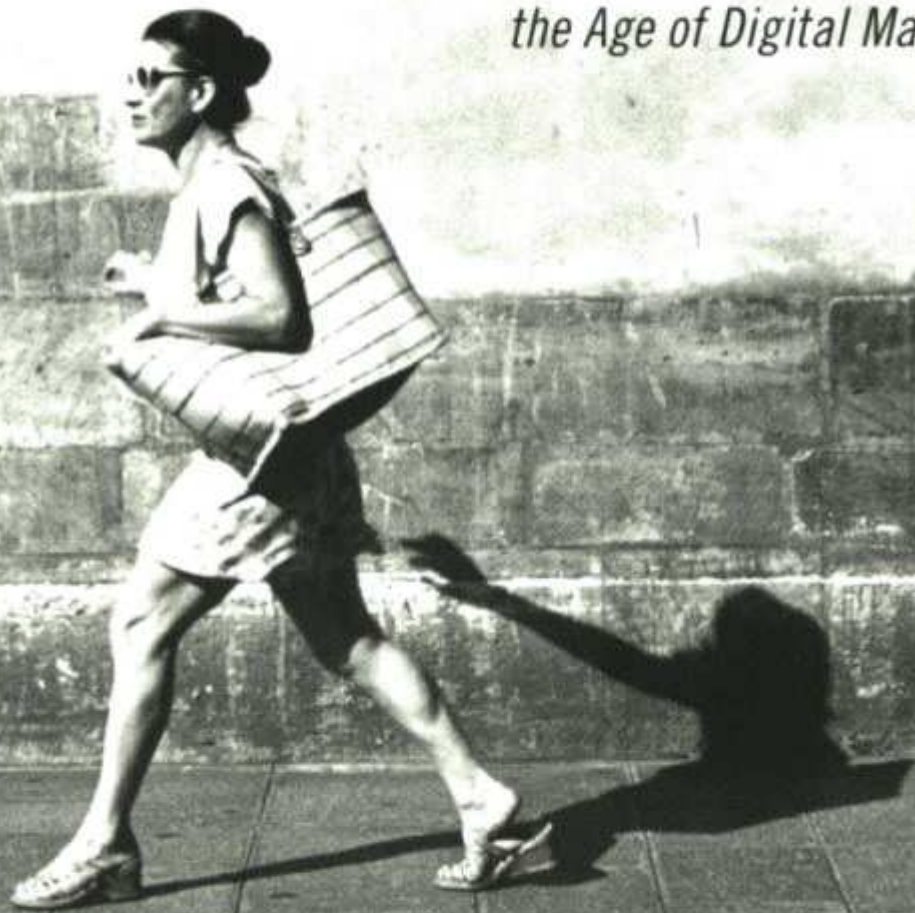


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INFORMATION PLEASE

*Culture and Politics in
the Age of Digital Machines*



MARK POSTER

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Information Please advances the ongoing critical project of the media scholar Mark Poster: theorizing the social and cultural effects of electronically mediated information. In this book Poster conceptualizes a new relation of humans to information machines, a relation that avoids privileging either the human or the machine but instead focuses on the structures of their interactions. Synthesizing a broad range of critical theory, he explores how texts, images, and sounds are made different when they are mediated by information machines, how this difference affects individuals as well as social and political formations, and how it creates opportunities for progressive change.

Poster's critique develops through a series of lively studies. Analyzing the appearance of Sesame Street's Bert next to Osama Bin Laden in a *New York Times* news photo, he examines the political repercussions of this Internet "hoax" as well as the unlimited opportunities that Internet technology presents for the appropriation and alteration of information. He considers the implications of open-source licensing agreements, online personas, the sudden rise of and interest in identity theft, peer-to-peer file sharing, and more. Focusing explicitly on theory, he reflects on the limitations of critical concepts developed before the emergence of new media, particularly globally networked digital communications, and he argues that, contrary to the assertions of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, new media do not necessarily reproduce neo-imperialisms. Urging a rethinking of assumptions ingrained during the dominance of broadcast media, Poster charts new directions for work on politics and digital culture.

