

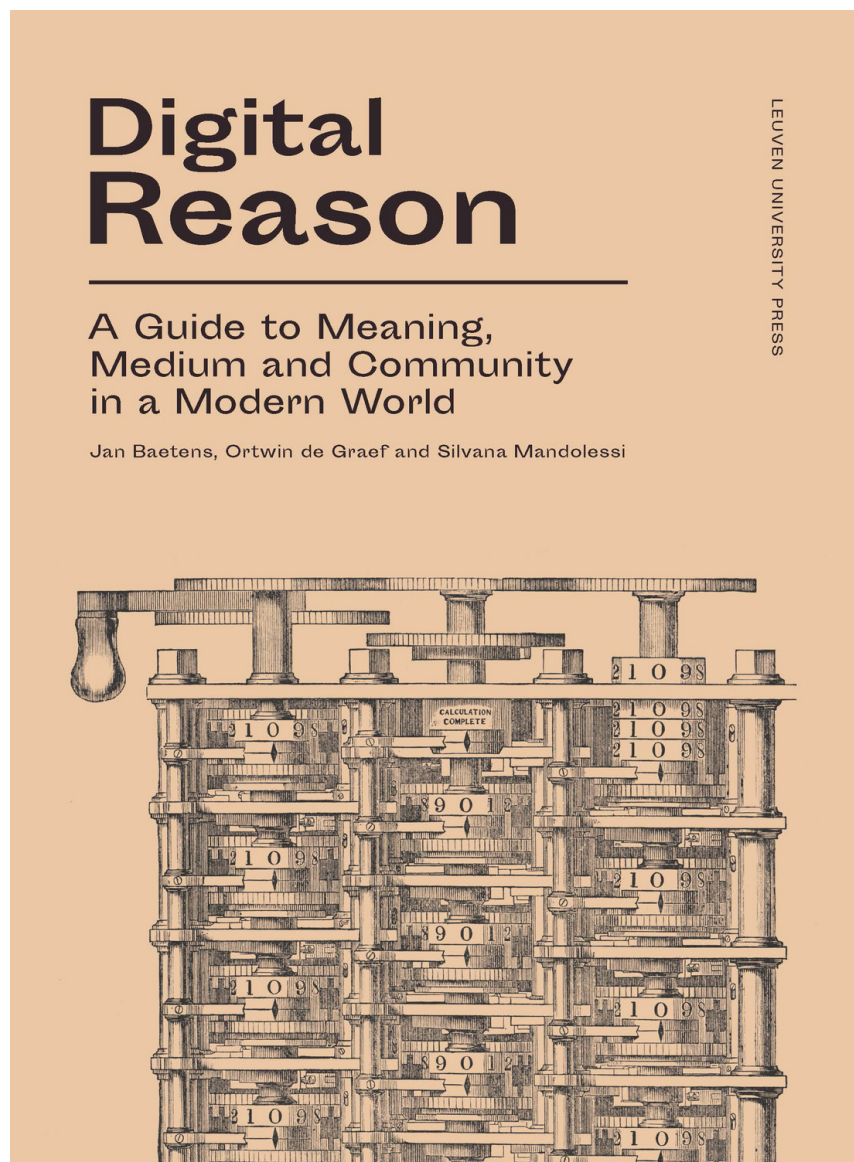
Digital Reason: A Guide to Meaning, Medium and Community in a Modern World

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Jan Baetens, Ortwin de Graef and Silvana Mandolessi. *Digital Reason: A Guide to Meaning, Medium and Community in a Modern World*

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Digital Reason: A Guide to Meaning, Medium and Community in a Modern World provides precise, accessible discussions of pertinent theories arguing against the analogue/digital divide and working with a dialogue between the two to highlight both continuities and divergences. Beginning with the thought-provoking claim, “We have always been digital,” the three authors look at the digital through taking the human need for symbolic activity as their starting point. *Digital Reason* is accordingly divided into three sections: mass meaning (Ortwin de Graef), medium (Jan Baetens) and community (Silvana Mandolessi). The thematic organization of the book is supported by a chronological one beginning with the Enlightenment and tracing the main lines of thought forming the pre-digital and contemporary ages. Although closely connected, each section is autonomous and can be read on its own.

