There is no doubt Mark Poster is one of the most important American theorists of the digital information age. His book *The Second Media Age* was released in 1995 to a flurry of public praise about his conception of human-machine relations. In the text, Poster celebrated what he saw as the inevitable reconstruction of one-way models of communication focused on industrial production and mass consumption to a "second media age," characterized by co-active and decentralized networks of communication (Poster, 1995: 53). This change would lead to possibilities for multiple identity formation and a "true" post-modern society where "a decentralized network of communications makes senders receivers, producers consumers, rulers ruled [and] upsetting the logic of understanding of the first media age" (Poster, 1995: 33). At the time, some commentators (Flagan, 2002) suggested difficulty with Poster's straightforward transition from centralized broadcast models to the second media age. Others suggested that Poster's conception of the second media age was perhaps premature -- too intently seeking to attach Internet technologies to both concepts of the post-modern and radically disjunctive social identities (See Flew, 2005).

The text is part of what Poster describes as an ongoing project to theorize the ways digital media become integrated into our social and cultural selves, as well as to detail the forms of social identity suggested by conceptions of the second media age. Indeed, much of Poster's work has underlined the transformative possibilities of the internet. In *What's the Matter with the Internet?* (2001), Poster suggests the possibilities that social application of the internet could have for issues as broad as national and ethnic identity, right down to the ways we think about authorship. Both this text and *Information Please* are unashamedly positive that the internet, despite its colonization by some aspects of governance and business, is still capable of transforming contemporary social and cultural practices.

One senses that Poster's latest book *Information Please: Culture and Politics in a Digital Age* serves to answer both these criticisms by mapping his "second media age" within everyday material practices. The text is part of what Poster describes as an ongoing project to theorize the ways digital media become integrated into our social and cultural selves, as well as detail
the forms of social identity suggested by conceptions of the second media age. The overarching argument in Information Please is deceptively simple: that the integration of human and machine have far-reaching consequences for both the constitution and understanding of culture. Of course, his text shows that these consequences are vast and complex, touching on aspects as diverse as the consumption of media to the very conception of identity.

Poster begins his book by foregrounding issues of the impact of media on culture. His goal is necessarily combative; he argues that cultural theory has not considered the implications of a second media age on understandings of culture. For example, Poster suggests that post-colonial theory has not seriously addressed how relations between West and non-West might be altered by the changes that digital media have had for the construction of self and culture. To do this, he takes the reader on a scenic route through cultural theory, driving the reader through the work of diverse theorists like Homi Bhaba, Antonio Negri, and Michel Foucault. This is an enjoyable adventure, with Poster's depth of knowledge and skill as a writer directing his critical examination of various cultural theories. The engaging part of this critical examination is Poster's often eccentric choice of examples, from a Citibank commercial for identity fraud, to the appearance of Sesame Street characters in a protest in Pakistan.

Throughout Information Please, Poster argues that political structures can now only be built in affiliation with machines. In the second section of the text, this argument continues as Poster claims that "we need to reconfigure the political individual in relation to the conditions of globalization, to discover amid the troubling inequalities of North and South, and the unlimited appetite of corporate greed, a means to define a new form of power and a new means of association" (71). Poster thus suggests the contingency of humanist notions of citizenship with the intention of showing how internet technologies foster new political forms of being; he calls this mode of political participation the "netizen." He suggests that the netizen "might be the formative figure in a new kind of political relation, one that shares allegiance to the nation with allegiance to the net and to the planetary political spaces it inaugurates" (78).

It is hard not to be taken in by Poster's rallying cry for political allegiance to digital space as the new agora. There is no doubt that Poster's writing style is utterly absorbing, to the point of wanting to punch the air in allegiance to the digital cause. But sobering up after drinking in Poster's heady combination of prose, intellect, and political inspiration, I felt somewhat unnerved by imagining Poster's strict adherence to the net as a globalized political tool, especially when the implications of issues like third world politics, economic disadvantage, language barriers, and cultural hegemony are considered in the use of the net as a political tool. After all, the vote is free, but participation in global media is not.

