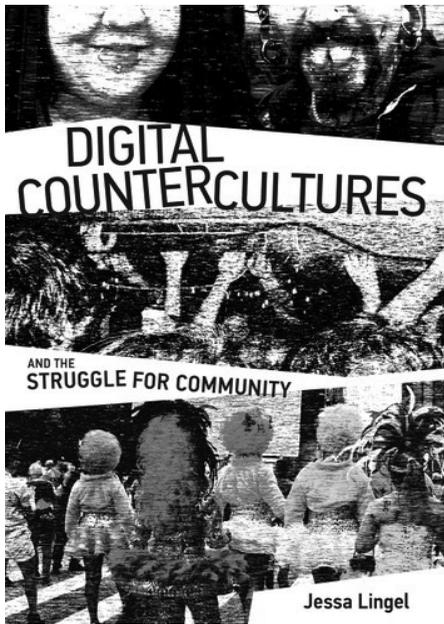


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Book Review: Jessa Lingel, *Digital Countercultures and the Struggle for Community*



The MIT Press, 2017. \$30.00
ISBN: 9780262036214

Jessa Lingel's *Digital Countercultures and the Struggle for Community* (MIT Press, 2017), published in the Information Society series edited by Laura DeNardis and Michael Zinner, provides a compelling account of the ways in which countercultural groups, far from being quashed by the Internet's endless imperative towards hegemony, have found ways to incorporate the digital into their communities and values—and vice versa. Using three case studies, Lingel identifies three key countercultural design values: legibility, flexibility, and authenticity. By playing with these values, she suggests, various groups outside the mainstream have not only been able to deploy the Internet to their own ends, but have found ways to align their Internet practices with their political and cultural ideals, making invaluable contributions to the development of Internet technologies in the

process. Lingel's research, which she describes as "networked field studies," is largely ethnographic, but she takes several interconnected approaches. She interviews members of each group, uses both digital and physical archives to offer historical context, and charts key pieces of data, while continuously contextualizing her work in the fields of both communications and Internet studies (as well as studies of alterity in other disciplines, including work by Sara Ahmed and Mary Douglas, for example).

Lingel's first case study comes in the third chapter, entitled "The Death and Life of Great Online Subcultures: An Analysis of *Body Modification Ezine*." *Body Modification Ezine* (BME), a social media site founded in 1994, incorporated "personal blogging, online dating, podcasts, and wikis"¹ into its complex platform. Body modification includes tattoos, piercings, and a variety of more extreme scarification and voluntary mutilation practices; members of the BME online community shared resources and information, showed off their newest "body mods," and formed significant and lasting relationships. Lingel, who has used the social network herself, deftly interweaves several histories of the website. She focuses on the evolution of some of its more technical elements—in particular, BME's unusually transparent Terms of Service, which prioritized a communitarian approach over a punitive one and helped differentiate it from the impersonal rigidity of a site like Facebook in the latter's early days. Alongside this, she also explores changes in leadership, the rise and fall of certain key figures in the scene, and the ways personal relationships and conflicts shaped the site. In doing so, Lingel places BME effectively in its wider context, considering the history of other social media platforms alongside the slow mainstreaming of many forms of body modification at the turn of the twenty-first century—two forces that would

greatly contribute to BME's eventual demise.² For Lingel, BME's commitment to legibility—to “meaningful openness”³—nevertheless provides a key insight into the ways that a countercultural ethos might be implemented online.

The following chapter, “They Came from the Basement,” turns its attention to the idiosyncrasies of the basement show scene in New Brunswick, New Jersey, primarily in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Lingel's connection to her subject matter, here, becomes even more immediate and personal; along with a brief history of the DIY (do-it-yourself) scene, she recounts her personal experiences of life in New Brunswick as a graduate student and frequent showgoer, and provides firsthand accounts of key changes that took place in the local community, as well as the strategies for online communication they provoked (or, in some cases, were provoked by). In order to evade shutdowns by the police, but still maintain a steady schedule of well-attended shows in local basements, New Brunswick punks developed specific codes, hybrid forms of on-offline communication, and other practices that allowed a DIY ethos to thrive even within the decidedly not-DIY space of social media. Lingel writes: “New Brunswick's basement community provides a valuable opportunity for examining tactical flexibility, information sharing, and online technologies in terms of secrecy.”⁴ Tactical flexibility, in this case, implies the continued adaptation of community tactics to combat the “shifting strategies of infiltration”⁵ that threatened it.