"Engaging, informative, and thoroughly enjoyable, *Information Please* is a tour de force in its clear articulation of a coherent approach to the spectrum of issues arising from the penetration of information technology into every aspect of human life, from questions of global politics to the construction and protection of identities and selves in the context of digital media."—**Tim Lenoir**, Kimberly J. Jenkins Professor of New Technologies and Society, Duke University

"Mark Poster has been one of the foremost scholars of global digital culture over the past decades. *Information Please*, probably his best and most advanced book to date, continues his project of using contemporary theory to interrogate new media and new media to illustrate and critique certain forms of theory."—**Douglas Kellner**, coauthor of *The Postmodern Adventure: Science, Technology, and Cultural Studies at the Third Millennium*

**MEDIA STUDIES/
CULTURAL THEORY/
GLOBALIZATION**

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PERFECT TRANSMISSIONS: EVIL BERT LADEN

My contention is that information increasingly appears in complex couplings of humans and machines.¹ Culture can thus no longer be understood as separate from technology. If this is so, many assumptions long held in modern society require revision. One such assumption is that cultures are in essence national. Yet the emerging mode of information, tethering humans and machines, is recognizably global. In this context, I begin with an analysis of how cultures interact in planetary human-machine relations by examining one case of Internet-mediated communications.

In the globally networked world, strange, unexpected, and sometimes amusing events occur. I will analyze one such happening with the purpose of understanding how the global communication system affects national cultures. It is my hypothesis that the condition of globalization, of which the Internet is a major component, imposes a new and heightened level of interaction between cultures. This interactivity changes each culture in many ways, one of which I highlight: the degree of autonomy of each culture is significantly reduced as a consequence of the global information network, and at the same time, the task of constructing a planetary culture is posed. On the one hand, all attempts to sustain such autonomy tend to become retrograde and dangerous. Local beliefs, values, and practices can no longer be held as absolute or as exclusive, at the expense of others. On the other hand, a new opportunity arises for a practical definition and articulation of global, human, or better posthuman culture. In short, more and more, the local becomes relative, and the global may become universal. This universal, unlike earlier attempts to define it or impose it, will be differential; it will consist of heterogeneous glocal fragments.

Although there are significant economic and demographic components of the new level of global interactivity, I limit my discussion to the issue of the flow of cultural objects within cyberspace. New media contribute greatly to the quantity and quality of the planetary transmission of cultural objects. Cultural objects—texts, sounds, and images—posted to the Internet exist in a digital domain that is everywhere at once. These objects are disembodied from their point of origin or production, entering immediately into a space that has no particular territorial inscription. As a result, the Internet constitutes distributed culture, a heteroglossia that covers the (virtual) earth. Cultural objects in new media are thus disjunctive from their societies. They are intelligible only through the medium in which they subsist—cyberspace. Cultural objects embedded in cyberspace raise the question of a new hermeneutic, one that underscores the agency of the media, rendering defunct figures of the subject from all societies in which it persists and has persisted in a position understood to be separate from objects.

The Internet enables planetary transmissions of cultural objects (texts, images, and sounds) to cross cultural boundaries with little “noise.” Communications now transpire with digital accuracy. The dream of the communications engineer is realized as information flows without interference from any point on the earth to any other point or points. As Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver theorize: “The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point” (Shannon and Weaver 1949, 3). Cybernetic theory is seemingly fulfilled by the Internet: both machines and the human body act on the environment through “the accurate reproduction” of information or signals, in an endless feedback loop that adjusts for changes and unexpected events (Wiener 1950). The physicist’s theory of communication is apparently realized as messages circulate around the globe in radio frequency channels, fiber-optic cables, or copper cables with each element of text, image, or sound being reproduced, transmitted, and stored in a single, instantaneous operation.²

And yet, as Derrida (1987) argues in *The Post Card*, things are not so simple. All the bits and bytes are there all right, but the message does not always come across or get decoded. Misunderstandings abound in our new global culture, sometimes in quite pointed ways. This chapter is

about one such miscommunication. It concerns a perfect transmission of an image halfway around the globe that somehow went awry. Indeed, one may argue that the global network, with its instantaneous, exact communications, systematically produces the effect of misrecognition as cultural objects are transported across cultural boundaries. Global communications, one might say, signifies transcultural confusion. At the same time, the network creates conditions of intercultural exchange that render politically noxious any culture which cannot decode the messages of others, which insists that only its transmissions have meaning or are significant. As never before, we must begin to interpret culture as multiple cacophonies of inscribed meanings as each cultural object moves across cultural differences. Let us look at one instance of the issue that I have in mind.

