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## InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

### Title

The Social Machine: Designs for Living Online by Judith Donath

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6xt0s2b6>

### Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 11(2)

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### Publication Date

2015

### DOI

10.5070/D4112027205

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**The social machine: Designs for living online** by Judith Donath. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014, 432 pp. ISBN-13 978-0262027014.

In order to interrogate the potential of interface design to contribute to the communicative capacities of computers, Judith Donath's (2014) *The Social Machine: Designs for Online Living* draws on two decades of research, design, and experimentation in "inventing technologies to transform how people think, learn, and communicate" (p. vii). Proceeding from the premise that a networked computer can be a machine for socialization just as a house is a machine for living in, Donath aims to probe the state-of-the-art of interface design (p. viii). From the outset, Donath describes technologically mediated communication as a poor imitation of face-to-face contact, as a primitive and still emergent mode of socializing that has yet to realize its potential: "[W]e are, after all, embodied creatures whose cognition is based on physical experience" (p. 6). Rather than belabor this perceived dualism, the author directs her inquiry to those kinds of communicative situations that can arise "*because* they occur within a computational medium" (p. 6, emphasis in original). This work announces two goals: first, the book aims to enrich interface design by synthesizing canonical research from psychology, communication, art history, and world events; second, the author frames the work as

a manifesto about what the connected world can be like – a vivid, nuanced space in which the inhabitants have the awareness and tools to shape their worlds and the impression they make in it. (p. 340)

This book primarily addresses designers of computer interfaces and functions much like an extended visual essay, replete with lush illustrations and numerous examples, many of them digital projects built by the author and her students. Roughly half of the work is devoted to critiques of previously developed interface designs. The other half consists of extended meditations by the author on familiar ideas from the history of computer-mediated communication such as affordances, the distinction between public and private, group dynamics, and so on. For interface designers, Donath's book offers a fundamental challenge to approaching the design of online spaces expressed as three central tenets: Be innovative. Be legible. Be beneficial (p. 6). Throughout the work, Donath insists on a fundamentally social approach to interpreting communicative media, an attention to the process of selectively capturing aspects of face-to-face communication that might enrich the nascent field of interface design. "We are at the beginning of a revolution in human communication," she writes, the terms and outcome of which are still mutable and contested (p. 6).

The book features a unique organization, one that serves to make each chapter fairly self-contained and promotes browsing, especially by readers interested in improving interface design. An introductory chapter begins with the

central argument of the book: "Design Shapes Society" challenges designers of interfaces, apps, and other sites of networked socialization to ask themselves what kind of society they want to build. Five sets of paired chapters examine a single focus from two different perspectives. "Visualizing Social Landscapes" and "Interfaces Make Meaning" bring to the fore interpretive aspects of data visualization and the rhetoric of graphical display. "Mapping Social Networks" and "Our Evolving Super-Networks" examine various aspects of social networking sites and applications, emphasizing an approach that does not take the sociability of computer-mediated communication for granted. "Visible Conversations" and "Contested Boundaries" look at ways of depicting the rich informational dynamics of human interaction via technological means. "Data Portraits" and "Constructing Identity" play on the tension between individual people and their representation via digital data in a framing that depends rather disconcertingly on loose notions of objectivity, neutrality, and accuracy.

The two chapters most likely to interest scholars in information studies, communication, or science and technology studies, "Embodied Interactions" and "Privacy and Public Space," together theorize the role of embodiment in digitally mediated spaces, rather vehemently positing a digital/physical dualism. Finally, "Social Catalysts," easily the most creative chapter, addresses the transformation of the experience of public space, "bringing some of the online world's open sociability to public space by bringing physically distant people into contact or by providing people with new knowledge or new means to interact with one another" (p. xi). In these chapters, the author alters the scale of her focus through clever application of a cinematic metaphor: the long shot captures the whole society or community and its complex communicative patterns; the medium shot illustrates the intimacy and nuance of small group communications; and the close-up depicts the individual through "data portraits." Donath's central admonition to designers is to go "beyond being there," an oft-repeated slogan borrowed from a 1990s paper that aims to expand the designer's sense of possibility through an engagement with social science literature and an attention to the complexities of the communicative situation (p. 132). The work is pleasingly wide-ranging: references to Michel Foucault share space on the page with accounts of the work of Erving Goffman, William Whyte, Walter Ong, 4chan, Richard Avedon, Edward Tufte, and numerous others.

While this work succeeds at challenging designers to engage more fully with established ideas from social science, it also promises to provide a manifesto for users. As a manifesto for users, the work is considerably less successful, owing primarily to its commitment to nuance and its appeal to the logic of balance and trade-offs, to compromise. A manifesto is a blunt and incendiary text, one meant to spur others to action. Here, the appeal is couched in terms of contemporary public service campaigns, a non-confrontational call to "raise

awareness.” Absent here are strident critiques or even general conclusions. For example, of the rancor endemic to the comments sections of websites (and of public discourse more generally), the author says only, “[F]ar too many of today’s discussions descend into vicious acrimony” (p. 10). The author’s position is that good design might ameliorate such a woeful status quo, but this gesture toward diffidence runs counter to the logic of a manifesto, which seeks no consensus. The author carefully makes an argument for an enriched sense of purpose in interface design through braiding together images, anecdotes, and summaries, but such subtleties and understatements do not constitute a plan of action for users or a response to actions already underway. For all the author’s talk of revolutions, she assiduously avoids naming the predictable winners and losers of such revolt. She mentions in passing e-waste, government surveillance, and the proliferation of gadgets in daily life as if they were unanticipated consequences of technologically mediated communication, when they might more productively be considered features. Of these deep and foundational challenges to any ideal of improvement, the author says only, “Balance is the key: balance between being secure and being free; between being part of a community and having to be different, alone, a stranger” (p. 340). This tendency toward conciliation defeats the project of the manifesto for users, particularly when viewed alongside other passages that engage more fully with the political economy of information technology. A brief and refreshingly frank discussion of the American military’s reliance on drone technology shows that the author has been unnecessarily restrained in her description of the general situation of contemporary users of digital communication technology (p. 324).

Designers of interfaces will find in this work a careful and nuanced approach to a number of ideas that might expand their approach to their own work. As the author notes, the increasing cultural significance of computers and the communicative environments they enable demand reflection. A computer is no longer a tool of calculative rationality alone, but “an electronic place to see and be seen” (p. vii). Donath’s book invites designers to ask what kind of relations people might wish to have in such environments. And while no single volume could hope to answer the basic questions that underpin the technology that increasingly houses and mediates the very vital processes of sociability that constitute everyday life, this work provides very promising grounds to begin such conversations.

#### **Reviewer**

Roderic Crooks is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA. His research interests include community archives, participatory media, and smartphone computing.