

## Convergence book reviews: Reflections on the field

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Book reviews have important but sometimes devalued functions. For example, they direct readers to research they might not be aware of, strengthening connections between scholarly work on an international and potentially interdisciplinary scale, and a well written review will point out a book's key contributions when scholars often have precious little time to read books. There are, however, politics to writing book reviews and early-career researchers (ECRs) in particular are often told they do not 'count' in the way that other outputs do. In many ways, this is true. An over-reliance on casual contracts in academia and increased competition for permanent/tenure-track posts (UCU, 2017) means each publication must not only 'count' but it must count in the *right* way. As Casey Brienza argues, these conditions are leading to a 'creeping intellectual impoverishment' through which individualistic understandings of the 'right' kinds of publication outweigh those that are for the 'collective good', like book reviews (2014, para. 10). The reinstatement of the book reviews section in *Convergence* – the first since 2015 – reflects the new Editorial Board's view that reviews are a key space for supporting academic development.

Book reviews have several benefits for different parties and are often experienced collectively, between book authors, potential readers, publishers and reviewers. For the person writing the review, the benefits might take a different shape according to their level of experience. For example, book reviews can introduce PhD candidates to the peer review system, from submitting a manuscript and receiving feedback to responding to reviewers' comments and seeing a paper through to publication. They tend to have short word counts (*Convergence* asks that reviews sit between 500 and 1000 words), thus offering scholars at all levels a chance to hone their writing skills. Book reviews for digital media-related journals like *Convergence* also have different stakes to those published in outlets dealing with slower-paced topics. Digital media scholarship is a constant and at times frustrating push–pull between the slow pace of academic publishing and the fast pace of not only technological developments but public 'hot takes' about what all of this *means* on a larger scale. Academic books tend to offer 'big picture' discussions about what matters, why something matters and, often, why it has *always* mattered (see Baym, 2010: Ch. 2), and where researchers and other parties should redirect their attention. A good book review will succinctly tell readers what the author's big picture contribution is.

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Since *Convergence* was founded in 1995, we have seen the rise of social media, smartphones, data mining and more, along with the growth of more sophisticated forms of virtual reality, gaming, artificial intelligence and machine learning. We are also seeing an increased interest in digital media technologies in other disciplines. But *Convergence* is one of the few journals to maintain a focus on the convergence of emerging (and extant) media technologies into people's domestic and everyday lives, a vital emphasis as technologies are becoming integrated into more and more spaces, some of which we are not yet aware. The books reviewed in *Convergence* typically address this core issue given recent debates around, for example: self-promotion and 'relational labour' on social media (Baym, 2018); search engines, racism and inequalities (Bucher, 2018; Noble, 2018); the everydayness of artificial intelligence and automated decision-making (Eubanks, 2018; Papacharissi, 2018); content moderation and the governance of social media (Gillespie, 2018); users' trust in social media platforms (Kennedy, 2016), and selfies, sexting, self-tracking and gendered identities (Neff and Nafus, 2016; Thornham, 2018). All of these books will be reviewed in forthcoming issues. The reviews included in this issue of *Convergence – Television 2.0: Viewer and Fan Engagement with Digital TV* (Bury, 2017), *The Stuff of Bits: An Essay on the Materialities of Information* (Dourish, 2017), and *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (Duffy, 2017) – exemplify the types of books we review in the journal. While these books share a focus on digital technologies, they cover various kinds of engagement and contemporary concerns: a re-examination of the television – and its audiences – in contemporary domestic life (Bury, 2017), the material arrangements of information and its powers of representation (Dourish, 2017), and changing gender/labour relations in a social media age (Duffy, 2017). By exclusively exploring the convergence of technologies and societal developments, *Convergence* continues to play a vital role in the Communication landscape, making its book reviews informative spaces for readers, and where the journal's focus will change and shift to reflect the transformations within the field.

## **Writing your *Convergence* book review**

I am often asked about the 'right' approach to a book review and the short answer is that there is no standardised formula. But most book reviews will have several things in common and I ask that future reviewers be partly guided by the following questions: where is the author situated in the field of 'convergence studies' – who are they in conversation with, and whose work are they building on? What does the writer address in each chapter and, crucially, what is the *overall* contribution of the book to the field? Which passages help to support your evaluation of the book? Which research method(s) does the author use (if applicable)? What are the book's core strengths and shortcomings?<sup>1</sup> Who would this book be useful for, not just in terms of disciplinary interests but also for undergraduate and postgraduate students on particular courses? These questions are not exhaustive and there are various helpful online resources listing the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of writing book reviews. A piece of advice shared by several writers is that inexperienced reviewers should read examples from the journal they hope to publish their review in, and perhaps from other journals in their field. Indeed, many reviewers read other reviews of the same book to engage in a dialogue.

We look forward to receiving all future book reviews, both to showcase scholarship at the forefront of the field and to give emergent scholars the opportunity to contribute to one of the few journals dedicated to exploring the convergence of emerging (and extant) media technologies into people's lives.

If you have identified a suitable book to review for *Convergence*, please email the Book Reviews Editor in the first instance or contact the new journal Editors: Sarah Atkinson and Helen W Kennedy.

### Note

1. This question is a tricky one because it can be tempting to *only* write about one or the other, so remember that readers are first and foremost interested in learning about the book.

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