



Surveillance & Society

Book Review

Hawk, Byron, David Rieder and Ollie Oviedo, eds.
2008. *Small Tech: The Culture of Digital Tools*.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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The emergence and rapid increase in popularity of so-called “Small Tech” – portable digital tools such as cell phones, iPods, digital cameras and PDA’s – has been very evident in recent years. There has, however, been little academic literature which addresses the cultural impact of these digital tools. *Small Tech*, then, is a timely and relevant compilation of essays which does just that. The essays cover a fairly broad range of topics, but the prevailing theme is that we are moving away from the view that there is a clear distinction between the real and the virtual, towards a sense that the two are complimentary processes. *Small Tech*, more than anything else, exemplifies the blurring of these two domains.

The book is divided into three sections, all of which contain a number of short essays. Each essay is devoted to a different technology, and the cultural issues that it raises. The theme of the first section is “Traditional Software in New Ecologies.” This section does not look specifically at “Small Tech,” but various established technologies and the changes that are happening within, and as a result of, these technologies. One particularly notable work in this section is by Kahn and Kellner. They argue that online blogging is helping to facilitate a new age of political activism by allowing individuals to broadcast critical views and initiate debates. This effectively democratises journalism, meaning that anyone with access to a computer and internet connection becomes a potential journalist. Blogging allows for the expression of different opinions, and for groups to form around shared political interests. These occurrences are described as “tentative forms of self-determination and control ‘from below’” (34). The authors argue this is an example of technoculture, in which technology and culture gradually become one and the same. This theme runs through the majority of the essays in the first section, which covers topics such as the cultural impact of cut, copy and paste, and digital video as post-literate practice and scripted writing altering the notion of what text is. The consensus seems to be that these digital tools are also shaping and influencing how we live our lives outside of the virtual world.

The second section, “Small Tech and Cultural Contexts” is shorter, containing ten very brief essays. This is the more accessible of the three sections, and the essays are all written in a fairly informal style. In Wendy Warren Austin’s essay, “Text Messaging: Rhetoric in a New Keypad,” the last few sentences use text message-speak to illustrate how text-messaging has improved our photo-visual literacy skills. She argues that as a result of text messaging, “We r nterin a new stj in wrtng” (106). Other themes discussed in this section include the rise of podcasting, using PDA’s to manage textual information, and cell phones as liminal tools that break down the boundary between public and private.

The third section, “Future Technologies and Ambient Environments,” looks at the emerging and future changes regarding virtual technologies. Jason Nolan, Steve Mann and Barry Wellman’s discussion of sousveillance is intriguing. The concept refers to a reverse Panopticon situation – such as capturing footage on a camera phone and posting it on YouTube – in which it is possible to surveil the surveillers. They argue that “by enabling people to be simultaneously the master and the subject of the gaze, wearable

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computing devices offer a new set of strategies and voices in the usually one-sided dialogue of surveillance” (195). This section also includes essays about virtual reality as a teaching tool, haptic interfaces and how they may affect linguistics and the way we communicate in the future, and how digital video can create new ambient environments in the domestic sphere. The emphasis in this section is on the usefulness of these digital technologies, rather than seeing them as simply distractions or part of leisure activities. The vision is of a future where digital technologies are integral to, and important for, people’s daily lives.

Perhaps the most obvious limitation of this book is, ironically, that the editors seem to have been rather ambitious in terms of the number of different topics that they chose to include. Although the structure of the book is user friendly to the extent that the short essays are likely to prevent the reader from losing interest, there is a feeling that the editors have tried to condense the work of as many contributors as possible into the book. The result is a somewhat unsettling experience, particularly in the second section, where the essays are so short that they do not add much to the overall message. The title of the book, “Small Tech,” is also slightly misleading. Although they are among the most high-profile and exciting of the digital tools discussed, very few essays actually deal with small, mobile technologies like PDA’s or iPods.

Small Tech is potentially appealing to a large audience, as the subject is something which is both familiar and fascinating to an ever growing number of people, not just specialists in the field of technology. This book is recommended for anyone who is interested in the social impact of technology. As the editors put it, the virtual is becoming increasingly integrated, increasingly real: “As information technologies become a part of the ambient social infrastructure, they become parts of material situations, not just isolated tools with connections to the digital network.” (xv). The general tone throughout *Small Tech* is one of optimism, and the old cliché of digital culture being a retreat from the real is convincingly challenged in this collection of essays. “Small Tech” is, for the most part, a way to enrich one’s social life and sense of connectedness to a diverse range of individuals. It has been argued that the Internet increases people’s social capital, but this book suggests that the possibilities are even more promising.