STALDER, F. (2018). *THE DIGITAL CONDITION.* CAMBRIDGE: POLITY PRESS.

Helena Barranha
Instituto Superior Técnico, University of Lisbon, Portugal/
Institute of Art History, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, NOVA University, Portugal

Over the past few decades, the word "digital" has become recurrent in the most diverse discourses and media. Used both as a noun and to qualify different actions, products and experiences, it became part of the everyday lexicon, appearing at the same time as a keyword in numerous projects and scientific articles. Together, these different approaches contributed to a generalized consensus around the idea that digital technologies condition all spheres of contemporary life. But what exactly characterizes the "digital condition" in which we live? If the question was already topical in 2016, when the first edition of Felix Stalder's book was launched, its relevance is even more evident today.

At an unprecedented registry and pace, the Covid-19 pandemic forced a large percentage of the world population to transfer, to digital and networked media, many of the professional, social and family activities that, until now, had been carried out mainly in face-to-face contexts. People, institutions and companies thus had to adapt, in an extraordinarily short period, to teleworking routines, distance learning methods and socializing by videoconference. In this scenario, whose contours and impacts are yet to be determined, *The digital condition* provides several references that allow us to better understand the current situation, as well as to reflect on the respective antecedents and possible developments.

This work reflects the professional and academic career of the author and the research work he has been carrying out since the 1990s, in an area of intersection among culture, politics and technology. In parallel to his activity as a professor of digital culture at the Zurich University of the Arts, Felix Stalder collaborates with the Institute for New Cultural Technologies and the Technopolitics Group in Vienna, focusing on topics such as the new modes of collaborative production (*commons*), the control society, copyright and the transformation of subjectivity[1].

The structure of the book, based on only three chapters with the titles "evolution", "forms" and "politics", reflects the clarity with which the author elaborates his entire discourse. In the introduction, Stalder briefly presents the content of each of these topics and also reveals the assumptions and objectives of this study, focused on "cultural developments in the (transatlantic) West" (p. 4) and on "open-ended dynamics that can still be influenced" (p. 6).

---

[1] See the author's autobiography, available at http://felix.openflows.com/node/4

Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais / Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies, vol. 7, n. 1, 2020

Stalder, F. (2018). The digital condition. Cambridge: Polity Press. · Helena Barranha

In line with reference texts, in the field of the theory and history of contemporary culture – it would suffice to think of Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* (1979) – Stalder constructs his reflection from the identification of a unitary system, a new socio-cultural framework which he describes as "condition". Placing the problem in the singular implies, undoubtedly, recognizing a set of forms or characteristics common to the broad spectrum of cultural transformations and manifestations that have occurred in recent decades. Throughout the book, the author convincingly demonstrates this interpretive hypothesis. In the first pages, Stalder also discusses the concept of "digital", noting that the new media are relational technologies whose evolution and reach go beyond the strict technological dimension:

> "digital" thus denotes the set of relations that, on the infrastructural basis of digital networks, is realized today in the production, use, and transformation of material and immaterial goods, and in the constitution and coordination of personal and collective activity. In this regard, the focus is less on the dominance of a certain class of technological artifacts – the computer, for instance – and even less on distinguishing between "digital" and "analog", "material" and "immaterial". Even in the digital condition, the analog has not gone away. Rather, it has been re-evaluated and even partially upgraded. The immaterial, moreover, is never entirely without materiality. (pp. 8-9)

In addition to showing the growing hybridization between digital and analog, material and immaterial, the author considers that the attributes generally associated with digital – immateriality, perfection and virtuality – have lost relevance (p. 9). Stalder here approaches his perspective to the concept of "post-digital", citing authors such as Kim Cascone and Florian Cramer (p. 9). Curiously, there is no mention of Marisa Olson, artist, curator and art critic who, since 2006, contributed decisively to coining the term "postinternet", understood as "a moment, a condition, a property, and a quality that encompasses and transcends new media" (Olson, 2011, p. 63).

The globalization of the mass media is in focus in the first chapter of the book – "Evolution" – in which Stalder argues that the "Gutemberg Galaxy", theorized by Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s, was replaced by a new reality, marked by the crisis of previously established cultural forms and institutions and through their gradual replacement by new ways, which have led to "new, contradictory and conflict-laden political dynamics" (p. 4). In this historical synthesis, the emergence of the knowledge economy is analyzed, successively associated with notions such as "post-industrial society" (1970s), "information society" (1980s) and "network society" (1990s) (p. 17).

