Digital minds for analog experiences

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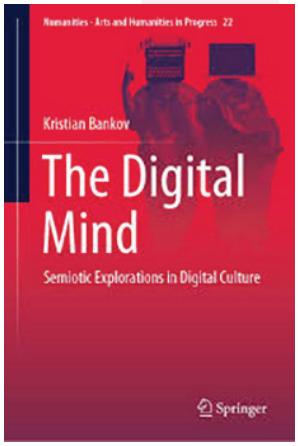

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The Digital Mind:
Semiotic Explorations in Digital Culture

Cham: Springer, 2022, 226 pp. (hbk ISBN 978-3-030-92554-3, pbk ISBN 978-3-030-92557-4, ebk ISBN 978-3-030-92555-0)

In an era increasingly preoccupied with artificial intelligence, *The Digital Mind: Semiotic Explorations in Digital Culture* reminds us that digitalizing our cultural practices predates the current AI surge. The book – part of the *Humanities*: Arts and Humanities in Progress series from Springer – offers a compelling and methodical exploration into the semiotic dimensions of digital culture, with one overarching argument: the digital semiosphere is shaped not only by cultural forces but also by deeply embedded economic structures. The cover, a digitally edited detail from *The School of Athens* – with Plato and Aristotle reimagined as a typewriter and a laptop – encapsulates the book's ambition: to bridge the classical and the contemporary, the philosophical and the technological.

The Introduction bridges the semiotic tradition of the past and the challenges that have emerged with the appearance of digital media. A significant part is dedicated to reviewing a substantial body of work on the subject within semiotics, noting the main omissions observed. However, while some of the proposed ideas have surfaced in prior work (the author points out *On the Digital Semiosphere* by Hartley, Ibrus, and Ojamaa 2020), this volume presents them with unprecedented confidence and clarity.

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The book is divided into three parts. The first (comprised of Chapters 1 & 2) lays the theoretical groundwork, examining the convergence of digital culture and economic behavior. Chapter 1 proposes that the internet – particularly in its Web 2.0 phase – resembles Juri Lotman's concept of the *semiosphere*, complete with peripheries, center, and boundaries. Although Lotman's definition remains broad, the analogy is persuasive: online interactions mirror these structural features. The author acknowledges critiques of this metaphor (such as those by Bruni, 2011, 2015), but notes that their objections tend to target ethical arguments (regarding the inclusion of economic constituents into discussion) rather than theoretical. Ultimately, our everyday digital routines seem to verify the model: user-generated content stems from the periphery towards the center (the actual code of the internet, as the author suggests), transforming it, in a similar fashion to *metabolism*, after being filtered through the various platforms and their interfaces.

After establishing the fundamental framework, Chapter 2 critiques the persistent textualism in digital media analysis, rightly arguing that it obscures the medium's inherent interactivity. According to the author, interactivity is the core feature that transforms digital information into experience – and experience, in turn, a commodity. This is the starting point for what the book terms the "experience economy." Online behaviors, from browsing to socializing, are negotiations of resources, with time being the most valuable. Interactivity transcends both enunciation and ludic production. In this context, the shift toward algorithmic communication doesn't necessarily imply a paradigm of absolutely calculable parameters and outcomes; rather, it signals a transformation in semiotic practices that we are only beginning to grasp.

Chapters 3 through 8 deepen this investigation into the economics of digital culture. As discussed in Chapter 3, copyright is portrayed as both a legal and semiotic concept that originates from a fixation on the text. The historical link between copyright and monetary authentication – comparable to the advent of paper money – reveals an early intersection of value, authenticity, and reproduction. This parallel is not coincidental but structurally significant, as both systems emerged alongside the standardization of language and the rise of national ideals.

The sensorimotor dimension of digital goods is touched upon in Chapter 4. Several aspects of digital media, such as special effects, play a significant role in the viewer's suspension of disbelief, an absolute necessity in the digital world. These effects reinforce the central tenet of experience consumption, where realism is not an ontological goal but a semiotic strategy. The experience economy, as the author repeatedly emphasizes, caters to the desire for effortless and immersive consumption.

The following two chapters apply this framework to case studies. Football, as explored in Chapter 5, emerges as a prime digital good: widely consumed online, intricately tied to betting cultures, and imbued with affective significance. Chapter

6 turns to sex and love in the digital age, highlighting how swipes, likes, and dating apps transform intimacy into a semi-commercial activity, further substantiating the book's central thesis.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal directly with money as a sign. Drawing on Rifkin's idea that money is "trust inscribed" (2000), the book presents cryptocurrency as the culmination of this logic. The author identifies three types of money signs – commodity, representative, and fiat – each with its own semiotic function. Baudrillard's notion of *semiocracy* is invoked (1976), suggesting that digital capitalism is built on "semiotically manipulated wealth." A particularly insightful point is made: it is not the scarcity of production but consumption that threatens the system – especially in an economy driven by attention and engagement.

