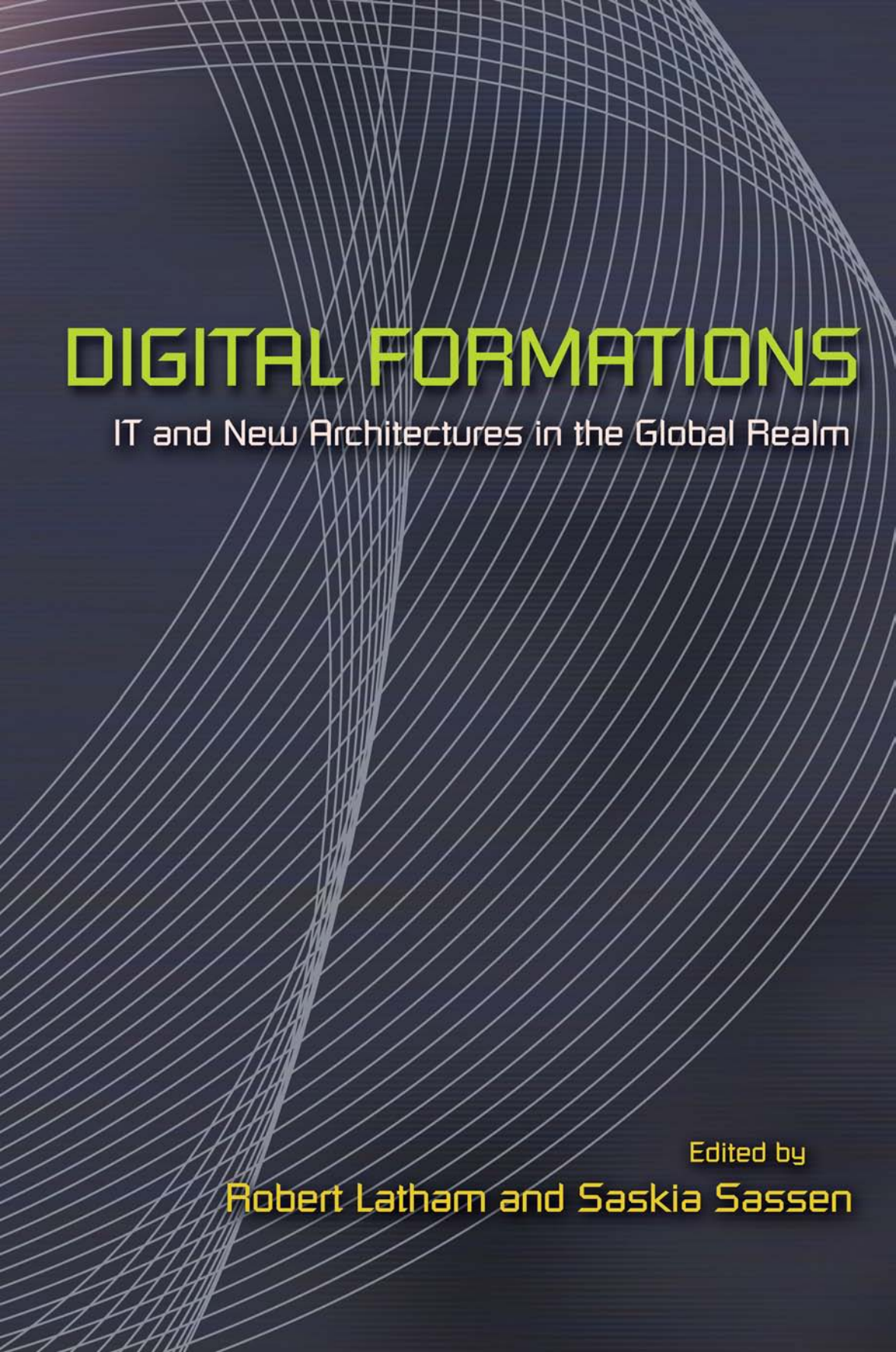
DIGITAL FORMATIONS
IT and New Architectures in the Global Realm
Edited by
Robert Latham and Saskia Sassen

