

Book Review: *Digital Cultures, Lived Stories and Virtual Reality* by Thomas Maschio. Anthropology and Business Series. London and New York: Routledge.

Wayne Fife

The author of this book, Thomas Maschio, has lived two anthropological lives; an earlier one as an academic anthropologist and a later one as an anthropologist running a company (Maschio Consulting) that specializes in the use of ethnographic research methods to help solve business problems and provide new kinds of information for business decisions. This combined background shows, as this volume is full of insights that translate both to the rough and tumble world of business practices and the more abstract world of academic understandings. This is to say that it offers readers insights into common social practices, such as the use of personal devices (for instance, smart phones) or the production of contemporary journalism, that can be utilized by both business practitioners and university-based researchers to think more about the ever-increasing role that digital technology is playing in our lives. As such, I could see this volume being used as a standard textbook in different kinds of social science or business courses, as well as being of interest to those who are simply curious about the intersection between business

Page 1 of 3

JBA 11(2): 253-255
Fall 2022

© The Author(s) 2022
ISSN 2245-4217

www.cbs.dk/jba

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.22439/jba.v11i2.6781>

and anthropology or who want to gain a greater understanding of contemporary digital practices.

The author assumes a stance that comes from humanistic and phenomenological forms of anthropology. This is a method of social analysis that is grounded in the culturally-based understandings that help create reactions to and feelings about objects, people, and the larger environment which surrounds them. These cultural lenses not only inform decision-making; they are often the critical factor in such decisions. Maschio draws upon the work of a number of anthropologists and other cultural theorists who have focused upon human meaning – the way humans create life-worlds and learn to think about these worlds – as an entry point into understanding why some practitioners resist or accept a shift to more digitally-based forms of journalism, why some leading-edge users of internet applications move from one to another, why smart phones or tablets become forms of play for many people, and why contemporary digital community members often see themselves as participating in a gift economy, among several other consulting projects he has completed over the years.

One of the things I like best about this book is that Maschio lays the evidence for his findings out for readers in great detail. Numerous photographic illustrations and a copious amount of direct quotation from participants in his practically-oriented research projects are included in the text. This allows the reader to follow his lines of reasoning and see how he arrives at his conclusions and the recommendations he makes to the companies who employed his consulting firm. In all honesty, I am an academic anthropologist with no business background and yet I did not find it difficult to follow what he was doing, why he was doing it, and the implications his findings could have for those making decisions about what to do next.

Maschio also makes extensive use of fruitful comparisons, whether suggesting that certain online digital practices echo standard interpretations of ritual behavior or that lived stories created through online presences share a great deal with the ways identities have been formed in many societies that were not driven by capitalist imperatives. Perhaps the most extensive use of a comparative perspective comes in a chapter about “digital play in Singapore.” In this chapter, Maschio makes a convincing case that larger cultural shifts in Singapore have a direct impact on the way that younger Singaporeans use and think about their personal digital devices, comparing this to a different cultural situation in the United States. Maschio notes on page 160, for example, that “Singaporeans approach the acquisition of new applications with a searching intensity we found absent in the North American research.” A few pages further along, he brings our attention to how Singaporean parents tend to see their young children’s use of digital devices such as tablets as examples of learning how to do something that is difficult

through perseverance and hard work, while American parents tend to see their young children's use of such devices as showing evidence of "natural play"; as something that displays an innate ability in the child, which can be unleashed through such a device. Differences that make a difference in the ways that humans actually think about the world and behave in it can only be found through the kind of fine-grained cultural analysis and ethnographic research methods that Maschio uses in this book; they will not be discovered by crunching large amounts of statistical data alone.

At the beginning of this book, Maschio (p. 5) suggests: "I make the case to clients that accurate and creative interpretations of the human meanings of a practice or technology is the only way to create effective business strategy." He then goes on to show the reader exactly how he does this through projects that have ranged from the use of virtual reality gear to investigations into a small cadres of internet leaders – those who always ride the first wave of new technology and new applications. His two chapters on newer forms of journalism and the difficulties that have been encountered by journalists, editors, and others associated with this shift are to my mind worth reading the book for alone, and not just for the light it throws onto new business practices, but also because of what it can teach to social researchers who are interested in news and other forms of information dissemination. Many of the insights in this book are well worth thinking about by anyone interested in the effects of new digital technologies on our lives, and I would recommend it not just to those interested in how anthropological research methods can be used to glean new information for more effective business practices, but also to students and social researchers who want to learn more about the human face of digital technology.

Wayne Fife recently retired as Professor of Anthropology at Memorial University. His two latest books are *Imaginary Worlds* (2022) and *Counting as a Qualitative Method* (2020). He has conducted ethnographic, archival, and material culture research in Papua New Guinea, England, Spain, and the Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Ontario, and Newfoundland/Labrador. Fife has published numerous scholarly essays on the topics of education and social change, the politics of play, bureaucratic forms as social and economic borders, ethnographic research methods, art and other material forms, heritage and ecotourism, archaeological sites and museums, implicit religion, nineteenth century missionaries, and national parks.