Contents

Acknowledgements x

1 Addressing the Internet as Socio-Cultural Forms 1
Introduction 1
Outline and Context of the Argument 1
Outline of Chapters 4

2 The Cultural History of the Internet 9
Introduction 9
A Framework for Historical Analysis 9
Framing the History of the Internet 11
The Internet's Theatre of Innovation 15
Analysis: Linking the Details of the Innovation of the Internet with Social Change 26
Conclusion 28

3 Cultural Forms and Socio-Technical Change 30
Introduction 30
Addressing Technology and Social Change 31
Deconstructing the Relationship between Technology and Social Change 32
Associating Technology and Social Worlds: Work in Institutionalizing Technology 34
Addressing the Cultural Dynamics of Technological Change 37
Conclusion 46

4 The Socio-Cultural Environment of the Internet 47
Introduction 47
Social Landscape of the Internet 47
Relationships between the Internet and Society 51
The Transformation of Sociability: Networked Individualism and Networked Social Movements 53
The Social Dynamics of the Internet and Conceptualizing Information Society 55
Conclusion 64

PROOF

5 Work and the Internet **65**
Introduction 65
Relations of Production: The Changing Context of Work 65
Narratives Regarding Work in the e-Economy 69
Participation in the Workplace 72
Participation and Organizational Issues 77
Participation and Gender 79
Conclusion 82

6 Public Policy and the Internet **83**
Introduction 83
The Logic of the Internet in Public Policy 83
Internet and Political Process 88
The Internet in Public Services and Democratic Processes 91
The Internet in Health and Social Care 98
Conclusion 102

7 Exclusion, Inclusion and the Internet **103**
Introduction 103
General Context of Inclusion and Exclusion 103
Exclusion and Digital Divides: The Global Dimension 107
Access and Knowledge 110
Case Studies: The Dynamics of Inclusion and Internet Socio-Cultural Forms 115
Conclusion 122

8 Culture, Everyday Life and the Internet **124**
Introduction 124
Cultural Change and Everyday Life 125
The Second Age of the Internet and Everyday Life 129
Routines and Practices in Daily Life 131
Networks and Networked Individuals as Social Forms 132
Placing the Internet in the Meaningfulness of Everyday Life 134
Conclusion 141

9 Cyber Cultures and the Internet **143**
Introduction 143
Considering Culture, Mediated Communication and Practice 143
Defining and Working with Cyber Culture 145
Living Cyber Culture: Narratives of the Form 148
Experiences of (Cyber) Cultural Activity: Hopes, Dreams and Actualities 150
Conclusion 160

PROOF

10 The Communications Environment and the Internet 162
Introduction 162
Shaping a Communications Environment: Continuity and Change 163
Key Concepts in Analysing New Media 164
The Social Relations of a New Communications Environment: The New and the Established 168
Mediapolis and Proper Distance in Communication 177
Conclusion 179

11 Conclusion 181
Introduction 181
Social and Technological Change in the Context of the Internet 181
Internet as Socio-Cultural Form: The Communicative Turn 182
Relations of Production 184
Narratives of the Form 185
Modes of Participation in the Form 186
Internet as a Socio-Cultural Form in Contemporary Society 187

Notes 189

Bibliography 202

Technical Glossary 223

Index 225

1

Addressing the Internet as Socio-Cultural Forms

Introduction

The book explores the Internet within various dimensions of society and situates it within sets of social relations and various cultural contexts. The Internet is conceptualized in its different contexts of production and use as social and cultural forms. The argument is that the Internet is embedded in contemporary socio-cultural forms and by understanding the relations of production, the narratives and participation in these forms one can analyse the Internet's characteristics, meaning and significance to contemporary society. This approach produces an analysis of the Internet that is neither technologically nor socially determined.

To this end, the book discusses core aspects of contemporary social life such as work, citizenship, welfare and inequality as well as culture and everyday life in which the characteristics of the Internet are embedded, shaped and given meaning. Its characteristics such as interactive networked communication, virtual worlds and cyber cultures are understood as they materialize through social and cultural processes into specific social and cultural forms such as mobile work, e-citizenship, diasporic hubs and social networking sites. Through these explorations, the book examines whether society is undergoing transformations in which the Internet plays a part and, if there is change, what the significance of that change is to our understandings of social life. It concludes by arguing society is reconfiguring its forms of communication through its informational and intermediation processes. This communicative turn is resulting in an informational and intermediated society rather than an information society.

Outline and Context of the Argument

The Internet, as part of a whole range of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT),[1] is being used in a number of ways within late modernity.

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In general terms, ICT are electronic systems that are used in telecommunications, computer-mediated communication and digital media. Examples of ICT, apart from the Internet, include personal computers, video games, interactive digital television, mobile phones and electronic payments systems. The Internet is a global system of interconnected computer networks that interchange data by packet switching using the standardized Internet Protocol (IP) Suite. It is a 'network of networks' that consists of private and public networks, academic, business and government networks, which are local and global in scope. Copper wires, fibre optic cables, wireless connections and other technologies link these networks. The Internet carries various information resources and services, such as electronic mail, online chat, file transfer and file sharing, online gaming, and the interlinked hypertext documents and other resources of the World Wide Web (WWW). The WWW is a system of interlinked hypertext documents accessed via the Internet. With a Web browser, a user views Web pages that may contain text, images, videos and other multimedia and navigates between them using hyperlinks. The ongoing developments of the WWW include the concept of Web 2.0, which is sometimes referred to as 'social computing' that describes intelligent web services in which users are more active on the Internet. Most Web 2.0 services involve a cluster of dynamic social networks, which the OECD calls the 'participative web' to stress the active roles of users (Frissen, 2008).

