BOOK REVIEWS

Home truths: exploring the domestic consumption of computers

E. Lally, At Home with Computers (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 246 pp., ISBN 1-859-73561-4 (pbk), £15.99.

K. Facer, J. Furlong, R. Furlong & R. Sutherland, Screenplay: Children and Computing in the Home (London: Routledge, 2003), 262 pp., ISBN 0-415-29843-1 (pbk), £22.50.

Rather than duplicating their efforts, these two qualitative accounts of home computer use turn out neatly to complement one another. Elaine Lally’s title concentrates on adults’ consumption of computers in the home (and its blurring with the boundaries of work, leisure and learning), whilst Keri Facer et al. set out to examine children’s use of computers at home (and its blurring with the boundaries of school and learning). There is, of course, a distinguished lineage of studies examining the domestication of information technologies, and both books rightly acknowledge their debts to earlier work by Roger Silverstone, Graham Murdock and others. They also remind the reader of the seminal nature of Silverstone & Hirsch’s (1992) Consuming Technologies collection. Indeed, both these books can be seen as a continuing and updating the approaches and analytical arguments outlined in Consuming Technologies, based upon empirical work carried out in the mid- to late 1990s (Lally’s study starting in 1995 and Screenplay spanning 1998–2000). To be hypercritical for a moment, the time lapse between data collection and the production of both books highlight the problem of media researchers relying on the printed page to disseminate their findings. Participants in Lally’s study, for example, talk with pride of having ‘revved up’ 286 computers and even frequent computer users view the Internet with a degree of scepticism and doubt that it could ever be that useful to their everyday lives. Similarly, in Screenplay we are reminded how vital the ‘millennium bug’ seemed to be at the time. Of course, the theoretical and practical
issues brought up in the course of these discussions remain just as valid today as they were five years ago — and it is in this respect that both books ultimately excel.

Elaine Lally’s book is a monograph based on a PhD study carried out in Ien Ang’s department of School of Cultural Histories and Futures at the University of Western Sydney. This proves an invaluable strength with Lally, as with all good PhD students, having the interest, time and motivation to be more rigorous with her subject matter than older, perhaps more weary researchers caught in the endless cycle of grant applications and procurement of funding. Thus, the writing in At Home with Computers is lively and engaging — not something that can be said of most academic texts. It is also wide-ranging, with the book’s initial discussion of notions such as ‘ownership’ and ‘home’, for example, drawing on a variety of literatures from law to anthropology, to social psychology. At times this eclectic approach leaves the reader wanting slightly more discussion and analysis. There are all-too-brief considerations of Le Corbusier’s notion of the house as a ‘machine for living’ and Lévi-Strauss’s notion of ‘bricolage’, which could have sustained further elaboration — as could the conclusion to the book, which teasingly introduces the notions of alienability and inalienably with regard to the relationships that people develop with home computers. Yet, on the whole, the book’s discussion of such theoretical precedents is admirably sound without patronizing the already informed reader.

Lally’s analytical framework of home use of computers is clear and thorough. Taking thirty-one case-study households, she tracks the domestication of computers through the stages of appropriation, objectification and incorporation into the routines of daily life. Lally’s thesis is simple but powerful in the analyses it brings to bear in ‘making the familiar strange’. The book commences with the aforementioned discussion of what is really meant by ‘ownership’ of an artefact before considering the social construction of the computer by commercial concerns and the corresponding rationales that people develop for choosing to acquire a computer. These are summarized succinctly by one of Lally’s participants as ‘acquiring a handle on the future’ — be it for children, work or merely keeping up with the ‘information society’. The book then goes on to explore how the computer finds a place within the pre-existing social structures, temporal patterns and gendered dynamics of the home — all of which is at once as mundane and unique as any other aspect of household consumption. Thus computers are fought over by family members, ‘borrowed’ from the workplace and given pet names, and software is pirated as the computer becomes embedded into the lives of Lally’s case-study households. Throughout the fourteen chapters, Lally constructs an engaging study of domestic consumption of the computer which should remain an authoritative piece of writing in the area for many years to come.

