

[RRE]notes and recommendations

To "Red Rock Eater News Service" <rre@lists.gseis.ucla.edu>

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Some notes about administrative stuff, social science, and the return of absolutism, plus a batch of URL's.

Maybe you can help me. I sometimes agree to give speeches on subjects that I'm not up-to-date on, just to compel myself to get up-to-date. Two of these speeches are coming up. The National Science Foundation is organizing a workshop in a few weeks about advanced multimedia courseware in introductory level science courses, basically replacing lectures with interactive multimedia productions that can be used over the Internet (e.g., <<http://server2.nslc.ucla.edu/ms/>>), and the workshop organizers asked me to give a talk about "what can go wrong". So my question is, what *can* go wrong with technology-based teaching, especially in large college classes? I'd love to hear any anecdotes, checklists, rants, speculations, concepts, references to the research literature, and so on, and especially the sorts of things that the scientists who are embracing this technology might not have thought about. What can go wrong educationally? politically? financially? administratively? technically? sociologically? psychologically? All of that. My own stance, as you know, is not that technology in teaching is inherently good or bad, but simply that one should take the entire context into account, articulate all of the values that are at stake, and make conscious decisions from the whole range of social and technical options. I'll gather the constructive responses and make them available to everyone on the list. If you want me to keep your response confidential please let me know.

The other topic is the place of information technology in the local community. I am speaking on this subject at University of Linkoping in Sweden in August. Linkoping is an interesting place, where for example the computer science people have a sociological orientation. (Too bad it's the Swedish equivalent of Urbana -- perfect if you want to have a really quiet life.) The question is, what are people doing now with computers in local communities? I was up to date on this

topic a few years ago from attending the most excellent Ties That Bind conference that I wrote about on this very list. But I gather that things are maturing out there. Local communities are fighting the broadband access wars, schools are linking to families through Web pages, and so on. I would really like to hear your stories, either from personal experience or stuff you've heard. In particular I'd like your sense of what people are thinking about now that they weren't thinking about a few years ago. And how is local democracy changing, even just on the level of people sending e-mail to others on their block, in their church, organizing soccer leagues, keeping track of local issues, complaining, and that sort of thing? One item that I do know about is the Community Technology Review issue entitled "Communications Policy on the Front Lines" that came out recently: <<http://www.civicnet.org/comtechreview/>>. Once again, I'll gather the constructive responses and make them available to everyone on the list.

I'll be traveling a good part of next year. Here is my rough schedule for those who need to intersect with me. I won't be checking phone messages very often, but I should be able to read e-mail most of the time. I'll also be passing through Los Angeles several times. RRE will keep running throughout. I have a few different projects next year. I need to write stuff, which I plan to do largely by giving talks, recording them, and editing the transcripts. I want to learn about interdisciplinary design programs, so I'll be visiting some of those. (I want to reinvent our systems analysis and design course to be network-centered, and to use methods derived more from industrial design than from industrial automation, so I'll be looking for advice on that project.) And I want to give lectures about information and institutional change in countries where such lectures will do good, particularly countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. I'll be living in Budapest in the fall, and I'm talking to people in the various countries to schedule visits. We'll see if that works out. In the winter I'll be living in Athens because it's warm there and not real expensive, and thus presumably as good a place as any for writing.

London, mid August

Copenhagen-Linkoping-Stockholm-Malmo, late August

Dublin-Galway-Belfast, early September

Newcastle, September 7-8-9

Hong Kong, September 11-15

Sao Paulo, September 17-24

Washington, September 25-27

Salvador, September 28 to October 3

Budapest, October 4-25

Los Angeles and San Diego, end of October

Budapest, November 4-30
San Francisco and Los Angeles, December 1-10
Athens, December 10 through February
New York, maybe March
Los Angeles, April-June

Then maybe Australia.