The way in which the Internet is produced, used and talked about interacts with, and is embedded in, the dimensions and dynamics of social life. It is, however, difficult to understand the ways in which these technologies are being shaped within the processes of contemporary social change on the one hand and how, on the other hand, they become institutionalized into social and cultural order. To understand the ways in which the Internet interacts with society involves considering the ways in which its characteristics are materializing into social and cultural forms. The use of the concepts of social and cultural forms is well established within the social sciences and is particularly used in sociology and cultural studies. Although these concepts have been adapted in different ways, they nonetheless provide ways in which social scientists can identify the organization of social and cultural life.

Social and cultural forms represent the articulation of economic, political and social dimensions of society. These forms are enacted out in action and interaction; they are performed and reflected back to social actors as material objects and culture. The use of social forms is often focused on social action and social institutions such as, for example, the organization of work, the family, and education and welfare. Cultural forms focus more on action that seeks to express subjective and inter-subjective meaning through specific performances: it thus covers the expression and performance of

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popular culture and high culture seen in, for example, film, theatre, visual arts, music and sport. However, aspects of the social and the cultural are interdependent, producing the interlinking of social and cultural forms. For instance, shopping is both a social and cultural activity and, in the context of consumer society, shopping malls can be viewed as cultural forms.[2] This extends into all domains of social life because the characteristics of social forms are culturally informed, shaped and experienced. Thus, patterns of parenting are given meaning through culture, work related social forms gain their distinctiveness through organizational cultures and entertainment genres foster engagement with audiences culturally in a number of ways such as, for example, fandom. Culture is therefore 'ordinary' as Raymond Willaims argues, and communication is culturally shaped, and it makes and remakes culture. The focus on the meaningfulness of communication in all aspects of social life including socio-technical change is embedded in the cultural dynamics of communication and requires an understanding of the relationship between social, economic and cultural dimensions of technological change.

Therefore, although in analytical terms social scientists have made distinctions between social and cultural forms, this is questioned in anthropological terms. Clifford Geertz in particular addresses the interlacing of the social and the cultural. He argues that cultural and social phenomena are symbiotic and that culture is deeply embedded in the realities of social and economic structures (Geertz, 1973). This understanding of the interweaving of the economic, social and cultural aspects of the social world reaches into the richness of communication systems and socio-cultural life, as these systems are at once shaped by economic, social and political imperatives and made meaningful through culture. In this book, the term 'cultural forms' is used to address both the cultural meaningfulness of social forms as well as cultural forms within the genres of entertainment and other culturally defined activities. In effect the book addresses socio-cultural forms, communication and the Internet.

This perspective provides the provenance to address the meaning of communication and ICT in social life, which requires seeing the way people[3] communicate as cultural. In this book, the development of cultural forms in which communication is embedded is understood through the following framework. The cultural form has three interdependent dimensions which interact to produce distinctive phenomenon, such as the Internet as a communicative medium in society. One dimension is the 'relations of production', which involves the social organization of production and distribution of the form, including the specific features of the technology. Another dimension is the characteristic mode of narration, which embraces the themes and styles of the form. The third dimension is the type of interaction between producer, narrators and participants that characterizes

PROOF

participation in the form (Chaney, 1990; Wessels, 2000a). The interaction of these three dimensions and interdependencies generate particular social and cultural forms – socio-cultural forms. The Internet and WWW as a distinctive information and communication form is a cultural form in itself. However, its flexibility and adaptability means that it is also embedded within a range of socio-cultural forms, making it pervasive across society with its presence and absence felt by many people.

The variety of adaptations of the Internet in social and cultural life is shaping experiences of society. The context of these experiences emerges from distinctive modes of production and ways of life. These vary, but these contexts and people's actions within them are how the Internet gains its shape, meaning and use in society. This does not, however, mean that society has transformed into an information society, rather this book shows how society has developed new forms of communication, creating society that is intermediated and informational in new ways. This means that there is an ongoing and embedded interaction of mediated, disintermediated and reintermediated communication weaving through social life that crisscross between and across people and institutions. These combine in different constellations that are made up from different provinces and flows of information and knowledge between institutions and people that occur across time and place in all dimensions of social activity. This book explores the characteristics of this dynamic in the following contexts.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 2 explores the history of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) and shows how technology is socially shaped and culturally informed. The history of the Internet and the WWW shows how it rapidly developed from its conception in 1962 in military research to its commercialized use in 1995. Its 'relations of production' involve military and academic researchers, graduate students, hackers and various counter cultural groups who work with a narrative of networked computer communication. A key characteristic of participation in Internet related activity is that users actively participate in shaping it. Its history shows how entrepreneurs exploited the early Internet and WWW related values of free and open communication to commercialize it within late capitalism, which introduced commercial dynamics and market inequities into its development. The contradictions between a utopian ideal of free and open communication shaped by its early developers and users and the Internet's subsequent commercialization by entrepreneurs for business, public sector and popular markets are influential in its ongoing development.

