Book Review

Lamberti, A. P. & Richards, A.R. (Eds.). (2011). Complex Worlds: Digital Culture, Rhetoric and Professional Communication. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing.

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In *Complex Worlds*, editors Adrienne P. Lamberti and Anne R. Richards have set themselves a challenging task: to bring together a coherent set of perspectives relating to digital culture while promoting an open-ended flexibility suggested by their preferred term, "*digital divergence*" (p. 2). The volume's title evokes the issue confronting academics and professionals: to comprehend not one, but multiple worlds – each complex, evolving and interacting with one another in unexpected and unpredictable ways. In response to this "multifaceted and heterogenous...digital era we are all attempting to navigate" (p. 2), Lamberti and Richards have collected eleven papers that offer multiple lines of inquiry and methodologies in an effort to understand aspects of the transformative nature of digital technology.

In the Introduction, the editors outline their dissatisfaction with the conventional notion of a "digital divide". Rejecting the simple binary opposition of affluent, sophisticated digital *haves* against relatively impoverished, ignorant *have-nots*, they adopt the more granular concept of digital divergence "to facilitate a more penetrating awareness of digital culture, [...] a heuristic focused on the topic of digital technology" (p. 2). They describe the way remix culture undermines a rigid distinction between digital content producers and consumers, for example, and point out that soaring rates of mobile phone ownership in developing countries suggest access to digital technology is no longer simply a function of relative affluence. "Digital divergence" suggests a spectrum of access and empowerment with respect to digital technologies, and the papers selected for the volume represent "a methodological pluralism" (p. 11) that complements the scope afforded by this overarching concept. If at times their very diversity brings into question why these papers have been collected in a volume, some thematic consistency is imposed by the editors through the explicit identification of a handful of key concepts: access, literacy, advocacy and pedagogy. The book is divided into four sections aimed at exploring each of these topics.

The first section, "Transforming Advocacy," consists of three papers that address the various ways new communication technologies challenge existing norms of authority – in both the political and academic sense of that word.

In an article on cyberactivism focusing on the viral web video *The Meatrix*, Eileen Schell argues that digital literacy is itself just one of many kinds of "critical literacy" (p. 24), all of which need to be fostered not just in the classroom but in society as a whole. The digital literacy required to locate and view a web-based video, while critically important, must be accompanied by other kinds of literacy, including "agricultural literacy" (p. 29). As with the issue of access to technology, the "have/have-not" binary formulation is shown to be too simplistic with respect to questions of food production, distribution and consumption. Ultimately Schell shows that it requires multiple approaches and perspectives to gain an effective critical understanding of the cyberactivism demonstrated by *The Meatrix* as well as the factory farm system exposed by the video.

Co-editor Adrienne Lamberti's essay on the challenge to traditional concepts of *dispositio* offered by hypertext represents a particular kind of advocacy. The non-linear and decentralized opportunities hypertext provides for the reader are an obvious challenge to authorial control but these same readers, Lamberti finds, are resistant to the way a hypertexually-arranged document subverts linearity and the idea of fixed, orderly argumentation. Her paper sketches the history of hypertext's reception in academia, especially the unease arising from "perceived challenges posed by technology to acts of authorship" (p. 46) and in particular hypertext's potential to "encourage deconstruction of grand narratives and [foreground] alternative and transgressive ways of knowing" (p. 49).

In the final paper in the "Advocacy" section, Leonard Witt describes the potential impact on the practice of journalism from the "open-source philosophy" (p. 57) popularized by software developers. Citizen journalists are empowered by readily-available digital technologies and web platforms facilitating digital distribution of information. Proliferating viewpoints present profound challenges to traditional media, but also offer avenues to engage civic communities and strengthen democratic foundations "and migrate with them into an era of uncertainty but great promise – the digital" (p. 73).

The second section of *Complex Worlds* focuses on the impact digital technologies have had on particular professions within the arts and humanities. In the first chapter Jason Farman discusses the use of interactive video and hypertext links within a CD-ROM devoted to a live performance of Gertrude Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. The digitized artifacts create a product that makes the viewer an active participant in the performance; digital technology enables the audience to move

beyond passive consumption, creating "...a CD-ROM that operates as a performance of the document rather than as a document of the performance" (p. 93). Farman shows how digital products render problematic the concept of an "authoritative" version of even a single theatrical performance, as the structure and content of each viewing can be modified according to a viewer's individual choices.

John Killoran's paper evaluating the value of web-based materials for employment purposes attempts to use a quantitative approach in order to calculate the cultural capital accrued by individual employment-seekers who create online résumés and portfolios. Use of the World Wide Web, particularly for showcasing digital design skills, presents opportunities for job-seekers while at the same time exacerbating existing inequalities, given that the means of producing and promoting such digital assets to aid in an employment search are not distributed equitably. His analysis echoes Farman's conclusions regarding the potential inherent in new technologies to subvert the existing order in some ways, while subtly reinforcing it in others.

