

Thomas Streeter, **The Net Effect: Romanticism, Capitalism, and The Internet**, New York and London: New York University Press, 2011, 232 pp., \$45.00 (hardcover), \$22.00 (paperback), \$9.68 (Kindle).

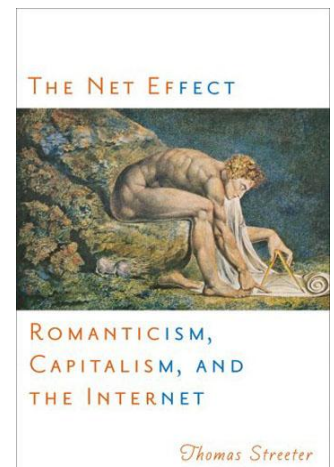
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The Internet, in other words, is a socially evocative object. It does not by itself guarantee democracy, but the last several decades of Internet evolution offer a set of shared experiences that serve as political object lessons about democracy. Thomas Streeter (2011, p. 187)

Central to Thomas Streeter's arguments is that the development of the Internet in the United States since the 1960s has largely been shaped by the social imagination of the technology at the individual and institutional levels. By crafting a critical genealogy of the Internet in the United States, Streeter's *The Net Effect* not only serves as an intervention into U.S. historiography of the Internet but also as a critique of the technological determinism that has dominated new-media studies. Recognizing how discourses of the Internet have directed the creation and use of the technology, Streeter invites us to look specifically at the consequences of two dominant paradigms in the field of study: the utilitarian and control paradigm, and the expressive and identity paradigm.

Compared to Manuel Castells' (2010) "informational capitalism," which focuses on how the economic logic of productivity and competitiveness in late capitalism contribute to the proliferation of information technology, Streeter focuses on U.S. romanticism to add another layer of insight to a critical understanding of the networked society. Rather than departing from a Marxist framework, Streeter instead considers how the trope of networked-computing romanticism has supported the proliferation of neoliberalism as the hegemonic political-economic ideology in the United States, and how, simultaneously, this romanticism inspired new ways of thinking about democracy. By locating the material consequences of the ideology and its dialectical dynamics underlying all social constructs, Streeter views "the Internet not as a thing that has an effect but as itself a process of social construction. The net effect is in the making of it" (p. 9).

An important argument that stands out in Streeter's analysis of Internet technology and neoliberalism regards the shifting discourse of individualization. Streeter argues that although romanticism refutes Cartesian rationality as presumptuous, it does not escape the libertarian notion of individuality. Streeter further argues that selfhood of the "male sort of loneliness" that has been attributed to Internet technology is a historical marker, a discursive practice, rather than the essence of the technology. In chapter 1, "Self-Motivating Exhilaration: On the Cultural Sources of Computer Communication," in contrast with Castells' privileging of network enterprise in the development of information technology, Streeter interrogates corporate liberalism in the context of the military-industrial-university complex in the United



States and points to the liminality of the cybernetics framework of the Internet. In chapter 2, "Romanticism and the Machine: The Formation of the Computer Counterculture," Streeter returns to the formative years of Internet technology in the United States in the 1960s, arguing that U.S. computer culture was reinforced by a mixture of romantic sense of pleasure and rebellion with an emphasis on individual creativity and expression.

Although Steve Jobs is regarded as the charismatic pioneer of the personal computer revolution, in chapter 3, "Missing the Net: The 1980s, Microcomputers, and the Rise of Neoliberalism," Streeter completely disagrees with the American romance with the entrepreneurs and the individualist discourse of innovation and sophistication of the microcomputer. Instead, he says that neoliberalism actually took off upon the theory of the information society in the 1970s. Streeter points out many important developments of the 1980s, when the information society thesis rode on the postmodern turn in social theory while it secured popular appeal outside academia. Digital convergence led to the construction of digital information as property, especially when the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Department of State asserted intellectual property rights in trade agreements. Microcomputer and other technological innovations were brought into the home by the privatized capitalist system within a corporate-dominated consumer economy. Streeter is persuasive in showing how the microcomputer has been envisioned as an icon of neoliberal marketplace enthusiasm, in line with the radical market-oriented policies of the Reagan era.

Streeter returns to his interrogation of the military-industrial-university complex in chapter 4, "Networks and the Social Imagination," resituating the appropriation of "rough consensus and running code" and "end-to-end design" in the autocratic and highly oppressive political structures that emerged from the Cold War of the 1950s. He argues that commercialization and privatization of the Internet in the early 1990s under the discourse of corporate liberalism and the Information Superhighway never separated the Internet from the military-industrial-university complex. In chapter 5, "The Moment of Wired," Streeter focuses on the structure of feelings of pleasure of anticipation and the notion of knowledge workers as a professional class in cyberspace. Streeter demonstrates that the libertarians successfully fostered a balance of the romantic individualist vision of the Internet with a free-market vision of the Internet. Chapter 6, "Open Source, the Expressive Programmer, and the Problem of Property," reiterates how the neoliberal consumer economy fleshed out the romantic individualist representation of computing and how the utilitarian and managerial principles of neoliberalism facilitated the establishment of cyberlaws that directly countered the utopian visions of digital sharing.

Streeter concludes his book by reminding us again of the role of romanticism in shaping our association of the questions of rights, property, freedom, and society with the burgeoning development of the Internet. His last two chapters, on knowledge workers and programmers of Open Source software, elaborate on Katherine Hayles' (1999) theoretical intervention into questions of the embodiment and materiality of virtuality in information technology. While *The Net Effect* makes a great contribution to our knowledge on the question of labor in Internet technology. The last two chapters also point to the question of immaterial labor at the affective turn of social analyses, and especially speak to Mellissa Gregg's latest scholarly work, *Work's Intimacy* (2011). I would recommend that those who are interested

in questions of immaterial labor or affective labor pick up Streeter's *The Net Effect: Romanticism, Capitalism, and The Internet*.

Contrary to celebrating private corporations' success in networked computing, Streeter recaptures the legitimacy of all the unglamorous work that has been almost forgotten in history, shifting the margins on questions of labor, creativity, and entrepreneurship. After putting down the book, I still remember vividly the remarkable metaphor of diaper-changing that Streeter drew from feminist technology writer Paulina Borsook, an analogy that describes the mundane labor involved in a networked society of the digital age.

References

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Gregg, M. (2011). *Work's intimacy*. Cambridge: Polity.

Hayles, K. (1999). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.