Book Review

Mia Consalvo & Charles Ess (eds.):
The Handbook of Internet Studies
Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. 2011

Jeremy Hunsinger, Lisbeth Klastrup & Matthew Allen (eds.):
International Handbook of Internet Research
Dordrecht: Springer. 2010

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Over the past decade, scholars within the social sciences have discussed whether there is such a thing as a distinct, independent field of Internet studies. Such discussions, naturally, have focused first on the empirical demarcation of the phenomenon: i.e., can the Internet be distinguished from other media? Secondly, it has been another topic of discussion whether the Internet represents something radically new and different compared to other media and thus calls for new theories, approaches and traditions.

Although there is an enormous field of technical research and development on the Internet, scholars within the fields of the social sciences and the humanities have often felt marginalised and at the boundary of their established research traditions. In the beginning, some traditional media scholars tended to neglect the importance and consequences of the Internet. Further, the net was surrounded by much hype, commercial and philosophical, which contributed to reducing Internet studies to something not worth serious academic effort, a fate shared with game studies (and, for that matter, television studies some decades earlier).

In order to establish a field and find a common haven for researchers interested in the social consequences of the Internet, a range of (mainly American) scholars held the first annual Internet research conference in 2000 in Lawrence, Kansas. The conference was a success, quantitatively and qualitatively, and resulted in the formation of the Association

of Internet Researchers (AoIR), which has steadily grown into a truly international and respected academic community.

The two handbooks reviewed here originate in that research environment, as all the editors and many authors are prominent members of AoIR.

By taking the decision to publish such handbooks, the editors clearly establish the view that there is such thing as an empirical field of Internet studies, here with a social rather than a technical focus. As is obvious in both volumes, the field of "Internet Studies" or "Internet Research" attracts a very diverse body of scholars from a number of disciplines: communication studies, anthropology, political science, psychology, law and linguistics, just to mention a few. That diversity is of course a blessing when the result is fruitful interdisciplinary discussions. On the other hand, when such interdiciplinarity does not take place, we are left with isolated contributions, interesting enough by themselves, but hardly transcending narrow disciplinary perspectives.

The latter, unfortunately, is very often the case in *The International Handbook of Internet Research*, which originates from a cross-national editorial cooperation between Jeremy Hunsinger (American), Lisbeth Klastrup (Danish) and Matthew Allen (Australian). The 31 contributions represent a variety of disciplines and the author list include a vast body of respected scholars. The editors have succeeded in securing many interesting contributions, but have not paid sufficient attention to the structure or the logic of the handbook; contributions seem to appear in random order, mixing contributions on theory with straight methodological discussions. Much of this content is relevant and important, but the connections between most chapters seem to be non-existent or at least hard to grasp.

This is reflected in the very short introduction, written by Steve Jones, professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He is among the pioneers of social Internet research. In the late 1990s, drawing on the already somehow established tradition of computer-mediated communication (CMC), he sought to define Internet studies as a discipline. His edited volumes *Cybersociety 2.0* (1998) and *Doing Internet Research* (1999) are still essential works within the tradition. The introduction, however, is merely programmatic and does not really serve to condense topics of the handbook.

The chapters span from theoretical speculations based on Gilles Deleuze to analyses of Internet regulation and global knowledge production. We learn about everything from information infrastructures to Internet aesthetics. Some chapters are genuine introductions to sub-fields within Internet studies, like Naomi Baron's on Instant Messaging, Axel Bruns' on citizen journalism and Lisbeth Klastrup's on game worlds. Others are significant methodological contributions, for instance, Susan Herring's on web content analysis and Michael Zimmer's on web search studies.

As such, the handbook has a very broad framework, illustrating the diversity of the field. However, the wide range of articles without any demonstrated progression throughout the handbook leaves the reader bewildered. The handbook might rather be characterised as a

reader which can easily form the main part of a syllabus for undergraduate as well as graduate courses. And it will surely do the job well.

On the other hand, *The Handbook of Internet Studies*, edited by Mia Consalvo and Charles Ess, both former presidents of the Association of Internet Researchers, appears to be a genuine handbook. It is well structured and is divided into three different parts: Internet history, methods and ethics; the Internet and society; and the Internet and culture. The empirical and methodological scope is similar to that of *International Handbook of Internet Research*, but here the chapters show internal consistency and all seem to be relevant to the wholeness and progression of the book.

We are provided with a nice introduction, written by the editors, where they discuss and distinguish the field of Internet studies. The introduction is followed by the first part of the book containing historical and systematic accounts of the discipline of Internet studies. For instance, Niels Brügger and Klaus Bruhn Jensen discuss important methodological challenges related to web archiving and online/offline divides.

The second part of the book is reserved for societal issues; we learn about: political discussions online in a brilliant overview provided by Jennifer Stromer-Galley and Alexis Wichowsky; religion online in the chapter by Heidi Campbell; and diverse topics such as health communication, international development and queer studies.

The third part of the book addresses Internet and culture in the broadest sense; again, chapters serve as overviews of different aspects of the Internet and Internet studies. Lori Kendall presents us with a well-written chapter on community and the Internet, T. L. Taylor on Internet and games and Nancy K. Baym writes about the ever-ubiquitous social networks, just to name a few examples.

All three parts are provided with a small but substantial introduction, written by the editors, so the reader never loses sight or the relevance of the various contributions. One is left with the impression that many more chapters could have been added and that the editors had to make some tough (but successful) decisions in making the selections.

Many contributors to both handbooks are relatively young scholars, as are the majority of Internet researchers who have started their research careers just as established academia started to take Internet research seriously, providing scholarships and positions. The result is often fresh with new perspectives, although the overview and solid academic work rarely are compromised. There are many very good Internet scholars out there, and fortunately a great deal of them have found their way to these volumes.

Altogether, as a reader, the *International Handbook of Internet Research* will provide. If one wants a genuine handbook, providing a good and structured overview of what seems to have become an established discipline, *The Handbook of Internet Studies* should be the choice. Its publication was delayed by almost one year, but it seems as if the extra time was worth the wait, as readers are presented with a genuine, readable and informative handbook which will remain relevant at least for some years in an ever changing field.

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