Over the past 5 years, the Federal government has released a number of key policy documents relating to Australia’s place in a global information economy. The Strategic Framework for the Information Economy is one important example. This document outlines the Federal Government’s vision of a “wired Australia” and paves the way for billions of dollars to be spent on infrastructure and services that the Government hopes will secure Australia’s place in the global information revolution. Unfortunately, what’s missing from many of these ‘visionary’ documents is any analysis of how the significant changes in our work and play wrought by new communications technologies impact on individuals and communities. The rhetoric of ‘revolution’ used by governments and policy advisors seems to suggest a profound and sudden shift in our relationship to technology, ignoring the effects that changes in technologies produced within and by culture have on cultural formations.
One key difficulty faced by analysts, critics, academics and the public when thinking through the relationship between culture and technology in our current circumstances is that it also seems to exceed the current moment. As critic Peter Lunenfeld says, we seem to be living in a state of future present. That is, the future appears to be alive in the present moment, happening simultaneously. We are always arriving too late. Every time we stop to learn a new version of the software, a new version is released that exceeds our knowledge of the first. While a great deal is written on the subject of culture and technology, there always seems to be more being written as we speak.

Andrew Murphie and John Potts’ Culture and Technology comes as a timely incursion into this somewhat fluid and ephemeral field. Primarily a survey of key issues relating to culture and technology, this book operates as a kind of pause in the flow of information about information and new technologies, reminding us that much in the past is illuminating in relation to the present and the future.

Culture and Technology begins with several useful and clear definitions of its key themes—technology and technique, culture and the intersection between these. The authors then canvass a number of important theoretical frameworks. These are often contradictory and discontinuous, ranging from what the authors describe as the technologically deterministic approaches of Baudrillard and McLuhan, to the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams and on to Deleuze, Guattari and Virilio. The breadth of the frameworks allows the reader to get a sense of the very multidisciplinary nature of the field of inquiry.

Having established a ‘scene’ in which the discussion of culture and technology can occur, the authors then examine key topics. These include the relationship between art and technology; digital aesthetics; science fiction; the cyborg; artificial intelligence; war, commerce and the nation-state; and machine ecologies. Much of the material presented will be familiar to readers interested in any of these subjects. For example, the chapter on the body and technology, “Cyborgs: the Body, Information and Technology”, examines Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto, Manual De Landa’s War in the Age of Intelligent Machines, Sadie Plant’s Zeroes + Ones and N Katherine Hayles’ How We Became Posthuman, standard texts for anyone critically interested in the cyborg. What distinguishes Culture and Technology however is the straightforward manner in which the authors present these important ideas to the reader without simplifying what are often complex arguments. Though not overtly didactic in tone, the authors have produced an excellent textbook while still maintaining a scholarly and critical edge to their writing.

In the final chapter Murphie and Potts provide the most explicit sense of their position on the subject. While they ostensibly relate accounts of how we might live with the virtual in an increasingly networked society, their process of selection is telling and offers an almost unconscious invocation of how to read the book. Discussing Guattari’s machine ecologies, the authors note that the ‘regular way of differentiating between technologies and life is that technologies are ‘allopoietic’...[and that] living things are normally considered as ‘autopoietic’.” [The former are dependent systems, the latter autonomous. Eds] They go on to note that in Guattari’s formulation of the machinic assemblage, there is always a relation between these states. Like the internet, our communities, and even ourselves, “we...are all autopoietic and allopoietic machines.” As an assemblage, then, Culture and Technology is an autopoietic and allopoietic
machine. It is a book that deals in a focused and lucid way with many complex ideas, however it’s also interactive in the sense of being woven together from ideas outside of itself.

Given the multidisciplinary nature of the material the authors explore, Culture and Technology should be very much at home on the required reading lists of courses in philosophy, cultural studies, media studies, sociology, new media and political economy. However, it’s a pity that it is, like much scholarly publishing today, overpriced. Potts’ and Murphie’s prose is clean and user-friendly, as all good code should be. As such, it should also provide the general reader with an accessible and intelligent introduction to these fields as they relate to culture and technology.

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