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Chapter 3 introduces three main approaches to the social study of technology and moves beyond these to argue that technologies including the Internet are socially shaped and culturally informed. The three main approaches are technological determinism, social shaping and social constructivism. These perspectives are extended to show how technology gains meaning in different social contexts through the interaction of social values, cultural sensibilities and economic and political agendas materializing in specific socio-cultural forms. Technologies gain meaning in society by exploring the interdependency of the relations of production with the narratives and forms of participation of cultural forms. There is a need to explore the ways in which the Internet is materializing in an array of social and cultural forms to gain an understanding of the meaningfulness of the Internet within contemporary society.

Chapter 4 addresses the social environment of the Internet and considers whether the Internet is part of a broader social change that is resulting in an 'information society'. First, the discussion addresses the ways in which Internet-based communication interacts with notions of 'time and place' and 'the virtual and the real' and considers how these notions contribute to changing senses of identity, community and civil society. Some of the analysis tends to be overly optimistic, seeing the Internet as a source of liberation by taking social actors out of their established relations of community, institutions, time and place into virtual worlds, techno-spaces and cyber cultures. Pessimistic views, however, include a prognosis of isolated individuals, the break down of community and loss of social interaction. The chapter then addresses changes in economic, occupational spatial and cultural areas to consider if the Internet is part of a transformation that is resulting in an 'information society' or whether society is intermediated and informational without having undergone any fundamental transformations.

Chapter 5 addresses the ways in which the Internet and the transnational informational economy is interacting in the context of work by looking at, for instance, the renegotiation of time and place in tele-work and the renegotiation of gender roles seen in discourse on the demise of 'organizational man' and the rise of 'flexible woman'. Although the Internet is shaped by, and is shaping, new forms of work based on networks, some old work structures and practices are proving resistant to change. The extent, character and consequences of any of these changes are considered through the labour process and the relations between management and labour. There is also an exploration of the implicit promise of 'restored relationships' with a better work-life balance via the 'electronic cottage' and mobile work. These issues are strongly interlaced with the gendering of organizational cultures and women's access to, and experience of, work in an e-enabled economy. They show that the use of the Internet in the

PROOF

context of work reproduces existing social relations, inequalities and hierarchies as well as challenging work gender relations and inequalities.

Chapter 6 looks at how the 'logic of the Internet' is interacting with changes in the ideology and practice of many aspects of welfare and health provision, education, (local) government and citizenship. It addresses the provision and character of education, welfare and democratic process in the context of the consumerization of the public sphere and examines how the Internet and its networking capacity is being shaped to mitigate between consumer choice and welfare needs. This chapter extends the analysis to show how social values, working practices and technologies interact with the provision of public services and the practices of citizenship. It is also the arena in which issues of access, usage and design are visibly linked to concerns of inclusion and exclusion. Changes in the ideology of welfare – namely the move from a collectivist approach of universal provision to a consumerist welfare based on choice and conditionality – are becoming embedded in e-service delivery, e-citizenship and in e-participation, with some residual notion of social justice in those relationships. In this context, agency is an important aspect in ensuring quality of care, participation and equality in society.

The discussion of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the Internet in Chapter 7 brings together the issues raised above and identifies contemporary inequalities. The idea of a digital divide can be understood as the differentiation between the Internet-haves and the Internet-have-nots, which can feed into and reinforce existing sources of inequality and social exclusion. The discussion moves beyond issues of access to situate the digital divide in the multidimensional dynamics of exclusion. Factors within these dynamics are socio-economic position, ethnicity, family status, geographic location, language, as well as educational capacity and digital literacy. The 'knowledge gap' and access to information is important in the dynamics of inclusion as they are used in life-long learning as resources for work and personal development. These dynamics are further complicated in the global digital divide, where lower Internet penetration in developing countries (although it can be uneven within these countries), combined with rapid changes of the Internet-based technological paradigm, requires that the less developed countries have to out-perform advanced economies just to stay where they are, thus fostering and reproducing global inequalities.

Chapter 8 discusses the ways in which the Internet is becoming embedded in everyday life, highlighting the ways in which social actors are negotiating their lived realities and cultural sensibilities in shaping the Internet through its use. Contemporary cultural change such as fragmentation, popular democratization and informalization influence the way the Internet is embedded in everyday life. The development of networked

PROOF

individualism is shaping everyday life and the Internet is used as a tool for communication in this context. However, networked individualism and networks are grounded in institutions and the concept of 'domestication' shows how the Internet is becoming part of everyday life through the social relations of households and their moral economies. The argument opens up this discussion to address how the differentiated use of the Internet is culturally informed, by analysing the use of digital communication technology in a small rural town, in the cosmopolitan condition, in diasporic communities and in the mobile routines of the daily lives of mothers and children. Very often, in everyday life, the socio-cultural forms of the Internet are a combination of old and new forms of participation.

