

Debate Forum

Review of "Information Technologies. Using Technology with Heart" by Bonnie A. Nardi and Vicki L. O'Day. MIT Press 1999

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Review

Ubiquitous technology, technology in the flesh, technology anywhere, anytime. The human race has indeed become wired. And the economy has - as gracefully described by Kevin Kelly, become a network of opportunities, even though Bill Gates maintains that it is still good old capitalism, only now by virtue of new technology made friction-free.

Millenniums have passed, since humans tamed the fire, dared to mine the iron out of the bottom of the earth and shape it. Ever since, we have been inclined to understand our existence by mirroring ourselves in the mirror of our newest technology. Exited by any new look and unfaithful to the look of yesterday, ignoring the fact that what works for us right now is exactly the dethroned and mundane technology, the technology of yesterday. And yesterday's technology works because it is no longer THE technology, but a diversity of OUR technologies, and as such the heart beat of our practice.

Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day have made this observation into a rich and compelling narrative about 'Information Ecologies. Using Technology with Heart'. The - otherwise candyflossy - subtitle of their book should be read as a depiction of the living rhythm of everyday practice, metaphorically taken as an ecology of human habitats where "different species take advantage of different ecological niches". The authors use the ecology-metaphor to show the diversity in everyday use of information databases, virtual worlds, digital photography, and surgery monitoring systems, as are the cases reported.

Both authors, Nardi as an ethnographer and O'Day as a computer scientist, share the everyday life of the people of Silicon Valley, as inhabitants and as employees in big computer companies. They arrived at this technological wonder world, the pronounced future, many years ago, and their double perspective as designers and users is the driving force behind the book.

Nardi has in her earlier books given a refreshing perspective on Human Computer Interaction from the point of view of everyday use. Here, at the turn of the millenium she and O'Day take up the concern imposingly presented in the early 80ties by Joseph Weizenbaum: Is the computer going to deprive ethical concern and responsibility amongst its users? Without skipping the honorific to philosophers of technology - this book contains a remarkably informative and easy to read account for current techno-philosophical viewpoints - Nardi and O'Day go beyond pessimism and optimism and call for appreciation of the vigorous ways in which humans adjust and accommodate to new conditions of living. They take the reader out into the fields of everyday work with computers and show the diversity in the ways people approach and make use of computers. They salute the 'gardeners', those, who help shape the technology once designed in fancy labs, a group of people Nardi introduced in her earlier book 'A Small Matter of Programming'. Through the reported case studies the authors convey a sense of hope for the future, hope that humans will still be able to keep up with the challenge of changing conditions.

Nardi and O'Day spell out the inner meaning of Alexander's dictum that design is the fit between form and context, the fit that only few designers take seriously into account. The book should be widely read and enjoyed. The fun of reading the many examples of users shaping their own technological future, by design-in-practice make the reader bear with the authors when they here and there tend to overexpose the metaphor of ecology.