DIGITAL CULTURE

The Download with Dr. David Arditi

During the 2017-18 academic year, the Center for Theory hosted a colloquium series on digital culture. The colloquium inspired The Dialectic of Digital Culture, edited by CoLA faculty members: Dr. David Arditi, of Sociology and Anthropology, and Dr. Jennifer Miller, of English. Throughout his career, Arditi has focused much of his research on digital technology's impact on culture. We caught up with him to delve a little deeper into digital technology and culture.

Q: How are two (seemingly) different concepts, digital technology and culture, actually intertwined?

A: When we think about technology, we often imagine that it is created in a vacuum, with a mind of its own. However, people create technology, and people use technology. For me, culture is the process through which people make meaning out of everyday things. At the moment that someone creates a new piece of technology, they place their cultural understandings within it. Then, as we begin to use the technology, we place our own cultural meanings into them. For instance, look at recorded sound. It didn't descend from the sky. The phonograph was initially used to record people's voices, so that after they passed away, their voices could survive. More than a century later, this is not among the primary reasons we use recorded sound today.

Q: One of the things people often discuss is the democratic potential of the Internet. How does the Internet foster democracy?

A: How does the doorbell foster democracy? I say this because the doorbell is a form of communication technology: it alerts people when someone is at the door. It sounds silly to think about how a doorbell promotes democracy. But almost every time that someone invents a new communication device, people claim that it will herald a new era of democracy and equality. From the printing press to the smartphone, people imagine that these technologies will facilitate democracy, equality, and freedom. This says

more about our state of unfreedom and lack of democracy than anything because we never seem to achieve democracy. We should not expect technologies to do anything that they weren't created to do. The U.S. Department of Defense created the Internet to better coordinate military operations, not to bring Americans democracy.

Q: What do you think is the biggest threat to culture in the online environment?

A: Where do I start? In all sincerity, the biggest threat to culture is the loss of privacy. People, especially digital natives, no longer have an expectation of privacy, and that's not just online. We recognize that everything we do can be traced by corporations, by governments, by our families, and by our (future) employers. For instance, students use apps on their phones to track their significant others because they grew up with their parents tracking their movements with phones. Or, people assume that their searches can be tracked, so they don't search for certain topics. Employees use Fitbits that communicate to their employers their activities. We don't need any of this, and if we went back 30 years, people would be amazed at how much privacy we gave up.

Q: Most of your research is on music. What do you see happening to music in the streaming era?

A: Because record labels no longer need to sell an album, the album is going away. But that seems like the most obvious point. More importantly, music is more disposable than ever. Streaming makes it so that people can tune-in to a generated playlist. They listen to whatever is on that playlist now. Two months from now, it could be all new music on that playlist and the listener may not even remember most of the artists they listened to two months ago. It's important to remember, however, that technology didn't do this. People at major record labels decided to change the way we listen.