Charles Brewer
Review of Floyd, J & Katz, J.E. (eds.) *Philosophy of Emerging Media*. OUP. New York. 2016

The Lures and Risks of Modernity in Philosophy

In Nassim Taleb's 'Antifragile', there is an interesting observation that, unlike living things, artefacts tend to live longer, the longer they have already lived. Hence chairs, tables and books have already been around for a long time, and can be expected to continue to do so, whereas slide rules, gas-powered cars and Pokémon Go have all died, each with a decreasing length of survival.

In writing a paper for a book entitled "Philosophy of Emerging Media" there is a great danger of thinking "the new new thing" (to reference a book about a revolutionary internet-based health care firm which disappeared three months after its IPO) is "a thing"[1], when in fact it is little more than a good marketing launch which rapidly fizzles out.

Thus, Ambroise's on 'Speech Acts and the Internet", makes significant reference to the Facebook "Poke" function, which had almost disappeared from Facebook (you have to really look hard to find it), and appears to have had no coherent meaning or use during its rather brief and clearly unlamented life.

Similarly, in Richard Harper's analysis of Skype ("Explorations in the Grammar of 'Being in touch'") he seeks to find some distinctive, transformative emergent quality about this service, when by 2018 is has been superseded by WhatsApp in the West and Viber and Lime/Line elsewhere, largely because WhatsApp made the user's phone number their reference rather than a separate ID which Skype does. In fact, the main features of these services are that they offer FREE, very high-quality phone and text messages, they are in no significant way different from standard telephone service except, crucially, in terms of price. They may have had significant volume effects on international telephone usage, but a corporate (i.e. not paying for it themselves) phone user of the 1990s would have had almost exactly the same service and attitude.

Other writers have sensibly taken a rather longer view with a tie-in to more traditional philosophical areas, seeing today's "emerging media" as an example rather than a special case.

Thus, Katz and Robinson ("Challenging Philosophical Concerns about Emergence and Media as Emerging") run through an interesting set of perspectives "The Old in New Media" where the content is as before but conveyed in a modified manner – faster, more completely - to a wider audience but noting that Hume had already fully addressed the phenomenon of genuinely new information which can be adequately assessed with just the same old human critical faculties as before.[2]

---

[1] According to Google, "being a thing" began being "a thing" in around 2006, then dropped off, but since 2016 has had a slow but steady rise, maybe it's "a thing" again.

[2] The platypus is a splendid counter-example where, at least by reputation, the initial examples were thought to be fakes

They also, in the section "The New in the New Media" address the emerging capabilities which vast raw data and way-beyond-human processing capabilities can begin to uncover and address new discoveries or ways of control. Their well-argued conclusion is a conservative one that the media do not, and should not, deeply affect traditional philosophical questions but rather bring new grounds for the application of those concepts.

Grant ("Human Nature and Social Transformation") takes an even deeper view of the application of the traditional calling on the stalwarts of the Scottish Enlightenment who *weren't* David Hume, namely Adam Smith, Thomas Reid and Adam Ferguson as well as Marx, to argue that "the philosophy of technology" is nothing more than economic and social philosophy written in 21st century terms.

Two papers by Floyd ("Turing, Wittgenstein, and Emergence" – interesting comma use!) and Krämer ("Leibnitz on Symbolism as a Cognitive Instrument) seek to take matters elsewhere and look at what is happening when a transformative representation makes some profound shift in how we relate to the world.

This is less about innovative technology *per se* than our capacity to interact with the world with understanding and not simply reporting.

Krämer's paper is particularly fascinating in that she seems (I think) to have discovered in the Oxyrhynchus of Leibnitz's writings a suggestion that we can only begin to gain a scientific (that is explanatory and predictive) insight into a domain of experience once we have established a formalism in which to represent it. The implication would appear to be that emergent media are methods of representation and rules which allow the represented things to be linked, associated and their relationships portrayed in a manner which is unexpectedly productive.