We've finally fixed a bug that has prevented me from looking at the full list of RRE subscribers since we moved the list to UCLA last year. A few Emacs keyboard macros reveal some interesting statistics. The list still has somewhat over 4000 subscribers, a number that has remained stable for at least a few years. A thousand new people have subscribed and a thousand old ones have dropped -- that's three per day. A hundred people changed their addresses. Subscribers' tld's include com (1532 addresses at 783 sites), edu (880 addresses at 251 sites), gov (50 addresses at 28 sites), int (1 address in eu), mil (14 addresses at 5 sites), net (505 addresses at 271 sites), org (210 addresses at 127 sites), and 1061 addresses in 56 country codes (at au be bm br bw ca ch cl cn co cr cy cz de dk ee eg es fi fr gr hk hu ie il in is it jp kh kr kw my nl no nu nz pg pk pl pt ro ru se sg si sk th to tr tw ua uk us za). There are 205 addresses in the ca domain, 204 addresses in the uk domain, and 170 in the au domain. The top 10 most RRE-intensive edu sites are MIT (62), Michigan (36), UCLA (34), Berkeley (30), Stanford (26), UCSD (24), Washington (24), Texas (23), and Cornell (21), and Indiana (20). The top 20 com sites are aol (121), netcom (51), hotmail (36), well (30), mindspring (28), panix (24), msn (24), pobox (23), compuserve (23), home (22), yahoo (20), xerox (18), std (17), microsoft (16), erols (15), jun0 (13), bigfoot (13), cisco (12), ibm (9), and best (9). This is the sort of thing you can do with Emacs keyboard macros and some Emacs Lisp code.

I often use the RRE archives to retrieve stuff that I have sent to the list, but the archives have gotten so big that I can't find anything. (Of course, if they really were archives, and not just the simple database mechanism that computer scientists see fit to *call* archives, then I wouldn't be having that problem.) For my own benefit and others', therefore, I have created some simple resources that you can find through my home page: <<http://dlis.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/>>. On the home page itself, in a new section toward the bottom, you'll find links to lightly marked-up Web pages of most of the unfinished articles that I have sent to the list, especially those that started out life as speeches and conference papers. Then on the RRE page, <<http://dlis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/rre.html>>, you'll find links to some of the longer articles by other people that I've sent to the list. You'll also find a link to a very simple annotated index of the

"notes and recommdations" messages that I've been sending to the list since I stopped editing The Network Observer in 1996.

There's a pattern here. It probably wouldn't have been worthwhile to make these indexes just for myself, but it's worth a little bit more effort if lots of other cool people can benefit. One type of benefit is altruistic: as a professor at a public university part of my job is to engage in "public service", and when I want to get promoted I list these sorts of activities in the "public service" column. And another type of benefit is collateral: I do good things for the community, and then sometimes the community does good things for me. It's the gift economy at work. So whenever I'm doing something for my own benefit, like assembling a syllabus or a reading list, I ask myself what else I can add that would provide these altruistic and collateral benefits. It's a good habit of thought, and one that I assume the Internet is encouraging in others as well.

Does anybody know where the word "disintermediation" originates? I'd thought I remembered it from George Gilder's "Life After Television". But it transpires that even though that book anticipated most of the bad cyber ideas of the 1990's, disintermediation is not one of them, at least that I could find. Also, does anybody know whether the word "reintermediation" appears anywhere earlier than Nicholas Negroponte's column in the September 1997 issue of Wired? If anyone can tell me the answers I'll let you know.

In comparing industrial designers and computer scientists the other day, I said inter alia that computer scientists "have an ahistorical, acontextual understanding of their user". One computer scientist complained about this, and her complaint follows a pattern. To most technical people, a statement such as "computer scientists have an ahistorical, acontextual understanding of their user" sounds pretty much the equivalent of "Irish people have a hard time staying sober". It sounds offensive, like a generalization or a stereotype. And I'll admit that it can sound that way to a reasonable person. But that's not what it is. The underlying problem here is another systematic miscommunication between social science people and technical people.

For social scientists, at least of the interpretive and qualitative sort with whom I associate, it is the most natural thing in the world to think and speak in terms of collective entities such as cultures, professions, discourses, communities, and so on. It is, of course, just about the hardest intellectual problem in the social science to explain what one means by speaking in such terms, but it is also next to impossible to talk about the social world without such language. (Some people do try. Most of them call themselves methodological

individualists, but others, especially the ethnomethodologists have more complicated approaches.) The point is that a collective level of analysis is just that, and that in speaking of "computer scientists" as "having" such-and-such, what one really means is that a collective entity such as "the computer profession" or "the main tradition of computer systems design" or "the academic discourse of computing" "has" the thing in question. It does not follow that every individual computer scientist "has" that thing, but rather that in becoming a computer scientist the group tries to socialize you into "having" it, or that one learns and speaks a language that tends strongly to presuppose such a thing, or that one masters and routinely engages in a system of practices that tend strongly to produce that thing, or something of that sort.

