Surveillance & Society

Book Review

Andrejevic, Mark. 2013. *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know*. New York and London: Routledge.

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Mark Andrejevic's *Infoglut* offers a theoretically rich account of the modern information landscape, examining how the massive proliferation of information transfer and storage through modern technology impacts our understanding of both communication and critique. The hyperproliferation of information in the era of the internet and computer data storage has contributed to a form of information overload called 'Infoglut.' This state of information overload marks what Slavoj Žižek calls the 'decline of symbolic efficiency,' in which the proliferation and accumulation of competing narratives and truth claims ultimately calls all claims to truth into question. Whereas power once operated through the establishment of a dominant narrative and the suppression of alternative narratives, the perpetual availability of competing claims to truth now makes old strategies of controlling information irrelevant. Where the task of the powerful was once to prevent new information from circulating that could hurt their interests, the task of the powerful is now to circulate so much information that any claim to truth can ultimately be called into question by mobilizing enough data. Controlling information no longer requires preventing new information from circulating but rather controlling access to databases and infrastructure capable of storing, monitoring, and analyzing massive quantities of data. Critical practices of the pre-infoglut era, rooted in theories of representation, are now reduced to conspiracy theories that dispel all claims to expertise as a form of hidden ideology, all while posing a new ideological claim under the post-ideological guise of prediction or affective certainty.

Andrejevic sets out to examine how our modern condition of infoglut both changes the relationship between power and knowledge and calls for a re-examination of the role of critique in a time of post-narrative uncertainty. A variety of case studies demonstrate that, in response to the decline of symbolic efficiency, practices of analyzing data emerge that displace communication and deliberation by appealing either to the supposedly value-free calculations of an algorithm or the market place or to pre-cognitive affect in body language and neuroscience. Andrejevic looks at the way information is gathered, stored, analyzed, automated and deployed to shine light on the varied landscapes of modern information processing, including the way inequalities manifest in the architectures of data storage and analysis. Andrejevic offers a critique of the democratizing spirit of the internet as a means for the mass distribution of information, arguing that consumers now take part in ubiquitous acts of data sharing in which their behaviors are monitored, analyzed and used both to predict future behavior and to help shape future behavior. Looking at the phenomenon of 'digital convergence,' the process by which formerly distinct bodies of digital information converge, Andrejevic points out how ubiquitous information storage is becoming across the social field. By looking at the convergence of data analysis in marketing, politics, surveillance, security, policing and popular culture, Andrejevic mounts a convincing argument for information management as an all-encompassing and quotidian element of modern power.

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However, Andrejevic is quick to warn readers against reading the decline of symbolic efficiency as a totalizing or all-encompassing fact of modern existence. Far from the perfect crime predicting capacities foretold by the movie *Minority Report*, Andrejevic reminds readers that there are imperfections and probabilities distributed across these systems. Not all narratives can be disturbed through the proliferation of counter-information, and the decline of symbolic efficiency is far from complete. Yet despite this caveat, it is possible to detect some totalizing tendencies in Andrejevic's account of information overload. For example, in his discussion of data mining, Andrejevic argues that modern forms of information gathering have displaced old forms of targeting and surveillance because whereas in old regimes the target had to first be identified in order to be surveyed, in the modern era of infoglut, data gathering and analysis of every possible variable allows data experts to predict who potential suspects may be. As a result, Andrejevic argues, 'emerging surveillance strategies will continue to push for data access at the level of entire populations as opposed to, say, that of suspicious (or, from a marketing perspective, desirable) groups or individuals' (36). While Andrejevic is right to argue that surveillance practices have taken on new forms in an era of modern infoglut, it would be a mistake to overemphasize these new forms as a break from previous surveillance strategies. Doing so would miss the way in which surveillance still works to disproportionately target differently racialized, gendered and abled bodies. While it is true that more and more members of the population increasingly participate in data transfers that are stored, monitored and analyzed by data experts, racial, gender, class and other values can nevertheless be inscribed into the information processing systems Andrejevic describes. Future scholars should build on Andrejevic's work by pointing to how these axes of difference influence modern conditions of infoglut.

