

Superinjunctions, revolutions, censorship and SOPA: it's hard to believe that the internet hasn't cracked up

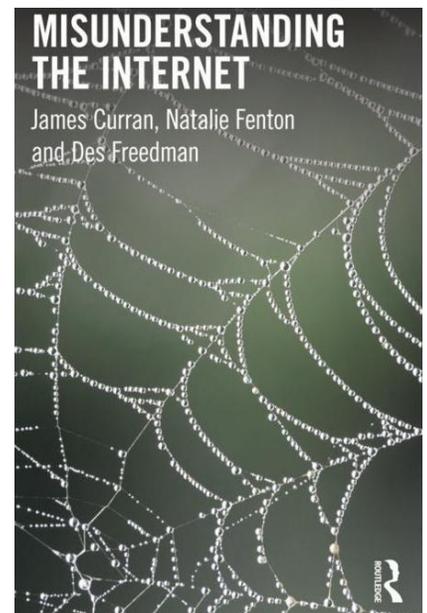
Jul 12 2012

*The growth of the internet has been spectacular. There are now more 1.5 billion internet users across the globe, about one quarter of the world's population. This is certainly a new phenomenon that is of enormous significance for the economic, political and social life of contemporary societies. **Misunderstanding the Internet** is a polemical, sociologically and historically informed textbook that aims to challenge both popular myths and existing academic orthodoxies around the internet. Reviewed by **Aidan Byrne**.*



Misunderstanding the Internet. James Curran, Natalie Fenton and Des Freedman. Routledge. March 2012.

In 2009, Hillary Clinton warned that 'countries that restrict free access to information or violate the basic rights of internet users risk walling themselves off from the progress of the next century'. The Chinese, she warned, were standing in the way of the net's inherently democratic instincts. Little more than a year later, her tone had changed remarkably little, despite the US Government's vicious crackdown on Wikileaks: Bradley Manning imprisoned under the same conditions reserved for war criminals, donation routes blocked by Visa and Mastercard, and furious accusations that the organisation had caused the deaths of sources and informants. And yet, Clinton insisted, 'We are convinced that an open internet fosters long-term peace, progress and prosperity. The reverse is also true. An internet that is closed and fractured, where different governments can block activity or change the rules on a whim – where speech is censored or punished, and privacy does not exist – that ... is an internet that can cut off opportunities for peace and progress and discourage innovation and entrepreneurship'. This while the US and Israel (allegedly) brew up vicious software like Stuxnet and Flame to wreck the infrastructure of its enemies.



This is the kind of rhetoric routinely employed by politicians across the globe: asking them to recognise complexity in any sphere is a fool's errand, but nowhere is the gap between words and actions more obvious than in governmental approaches to electronic media. Buffeted by

corporate interests, the hysteria of pro-censorship groups and the demands of realpolitik, your average politician (very unlikely to have any background in evidence-based activity or technology) is reduced to cliché. Twitter in Egypt? Good. Wikileaks in America? Bad. Not that other groups are much better: we've recently seen Hollywood lawyers issuing takedown notices to Youtube over clips uploaded by other divisions of the same studios.

It's hard not to believe that the Internet – if we can still refer to it so baldly – is cracking up. As Curran, Fenton and Freedman's *Misunderstanding the Internet* demonstrates, it's a sea of contradictions. A military device which became the preserve of gentle, libertarian university and tech geeks, it mushroomed into a field of battle between neoliberals, Open Sourcerers, Big Media, Big Money, Big Tech, fans and a host of competing interests. And yet most users sail blithely on, believing that web access is a charitable gift from, well, somebody out there, secured by the payment of a small monthly subscription to their ISP.

This vision is soon (hopefully) to be shattered – or reinforced. The growth of App-based access: on iPads, iPhones and similar devices should be seen as the equivalent of the United States' policy of establishing 'strategic hamlets' in the Vietnam War, or the USSR's Potemkin villages. Within the corral, everything's shiny, easy and nice. As long as you stick to the rules (essentially: buy stuff and don't get into the weirder porn or any sort of politics, particularly tech-politics), you'll be left alone to shop, update your Facebook page and join the conversation. Stray outside (seek out 'lost' TV shows on torrent sites, for instance), and you'll find your access withdrawn and a 'cease and desist' letter in the post. Search for The Pirate Bay on a BT internet connection, and you'll see only the infamous – and dishonest – 404 Error: Page Not Found. No wonder, then, that some activists are campaigning for a new error code which makes it clear that corporate interests, rather than DNS problems, have blocked your access to torrent sites. Discouraged from tweaking our devices and the programmes they run in any way (Apple are particularly guilty of this approach, though its Unix underpinning is powerfully adaptable by amateurs), we have outsourced our freedom to these gatekeepers.

