

[Edgar A. Whitley](#)

## Book review: virtual society?: technology, cyberbole, reality edited by Steve Woolgar

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Unrefereed)**

**Original citation:**

Whitley, Edgar A. (2004) *Book review: virtual society?: technology, cyberbole, reality edited by Steve Woolgar*. [British journal of sociology](#), 55 (2). pp. 311-312. ISSN 0007-1315  
DOI: [10.1111/j.1468-4446.2004.00020.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2004.00020.x)

© 2004 [Wiley-Blackwell Publishing](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/11973/>  
Available in LSE Research Online: August 2012

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Woolgar Steve (2002) *Virtual society? Technology, cyberbole, reality*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. (ISBN 0-19-924875-3)

This book presents (some of the) research undertaken as part of a £3 million ESRC funded programme: *Virtual society? The social science of electronic technologies* (<http://virtualsociety.sbs.ox.ac.uk>). The programme took an avowedly sceptical view of the internet and other electronic technologies and drew on key ideas and insights from the social sciences with the aim of moving beyond the hyperbole that is often found in this area.

In many cases, a “book of a programme” runs the risk that there is limited coherence between the chapters. To address this, in the opening chapter, Woolgar proposes five ‘rules’ of virtuality that arise from the many “counter-intuitive” results reported by the programme:

- The uptake and use of the new technologies depend crucially on local social context;
- The fears and risks associated with new technologies are unevenly socially distributed;
- Virtual technologies supplement rather than substitute for real activities;
- The more virtual the more real;
- The more global the more local.

The remaining chapters of the book present summaries of the research undertaken by various projects and it is in this area that the book, as opposed to the underlying programme, is at its weakest.

As a researcher interested in the social study of information technology, I failed to see that the many results were as “counter-intuitive” as claimed; indeed, they typically provided further empirical support for fairly straightforward academic claims (I find it a useful test to try negating such claims to see if they are realistic propositions: for example, is any social scientist likely to hypothesise that uptake and use of new technologies *doesn't* depend crucially on local factors?).

Amongst the most interesting chapters for me were those that overlapped areas of concern in my own discipline (information systems), particularly the chapters by Knights *et al.*, McGrail, Mason *et al.*, Brown and Lightfoot and Hughes *et al* on organisational transformation , surveillance, e-mail and standardisation. It was also very apparent from these chapters, however, that they were generally very much stuck in their own literatures on technology, society and organisations, rather than drawing on the many other perspectives that exist in these areas.

Agreed, the worst of this broader literature is uncritical management hype, but there is also much well written material there. To illustrate the extent of this problem, I found fewer than 30 references, amongst the 26 pages of references, to journals in information systems and management that could have provided useful insights onto the issues these projects were researching.

The programme was funded by a UK social science funding body and as a result, most of the research is (understandably) UK based; nevertheless given the topic and the social science focus I was struck by a number of important missing topics. Thus whilst there is some discussion of globalisation, there is little talk of gender (one reference in the index) of race or of identity (not listed at all in the index), despite these being topics that are widely acknowledged by social scientists as being affected by electronic technologies.

Another conspicuous absence from the book is any consistent consideration of theorising; what the reader is given is empirical data and countless reminders that the data illustrate several of Woolgar's rules of virtuality. There are few attempts to step up from the data to draw broader conclusions. When theorising does occur, as in the superb chapter by Agar *et al.* and, to a lesser extent, in Strathern's closing piece, the difference in quality is immediately apparent.

Overall, therefore, the book is quite useful for those looking into the social science of electronic technologies, but for true insights and theoretical contributions, unfortunately, it is best to look elsewhere.

Dr. Edgar A. Whitley  
Reader in Information Systems  
London School of Economics and Political Science  
<http://is.lse.ac.uk/staff/whitley>