction, and construction of ‘the self’. These works centre about concepts of self-construction as formulated in the works of Foucault. Several incorporate Castronova’s research on massively multiplayer online role-play games (MMORPG), and Bourdieu’s understanding of habitus. The works examine the affects of surveillance upon identity, political identity as affected by social media, external imposition of identity, and the ways in which current technologies directly shape the quality of social interactions.

The contributors (including the editors) each provide an article which is essentially a summary of their doctoral thesis; as such, each piece engages on a very deep level with the subject at hand, drawing on several years of research and investigation to provide a very complete understanding of one narrow aspect of an issue within digital identity.

Each pair of articles subtly presents opposing views upon the desirability of a particular use of technology; only in examining the pair of articles together, however, does this come to the fore: read alone, or on separate occasions, the contrast between the pieces may be easily overlooked. This would be a great shame, as it appears to have been by design, considering how each pair so neatly works together. In future editions this opposition between the pieces should be made more explicit.

The first section of the collection considers the affects of surveillance upon the individual, in terms of how that individual constructs identity and preference, and in terms of how groups socialize given the presence or absence of overt surveillance. The two issues considered are the impact of ambient intelligence upon behaviour, and the social interactions within a highly-restricted communications environment (that of craigslist ‘missed connections’). Together, these pieces encourage examination of the effects of imposed order via surveillance willingly accepted by those utilising the technologies. Whether by accident or design, both pieces take a fairly neutral stance towards the human impacts of surveillance technologies, only hinting at or listing a few of the negative affects they may have upon individuals and society, rather than making any strong statement against misuse of such technologies.

The second pair of articles consider the intentional use of social technologies as instruments of political change. They examine groups which bridge participation between the online and offline environments, and the efficacy of social technology within national

and international political discourse. The two pieces investigate two instances in which social technologies are used to engage participants in the construction of a ‘political self’ which is participant in a highly structured, controlled, regulated series of interactions, each of which activity serves the end purpose of those at the apex of the power structure. Again, these pieces take a very neutral stance with regards to judging the systems under examination. It is only via the language of the pieces that it becomes clear that one of the authors might feel some disapprobation for the cynical way in which social media was deployed as a ‘weapon’ in the ‘mobilisation’ of ‘troops’. Only by contrasting the two pieces does it become clear that the second author strongly approves of the very same use of technology, albeit in a different social context.

The third pair of essays examine the sometimes-paradoxical imposition of ideologies of the self by gaming systems and by video-blogging (‘egocasting’) systems, providing a positive portrayal of various, violent, computer-gaming environments, contrasted with a consideration of some of the issues suffered by individuals as they transition in and out of different cultures. This pair of articles examines the fixity of self-identity, and the degree to which identity is imposed by technology as compared to a like imposition by individuals within society. Only by reading the pair of articles does it become clear that this is the intent in their presentation; however, each article is relatively staid, moving forward its own point about identity and identity construction, neither piece directly addressing issues of the imposition of identity directly.

The last two works examine extremes of interpersonal connection within the online world: the egotism of collecting ‘friends’ as status indicators and a narcissistic practice; and that of providing a place to ‘couch surf’ to complete strangers so that a true, deep connection may be established. The first practice is very much anti-social, the second intensely human. Both are facilitated by very similar technology; the two articles give a deep insight into the different ways in which technology may be used to either hinder or facilitate human communication, and directly assert that it is the construction of the technology which drives the behaviour within the technology: the system developer is a causal factor in the uses to which the technology is suited.

The various pairs of essays each attempt to address a single topic in depth, providing a surfeit of bibliographic references should the reader wish to continue further. The works – as condensed versions of theses rather than scholarly articles – serve better as introductions to the various subject areas than as exposition in and of themselves; indeed, perhaps that is not their goal, yet the reader might be better served if the goal of the collection were made explicit. Stylistically, the collection lacks consistency, excessive citations serve to interrupt the flow of the articles, and little effort was made to render the pieces readable. Perhaps a future edition will remedy issues of style and readability. As a resource for teaching about the impact of technology upon humanity, at the university level, I would recommend this work. I sincerely hope that a future edition will emphasize the potential use of this work in an educational setting, as the subjects under consideration are of

importance to any user of technology. The pieces subtly play up the positive and negative affects of technology upon humanity, and would allow for a great deal of classroom debate. Because of the extensive amount of bibliographic information – provided after each article – this work would serve nicely as an instructional resource, providing a ready list of academic sources for consultation and further investigation.

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