

Book review

Johan Farkas & Marcus Maloney (Eds.)

Digital Media Metaphors: A Critical Introduction

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Digital technologies are not only part of our everyday lives but also a recurring subject in the conversations of ordinary people, the news, and often also the focus of political, economic, and cultural discourses. The terms and phrases that refer to particular digital media and frame what they can represent for society oftentimes circulate as buzzwords that go unquestioned and become naturalised.

The collection *Digital Media Metaphors: A Critical Introduction* – edited by Johan Farkas from the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, and Marcus Maloney from Coventry University, UK – brings together eleven original contributions focusing on central terms or expressions around digital media that have been integrated into common language and have retained buzz during a particular period of time. The short collection unpacks those metaphors, following Lakoff and Johnson's conception in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) that the terms chosen to refer to different aspects of digital media are not neutral, but shape how individuals relate to them, as well as think and act – or not – upon the world. While metaphors help “us navigate the world”, they “are not merely ornaments” (p. 104).

From the notion that metaphors do not just “reflect our understanding of reality but also help construct it” (p. 91), the different contributions trace the origins of metaphors such as “cloud” or “troll” to then offer a critical understanding of the consequences of using those metaphors in social, and often academic, discussions to refer to digital media. Together, the short chapters raise a critical perspective on the “moral, political, and legal questions”, but also academic limitations of sometimes grabbing or holding on to metaphors.

Digital Metaphors can be seen in dialogue with previous, landmarking projects around key terms in media and culture, even digital media. The seminal *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976) by Raymond Williams, followed by *New Keywords* (2005), edited by Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris and *Digital Keywords* (2016) by Benjamin Peters, gathered extensive lists of terms, with shorter entries and organised alphabetically. The editors of *Digital Metaphors*, on the other hand, made a clever editorial decision to structure the book into parts, gathering metaphors pertaining to Infrastructure, Content, or Users. This organisation adds comprehension to the different metaphors and terms that (seek to) characterise and mark the debates about distinct dimensions of each of those levels of digital media.

Such an editorial organisation, together with a relative diversity of perspectives (contributors are mainly from institutions in Europe, Australia, and the United States), make this an interesting read, accessible to lay audiences, practitioners, and anyone outside academia, as well as a consistent contribution to an academic public, bringing an historical and critical perspective on digital media. The emphasis on the power of metaphors and how they produce or reproduce injustice in power relations can appeal to scholars interested in science and technology studies, sociology, and critical studies on digital media, as well as, more broadly, on social constructivism and discourse.

Focusing on the specific contributions, Part I focuses on infrastructure, and we find chapters on “cloud”, “platform”, “frontier”, and “digital town square”. Part II is dedicated to content and includes chapters on “filter bubble”, “data as new oil”, “rabbit hole”, and “information warfare”. Lastly, Part III includes metaphors around users, namely “toxic”, “digital native”, and “troll”, that illuminate wider perceptions about how digital media intersect with the self, identity, and sociality.

Some of the chapters explore important tensions between idealism and materialism, individualism and collective. This is done especially in Part I, but not exclusively. Mark Andrejevic and Zala Volcic discuss the metaphor of “cloud” as one that connects to “idealistic models of computation-as-public-utility” (p. 17) while obfuscating its “imposingly material, costly and energy hungry” infrastructure (p. 15). Anne Helmond and Fernando Van der Vlist document the rise of “platform” from a technical realm into economic agents and subjects of governance and regulation, arguing for a focus on ecosystems of platforms that can tackle their interconnectedness and interdependencies. Their chapter also demonstrates how metaphors are not static. This theme of materialism continues in Part II, where Lisa Reutter explores how the metaphor and analogy of “data as oil” links digital to natural resources and “removes the human subjects that produced the data in the first place and its effects on society” (p. 81).

Another cross-cutting theme is the agency of the user as envisioned by these digital media metaphors, explored particularly in Part III. The chapter on “toxic”, by Marcus

Maloney and Judith Fathallah, explores the case of the platform 4chan while observing the pervasiveness of this metaphor across several “digital spaces, experiences, identities, and communities” (p. 117). The implication of using such a medicalised image is that it ultimately works as “both disempowering and individualising, divesting internet users of agency and responsibility, and eliding the socioeconomic structures that actually do shape our online attitudes and practices” (p. 123). Also, the case of the term “digital native”, popularised by Tapscott and Prensky in the late 1990s and early 2000s, richly illustrates the dangers of metaphors becoming myths. The author, Sharon Greenfield, explains why the metaphor is still used despite abundant criticism of this expression, starting from the view that a generation should not be seen as homogenous. This myth has persisted, Greenfield argues, because it is an “easy visual metaphor” that narrativises changes happening in society, and which feeds a panic of educators and parents regarding the use of technology by children, while at the same times soothing it. As a myth became “truth”, promoting a counter-narrative in academia is hardly effective in popular and journalistic discourses.

Some of the chapters focus on aspects related to the value of digital media for democracy, under the themes of infrastructure as well as content. Anne Kaun’s chapter on the “digital town square” revisits the history of the value of social media for democracy and its broken promise of open dialogue and revitalising democracy, turned into a tool of surveillance capitalism and narcissistic culture. In turn, Axel Bruns explores how the simplistic metaphor of “filter bubble” “has substantially misdirected scholarship and policy responses and actively kept us from focussing on the real issues of mis- and disinformation, abuse, and hate speech” (p. 65). The ill-defined concepts of filter bubble and echo chamber circulated widely and were pointed to as causes for problems in political cultural and societal cohesion without looking enough at wider political, cultural, and economic problems. Similarly, the visual metaphor of “rabbit hole”, borrowed from Lewis Carroll, has persisted in popular and some academic debates to explain radicalisation as a product of algorithms, Becca Lewis argues. The metaphor builds on emotional representations of digital technology, at the cost of failing to offer consistent explanations for a complex social phenomenon involving marginalisation and extreme discourses and action.

Crucially, some of these metaphors refer to the power relations, not least pertaining to knowledge and international relations. The analysis on “frontier”, especially drawing on the viewpoint of Palestine, examines how a metaphor both highlights some values and neglects others – includes and excludes, promotes cohesion and creates division. This chapter raises important questions about economic power (the power of corporations to organise systems), but also epistemological consequences (the concurrent models of collaboration, inclusiveness, and openness for the sake of more accessible knowledge). In a similar vein, Valentyna Shapovalova’s chapter looks at Russia’s war in Ukraine to discuss the metaphor of “information warfare” and how digital media are a battlefield where affective divisions are defined and reinstated, and fights over *truth* occur. These wars can take shape through top-down or bottom-up regimes such as digital authoritarianism or digital militarism, respectively, and occur through continuous and collaborative efforts in concurring directions such as war memes or platforms for conspiracy theorists.

Taken together, these contributions create different entry points into critical issues in digital media studies, and media studies more generally. Some of the metaphors – such as “town square”, “frontier”, and “cloud” – build around notions of space, according to Lewis in chapter 8, precisely to “to help internet users orient themselves in a context that seemed otherwise disembodied” (p. 96). Nevertheless, they are not neutral in representing reality, and some of the vocabulary has worked to reify, “trivialise”, or “launder” its social impact. *Digital Metaphors* is thus a timely publication that can foster more research in metaphors of digital media evolving and circulating in different parts of the world.

References

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