Digital technologies such as email listservs erode boundaries by fostering new communication channels between traditionally disparate enclaves within post-secondary institutions, according to Huiling Ding. Her paper examines and categorizes messages sent over a one-month period to the electronic mailing list for Writing Program Administrators in the United States, and concludes the medium encourages more open dialogue, enhances the role of informal knowledge-making, and automatically creates a persistent, searchable archive of past messages for future reference.

These chapters demonstrate how professions in the arts and humanities in particular can benefit from digital technology as it enhances and simplifies the way information is shared. From web portfolios that increase the options for potential job-seekers to interactive video that transforms the viewer's experience of a dramatic work, the potential to challenge hierarchical relationships is easy to demonstrate, yet barriers in the form of access to technology and the requisite digital literacy necessary to make use of these emerging tools remain.

The third section of *Complex Worlds* contains two papers that describe the emergence of particular communities within academic environments due to the adoption of digital communication platforms. Faiz Derbel and co-editor Anne Richards contribute a paper that discusses a collaborative online course pairing undergraduate students at a Tunisian university with undergraduates from a Midwestern US university. Student interactions and their subsequent reflections on the experience highlighted important cultural and socio-economic factors at work in the way their respective cultural

and economic backgrounds shaped how each group of students accessed and employed digital technology. This paper, perhaps more than any other in the volume, illustrates in clear, concrete terms the numerous "divergences" discussed in the book's introductory chapter.

The other paper in this section, a survey-based study by Heeman Kim and William Faux, looks at attitudes to computer-mediated communications among US and Korean college students. Here the student cohorts are not engaged in collaboration with one another, but instead both cohorts are observed forming and enhancing social relationships in their respective online environments. One limitation of both papers presented in the section stems from a narrow definition of "community"; the affordances of digital technology are shown clearly, but in each paper the communities being observed are the somewhat artificial and relatively homogenous groupings of undergraduate students in a university setting. Are observations about the way undergraduates embrace digital tools to build communities generalizable to the wider culture? Neither paper addresses the issue.

The impact of digital culture upon education is continued in the final section, "Informing Pedagogy". In her contribution, Laura McGrath advocates for technical and professional communication (TPC) programs that resist casting digital technologies as somehow antithetical to "humanities-based professional writing curricula" (180). Instead, she argues that successful TPC students will require both technical aptitude for the digital technologies they will use in their professional roles and "rhetorical knowledge and critical awareness" (185) of these new tools. The paper elaborates upon several key components integrating critical thinking with digital literacy to "support TPC students in becoming technical rhetoricians who engage in reflexive praxis" (192).

The concept of digital divergence is used by Rudy McDaniel and Sherry Steward in their exploration of broadband technology's impact on expectations within industry versus the static teaching practices evident in university writing programs. They contrast adoption of multimedia (and multimodal) instructional materials developed by industry with a continued focus on print-centric documentation strategies within academia. In response to the rise of digital technologies they stress the need for interdisciplinary professionals capable of using a range of digital communication networks to communicate effectively with multiple audiences. Like McGrath, they advocate for closer links between academic writing programs and the information technology (IT) professionals who maintain the technological infrastructure upon which digital communication channels rely.

Rounding out this section is a paper by Aimee Kendall Roundtree that explains the basics of extensible markup language (XML) to technical communicators engaged in documentation. While the paper is highly specialized, it serves as a useful objective example of the kind of focused technical

knowledge to which the other papers in this section refer, and illustrates how effective technical communication needs to extend beyond rhetorical strategies and awareness of audience to embrace the underlying technologies (in this case XML tagging for digital documentation) of digital culture.

Within the guiding principle of digital divergence, the essays in *Complex Worlds* exist as individually useful contributions, rather than integral parts of a cohesive argument. I believe the editors sacrifice a clear thematic focus for the volume in order to embrace the sheer range of influences wrought on culture by digital technologies. It is easy to see how individual chapters or even whole sections might be useful to researchers or as case studies for students in courses studying aspects of digital culture, but it is difficult to imagine an audience for the collection as a whole.

The difficult thematic balancing act is compounded by the conflict between the relatively sedate nature of academic publishing and the breakneck pace of technological change. *Complex Worlds*, published in 2011, contains papers written between 2006 and 2009. As a result, a number of the chapters now provide historical context to our present situation rather than relevant insight. For instance, the vision outlined in Chapter 3 of the democratizing potential for citizen journalism has largely been eclipsed by the de facto consolidation of news sources through the aggregating influences of Google page ranking and Facebook mentions. In fact, Facebook, arguably among the most influential forces currently affecting digital culture, is not mentioned by any of the authors. Similarly, the attention to personalized web-resumes in Chapter 5 seems misplaced given the current influence of employment-related social networking site LinkedIn and online job-search/resume-building sites like Monster.com and Indeed.com.

This is not offered as a criticism of *Complex Worlds*, but as recognition that virtually all insights about digital culture are rapidly made obsolete by new developments. If the papers collected in this volume no longer describe accurately the technological landscape readers will experience, they do offer valuable historical perspectives and examples of engaged scholarship in the ongoing process of understanding the multifaceted influences of digital culture.