

KÖNYVSZEMLE / BOOK REVIEWS

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Navigating the Nexus: Geography, Technology and the Cloud Societies

Saran, S. - Sarma, A. (2025): GeoTechnoGraphy: Mapping Power and Identity in the Digital Age. India Viking. ISBN: 978-0143469513

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Samir Saran's and Anirban Sarma's book aims to examine current trends and the effects of digitalization by considering geography, technology, and society. The title, *GeoTechnoGraphy*, refers to the collision of these fields; their nexus is indispensable to understanding today's world order. In an era where crisis and uncertainty have become the 'new normal', gaining a comprehensive knowledge of the interconnections between pivotal events and trends is essential; this book serves as a vital tool in building such awareness. The Introduction poses a relevant question: 'How do we reboot the present to ensure that the future doesn't repeat the errors of the past?' In *GeoTechnoGraphy* the authors seek to answer this question, through secondary sources and extensive examples.

In the Introduction, the authors explain the term 'cloud societies' and describe their emergence. 'Clouds' are societies that utilize the Internet and social media to express their views and opinions, while also maintaining connections with like-minded peers and interest groups. Although cloud societies are virtual communities, they remain rooted in certain geographies, and their online activities significantly affect the offline realm. Therefore, Saran and Sarma argue that geography still plays a crucial role in world affairs, even as it becomes increasingly interconnected with technology and society. These fields have undergone a fundamental change: starting from early settlements and moving through the transition from agrarian to industrial societies, followed by the Third Industrial Revolution, communities have evolved into digital societies shaped by technological and geographical factors. This era is now characterized by the widespread use of social media, the rising importance of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and the dominance of Big Tech firms. The authors examine the tech-driven epoch, its disadvantages, and opportunities for regulation.

Chapter 1 opens with two political examples: Donald Trump's 2016 electoral victory and the Egyptian protests of the early 2010s. Both cases demonstrate the power of societies and the significance of place. The authors argue that the environment is more than a physical setting; it encompasses cultural, emotional, and spiritual dimensions (Papp et al., 2022a, 2022b; Sárvári, 2021). Even in pre-modern societies, individuals were connected through similarity and natural affinity, in addition to their shared geographical area. As these communities evolved, solidarity did not vanish, but rather transformed, becoming more diffuse and organic. In this 'new era of solidarity', the organization of work and production differs from the methods prevalent during Fordism. Today, specialization and interdependence are the defining characteristics of the global economic system (Gervai et al., 2015). These interdependent social relationships require governance to manage potential conflicts. Saran and Sarma describe two landmark historical events, the Magna Carta and the Peace of Westphalia, which are considered the foundations of modern governance and sovereignty. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, several nation-states emerged and consolidated, some of which later expanded their territories through colonization. In the following century, decolonization became the primary objective for colonized nations, such as India. The end of the Second World War and the establishment of the United Nations marked the end of formal colonization and the beginning of a new rules-based order. See further examples in Bethlendi and Holczinger (2026) and in Deák and Sárvári (2023).

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The expansion of social media has significantly reshaped how communities are constructed. Chapter 2 explores this recent transformation and its implications. Today, individuals are linked by shared values, interests, and cultural affinities rather than physical proximity. Saran and Sarma assert that these digital connections lack the inherent strength of face-to-face contact, although online collectives still possess considerable influence, as demonstrated by the #SaveAarey campaign. Regulation is necessary in cyberspace, yet it fundamentally diverges from the Westphalian model. Nations approach digital governance differently; for instance, China, with its social credit system and censorship, and Russia, through its state-led internet control, represent outliers (Bartha, 2024; Morris & Sárvári, 2021; Sárvári & Szeidovitz, 2018; Vaszkun et al., 2022). Most countries prioritize digital rights, with freedom of speech occupying a prominent position. The authors draw a comparison between India and the United States in this context. However, social media platforms often mediate free speech by establishing their own rules and guidelines for discourse. These content standards effectively function as a form of legislation, a phenomenon precisely captured by the phrase ‘code is law.’ For average users, daily life is dictated by this ‘code’, which can result in detrimental real-world outcomes (Sárvári, K., 2021). One such effect is the ‘new tribalism,’ where topics like politics, climate change, and the Black Lives Matter movement become deeply polarizing. This online fragmentation is further fueled by fake news, leading to widespread disinformation with serious societal impacts.