Misunderstanding the Internet is a decent guide to the history and current condition of the internet for undergraduates. It takes an essentially Marxist approach, applying the theory of labour and surplus value to our online existence. What, it asks, is the virtual equivalent of labour? The answer is that we're all labourers in the online vineyard: while many people believe that Facebook, for example, is a service, it is in fact a vast surveillance network. The genius is that its owners have outsourced the reporting to its users: billions of Westerners (other areas of the world have alternative sites) constantly letting the company know what they like doing, buying, reading and watching. This is then sold, lucratively, to advertisers. The same model applies to Google and all the most familiar names: Amazon in 2009 claimed almost 20% of all US e-commerce, giving it a virtual monopoly.

Where the book shines is its demolition of the oft-cited claim (as in Clinton's speech cited above)

that the internet is inherently democratic. Drawing on economic analysis, they paint a picture of the web (in particular) as the domain of the corporate giants, especially in news and commerce. Millions of us blog – including me, at plashingvole.blogspot.co.uk – but the vast majority of readers stick to five or six authoritative sites: in the UK, those will be the BBC, Amazon, Google and either the Guardian or the Mail. News gathering is difficult and expensive, hence the dominance of meat-space entities in the virtual world, but brand recognition is also important. Impressive, too, is the book's clear-eyed scepticism about the new media's apparent benevolence: Google's 'Don't Be Evil' is vague enough to allow it to censor widely, while Blogspot's new country-specific URLs (hence the '.co.uk' on my blog's address) enables it to easily block access to whole swathes of its pages if that's the price of doing business in various countries.

Misunderstanding the Internet is particularly strong on economic and regulatory analysis of the state of the Internet, and offers an excellent corrective to the starry-eyed boosterism of the libertarian-capitalist cheerleaders of the previous generation. Where it's somewhat lacking is in the cultural sphere and – to a lesser extent – in the wilder reaches of the web: the Electronic Freedom Foundation, the battle for Open Educational Resources (OERs), the left-liberal thinkers centred on BoingBoing, and Darknet aren't mentioned, while the copyleft/IP movement is given little attention. The law's failure to keep up with new media – such as the widespread use of Twitter to break injunctions and super-injunctions – and the disconnection between states and the partially stateless internet also needs exploration. More seriously, post-structural aspects of the internet are left unexplored: some discussion of the net on notions of personal identity and social structures is desperately needed, yet Baudrillard's concept of simulation, Foucault's ideas about agency and Bourdieu's cultural capital all go unmentioned. Amongst the acronyms covertly controlling us (or your children), SOPA, PIPA and MMORPGs aren't mentioned, yet they are the new battlegrounds of our political, cultural and economic futures.

There are a whole swathe of revisionist books about the internet around at the moment: chief amongst the Morozov's *The Net Delusion*. *Misunderstanding the Internet* is a sound, readable, often dryly humorous and above all sensible introduction. I'll be buying a few copies for my university library, but it certainly requires supplementing.

Aidan Byrne is a Senior Lecturer in English and Media/Cultural Studies at Wolverhampton University. He specialises in masculinity in interwar Welsh and political fiction, and teaches on a wide range of modules. He blogs as Plashingvole.blogspot.com and tweets as [@plashingvole](https://twitter.com/plashingvole). [Read more reviews by Aidan.](#)

Related posts:

1. [The promise and peril of the Arab revolutions \(8.7\)](#)

2. [Book Review: Media and Terrorism: Global Perspectives](#), edited by Des Freedman and Daya Kishan Thussa (7)
3. [Book Review: Borderless Economics: Chinese Sea Turtles, Indian Fridges and the New Fruits of Global Capitalism](#), by Robert Guest. (6.3)
4. [Whether it's Vietnam, Somalia or the war on terror, the media looms ever large in discussions of terrorism](#) (6)
5. [From cyberjihad to Habermas: understanding Muslim identity and resistance online](#) (5.9)

This entry was posted in [Africa and the Middle East](#), [Aidan Byrne](#), [Asia](#), [Britain and Ireland](#), [Latin America](#), [Media, Film and Cultural Studies](#), [Politics and International Relations](#), [Routledge](#), [USA and Canada](#) and tagged [censorship](#), [China](#), [Egypt](#), [Foucault](#), [internet](#), [Marxism](#), [media](#), [politician](#), [rhetoric](#), [superinjunctions](#), [Twitter](#), [USA](#), [WikiLeaks](#), [Youtube](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). [Edit](#)