What’s the Matter with the Internet?
MARK POSTER
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Technology, Social Revolution and the Information Age

Considerable effort has been deployed to convince us that we are witnessing a revolution as important, as life-changing, as the industrial revolution. And, while some of the hyperbole has subsided in the wake of the dot.com crash, still the claims that we are entering a new age, the ‘information age’, abound. Leaving aside the posturing of the most extreme proponents of the ‘Californian ideology’,¹ perhaps what is more worrying is that these claims have become a commonplace in the socio-political literature that contributes to our continuing analysis of the everyday. Here, I examine a recent contribution to these debates by Mark Poster and lay out two important problems that an historical-materialist analysis might identify with these claims.

Like most literature examining the internet, Poster identifies its constituent technologies as being important drivers behind globalisation. Indeed, he offers us the by now relatively commonplace (if mistaken) state-in-decline treatment of globalisation. While he recognises that the more extreme characterisations of this process need to be approached with caution, he is nevertheless clear that many of the activities by which the nation-state established and maintained its position in the world have been undermined by the processes of internet-based communication. Adopting the notion of deterritorialisation, he suggests we are at the
cusp of an age of global interactions whose density and scope has never before existed and never before been materially and technically possible.
(p. 128.)

Poster reminds us that ‘Cyberspace is surely no total departure from all previous history’ (p. 5). Encapsulated in these remarks is the central analytical problem when encountering the internet: is it something new or not? No analysis can claim all is new, or conversely that nothing is. Analytical differences relate to the stress which any particular writer puts on continuity or change.

¹ Barbrook and Cameron 1996.
Poster tells us that the Althusserian notion of overdetermination has become so exaggerated and expanded over the internet that, in cyberspace, everything is in effect underdetermined by virtue of the overdetermination of all virtual ‘objects’ (pp. 17–19). There are just too many elements which networked knowledge and information contains to discover any determining factors, even in the last analysis. In this new world, all is indeterminate and thus a world of new possibilities emerges. Furthermore, new analysis is needed to take account of, and understand these new potentialities. Poster stresses that, while the potential encapsulated by underdetermination was always evident for print and previous mass media, it is only with the internet (and its associated technologies) that it has become actualised for the majority of users. Indeed, as Porter points out in his later discussion of the digital authorial function,

the impact of technologies is never the linear result of the intention of their creators or of their internal, ‘material’, capabilities. (p. 77.)

Rather, the radical combination of actual use and emergent possibility steer technologies down new avenues of social deployment and practice. Thus, while identifying the role of technology in this social revolution, Poster also resists technological determinism by stressing the radical potentiality of the internet to disturb and upset previous social settlements, identities and structures. However, as I argue below, to establish this position, Poster has built an analytical structure on unsound foundations.

Like others (although perhaps not as severely as the worst cases), Poster seems to fail to appreciate that very few new technologies have a real and immediate revolutionary impact. At its most simple, we might divide technological advances or innovations into two groups, which Peter Golding, in a recent analysis, calls ‘Technology One’ and ‘Technology Two’:

Technology One allows existing social action and process to occur more speedily, more efficiently, or conveniently (though equally possibly, with negative consequences, such as pollution and risk). Technology Two enables wholly new forms of activity previously impracticable or even inconceivable.²

Analytical problems arise when Technology One is mistakenly identified as Technology Two, and, in the debates around information society, this is a frequent and far-reaching cause of exaggeration of its effects. If ICTs are a Technology One, then it is unsurprising that the changes they have prompted have been less than revolutionary, indeed this would be expected. But, if ICTs are (mistakenly) seen as a Technology Two, then their potential effects become exaggerated. This then requires the identification of a truly transformative information age to be constantly presented as a forthcoming development, because its ‘true’ effects have yet to be felt.

² Golding 2000, p. 171.