So the point isn't that individual computer scientists are consciously trying to portray users in ahistorical terms. Indeed in many cases they are trying *not* to. But to the extent that their system of institutionalized language and practices presupposes an ahistorical approach, the practitioners will nonetheless, for most purposes, produce that outcome in the end. The individuals, who are doing the best they can, but the collective phenomenon is having its effects anyway. The structures of history live through us -- not completely, of course, but quite a lot -- and consequently most of the structure of action is unconscious. The solution to this problem is partly consciousness-raising and partly a reform of practices, and that's what I'm after here, not any kind of attack on computer scientists.

The largely unconscious nature of action does pose significant moral problems, but for social scientists the temptation to accuse others of unconscious evil is tempered by a sense that the same kind of evil is perpetrated by everyone, the social scientists included. The point of critical work is largely to cultivate a consciousness of all of the assumptions and commitments and relationships and so forth that one acts out through the discourses and practices into which one has been socialized. What's really immoral, in my view, is to *not* cultivate any such awareness, and to assume complacently that everything is just as it appears to be.

It is not true, by the way, despite what some people have apparently heard out there, that I am a social scientist by training. I received my PhD in computer science from MIT in 1989. I was a mathematician originally, and just about everything I know except math, computers, and physics comes from my own reading. I've told a bit of the (not terribly heroic) story in a book chapter entitled "Toward a critical technical practice" that you can find on my home page. I haven't done much technical work for over a decade, so that even though I could certainly design a computer from the gate level through the operating

system, it would be a computer from the 1980's.

Here is the quote of the week:

"Across a variety of markets, the No. 1 player has left its rivals in the dust in the 1990s, and reaped hugely disproportionate returns in stock-market valuations, often giving it the means to consolidate its position through acquisitions. ... Nowhere is the gap between the gold medalist and the rest of the field more stark, perhaps, than in Internet-based competition. ... Today, it's axiomatic in Silicon Valley that the Internet is a 'land grab' where the early dominant player walks off with most of the booty."

Bernard Wysocki, Jr., No. 1 can be runaway even in a tight race, Wall Street Journal, 28 June 1999, page A1.

This pretty much speaks for itself. So does this:

Nobody wants to be in the dial-up business. What they want is the first crack at the eyeballs.

Harry Fenik of Zona Research, quoted in Michael Kanellos, Intel to launch major ISP strategy, CNET, 28 June 1999.

Brave new world.

Recommended: Sherry Turkle, Paradoxical reactions and powerful ideas: Educational computing in a department of physics, in Mark A. Shields, ed, Work and Technology in Higher Education: The Social Construction of Academic Computing, Erlbaum, 1994. So many people are talk-talk-talking about how information technology is revolutionizing everything that it's refreshing when someone goes and looks at what's happening. In this short ethnographic study of MIT's Project Athena, Turkle finds something useful that is similar to what I call the "digestion model" of technology adoption: the people who planned the Athena computers had in mind something conservative, a way to support existing methods of teaching and learning by providing software to do the exercises that had been done on paper. But once the system was being used by students, it participated in much more basic changes in the dynamics of the learning process. Students were able to explore more, because it was easy to run different scenarios, and to cooperate more, because they were using compatible systems. This happens a lot.

It being the Fourth of July, please enjoy the US Constitution while you can. The Ministry of Truth is hard at work on it.

Article VI

This Constitution, and the Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof; and all Treaties made, or which shall be made, under the Authority of the United States, shall be the supreme Law of the Land; and the Judges in every State shall be bound thereby, any Thing in the Constitution or Laws of any State to the Contrary notwithstanding.

Amendment XIV

Section 1. All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

Section 5. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

These are the articles that the Supreme Court repealed the other day by adding to the 11th amendment a new states'-rights provision that, as the majority openly admitted, can be found nowhere in either the text or the framers' discussions of it.

Amendment XI

The Judicial power of the United States shall not be construed to extend to any suit in law or equity, commenced or prosecuted against one of the United States by Citizens of another State, or by Citizens or Subjects of any Foreign State.

You will notice that this says nothing about suits against a state by its own citizens. Such suits are plainly allowed by Article VI, but no more. A couple of years ago, the court also provided states with broad immunity against suits in federal court. Now the court has closed off suits against states in state courts, and as a result the states can hardly be sued under federal law at all. In defending this extended conception of sovereign immunity, the majority relied not on the Constitution but on English law before the Revolution. Which is astonishing. This is not England. The point of sovereign immunity in English law had been that you can't sue the king, and getting rid of that kind of absolutism was whole point of the Revolution. And the whole point of the Constitution was to provide

the strong federal government that was not provided by the failed Articles of Confederation. Yes, the Constitution imposes limits on the power of the federal government. But even if it is stipulated that the federal government currently has more power than it is supposed to, this ruling is still bizarre. If states cannot be sued under federal law then the federal government effectively does not exist at all. This outcome would suit many people just fine, but it is not what the Constitution says. The Constitution has been repealed, and the law no longer makes any pretense of following it.

