

“Superconnected. The Internet, digital media and techno-social life” – pre-print version
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Review by Marco Gui, in Sociologica 3/2017

Reading *Superconnected* takes the reader on a comprehensive exploration of the most recent issues that the digital revolution has opened up in our societies. Chayko explains our condition of superconnectedness as the result of a triple revolution: the internet, mobile media and social network sites have brought the world to an unprecedented technological and social superconnection. This has profound implications on the lives of individuals and communities about which the book provides one of the most complete existing overviews.

Although the text covers many literatures, from sociology to communication and media studies, sociological theory is the main point of reference in Chayko’s viewpoint. In fact, one of the main virtues of the book is to combine an informed and updated look at digital societies with a rereading of traditional sociological concepts, something which is not frequent in media sociology literature. Issues such as socialization, inequality, culture and self-construction are re-interpreted and used to shed light on the social change occurring in digitalized societies.

The book’s 300 pages flow smoothly, with useful examples and invitations to reflect and adapt the concepts presented to one’s own experience. Chapter 1 introduces the main concepts of the book: superconnectedness, digitalization and “techno-social life”. Chapter 2 offers an interesting and original look at the history of digitalization. It shows how ideas behind some of the most advanced current technology often date back many decades (even centuries) and offers an interesting reconstruction of the early years in the history of social networking sites. Chapter 3 discusses what techno-social life is. Chayko explains why online life cannot be separated from face-to-face experience, something which leads her to criticize the use of the “cyber” prefix and to introduce the concept of “socio-mental spaces”. Chapter 4 illustrates the main dynamics of online sharing and surveillance, from the emergence of “prosumers” to practices such as crowdsourcing, sharing and liking. She also shows the differences between vertical and horizontal surveillance and the implications of each of them. Chapter 5 addresses a number of problems (and opportunities) connected with the diffusion of the internet: globalization and inequality, crime and social movements. Chapter 6 is an interesting view of how digital media influence socialization processes and identity construction. Chapter 7 covers the issues of friending, dating and relating online. Chapter 8 looks at the techno-social institutions of family, healthcare, religion, work, commerce, education, libraries, politics and the media. Although these central chapters do not provide a critical discussion of the phenomena considered, their value lies in the exhaustiveness and systematic nature of the presentation. Chapter 9 discusses the emerging flipsides of superconnectedness (overload, addiction, attention deficits, etc.). This is in my knowledge the first chapters in a manual that separately addresses the issue of the collateral effects of digitalization, although I will later outline some critical aspects. Chapter 10 provides some reflections about what the future of techno-social life could look like.

Throughout the book, the author puts a particular emphasis on conveying two fundamental messages. The first is that online life is no less real and “social” than its offline counterpart. Indeed, the author stresses the concept of techno-social life to give similar importance to the social and the technological in the understanding of online experience. The second message is a strong warning against “technological determinism”. Chayko tries very hard to de-demonize superconnectedness: rather than a dysphoric outcome of technological development, superconnectedness is our current condition, which has to be looked at objectively before expressing judgements. Although these two messages are useful and sometimes provocative, they nonetheless open a number of theoretical inconsistencies and gaps.

As for the first message, Chayko shows how classical sociologists had already described societies as being made of both material and mental products and relationships. Therefore digital environments

are nothing other than a new way of experiencing sociality, albeit more focused on the mental than on the physical sphere. However, this can appear contradictory with the pervasive use of composite labels such as “socio-mental” or “techno-social”. If we agree that the “mental” and the “technological” are already contained in the “social”, why then should we need to specify this again and again in our definition of social life? In a sense, those labels convey the opposite idea: that we have to add something to the social part in order to fully address online life. Probably this is done to remind the reader that technological aspects and mental states are of particular relevance in today’s societies. Nonetheless, it opens the way to possible theoretical misunderstandings.

Even more problematic in my opinion is the second theoretical inconsistency. Chayko argues that technology is not to blame for our social, psychological and existential problems. Alerting the readers to the intellectual dangers of “technological determinism” is a common topic in the sociological literature on media, but also in science and technology studies (see Wyatt, 2008). However, Chayko probably goes too far down this path: it seems as if a fear of falling under a techno-deterministic view prevents her from properly examining legitimate questions about how specific features of online environments can influence human behaviour. A Nobel prize was won last year by Thaler’s “nudging theory”, which recalls us that individuals behave differently depending on the conditions in which they find themselves. This is because psychological and social but also material and technical conditions can nudge them towards specific kinds of behaviour. Of course technology does not “determine” social change as a unique cause, but it certainly profoundly influences it. For this reason, I do not completely agree with sentences such the following: “crimes and harm that involve tech use are not specifically caused by the technology (recall the fallacy of technological determinism)” (p. 103); “the technology itself need not to be blamed for these conflicts” (p. 147) or “the internet and digital media are not responsible for the stresses and pressures of modern life; more often than not, they help people manage these stresses” (p. 189). To give just one example on this last point, there is a growing body of literature showing that overabundance of digital media choices can bias selection behaviour (see Panek, 2012, 2014) or that multitasking is incentivised by digital interfaces causing stress and depletion of cognitive resources in specific conditions (Lepp, Barkley, & Karpinski, 2014; Ophir, Nass, & Wagner et al., 2009). A sociological overview of digitalization cannot close its eyes to these aspects, all the more when considering that technology itself is a social product! Chayko’s position becomes increasingly contradictory when, in other parts of the book, technology is seen as being responsible for positive social change (e.g. “social media has been instrumental in helping to inspire, jump-start, spread the word about, and sustain a number of movements”, p. 106). So how could technology impact social change for positive events but become irrelevant when negative outcomes are considered? At times, the reader may have the sensation that the author is trying to convey an optimistic view about online life, rather than taking a scientific approach.

In summary, I recommend the use of this book for teaching and research purposes, especially in sociology, as it is one of the first systematic perspectives on the late digital era. At the same time, I would suggest a cautious and critical evaluation of these two theoretical and definitional issues.

References

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