The second week of October 2001 was eventful with the onset of U.S. and British bombing in Afghanistan. Like many Americans, I attempted to get my bearings on the events by listening intently to reports of the war and to analyses by informed commentators and academics. On Friday of that week, a few days after the start of the bombing, I heard, on a National Public Radio broadcast, one expert on Middle Eastern cultures explain to the interviewer and audience that among the many aspects of American society that antagonize Islamic fundamentalists, the greatest irritant is American popular culture. Even more than American support for Israel or the American-led embargo of Iraq, the enemy, in the eyes of these Muslims, is, of all things, American popular culture. Samir Amin has argued to this effect for some time, pointing out that “the prodigious intensification of communication by the media, now global in scope, has both quantitatively and qualitatively modified the contradiction generated by the unequal expansion of capitalism. Yearning for access to Western models of consumption has come to penetrate large numbers of the popular masses” (Amin 1989, 140). In the context of the Middle East, the fundamentalist Muslims are threatened by this “yearning” by other Middle Easterners for Western styles and commodities. With some surprise, I filed this bit of knowledge somewhere in my brain’s database and continued my ride home.

Much could be said about American popular culture in the age of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call “Empire” (Hardt and Negri 2000). Here I need only note that a peculiarity of many Americans is an emo-

tional fixation they often develop for figures in popular culture, not simply for acknowledged celebrities but for all manner of objects: clothing, food products, animated figures, music styles, television shows, and so forth. Americans obsess about selected aspects of popular culture. One such American is Dino Ignacio, who had an intense dislike for Bert, a muppet on public television's long-standing children's show *Sesame Street*. For Mr. Ignacio, Bert was evil. To satisfy his obsession, Ignacio created a Web page entitled "Bert Is Evil." There, with the aid of a Web browser, one finds Ignacio's "evidence" of the muppet's alleged misdeeds. Among this evidence is a series of images that Ignacio thinks prove the point: Bert is pictured with Hitler, with the KKK, with Osama bin Laden, and with a long list of other evildoers (see figures 1–3).

Bert's crimes are thus detailed with fastidious and unrelenting hostile energy.³ Perhaps Ignacio has too much time on his hands, but in any case, his Web design is characteristic of the commitment of many Americans to their peculiar, fetishistic attachments to popular culture figures. An understanding of this aspect of popular culture in the United States is essential to appreciating what follows. It must be noted, however, that Ignacio is an immigrant, a native of the Philippines who, as a child, viewed *Sesame Street* from the distance, by means of satellite television transmissions, and created the "Evil Bert" Web site in Manila. This site won Ignacio a prize—"the Webby prize for best weird site in 1998," according to the media historian Roy Rosenzweig⁴—and brought him to San Francisco to study art. American popular culture is thus far advanced in its global reach.

On Sunday, October 14, a friend and colleague, Jon Wiener, e-mailed me with an urgent message to look at the *New York Times* for an incredible story concerning a protest in Bangladesh begun on October 8 against American bombing in Afghanistan. The story he referred to by Amy Harmon, one of the most astute journalists writing on new media, included a picture of the protesters in Bangladesh carrying a poster of Osama bin Laden that was an attractive collage composed of several images of him along with a tiny picture of Bert, the *Sesame Street* muppet, sitting on his left shoulder and staring smugly (figure 4).

Another photograph that I found on the Web reveals more clearly the face of Evil Bert (figure 5). Bert is in the highlighted circle, grimacing at the viewer more fiercely than Osama. How was it possible for Bert to get



FIGURE 1. Bert and Hitler
(<http://carcino.gen.nz/images>)



FIGURE 2. Bert with the KKK
(<http://carcino.gen.nz/images>)



FIGURE 3. Bert and Osama
from the Evil Bert Web site
(<http://carcino.gen.nz/images>)



FIGURE 4. Image from the Web that appeared in the *New York Times*, October 8, 2001 (AP/World Wide Photos. Reprinted with permission.)

into the heavily charged political scene in Bangladesh? Amy Harmon could not explain the inclusion of Bert in the poster, but there he was for all the world, and especially protesting Islamic militants, to see. Perhaps he truly was evil, living up to Ignacio's image of him, siding with the al-Qaeda terrorists.

I was fascinated by Harmon's story and the accompanying photograph. Out of curiosity, I searched the Web for more information about Bert's remarkable presence in Bangladesh. A simple image search for "Evil Bert" in Google yielded a number of photographs that confirmed the one reproduced in the *New York Times* article (see figures 6–9). They are also significant to understanding more of the story.

The photograph in figure 9 yields the best information about how Evil Bert managed to appear in the poster. It shows that the image of Bert in the poster is taken from Ignacio's Web page. The image on the Evil Bert page has simply been set into a collage of images of bin Laden. There are eight images of bin Laden in the poster, including one from the Evil Bert