This is the logical culmination of the corrosion of reason in the United States during the 1990's at the hands of an extremist movement whose whole modus operandi, quite systematically, is to falsely accuse its opponents of doing whatever it is doing itself. Accusations of judicial activism against judges who uphold the Constitution are now thrown into their proper light as the most extreme episode of judicial activism in American history has now come and gone without a sound.

The real target here is the Voting Rights Act. Chief Justice William Rehnquist first made his name as a segregationist attorney. "States rights", of course, was a code name then for Jim Crow, and Rehnquist has never publicly recanted those views. What will happen now when a resident of Mississippi files suit against the State of Mississippi under a federal civil rights law? Our country is being taken over by the losing party in the debate over the Constitution -- the one that would prefer a loose confederation of theocracies -- together with the losing party in the Civil War. And we are all so numbed by their professionally irrational screaming that we are hardly trying to stop them. When they howl against relativism, their goal is to reinstate absolutism. The new decision makes this about as plain as it can be.

Some URL's.

The Constitution of the United States

<http://www.nara.gov/exhall/charters/constitution/conmain.html>

United States Supreme Court Decisions -- 1998 term

<http://www.usscplus.com/current/>

Supreme court federalism decisions

<http://caselaw.findlaw.com/data/Constitution/amendment11/01.html>

Economist articles on implications of the Internet

http://www.economist.com/editorial/freeforall/19990626/index_su9828.html

Web Accessibility Initiative

<http://www.w3.org/WAI/>

The Internet in Developing Countries

<http://www.acm.org/pubs/articles/journals/cacm/1999-42-6/p31-petrazzini/p31-petrazzini.pdf>

privacy amendment to HR 10, the Financial Services Act

http://www.house.gov/rules/privacy_006.pdf

<http://www.wired.com/news/news/politics/story/20498.html>

jurisdiction in lawsuits involving AOL customers

http://www.internetnews.com/isp-news/article/0,1087,8_136521,00.html

<http://www.news.com/News/Item/0,4,38611,00.html>

A Case of Academic Plagiarism

<http://www.acm.org/pubs/articles/journals/cacm/1999-42-7/p96-kock/p96-kock.pdf>

Networks for People conference, Arlington, VA, 1-2 November 1999

<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/otiahome/tiiap/>

US Computers Track Millions

<http://detnews.com/1999/technology/9906/27/06270078.htm>

UK Wants ISPs To Build In Interception

<http://www.techweb.com/wire/story/TWB19990625S0019>

Silicon Valley Cultures Project

<http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/anthropology/svcp/SVCPwic.htm>

The DoubleClick/Abacus Merger

<http://www.junkbusters.com/ht/en/doubleclick.html>

ICANN Watch

<http://www.icannwatch.org/>

Project on the Information Revolution and World Politics

<http://www.ceip.org/programs/info/>

The 21st International Conference on Privacy and Personal Data Protection

<http://www.pco.org.hk/info/international.html>

Agencies of the US Intelligence Community

<http://www.odci.gov/ic/icagen2.htm>

The Magic Cauldron

<http://www.tuxedo.org/~esr/writings/magic-cauldron/magic-cauldron.txt>

The Socioeconomic Dimensions of Electronic Publishing

<http://www.press.umich.edu/jep/04-02/>

A \$1000 supercomputer?

<http://www.cnn.com/TECH/computing/9906/15/supercomp.idg/>

Scholars Build a Data Base for Resettling Kosovars

<http://chronicle.com/free/99/06/99061701t.htm>

Iword: Internet Appliances and Universal Access

<http://www.iword.com/>

Connected

<http://connected.hamquist.com/>

end

Partial thread listing:

[RRE]notes and recommendations, (continued)

- [Phil Agre](#) (07/04/99)
- [Phil Agre](#) (08/13/99)

[RRE]Peter Lyman, [Phil Agre](#) (11/04/98)

[RRE]Books about Religious Conservatism in the United States, [Phil Agre](#) (11/01/98)

[RRE]The Return of Antimasonry in American Political Life, [Phil Agre](#) (10/30/98)