

## Review of Tim Jordan (2019). *The Digital Economy*. Polity Press.

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Tim Jordan's book is organised around the surprisingly difficult question "what is the digital economy?" (1). He approaches it through five case studies and two theory chapters before turning to policy recommendations inspired by his analysis. The case studies look at the search and advertise model, social media sites, disintermediation by companies like Uber and Airbnb, fully free digital services, and the digital gaming industry. Each is approached by analysing a small number of predominantly U.S. cases such as Google and Facebook. Although Jordan also gives space to other cases such as Baidu's search service, only WeChat is recognised as genuinely distinctive by comparison with the U.S. cases.

These case study chapters are well-informed, interesting and thorough, analysing cases as sets of practices engaged in by the different actors involved. Google, for example, is seen in terms of the practices of search users, advertisers and Google itself, and the consequences arising from the intersection of those practices. This is a productive and illuminating way to explain how these platforms work – indeed I adopted a similar approach to an overlapping set of cases in my own book *Profit and Gift in the Digital Economy* (Elder-Vass, 2016). I was particularly impressed by the depth of his knowledge and the subtlety of his analysis of the computer gaming industry.

In terms of their findings, the common thread of the case study chapters is that digital economy platforms work by building communities and then "reading" them, either to monetise them or in the case of the fully free services to provide information as a public good, a commons. Social media sites, for example, read their user community by extracting data from their posts, aggregating and analysing this data, and then using it to target advertising at their users. It seems fairly clear from examples like this one what Jordan intends by this *reading* metaphor, although he never spells it out, and we are left wondering where this term comes from and what its wider theoretical implications might be. It seems self-evidently appropriate to his commercial cases, but it is much less clear how it applies to the gift economy cases he considers – Wikipedia, free and open source software, and the World Wide Web Consortium. I welcome his desire to ensure the visibility of this important sector of the digital economy, but I would have liked more clarity on how much it actually shares with the commercial sector models he summarises with this concept of reading the community.

The first of his theory chapters engages with three well-known debates on the sources of profit, free labour, and prosumption (the collapse of the distinction between production and consumption) in the digital economy. He shows good judgement in rejecting some of the more

extreme accounts of these issues, in particular rejecting the view that all user activity on commercial websites can be reduced to infinitely exploited free labour. Instead, he makes interesting use of the work of Jarrett on household labour (Jarrett, 2015) to argue that the same activity may have multiple meanings to different actors and thus that user activity may sometimes simultaneously be emotionally fulfilling from the perspective of the actor but also labour from the perspective of the platform they are using. This certainly captures the ambiguous nature of this activity, which is effaced by the reductionist view of all user activity as labour. On the other hand, I would have liked more clarity about how he defines labour and what the consequences are of identifying some user activity as labour from the perspective of the platform. As the argument stands it's not at all clear why we should care whether user activity counts as labour or not.

His second theory chapter ties together all of these threads to offer us an answer to his opening question. "A digital economic practice," he tells us, "is distinct from other economic practices and is defined by the creation of a community of activities the 'reading' of which offers an opportunity for monetisation... Each digital economic practice is created through a platform..." (139). Platforms are the glue that tie together a set of economic practices, and each platform provides and controls a point at which the corresponding activities and the associated community interactions can be accessed. As an abstract description of how a broad range of commercial internet sites operate, this seems perceptive and accurate. I'm less convinced of it as a *definition* of the digital economy. On the one hand, it seems too wide because the technological element of the digital itself is absent, with the result that we can find non-digital cases that fit the definition. Consider the football (soccer) industry. As a set of commercial businesses, it depends on creating a community of fans which can then be monetised through, for example, TV rights, ticket sales and merchandise. Information from and about the community is read in order to enable this monetisation – knowing which clubs have most fans, for example, is crucial to deciding which games to show on TV. On the other hand, the definition seems too narrow because, as suggested above, it does not seem to cover the non-commercial sectors of the digital economy.

The closing chapters turn to policy questions, and here I am thoroughly in agreement with him. His argument about the dependence of the digital economy on reading communities leads directly to the closing argument: "The industry has to recognise, or be forced to recognise, that its dependence on our collective emotional, social and cultural activities gives us rights over its development of our lives. The digital economy is ultimately a vampire and must be staked by a democratised digital culture" (171). As he says, arguments about the location-less-ness of the internet simply do not hold water and states should be able to tax and regulate internet companies for the common good. Furthermore, the information that commercial internet companies now accumulate by reading the communities they create has mushroomed out of all proportion to the ordinary user's understanding of what they are giving up when they tick the box to accept a site's terms and conditions. The ability to read across a whole community's data gives these companies enormous information power, and as Jordan argues, there is a strong case for seeing this information as a public good that should not be in the hands of private companies. He doesn't discuss the matching risk that such data is potentially even more dangerous in the hands of the state, but this is not the solution he is proposing: community data, he argues, should become open data, but with data on identifiable individuals protected from view.

Overall, this book is a worthwhile read for scholars of the digital economy. The case studies in particular are well informed and raise a range of interesting and important issues. The book as a whole makes a valuable contribution to enhancing our understanding of the digital economy and the challenges it raises.

## References

Elder-Vass, D. (2016). *Profit and Gift in the Digital Economy*. Cambridge UP.

Jarrett, K. (2015). *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife*. Routledge.