Let Them Eat Data

Assignment – 05

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: This paper has discussed some of the criticisms made by the author C. A. Bowers. The reader will find claims that computer-based culture is becoming an even more destructive form of colonialism. Technology has failed largely in universities, and there is a need for a radically different approach to technology. The reader will learn of ecological and environmental problems that have developed due to the advancements in technology.
The book entitled *Let Them Eat Data* by the author C.A. Bowers has a belabored and contradictory look at computers than you might think; within this paper you will find a comprehensive look at specific issues. Bowers speaks of computers in somewhat of a negative and unglamorous way. Bowers claims, “Computer-based culture is becoming an even more destructive form of colonialism than was experienced in the nineteenth century” (Bowers, p.10). He believes we have entered irreversible stages that are raising negative environmental issues. Within this book are found examinations of cultural differences while looking at the concept of “cyberspace.” We will further examine ecological implications in regard to local knowledge. I have found philosophical ideas centered on the global spread of computers in relationship to issues centering on the evolution of technology. We also are introduced with the concept of what is known as “virtual universities.” Later a discussion exists between the relationship of teachers and computers. The last subject we will discuss within this paper is the notion of why little attention is given to understand how technology affects the quality of individual and community life. Much of what I have learned I do not necessarily subscribe to at first glance, however, within this paper, I will discuss these issues of what C.A. Bowers has sagaciously and profoundly analyzed.

The first items discussed were centered upon the diminishing environment and ecosystem. It was amazing to find out that over ninety million new people are being added to the Earth’s population each year. I am curious to what accounts for this rapid growth. I did learn that this poses a problematic threat to humanity. With respect to some of the areas with a more upward trend in growth, the author states, “These regions
are also developing modern economics and consumer expectations that will result in a rapid increase in pollution, including changes in the carbon cycle that directly influence global warming” (Bowers, p. 6). This is a fascinating correlation between the environment and cyberspace. Although this might seem like a sensational stretch, this global environment problem is on the rise. Furthermore, within the first chapter, there is a degrading trend of health among humanity. This downward trend is attributed to all the pollutions released into the environment.

Technologically advanced countries have this ubiquitous need for the web and computers to be present all the time. The industry moves closer and closer to the future of everything being web exchanged. Educational institutions of cultural diversity brings people closer as a human race. The author proposes a question that might suggest the possibility of further distancing individuals from each other with the use of technology. One might assume this would not be the case, but the question at hand says, “Does the globalization of cyberspace contribute to the loss of cultural diversity and thus the loss of knowledge of sustainable living within local ecosystems” (Bowers, p.17)? I believe this is not a negative idea per say. The underlying idea at hand might suggest that because of this shared medium, computers are a common culture and language. This computer exchange has created a completely new experience for nations to share; it is obvious with the advent of technology and computers that people’s lives are changed forever. Change on the surface is usually good, but findings within this book suggest something strangely odd: that societies will fail with technology changes.

Interestingly, with respect to this radical idea of cyberspace and alternative reality, oftentimes people accept unreal experiences for real ones. For example, often times a
person consumed with a television show could find themselves living vicariously through a character within that show. You can extend this way of thinking about a person sitting alone at a computer chatting where they might not have a moral consequence. It is evident that computers will change people’s lives in this way. Sherry Turkle, the author of the book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, writes more of how computers will change lives. She suggests, “people will become increasingly comfortable with substituting representation of reality for the real” (Turkle, p. 23). This is certainly going beyond the typical characteristics of communication and experience.

This concept springs forward into a virtual world of seemingly magical and unreal properties. Life becomes more surreal where there is unaccountability and no real consequences.

This brings us to our next topic of discussion; this has to do with elitism and the lack of. Bowers considers the ideological characteristics of data as a form of high-status knowledge. He later expresses, “It is easy to recognize the connections between data as high-status knowledge and the ideology of elite groups who promote technologically based economic development” (Bowers, p. 55). Bowers argues that the knowledge of computers is the substitution for “local knowledge” with data. To sum this up, the ideas of skills and knowledge, which are highly in need, but really at a local level, are cut down with the opposition of high-status knowledge. Bowers continues, “Knowledge of place, when it is deeply embedded in personal experience and understood as an intergenerational responsibility, also includes knowing who were the earlier inhabitants, and what was their technology and economy” (Bowers, pg. 64). These are really
important experiences that strengthen and help contribute to the ideas held on to, of where one comes from.

