Adriana Cavarero conceptualize the voice beyond the phoneme (both using song as a case study) in order to challenge Ong’s and McLuhan’s language-centric approach to speech. Alexander Weheliye’s and Jacob Smith’s pieces—about “canned laughter” on TV and vocoders in R&B recordings, respectively—juxtapose technological mediations of the human voice to scrutinize elements of speech that ostensibly signify “humanity.” Finally, cultural theorist Mladen Dolar examines “presymbolic” (p. 548) speech (such as that of infants) and “postlinguistic” (p. 550) speech (such as laughter, with rich overlap with Weheliye), further separating the voice from language.

The Sound Studies Reader places a heavy emphasis on philosophical theory throughout. Derrida, Barthes, Steve Goodman, and Sterne all attend to a basic concept for sound studies: the very definitions of sound. Is sound first and foremost a physical vibration or a human sensory phenomenon? What are the cultural preconditions of audition? The stakes of this debate are not only for philosophers’ circles. How we conceptualize the telephone, for instance, can put into play a host of larger ideas. Is a telephone a configuration of technological encoding schemes, a mobile nexus of community, a symbol of institutional hegemonies, or all of the above? These battlegrounds of meaning alter how we think about sounds in everyday life.

How, then, can sound studies best produce knowledge about sound? The editor carefully—perhaps too carefully—avoids answering that question. Drawing on poststructuralist ideas, Sterne wisely emphasizes the need for a reflexive examination of method, and suggests sound studies approach case studies as contextual sites rather than as objects in themselves. After thus deconstructing the objects and subjects of sound, however, what is left does not form a coherent methodological foundation for sound studies. While Sterne briskly calls into question many of our presumptions about sound, the problem remains that he does not move the field itself in any specific direction at all. But whatever the threat (or possible blessing) of methodological incoherence, the strength of this volume is its ability to inspire, to start new conversations, and to survey a vast, historically rich intellectual landscape. The Sound Studies Reader succeeds in portraying a field of possibility open not only to historians and media scholars, but to any reader eager to experience a revelation about sound’s place in culture. This is a revelation no further off than the nearest city street, the telephone, or the ears on the reader’s head.


Reviewed by: Noriko Hara, Indiana University, USA

Although the Internet has been in existence for decades, it remains a technology in flux. This edited volume uses “critical theory of technology” as a framework to demonstrate how the Internet evolves as different uses and interpretations of the technology emerge. The introductory chapter written by Feenberg distinguishes this “critical theory of technology” from science and technology studies (STS) by stating that critical theory of technology treats
such technological worlds as terrains of struggle on which hegemonic forces express themselves through specific design strategies in opposition to subordinate groups that are more or less successful in influencing the future form of the artifacts with which they are engaged (p. 4).

No matter how subordinate or dominant each group is, interactions among them influence how the Internet comes to be shaped. With these forces in mind, Feenberg examines the Internet from three divergent perspectives: the information model, the consumption model, and the community model. The information model perceives the Internet as a tool for disseminating information. Under the consumption model, the Internet predominantly serves the private sector, such as the entertainment industry and e-commerce. Feenberg seems particularly invested in the community model. He contends that mediated communities on the Internet “strongly resemble [a] face-to-face community” (p. 12) and that this community model is the most viable scenario for the future of the Internet.

Of course, these models for understanding the Internet need not be mutually exclusive. There is much to be gained from combining them. Maria Bokardjieva’s chapter “Subactivism: Lifeworld and politics in the age of the Internet” involves a case study of a gap between reality and hopes that the Internet could actively support civic engagement, itself similar to work I pursued in a literature review of online social movements (Hara and Huang, 2011). The technology will not automatically make people more politically engaged, but it may enhance preexisting political interests (Agre, 2002). People are not only using the communal aspects of the Internet; they are also using the Internet for informational and consumption purposes. Similarly, Kate Milberry’s chapter “Hacking for social justice: The politics of prefigurative technology” demonstrates a concern for all three models presented in Feenberg’s introduction.

One of the finest chapters in this volume is Norm Friesen, Andrew Feenberg, Grace Smith, and Shannon Lowe’s “Experiencing surveillance: A phenomenological approach.” The authors shed light on the conceptualization of surveillance by employing Sartre’s vignette of “the look” with a phenomenological description of using a bank ATM machine. Articulating the notion of one observing and being observed is fascinating. As we are all part of society, we have multiple roles to play, making us observers and observed much of the time. Whereas some have discussed the idea that we are being observed, few have explicated this duality of roles. Moreover, in the digital world, very little can be hidden. The permanent nature of the transaction data cannot be emphasized enough. Friesen, Feenberg, Smith, and Lowe describe how concrete data, such as receipts, can be destroyed. However, there are many traceable data that exist without the awareness of the people who initially generated such data. The implication of this chapter is clear, for example, in the privacy issues related to Facebook and the kinds of surveillance issues we find exemplified in political regimes around the world. However, I wonder how many digital natives are aware of the complexity of the structure. For instance, a Facebook account can be deleted, but all the data for that account remain on the Facebook server.

Another virtue of this book is the diversity of the topics it covers—ranging from the history of online education, to online gaming, to hacktivism. At the same time, it would have been more informative to expand the book sections discussing online education, online entertainment, and online civic engagement. Currently only the last category,
entitled “The Civic Internet,” contains three chapters. The first two chapters are combined into one section called “Play and School Online”; a chapter that critically analyzes Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to discuss how this type of online education changes pedagogies in higher education, for example, could have been a valuable addition to the collection. I would also have expected to see a concluding chapter synthesizing what has transpired in the chapters.

Despite these limitations, this volume offers theoretical insights that are applied to concrete case studies. Although the assorted case studies sometimes lack theoretical depth, the chapters in this book use these case studies to inform theories. Articulation of agencies in relation to technologies is evident throughout the book. This edited volume can be a valuable resource for graduate courses in communication, information science, culture studies, political science, and sociology.

References