Chapter 9 discusses cyber culture in the context of late modern culture. Cyber cultures have a material dimension in that they consist of computing artefacts and websites; they also are symbolic in that they exist in fiction, film and in people's imaginations; and they are lived through the cyber experiences of people participating in cyber culture. Nonetheless, the notion of the 'virtual' is important in understanding cyber cultures, so it is considered in relation to the ways in which, and to what degree, social actors play with virtual identities, virtual communities and subcultures, as well as virtual sexualities. The early rhetoric surrounding cyber culture emphasized the possibilities of liberation from traditional forms of identity, community and sexuality. Although there are some examples of liberation, these hopes have not reached their envisaged potential; for example, in relation to gender and ethnic identity or in the reinvigoration of community. The practices of online interaction limit total free-play in virtual worlds because values such as trust, reciprocity and honesty in communication remain important in Internet-based communication. Cyber cultures emerge as a negotiated reality mediated between imaginations, on and offline experiences and social mores, being facilitated by machines, wires and websites.

Chapter 10 addresses new media in the context of a new communications environment. The media is a defining feature and institution of modern and late modern life. The focus on new media reiterates the tension between the consumerization of the Internet on the one hand and its historical legacy of free and unregulated communication on the other. The dynamics of this tension feed into the communication environment of the public sphere. The key characteristics of new media, namely digitization and convergence, are discussed in relation to interactivity in mediated forms of communication and the rise of networks in the reshaping of a communications environment. The cultural contexts of new media developments show a relative under-determination of new media when compared with traditional media, as the medium does allow users to participate more interactively in media forms. However, although there are

PROOF

some examples of innovative and participative new media, they are part of the media environment's culture of global capitalism. This is reproducing media concentration as well as generating new media nodes in the communications environment. The ubiquity of interactivity and more individualized use of new media raises questions on the quality of content and raises issues about online experience. For example, although social networking sites connect people with each other they also produce arenas of personalized and individualized entertainment, rather than cultural critique in an active public sphere. These issues situate the Internet in broader social and cultural change by exploring the ways in which new media is materializing in socio-cultural forms in everyday life and in broader institutional change.

In Chapter 11, the Conclusion, the analytical framework of the cultural form brings the main themes of the chapters together to discuss the characteristics of the relations of production, narratives of the medium and types of participation in the socio-cultural forms of the Internet. The relations of production are based in transnational informational capitalism, which is organized through networks. The narratives are about open and free communication based on interactive, flexible and networked communication. Forms of participation are based on the idea of users shaping the form, with freedom of communication and association. Overall, the interdependency of these three dimensions is producing the Internet as a socio-cultural form which is defined by its flexibility and adaptability to facilitate a range of socio-cultural forms. The socio-cultural shaping and materialization of the Internet in various forms and contexts of use mean it contains the contradictions of social life – therefore, one sees not freedom but the negotiation of constraints as people seek to sustain ways of life that are meaningful to them. In terms of the character of society, there have been some changes in the organization of capitalist society towards a networked, informational and intermediated society; however, there is continuity in social practices and cultural sensibilities that militate against the development of a narrow technocratic society. The focus, therefore, is on communication, with the evolvement of a highly communicative society in which the ability to connect is of paramount importance. Communication is cultural and the forms it takes both create and challenge institutions. The current communicative turn is both social and cultural and shapes the technologies which humans create. Given the contradictions of the Internet and of society, there is a need to secure culturally the ethos and capacity for everyone to be able to shape and participate in the forms of communication that the Internet allows.

Index

access issues 6, 110–16, 173
action 34, 53, 192n7
  collective 54, 88, 119, 152–3
  social 30, 36–44, 126, 135
actor-network 34
Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) 15–17
agency 30, 35–6, 64, 192n7
AIDS pandemic 98
alienation 130
alternative officing 74–5
Alto computer 18
architecture of openness 21
ARPA-INTERNET 17
ARPANET 16–18
artefacts 34, 35, 40, 146
Arunachal Pradesh 119–20
audience 166, 169, 171–2
Australian Parliament 89
automation 74
axial principle 56

Baran, Paul 16, 17
Belgium 95
Bell, D. 56, 146, 149
Bell Labs 18
Berlin Wall 16
Berners-Lee, T. 14, 19–21, 173, 185
BITNET 18
blogs 129, 188, 190n8
Bodies INC 158, 200n22
body 158–9
bourgeoisie 163
broadband access 112, 113–14
Bulletin Board Systems 18, 22
Bush, Vannevar 20

call centres 70, 75–7
capital
  labour and 67, 83–4
  social 117, 133
capital accumulation 184
capital flows 110
capitalism 14, 28
  crisis of 108–9
  global 163–4, 166–7, 168, 183
  informational 58, 61–2, 66, 95–6, 104, 105
  Internet-based 109–10
  reorganization of 84
Carpenters Connect Project 175
Castells, M. 13, 54, 58, 107–8
casualized workforce 110
cell phones, *see* mobile phones
Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) 43
CERN 19
Chaney, D. 40, 44, 126, 127
change
  resistance to 77–8
  socio-technological 9–10, 12, 30–46
  see also technological change
chat rooms 145, 176, 188
citizen networks 54–5
citizenship 6, 51, 84, 165–6
civic engagement 88–91, 130
civic government 63
civil society 50, 162
class dynamics 56–7
clerical work 75
Cleveland Freenet 55
Cold War 15–16
collective action 54, 88, 119, 152–3
commercialization 4, 24, 164, 173, 182, 186
commercial sector 12
commoditization 26, 164, 180, 184, 186
communication
  computer mediated 79, 130–1, 146, 155
  cultural dimension of 3–4, 8
  distributed 16–17
  forms of 183–4
  Internet and 132–3
  meaningfulness of 3
  mediated 48, 143–5
  network 8
  new forms of 13
  proper distance in 177–9
  reconfiguration of 1
  relations of 177

