Navigating Technomedia: Caught in the Web

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Sam Han’s *Navigating Technomedia: Caught in the Web*

Review by Jeffrey Barlow

There are many ways to approach the impact of the Web. Many of us are simply pragmatic users, wanting to know more about useful applications. Perhaps at the opposite end of the virtual poles from those users are theorists who want to know what, finally, it all *means*. The author of *Technomedia*, Sam Han, is one of the latter.

Mr. Han is a student in the Ph.D. program in Sociology at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CCNY) and teaches in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work at The College of Staten Island of CCNY. We assume that *Technomedia* may be from a Ph.D. thesis in progress and he may have become, by the time of this writing, Dr. Sam Han.

Mr. Han is very much a postmodernist, [1] and that is perhaps the primary value of this book. It is now evident that most scholarship analyzing the nature of the World Wide Web is going to be dominated indefinitely by postmodernist approaches. To those of us who are perhaps less theoretical in our approach, or impatient to arrive at a "real" or "final" understanding of the nature of the Web, postmodernist theory often seems like a foreign language spoken by those who are self-referentially passing through an infinite regress. The minute they open one door and we believe we see a glimmer of understanding, another one, barred to us by our lack of vocabulary or unfamiliarity with the standards by which it was constructed, swings closed.

*Navigating Technomedia* serves nicely as an introduction to the broad issues in postmodernist analysis of electronic media and will quickly bring a determined reader up to speed so as to better understand emerging analysis. We emphasize "determined." The work is anything but easy going, but neither is postmodernism.
It is not, I think, Sam Han's intention to arrive at a final analysis. *Navigating Technomedia* offers, rather, an intellectual history of the broad sweep of media analysis so far as the World Wide Web is concerned. It is Han's position that we can no longer separate "media" from "technology." They have become interrelated to an extent that they are "radically challenging the fundamental concepts of modernity, namely, knowledge, space/time, subjectivity, and politics." [2] These four factors constitute the "core themes" of the work.

As Han maintains, such topics as these, as related to technomedia, challenge any attempt to utilize a simple "linear chronicling" of events. That is, Han believes it impossible to write a simple narrative history of technomedia, so intertwined has the subject become with the various theoretical approaches to it. What he offers us then is an intellectual history of the central (and sometimes not so central) theorists who have contributed to contemporary studies of technomedia, always bearing in mind that the author believes the technology and its content to be inseparable.

This interconnectedness leads to a sometimes-disjointed work, though the focus on the four core themes is a very useful one. Anyone who works often with the Web or uses it as an entertainment device is usually aware, if thinking at all, that it raises many fundamental questions for all of us. Where, exactly, is "there" on the web? Who is it that speaks and who is it that listens? What is "real" in an HTML enabled world? What is "true" on the Web, and what is merely "truthy" in the comedian Stephen Colbert's term? [3] Does the Web, in fact, as Han argues, change the very meaning of time?

Han's analysis, and accumulated postmodernist analysis in general, is founded on the assumption that the largely dominant postulants of Modernism (think primarily here of science and objectivity) are called into question by the World Wide Web.
Reading this book will not place the reader in a comfortable space in which he or she finally answers the above questions. But it will introduce the audience to the major thinkers and their theories in a cogent and clear framework, which can orient the reader to the various threads of the discussion.

While holding to his four core themes, Han also introduces elements of the ongoing debates between various postmodernist schools and their proponents. As befitting a postmodernist analysis, ideas are always presented as imbedded in a specific context. In particular, Han utilizes a very useful device of first introducing an important theorist (most of them European academics) and then in a page or less explaining their careers and introducing their important works.

It would not be fair to reduce the book to being merely an introduction to postmodernist analysis because Han brings his own perspective to the discussion, particularly his insistence that media and technology are now, for all practical purposes, one and the same. But it is certainly one of the work’s main contributions that it lets us begin to understand which thinkers might illuminate some of our own questions. *Navigating Technomedia* then, to return to my metaphor, might be the first door that many of us might reasonably open.

**Endnotes**


[2] p. xxiii