Screenplay by Keri Facer and colleagues from the UK takes the reader to the other side of the world from Lally’s Sydney suburbs — but ends up describing
a remarkably similar set of processes. In these days of interdisciplinarity, Facer et al. take as their starting point a promising amalgam of media and cultural studies, sociology of education and social psychology — ostensibly looking at how children use computers at home and school to learn, work and play. On the whole, this blend of disciplinary and analytical styles works well. Moreover, whereas Lally’s project was justified as examining one of the last generations of adults who had not grown up with computers, Facer et al. seek to focus on one of the first cohorts of children who have known nothing else but a computerized world — the ‘digital natives’ rather than ‘digital immigrants’ as the authors put it. Based on empirical work carried out in the west of England and south-east Wales, Screenplay takes a considered look at how young people learn to use and make use of computers in the day-to-day lives — ultimately tackling the $64 million question ‘In what ways do computer technologies enhance and transform children’s capabilities?’ This concern is addressed via a detailed survey of 855 school pupils with year-long case studies then carried out with sixteen families of children who had responded. Like Lally, Facer et al. take a methodical and detailed approach to describing how children use information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the home. Starting with parents’ histories of computer use (their ‘technological biographies’), they go onto describe how families negotiate the entry of the computer into the household and the ongoing spatial objectification that ensues. After considering the key uses of computers for play, informational navigation and the creation of cultural products, the book then takes a wider perspective on how computers ‘fit in’ with young people’s lives and what role(s) computers play in children’s identity formation — arguing that children construct different ‘digital identities’ contingent on their consumption of ICTs. Then, reflecting the project’s origins in a university department of education, the book concludes with two (perhaps less compelling) chapters on how children learn with computers at home and in school — concluding that the school context of computer use needs a dramatic re-engineering if it is not to be seen as irrelevant to the digital identities of the children it purports to serve. Nevertheless, as a whole Screenplay represents a major contribution to our understanding of children and computers — rightly shifting attention away from purely educational uses and contextualizing children’s ‘digital lives’ in the domestic context. As such, it deserves to be seen alongside the work of Sonia Livingstone and Gill Valentine as a key part of the contemporary British literature on young people and ICTs.

If there is a common weakness to both books, then it is regarding who is being researched and how their stories are presented. Of course, conducting qualitative case-study work of this type presents an almost unavoidable problem as to the kind of people who participate in such social science research. Those who are happy to complete questionnaires and to allow researchers to make repeat visits to their homes and ask seemingly inane and repetitive questions are a generally homogenous group. As such, both books tend to draw the
reader into the middle-class, educated world of the ‘average’ computer user, thus meriting a significant health warning to the generalizability of the stories that ensue. For example, whereas Screenplay’s sampling strategy is strengthened by its use of an initial survey to frame its choice of case-study families, Lally’s approach is less rigorous. Of course, as the author acknowledges, by concentrating on home use of computers her study unavoidably excludes ‘people without such a place’ (p. 10) such as the homeless, refugees and long-term travellers. More serious, though, is the blend of convenience and snowball sampling that she uses to gain her study households. Although using the strategies she did (such as drawing upon members of an evening IT class that she was teaching as well as administrative staff in her own university) represents a practical way in which her study could gain a sample, it does leave the book based on an atypical selection of the general population. For example, Lally has an over-preponderance of adults who have bought computers to engage in formal adult learning, which is not reflected in other studies using more systematic approaches to sampling. She also has a lot of people working in and around her own university as students, administrators and staff. This leaves At Home with Computers with a fairly homogenous cluster of computer users with high levels of education, cultural and economic capital as well as a conspicuous lack of ethnic, age or disability diversity. This is not to decry the value of the book but certainly constitutes a significant caveat to the strength of the findings.