PROOF

communication – *continued*
ritual in 48–9
social life and 125–6
social vision of 27
society and 9
Communications Decency Act 50
communications environment 162–80
new media 164–8
shaping of 163–4
social relations of new 168–77
communications infrastructure 109
communicative turn 126, 182–4, 188
communities of interest 169
community 48–9, 130, 134, 150–3, 193n1
community networks 19, 22
community telematics 120–1
CompuServe 24
compu-sex 199n19
computer games 149–50
Computer Lib manifesto 173
computer mediated communication (CMC) 79, 130–1, 146, 155, 197n8
computer skills 117
computer technology 13
connectivity 132–3
consciousness 128
consumerism 6, 84–5, 159–60, 184, 187
consumers 164
consumer society 66
consumption 58
contemporary culture 48–51, 61, 125, 141, 161, 163
content providers 109, 164
contract work 70, 75, 77–8
convergence 7–8, 164–5
cooperation 152
copyleft 18
cosmopolitanism 138
countercultural movements 22
counter-culture movements 125, 185
creative industries 197n5
cross-dressing 157
Cuban Missile Crisis 16
cultural artefacts 146
cultural change 39–40, 125–9
cultural dynamics, of technological change 37–46
cultural exclusion 104
cultural expression 159
cultural forms 181–2
concept of 2–4
dimensions of 3–4
history of Internet and 11–12
Internet and 26–7
Internet as 11–14
socio-technological change and 30–46
cultural history, of Internet 9–29
cultural industries 197n5
cultural objects 35
cultural performance 40
culture 3, 143–5
commoditization of 184
contemporary 48–51, 61, 125, 141, 161, 163
entrepreneurial 24–5
of everyday life 137–8, 141
family 138
fan 159–60, 187
fragmentation of 172, 186
hacker 19, 25, 186
Internet and 124–5
popular 148–9
virtual 22–3
cyberbalkanization 54
cyber cultures 7, 143–61, 185
community and 150–1
defining and working with 145–8
ethnicity and 158
experiences of 150–60
identity in 154
narratives of 148–50
cyberpunk genre 145–6, 148, 156, 185, 199n3, 199n5, 199n6
cyberspace 145–9
cyborgs 154–5, 159

daily life, *see* everyday life
Davies, Donald 17
deadheads 22, 190n7
Defense Communication Agency (DCA) 17
democratic citizenship 165–6
democratic process 6, 51, 54–5, 88–98
Derrida, J. 179, 201n11
deskilling 72, 74
determinism, *see* technological determinism
developing countries 118–19
Dialogue project 175–6
diasporic communities 138, 140–1
differentiation 36
digital divide 6, 89, 103, 106–10, 115
digital literacy 113–14
digital media 165
digital revolution 10
digital television 2, 169, 171, 175, 188
digitization 7–8, 164–6
Dilthey, W. 38
disembodiment 156
disintermediation 166, 200n3
distributed communications 16–17

PROOF

domestication 7, 37, 124, 135, 137, 142, 198n13
domestic sphere 135–6
dossier society 194n3
drama 41–3
Dutton, W.H. 72–3
Dynabook 18

e-Arik 120
Eastern Europe 89
e-business 68
e-citizenship 6
e-commerce 62
economic exclusion 104
economy
  e-economy 69–72
  gift 19, 152, 186, 189n3
  global 68, 108–10
  knowledge 59, 184
  moral 135–6, 192n11, 198n12
education 6, 95–8, 114–15, 184
e-economy 69–72
e-government 46, 91–8
e-inclusion 112–13
e-learning 96–8
Electric Minds, Inc. 49
electronic cottage 5, 65, 71
Electronic Frontier Foundation 52
electronic payment systems 2
electronic surveillance 67, 72, 79
email 79, 129
embodiment 158–9
employment relations 70
Enclosure 14
Enclosures acts 27
Engelbart, Doug 20
English language 114
entrepeneurs
  Internet 23–5
  social 55
e-participation 6
e-service delivery 6, 92
Estonia 95
ethnicity 158
ethnomethodology 35
European Commission (EC) 112
European Information Society 37, 112–13, 172–3
European Union (EU) 172
everyday life 197n2
  cultural change and 125–9
  culture of 137–8, 141
  institutions of 135
  Internet in 124–5, 134–41
  meaningfulness of 134–41
  routines and practices in 131–2
  second age of the Internet and 129–31
exclusion 6, 103–7, 184, 188
  access issues and 110–15
  case studies 115–22
  digital divide and 106–10
  from labour market 104
  policies to counter 116–17
exclusive society 84

