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DIGITAL NATION

A review of Anthony G. Wilhelm, *Digital Nation: Toward an Inclusive Information Society*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004. xiv + 161 pp, 2 illustrations. \$27.95 (cloth); \$14 (paper). ISBN 0-262-23238-3.

ANTHONY WILHELM'S BOOK, *Digital Nation: Toward an Inclusive Information Society* logically follows upon the heels of his previous book, *Democracy in the Digital Age* (2000) in proposing to "resuscitate the national debate about how we will confront the challenges and opportunities posed by a media-rich and technologically intensive society" (xiv) as a "necessary first step" to solving the problem of the digital divide and using digital technologies to realize the full potential of citizens in a democratic society. *Digital Nation* does not so much map out where the U.S. is now (in outlining the digital divide) as it tentatively points out where we have failed to go, and describes in general terms a landscape in which digital technology is used to achieve this social ideal. In all, the *Digital Nation* is a thought provoking proposal whose limited scope serves to prompt discussion and speculation.

As this book points out, the United States has increasingly ignored social justice and fairness in its pursuit of achieving efficiencies through technology and through the belief that market forces and the diffusion of innovations will "naturally" allow citizens access to the cornucopia that is the digital age. The primary focus of the book proposes a general solution to the digital divide and "the moribund state of our democratic institutions" (19), a solution that Wilhelm calls "the Digital Nation." The Digital Nation is Wilhelm's technological city upon a hill, a "society where technology does not increasingly fray the social fabric, where everyone can take advantage of faster, cheaper, and better services" (xiii). This digital nation is "a more productive and inclusive society" (4) brought about through the harnessed potential of information and communications technologies (4) and peopled by technologically savvy, engaged, citizen producers who actively participate in society rather than passively receiving information.

The book rests its argument on three basic premises. The first is that digital technology, literacy and content, what Al Gore termed the Internet ABCs (as qtd 90), are comparable to the telephone or electricity in their importance to modern life. Further, those skills that had once been enough to connect to democratic and commercial life are now no longer adequate. Wilhelm underscores the importance of this technology, the skills to use it, and the appropriate content¹ by citing several notable failures of the government to adequately address the needs of its citizenry. Wilhelm illustrates the negative effects of failing to provide universal access and to commit to connect all citizens through providing examples of government outreach using the internet as the primary platform when the audience does not have internet access (73) and the "close-down effect" where organizations "transfer ... information and services from paper formats and physical locations to cyberspace" (23).

Interestingly, this book neither explains nor explores in great detail the existence of the digital divide. While *Digital Nation* provides some evidence of the extent to which the disconnected exist, such as that 112 million Americans are not on-line, 90 million are defined as low-literate, 53 million have some disability, and 25 million adult residents do not speak English at home" (73), an audience skeptical of the existence of the digital divide and critical of any government policy initiatives to alleviate it would require more information. However, when viewed as a part of a larger discussion, many other works have already been published on the nature and extent of the digital divide.²

The second premise is that laissez-faire economic policies and those forces that traditionally allow for the diffusion of innovations will not adequately allow for equitable access to the digital infrastructure, nor provide the necessary skills to navigate this infrastructure and society, nor allow for content relevant to and accessible by all citizens. However, in this claim in particular, the book must far better substantiate its claims that the digital divide exists and is being

¹ By appropriate content, I've interpreted Wilhelm to mean that content must be created with the reading levels and knowledge of its audiences in mind, whose purpose is less entertainment oriented and more informative and educational.

² For works that critically examine the phenomenon of the digital divide, see Benjamin M. Compaine, *The digital divide: facing a crisis or creating a myth?* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001; Pippa Norris, *Digital divide: civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet worldwide.* Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001; Richard T. De George, *The ethics of information technology and business.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003; William Wresch, *Disconnected: Haves and Have-Nots in the Information Age:* Rutgers University Press, 1996; Mark Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003; Karen Mossberger, Caroline J. Tolbert, Mary Stansbury, *Virtual Inequality: Beyond The Digital Divide.* Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003; James Everett Katz and Ronald E. Rice, *Social Consequences Of Internet Use: Access, Involvement, And Interaction.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.

exacerbated by the deregulating and free-market philosophies of the late nineties and especially under the G. W. Bush Administration. For those that hold opposing viewpoints,³ more support is needed.

Given audiences opposed to the use of international law and precedent as a basis for legal policy in the United States, Wilhelm's choice of sources is also somewhat problematic. Kofi Anan and UNESCO's 1980 "MacBride Report: Many Voices, One World" both see "communication is a basic individual right, as well as a collective one required by all communities and nations. Freedom of information- and more specifically, the right to seek, receive, and impart information- is a fundamental human right; indeed, a prerequisite for many others" (as qtd. 29). This begs the question, does access to information technology constitute a civil right as maintained by AOL Time Warner CEO Steve Case (30) or is it a luxury as maintained by former FCC Chairman Michael Powell?

