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Inhuman Networks / Controversies in Digital Ethics

Talking about the rise of the internet is at once as trivial as it is banal. If I asked a friend a speculative question, how do I make my own sourdough culture, they would sarcastically respond, there is this new thing where you can type in these questions without asking me – it is called Google. As the internet still continues to rise, like a successful sourdough culture in the oven, it leaves in its wake a trail of data that has yet to be reassembled. The task of rearranging this data to form a coherent narrative or just to at least make sense of what questions can come out is the objective that Grant Bollmer's *Inhuman Networks: Social Media and the Archaeology of Connection* (2016) and *Controversies in Digital Ethics* (2016) edited by Amber Davisson and Paul Booth have set themselves.

Bollmer's *Inhuman Networks* attempts to delineate a growing dependence on network culture and the myth that supports this dependence. The basic tenet of Bollmer's argument is that networks are not bound up with human nature. Bollmer argues that the belief in the perpetual increase of networks is a contemporary one and has been foisted and supported by an overarching 'form of governance' (p. 110). *Inhuman Networks* promises to drill down into his main subject area early on, this being social media and how it attempts to 'normalise seemingly strange transformations where humans and technology become interchangeable through the privileging of connectivity and flow above all else' (p. 5).

The mission statement from the editors of *Controversies in Digital Ethics* is less about rethinking human nature and more about identifying what new ethical questions have come out of the now ubiquitous culture of the internet. *Controversies in Digital Ethics* therefore points 'to the places where digital technology users are struggling to deal with innovations that make possible

behaviours we had not previously worried about' (p. 4). While both books set at the task of navigating internet culture from almost antithetical methodological approaches, they both come back to the simple fact that it is the contemporary user, the person in front of the screen, that is at the centre of this maelstrom of memes, big data, and hyper-connectivity. Bollmer calls this person the 'nodal citizen' whereas Davisson and Booth refer to this person as a 'netizen'. These portmanteaus are indicative of both texts' search to name what is new and aptly show how this nascent field of internet scholarship still has many stories left to tell.
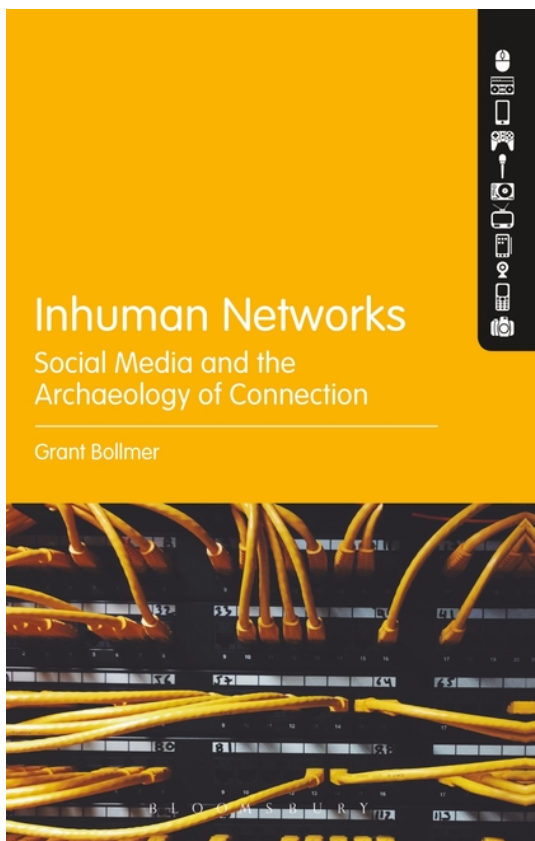
Starting with *Inhuman Networks*, Bollmer tackles the topic of what a network is in three sections: 'Network Archaeologies', 'Nodal Citizens', and 'Beyond Social Media, or, a World Without People'. 'Network Archaeologies', aims to reveal that humanity's 'eternal desire to connect' is one that is historically 'contingent' (p. 23). Part one uses an explicitly Foucauldian approach to 'trace

genealogical transformations of networking and connectivity' (ibid.) and provides a historical foundation for Bollmer's more contemporary, and nebulous, arguments of what a network is in the latter half of the book. Part one uses anatomical examples from the Renaissance to reveal the subcutaneous associations that feed into the contemporary understanding of a network. For example, Bollmer states that at the 'beginning in the 1600's and peaking in popularity by the later 1800's, physicians used "network" to describe many structures of the human body, most notably the nerves, arteries, and veins' (p. 33). Bollmer moves from the history of science to the social by looking at how the telegraph and in particular the railways that were created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demonstrate how human nature is not 'always-already networked' but were 'fodder for populist (and in some cases, capitalist) fears of social and economic connectivity' (p. 46).

