Book Review

Nancy K. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*

Ali Shehzad Zaidi[1]

Nancy K. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age,* Marden, Massachusetts:

Polity Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-7456-4332-8 (Paperback). 184 Pages.

Nancy K. Baym's *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* is an entertaining introduction to the social uses of the internet. Baym discusses the attendant anxieties that have accompanied the exponential growth of the internet which has profoundly altered how we relate to others. She notes that social media has acquired a quasi-public character and has complicated our sense of the self such as when we monitor mobile phones thereby making ourselves simultaneously present and absent in two locales (3, 153).

Over the past three decades the rapid evolution of the internet has reconfigured intellectual life, political activism, and social interaction, creating new words such as spam, blogging and flaming (62). Today it is hard to imagine that cyberspace was once but a premonition of William Gibson, who coined the term: "A consensual hallucination… Unthinkable complexity. Line of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding." Besides quoting these words of Gibson, Baym provides her own evocative description of cyberspace as "bodiless, unreal, seductive in its modern offering of the pioneering freedom of reinvention enjoyed by the cowboys of American mythos" (151-52).

This digital dawn of adventure, discovery, and possibility is epitomized, Baym tells us, by a MCI ad: "There is no race, there are no genders, there is no age, there are no infirmities, there are only minds. Utopia? No, the Internet" (34). This sort of rhetoric holds liberatory and even paradisal promise unlike dystopian discourses on technology. Baym argues that new technologies are first believed to be irresistible forces but soon become internalized and eventually invisible (24, 45). She recalls how some of the elite once had misgivings

[1] Assistant Professor of humanities at the State University of New York at Canton, Address: 34 Cornell Dr, Canton, NY 13617, United States of America, Tel.:+1 315-386-7011, Corresponding author: zaidia@canton.edu.

about the telephone since they would no longer be inaccessible, and how many white Americans used to fear that radio would bring black jazz into their homes (25, 33).

Baym, a former professor of communication and currently a researcher for Microsoft, praises digitally mediated communities for their "sense of shared space, rituals of shared practices, and exchange of social support" and notes that the internet has expanded the reach of grassroots media (10, 86). She observes that technology is not inherently good or bad, only its uses, pointing out that a knife can save lives in the hands of a surgeon or be used to commit murder when wielded by a criminal (46). Baym remains confident that "people are adaptive, innovative, and influential in determining what technology is and will become" (151).

While Baym believes that it is disempowering to have to forego technology (27), much of what passes for progress is often destructive. The development of railroads in the United States, for example, seemingly necessitated the slaughter of millions of buffalo. Perhaps Thoreau had this in mind when he wrote in *Walden* that "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides on us" (345). Baym fails to note that corporate imperatives, more than individual pluck and initiative, determine the uses of technology. Television in the United States once held ample educational promise but the ostensibly public airwaves have been filled with commercials that profit corporate conglomerates. Internet communities face a precarious existence, threatened by despotic governments and by cable companies bent on creating digital toll roads that will prioritize commercial content. Indeed, the lack of discussion about net neutrality is a shortcoming in this otherwise fine book.

Other Works Cited

Thoreau, Henry David (1964). *The Portable Thoreau*. Ed. Carl Bode. New York: Viking Press.

http://thoreau.eserver.org/walden02.html.