Book Reviews

Bowers, C. A. *Let Them Eat Data: How Computers Affect Education, Cultural Diversity, and the Prospects of Ecological Sustainability*. Athens: Univ. of Georgia Pr., 2000. 216p. alk. paper, cloth $40 (ISBN 0820322296); paper $18.95 (ISBN 082032230X). LC 00-26718.

C. A. Bowers is a well-known environmentalist and educator who belongs to what is known as the "deep ecology" movement. *Let Them Eat Data* is the latest of several books in which Bowers presents a radical critique of modern technological society. "This book," he explains, "examines the linkages between computer-mediated learning and the spread of environmentally destructive cultural patterns and practices." For Bowers, the computer is only the latest developmental stage of a technocracy that goes back at least as far as the Industrial Revolution, perhaps even to Ancient Greece. According to Bowers, no one questions the prevailing optimistic view of computer technology, or if they do, "few individuals can imagine viable alternatives." Bowers has alternatives to offer. Whether they are viable, the reader must judge.

Without completely denying the usefulness of computing for certain purposes, Bowers argues that computers threaten to dominate the entire world, imposing a monoculture on the planet and driving out traditional cultures that live more spiritually and harmoniously within the natural environment. Modern Western rationalist, individualist, anthropocentric culture (exemplified by the cyberspace experience) is depleting resources and polluting the earth at a rate that cannot be sustained. According to one source cited by Bowers, if the entire world's population were to adopt the consumer lifestyle of the average North American, "it would need two additional planets to produce the resources, absorb the wastes, and otherwise maintain life support." This apocalyptic vision demands an almost-religious response, a revolution in consciousness and lifestyle that few of us would be likely to make after merely reading a book. But we do not have to agree with Bowers to benefit from his unsparing attack on the cherished myths of today's digitally crazed society.

The book begins by questioning the legitimizing ideology of computers and the "widespread acceptance of data as the basis of thought," which devalues ways of knowing that are not quantitative or scientific in nature. One of Bowers's most insistent points is that computers are not neutral, they are not simply tools that people can use as they will. Cyberspace culture posits an individual identity freed from traditional social and biological constraints. It projects an "affluent, progressive, and experimental" mind-set. Computers commodify and colonize more and more aspects of human life, just as they are colonizing more and more regions of the world. "Local knowledge" is replaced by abstract, universal, and wholly disembodied "data." Local knowledge is attained through transgenerational communication that respects elders and the past, mentoring, oral communication, sensual experience, ritual, and experience of place. Cyberspace, in contrast, is without context; indeed, its proponents boast about its ability to erase the boundaries of time and space. Bowers sees this as a loss to the individual, the community, and the necessary diversity of the earth as a whole.

As a reference librarian, I am impressed with the book's insights into the unsettling properties of the Internet as a source of knowledge. It is not just a question of information overload and quality control. Many people experience the lack

of context, the reduction to bits and pieces of data, as a qualitative loss. I think that Bowers is correct to see this phenomenon as something broader than the Internet, something that permeates and perhaps (as he claims) even serves as a root metaphor for our culture. Consider these chilling words: "By shaping consciousness and bodily experience to accept computer mediation as normal, the computer subculture (which is fast becoming the dominant culture) is also defining what is abnormal, deviant, and deficient." Which of us has not wondered whether libraries, librarians, and physical collections are not viewed by students today as abnormal, deviant, and deficient. It is no exaggeration to say that, at least at the campus where I work, students expect all information to be mediated by computers. The library accepts that fact and tries to provide services and collections electronically. In doing so, Bowers would say, we are accepting and endorsing a reductive view of knowledge and education.

Bowers writes in a style that is accessible to the nonspecialist, with quotations from authors on both sides of the debate and a decent bibliography and index. There is a great deal of repetition in the book, and I suspect that many of the ideas are recycled from earlier publications. At times, the focus wanders into areas of cultural studies, environmentalism, or educational theory that have little to do with computers per se. Computers are used as a handle on which to hang more general arguments. To give just one example (which may surprise librarians), Bowers attacks computer culture as exclusively visual and based on writing, traits that are also shared by books. And, of course, it is true that books are decontextualized forms of communication that eliminate the boundaries of time and space just as computers do.

The latter section of the book, entitled "Educational Consequences," begins with a spirited attack on the "industrial model" of university education that has recently emerged, which Bowers characterizes as "just-in-time learning for employees." He takes a swipe at the currently dominant educational paradigm (based on Piaget) which insists that students "construct their own knowledge." Examples from popular educational software packages such as Storybook Weaver, DynoPark Tycoon, Oregon Trail II, and the Sim series of simulation programs expose the cultural bias and pedagogical weakness of the technological approach to learning. Bowers concludes by explaining why computers should not replace teachers, offering several detailed scenarios for making teachers and students more aware of the cultural dimensions of software and computing. This was the least convincing aspect of the book for me. Bowers is better at attacking the assumptions and consequences of computer technologies than at developing solutions that are not overly simplistic or utopian. The value of the book lies in its ability to make a case for the prosecution. The defense can take care of itself.—*Jean M. Alexander, Carnegie Mellon University.*

Creating Web-Accessible Databases: Case Studies for Libraries, Museums, and Other Nonprofits. Ed. Julie M. Still. Medford, N.J.: Information Today, 2001. 184p. $39.50 (ISBN 1-57387-104-4). LC 00-063283.

Have you ever wondered what it takes to publish a database on the Web? Does your library have a Web-publishing initiative? Are you aware of a resource unique to your institution (inside or outside the library) that deserves wider dissemination? Do you have an idea for a Web database but are not sure how or where to start? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you will likely find much of interest and value in this edited collection of case studies and general essays on Web publishing from the nonprofit perspective. Indeed, most of the chapters address issues directly relevant to academic libraries and librarians.

The prefatory matter includes a useful preface by the editor, Julie M. Still, a librarian at Rutgers University. Of special interest here is the list of questions she asked