As I am already predisposed to agree with his findings and evidence, I find Wilhelm's argument convincing and see no problem with the support he has chosen to use. Yet, if the book is to quiet those free-market, small-government voices that will definitely disagree with this proposal, it must better refute their objections and ground more of its argument in the U.S. Constitution and American, rather than international, laws and policy.

These two premises essentially lead to his third: that the importance of this new technology to the average citizen and the inability of market forces to alleviate this problem, require that the United States intervene through policy. Overturning the policy standpoint of the Clinton Administration, the belief that market forces and not public policy should govern communications (and digital technology) in the United States has gained increasing prevalence since the 2000 election. Outlining the about-face in policy and view of the nature of digital media and the digital divide, Wilhelm starkly contrasts the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations through his discussion of the latter's monograph *A Nation Online*. The title of this work is important, in that implies that there is no real divide between the connected and disconnected. The nation is online. This report, as Wilhelm describes it, purposefully omits discussions of the digital divide currently existing and explains away the digital divide that existed prior to 2000 as a natural product of market forces and diffusion (81). Combined with the deregulatory and consolidation mania of the 90s, Wilhelm paints a somber picture of the lack of leadership or vision both in current U.S. communications

³ Such as Robert W. Crandall's "The Digital Divide: Bridging the Divide Naturally" *Brookings Review*, Winter 2001: 38-41, in which he claims that market forces should have time to make access more readily available.

policy and in its approach towards bridging this gap. Compounded by the burst of the dot com bubble and the effects of the resulting economic downturn, Wilhelm illustrates the resulting retrenchment and disparity in access. However, were an audience skeptical of the claims that market forces will not diffuse the technology and skills necessary to navigate modern, digital society, this book does not go far enough in proving its point.

The Digital Nation, as a solution to the problem of the digital divide and as a means of creating a more equitable and inclusive society, has three parts. First, public and private entities must work together to equitably provide the infrastructure and universal access (3). As Wilhelm properly points out, the precedent exists in the Rural Electrification Act of 1936 and the U.S. Government providing the groundwork for universal access to telephone service through the Communications Act of 1934.

Wilhelm maintains that an inordinate amount of attention and resources have been focused on hardware and infrastructure at the expense of training and education (90). Wilhelm claims that these "inputs" are not enough to bring about a digital nation and refers to the widely recognized problems with the Clinton administration's efforts to wire and put a computer in every classroom (9). Without the second part to this solution, training and the ability to "locate, evaluate and use information effectively" (20), citizens will be unable to reap the rewards of a Digital Nation. To create a digital nation requires providing the necessary "skills to navigate a post-Enlightenment society" (6). Wilhelm's cross-country comparison of Germany, the United States and Finland attempts to prove that increased expenditure on training, as is the case in Finland, brings about favorable results (102).⁴ However, granting Finland's homogeneity,⁵ this is not necessarily the best means of arguing this point. Finland's demographic and economic situation is not comparable to that of the U.S. or Germany.

The third component to Wilhelm's Digital Nation requires creating measurable benchmarks and timetables to gauge progress and hold institutions accountable (6). As a means of evaluating the success of a program, it is not enough to simply measure resources spent or put into a project. It is what the citizens do with these resources and infrastructure that matters, not how much is spent or the number of computers in each school. In a way, by proposing to set measurable benchmarks and timelines and emphasizing the need for measuring the success

⁴ For a wider cross-country comparison, see Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, And The Internet Worldwide*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

⁵ *Statistics Finland*. http://www.stat.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk_vaesto_en.html. Last updated May 9, 2005. Accessed June 6, 2006

of the proposal, Wilhelm is doing nothing new. Of course the stakeholders in this grand new enterprise would want to know how effectively they are meeting the needs of their fellow citizens. However, benchmarks used inappropriately can be just as problematic as focusing on increases in efficiency and possibly ignore those factors that are hard to quantify. For instance, how do you calculate quality of life, degree of self-expression, or personal involvement? In no way do I maintain that Wilhelm wants this overly reductive act to take place, yet such plans often yield to the temptation to focus on those things that are easily measured, such as efficiency. In this third part to the plan we see a microcosm of those processes that run the digital world. The digital world requires that the analog world be broken into parts—sampled as we would an MP3, or the scan of a picture. These discrete parts form what appears to be a whole, but in reality are formed with a degree of loss. While human perception might be unable to notice the difference between an actual performance and a performance recorded as an MP3 track, all such ventures require a small loss. In focusing on these measurable benchmarks and outputs, in describing skills as "humanware" (90) we as a culture risk losing something precious.