The third part of the book focuses on digital identity. Chapter 9 examines the symbolic use of the Bulgarian flag and national emblems in online discourse, arguing that such signs generate recognition – a scarce and highly valued digital currency. This is followed by a discussion of the encyclopedic nature of the internet in Chapter 10, referencing Umberto Eco's idea of the encyclopedia (1984). The author contends that digital memory is no longer about storing facts but mastering retrieval. As search engines become smarter, our questions grow blunter, resulting in a diminished capacity for structured reasoning.

Chapter 11 provides a case study on the politicization of sex and gender in Bulgaria, showing how satire and pseudo-science can amplify ideologies. This leads into a discussion on memes and emojis – digital phenomena that serve as semiotic shortcuts, both dense and easily consumable. Chapter 12 revisits textualism and emphasizes the shift from author to reader, suggesting that meaning is now co-constructed in dynamic, hypertextual environments. If we accept that textualism is roughly divided into two main directions – *euphoric* and *methodological*, as the author suggests – then hypertext here refers to the domination of the former, where multimodal narrative experiences gradually substitute texts.

The final Chapter 13 looks at Facebook's rituals – likes, shares, comments – as participatory acts within the experience economy. Though Facebook may no longer be the dominant social media platform, the semiotic mechanisms it exemplifies remain relevant across digital media. McCracken (1988) explores four types of rituals (possession, exchange, grooming, and divestment), and perhaps not surprisingly, they find their digital analogues on social media platforms. Naturally, these modes of meaning transfer exist only because software engineers allow them to exist, showcasing that the semiosphere's center (the code), in turn, affects the flow from the periphery, resulting in a fully dynamic system.

A brief epilogue considers the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated many of the phenomena the book analyzes. Physical distancing intensified our

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dependence on digital communication, inadvertently validating the book's framework. Likewise, the rise of AI – though not its primary focus – figures throughout the text, suggesting that many of today's semiotic questions (real vs. fake, monetization vs. access, data as capital) were anticipated.

This proves to be the book's strongest asset. Despite being written before the popularization of Artificial Intelligence, it provides us with all the relevant framework to begin assessing its semiotic aspects. Most chapters are more or less directly linked to matters that AI brought to the surface. The issue of textuality is again brought into the spotlight in the case of LLMs, where the training of models is based on text, but the retrieval of information is also based on verbal prompts. Misuse of content on behalf of AI companies has already caused a significant stir in the field of intellectual property rights, where the lack of a comprehensive legislative model leaves a blurred image. Suspension of disbelief, aiming to engage users-consumers, does not lie solely on sensorimotor experience, but on Touring-successful algorithms that imitate human behavior and interaction. Developments of generative AI allow it to be used to a greater extent to produce spectacle content, with the first official music video already presented (Han 2024). Intimate relationships might go through a crisis, as signs of chatbot addiction are already being documented (Jerlyn et al. 2025). In the center of all this discussion lies the debate on the impact of AI on the economy. While an undeniably incredibly versatile system, it requires tremendous energy to operate. In the meantime, the possible threat of replacing human labor gave rise to discussions about Universal Basic Income and Universal Basic Compute (Bélisle-Pipon 2025). If search engines impacted our way of learning and memorizing knowledge, AI goes a step further, depriving us of valuable cognitive potential. Most importantly, the widely available ability to "fake" content will require reconsidering the digital identity.

Despite its many strengths, the book is not without limitations. The pace of technological change means that some examples – such as Facebook – already feel outdated, particularly in light of the rise of new social media platforms (like TikTok) and generative AI. The book does not deeply engage with emergent technologies such as Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, or Non-Fungible Tokens. Still, this absence is understandable since the book does not aim for exhaustive coverage but to equip readers with conceptual tools to approach these new developments.

The Digital Mind is a thought-provoking and significant contribution to digital semiotics. While not conclusive – and perhaps necessarily so – it lays a solid foundation for future research into digital media's semiotic and economic dimensions. Its greatest strength lies in its ability to anticipate and interpret the evolving interplay of sign, economy, and culture in the digital age. In this respect, it makes a bold and valuable statement in a field that, as the author suggests, is still in its early stages.

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