

book review

**Untangling Digital Citizenship**

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Engin Isin and Evelyn Ruppert

*Being Digital Citizens*

Rowman and Littlefield International, London, 2015

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Relatively early in their book on digital citizenship, Engin Isin and Evelyn Ruppert caution their readers: ‘We cannot simply assume that being a citizen online already means something (whether it is the ability to participate or the ability to stay safe) and then look for those whose conduct conforms to this meaning.’ (19) So what can scholars of new media assume after the arrival of ubiquitous mobile and social media? In the age of high-tech classrooms and wearable self-tracking devices it seems attention turns to cultures of use and the kinds of governance that might foster digital life and allow a connected society to thrive. Although we can question the universality of this scenario it is clear that it is an idea whose time has come. The increasing public commentary about online harassment, trolling, hacking scandals, the promise and perils of eSociety, eHealth, data retention and cyber safety, has

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effectively carved out a sociopolitical language of 'digital citizenship' in the name of security or the social good. In all this talk of digital citizenship two scenes tend to come to mind. There are big picture questions about how governments and internet giants like Google and Facebook collect our private data and possibly intrude on our private lives while reshaping the very boundaries between publicity and privacy. Or, we hear about the risks of anonymity, such as trolling, cyberbullying and all the unknown things that young people are doing online that might verge on the socially irresponsible.

From the start, Isin and Ruppert's *Being Digital Citizens* takes aim at some of the issues commonly flagged in relation to the role of digital technology and social media platforms. Rather than engage the digital scaremongering, they assert that how we act through the internet is changing our political subjectivity as new sets of rights claims and struggles play out around platforms like Wikileaks or the Pirate Bay and new cultural heroes or demons emerge like Edward Snowden. The hotspots of digital contest, such as debates around how to make the wild corners of the internet safe, civil and accountable, now engulf ordinary internet users, such as the young person navigating rules about mobile and social media use in and out of school who is regularly confronted with choices about pirating, sharing, trolling and responding to online harassment, or the transgender person having to negotiate Facebook's 'real name' policy while maintaining a social media presence. These everyday social actions have already brought into being 'the digital citizen' as an emerging political subject whose behaviour is subject to regulation and policing (as in the topical examples of sexting and harassment) and increasingly the object of research inquiry.

Over the last fifteen years, the research area known as 'online participation' has grown with the proliferation of mobile and social media. Across that time academic interest in online activities has maintained a dominant focus on political participation or civic engagement but has also fragmented in method and object of study. There are studies of everything from mainstream politics to activism, digital communities to DIY cultures, as researchers struggle to keep up with the ever-expanding uses to which new media are put. *Being Digital Citizens* offers a conceptual toolbox for framing this disparate field of research as well as contesting the often-implied notion of digital citizenship embedded within this work.

To find a theoretical foothold in debates about the digital, Isin and Ruppert work through some of the central and contested tenets of citizenship studies. They draw a useful theoretical line through the social theory of Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Wittgenstein, Nancy, Rancière, Latour, Butler and Balibar, among other thinkers on subjectivity, agency and power. But it is J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* that is central to their exploration of 'digital acts'. Austin's speech act theory has obvious advantages when the target of analysis is the modes of participating, connecting and sharing that underpin digital life. Following Austin's model, Isin and Ruppert identify the kinds of speech acts that comprise digital life and the conditions necessary for their performance. Understanding the language of online communication as performed activity rather than code sets the ground work for a broader interrogation of digital acts understood as all the acts of expression and exchange that constitute our digital life and bring our digital selves into being. (53) Isin and Ruppert's theorisation of digital acts is precise, sustained and accessible. While there are other theorists in this area who could also have been considered, such as Whitehead and James, this might be work for others to continue rather than a limitation of the current volume.

Taking a pragmatic approach to digital citizenship means Isin and Ruppert are able to move beyond the binary of freedom and control that shapes much current debate around the internet. (79) Rather than more debate from one side of this rickety fence or the other, Isin and Ruppert begin to unravel the question of how ordinary social media users, activists, governments, internet corporations and web developers might continue to act in relation to each other through the internet and its associated technologies. There are multiple facets to these interactions: 'digital acts are refashioning, inventing and making up citizen subjects through the play of obedience, submission, and subversion'. (77) The point of departure for future empirical work lies in the need to better know the direction and effects of digital acts, which is where Austin again proves useful.