Lingel's third and final case study, of the drag ball scene in Brooklyn, New York, effectively connects the two different forms of community she studied in the previous chapters: communities formed around a shared form of self-presentation and identity (body modification and drag) vs. communities rooted in geographic proximity and regular presence at “offline” events (New Brunswick punk shows and Brooklyn balls). Drag queens in the scene, Lingel notes, not only take advantage of social media, especially Facebook, as a way to share resources and information, create personal and community archives of the drag “journey,”⁶ and discuss social issues; they also deploy tactics of secrecy and adaptability, such as changing their Facebook language to Indonesian in order to be

permitted to use a single moniker rather than a first and last name.⁷ Lingel borrows Rosemarie Garland Thomson's celebrated paradigm, from feminist disability studies, of “misfitting”⁸ to describe the drag queen's online praxis: an encounter between two forms, or platforms, that are not necessarily intended for one another but which can generate, in their mutual mismatch, new and pragmatic solutions. Drag performance challenges the very notion of a singular, constant, and authentic individual. Drag performers, Lingel suggests, have repeatedly found ways to resist (and thereby expose) social media's insidious imperative towards a rigid, easily-identifiable, state-sanctioned and normative form of individual identity.

Lingel's use of the term *counterculture* is somewhat confusing; she defines it flexibly, as an intentional opposition to “mainstream norms and values” that is less burdened with stigma than *subculture*.⁹ While this looseness is integral to Lingel's methodology—one that actively embraces the messiness and ongoing mutability of online communities—it ultimately highlights some irreconcilable differences between her case studies. The three groups she studies have very different reasons for wanting (and in some cases not wanting) to remain outside the mainstream. For example, while the mainstreaming of body modifications and drag might help relieve certain stigmas associated with the subversion of bodily and gendered norms, privacy and secrecy are absolutely vital to the basement show scene. The political imperatives of each group are also unclear. There is relatively little evidence in the book to compellingly suggest that an active opposition to the mainstream, rather than an interest in a certain practice or type of event, is what primarily brings these communities together. Lingel writes in her introduction that she is providing a counternarrative to “imagined uses of the Web,”¹⁰ but it is not entirely clear to which imagination(s) she is referring. This ambiguity may emerge from Lingel's general disinterest in taking a polarizing stance: she offers the inarguable assertion that “digital technologies alternately help and hurt the work of building community.”¹¹

Similarly, the term *digital* feels a bit misleading. Lingel's three case studies, despite their many differences, share a key trait: they all derive from lengthy, complex histories that vastly predate the

BOOK REVIEW: *DIGITAL COUNTERCULTURES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR COMMUNITY*

Internet. She is studying countercultures that have adapted to, and made use of, the Internet, but that did not emerge therein. The second half of the book's title—"and the Struggle for Community"—is perhaps a more apt descriptor of its concerns than the title *Digital Countercultures*. Lingel notes that her use of *community*, in spite of its "fuzziness," multiple meanings, and often romantically utopian connotations, emerges directly from her field work and the ways her interview subjects preferred to identify themselves. That is, while it is not entirely clear whether any of the groups studied here are, strictly speaking, countercultures, and their relationship to the digital is fraught and inconstant, they have each formed out of a common desire: the desire to forge meaningful interpersonal connections outside of dominant systems of power,

and to do so in a world that is increasingly hostile to grassroots organizing.

At the start of the book, Lingel positions herself clearly, writing: "I work from the margins as a way of evaluating many of the promises that came with the mass adoption of technologies—that differences would be erased, tolerance would be fostered, time and space would collapse, and technological innovations needed to be profitable."¹² Our current political moment has demonstrated, in myriad ways, the emptiness of many of these promises. *Digital Countercultures and the Struggle for Community* serves as an important reminder of the profound value of the marginal position (online and off), the long view it affords us, and the hopeful futures it portends.

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Notes

- 1 Jessica Lingel, *Digital Countercultures and the Struggle for Community* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 37.
- 2 Lingel, 68.
- 3 Lingel, 31
- 4 Lingel, 72
- 5 Lingel, 96
- 6 Lingel, 108
- 7 Lingel, 114
- 8 Lingel, 119
- 9 Lingel, 6
- 10 Lingel, 2
- 11 Lingel, 5
- 12 Lingel, 3