While Poster's arguments about the importance of the human-technology interface for new modes of political participation are compelling, the delivery of this argument might have been more complete by touching on the complexities or inconsistencies of this vision. While Poster does discuss some
possible critiques of the netizen, a discussion of restrictions that states have put on the use of the internet as a political tool would also have been useful. For example, though he suggests both Singapore and China as examples of how the internet fosters new political networks, he does not discuss the incredibly dynamic forms of political control that these governments have fostered over public use of the internet. Some interesting research on Singapore’s use of the internet has been completed by Gary Rodan (1998) and Terry Johal (2007). Broader texts like Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas’ *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (2003) suggest that authoritarian governments are adept at controlling technologies that are meant to be used for “free” social networking. These texts suggest that some productive cultural exchanges produced by the internet can be restricted and somewhat spontaneous, rather than the overriding feature of participation on the internet. However, this is a small quibble of an otherwise thorough and vigorous text. One imagines that Poster’s future work will continue to work on possibilities of internet for political participation, especially “new articulation of culture to reality” (84).

One of these articulations is suggested through Poster's exploration of identity in the second media age, in particular, the increased incidence of identity theft online. Poster analyzes case studies of the construction of "identity theft" as a crime and, paradoxically, the "security" of identity. In doing so, he observes that identity must be constructed as an "object" that has become susceptible to theft. Poster writes: "Digital networks thus extend the domain of insecurity to objects that had been relatively safe ... When their material character metamorphizes to the digital level from the analog realms of paper, film, tape and the like, they step into the dangerous world of insecurity that had previously affected only large material objects" (101).

The insecurity of construction of the self leads Poster into a discussion of the possibility of a new understanding of ethics in an age of information. He argues that ethical principles have been placed in suspension in an age of information. Given the instability of mediated identities in networked computing, ethics may be in fact limited in the range of application within cyberspaces. In the realm of the virtual, people constantly engage in fantasies and the presented "reality" of a situation becomes suspect online. This is a fascinating discussion, with issues of anonymity, content, and "netiquette" focused on. Poster even goes so far as to mandate a new moral obligation for the second media age: "Act so that you will continue to maintain the identities you have constructed in relations with others" (151). While some may find this suggestion somewhat confronting, Poster's argument takes on an important political imperative, because new power relations form through the emergence of new ethical possibilities in the digital age.

The last part of the book extends this discussion of ethics to focus on how human-machine interaction affects issues of power and control in social and political life. Perhaps the most pertinent discussion is focused on issues of copyright control developed through peer-to-peer sharing on the net. While the effects of copyright control on new communications technologies have been examined at length, Poster's exploration of this area is somewhat
contrary to the typical legalistic arguments. He suggests that a capitalist market ceases to exist in a digital media environment. Digital cultural objects do not fall under the laws of the market, because they require almost no cost to be copied and distributed. Apart from this, reproduction in a digital environment is part of a new culture of heterogeneous construction of the self: it is the material structure of technology that assists in creating the cultural forms that copyright seeks to control. Copyright does not work in this sense, because it seeks to control the practices and discourses concerning digital technologies without the realization that they are inherently tied to the digital technologies themselves.

Therefore, Poster's final suggestion that cultural theorists must engage with the highly complex task of how digital media participate in the construction on everyday social, political, and cultural processes seems more pertinent than ever. While one gets the sense that Poster hasn't answered all the earlier criticism of *The Second Media Age*, his most recent book certainly continues his journey of analysis and more importantly of possibility of digital media. Indeed, where Poster starts his text with a charming anecdote about how technology allowed a lasting relationship between a woman and child to develop, so Poster ends his text with the possibilities for social, political, and cultural interaction to be bettered by human-machine interfaces. Not only this, but that our basic understanding of each other -- our human relations -- could be bettered by our bond with machines. It's an exciting vision that, although yet to materialize, this text allows us to see as a possibility.


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