

The push button and the digital condition

Abstract

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The project's goal is to characterize the push button (and analogous components like the keys on a keyboard or the switch) as a pivotal element of today's media technology and a powerful manifestation of digitality (i.e. the condition of being digital). It addresses the following two main questions: (i) How did the push button evolve and how did its evolution shape the form and function of digital media? (ii) What would a concept of digitality look like that went beyond common definitions (i.e. being composed of discrete and numerically represented elements) and which entailed the role of the human hand or, more precisely, its digits? In the so-called digital age, our daily routines are structured in a large part by buttons (e.g. on kitchen appliances, elevators, vending machines, automated tellers etc.). Indeed, perception and knowledge are nowadays mediated more and more through the manipulation of buttons (e.g. on mobile phones, computer keyboards, cameras etc.). An examination of the button's significance in the technical and cultural framework of modern societies thus promises a better understanding of our 'digital condition'. Given the button's ubiquity and necessity in everyday life, it is striking that there have been no extensive studies on the subject to date. The historiography of media has so far failed to recognize the importance of the button; theories and concepts of digital systems, on the other hand, have mostly ignored the systematic role of the fingers or digits for digitality. The project takes a two-fold approach to study the button from the perspective of media studies: it combines a historical investigation of the button's evolution from around 1840 to the present day with a theoretical argument for the inclusion of the hand into a broader concept of digitality. The historical investigation follows the principles of a variant of discourse analysis developed by F. Kittler and others for the study of the technological conditions determining discursive formations. The theoretical part is based on structuralist notions of sign systems (F. de Saussure; R. Jakobson) and their grammatological revision (J. Derrida), on anthropological arguments by A. Leroi-Gourhan, M. Mauss, and others, and on V. Flusser's phenomenological method for the study of gestures. The project will argue that the so-called digital age can be described as resulting from the 'revolution of the button' and that the 'digital gesture' of pushing buttons is the fundamental cultural technique of our time.

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