Facebook 130, 174, 201n10
face-to-face interaction 51–2, 79
family cultures 138
fan cultures 159–60, 187
FidoNet 18
Finland 95
flexibility 141, 185
flexible woman 72
Fordism 66, 83–6, 194n2
Forster, E.M. 14
fortress communities 153
Fourth Estate 163
fragmentation 48–9, 126, 155, 172, 186, 187
freedom 21, 25, 185
Freeman, C. 57
free market ideology 84
Free Software Foundation (FSF) 19
Fuchs, C. 61–2
functionalist arguments 192n10

Garfinkel, H. 34–5
Gates, Bill 24, 25
Geertz, Clifford 3
gender identity 144, 155–7
gender relations 71–2, 79–81
gender roles 5–6, 144
General Practice (GP) 99–100
geographical divides 113–14
Germany 117
Gibson, William 145–6, 148
gift economy 19, 152, 186, 189n3
global capitalism 163–4, 166–8, 183
global economy 68, 108–10
globalization 104, 108, 110, 165
glocalization 134
Goddard, J. 60
Gonzalez, J. 158
governments, crisis of legitimacy for 110
grass-roots ethos 18–19
Greece 94–5
groupware 152

PROOF

Habermas, J. 164
hackers 18
  culture of 19, 25, 186
  Microsoft and 24
Haraway, D. 154–5
health care 98–102
hegemony 43–4, 106
high culture 3
high-speed connections 112
Hine, C. 146
historical analysis 9–11
Hogget, P. 86
home design 198n14
home workers 71
hospitality 179, 201n11
hot-desking 74
hotelling 74
households 135–8
human interaction 51–2
hypermobility 139
hypertext 20, 166
hypertextuality 149

ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) 23
identity
  construction of 154
  experimentation with 52
  fragmentation 155
  gender 144, 155–7
  sexual 157–8
  virtual 50, 52, 122, 143
imaginative worlds 155–6
immersion 149–50
immigration, as source of labour 70
inclusion 6, 103–7, 115–22, 196n11
India 98, 119–20
individual freedom 18
individualism 6–7, 84
  networked 53–5, 133–4, 183
industrial revolution 27
inequalities 6
Infinity Story project 96
informational capitalism 58, 61–2, 66, 95–6, 104, 105
Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) 1–2, 13, 62, 197n1
  diffusion of 136–7
  producers of 136–7
information networks 60
information overload 78–9
Information Processing Techniques Office (IPTO) 16
information society 5, 47, 196n9
  conceptualizing 55–64
  measures of 58–9
  occupations within 59–60
innovation 10, 30–1
  cultural approach to 37–46
  in everyday life 135
  social environment and 15
  social shaping and 32–3
  theatre of 12–13, 15–26, 31, 45, 182
innovation studies 30
innovative action 30
Institute for Global Communication (IGC) 22
institutional agency 165
institutional change 172, 187
institutional-technical change 36–7
institutions, role of 58
Integrated Services Digital Networks (ISDNs) 57
intellectuals 56
interactive digital television (iDTV) 2, 169, 171, 175, 188
interactivity 149–50, 165, 167–8
Internet 8
  access issues 6, 106, 110–16
  commercialization of 24–5, 52, 173, 186
  communications environment and 162–80
  as cultural form 4, 11–14, 26–7, 182
  cultural history of 9–29
  cyber cultures and 143–61
  embedding of, in everyday life 6–7
  everyday life and 124–42
  exclusion, inclusion and 103–23
  first age of 197n6
  freedom on 21
  in health and social care 98–102
  history of 4, 11–15, 186
  narratives of 185
  participation and 21
  political process and 88–91
  privatization of 18
  public policy and 83–102
  in public services 91–8
  relationships between society and 51–3
  second age of the 129–31
  social change and 26–8, 181–2
  social dynamics of 55–64
  social environment of 5
  social landscape of 47–51, 63–4
  socio-cultural contexts 1–4
  socio-cultural environment of 47–64
  as socio-cultural form 182–4, 187–8
  structure of 2
  technological change and 181–2

PROOF

Internet – *continued*
uses of 1–2
work and 65–82
Internet activities 11, 129–30
Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) 23
Internet-based capitalism 109–10
Internet entrepreneurs 23–5
Internet pornography 26, 50–1
Internet Protocol (IP) 2
Internet Service Providers (ISPs) 18
Internet Society (ISOC) 23
Internet telephony 129, 173
interpersonal skills 71
intertextuality 149
inventions 10
Ireland 138

jacking in 146
just-in-time processes 66

Kinky Komputer 22
knowledge 62
access issues and 110–15
economy of 59
tacit 78
knowledge economy 114, 184
knowledge gap 6, 114–15, 173
knowledge labour 62
knowledge space 166–7
knowledge workers 69–70, 105

labour 5
capital and 67, 83–4
divisions of 62–3
in e-economy 69–72
sexual division of 79–81
labour market, exclusion from 104
labour process theory 66–8
LambdaMOO 156, 199n17
La Neta 22
language issues 114, 155
laptops 97
Latour, B. 34
Law, J. 33–4
leisure time 126–7
less-developed countries 108–9, 118–19
lifelong learning 97–8, 114
liminoid 42
Linux 18, 152, 189n1
local communities, outreach to 120–1
London 116, 120–1
London Connects Project 167
lurking 49

