Book Review

Miah, Andy and Emma Rich. 2008. *The Medicalization of Cyberspace*. London: Routledge.
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Andy Miah and Emma Rich have written an insightful and provocative book about cybermedicine, the varieties of knowledge, experience and practice emerging at the intersection of health information and the Web. Decentralised and unregulated forms of Web interactivity such as easy to use online publishing, blogs, online communities, “social software” such as YouTube and Facebook have created diverse cybermedical bodies, practices, and information which “stretch the limits of medicine’s traditional goals” (24). Miah and Rich discuss the implications of this emerging cybermedicine for both social scientific theorising and how people make sense of health and of themselves. In particular, they examine complex shifts in doctor-patient relationships (particularly patient empowerment and autonomy alongside professional concerns about the loss of authority and expertise), the interplay of consumerism and identity narratives as bases of health knowledge, myriad ways in which the Internet is used to constitute and govern health behaviour, and some of the diverse subjectivities created through the engagement of health/illness and cyberworlds. Arguing that “cyberspace provides a specific context through which various [and distinct] forms of medicalisation may take place” (23), the authors’ analysis identifies the complexity and heterogeneity of this medicalisation, its effects, and its engagement by patients as well as medical institutions and practitioners (70). Further, Miah and Rich move well beyond debates about medicalisation to engage questions about the complex intertwining of bodies and ethics in cybermedicine.

The examples of innovative cybermedical bodies and practices which provide the empirical basis of their analysis are diverse, including among others, online support networks for persistent sexual arousal syndrome, the appearance of an e-Bay entry for a human kidney, online selling of prescriptions such as Viagra, the Ron’s Angel’s website purporting to sell human eggs, and Pro-Anorexia websites. While many of these examples have been discussed elsewhere, this reviewer found particularly compelling Miah and Rich’s discussion of the online community of women who do not wish to be “cured” or “treated” for bulimia and anorexia but seek to maintain these eating disorders as a “lifestyle choice.” The authors offer a nuanced analysis of the disturbing content of women’s narratives glimpsed on open access websites and blogs, highlighting how some feminist analyses have politicized anorexia, but, along with medical and psychiatric discourses, have failed to grasp the complex and diverse embodied subjectivities of women pursuing jobs and degrees while choosing to starve themselves, to help others do the same, and to negotiate ongoing relationships with family, friends, and practitioners who seek to “cure” or “fix” them. Miah and Rich probe the ethics of Pro-Ana sites in ways that undoubtedly stimulate debate, but their analysis of the online representation and embodiment of lifestyle starvation is equally rich. Here the authors employ as their central analytic device (107), the “emergent *posthuman body*, a political positioning of the human condition as perpetually in flux and inextricable from technological systems” (73, authors’ emphasis). Rejecting the past-humanism of both machine robotic “hard cyborgs” or Hayles’ bodies as information, Miah and Rich seek to recuperate and theorise the bodies generated by the online selling of body parts or the MySpace images of chosen starvation as instances of a “critical reworking” of the body (116), as “morally complex but not immoral” (15) and more strongly, as “the body reincarnate, with essential missing or transformative ingredients” (115).

As the basis of their analysis, the authors bring together an impressive range of existing research and theorising on medicalisation, cyborg bodies, Internet health studies, and digital culture. Although they are not interviewing users or producers of cybermedicine, Miah and Rich do offer a fresh perspective on that existing literature. Of particular value is their discussion and resisting of a series of binaries that have become commonplace in theorizing about cyberworlds. While talk about the Internet has tended to see it either as emancipatory or restrictive (7) and exclusive or inclusive, and cyberbodies have been cast as either absent and liberatory or machinic and dehumanizing (27), Miah and Rich successfully explore what lies at the generation and intersection of these binaries. Along similar lines, they want to avoid conceptualising emerging Web practices as separate from and completely transformative so as to account for “the embeddedness of digital worlds within the non-digital” (118). Although much of their analysis is both provocative and persuasive, the authors make clear that they are not principally concerned with the “digital divide” or the ways in which there is unequal and unfair access to the Internet or to cybermedicine, nor is this a comprehensive survey of the range and diversity of instances of cybermedicine. Yet, while their focus on instances such as appearance of a human kidney on e-Bay certainly brings morally complex “negotiations of value” (2, 73) into view, it leaves hanging what is learned about body, medical knowledge, identity and (ill) health as diversely constituted and experienced in more mundane engagements with the Web. For this, we must await their next book (121).

Despite its broad mandate—the intersection of the Internet with health—*The Medicalization of Cyberspace* is tightly framed and succinctly argued. The writing is generally accessible; a considerable achievement both because of rapidly changing Web technology and processes and because theorizing about digital culture and the body has spawned often impenetrable language. The authors assume that the reader is familiar with current Web practices and processes (RSS, blog, social software), although there is some explanation in endnotes. Similarly, readers unfamiliar with the artist Stelarc, the Visible Human Project, Body Works, Ron's Angels and the other moments of cybermedical bodies and practices described in this book may need to spend some time exploring them in order to grasp the nuances of the arguments advanced in this book. Although the discussion is terse in places, the overall length at 160 pages means that book will work well as a secondary text in courses dealing with health information, technology, culture studies, and the body. The length is also very attractive to text-swamped academics and medical professionals who seem to be bypassed by that promised paperless world of abundant time saved.