While I agree with the overall general solution, I remain unconvinced that the Digital Nation is the silver bullet for the social problems that plague the U.S.:

A digital Nation policy agenda calls for a democratic and inclusive media and communications culture, one in which alternative perspectives potentially can become conventional. Invigorated by the citizen-producer, a Digital Nation becomes the milieu in which a healthy media and communications culture can be cultivated. (76)

Wilhelm seems to rest much of his hopes in the transformation of the U.S. political situation on the Millennials (112), the demographic group most closely associated (and comfortable) with the tools and landscape of the digital age. And while "[d]evolving authority to the citizen producer" is a required aspect of the Digital Nation agenda, it does not necessarily follow that democracy as we know it will benefit from this technology, nor that the desired benefits themselves will necessarily result from instilling within the populace the "[h]ighest order digital literacy" that "is to become citizen producers and not just passive consumers. Unlike the telegraph and the printing press, youth can play a central role in shaping the use of and producing content for the commercial internet" (121).

While Wilhelm is no Pollyanna, I remain unconvinced that his proposal adequately addresses the great problems posed by uncritically embracing digital technology. The book rightfully points out that making technological adaptation decisions based solely on potential gains in efficiency is intensely myopic (42). The aptly named Chapter 3: "A Faustian Bargain for the Digital Age" details

some of the intended and unintended consequences of a culture adopting new technology uncritically. Redundancy, tax structures privileging the connected, and lack of access to necessary information all demonstrate the obvious seriousness of these issues and are acknowledged throughout Chapter 3 and the book. This book acknowledges the perils digital technology creates for society, such as in his discussion of the prevalence of amusement-centered content for digital media—as opposed to education or engagement. He also discusses three negative trends in technology. The first is that participants in digital technology are more likely to chime in and contribute to a discussion, but will not necessarily seek more information on a topic (123-124). The second trend is that such technology allows for an easy aggregation of individual preferences rather than allowing for true engaged discussions (124). The third is that individuals tend to gravitate towards a forum that harbors their own views with little chance for real engagement between people holding opposite views (124). Wilhelm correctly points to failures in the current system: "The surge of different forms of radicalism and intolerance reveals the deficit of dialogue and understanding between cultures, not to mention symptoms of growing economic inequalities between rich and poor" (123), and even acknowledges that a technology that allows for personalization will emphasize the individual at the expense of exposing a broad, varied slice of the American public to varied viewpoints (124).

It is this last problem that poses far greater dangers to the American public sphere than what he acknowledges in this book. Rather than exposing the majority of Americans to the same information, digital technology could deliver what Cass Sunstein calls "the Daily Me."⁶ While selective perception and retention are bad enough, the personalized digital media described in Cass Sunstein's *Republic.com* will bring about a step beyond selective exposure. In the "Daily Me," computer programs filter news and information based on personal preferences, exposing individuals only to that news that fits their interests and preferences. "The Daily Me" will balkanize the public sphere, polarize communities, and draw new boundaries along ideological rather than geographic lines.

In my opinion one of the greatest problems facing modern U.S. society is how to best instill within the population the skills necessary to navigate a world with fewer gatekeepers (48), which I would imagine Wilhelm would include as one of the basic digital literacy skills. While outside the bounds of the book's discussion, I am also curious how a society predicated on Enlightenment ideals and textual

⁶ Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. A close parallel to "the Daily Me" occurs whenever an individual accesses a web portal, which personalizes the information appearing on the screen.

skills can survive in a media landscape that no longer privileges them. This point seems to fall at the root of my slight misgivings about the book. Given the increased emphasis on the visual over the linguistic and the corresponding effect on logic and argument, the cornerstones of democratic society, I am inclined to see problems largely ignored by Wilhelm's digital nation. I find the arguments convincing and thought provoking, yet question whether the optimism of the author is best placed in digital technology. One need only consider the works of Sven Birkerts,⁷ Neil Postman,⁸ and Robert Putnam⁹ to find reasons enough to deliberate the promise of digital technology.

In all, I found this book to be a sobering examination of current U.S. policy and the state of the digital nation. While too optimistic in extolling the virtues and benefits of digital technology, the book is a clearly outlined argument for creating a better society through technology. The ideal embodied in *the Digital Nation* is a noble one—to connect the unconnected, enfranchise the disenfranchised, and to provide the opportunity for all members of a society to succeed. "Navigating this society will require that people be motivated and empowered to invent their own futures, buoyed by a new social contract in which rampant inequalities sown by the acquisitive spirit are tempered by the tender embrace of liberty, equality, and solidarity" (134). What Wilhelm sets out here is a proposal to truly build a city upon a hill; one that will shine out for all the world to see. While the focus is somewhat blurry, it is an admirable sight.

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⁷ Sven Birkerts. *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994.

⁸ Postman, Neil. *Technopoly: The Surrender Of Culture To Technology*. New York: Knopf, 1992.

⁹ Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon and Shuster: New York, 2000.