management studies 30
Mark, Karl 31
Mark 1 17
Marxism 67
mass media 144
material worlds 155–6
meaning 38–9
media 128, 144, 162
commercialization of 164
digital 165
new 7–8, 164–77
pervasiveness of 61
proper distance in 177–9
reconfigured 169–71
traditional 169, 170
use of 163–4
media ownership, concentration of 169
mediapolis 177–9
media politics 90–1
mediated communication 48, 143–5
mediated discourse 171
mediation 144, 171
media use 131–2
Memex machine 20
Microsoft 24
middle-range theory 36
migrants 118
MILNET 17
Ministry of Technology 17
Minitel 23
minorities 118
misinformation systems 79
mobile centrics 196n8
mobile devices 174
mobile phones 2, 61, 129, 139–40
mobility 128–9, 151
MODEM 18
modernity 48–51, 163, 170, 178, 180
Molina, A.H. 34
MOOScape 158
moral economy 135–6, 192n11, 198n12
Moses Bridge 33
MUDS 23
MySpace 130

Napster 166
narratives 30, 42, 44–6, 69–72, 120–1, 185
National Health Service 99
National Science Foundation (NSF) 17–18
National Service Framework (NSF) 195n7
Nelson, Ted 20, 173
neo-liberalism 84, 86–7, 92, 104, 137
network capital 58
network communication 8

PROOF

networked individualism 6–7, 53–5, 133–4, 183
networked individuals 132–4
networked offices 73–4
networked social movements 53–5
networks 57–8, 60, 68, 85–6, 87, 132–4, 167
Network Working Group 17
Neuromancer 148
Newham Online 55
new media 7–8, 164–77
niche channels 169
Ning 201n8
NSFNET 17–18
nuclear war 16

occupational structures 59–60
offices, networked 73–4
offshoring 76
omnivores 196n6
online communities 22, 49–50, 53, 153–4
online games 129, 149–50
online interactions 153–4
online/off-line dichotomy 51–2
online publishing 171
open-source movement 18
OpenXAdes 95
organizational change 73–4
organizational structures 77–9
organization man 72
organizations 35
Orlikowski, W.J. 35
otherness 177, 178
outsourcing 76

packet switching 16–17
paradigm shift 10–11
parental shaping, of technology 137
parliamentary democracy 88–9
participant design, of services 101
participation 21, 106
  gender and 79–81
  modes of 186–7
  organizational issues and 77–9
participative web 26
patriarchal relations 80, 81
pedagogy 115
peer recognition 19
performance 40–3, 181–2
personal computers (PCs) 2, 18–19
personal spheres 139
persons with disabilities 111
Pfaffenberger 37, 39
Plant, Sadie 199n16
podcasts 190n8
political exclusion 104
political process, Internet and 88–91
politics
  society and 153
  of technology 33
popular culture 3, 148–9
popular democratization 126
pornography, Internet 26, 50–1
Postel 23
post-Fordism 66, 84, 85, 104
post-industrial society 55–6, 66, 69–72
post-modernism 31, 32, 191n1
power relations 14, 106
praxis 38
privacy issues 79
private sphere 162–3, 188
producers 164
product development 33
production 44, 58
  relations of 15, 29, 65–9, 105, 184
protest 152–3, 159
Protestantism 25
public engagement 51
public goods 152
public policy, logic of the Internet in 83–8
public profiles 174
public sector employment 81
public service broadcasting (PSB) 163, 164, 170
public services 91–8
  health and social care 98–102
  provisioning of 6
public sphere 6, 162, 163, 188

queer culture 157–8

race 158
racial inequality 111
racial prejudice 33
radical movements 125
Reaganism 84, 92
recombinant 164–5
reconfigured media 169–71
reflexivity 154
regimes 106
regulation theory 86
re-intermediation 166
relations of production 15, 29, 65–9, 105, 184
remote mothering 140, 188
research and development (R&D) projects 38
revolution, meaning of 10
Rheingold, H. 151

PROOF

Riga Ministerial Declaration 112–13
ritual 48–9
Robins, K. 153, 166–7
role-playing 40, 52, 155
rural areas 119–20