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Contents

List of Illustrations vii

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction
Digital Formations: Constructing an Object of Study 1
ROBERT LATHAM AND SASKIA SASSEN

SPACES OF KNOWLEDGE 35

Recombinant Technology and New Geographies of Association 37
JONATHAN BACH AND DAVID STARK

Electronic Markets and Activist Networks:
The Weight of Social Logics in Digital Formations 54
SASKIA SASSEN

The New Mobility of Knowledge: Digital Information Systems and Global Flagship Networks 89
DIETER ERNST

NETWORKS OF COOPERATION 115

Cooperative Networks and the Rural-Urban Divide 117
D. LINDA GARCIA

Networks, Information, and the Rise of the Global Internet 146
ROBERT LATHAM

The Political Economy of Open Source Software and
Why It Matters 178
STEVEN WEBER

DESIGNS AND INSTITUTIONS 213

Designing Information Resources for Transboundary Conflict Early Warning Networks 215
HAYWARD R. ALKER

Discourse Architecture and Very Large-scale Conversation 242
WARREN SACK

Transnational Communication and the European Demos 283
LARS-ERIK CEDERMAN AND PETER A. KRAUS

Information Technology and State Capacity in China 312
DOUG GUTHRIE

List of Contributors 339

Index 341

List of Illustrations

Sassen: Electronic Markets and Online Activist Networks
TABLE 1. Financial Assets of Institutional Investors, 1990 to 2001 60
TABLE 2. Cross-border Transactions in Bonds and Equities, 1975 to 2002 63
TABLE 3. The Twelve Biggest Stock Markets in the World, 2000 and 2003 66
TABLE 4. Foreign Listings in Major Stock Exchanges, 2000 and 2003 67

Ernst: The New Mobility of Knowledge
FIGURE 1. GFNs, DIS, and Knowledge Diffusion 91

Latham: Networks, Information, and the Rise of the Global Internet
FIGURE 1. Transboundary Internetworking Styles 153
FIGURE 2 172

Alker: Designing Information Resources for Transboundary Conflict Early Warning Networks
FIGURE 1. The Case of Chiapas in the CEWS Explorer 229

Sack: Discourse Architecture and Very Large-scale Conversation
FIGURE 1. Mozilla News 245
FIGURE 2. soc.culture.palestine during the period August 1–7, 2001 261
FIGURE 3. soc.culture.palestine during the period August 4–11, 2001 263
FIGURE 4. soc.culture.afghanistan during the period September 24–28, 2001 264
FIGURE 5. alt.politics.election for the week prior to the 2000 U.S. election 270
FIGURE 6. The Same Conversation Map as Shown in Figure 5 with the Discussion Theme "Gore" Selected 271
FIGURE 7. A Partial List of the Terms Associated with Bush and/or Gore 272
FIGURE 8. A Sentence from the Newsgroup Associating a Term (Bush) with a Verb 273
FIGURE 9. Close Examination of the Structure of a Thread 273

FIGURE 10. alt.politics.election for the Week after the 2000 U.S. Election 275

Cederman and Kraus: Transnational Communications and the European Demos
FIGURE 1. The Logic of National Substantialism 288
FIGURE 2. The Logic of Civic Voluntarism 290
FIGURE 3. The Logic of Bounded Institutionalism 292

Guthrie: Information Technology and State Sovereignty in China
TABLE 1. Access to Media of Information in China, 2000 318
TABLE 2. Growth of Information Technology in China, 2001 319
FIGURE 1. Number of Foreign Joint Ventures in Selected Industries 321
TABLE 3. Foreign Capital Invested in China in the Reform Era, 1985 to 1999 325
FIGURE 2. Gross Industrial Output by Ownership Type 331
TABLE 4. Vital Statistics on Higher Education in China, 1980 to 1999 334

Acknowledgments

This volume is the end product of a research working group on "Cooperation and Conflict in a Connected World," organized through the Social Science Research Council Program on IT and International Cooperation. The program was established to help advance the interdisciplinary, social scientific study of the international dimensions of IT. Building a social science of IT means that research and theory-building around IT should be well integrated into each of the social science disciplines. This will better enable researchers to understand not only IT itself, but also how it intersects with other conditions and challenges existing theories and empirical generalizations. The aim is to avoid a segregated domain of "IT studies"; instead, information and its technologies should become a category of analysis for the social sciences in much the same way as "institutions." We hope that the chapters that follow live up to these aims.