Andrejevic's book should likewise be required reading for those attempting to engage in leftist politics in a digital age. Andrejevic argues that the 'postmodern right' has coopted the process of critique in the name of conspiracy theory and encouraged the proliferation of multiple truths in order to swamp any attempt to make a claim to a truth against the right. Examining, for example, the strategies of the Bush administration in Iraq, Andrejevic argues that the postmodern right relies on what Žižek calls the 'Borrowed Kettle' strategy in order to dispel criticism. In the face of critiques of the Bush's handling of the war in Iraq, the administration offers multiple contradictory accounts in order to preclude the possibility of locating one as true and thus being able to pin down the administration's failures. Additionally, Andrejevic looks at Glen Beck's mobilization of conspiracy theories rooted in affective claims to understanding reality that dispel the knowledge of so-called 'experts.' Far from challenging the logic of the postmodern right, strategies that focus on critiquing their narratives and offering counteracting truth claims merely feed into the information economy that sustains the postmodern right's existence. Additionally, Andrejevic shows how the convergence of data works as a conduit of both capitalism and the state, as a method of studying populations to predict and intervene on human behavior. Data mining gathers and stores massive amounts of consumer data, which in turn gets stored in databases that can be used for police and security measures. Prediction markets are used to bypass deliberative processes by depicting the market as a neutral arbiter capable of rising above the clutter of information overload, cementing antidemocratic, capitalist practices while laboring under the banner of a market based populism. These interlocking inequities and power dynamics are all at play in *Infoglut*.

Andrejevic similarly offers a fruitful interrogation of the role affect plays in negotiating the decline of symbolic efficiency. If the proliferation of competing claims to truth in an age of infoglut makes representation unreliable, affect offers a way of cutting through the fog of data by reading and analyzing the body's pre-cognitive processes of decision making. Andrejevic examines how new social media technologies prompt new ways of attempting to analyze and interpret emotion. Here, affective economies encourage the monitoring of social media both in order to predict and intervene to help shape popular sentiments. Chapter four studies how the logic of the market comes to function as a sort of 'affective fact' that continues to function even in the face of the failure of the markets which dispel its main narrative. Andrejevic similarly locates the study of affect in popular culture representations of the reading of body language, such as the TV shows *Lie to Me* or the *World Series of Poker*. In all of these case studies, affect

offers a means of bypassing the unreliable plane of discourse and representations to give way to a pre-discursive understanding of the subject's desires, feelings, and behaviors.

While much of Andrejevic's work on affect describes how affect works in a historical context of infoglut, Andrejevic also offers a bold theoretical move by critiquing affect theory, with its focus on pre-cognitive intensities rather than rationality and reason, as implicated in the strategies of neuroscience and neuromarketing used by the powerful in response to the decline of symbolic efficiency. While this theoretical claim is perhaps one of the more interesting in the book, Andrejevic seems rushed to lump the entire theoretical trajectory of affect theory together with the practices of neuromarketing. While both affect theory and neuroscience share an interest in the precognitive elements of human behavior, it remains to be seen how the particularities of affect theory either permit or challenge the practices of neuromarketing. While Andrejevic ultimately points toward a more nuanced role for affect theory by arguing for a mode of affect that is neither incompatible nor identical with reason, more scholarly work should be devoted to studying the links between affect theory and forms of capitalist advertising and marketing practices that work at the level of affect.

Infoglut is an important read for scholars interested in big data, affect theory, psychoanalysis, Surveillance Studies, and the relationship between data and communication studies. This book is a must read for communication scholars because it interrogates the ways that strategies of managing information overload attempt to bypass discourse, representation and deliberation. In the face of an infoglut which thwarts traditional modes of criticism, Andrejevic calls on scholars to 'gain control over the forms of post-comprehension knowledge that promise to populate the databases and contest their displacement of comprehension, models, theories, and narratives' (164). *Infoglut* begins this project and marks an outstanding move in that direction.