Janet Sternberg, **Misbehavior in Cyber Places: The Regulation of Online Conduct in Virtual Communities on the Internet**, Lanham, MI: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012, 213 pp., $20.69 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Yao Sun
University of Southern California

To be programmed or to program? That is the question. For media ecology scholars, it is time to examine digital media from a new perspective. Janet Sternberg gives her answer to the above question in the book *Misbehavior in Cyber Places: The Regulation of Online Conduct in Virtual Communities on the Internet*. In comparison with monographs on digital media or human behavior, the book is intriguing because it revisits media ecology both from social and human behavioral perspectives and acts as an important call for scholarship on studies involving situationist-based medium theory.
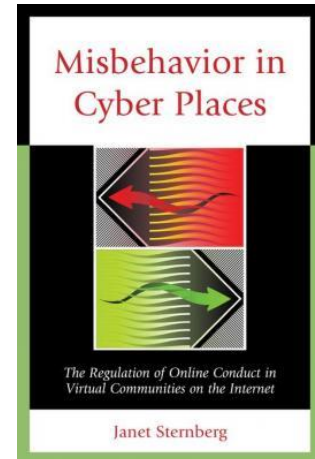
The work is organized into three major parts that include an introduction of research context of the study, a reconceptualization of troublesome behavior in cyber space, and an illustration of the power dynamic getween "misbehaviors" and "rule makers." The book provides a historical perspective by documenting the initial phase of Internet activity up to the end of the 20th century, from desktop computers to laptops and from cell phones to multifunction handheld devices. Theoretically, the work merges media ecology with computer-mediated communication studies, calling readers' attention to a clearer media ecology perspective. Sternberg notes that in spite of rapid technological changes, human nature has not changed. Therefore, distinguishing misbehavior and rule breaking from crime and lawbreaking is crucial in academic studies. What is striking about this work lies is the two-fold perspective of participant and scholar, which enables Sternberg to swap between different points of view when making observations.

Drawing on an enormous amount of literature, Sternberg begins by clarifying several ambiguous and overlapping concepts, such as online misbehavior and cybercrime, rule making and lawmaking, and community and public space. Several research questions were generated regarding the taxonomy construction and the pattern identification of cyber behaviors, both in relation to different types of misbehavior and as a means of regulating misbehavior in virtual communities. The author also offers definitions of several key terms, which serve as the basis for the research. Generally rooted in McLuhan's and Goffman's works, the book identifies five major principles underlying media ecology studies: media as environments; environments as media; space and place; situations, rules, and rule breaking; and mediated interpersonal communication. With regard to research method, by and large, this work applies philosophical inquiry to consider a number of online environments such as electronic mailing lists, Usenet newsgroups, BBSs, the World Wide Web, and so on.

Increasing amounts of trouble in cyberspace such as flaming, spamming, or virtual rape have attracted the attention of more and more scholars. In chapters 3 through 5, Sternberg systematically categorizes two major types of troublesome online behavior. One is termed lawbreaking behavior, or cybercrime. Sternberg points out that cyberspace lacks a "ringmaster" to keep it on the right track due to follies in amendment and jurisdiction. The second type of behavior is rule breaking, which has its roots in human nature. Examples of this type of behavior include being negligent, naughty, or nasty. Sternberg calls for certain rules and norms to facilitate behavior management and social control within online environments. However, as she also maintains in the book, a boundary-breaking paradigm is urgently called for as the analysis of media ecology in the digital media era is at a crossroads where online and offline environments meet

The next section of the book focuses on regulation, which is a serious concern considering the type of misbehavior discussed previously. Given the dynamic of "breaking, making and enforcing rules" (p. 155) offline, a similar process that has occurred offline could be applied to online environment. However, considering that online rule breakers are mostly netiquette newbies, packet pranksters, or modern miscreants, this study specifically includes several findings about rule making and rule makers of virtual communities. First, the rules of online conduct are made up of different layers in terms of "explicitness" and "formality," "reflecting anthropologist Edward T. Hall's three levels of operationalized culture: informal, formal and technical" (p. 165). Another concern related to rule making in online environments is how to negotiate "local" and "global" issues, especially when cultural and subcultural differences are conflicted in regulation. With regard to the role of rule maker, according to Sternberg, there is much overlap with the role of rule enforcer—and sometimes there are no distinctions between the two. A specific attribute of an online rule maker is that volunteers may fill in the position in virtual communities and perform the function of making rules (e.g., volunteers who maintain Usenet groups, as described in chapter 5).

Another finding about rule makers in virtual communities involves gender and age issues. For example, young males tend to act more as rule breakers, whereas the majority of online rule makers are females or older participants. In addition to rule breakers and rule makers, another role occurring within online communities is that of rule enforcer, an individual responsible for the daily handling of troublemakers in online communities. As Sternberg notes, rule enforcers usually act as moderators or "sysops" on cyber patrol.

Regulating online behaviors has increasingly attracted attention from both academia and industry. Cyberspace, Sternberg concludes, involves a new sense of place where both physical and behavioral boundaries tend to blur. In online environments, boundaries tend to be recognized by behavioral patterns instead of physical properties. Netizens develop a sense of belonging through building and maintaining behavioral patterns. Moreover, the transnational nature of cyberspace diminishes the impact of national boundaries while reinforcing cultural relativity. Therefore, "we must abandon nationally-oriented legal frameworks . . . (and) encourage a multiplicity of decentralized locally-oriented solutions for regulating online behavior" (p. 177).

Some questions remain unanswered concerning differences between misbehavior types and regulatory means in virtual communities. For example, do people misbehave differently in different types of online environment? If so, what are the mechanisms behind their actions? What are the different methods that should be applied in different types of online environments? Do these methods differ in terms of effectiveness in regulating online misbehavior? *Misbehavior in Cyber Places* is an intriguing and exciting read for those interested in online behavior and media ecology in the digital era.