Another minor quibble would be Screenplay’s under-use of all the data collected. In these days of the social world being researched within an inch of its life there is an obligation for researchers to use the data they collect to its fullest extent – given the inconvenience that subjects have to endure in the data-collection process. Despite giving out lengthy questionnaires to 855 school children, Screenplay’s analysis of the project’s quantitative data is limited. There are many more questions, trends and patterns that could have been teased out of these rich data if the authors were so inclined. Similarly, the project’s use of more innovative data-collection techniques such as videotaping subjects’ use of computers, diaries and logs of computer use and photographs is necessarily limited by the book format. Aside from ten still photographs of computer workstations and two screenshots of a web page, Screenplay makes little use of these undeniably rich sources of data and (over-)privileges the spoken/transcribed word for representing the complex social processes it seeks to describe. Of course, this is not a criticism peculiar to Screenplay, more a general unease with the current trend in social science research to be seen to use seemingly ‘innovative’ methodologies but then having to marginalize them in the dissemination process – again highlighting the limitations of the printed page in new media research.

Of course, one can find methodological limitations in every piece of research, and these technical points should not detract from the overall conclusion that both these books are to be highly recommended and, as a pair,
represent the ‘state of the art’ in terms of empirical exploration of domestic consumption of ICTs. They also serve to introduce some new names into the media studies field that will undoubtedly play a large part in its development during the future. I would hope that both books also stimulate further research and refinement of methods as academic researchers continue to grapple with the ‘messiness’ of people’s adoption and use of ICTs in everyday life. For one, both books point to the importance of ‘outside home’ influences on home uses of computers which merit further consideration and study – such as the workplace, community sites and wider neighbourhood. As such these two books provide an invaluable and sound basis for such work to take place.

Neil Selwyn

Reference

Silverstone, R. & Hirsch, E. (eds) (1992) Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces, Routledge, London.

Rachel Gibson, Paul Nixon & Stephen Ward (eds), Political Parties and the Internet: Net Gain? (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 250, ISBN 0-415-28274-8 (pbk), £19.99.

This is a useful addition to the growing e-democracy literature. The North American dominance of the early literature has tended to neglect the role of political parties, but it is still the case that in most democratic countries these strange institutions provide the main channels of linkage and mediation between the public and state power. Gibson & Ward have made a consistent contribution to theoretical and empirical analysis of parties in an age of decentralised politics and information abundance. Their three chapters in this volume (two of them co-authored with Paul Nixon) consolidate much of their valuable research.
This is not a volume that promotes only one line. Gibson & Ward have been convincing contributors to the reinforcement-mobilization debate and have argued that, at least putatively, the Internet could make it easier for traditionally weaker and less resourced political actors to mobilize and disseminate messages. Margolis, Resnick & Levy put the opposite (reinforcement) argument in an ably argued chapter about US politics – although I am uneasy about the tendency to generalize on the basis of such an exceptional political culture. This is somewhat offset by the widely comparative range of chapters, looking at how parties are adapting to the Internet in Spain, Portugal, Greece, France, Australia, Romania, Mexico and Korea – as well as the UK and USA.

What I think is missing from this book is a sense that political parties, at least as we have known them, have had their day. The book reads as if parties are a permanent fixture of political life. Perhaps they are. But with more opportunities for citizens to be consulted directly about issues that concern them, and with a volatile electorate demanding more direct relationships with their representatives, might we see the demise of the ideological leviathans that had aggregated and packaged politics in an age of mass political consumption? Might parties eventually go the way of all over-sized, sluggish and unresponsive industrial giants that have imploded in the networked world? This volume fails to link its empirical findings about what parties are actually doing to the wider debate about new social movements and the scope for new forms of collective action in an age of information abundance. Such a connection might lead to the conclusion that parties remain necessary as aggregating and mediating ‘shock absorbers’ of representative democracy, but need to reinvent themselves if they are to regain any kind of meaningful democratic legitimacy. Reinvention could involve abandoning the tribal preoccupation with joining and membership and concentrating on becoming (possibly virtual) networks of collaborative intelligence. The website of the Labour Party in the UK has moved in an interesting direction lately, urging its visitors to become ‘supporters’: a role of no constitutional meaning in traditional tribal politics, but very important in an age of identity politics.

Most of the chapters in this volume suggest that parties’ online strategies are primarily intended to create a relationship with the general public. Such an assumption probably credits parties with being more outward looking than they are. Party officials are mainly concerned to use the net to feed their members with appropriate messages and maintain a degree of centralized control. From the iron law to the virtual network of oligarchy – but it is still oligarchy. I was left by this interesting empirical account not at all certain whether a ‘net gain’ for political parties as we know them is in any sense a net gain for democracy.

