

H-Net Reviews

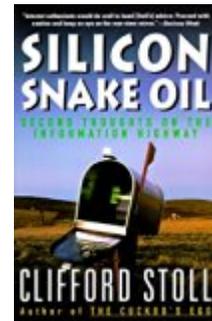
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Brook, Iain A. Boal, eds. *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1995. 278 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87286-299-9.

Kirkpatrick Sale. *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and Their War on the Industrial Revolution : Lessons for the Computer Age*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1995. 320 pp. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-201-62678-0.

Clifford Stoll. *Silicon Snake Oil : Second Thoughts on the Information Highway*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. 247 pp. \$14.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-385-41994-9.

Reviewed by David Silverman (University of Maryland)
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Here Come the neo-Luddites: Three Approaches Towards Encroaching Technology

From the railroad to the radio, from telegraph to television, Americans have greeted new communication technologies with both open arms and contentious scowls, heralding at once utopian dreams and dystopian fears. Today we witness similar reactions to computer-mediated communication in general, the Internet in particular. After years of technophilic hype and hyperbole, found within cover stories in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Wired* and between the pages of such bestsellers as Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* (1993) and Nicholas Negroponte's *Being Digital* (1995), we can and should expect The Backlash. Ladies and Gentleman, here come the neo-Luddites.

Clifford's Stoll's *Silicon Snake Oil*, Kirkpatrick Sale's *Rebels Against the Future*, and the anthology entitled *Resisting the Virtual Life* offer very different solutions to the same basic problem: how should we live in an age where simulation and simulacra are no longer theoretical constructs but aspects of the everyday? Phrased differently, what is to become of face-to-face communication, interaction, and community in a world of Internet Relay Chat, cyberspace cafes, MOOs, and MUDs? Reduced to its most simple terms, the problem becomes a question: to email or not to email?

For Stoll, the solution is clear: turn off your computer. Practically a walking soundbite, Stoll can—and does—voice a thousand complaints regarding the world of cyberspace. His critiques are both broad and diverse, and range from technical shortcomings—one can't email in the bathtub—to fears of alienation. Ultimately, his conclusion is less profound than obvious: "life in the real world is far more interesting, far more important, far richer, than anything you'll ever find on a computer screen" (13).

What makes Stoll's tirade credible is the fact that the author is no "net newbie." In 1989 the California-based astronomer wrote *The Cuckoo's Egg*, a true and fascinating account of how he used the Internet to crack a German spy ring. Yet apparently the Internet has changed too much in the past five years and Stoll has gone from cyber-hunter to cyber-griper.

While Stoll backs up his position with anecdotes, Sale uses history, finding an appropriate case-study in the Luddites, a collection of cottage textile workers who during a few months in 1811 and 1812 bonded together in a violent attempt to destroy the "Machinery hurtful to Commonality" (119). Drawing heavily from E. P. Thompson's classic, *The Making of the English Working Class*

(1963), Sale weaves discussions of technological developments with accounts of populist resistance, and contrasts the “logic of industrialism” with the communitarian ideals of the Luddites. Sale’s strength is his attention to details, drawn from a host of sources, including the popular press, personal testimonies, worker slogans, petitions, posters, and beer-hall chants.

Yet Sale’s aim is twofold: “understanding in an intimate way the narrative of the Luddites, we may not only dispel our ignorance of the past, we may find some necessary guidance for the future” (23). Sale presents this “guidance” in the form of eight “lessons from the Luddites,” which include among others an awareness that technology is never neutral, that technologies inevitably reflect the economic system which created them, and that successful political movements must be rooted in an appreciation for nature.

Ultimately, Sale’s message resembles closely that of Stoll: resist technology. What is missing from both books is any suggestion of resistance through technology, an approach which lends special vitality to current scholarship in the field of cultural studies, as reflected by Constance Penley’s and Andrew Ross’s *Technoculture* (1991) and Mark Dery’s *Flame Wars* (1995). These collections seek not to romanticize technology but rather to critically examine it within its proper social and political context. Fostering an understanding of both the technology and its context, such an approach allows for critical interventions in, and progressive appropriations of, new technologies.

Such is the approach taken by many of the contributors in *Resisting the Virtual Life*. Mixing critical, rigorous analysis with tempered optimism, the book attempts not to shatter the hype surrounding the Internet but rather to ground it in reality. Significantly, the

depth of its critique is derived from the diversity of its contributors, which include scholars, writers, activists, and artists. Thus, while Herbert Schiller and Howard Besser uncover the global ramifications of the “Information Superhighway,” Laura Miller examines the ways in which the “electronic frontier” has been coded in hyper-masculine terms. Writer/software engineer Ellen Ullman’s hilarious account of the world of programmers and photographer/filmmaker Marina McDougall’s surreal and terrifying photo essay lend rich description to the anthology’s subject. Critical, yet at times playful, the anthology also includes essays which offer pragmatic strategies for making technologies democratic. Essays by activists Jesse Drew and Richard Sclove are must-reads for any aspiring techno-activist.

When viewed together, the books reflect three very different neo-Luddite approaches towards technology: cynical dismissal, historical contextualization, and critical intervention. While Sales’s historical analysis proves more interesting and informative than Stoll’s anecdotal diatribe, both critiques suffer from their limited either/or approaches. Within such a framework, technology is either dominating or dismissed, overwhelming or refused. That said, we must keep in mind that although it may be tempting to take neo-Luddites with a grain of salt, we must take seriously their contentions, for indeed, technology is never neutral. Using this contention as a springboard, *Resisting the Virtual Life* combines anecdotal evidence with historical context to formulate a much richer approach, one which both encourages and makes room for critical intervention.

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