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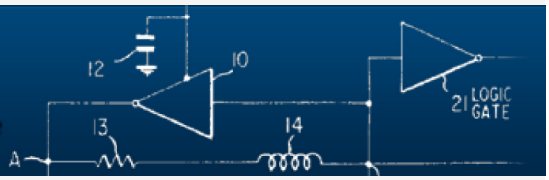
research and expert commentary on digital technologies in public life



Neophilia and Human Nature

OCTOBER 27, 2016 BY PAULINA BORSOOK

In the spring of 2012, I attended the memorial service for John McCarthy, a computer science founding father, at an auditorium on the Stanford campus. Among the great and good anecdotes told about this great and good guy was the mention of how McCarthy, more or less in around 1961, invented time-sharing—which, as was pointed out, is what is now called cloud computing. The attendees at the memorial service gave small rueful laughs of recognition; other incarnations of the same idea have long cropped up from the 1960s onward, among them client/server architectures of the 1990s as well as The Long Now Foundation's Danny Hillis's notion of computing as a utility you pull in from the wall.

In 1987, when I wanted my then-boss to pay for a kind of gray-market Internet access (I had hunted down a Net route-around, as in those explicitly non-commercial days only academics and government were supposed to have Net access) he harrumphed and said, "I don't want to pay for your hanging out online and flirting." Even then, wasting time on screens was a known Thing.

Before there were Arab Spring and Twitter, there were Fidonet and Serbia. Before there was Facebook, there were Usenet, Compuserve, Plato, DECnet, Minitel. 1960s-era FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson often warned about the losses to privacy when big databases would be tracking and storing information about everyone, and sharing that information with each other. He was also concerned about the losses of privacy when video would make it possible to monitor people in public places.

As long as there have been electronic computation and communications, humans do what they have always done, their desires and drives are eternal. People want to communicate and flirt; businesses want to find competitive advantages; governments want to keep track of internal and external threats. Technology and its implementations may change but people do not.

It's not to say there is no such thing as innovation but in our peculiar cultural moment it seems it's been forgotten that even in the realm of information technology, many of the same technical challenges, partial solutions, and problem areas have been around since the beginning of the discipline.

Neophilia—"love of the new and novel"—can be a useful way to describe an impulse towards discovery and innovation. Novelty-seeking, in other words. But the romance with neophilia in 2016 has come to have a dark side, an implication only the newest has value and nothing interesting or relevant can ever have happened before. And not only that, neophilia's ahistoricity posits that everything in IT is fundamentally new—when it is no such thing at all. As neophilia courses through popular and industry discourse about technology in 2016, it has come to equate with a kind of cultural amnesia.

Yet we still read the Greeks and Romans to learn about tragedy, tyranny, and how great empires fall. It's worth knowing that people who attended the first few Computers, Freedom, and Privacy conferences back in the early 1990s were already worried about the snarled-up intersection of computer and communications powers with surveillance (both corporate and governmental), privacy, intellectual property, and civil liberties, issues which remain intractably knotty in 2016.

When Julian Assange came into the mediasphere, he seemed like a cypherpunk hero made real. The cypherpunks were an early-90s self-assorted bunch of crypto zealots/privacy fanatics/code warriors/anarchocapitalists—who in their very name paid homage to the *cyberpunk* slightly dystopian slightly-into-the-future speculative fiction of the 1980s, best known as created by writers Bruce Sterling and William Gibson. It turns out young Assange used to hang out on cypherpunk lists and thus knew how to style himself as a freedom-of-information fighter and was remarkably media-savvy.

We all, as Isaac Newton said, stand on the shoulders of giants.

Thus, in the spirit of everything old is new again, here's a booklist of older titles still worth reading.

"Suck: Worst-Case Scenarios in Media, Culture, Advertising and the Internet". Edited by Joey Anuff and Ana Marie Cox, 1997.

"Suck" was a pioneering super-snarky insidery website that spun out of the "Wired" media combine. Joey would go on to write the first memoir about life as a daytrader and Ana Marie has gone on to have a career as a pundit. Much of the web voice, as it came to be known in sites such as Gawker, is a knockoff of what "Suck" started (and no, nothing to do with porn).

"Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information". Edited by James Brook and Iain Boal, 1995.

Freedom to Tinker is hosted by Princeton's Center for Information Technology Policy, a research center that studies digital technologies in public life. Here you'll find comment and analysis from the digital frontier, written by the Center's faculty, students, and friends.

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Contributors

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An anthology published by City Lights, the San Francisco literary press started by the Beat Generation's Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Iain Boal is a British lefty labor economist; contains among other things an essay by Ellen Ullman, a former programmer best known for "Close to the Machine: technophilia and its discontents".

"Bad Attitude: The Processed World Anthology". Edited by Chris Carlsson, 1990.

"Processed World" was a San Francisco-based zine that with essays, cartoons, journalism, memoir, and humor brought deep understanding to both IT itself and how it affected the lives of people working with it. Carlsson is a very interesting figure, someone with an anarcho-situationist point of vew who has done other important indie work: creating a decades-in-the-making collaborative people's history of San Francisco, "Shaping San Francisco"; and initiating Critical Mass, a monthly Friday-night group bicycle spin throughout the City, which went on to become a global cycling-advocacy movement.