Stephen Coleman
Albert-Laszlo Barabasi, *Linked: The New Science of Networks* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2002), pp. 280, ISBN 0-738-20667-9 (hbk), £18.99.

Albert-Laszlo Barabasi sees scale-free networks everywhere. With the discovery by his research group in 1998 that the topology of the World Wide Web did not conform to the expected random graph configuration, but instead followed a power law, a door opened for Barabasi that explained the operation of all kinds of networks, from the biochemical networks of the human cell to the social networks of Hollywood actors. Barabasi expects the ramifications of this discovery to be felt in almost all areas of life, including cancer research, Internet security, marketing and the design of Web search engines. Barabasi’s book *Linked: The New Science of Networks* details the background leading up to the discovery of scale-free networks and describes in a clear and entertaining manner the significance of this discovery.

Barabasi, a physicist on faculty at Notre Dame University, declares that, previous to this discovery, networks were assumed to consist of nodes that were linked together randomly – that is, each node in the network had the same chance of being linked to every other node. The distribution of links between nodes, or degree distribution, did not vary significantly from the average but followed a bell curve. The fact that many networks follow a power law, however, means that these networks behave differently from most networks. They are scale-free networks – that is, the number of connections a node can have is many magnitudes larger than the average number of links in a network. This configuration is immediately discernable in the World Wide Web, where a few websites like Google, e-Bay, and Amazon.com are linked to thousands of other websites, while thousands of websites belonging to individuals have only a few other websites linked to them.

The two laws governing real networks, Barabasi states, are growth and preferential attachment. While previous network models assumed that the number of nodes was fixed and that they were randomly connected to each other, Barabasi brings their dynamic nature into the equation. New nodes are constantly being added to networks. When new nodes are added, there is a clustering effect as the newcomers are more likely to attach themselves to the older nodes, creating hubs of highly connected nodes – a process Barabasi calls ‘preferential attachment’. The presence of hubs leads to one of the essential
characteristics of scale-free networks: their robustness. As long as failures occur at random – that highly connected nodes have the same probability of failing as sparsely connected nodes – the network will remain functional. The weakness of scale-free networks, however, is just this propensity for highly connected nodes. If there is a deliberate attempt to cause a network to fail, it is easy to identify these popular nodes and remove them. This may have disastrous consequences in the case of network commerce or the air traffic system, but positive consequences in the area of AIDS research, where treatment focused on AIDS victims who have many sexual partners may reduce the spread of the disease.

Barabasi is most excited about how network research is changing the study of diseases. Recent investigations have found that cellular networks are also scale-free, in fact that they are small worlds with three degrees of separation (p. 186). This means that any treatment targeted at one molecule has a high probability of affecting other molecules in the network. Having a detailed knowledge of the ‘web of life’ will make it possible to understand how organisms interact and how the treatment applied to one gene will affect others in the cellular network. With this knowledge, drugs can be developed ‘that affect only the malfunctioning cells, leaving the healthy cells alone’ (p. 194).

Although Barabasi makes a concerted effort to acknowledge the contributions of research in other fields to his discoveries about networks, his knowledge of this research seems more perfunctory than real at times. For instance, the discussion on diffusion of innovations does not mention Everett Rogers (1979) and he appears unaware that the clustering coefficient developed by Duncan Watts & Steven Strogatz is identical to the method long used in social network research to measure the density of social networks (p. 46). There is a problem as well with calling social networks scale-free, since there is a natural upward limit to how many friends a person can have. It is surprising that Barabasi does not refer to Zipf’s law, which has been around since the 1930s and describes similar power law distributions for the frequency of word usage in the English language, journal citation networks and the size distribution of earthquakes and cities. Information scientists have long noted the similarity between the Zipf distribution and the configuration of the Web (Adamic & Huberman 2002).

