User Error: Resisting Computer Culture

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User Error: Resisting Computer Culture

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This book is related in several ways to one reviewed in our last issue, Laura J. Gurak’s Cyberliteracy, Navigating the Internet with Awareness [1]. Both books are by Canadian authors and come out of a critical school of Canadian post-modernist scholars who are focused upon “deconstructing” computer usage and the Internet. There is a strong Canadian tradition of critical work dealing with media, most notably, of course, that of Marshall Mcluhan. [2] Canadians, perhaps, have a particular motive for taking a critical approach to media: so much of the media appearing in Canada comes from the economic colossus to its south, the United States.

As acting book review editor of Interface, I prefer to review books that I can heartily recommend. Most of us are so busy that reading even one book a month can be a challenge. This is not such a book, yet from a particular critical perspective it is nonetheless a potentially useful one. If you are yourself suspicious of the passion for computers and the Internet, or want to understand a more critical scholarly perspective, then this is the book for you. It is practically a pastiche of critical scholarship. Many pages consist largely of references or quotations strung together to suit the author’s purposes. Any reader quickly will become familiar with the work of all the major opponents of the Internet, from the well-known such as Neil Postman and Clifford Stoll to the lesser known French post-modernists such as Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault. If you are an enthusiastic supporter of the Internet, you may see influential figures such as Bill Gates, Ray Kurtzweil and Sherry Turkle relentlessly criticized.

Another very useful portion of the book comes from the author’s experience. Rose, Professor of Information Technology Management at Ryerson University, [3] worked as a program documentation writer and her survey of this field is both enlightening and amusing for those of us who have suffered through trying to understand those thick user manuals that often seem themselves to require a manual of their own.

At the last, however, I find myself wondering for whom precisely this book was written. Professor
Rose seems to envision an audience that is simultaneously able to navigate the perilous waters of post-modernist (Cultural Studies) vocabulary and analysis, but at the same time, is made up of rather uncritical users of computers. She continually draws a distinction between “Users”, who are a culturally conceived and constructed identity, all of those of us who despite our staggering differences are reduced to being an “amorphous being without gender, form, place, time, knowledge, voice, or power” while the “user” is an actually “embodied individual”. (p.7) Her plea, surprisingly anticlimactic after chapter after chapter of harsh criticism of an entire culture hell-bent on creating us as “Users” is that we become more thoughtful “users”. (p. 174)

But to move from User to user we need to be able to follow prose such as this:

“Indeed, one of the reasons that I undertook this study in the first place is because I regard the homogenizing tendency of software user documentation, and other artifacts of computer culture not only as dehumanizing but also as depoliticizing in that it removes from the realm of debate the relationships of power inherent in very different subject positions.” (p. 13)

Professor Rose also continually adopts heavily loaded prose that ultimately has the effect of antagonizing the skeptical reader rather than persuading. At page 2-3, for example, one notices that in introducing the positions of advocates of the computer she uses terms such as “spin”, “prefer to regard”, “proclaims”, “asserts”, and “peppers”, while the critical souls whom she admires merely have a “view.” At other points she simply throws good research to the winds and takes the curious position that there is a “relative paucity” of the critical examination of “computer addiction”. (p. 137) At another juncture, she interprets children’s playing of violent computer games as “one way to resist the imposed subject positions of innocence and experience” associated with the push to make us all “Users”. (p. 156)

Professor Rose also chooses her critical ground very carefully so as ultimately to avoid an objective weighing up of the true social value of computers. At bottom, she considers their use no better than unavoidable while criticizing odd corners of the field, such as the tendency of futurists to rhapsodize while frequently being proved wrong. But as I sit in an Internet café in Beijing writing this review prior to emailing it to our student webmaster and Interface editor, Marci Lim, I think that she might well spend more time thinking about how the Internet permit us to distribute our work load across space and time, and enables an unprecedented degree of global communication. Perhaps I have become an uncritical User, but I am experiencing myself as a greatly enabled user at present.

Perhaps I should not have attempted to review the book as my position as Faculty Director at the Berglund Center and editor of Interface does amount to a sort of profiting from the development of both computers and the Internet, and Professor Rose often criticizes those of us in this position as irredeemably self-interested.

Jeffrey Barlow
Editor, Interface.
Notes:

These books are so similar that John Seeley Brown, noted scholar of the Internet, has written
substantially the same jacket blurb for each of them.

[2] For the official McLuhan WWW site see: http://www.marshallmcluhan.com/ Another valuable
site is that of Professor Hibbits, found at: http://www.law.pitt.edu/hibbitts/mcl.htm

[3] As appropriate for somebody so critical of computers, Professor Rose is a rather elusive figure
on the Internet. However, one can download a pdf of a class syllabus at:
http://www.atkinson.yorku.ca/~cefg4000/PDF/syllado1.pdf