

## Book Review

# Review of *The Undersea Network*

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In *The Undersea Network*, Nicole Starosielski illuminates the hidden narratives of transoceanic cable systems – a useful project for exposing the flawed myths surrounding digitization that persist even in the library world.

Used to transmit the majority of Internet activity across the globe, undersea cables are seldom seen or thought of, notwithstanding their immense impact on global connectivity and the digital world. Her book aims to: “develo[p] a view of global cable infrastructure that is counterintuitive yet complementary to the popular understanding of networking. It is wired rather than wireless; semicentralized rather than distributed; territorially entrenched rather than deterritorialized; precarious rather than resilient; and rural and aquatic rather than urban.”<sup>1</sup> By her estimation, some of the biggest hallmarks for how we view digital technology are flawed. A greater focus on the material aspects of digital transmission can help correct these myths, with economic, ecological, and philosophical implications.

The flawed narratives Starosielski uncovers begin in our representations of the cables themselves: most maps of cable lines show them as “vectors”.<sup>2</sup> By taking a line-drawn rather than topographical approach, it is easier for maps such as these to elide the long political and colonial histories that are intertwined with the cables. Most narratives surrounding the cables focus on connection or disruption: when the cables were grounded or when service was disrupted. Both of these narratives are “limited”.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Starosielski urges us to focus on nodal or transmission narratives: human and nonhuman interactions with a node on the system, and a view that follows data as it is transmitted.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network* (USA: Duke University Press, 2015), 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

While Starosielski's new narratives may be more fitting, they are also limited, as all narratives must be. There is no story that can tell it all and remain cohesive. Starosielski's critique is a critique of maps in general and narratives in general: a line map shows different information than a topographical one, as does a narrative with one focus or another. Starosielski appears aware of this, advocating for "strategies of interconnection"<sup>5</sup> even as she attempts corrective measures. In *The Ecstasy of Communication* Jean Baudrillard describes a form of obscenity that matches what Starosielski is fighting against, which is the obscenity of communication and shallow object narratives.<sup>6</sup> Starosielski's cable narrative have a more inclusive view of connectivity than connection or distribution narratives generally do, but they are limited all the same. In a fitting description, Baudrillard states that: "Obscenity is not confined to sexuality, because today there is a pornography of information and communication, a pornography of circuits and networks, and of functions and objects in their legibility, availability, regulation, forced signification, capacity to perform, connection, polyvalence, their free expression...[etc]."<sup>7</sup> In addition to increased use of tools like wires for communications, there will be a greater view to expose the tools themselves. For Baudrillard, maps can never accurately depict the world because they are set to scale;<sup>8</sup> information that limits a subject by only capturing certain aspects is obscene because it is shallow. Starosielski's focus on connectivity can be seen as an attempt to counteract the flattening effect of such single focus. The surfacing.in interactive website (<http://surfacing.in/>), which was created in accordance with this book, is one such mapping of multiplicitous views of cables. It simultaneously takes part in the obscenity of communication, transmitted via internet cable as it is, even as it attempts to undermine simplistic one-to-one narratives.

The difficulty that Starosielski faces in countering incorrect narratives by pushing forward new, more inclusive narratives is a struggle faced by many theorists who engage with objects directly. Objects themselves are so difficult to clearly see and write about. Invisibility is characteristic of the "dematerialization"<sup>9</sup> that accompanies the digital age. Starosielski repeated argues that "wirelessness is accompanied by an increasing investment in wires";<sup>10</sup> the fact that we do not think of these wires corresponds to their purpose in creating a digital world. We lack a language to properly talk about wired-ness<sup>11</sup> and even if we had such a language, we would be discouraged

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York City: Semiotext(e), 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network* (USA: Duke University Press, 2015), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 9.

from using it. Military and political reliance on the cables behooves the powers that be to keep cables out of sight and out of mind for security purposes.<sup>12</sup> Even those in the transoceanic cable industry do not advertise their cables. Instead, they promote satellites, which are “sexier”,<sup>13</sup> along with the myth that satellites transmit most of our data. Mundane wires will not do. The real myth of digital technology lies in what is unseen and in the air – as the image of “cloud” computing suggests.

There are a number of similarities between cables and libraries in terms of unseen challenges. Narratives about when cable was laid or when service was interrupted miss the major fact of their ongoing maintenance. It requires “massive and continuous work” to maintain infrastructure.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, libraries require upkeep and ongoing financial support to maintain a collection. What’s imagined to cost nothing is actually very expensive,<sup>15</sup> the same for cables as for online collections of resources and digital upkeep. Cables are invisible in part because of the myth of wirelessness, and in part because of mass apathy, a “general lack of public interest.”<sup>16</sup> This is similar to how the public is, overall, apathetic to library classification schemes, collection methods, and manners of display: they simply do not care as long as they can access the information that they need when they need it.<sup>17</sup> When Starosielski writes that “analysis of twenty-first-century media culture have been characterized by a cultural imagination of dematerialization”<sup>18</sup> I am forcefully reminded of comments by the president of The University of Western Ontario, Amit Chakma, to the Western Library staff in 2009.<sup>19</sup> He stated that he has “given up going to the library for my reference needs ... life has changed — I subscribe to electronic [services] [...] I don’t have to go to libraries any more [sic].” These remarks imply that online materials are not a part of the library and do not require care. To the Western librarians who were poised to go on strike at this time it suggested that library work is not appreciated. The myth of immateriality has major consequences for how the library is perceived, and as a result, for how library work is undervalued and poorly understood.

Overall, Starosielski’s investigations into the physical side of digital networks are exceedingly useful for better understanding the myths that surround the digital world.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>17</sup> Lynne (E. F.) McKechnie, and Kirsti Nilsen. “Behind Closed Doors: An Exploratory Study of the Perceptions of Librarians and the Hidden Intellectual Work of Collection Development in Canadian Public Libraries,” *The Library Quarterly* 72, no 3 (2002): 296, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40039761>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>19</sup> Allie Fonarev “Chakma Slip Irks Librarians” *The Gazette* (Sept. 30, 2009) [https://issuu.com/uwogazette/docs/O3.017\\_wednesday\\_\\_september\\_30\\_\\_2009](https://issuu.com/uwogazette/docs/O3.017_wednesday__september_30__2009)

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