It seems correct to assume that Bowers is clear in suggesting that only a society that reduces its addiction on technology has a chance of survival, both ecologically and environmentally speaking. Perhaps this does not make a lot of sense as it might stand-alone, however, this has some credibility in relationship with the global spread of computers in an ever-evolving state of being. On the other hand, it is very plausible to believe that less-advanced cultures must adopt these ways of incorporating technology or, sadly, must face extinction. To further offer insight on the subject of the global technology evolution, one might turn to Nicholas Negroponte, a computer advocate who speaks on the issues. She says, “Early in the next millennium your right and left cufflinks or ear-rings may communicate with each other by low-orbiting satellites and have more computer power than your PC” (Negroponte, 1995, p. 5). Bowers might suggest something like the evolutionary process, although advancing in helping improve communication is fundamentally flawed.

It would logically seem that as technology gets more advanced and has integrated these advancements into schools and universities, the more likely people will be advanced educationally. However, the problem rests within the conceptual basis of determining the appropriate uses of computers in the classroom. The book reports the following criticisms, “Computers limit students’ imagination, students often have only a superficial understanding of the information they download, and computers frequently break down” (Bowers, p. 113). Among these arguments partly being true, a large opposing side might suggest these problems do not warrant the reductions of use of this
technology among young people. It is quite the opposite, and the book states that to find such articles or journals that support these almost preposterous ideas that support computers being destructive is next to impossible. Bowers, I believe, is rather brave to discuss the contrary side of these issues. All throughout this book is conveyed a highly critical idea that a universal humanist approach to education is beneficial. In his own words Bowers states, “Instead of blind optimism toward technological change, we need to take a more cautious, even skeptical view” (Bowers, p.182).

The next section of the book discusses the relationship between the teacher and technology and, more specifically, computers. It would be practical to assume that even the best technology can fail if the operator does not understand how it works. The book supports this thinking and mentions many conferences and public events where modern technology was used. At these conferences it was said a few times verbal messages got out of sync with visual elements. When this happened, of course attention was drawn to the presentation in a way it was not intended to. Jacques Ellul, a French Philosopher, was cited in the book. He made an interesting comment in regards to the relationship between the teacher and the technology. He said, “Its local nature, its subordinate role in mythopoetically ordered cultures, its incremental and conserving pattern of development, and its emphasis on the skill of the worker rather than the complexity and efficiency of the tool” (Ellul, p.142). This supports that a large amount of the success that occurs within the classroom is not necessarily attributed to the quality of the technology and tools but rather to the quality of the teacher or worker as Ellul stated it.

These ideas surrounding web-integration with technology bring us into the concluding topic of interest found within this book, which has to do with the degrading quality of
community life brought upon by technology. Little attention has been given to understanding why this has occurred. I have mentioned earlier within this paper about the rapid increase in pollution, the changes in the carbon cycle, and global warming. To cite another example found within the book, “The introduction of cars into China’s major cities is contributing to an alarming rise in the amount of lead that children are ingesting” (Bowers, p.179). This is simply another single problematic environmental issue with the rise of technology. The book also suggests that forests that take hundreds of years to develop are being cut down in minutes. In California, the mechanical tomato picker led to the reduction of thousands of industrial jobs. Endless amounts of stories exist that have been giving little to almost no thought over the years or are attempted to be hidden away. This is a growing ecological and environmental problem that needs to be reviewed without praising the great advancements of technology. It would seem that lifestyles are being destroyed rather than working conditions being improved by advancements in technology.

This book brings a unique perspective with regards to technology. As I mentioned, this book went through a brilliant analysis and a certain bravery to even question others’ deeply held beliefs. He concluded with some final thoughts and an admonition for all citizens to educate themselves in the following few aspects of technology:

First, there are differences between technologies developed in Western cultures and traditional, more centered cultures. Secondly, democratizing decisions about technology depends on understanding alternative assumptions that influence the dominant approaches to technology. Third, we need a systematic examination of how modern technology contributes to the culturally transforming process of
commodifying knowledge and relationships. Fourth, modern technology requires a more complex view of tradition. Fifth, technology has an impact on language and patterns of thinking. Sixth, social justice issues arise from the influence of modern technology on the nature of work. And last but not least, it is important to acquire knowledge about how the cultural characteristics threaten cultural diversity. (Bowers, p.190)

This book raised many interesting concerns of the misuse of technology in many contexts including global issues, ecological, and environmental issues. As the author proclaims, “Newspaper articles on technology serve as the best evidence of the failure of universities. We now need to take a radically different approach to technology” (Bowers, pgs 180,186). Perhaps this is the truth. It is not my intention to take sides but rather give a comprehensive look and review of this enlightening complex work.
References