It may be that examples which could be considered fruits of this method range from the Newton and Leibnitz's integral calculus to Feynman diagrams, Mendeleev's periodic table or, possibly most comprehensively, in phylogenetic representations in cladistics. Each uses a formalism which allows us to make testable predictions about creation of particles and energy, the existence of unknown elements and geographical and historical location of fossils. For, as JBS Haldane correctly said, the discovery of the fossil a single rabbit in pre-Cambrian rocks would destroy the entire edifice of evolutionary theory.

Most such formalisms fail and are rightly forgotten but we might wonder if Leibnitz (whose integral calculus transformed our ability to calculate values under curves as a function of infinitesimally divided mathematical space) was very much on to something, and that the successful emergent technologies are those which provide a new, or at least radically improved, formalism and representation of the world.

However, from the point of view of December 2018, it would seem that an absolutely critical aspect of emerging media and the embedding of advanced co-operative technology in society has been missed, and that is the ethics of emerging media. Whether the collection of data from always-on connected devices (mobile phones, cars that "phone home", smart TV and AI-driven personal assistants – confession, I currently have eight Alexa-based devices

in my home) or questions of collection and use of personal data which have led to politically led "moral panics", which may or may not have a profound effect on society, but in any case have opened up a series of important questions about how we interact ethically with one another, both locally, and more urgently, remotely.

Taken overall, the papers seem to indicate that the increasing ubiquity of technology has had profound effects on our interaction with the world in many ways. I shall try to extract what appears to have been discovered by means of reference to the components of Kant's transcendental aesthetic for it is there that we find the most profound effect.

In a review such as this, I can only give indications and examples rather than complete arguments, so there are going to be some serious holes in what follows.

First, let us consider the effect of new technologies on time. Previously, events were typically seen as forming part of a continuous stream going back into the past. Earlier events were seen largely as of the same standing as current events, although with a continuous "dimming" of their relevance. Thus, something someone did when they were 10 would, normally, be considered only mildly relevant to the present-day assessment of a 30-year-old man (obviously, particularly heinous offences or spectacularly good acts would have an enhanced weighting).

But with current access to data, there is now a dichotomous form of the stream of time. I have termed these two forms "historical time" and "ethical time". Historical time is that time which is used for giving events as reference for examples or which provides the intellectual stage on which discussion occurs. Ethical time is the time in which a person's actions are judged.

Historical time which used to be memorialised and accessed through books, newspaper archives or diaries, has now largely divided into "items accessible on Google" and "items not accessible on Google" with the latter heading for Memory Hole status. And since the results of a Google search have strong algorithmic bias towards the present (and perhaps a political slant) historical time has a strong divide around 2010. Before that, there is a steep drop into a very dark abyss until one hits the pre-internet era of books and journals, but which is very much a secondary and inferior source.

Ethical time, on the other hand has compressed until is almost resembles a continuous present. A tweet from 2008 posted by a 14-year-old will remain potent against its author in perpetuity and will be presented as if it were contemporary and a definitive indicator of moral character. It would appear that the fact that a relatively ancient fact is discovered with the same ease and by an identical method to a contemporaneous one distorts perspective.

The concept of space, and in particular, distance, has also undergone an odd transformation as discussed above. In earlier centuries, information moved at the speed of a ship or horse, in other words very slowly. Later when telegraphic and telephone cables made communication instantaneous - although there was a period when long distance and in particular international calls had to be booked in advance so that the multiple connections

could be made manually – communication was typically limited by cost, with a direct and close relationship existing between the rate charged and the distance of the call.

However, as discussed above, the cost element has now disappeared as a proxy for distance, and the main determinant of whether to call one's brother in Australia is whether he will be awake, not what it will cost.

Taken as a whole, the papers in this book both investigates and exemplifies the problems with trying to carry out philosophical investigations on contemporary phenomena whose longevity is utterly uncertain. Krämer's paper puts forward the most challenging framework for the analysis, but she (reasonably) does not seek to give any predictions.

Overall, the book is an intriguing and engaging mix of error, cunning and insight (with some spectacular and amusing fails) and several papers present sound and challenging analysis.

Charles Brewer holds degrees in philosophy from Edinburgh and Newcastle universities. He is the CEO of an IT company whose main product embodies and incorporates a series of principles found in the writings of 20th century philosophers.