However, it is important to note again that, according to the author, the current "digital condition" should not be seen as a mere consequence of technological advances. Contrary to the dominant technocratic discourses, the author seems to subscribe to the idea that "technological systems are socially produced" and "social production is

Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais / Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies, vol. 7, n. 1, 2020

Stalder, F. (2018). The digital condition. Cambridge: Polity Press. · Helena Barranha

culturally informed" (Castells, 2001, p. 36). This view has been corroborated by several researchers, such as Charlie Gere, who, in the book *Digital culture*, argues that "Digital refers not just to the effects and possibilities of a particular technology. It defines and encompasses the ways of thinking and doing that are embodied within that technology, and which make its development possible" (Gere, 2002/2008, p. 17). Stalder, moreover, returns to this subject at the end of the second chapter, adding that:

> strictly speaking, it is impossible to maintain a categorical distinction between social processes that take place in and by means of technological infrastructures and technical processes that are socially constructed. In both cases, social actors attempt to realize their own interests with the resources at their disposal. The methods of (attempted) realization, the available resources, and the formulation of interests mutually influence one another. The technological resources are inscribed in the formulation of goals. These open up fields of imagination and desire, which in turn inspire technical development. (p. 103)

Another particularly interesting point in the first part of the book concerns the "culturalization of the world", highlighting the way in which the consumer society has evolved towards an increasing appreciation and commercial exploitation of cultural and affective dimensions (p. 35). At the same time, digitalization and the dynamics powered by networks have created an infinite amount of new content ("raw material") and paved the way for appropriation and re-composition to become "general methods of cultural production" (p. 40).

In presenting the "digital condition" as a "cultural constellation that determines all areas of [contemporary] life" (p. 57), Stalder identifies a set of three predominant and ubiquitous features: *referentiality, communality and algorithmicity*, analyzed in detail in the second chapter, with the title "Forms".

> Referentiality, communality, and algorithmicity have become the characteristic forms of the digital condition because more and more people – in more and more segments of life and by means of increasingly complex technologies – are actively (or compulsorily) participating in the negotiation of social meaning. They are thus reacting to the demands of a chaotic, overwhelming sphere of information and thereby contributing to its greater expansion. (p. 125)

The fact that audiences have taken on an increasingly active role in the processes of cultural production and diffusion has also created new challenges for institutional structures. Besides digitizing and making their collections available online, museums, archives and other cultural institutions currently invest in activities geared towards a greater creative involvement of audiences, as is the case, for example, with the "Rijksstudio" initiative, promoted by the Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam (pp. 76-77).

Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais / Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies, vol. 7, n. 1, 2020

Stalder, F. (2018). The digital condition. Cambridge: Polity Press. · Helena Barranha

On the other hand, cultural practices based on self-referencing, which constitute one of the main catalysts for social networks, are inseparable from new group dynamics, based on a flexible cooperation model. According to the author, rather than individuals, it is the new community formations that assume and dynamize three essential functions for the "digital condition" – selection, interpretation and the constitutive ability to act – being, therefore, determinants for contemporary culture (pp. 80-81, 93).

Transversal to this context, algorithmicity arises as a response to the human inability to manage the immeasurable amounts of data which circulate online today and are produced daily by people and machines.

> Beneath or ahead of the social mechanisms of decentralized and networked cultural production, there are algorithmic processes that pre-sort the immeasurably large volumes of data and convert them into a format that can be apprehended by individuals, evaluated by communities, and invested with meaning. (p. 103)

Over the past few years, several authors have questioned the role of artificial intelligence and, in particular, the power of algorithms, "the method by which we access content that has colonized nearly all aspects of our daily life" (Pepi, 2011, n. p.). Felix Stalder stresses that algorithms have become progressively more complex and dynamic and warns that, by incorporating elements of personalization and contextualization, these automatic processes are increasingly unstable, opaque and ambivalent. Among the examples mentioned, the Google search algorithm stands out, as it is subject to permanent review and adapted to the profile of each user. Consequently, it turns out that these algorithms no longer aim to represent the world, but rather to generate a reality that is filtered and presented in a personalized way (p. 116).

This virtually unlimited power conferred on the automatic mechanisms to organize the world in which we live, carries, obviously, many risks, especially when the main digital platforms we use – namely Google, Facebook, Twitter or Instagram – are regulated by a restricted group of private economic agents operating on a global scale. In this context, the functioning of networks is closely linked to the monopoly effect (p. 143), a system owned by those who control not only the data, but also the algorithms that extract, order and reveal it.

The fact that these problems are still insufficiently debated and subject to public scrutiny gives special importance to the third and last chapter of the book, dedicated to the political dimension of the "digital condition". In this final part, Felix Stalder confronts two opposing trends which are already widely disseminated worldwide: *post-democracy* and *commons*. The author observes that we are facing two alternative ways which point to an overcoming of the current crisis of liberal democracy and might represent new political projects (p. 7).

Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais / Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies, vol. 7, n. 1, 2020

Stalder, F. (2018). The digital condition. Cambridge: Polity Press. · Helena Barranha

> The former [post-democracy] is moving toward an essentially authoritar-
> ian society, while the latter [commons] is moving toward a radical renewal
> of democracy by broadening the scope of collective decision-making. Both
> cases involve more than just a few minor changes to the existing order.
> Rather, both are ultimately leading to a new political constellation beyond
> liberal representative democracy. (p. 127)

In the point dedicated to post-democracy, Stalder point out that inequalities in ac-
cess to information inevitability generate power imbalances (p. 135). This imbalance is
reflected in the way users of digital platforms have access only to a small part of the data
that concerns them, while programmers and computer analysts working for major multi-
national companies have access to all information (p. 135). In this scenario, there is am-
ple evidence that social networks have the power (and often exert it) to manipulate users,
namely for political and commercial purposes. The technocratic (and anti-democratic)
argument that "there is no alternative" to this manipulation is usually based on the fal-
lacious idea that the informational environment in which we operate must be optimized
through control mechanisms that are alien to us (p. 149). Simultaneously:

> "post-democracy" refers to strategies that counteract the enormously ex-
> panded capacity for social communication by disconnecting the possibil-
> ity to participate in things from the ability to make decisions about them.
> Everyone is allowed to voice his or her opinion, but decisions are ultimately
> made by a select few. (p. 6).

Despite these threats, Stalder recalls that "every form of power provokes its own
forms of resistance " (p. 149) and mentions collaborative projects around common in-
terests and objectives (*commons*) as proof that there are indeed alternatives. The author
notes that this path is neither new nor specifically Western, explaining that, although the
term "commons" was only applied from the second half of the 1990s, this concept was
already implicit in the pioneering experiences of "free software" creation since the 1980s
(p. 156). In order to illustrate and discuss this notion, the author examines more recent
examples, such as Wikipedia, the non-governmental organization Creative Commons or
the collaborative project OpenStreetMap.

Sociocultural practices based on sharing and collaborative construction took on
new meaning in times of global pandemic. More than ever, it becomes clear that net-
works are not limited to representing reality; they condition and shape the individual
and collective reality in which we live. In addition to the informational dimension of the
networks, during the temporary closure of their physical spaces, cultural institutions
reinforced their online presence, digitally disseminating their heritage and their produc-
tions. Concerts, plays, guided tours, exhibitions, conferences, educational programmes
and many other activities are now available on the internet. Just like the institutions, the
artists themselves have also increasingly used networks as a creative, performative and

Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais / Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies, vol. 7, n. 1, 2020

Stalder, F. (2018). The digital condition. Cambridge: Polity Press. · Helena Barranha

communicative space. In this context, networks have assumed their full potential as the preferred stage for the development and presentation of diverse artistic proposals, a preferential meeting place for creators and their audiences.

However, and despite the inevitability of making more use of networks at a time when our freedom is limited by the threat of the coronavirus, it is important to maintain some critical distance. It is now particularly opportune to bring to the debate some of the questions posed by the book *The digital condition*, namely: can the networks owned by the big monopolies be truly recognized and appropriated as a public space? We can therefore conclude that the problematization around the "digital condition" constitutes a field still open for new research and reflections. Felix Sadler's book is, without a doubt, a stimulating and solid starting point for this discussion that, desirably, should mobilize the most diverse sectors of society.

Translation: Pedro Andrade

References

Castells, M. (2001). *The internet galaxy: reflections on the internet, business, and society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gere, C. (2002/2008). *Digital culture*. London: Reaktion Books.

Olson, M. (2011). Postinternet: art after the internet. Foam Magazine, 29 - What's Next, pp. 59-63.

Lyotard, J.-F. (1979). *A condição pós-moderna*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

Pepi, M. (2011) Iconology in the age of the algorithm. *Artwrit*, VI. Retrieved from http://www.artwrit.com/article/iconology-in-the-age-of-the-algorithm/

Biographical note

Helena Barranha has PhD in Architecture (University of Porto, Portugal) and a Master's Degree in the Management of Cultural Heritage (University of Algarve). She is an Assistant Professor at Instituto Superior Técnico, University of Lisbon and a researcher at the Institute of Art History, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, NOVA University. She was the director of the National Museum of Contemporary Art – Museu do Chiado, in Lisbon, from 2009 to 2012, and the Coordinator of the "unplace project – a museum without a place" (2014-2015). Her current research focuses on cultural heritage, museum architecture and digital cultures and she has published widely on these topics, both in Portugal and abroad. She is a member of Access Culture, ICOM-Portugal and the Europeana Network Association.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0250-1020
Email: helenabarranha@tecnico.ulisboa.pt

Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais / Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies, vol. 7, n. 1, 2020

Stalder, F. (2018). The digital condition. Cambridge: Polity Press. · Helena Barranha

Address: Instituto Superior Técnico, DECivil - Arquitectura, Av. Rovisco Pais, 1, 1049-001, Lisboa, Portugal