Chapter 3 continues to illustrate these grave societal impacts through examples such as the protests surrounding the Israel-Hamas conflict and the role of digital platforms during the Arab Spring. These cases clearly demonstrate that the flow of information has been accelerated. The authors discuss the expression of international solidarity and ‘despatialization’, which refers to the shrinking of space and time. These phenomena have contributed to another significant transformation within the media landscape. The digital revolution arrived with incredible speed, offering benefits through the democratization of information; however, the instantaneous sharing of experiences can also entail negative repercussions. Users often project an enhanced and idealized self-image on digital platforms, which rarely corresponds to their objective reality. In addition to these distorted individual representations, history itself is now mediated by the media. Saran and Sarma describe digital media as a ‘double-edged sword’ because of its dual capacity to both unite and divide. In this era, the previously introduced ‘cloud societies’ have emerged, defined increasingly by the content they share online. This online dominance has granted tech corporations tremendous influence over almost every aspect of modern life.

The next chapter, titled *From Censers to Censors: Is Big Tech the New Clergy?*, addresses the dominance of major technology firms. While the term ‘clergy’ traditionally referred to community religious leaders, today’s top technologists and Silicon Valley CEOs have assumed this role. Algorithms are now even partially regarded as a new form of religion, as they exert a profound influence over life choices and command an almost spiritual devotion from users. This remains true despite their inherent biases and the proliferation of misinformation. The prejudiced nature of these technologies is illustrated through the example of Google. By dominating the market, Big Tech corporations foster user dependency, making it increasingly difficult for individuals to leave their platforms. Saran and Sarma assert that technology tends to ‘play God’, potentially resulting in devices that program their owners rather than remaining under human control. In this context, the mention of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is inevitable; some researchers even argue that AI is capable of establishing a new colonial world order. As technology corporations increasingly impact democratic processes, institutions, and even geopolitics, the authors conclude that governance is urgently needed (Sárvári, B., 2021).

Chapter 5 poses the question of accountability regarding transnational Big Tech firms. The difficulty of regulating these corporations stems from their dominant, and at times, monopolistic positions. Their significant market share and success are rooted in a network-based approach: as more people utilize these platforms, a greater volume of data becomes available, allowing companies to extract insights and refine their algorithms. However, data management remains a concerning issue due to the lack of transparency and the unethical manipulation of user

consent. Prominent firms, such as Google, Amazon, and Facebook, have faced scrutiny regarding unethical data practices. Consequently, governments have sought to counter the dominance of major digital entities through various frameworks. Primary examples include India's digital public infrastructure (DPI) and Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The authors describe the GDPR as 'the world's toughest and most comprehensive personal data protection law', noting its global impact on privacy practices. Another potential solution for overseeing tech giants is the use of 'regulatory sandboxes', which can foster the emergence of fintech start-ups, providing them with a better opportunity to innovate and compete with major firms. Furthermore, this chapter also raises the critical question of who can be held accountable for user-generated content on digital platforms.

Despite national efforts to counter the dominance of Big Tech, so-called 'digital badlands' have emerged and continue to operate in the online sphere. Chapter 6 introduces the metaphor of the Apocalypse to describe illegal activities and their profound repercussions in the digital era. These virtual places are regarded as the breeding ground for cybercrimes and cyberattacks. One grave societal consequence is the escalation of hatred through social networks. In Myanmar, the case of the Rohingya Muslims illustrates the devastating power of hate speech and the rapid circulation of genocidal propaganda. Furthermore, several studies examining the impact of Covid-19 conclude that online hostility significantly increased during the pandemic. Consequently, nations face the arduous task of balancing the encouragement of free speech with the suppression of hate speech. While their approaches vary, there is a near-universal consensus that digital service providers must engage more actively in the fight against online hatred. The authors suggest that Big Tech and social media platforms should invest more in both human and technological resources to mitigate these negative effects. Artificial Intelligence also plays a critical role in cybercrime and cyberattacks; AI can be utilized as a potent and adaptable weapon, as it constantly learns from existing defenses. Alongside the rise of AI, three other trends characterize contemporary cybercrime: 'disaster capitalization', the evolving space of cryptocurrency, and the use of 'money mules' for money laundering. 'Disaster capitalization' refers to instances where cybercriminals exploit current crises to commit illicit acts such as the surge in fraudulent e-mails observed during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the case of 'cryptojacking', criminals illegally generate cryptocurrency by hijacking their victims' computing power. Furthermore, innocent individuals are often inadvertently involved in money laundering when recruited to transfer stolen funds through 'mule accounts'. As the Fourth Industrial Revolution is the fastest-developing upheaval in history, it presents several systemic risks, including these cybercrimes. Saran and Sarma extend the apocalyptic metaphor by invoking the Four Horsemen to describe these disruptive phenomena.