De Graef begins with offering possible answers to the question “what it means to be human in modern times” (20). He follows modern thought along three strands, even fault lines: the replacement of belief and religion by science, the emphasis on individual will and the need for a public discourse that provided room for the masses. We encounter Kant, Hobbes and Adam Smith, their understanding of human reason and their imaginings of the public sphere. De Graef then elaborates on Mathew Arnold and Thomas Henry Huxley’s contrasting opinions of the merits of cultural and literary versus scientific education, a debate that still persists in the polarization of the humanities and the sciences even though both work best in symbiosis rather than in antagonism. Thomas Huxley was the grandfather of philosopher and novelist Aldous Huxley, the biologist Julian Huxley, who was involved in the formative years of the educational wing of the UNESCO, and also collaborated with H.G. Wells son, G.P. Wells, one of the coiners of the “world brain,” a notion prefiguring the world wide web. De Graef’s section also discusses Richard Dawkins’ popularization of the not very scientific notion of the meme and connects it to the earlier concerns of educating humanity to trade individual, selfish tendencies for a collective good.

Baetens begins his section on the medium with a careful distinction between the more widely used term of media theory which focuses on communication and *medium theory* which, building on Joshua Meyrowitz’s work, understands “medium as social practice” (81). Communications specialist Marshall McLuhan’s dynamic, interconnected understanding of the medium, famously included the consideration of the medium as the message and as an extension of man. Baetens also emphasizes how meaning in McLuhan’s medium theory is closely connected to the history of the medium and its relationships with old and new media (84-85). This is followed by an elaboration on film scholar Stanley Cavell’s use of medium as a mix, an interplay of a host medium, sign and content (87), which complexifies the notion of monolithic media such as film or photography and pays attention to their techniques and medium-specific signification practices and content.

Baetens then tackles the terminological confusion around intermediality and argues for using intermedial for relationships within and across media, emphasizing the heterogeneity of each medium and transmedial for works that exist across several media. Situating the digital as a medium amongst, and interacting with, other media, Baetens expands on media archeological practices, “doing history from a media-theoretical point of view” (105), to interrogate the “future of media” or digital media in the ways they have transformed production and reception, performative and archival practices. He also elaborates on the forms and locations of digital writing and cultural value production in an age of information overflow and multiple collaborative possibilities.

Mandolessi's section on community begins with the most topical of concerns associated with the digital: politics and the possibilities—and dangers—of participation and manipulation. She emphasizes the more positive side of digital activism, social mobilization and connectivity before discussing how the Habermasian public sphere is transposed in problematic ways to the digital realm. Mandolessi expands on Zizi Papacharissi's powerful argument on how the public sphere has slid into the private realm in the digital era (193). Papacharissi's more optimistic view is contrasted with Christian Fuchs' critical study of the power dynamics manifested in social media which, contrary to expectations, are limited in their range of users, possibilities of interaction and heavily impacted by the role of consumerism. Mandolessi also discusses the activism and activities of Anonymous at length.

In examining digital selves, Mandolessi discusses the digital possibilities of establishing connections and the modes of self-representation. For the latter, she turns to Jill Walker Rettberg's work on self-representations across text, images and numbers, which is situated within a long history of orchestrated and technologically mediated representations of the self. Mandolessi then turns to the complex underpinnings of the selfie. She also introduces Siva Vaidhyanathan's privacy interfaces or the different "domains in which we live our privacy" and which accord different degrees of control (233). Ultimately, the self is closely connected to the "we". She also emphasizes the importance of understanding "what our possibilities to choose really are" and "how together we design the technologies" for repressive but also liberational purposes (241). The historical contextualization of the digital and its manipulation by diverse collective bodies, ranging from states to companies, renders the digital turn more a question of scale and speed than a complete novelty (236). Mandolessi's section concludes in this vein by looking back at surveillance and control in the works of George Orwell and Franz Kafka to draw connections with digital surveillance.

Engaging, profound and lucid, *Digital Reason* is recommended for students of the digital but also curious scholars and laypersons.

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