Book Review: Personal Connections in the Digital Age (Nancy K.Baym)

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Part of the Digital Media and Society Series, 'Personal Connections in a Digital Age' by Nancy K. Baym is a timely, insightful book, designed to provide the reader with an understanding of the implications of new technologies on human interaction.

While acknowledging that the digital age impacts practically all areas of life, ranging from politics to economics to health, Baym's focus, rather is on interpersonal relationships. Whilst technology has tremendous, mostly beneficial effects, Baym argues that it also deepens the rift between those socially, geographically and economically positioned to use it, and those who are not.

Setting out the goals of her manuscript decisively in the first chapter, Baym identifies the seven key concepts to bear in mind when analysing the effects of technological advances in communication: *interactivity*; *reach*; an inexhaustible ability for *Storage* and its associated *dangers of replicability* ; *temporal barriers* arising from synchronous media; *mobility*, and the loss of *social cues* arising from the lack of different forms of visual, auditory and contextual stimuli. Exploring this at length, Baym systematically addresses the issues thrown up by constructions and representations of identity as articulated through these concepts.

The book begins with an expansive discussion social psychologists who have worked on understanding to what extent the presence of online forums have impacted the development of interpersonal human relationships. Baym posits that online spaces allow for more cross-gender and trans-socioeconomic boundary interaction - without destabilizing the offline social order. The allowance of anonymity and the careful construction of virtual 'identity' make for what she refers to as 'pure' interaction that is not deterred by socio-cultural barriers. This is indeed, a fascinating idea, however, whilst Baym aggregates studies in the field, for most part, she addresses them broadly, leaving the conclusions open to interpretation by the reader highlighting the immense space for further research.

Baym then turns to the innate human tendencies of insecurity and narcissism in the digital era, presenting data from blogs and interviews she points out how people feel the need to look "FaceBook-worthy" on any given occasion, or the tendency to attend events where one could potentially get nice profile photographs. The author looks at such beha-

viour types as reactionary, stemming from the usage, and pressure to post unrealistically attractive images on social networking sites to generate maximum 'likes' and comments. These experiences and studies Baym suggests, lead the reader to analyse, at depth, the relationship between heavy make-up and body contouring attire in real-life to Photoshop and Instagram-like effects on profile pictures. On several levels, it is easier to manipulate and construct virtual identities - possibly allowing for individuals to be more satisfied with their creations of ideal selves. Could this be seen as one of the reasons for the exponential growth of social networking? Baym contends that it could, by manner of 'early idealization' - by the selective revelation of character traits. Addressing issues in asynchronous text-based media that allow space for interpretation, Baym provides an account a personal experience in the development of a meaningful friendship with a man named 'Markus' - that originated online. She argues, contentiously, that relationships initiated through online interaction can be as meaningful as those struck up offline. While this appears to almost contradict her earlier assertion of identity construction, it presents an interesting conundrum. Since 2008, Social Networking Sties (SNS) have largely been to maintain social relationships, juxtaposed with freedom of anonymity and the representation of an idealized version of oneself. Baym highlights the key problems here are in the appropriateness of selecting the medium for interaction, the idea of 'friendship', as well as the amount of information it is acceptable to disclose on a public forum.

This, of course, leads to the much-discussed idea of deception online. However, whilst citing horror stories of large scale misrepresentation - she argues that offline identity representation in relationships were as much projections that altered over time as individuals learnt to trust one another. She makes a compelling case, contesting that representations and interactions offline could be every bit as deceptive as those occurring online.

Overall, Baym's view appears to be one of acceptance. She states, resignedly, in the epilogue, "[d]igital media aren't saving us or ruining us. Digital media aren't reinventing us. But they are changing the ways in which we relate to others and ourselves in countless, pervasive ways." (p. 152)

This book is timely and thought provoking - one that informs the reader on the changing mediascape, and opens new avenues for thought, encouraging readers to consider ideas that may not have been entertained before. Examining the various ways in which human communication is impacted by online interaction, Baym builds an argument contesting that in spite of all its delimiting factors, digital media both eases and enhances communication. The author's ideas are fresh, and in my view truly confrontational, as we are shown how the inevitability of technology's influence on day-to-day communication imposes itself on our everyday lives. Whilst we grapple with the barrage of technological influence over technological mediated communication, Baym's book provides necessary insights into its human dimension. -a necessity for scholar working in the area.