Bollmer goes on to detail how the railroad was perceived with fear and suspicion through the connection it brought. Bollmer uses this section to claim that the creation of the telegraph causes the idea of networks to become 'dematerialised' (p. 56). The dematerialisation of the network was originally feared as it allowed undesirable social groups, such as Communists and the Jewish community, to be 'invisible and inaccessible' (p. 57). Bollmer then moves from the social to the economic to show how our understanding of network culture is a conflation of biology, technology, and social and economic forces. The economic section completes an ontologically engulfing history of the idea of the network that seeks to demonstrate that this concept has been 'grafted' onto human nature by a 'form of governance' rather than arising naturally from within the individual and her/his desire for connection (p. 96).

The second section introduces the concept of the 'Nodal Citizen' with the aim of showing how the individual that comprises this concept is made rather than self-determined. The individual, according to Bollmer, becomes part of 'an imagined material form' through the network, thus allowing the body of the user to be 'inscribed into and transformed through the possibilities of media's materiality', which ultimately leads to the user having to 'integrate themselves in the technological assemblage' thus becoming inhuman in turn (p. 111). The first chapter of this section sets up the rest of part two with haunting examples and discussion about death on social media with the aim of showing the ease to which 'the distinction between humans and data are gradually being erased' (p. 118). Bollmer uses examples from social media to show how despite a person having died the deceased user's existence remains.

Although social media companies claim that the dead's data has been taken down in line with requests from the family this is in fact impossible due to the fact that 'in the face of death, online information is revealed not only as separate from that of the user, but also as controlled and possessed by the network itself' (p. 121). Bollmer cites Facebook's terms and conditions to exemplify how social media retains all the rights to the data that an individual uploads including the 'right to sublicense' and 'use, copy, publish, stream, store, retain, publicly perform or display, transmit, scan, reformat, modify, edit, frame, translate, excerpt, adapt, create derivative works and distribute (through multiple tiers)' (p. 125). Bollmer concludes by saying that although Facebook usually complies with the wishes of the bereaved 'they are under no [legal] obligation to do so' (ibid.). Bollmer's point here is not so much that the deceased deserve to be treated with proper reverence, although this undoubtedly is one of the consequences of his line of argument, but that living users of social media are themselves spectral in that they become almost indecipherable from the dead, as personal information is harvested and then reproduced by big data companies irrespective of a pulse. The waters of depersonalisation are further muddied as Bollmer moves on to the topic of bots in the second chapter.

> Bots cannot be thought of as some marginal online population, insignificant in relation to the real action of human agency. Rather, bots are ubiquitous, their presence often more substantial than that of human users as they produce, consume, buy and sell. (p. 135)

Bots are algorithms programmed for specific tasks that range from data entry to spamming Twitter feeds. Bollmer cites their prevalence through the internet research company Incapsula, which concluded that bots 'comprised 61.5 percent of all website traffic' (p. 136). He goes on to state that what bots reveal is 'that the internet may not be an environment defined by human actions and agency' and the growing ubiquity of such inhuman actors 'calls into question the human "sociality" assumed by those who celebrate the organising power of social media' (p. 137). Bollmer's point is a pressing one in that as society and citizenship becomes more invested in online networks these networks undermine those that are invested in them, as the users are rendered equivalent to bots as 'the "human" never emerges in any precise way that can articulate online identity with an actual biological living person' (p. 154).

For the final section of part two Bollmer examines the 38.5 percent of living users and how this group is subjected to 'the full and totalising performance of the "truth" of one's identity' (p. 156). Bollmer here turns to the topic of self-censorship and how the logic of social media dictates that 'nodal citizenship' must be visible at all times or risk being 'excluded outright' (p. 158). Bollmer uses the case of MacMaster/Arraf to highlight the problems around demanding individuals being instantly 'authentic' and 'visible' while questioning the pitfalls that inauthenticity and invisibility pose as users can potentially operate outside of social responsibility. Bollmer here coincides with *Controversies in Digital Ethics* in calling for an understanding of new ethical questions that the internet poses, free from 'simple binaries of freedom or control' (p.172).