Drawing from Austin's speech act theory, Isin and Ruppert use the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary speech to introduce a terminology of callings, openings and closings to interrogate digital acts. Following Austin they argue that language has a force of action. Locutionary acts refer to what is actually said, while illocutionary acts are those actions that arise from what is

enacted *by* saying something: 'This is a speech act whose force creates a potential effect in a state of affairs.' (54) The notion of digital citizenship is itself a result of the illocutionary force of governmental acts, such as the establishment of 'eSafety' policies or commissioners. These actions draw together a specific range of behaviours within the guise of safety, security and citizenry. In contrast to this, perlocutionary acts refer to the response speech acts call forth in others howsoever that response is expressed. Invoking the significance of the perlocutionary, Isin and Ruppert emphasise the importance of nonverbal expression, gesture, movement and other embodied responses in what we consider digital acts. This realisation that expressive intentionality and consequence are registered beyond the digital trace points to the complexities of governing trolling or cyberbullying among other kinds of contested digital acts.

The second half of the book examines in more detail the digital acts through which digital citizens constitute themselves through rights claims. Participating, connecting and sharing are readily recognised as the primary 'callings' of digital life. As Isin and Ruppert note, each of these 'callings' involves both the 'closings' (filtering, tracking and normalising) and the 'openings' (witnessing, hacking and communing) that have become the battleground of popular and specialist debates about the internet as a techno-social assemblage. (35) While a great deal of attention is often paid to the technical constraints (aka closings) of the internet, such as Facebook's news feed or Google's filter bubble, Isin and Ruppert also highlight its normalising force. They give the illustrative example of Habbo Hotel (now Habbo), the globally popular 'virtual world' where young people can explore digital life, furnish rooms, engage in interactions, competitions and other activities. Although Habbo is promoted as a self-regulating community by its site owners, it is in effect governed by normalising conventions, 'an assemblage of algorithms, humans, rules, norms, and sanctions' that have been developed 'through an ongoing process of refinement in relation to the digital actions of citizen subjects'. (121) These digital actions, as we might expect, involve both complicity and disruption as when the users of Habbo:

learn that being a citizen involves not simply obedience but also submission to a number of actions (e.g., reporting) in which they

participate but which they also attempt to subvert by breaking conventions and resignifying actions. (121)

As this example reminds us, internet and social media platforms, sites and apps are not all-encompassing of a readymade digital citizenship even in its model or abstracted form. Rather, every site implicates users through closings just as it invites openings. In Isin and Ruppert's account, these productively contested processes are not only technical but also social, legal, political and commercial: 'the kinds of citizen subjects they cultivate are not homogenous and universal but fragmented, multiple and agonistic'. (122)

In this context Isin and Ruppert offer a nuanced account of hacking. In their discussion of the loosely associated organisation of activists and hackers referred to as Anonymous, they avoid the prevailing academic tendency to romanticise and Westernise the hacker ideal. In their account, hackers 'are those who subvert conventions governing themselves and digital citizens'; hence, it is 'the effects of the digital acts performed by hackers, not who they supposedly are [that] distinguishes them from programmers'. (144, 145) Thus it must be asked whose interests are being served when, under the auspices of citizenship, we name various figures as trolls, pirates, hackers, activists, bloggers or participants.

*Being Digital Citizens* goes a long way toward untangling the language of digital citizenship and its highly normative force. As Isin and Ruppert insist, there is a lot at stake in framing digital life in terms of digital citizenship. By moving beyond the term's conventional meaning (the ability to participate online) we can better understand the citizen as 'a composite subject of possibilities of obedience or submission to authority but also of potential subversion'. (77) Their insistence on conceiving the 'digital citizen as yet to come' opens up new trajectories for scrutiny and inquiry as well as intervention. In short, this volume is a provocation, a point of reflection and a spark for further conceptual and empirical work.

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