The central theme of Chapter 7, captured in its title, *Terminated? AI and Our Human Future*, explores the contrast between humanity and machines. Although AI has demonstrated the ability to defeat professional players in the complex game of Go, the authors argue that such systems are unlikely to achieve consciousness. Nevertheless, their exponential growth is remarkable, a phenomenon described by the term 'AI spring'. Like all automation technologies, Artificial Intelligence impacts the global workforce and poses a threat to certain professions, leading affected workers to protest against its extensive integration into their fields. Another pressing issue is the liability of autonomous systems, particularly in the case of driverless vehicles. However, accountability is not the only challenge lawmakers face; the layered nature of these technologies presents diverse risks that must be addressed through governance. Regulatory frameworks must adapt to the rapidly evolving character of AI without hindering innovation. Saran and Sarma identify three trends that governments should consider when maintaining healthy digital ecosystems. They emphasize the need for international laws capable of being enforced upon sovereign states. Furthermore, the authors highlight the unequal distribution of technological benefits, noting that the Global North plays a dominant role in both establishing frameworks and utilizing AI-supported solutions. Ultimately, the text stresses the importance of human capacity and awareness, describing AI as 'a core driver of contemporary geopolitics'.

The final chapter synthesizes the core concepts discussed throughout the book, including cloud societies, the changing notion of place, technological advancements and harms, and the international rules-based order. The authors argue that the original principles of this order have been interrupted by fundamental shifts in the digital age. They categorize these as the ‘three interruptions’, affecting sovereign states, common norms and principles and international institutions. Big Tech companies, through their massive data-processing operations, often challenge the authority of traditional institutions, undermining their efforts to ensure collective security within cyberspace. These interruptions are followed by ‘three disruptions’: technology has significantly altered citizens’ relationships with key elements - locality, mediated realities, and the political order including the prevailing myth of digital democracy. Finally, the authors propose ‘three solutions’ to prevent the collapse of democratic principles online: the development of robust digital laws, enhanced cooperation between governments and tech stakeholders, and, fundamentally, a re-evaluation of what constitutes human identity. The book concludes with a cautionary scenario: unless these systemic errors are addressed, the history of digital societies may prove regrettably brief.

GeoTechnoGraphy provides a rigorous examination of the fundamental transformation of societies, the emergence of advanced technology, and the growing dominance of tech conglomerates. The authors focus on the necessity of establishing and maintaining regulatory frameworks while shedding light on the inherent risks of the digital era. Amidst today’s crisis and turmoil, this work acts as an anchor by presenting reliable information about contemporary shifts. Saran and Sarma have compiled an extensive analysis of these phenomena, illustrated by compelling, up-to-date examples. Since nearly every aspect of modern life is influenced by these trends, the book is highly recommended for those interested in the nexus of geography, technology, and society. The text remains accessible, yet it addresses complex themes that encourage critical reflection on future implications. The authors primarily emphasize the negative facets of the digital age, yet they also outline solutions that offer positive outcomes and can enhance people’s lives. Beyond detailing the disadvantages, exploring exemplary practices could have been a promising area for further research. Consequently, *GeoTechnoGraphy* serves as a valuable resource for students seeking insights into historical events, current trends, and the trajectory of our digital future.

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