

To the Cloud: Big Data in a Turbulent World

By Vincent Mosco

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A Book Review by

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What's in a name? Paraphrasing Shakespeare, it is definitely worth asking: Would the cloud, by any other name, seem so sweet? Vincent Mosco's latest book, *To the Cloud: Big Data in a Turbulent World*, takes a critical look at the digital cloud that computer users have avidly embraced as the latest technological marvel, and found it far from benign. Mosco is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Queen's University, former Canada Research Chair in Communication and Society, and author of *The Political Economy of Communication* and numerous other books.

Mosco's 2004 book, *The Digital Sublime*, introduced the idea that digital technology has a mythical power to evoke a quasi-religious belief in its transformative potential. He calls this myth the digital sublime. Myths are not wrong-headed falsehoods, as they are often popularly conceived, Mosco stresses. "Myths matter", he repeats (quite often) in this new book, in part because they reveal fundamental truths about society and culture. They also have enormous power.

In *To the Cloud*, Mosco takes us a giant step further, using the myth of the digital sublime and the analytical tools of both cultural studies and political economy to perform a critical analysis of cloud computing—popularized as "the cloud"—the digital phenomenon that is currently captivating the public imagination. Some use the term "cloud" as a metaphor for the Internet, while others define it more specifically as a shared network of digital resources, readily accessed at almost any place or time.

Chapter Two of the book defines the cloud, details its history, and positions it as a new type of public utility, continuing the lineage of electricity, telegraphy, telephones, broadcasting, and other more-or-less publicly accessible, government regulated, yet for the most part privately owned, technological resources. The chapter introduces the major firms in the cloud computing industry and performs a political economic analysis that provides essential background for the chapters that follow.

In Chapter Three, Mosco moves into the cultural dimension, deconstructing the hugely successful hype with which the cloud has been marketed as the next big thing, convincing even hard-headed skeptics in business and government to upload their files to shared networks, despite grave potential risks to security, personal privacy, and the environment. It is a fascinating story of one of the world's great marketing campaigns, involving not just advertising and public

relations, but also the technical studies and reports used to convince legions of technology experts from the public and private sectors who ultimately succumbed to this prime example of the digital sublime.

The risks of cloud computing are considerable, as Mosco details in Chapter Four, appropriately titled “Dark Clouds”. Not only are the computers people use to access the cloud some of the world’s leading generators of toxic waste, but the cloud itself contributes to environmental degradation, storing its ever-increasing contents in enormous data centers that require huge amounts of electricity as well as diesel-powered back-up generators that spew clouds of pollution into the air. Then there are the privacy and security concerns that result from encouraging everyone on earth to upload their files to who knows where, in a world filled with hackers and hostile governments intent on stealing secrets from one another. Finally, Mosco examines the working conditions of people who labour in this industry—not just the elite workforce of engineers and designers we tend to identify with high technology, but also the tens of millions of workers who build and service the machines that make the cloud hum with activity at the busiest of times and keep it standing by, fully powered, at all hours of the day and night in case someone, somewhere wishes to perform a Google search. The risk of labour disruptions to this worldwide network, its supply chain and its power sources, is yet another serious drawback of the system. Yet one rarely hears of these potential problems in mainstream media coverage of the cloud.

The question of why this is so—why the cloud is so alluring to so many people and why its benefits are perceived as so much greater than its potential risks—is a phenomenon that Mosco alludes to throughout the book, but examines most fully in the final chapter. First, there is the formidable appeal of “big data”; that is, the contents of all those files and what can be done with them by those who have access. The ecstasy of the number-crunchers at this wealth of information, which can be run through computers to produce correlations that seem to predict trends, which are of course worth money, is considerable. Yet Mosco saves some of his most scathing criticism for the cult of big data, which he calls “digital positivism”, noting time and again that correlations prove absolutely nothing without context, and big data are the epitome of decontextualized information. After taking apart big data, Mosco performs a fascinating cultural analysis of cloud-based literary works from several eras, which shed light on the common myths and metaphors involving clouds. All of this helps to elucidate the metaphorical power of the cloud, which, when aligned with the mythical pull of the digital sublime, has made cloud computing nearly irresistible.

This is a book that every communication scholar should read. Indeed, its accessible writing style makes it possible for popular consumption. It behooves every computer user who has ever uploaded a file, participated in social media, or made an online purchase to read this cautionary tale of the seductiveness of the digital sublime.

About the Reviewer

Carrie Buchanan is an Assistant Professor in the Tim Russert Department of Communication and Theatre Arts at John Carroll University, a Jesuit college in northeast Ohio, where she teaches journalism and related courses. A Canadian, Dr. Buchanan earned her master’s in journalism and

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