Liza Potts

Price: $44.95.

On 11 March 2011, the world watched in real-time as tsunami waves overshadowed, then engulfed, the northeastern coast of the Japanese mainland. Television helicopters captured the onslaught in high definition while people across the coast and the entire country communicated their distress on social media platforms. Along with emergency generators, whose malfunction hastened the impending reactor meltdowns, the synergy of earthquake and tidal wave took out electricity pylons, power lines and cell towers. Curiously, data networks often continued to function where voice calls failed to connect, and many of the affected consequently turned to social media to communicate their situation. While these circumstances made the Great East Japan earthquake the most mass-mediated disaster event in history (Tierney 2014), its aftermath was as much a logistical and humanitarian crisis as one of information distribution and symmetry. It was two weeks into its unfolding that, amidst growing discontent with the state’s assistance and mass media coverage, the mayor of a small but particularly stricken community turned to social media to ask the outside world for help.

In the video that appeared suddenly on Youtube, Mayor Sakurai Katsunobu of Minami-Soma sits hunched; dressed in standard-issue emergency fatigues, staring stubbornly into the camera. ‘With the paltry information given by the government and Tokyo Electric,’ he declares, ‘we are left isolated […] and forced into starvation’ (Beech 2011). By directly addressing an anonymous public, appealing to strangers for material assistance, Sakurai sought to compensate for the inadequacies of both mass media coverage and official disaster relief, coordinated by the state and large aid organizations. As the original video went ‘viral’, subtitled versions soon reached a global audience. In short, Sakurai’s original statement became the locus that ensuing remediation and mobilization efforts defined themselves around, and in the early aftermath to the 3/11 disaster – an early and particularly legible symbol of social media’s potential to both facilitate and politicize collective knowledge production (the mayor was even named one of *Time Magazine*’s 100 most influential people in the world).

But how do we trace, record and analyze complex sequences of content folding, especially when, in situations of crisis, they seldom follow the centrifugal formula of Sakurai’s *cri de cœur*? More often than not, such trajectories of mediation are chaotic and irregular – fragmented across platforms, languages
and time zones. On one hand, individual participants on social media often divide their attention and contributions across different platforms, seldom committed to the maintenance of a single, coherent persona. On the other, people caught up in a crisis situation, whether directly or not, tend to turn to the platforms where they have an established presence. A brief example: little more than an hour after Malaysia Airlines flight 17 was shot down above Ukraine on 17 July 2014, an account on the Vkontakte social network associated with pro-Russian militant Strelkov posted annotated photos of the wreckage. Despite being retracted almost immediately, the status update had already been crawled by omnivorous archival spiders, and screenshots were circulated by well-known pundits on Twitter and Facebook (Lepore 2015). As the extinct original in a ripple of recontextualization, Strelkov’s update became a widely propagated and contested vector of representation, not only of the MH17 aftermath, but of broadly escalating geopolitical tension.

Liza Potts’ (Michigan State University) new book proposes a general methodology for excavating and reassembling complex trajectories of social mediation across the digital noise and platform fragmentation of rich media ecologies. Across several case studies, Potts wields a *bricolage* of actor-network theory to show how networks of human and non-human actors cohere around the negotiation of meaning on social media platforms. While doing so, Potts argues that the rigidity of current social media interfaces do more to hamper than to facilitate the production of knowledge, calling for more flexible interfaces to encourage (and harvest) the potential of social media. These interfaces, Potts believes, will be envisaged and created by an emergent class of ‘experience architects’.

**Network Agency**

Why actor-network theory (*ANT*)? Potts’ focus on interface reflects a fundamental insight: the technological always (in)forms the social. Regardless of how we classify the awkward appellation ‘social media’ vis-à-vis media forms ‘old’ and ‘new’, critical attention to its discursive and aesthetic environments thus demands accounting for questions of access and agency (Hea 2014; cf. Gerbaudo 2012). To Potts, all digital content emerges without context, as formless *data*. But connected to other data points, like names linked to a photograph, or hashtag to hyperlink – data becomes validated as *information*. Finally, information transforms into *knowledge* as it circulates and acquires meaning throughout a network. The structure of Potts’ short volume much resembles a performative appropriation of *ANT* to ‘make it useful’ for exploring these