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Michael Chwe also participated in the working group and contributed to the intellectual agenda. Paul Price helped formulate some of the initial purposes of the working group. Deborah Matzner assisted ably in the initial organization of the working group. Marcela Sabino and Gretchen Schwarz helped bring the chapters to final form. Without them both, this volume would not have been possible.

DIGITAL FORMATIONS

Introduction

Digital Formations: Constructing an Object of Study

ROBERT LATHAM AND SASKIA SASSEN

Computer-centered networks and technologies are reshaping social relations and constituting new social domains. These transformations assume multiple forms and involve diverse actors. In this volume we focus on a particular set of instances: communication and information structures largely constituted in electronic space. Examples are electronic markets, Internet-based large-scale conversations, knowledge spaces arising out of networks of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and early conflict warning systems, among others. Such structures result from various mixes of computer-centered technologies and the broad range of social contexts that provide the utility logics, substantive rationalities, and cultural meanings for much of what happens in these electronic spaces. In this regard, the electronic spaces that concern us in this volume are social. Digital formation is the construct we use to designate these specific types of information and communication structures. Digital formations are to be distinguished from digital technology tout court; not all digital networks are digital formations.

This volume seeks, then, to advance research that is at the intersection of what we might simplify as technology and society. We do not assume that technology and society are actually separate entities, and we accept many of the propositions in the critical social science literature that posit that technology is one particular instantiation of society—society frozen, that is, one moment in a trajectory that once might have been experienced as simply social (Latour 1991). Without losing this critical stance, we want, nonetheless, to capture the distinctiveness and variable weight of "technology" and to develop analytic categories that allow us to examine the complex imbrications between the outcome of society that we call technology and the social, economic, political, and cultural dynamics through which relations and domains are constituted. Much rides in social analyses of IT on the category of "newness," and this volume is no exception. We believe we are looking at formations that have not existed before, and we mean this to imply two things: that the forms were not

present in a given social context before, and that the formations in question are novel social forms.

That these are novel forms implies that we are looking at entities that are likely in the early—if not initial—stages of formation. We are not claiming this status for IT itself. Beniger (1986) underscores that the reflexive development and organization of complex IT-based formations is discernible as early as the nineteenth century.[1] Rather, we attach this status to the emergence of a wide range of formations of varying scales that depend on digital technologies, cross a variety of borders (national or otherwise), and engender a diverse array of spatial, organizational, and interactive practices.

The set of cases explored in the chapters that follow is meant to give readers a sense of that range and to cover topics that have been considered important to the social analysis of IT, especially as it bears on transboundary phenomena, including transnational civil society, transboundary public spheres, global finance, transnational corporate networks, global technological diffusion, regional integration, and international economic development. There has been no attempt to be comprehensive, however.[2] What joins the chapters is not only the effort to capture constitutive and transformative processes, but also concerns with design and social purpose.

Locating a New Field of Inquiry

One of the distinct capabilities of these technologies when it comes to the communication and information structures that concern us in this volume is the rescaling of social relations and domains. What has tended to operate or be nested at local scales can now move to global scales, and global relations and domains can now, in turn, more easily become directly articulated with thick local settings. In both types of dynamics, the rescaling can bypass the administrative and institutional apparatus of the national level, still the most developed scalar condition. As a result of the growing presence and use of these technologies, an increasing range of social relations and domains have become de facto transboundary. It need not be this way, and indeed many of these digital formations are not, but the trend is definitely toward expanding the world of transboundary re-

[1] Another significant historical analysis that is U.S. focused is Chandler and Cortada (2000).

[2] One noticeable omission is the security sphere. But see the related SSRC-sponsored volume, *Bombs and Bandwidth* (Latham 2003), which focuses exclusively on this realm. Further, a new SSRC volume on global civil society and the Internet is in progress (edited by Jon Anderson, Jodi Dean, and Geert Lovink).