

Silicon Snake Oil

Second Thoughts on the Information Highway

Clifford Stoll

(Excerpts From A Review By Dorit Winter)

I'm mainly speaking to people who feel mystically lured to the Internet: lotus-eaters, beware. Life in the real world is far more interesting, far more important, far richer, than anything you'll ever find on a computer screen. (p. 13)

Mr. Stoll knows what he's talking about. "He's the author of *The Cuckoo's Nest* - the best-selling book about how he caught German spies prowling through computers - and a genuine legend on the Internet. Involved with networks since their earliest days, Stoll has watched the Internet grow from an improbable research project into a communications juggernaut. He knows computers; he loves his networked community. And yet. . ." (from the flyleaf)

Silicon Snake Oil is all about the "And yet" Writing in a folksy vernacular, Mr. Stoll wittily refutes techno-hype, discriminating between the usefulness and illusion that the technology entails: "Lots of excitement, plenty of glitz, but little substance and even less reflection." (p. 10) He values substance, recognizes and appreciates individuality, and realizes that choice does not equal creativity.

Every resume looks striking. Why, then, am I disappointed when looking for a qualified research assistant? Before me, a stack of sixty resumes, each a sterile word-processed summary of someone's life. Not a smudge or finger-print in the lot. The only sign of humanity are the signatures at the bottom of cover letters; several of those are computer-generated as well. It's so easy to manipulate the appearance of a message that people spend inordinate amounts of time trying to get it perfect. I want to hire a human being, a living person who can handle the job, one who will latch on to a problem with verve. Judging from these resumes, I'm presented with a row of automatons, each with a different set of fonts and page-layout routines. No life here - just dry compilation of administrivia Fancy background and multicolor borders pull my eye away from the text. Special fonts and classy paper emphasize the designer's message. Pullout quotes and inset headlines flash the editor's point of view ... Such eye candy gets in the way of the author's message. It prevents me from searching out fallacies in his logic. The typography dilutes the presentation. (p. 77)

"No life here." In spite of his technological expertise and his interest and delight in the technological possibilities, he is unnerved by the sterility of on-line life. He says it wastes time. He prefers experience and process.

Log in - spend a week connected to the electronic world But remember, you're viewing a world that doesn't exist. During that week you spend on-line, you could have planted a tomato garden, volunteered at a hospital, spoken with your child's teacher, and taught the kid down the block how to shag fly balls. Claim that you can do all of those things while having a rich on-line life? Nope. Every hour that you're behind the keyboard is sixty minutes that you're not doing something else. (p. 14)

Mr. Stoll carefully and repeatedly debunks the "obsession with speed." And he is unimpressed by facts.

What's the capital of North Dakota? Where's the industrial section of Germany? On what lake do you find Kyoto? These are ordinary questions of geography. You'll find the answers in any atlas or encyclopedia. Or look 'em up faster using the Internet During the day it might take ten minutes (on you might get the reply within a minute. The answers are Bismarck, the Ruhr Valley and Biwa. Why don't these replies satisfy? Because these factoids are simple and boring. Geography is far deeper than names and places. (p. 123)

He is an astronomer who values depth, ridges and wrinkles, not the flatness of the screen. It fosters illusion:

It's an unreal universe, a soluble tissue of nothingness. (p. 4)
Electronic communications is an instantaneous and illusory contact that creates a sense of intimacy without the emotional investment that leads to a close friendship. (p. 24)
The image [of Venus] is phony The reality [of Mount Vesuvius] is much more subtle. (p. 83)
On-line art the image on my screen is afar cry from the actual painting. When I look closely at the monitor, all the details disappear into pixels. Vermeer's palette, famous for subtle hues, is now rendered by 256 discrete colors...
Bill Gates of Microsoft is said to be buying electronic rights to artworks, with the intention of becoming the dominant purveyor of electronic art.
At the same time the National Gallery in London lets visitors browse parts of their collections on terminals. Alongside the art are a few paragraphs about the artists. For eighty dollars I can buy a CD-ROM from Microsoft that includes selected paintings along with animations and audio track. For the same one, I can get two hefty coffee table books with great photographs and superb commentary.
After seeing Vermeer's maiden, I decided I don't want this CD-ROM. I'm not worried about Bill Gates taking over the art world, either. (p. 85)

If this is naivete, it is refreshing, coming from so informed a source. Mr. Stoll seems able to deal with Life On The Screen without losing his sense of reality. He has not crossed the threshold through Gates' Gate. For Stoll, there is still "something else": Life.

This raises a question which we, the little community of Waldorf teachers, have an obligation to consider: Just exactly how does the computer affect our "something else"? What exactly does get lost if, when a Waldorf teacher prepares a main lesson, he or she turns to the Internet to get the scoop from a distant, invisible, unknown colleague a hemisphere away? Can our inner work fortify our lesson preparations when our research medium is electronic? What about that marvelously unplanned encounter with a colleague in the hallway on the Friday before the new main lesson block is due to start Monday, when a seemingly random word in a seemingly casual encounter leads to the perfect idea for how to begin the block? Do we "meet" colleagues on the Internet as a consequence of spiritual activity, whether our own or that of the third hierarchy?

These are not just theoretical questions for many of the students in the San Francisco Waldorf Teacher Training, a weekend program. During the week these prospective Waldorf teachers are professionally bound to their computers. When bored, they cruise the Net for the latest Waldorf news online. They follow debates. They join the debates. They read what is being sent out from well-intentioned Waldorf professionals in distant lands. It is fascinating. There are now about 70 pertinent web sites, and the list is growing. Why should the Waldorf community be less prone to computer magic than the rest of the world?

Before jumping into the Web, hadn't we better clarify our motives? Are we asserting our anti-Waldorf Establishment rights? Refuting the ever-present specter of "old-fashioned"? Asserting our modernity by participating in on-line chat rooms or downloading files? Simply doing research? Enjoying an international community? Being party to "lots of excitement, plenty of glitz, but little substance and even less reflection?"

The Waldorf community has been oddly mute about its own interaction with interactivity. We have focused on other people's problems with computers. We have worried about the computer's powerful contribution to the attack on childhood and about the pressure to bring computers into our classrooms, while for many in the worldwide Waldorf community, logging on is routine. Not only questions of research, but other, more profound aspects have to be addressed.

Computer communication makes us less and less dependent on time and space. What are time and space? What are we sacrificing when we short-circuit time and space?

Loss of creativity, loss of imagination, loss of concentration, loss of process, of quality, of experience, of life - these aspects of computer culture are finding voices such as Clifford Stoll's, who still has confidence in "common sense and feeling" as measurements of validity, who still has common sense and feeling.

But for us, common sense and feeling are not enough. If Waldorf education presumes spiritual science, then we must get clear about the computer's impact on the supersensible realities through which we teach and learn.