[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), juno (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 altrustic 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

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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/


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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 Antimasonism in American Political Life, [Phil Agre](#) (10/30/98)