"Accidental Empires". Robert Cringely, 1992.

Written by a gossip columnist (yes, a gossip columnist) for "Infoworld", a computer-industry trade weekly, this was a breezy, readable, acerbic take on the rise of the personal computer industry and the not-necessarily-admirable personalities involved. It was later made into a three-part joint PBS/UK Channel Four documentary, "Triumph of the Nerds". Reading this, you get a clear picture of how much luck and not necessarily merit or good character shaped the coming of the personal computer, and it includes discussions of some industry pioneers now forgotten because they weren't among the business winners. Lots in here about Gates and Jobs and nothing about the Internet—because at the time, networking was mostly considered an afterthought of black magic and plumbing.

"The Soul of a New Machine". Tracy Kidder, 1981.

This depiction of IT employees as on a heroes' journey is about a Boston-area minicomputer company's efforts to bring its newer, zippier machine to market. The bestseller was the very first tech-company hagiography. Kidder had the gift for making technical challenges fascinating as examples of human striving. For better or worse, he also unwittingly created the entire genre of engineering-progress books/company-struggle books, which frame themselves as documenting struggles as important and worthwhile as writing the U.S. Constitution, discovering penicillin, or creating the first transatlantic cable.

"The New New Thing: A Silicon Valley Story". Michael Lewis, 1999.

Written by the modern master of explaining and debunking finance ("The Big Short" and "Flash Boys", most recently), this book might be described as "Lewis moved to California and fell into the Silicon Valley reality-distortion field". He understood that by the mid-1990s the art of the deal, rather than the solidity of the technology, was driving the Valley. Lewis was far less critical about his subject matter than he has always been about the machinations of Wall Street.

"Fair Use: The Story of the Letter U and the Numeral 2". Negativland, 1995.

"Negativland" was an ensemble of culture-jamming radio-hacking sonic outlaws who played around with pastiche, satire, and what we would now call mashup. Eventually they ran afoul of the megaband "U2", and their struggles over copyright and fair use are documented here. The book in part was *created* as something of a legal shield as Negativland went through its legal dramas and is an excellent introduction to the still-unresolved dilemmas surrounding creators' rights in an era of unlimited reproduction.

"Computer-Related Risks". Peter Neumann, 1994.

Peter Neumann was a senior computer scientist at the Silicon Valley-based industrial lab SRI (psst: where Siri came from); "risks" was a longstanding list-serv where people documented all the ways software can fail and go wrong and the harm these failures can cause. This book is sort of the best of (worst of?) "risks".

"The Cult of Information". Theodore Roszak, 1986.

Rozak was trained as a historian and is best known for writing the seminal/germinal "The Making of the Counterculture". This book is eerily proleptic in how it limns so many current controversies over IT's potential adverse effects on creativity and humanity; special callout to concerns over educational software.

"Silicon Follies". Thomas Scoville, 2000.

Thomas Scoville grew up in Northern California and started working with computers in the late 1970s, ending his career as a programmer in Silicon Valley in the year 2000. His first spot-on comic creation was "The Silicon Valley Tarot", published by the famous Steve Jackson Games out of Austin. Scoville did the illustrations himself for the card deck, which featured major arcana such as "The Hacker" and minor arcana such as "Five of Cubicles", and the whole deal remains remarkably au courant. Next up was "Silicon Follies", which ran as a satirical serial on Salon.com. A pilot was made of "Follies" for Ron Howard's Imagine Entertainment production company—and that's as far as it went until the homage paid to it by today's HBO dramedy, "Silicon Valley".

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Comments

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author log in

Lawrence D'Oliveiro says:
October 27, 2016 at 6:25 pm

The Internet wasn't supposed to be (just) about the Web.

The difference between the Internet and the time-sharing services of yore (or indeed the current phone system, both wired and mobile) is that the former puts the smarts at the periphery, the latter at the centre. You can't offer a new service on a centralized network without permission from those who control the network. Whereas the Internet lets anybody create a new application or service at any time. This is how the Web got started in the first place.

But the trouble with Web-based services is that they recentralize control. Bruce Schneier talked about this as being a "feudal" Internet, where major websites like Facebook, Google and others are the landlords, and we ordinary users are the serfs.

There are many other services and applications on the Internet besides Web-based ones. Will the balance shift in favour of one or more of them in future? Who knows…

> **Paulina Borsook says:**
> October 28, 2016 at 6:53 pm
>
> Hi Lawrence,
>
> Thanks for taking the time to comment. I don't think I disagree with you — the Internet is Not the Web, and certainly Facebook and the Apple store are also not the Internet.
>
> How the Net got commercialized in what ways is a subject many many people have written about (and anguished over).
>
> – Paulina

Como Acabar Com A Caspa says:
October 29, 2016 at 9:16 am

I know this site presents quality depending posts and extra material, is there any other web site which presents these stuff in quality?

> **Paulina Borsook says:**
> October 29, 2016 at 3:23 pm
>
> Always hard to find good consistent writing on as diverse a range of topics as CITP is willing to tackle, but perhaps the blog associated with Stanford Law's Center for the Internet and Society comes closest.
>
> There are probably other venues that others might suggest.
>
> – Paulina

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