



Book review

Balbi, G. (2023). *The digital revolution: A short history of an ideology* (B. McClellan-Broussard, Trans.). Oxford University Press, 159 pp.

Reviewed by **Philipp Seuferling**, Department of Media and Communications, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom, E-mail: p.seuferling@lse.ac.uk
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8401-5511>

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How changing media technologies come to matter across society and culture has been a question providing generations of media, communication, and Science and Technology Studies scholars with food for passionate debates. Approaches foregrounding the tangible, material characteristics of technologies, “the stuff you can kick” (Parks, 2015), stand in conversation with those insisting on technology being socially and communicatively shaped, asking what power lies in imagining, talking about, and thinking with “the stuff you can kick.” How do certain ideas of what media technologies are, should be, and will be, become naturalised and legitimised in the first place—and in turn materially shape technological infrastructures?

Gabriele Balbi in his book *The digital revolution: A short history of an ideology* provides a short, yet concise and poignant contribution to this question. Geared towards a wider, also non-academic readership, the book follows a discourse-analytical, conceptual-historical approach, in order to trace and dissect the grand “tales” of the so-called “digital revolution.” In doing so, the book aims to debunk the narrative of digital technologies equalling and causing a societal revolution as an ideology, and more precisely as a quasi-religious mantra.

Throughout four chapters, flanked by a short introduction and conclusion, Balbi simultaneously zooms in and zooms out, to carve out the contours of this “tale.” The book zooms in on concrete articulations of particular discursive structures that comprise the floating signifier “digital revolution,” e. g., in analyses of Wikipedia entries, or of utterances of tech gurus, journalists, or political actors. And it simultaneously zooms out of specific technologies and puts the discursive practices around a wide range of media and communication technologies into a wider historical context. It makes visible the trajectories of a longer lasting structure of feeling around digital technologies, and traces *the idea* that digitalisation is inherently a process of socio-technical revolution.

The four chapters deconstructing this revolutionary rhetoric of digitalisation discuss the conceptual vagueness and ambiguities in defining, naming, and periodising the “digital revolution” (Chapter 1); address the discursive association and deliberate parallelisation of the digital revolution with previous (political and tech-

nological) revolutions (Chapter 2); in order to then, in Chapters 3 and 4, deconstruct the religious, ideological pillars around the revolution narrative, by identifying its key “mantras” and its figures that become “gurus” or “heretics.” In these parts—arguably the strongest ones in the book—Balbi offers an interpretive reading of “digital revolution” discourses as an ideology that is constructed and practiced through religious metaphors. Specifically, Balbi identifies five characteristics of the revolution-framing of digital technologies: disruptive, total, irresistible, linked to the future, and permanent.

The proclaimed goal of the book is to “analyze [...] the ways in which the great tale of the digital revolution has been *told*, the rhetoric, the narratives, and the overt or implied debates that have accompanied it and continue to accompany today” (p. 2, italics in original). The book’s emphasis on language (and thus on the social shaping of technology) is theoretically backed up through ideology as a concept, deployed to denaturalise cultural hegemonies around how the digital has been imagined. The discussion of the concept, and its methodological gravitas, could have perhaps been extended upon, going beyond the presented double notion of ideology as a *particular* worldview as well as a potentially distorted one (consciously or unconsciously). Specifically, the question of which social standpoints condition how ideologies of the digital revolution are seen and experienced would be an interesting one to pose, and would perhaps complicate the book’s goal of “reconstructing, in the most neutral way possible, the historical-cultural path of the digital revolution so far” (p. 4). From what standpoint can narratives be analysed as “deceptive”?

Certainly, different standpoints refract the tales of digital revolutions and their embodied experiences in different ways. In this vein, the book left me pondering on the political stakes of the digital-revolution-ideology. What would a Black feminist or Indigenous experience and interpretation of these mantras look like? What’s the tale of the “digital revolution” by an Amazon warehouse worker, or an Indigenous community running out of water due to a data centre? Or, applying a political economic framing: How are financial structures and models of capitalist, neoliberal extraction implicated in how the digital revolution becomes ideologically told through “one-dimensional narratives” (p. 132)? For example, the sections on Elon Musk would invite for further analyses of how infrastructure ownership connects to quasi-religious, neofascist “mantras” of, for example, longtermism—ideologies directly spread on his own platform. Explicating the politics and material consequences of who gets to narrate the “digital revolution” as disruptive, total, irresistible, in the future, and permanent—and how it could be narrated otherwise—is at points left to the reader. Taking the critique of quasi-religious ideologies literally, I wonder: What would “secularized” narratives of digital futures look like?

In sum, the book speaks to relevant academic and societal debates on how media technological futures are imagined and built. While perhaps versed media historians or critical media technology scholars will be familiar with many examples, the book adds a discourse-historical perspective to deconstructionist work on digital technopolitics (e. g., on the “smartness mandate,” Halpern and Mitchell, 2023). And to the wider audiences the book intends to reach, Balbi makes accessible an academic debate about the communicative construction of socio-technical imaginaries. The book demonstrates in a concise manner, with relatable examples, how the “digital revolution” is not a neutrally existing thing, but constantly needs to be discursively reproduced, articulated, and spectacularised. Balbi holds a mirror to all of us unavoidably playing our part in this spectacle.

References

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