The major accomplishment of Linked, however, is that Barabasi is able to explain the properties of networks in a way that is intelligible to researchers in fields as diverse as physics and sociology. It is an intimate accounting of the many false steps and sudden insights that led to his discovery of scale-free networks. The story, in itself, is a testimony to the importance of social networks in pushing ahead scientific research, as he details the many conversations with colleagues that contributed to breakthroughs in his understanding of the nature of networks. Since this book is intended mainly for a lay audience, there are no footnotes, but the explanatory notes that accompany each chapter
are comprehensive and detailed. The book, however, would have benefited from a bibliography. *Linked* is a good, entertaining read that would be enjoyed by scholars in all disciplines, as well as non-academics, with an interest in networks. It makes the often hidden research process appear as exciting as discovering a new continent or scaling Mount Everest.

*Catherine A. Johnson*

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Martha McCaughey & Michael D. Ayers (eds) *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2003), 304 pp., ISBN 0-415-94320-5 (pbk), £14.99.

This is a timely collection of essays which seeks to address how a range of social movements for ‘progressive social change’ (p. 2) use online environments in pursuit of their goals. Its broader purpose, the book’s editors state, is to hold up a mirror both to scholars engaged with such movements and to the latter’s participants themselves, given that ‘online activists challenge us to think about how cyberspace is used’ (p. 2).

*Cyberactivism* is divided in to three parts. The initial chapters present some case studies of social movements that have arisen in the wake of, and in part
by means of, mass forms of online communication. The contributions in the middle section, devoted to ‘Theorizing online activism’, look instead at some of the encounters between information and communication technology (ICT) and established movements, including feminist and environmental circles. The book concludes with a set of ‘cautionary readings’ that emphasize the tensions running through efforts to deploy ICTs in both social movements and identity-based communities, above all in terms of the commercialization of relationships within them.

Collections of essays can be a mixed bag at the best of times. While there are often one or two gems to be found in such anthologies, their overall quality is frequently uneven. It is pleasing to report, therefore, that the contributions to this book are of a consistently high standard. For example, Dorothy Kidd provides a thoughtful account of Indymedia which sets that project within broader debates about commons and enclosures, while Maria Garrido and Alexander Halavais map many of the intricate threads of communication laid down in the mid-nineties through solidarity work with the Zapatistas. Equally striking are Steven McLaine and Joshua Gamson’s explorations, in the book’s final section, of the clash between community and commodification in two online ‘minority’ cultures.

The editors have also chosen to include a critical overview of the book’s contents. David Silver’s epilogue both pulls together a number of key themes across the essays, and poses some useful tasks for future research. Along with ‘more analysis of online activism on the right’ (p. 290), Silver calls for: greater historical contextualization of online politics; more focus upon the latter’s ‘rhetorical components’ (p. 288); a ‘digital archaeology’ of websites; and, finally, an increased preparedness for socially engaged researchers to listen and learn from (other) activists.

The most recent social movement in which the Internet played an important role was probably the round of mobilizations against the 2003 US-led military expedition to Iraq. Despite the scale of demonstrations around the globe on 15 February 2003, and the talk in some quarters of the emergence in their wake of a ‘second superpower’, what followed has so far proved to be ‘the war we could not stop’ (Ramesh 2003). The conclusions drawn from that failure will hold significant implications for the practice of online activism in the future. In the meantime, the essays brought together in Cyberactivism deserve to be pored over by activists and scholars alike.

Steve Wright

Reference

Ramesh, R. (ed.) (2003) The War We Could Not Stop. The Real Story of the Battle for Iraq, Faber & Faber, London.
Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford & Greig De Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture and Marketing* (Montreal; London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 368 pp., ISBN 0-773-52543-2 (hbk), £65.00; ISBN 0-773-52591-2 (pbk), £18.95.

The computer games industry turns over something like US$20 billion a year and is sometimes, possibly inaccurately, referred to as being bigger than the movie or music industry. It is probably fair to say that academic analyses of computer games have lagged behind their cultural, economic and social significance. *Digital Play* aims to fill this gap partially by producing one of the first integrated overviews of computer games, stretching from their production cycles to the cultures that games generate. This is a large ambition and one that the authors come close to fulfilling; the book provides an excellent overview, touching on most relevant aspects of computer games and using a clear and insightful theoretical framework. At most this text will become the standard reference on sociological and cultural approaches to computer games, and at least it will provide an essential reference point for any serious examination of computer games.