scandal politics 90–1
schools
  inequalities in 114–15
  reshaping 96–8
Schumpeterian Workfare State 85
Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) 57
scientific management 67–8, 194n1
service economy 62–3
sexual identity 157–8
sexuality 144, 156–7
SF-Lovers 21
shareware 166
shopping 3
shopping malls 3
short-message-services (SMS) 166
signification 61
Silicon Valley 24, 70
Silverstone, R. 126, 135–6, 177, 178, 179, 201n11
Slovenia 89, 94
Smith, Dorothy 128
sociability 48, 53–5
social action 30, 36, 44, 126, 135
social actors 31, 127, 146–7, 164, 188
social capital 117, 133
social care 98–102
social change 2
  Internet and 26–8, 181–2
  technology and 31–4
social citizenship 84
social computing 2, 25–6
social constructivism 5, 30, 33–5
social contexts 5, 143–5
social control 86, 105
social drama 40–3, 192n12
social entrepreneurs 55
social environment 5, 15
social exclusion 104, 195n1
  see also exclusion
social forms
  concept of 2–4
  networks and networked individuals as 132–4
social fragmentation 126
social identity 129
social interaction, Internet and 53, 54
social justice 173
social landscape, of Internet 47–51, 63–4
social learning 11–12, 33
socially excluded groups 116, 118
social movements 53–5, 187
social networking 2, 8, 130
social networking sites (SNSs) 26, 129, 162–3, 173–5, 187, 188
social order 41–2
social protest 152–3, 159
social relations 14, 39, 107–8, 166, 168–78, 184
social sciences 31
social shaping 5, 30, 32–3, 80
social structure 192n8
social worlds 34–7
society
  civil 50, 162
  communication and 9
  consumer 66
  information 5, 47, 55–64, 196n9
  interaction of Internet with 2–4
  networked 133–4
  politics and 153
  post-industrial 55–6, 66, 69–72
  relationships between Internet and 51–3
socio-cultural environment, of Internet 47–64
socio-cultural forms 4, 8, 40, 115–22, 127, 182–4
  Internet as 182–4, 187–8
  modes of participation 186–7
  narratives of 185
socio-technological change 9–10, 12, 30–46
socio-technological constitutencies 34
soft skills 71
somnambulism 37
South Africa 89
South Yorkshire 121
Soviet Union 16, 22
space 48–9, 128–9
  gendering of 137
  knowledge 166–7
  transformational 31, 42–3, 181–2
spatial reorganization, of work 75–6
Sputnik 16
state
  social control and the 105
  surveillance 105–6
stereotypes 158
stress, workplace 72
structuration theory 35–6, 191n6
structure, agency and 35–6
subcontractors 77–8
subculture 200n23
surveillance 122, 188
  electronic 72, 79
  state 105–6

PROOF

tacit knowledge 78
Tamagotchi 150
Taylorism 67–8, 194n1
techno-bricolage 159
technocratic elite 56–7, 92
technoculture 105
technological change 9–10, 28, 172, 187
  cultural dynamics of 37–46
  Internet and 181–2
  in workplace 73–7
technological determinism 5, 30–2, 43, 57, 66
technology
  consumption of 136–7
  content of 32
  duality of 35
  incorporation of new 135
  institutionalization of 34–7
  organizations and 35
  politics of 33
  social change and 31–2, 32–4
  social construction of 33–4
  social shaping of 80
  social study of 5
  uptake of 28
teenagers, Internet use by 132
tele-democracy 91–8
television 131, 198n15
telework 5–6, 70–1, 75, 78, 81
teleworkers 70, 74–5
Thatcherism 84, 92
theatre of innovation 12–13, 15–26, 31, 45, 182
3G mobile communications 173
time 48–9, 128–9, 131–2
traditional broadcasting sector 169
transformational spaces 31, 42–3, 181–2
Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) 17
transnational communities 138, 140–1
transnational informational capitalism 8, 104
travel 139
Turkle, S. 155
Turner, B.S. 41, 42

ubiquity 200n1
under-employment 72
UNDINA site 158
United Kingdom 93–4, 120–1
  health and social care 99–101
  Internet access in 115–16
  National Health Service 99
United States, Internet access in 111–12
Universal Resource Locators (URLs) 19
university campuses 18
UNIX 18
Unix-to-Unix CoPy (UUCP) 18
Usenet groups 129
Usenet News 18
user communities 12
user profiles 201n6
U.S. military 15–16

venture capital 25
video blogging (vlogs) 191n9
video games 2, 199n7
video-on-demand services 171
videophones 137
virtual communitarians 21–3
virtual communities 21–3, 143–5, 151–2, 165
virtual identity 50, 52, 122, 143
virtuality 147
virtual objects 150
virtual pets 150, 199n8
virtual reality 145
virtual sexualities 143, 156–7
virtual working 68–9
virtual worlds 7, 155–6
voluntary sector 63

Web 2.0 2, 25–6, 98, 111, 191n10
Web pages 2
web-spheres, political 89–90
Webster, 59
welfare 6, 85, 86, 86–7, 184
welfare state 83–4
Weltanschauung 38, 40
Westminister model 88–9
white collar society 59
Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL) 22, 151, 190n6
Wikipedia 152
Williams, Raymond 3, 43
Wilson, Harold 17
windows metaphor 149
women
  interpersonal skills of 71
  marginalization of 194n4
  participation in workplace 80–1
  work access and 5–6
work
  changing context of 65–9
  contract 70, 75, 77–8
  gender relations and 71–2
  Internet and 5–6, 65–82
  narratives regarding, in e-economy 69–72

PROOF

work – *continued*
organizational issues 77–9
participation issues 77–9
spatial reorganization of 75–6
virtual 68–9
workaholism 25
workers
deskilling of 72, 74
information overload for 78–9
resistance to change by 77–8
work flexibility 72
workforce
casualized 110
feminization of 66
work-life balance 5, 65, 71
workplace
gender relations in 79–81
participation in 72–7
work spheres 139
World Trade Organization (WTO) protests 159
World Wide Web (WWW) 2
commercialization of 186
as cultural form 4
development of 19–20, 20–1
history of 4
invention of 13
narrative of freedom and 185
participation and 21–2

Xanadu 20
Xerox Parc 18

Young People Online project 96
YouTube 98, 173, 174–5

Zambia 118–19
Zambian Association of Research and Development (ZARD) 119

PROOF