The final section of *Inhuman Networks* looks at how the conflation of the networks, as shown in part one, and the effects of conflated networks in part two, create a discourse that rather than celebrating 'the equality of networked connection' derides those who fail to connect, as they become failures in their apparent 'rejection of society' (p. 178). This absolutist logic of social networks that demands total connection or abjection of the subject, Bollmer claims, mimics the logic of neoliberalism which he claims is:

> a contradictory logic that suggests humans are essentially individualised economic agents in competition with one another. It relies on the dismantling of state institutions to liberate the natural 'entrepreneurial' capacities of the individual, but simultaneously depends on the state as a direct means for advancing this entrepreneurial reason. The tasks of the state are transferred to private organisations, delineating the worthy from the unworthy in their distribution of aid. The value of an individual is determined through their willingness to become personally 'responsible', acting as an 'entrepreneur of the self'. Network technologies are often directly articulated to these norms as tools that will empower individuals in their quest for proper self-management as the welfare state wanes away. (p. 178)

Fulfilling the role of the dutiful 'nodal citizen' then requires that the subject is properly comprised within the network, relying on the infrastructure of this network to connect to others, while operating as an 'entrepreneur of the self' and in this way adopting the contradictory nature of neoliberalism, according to Bollmer, in being supported institutionally while being required to maintain an unspecified high degree of responsibility. Bollmer frames responsibility for the nodal citizen as regulating the threat of the other, that is those who are unconnected, who are always an 'internal threat' to the network (p. 181). The unconnected then become a presence to be 'corrected' yet

as Bollmer claims this is in itself impossible as the lines of inclusion and exclusion are constantly changing and therefore renders all 'nodal citizens' as 'inhuman' because no one 'can neither be excluded or assimilated' (ibid.).

Bollmer's pessimistic take on networks and the internet age that renders those that use the internet, and seemingly also those that do not, as 'inhuman' negotiates axiomatic values associated with connectivity and network technologies. In turn this opens new lines of questioning into our ever-increasing dependencies on social networks and the internet. *Controversies in Digital Ethics* on the other hand is less about destabilising overarching ideas of our consumption and use of the internet but rather looks at how the internet has summoned new types of ethical challenges never before seen and that therefore require new ethical parameters to be drawn.
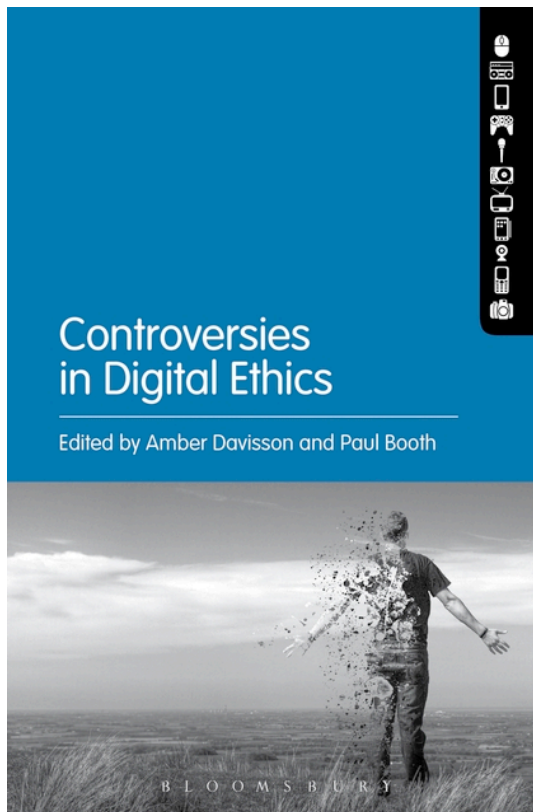
The first essay in the collection by J.J. Sylvia, 'Little Brother: How Big Data Necessitates an Ethical Shift from Privacy to Power', looks at how big data can be 'more emancipatory and affirmative' (p. 14). Sylvia questions

Bollmer's assumption that big data necessarily produces an inhuman subject and considers how big data can be used to empower the individual. Sylvia argues that currently the big data that serves as a source of 'consumer labour is more robustly than ever a source of profit' (p. 16). Yet Sylvia claims the individual does not know 'exactly what ways such data is being used to manipulate action' and therefore the users online labour becomes disguised and ultimately used against them in terms of freedom of choice, as targeted advertising creates 'unintuitive correlations' of desire, and in terms of privacy as one's online decisions come to attest to their offline life (p. 20). Sylvia states that the emergent role that big data plays in the world, through the way that information online is collated effecting both our offline and online lives, calls for 'ways to use big data that are emancipating' (p. 27). Sylvia concludes that 'it may ultimately be more beneficial to simply be creative and productive' rather than 'dwelling too long on problems of privacy and power' and therefore asks the question 'how can I, as an individual leverage data in ways that will improve the world or the lives of others' (pp. 27-28). This stands in contrast to Bollmer's way of seeing big data as a method of control; Sylvia asks how the individual can use big data to regain control.