Kline et al. provide a framework for their examination inspired by a range of sources, but particularly by Raymond Williams’s work on television. At the heart of their enterprise, then, is their desire to knit together cultural studies, political economy and semiotic studies. They do this by providing a totalizing account that distributes the three areas of marketing, technology and culture into three interlocking circuits, which they describe in this way:

The moment of gameplay is constructed by and embedded in much large circuits—technological, cultural, and marketing—that in turn interact with one another within the system of informational capital. The three-circuits model involves the cultural circuit, which links the player through the game text to its designers; the technological circuit, which ties the computer or console user through his or her machine to its developers; and the marketing circuit, which connects game consumers through the game commodity to its corporate promoters.

(p. 270)
These circuits are not conceived of as existing in isolation but are rather ‘abstractions’ that allow us to grasp aspects of games and gameplay, in which are intermingled aspects from each circuit. The different circuits are in this way conceived of as interpenetrating each other and of existing within the broad boundaries of informational capitalism. The latter concept is derived from such work as Castells’ three-volume examination of the Information Age (1997, 1998, 2000) and other similar information society debates.

With this framework in place, the authors set out to examine computer games in each circuit, which they do on the whole quite successfully, offering insights on topics as diverse as Pokemon, game piracy, a history of gaming or masculinity and gaming. Finally, they explore the notion that each stage of capitalism has an ‘ideal commodity’ whose analysis illustrates the essential tendencies of that form of capitalism, and they propose games as a possible ideal commodity for informational capitalism. To establish this point and to summarize their book, they explore in detail the Sims game.

All this is done accessibly, with solid empirical foundations and good theoretical insight. Digital Play is an extremely useful analysis of computer games that undoubtedly draws together a wide range of theoretical and empirical material into one coherent framework. Of course, despite this highly valuable contribution to the emerging field of games studies, there are some difficulties.

First, and particularly for readers of iCS, the book focuses mainly on non-networked and non-Internet games. When networked or Internet-based games are discussed, they are often treated as variants of standalone games; as if most online games were variants of networked first-person shooters like Quake. There is some discussion of massive-multiplayer online games, but their implications are not well thought out or integrated into the general analysis. One example is the failure to consider the different economic structure of online games, in which subscriptions and one-off purchases create the revenue in comparison to only one-off purchases. Another example is the assumption that a ‘god’ game like the Sims can be translated into a massive multiplayer online game, when such games tend to work against ‘godhood’ because so many people are playing.

Second, the economic analyses are welcome, particularly as they are connected to cultural issues; however, they also pose a number of questions that might be thought to speak more widely to the social sciences. The approach to issues of production and economics in Digital Play is largely Marxist, yet Marxism is itself a contested theoretical formation these days. In the social sciences, we sometimes seem to face the use of Marxism when economic questions are approached, without consideration to the questionable validity—in its details—in this context—of Marxism itself. One of the co-authors of this book is Dyer-Witheford, who has explored the nature of Marxism in some detail within his book Cyber-Marx (1999), and it is understandable that a book on computer
games does not wish to be side-tracked into an extended consideration of Marxism; however, this leaves the problem of an account of economics that relies on what is, at best, nowadays a body of theory whose importance and effects are unquestionable but whose validity in its details is contested. That there are no ready alternatives to social scientists who are unwilling to succumb to various forms of free market theories simply marks out a general problem for social science in tackling socio-economic questions.

Finally, the totalizing ambitions of this text sometimes tell against it because it, understandably, fails to extend to the totality of computer games and their cultures. In particular, issues of the psyche are virtually untouched, except for some implicit issues raised when discussing gender and computer games. Issues of obsession, which often arise in relation to computer games, are almost completely absent. Another example is that the discussion of Pokemon fails to consider why children might find it attractive and later on lumps it in with other violent games as an example of games that propagate a ‘fantasy of male domination’. This is a very shallow view of Pokemon, which also mystifies the attraction children may have to it. This point does not undermine the largely positive contribution Digital Play makes; rather it perhaps points out future research directions, and, indirectly, underlines the importance of this book, which could well form a strong framework for psychosocial analyses of computer games.

Tim Jordan

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