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Cyberliteracy, Navigating the Internet with Awareness

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Laura J. Gurak is the author of several previous books, including Persuasion and Privacy in Cyberspace. She is a professor of rhetoric and technical communication at the University of Minnesota, where she also directs the Internet Studies Center. [1]

Gurak’s position on cyberliteracy can be aptly summed up with this phrase: “Yet cyberliteracy is not simply a matter of learning how to keep up with the technology or how to do a web search. For communication technologies shape our social and cultural spaces.” (p. 27)

Her approach is to first place cyberliteracy (“a set of concepts and critical views with which to understand today’s Internet.” p. 3) into a historical context with other important changes in the nature of literacy. She then goes on through what seems to be almost a random list of topically-oriented chapters such as “Techno-rage: Machines, Anger, and Censorship” and “gender(s) and Virtualities”. She tells us, however, that these are key concepts in the “mainstream discourse surrounding the Internet.” (p. 6)

The topics seem to be primarily a vehicle for delivering a series of strong personal perspectives. The book is written in the first person, consonant with Gurak’s general postmodernist orientation. She wants to constantly remind us that the Internet is far from an objective space and that real people (or corporations) with real interests are always involved in communications decisions: “In the end, physicality makes the rules.” (p. 149).

This continual intrusion of the author’s voice, however, comes to detract at points as we have to decide whether or not we trust her particular voice, care about her opinions, or can identify with the daily life (her conclusions are usually embedded in a narrative anchored in her personal life)
that leads her to develop those opinions. Her underlying belief is that the earlier stages of the Internet, characterized by public funding, individual voices— in short, a democratic “space”— is rapidly being overtaken by corporate interests, a process which necessarily reduces public space.

This book is very difficult to typify. At bottom, I think it intended to be a sort of survival manual, though the author might prefer that we view it as the McGuffey’s reader of cyberspace. Its audience is the Internet user who can fully understand the postmodern voice and analysis, but who is too naïve to have already come to many if not most of Gurak’s conclusions. It is definitely worth reading, but in part because it is a short work, quickly assimilated.

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