The third chapter by Amber Davisson, 'Passing Around Women's Bodies Online: Identity, Privacy, and Free Speech on Reddit', questions how the internet creates new clashes between the right to free speech and the right to privacy through looking at examples of these clashes on the website Reddit. Looking at three subreddit groups – 'creepshot', 'fappening', and 'Facebookcleavage' – Davisson uses each as an example of how privacy and freedom of speech combine in the internet in new and unseen ways as the layers of online and offline merge with ideas of public and private space. What comes out of this engaging essay is not a definitive answer of how to conduct oneself online, although this is alluded to, but that the legal definitions of privacy and free speech need to be updated at the pace that the internet finds new ways of subverting these definitions.

Davisson's essay is not alone in suggesting that the pace at which the internet is accelerating demands an updated understanding of the space in which it accelerates into. The speed at which ethical problems arise from the internet are reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of chaos that can be 'characterised less by the absence of determinations than by the infinite speed with which they take shape and vanish' (p. 42). In David J. Gunkel's essay, 'Paradigm Shift: Media Ethics in the Age of Intelligent Machines', the idea of infinite speed takes on tangible meaning as 'intelligent machines',

with their inhuman processing powers, become more prominent social actors who can operate with inhuman speed. Gunkel states that computers are often thought of as tools rather than machines, and this confusion betrays the agency that machines are in fact 'the worker himself or herself, the active and self-directed entity' (p. 238). Gunkel uses the example of the New York Stock Exchange to show that 'intelligent machines', here in the form of algorithms, are employed to speed up transactions. The process worked and is now used in 'over 70 percent of all trades' (p. 239). However, one adverse effect of this mechanisation of 'intelligent machines' in the stock market was the 'flash crash' in 2010, where algorithms interacted with one another in such a way as to cause the Dow Jones to drop over 1,000 points in a few seconds and then 'rebounded almost as quickly' (p. 240). The causes for this 'brief financial crisis' are unknown as no human can be 'considered responsible' (ibid.). Here Gunkel shows how 'intelligent machines' have become social actors that 'take real-world decisions with little or no human direction' (p. 239).

Bollmer exemplifies Gunkel in that the former states that it is becoming harder to identify human from machine actors as life is being seen increasingly as an 'algorithmic process', where the human is blurred with the machine through 'mathematical formulas' (p. 144). This echoes Gunkel in his conclusion, in which he claims that humanity is in the 'midst of an invasion' by intelligent machines (p. 243). Gunkel concludes that what is called for are new forms of naming to create new paradigms, though we find ourselves in the 'cumbersome situation of trying to articulate what will exceed the current situation by employing the words and concepts that it already defines and regulates' (p. 245). In this way Gunkel strikes a pertinent note, that resonates through the whole of *Controversies in Digital Ethics*, of the urgency and need to tackle these new ethical problems that are not 'some future possibility' but are happening now (p. 244).

As the internet unfolds the promise of its freedom becomes enmeshed in problematic hierarchies that bring with them new ethical challenges. What develops appears as a natural order, yet as these two books demonstrate this is far from the case. As Chantal Mouffe in *Agonistics* states, it is the seeming naturalness of the 'natural order' that always requires questioning:

> What is at a given moment accepted as the 'natural' order, jointly with the common sense that accompanies it, is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices. It is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity that is exterior to the practices that brought it into being. (p. 2)

Bollmer sets himself the challenge to show how the seemingly innocent desire to be connected to others is part of the 'sedimented hegemonic practices' of a neoliberal elite. Tackling the twofold idea of the societal conception of human nature and those that apparently created this idea is no mere task of data entry and is one that Bollmer takes on with passion and insight. *Controversies in Digital Ethics* on the other hands provides a stable and even-handed account of specific internet case studies that offer ways of thinking about the future of digital ethics. Both books converge in their shared acknowledgement for the need to establish new lines of enquiry in thinking about the role that 'nodal citizens' or 'netizens' will play in the future and present developments of this disorientating digital age.

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References

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