BOOK REVIEWS

WRONG TURN ON THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY: EDUCATION AND THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE INTERNET

BETTINA FABOS
TEACHER'S COLLEGE PRESS, 2004
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Reviewed by Stacey Atwood

Commercialization is an inevitable reality in media. Fabos, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Study at the University of Northern Iowa, examines the commercialization of the Internet and its implications for education. *Wrong Turn on the Information Superhighway* provides a critical look at the past, present, and future impact of the Internet on education.

Divided into two parts, the author begins by addressing the history and context of educational media, from the influence of film to current lessons on the history of the Internet. This overview provides context for a greater understanding of the implications of Internet use. While highly detailed and well documented, the text is reader friendly and free of research jargon. Most educators, even those with a technology background, will appreciate the author's integrative style of writing. While addressing the pressing question of commercialism, Fabos aids the reader by explaining technical terms, such as cookies and sticky portals, so that the significance of the effects of commercialism becomes painfully obvious.

Fabos states, "As they are today, schools have been a constant target of businesses ever since public education began in the early 19th century" (p. 7). The author addresses the education challenge issued by former President Bill Clinton in September of 1995: "to see that every classroom in our country is connected to the Information Superhighway" (p. 39). It is noteworthy to mention that President Clinton's vision went beyond the public schools, encompassing privatized educational opportunities, including those offered in the Catholic schools.

Fabos discusses the corporate interest in Internet education. Major

American corporations such as AT&T, Sprint, America Online, and Sun Microsystems were enlisted in the school wiring effort. "By asking for their partnership, Clinton was signaling that all internet-related efforts on behalf of education would be, at least in part, within the context of corporate control" (p. 40). As the market developed, commercial education portals began popping up at an incredible rate. "The problem with these portals, however, was that more efforts were clearly placed behind the marketing and shopping elements than on the educational content" (p. 64). While Fabos is clearly opposed to this commercialization, the highlighted points of concern resound with this reviewer. As a teacher in the field during this era of Internet development, educational portals were heavily laced with advertisement banners, while quality educational resources were buried deep within the sites, if present at all.

In the final section of part 1, Fabos addresses commercial search engines and their use as a tool of choice in schools: "A study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in 2002 found that 85% of students used an online search engine to find information" (p. 69). The appeal of search engines lies primarily in two areas. First, by entering a keyword, the search engine will instantly retrieve a great quantity of hits or links to web pages that contain the keyword. They are easy to use and gratifyingly quick. Second, search engines are perceived as providing a wider breadth of information:

> By 2003, search engines continued to be the most visited locations on the web. It is this growing dependence on search engines that has led to their increased commercialization, their success as a business enterprise, and their erosion as trustworthy informational tools. (p. 70)

Fabos delineates three branches of the search engine industry: (a) search engine providers, (b) search engine portals, and (c) commercial search engine providers. Through this discussion, the author explains how "hits" are commercially funded on many search engines. Companies can buy the highest spots on the returned search list. Much like an auction, these spots go to the highest bidder. This section demonstrates the importance of search engine integrity, especially within the context of its use with children.

Part 2 addresses the use of the Internet in every classroom across America. Fabos begins by addressing how educators and librarians address the commercialized web. Presenting the realization that most students seem to trust the Internet resources that they find, Fabos notes that

> with students depending and trusting the web for most of their academic research, numerous educators and librarians have concluded that students need

> help in finding applicable online content. Their solutions have generally fallen into four areas: subject gateways, power searching, webpage evaluation, and critical literacy. (p. 84)

Each of these four areas is explored in detail with a critical eye toward the pros and cons of each topic. It was noted that unlike the United Kingdom and Australia, the United States has not made a significant effort to create a national public network, which would create an organizational structure for educational content.

Fabos further validates the research with hands-on experience. For a year, Fabos observed teachers and students at three schools within a well-wired district, and these observations from a Midwest school district provide the reader with a sense of ownership in the theories represented. Fabos interviewed teachers, media specialists, and students in an effort to uncover how they use the Internet. The title of the book is aptly chosen, for indeed Fabos found that regardless of the evaluative skills that students were being taught, their search habits remained primitive. They were indeed making wrong turns on the information superhighway. In addition, very little time was spent determining the validity of source or quality of the content of the web pages students found through searching. While most of these students had received instruction in terms and concepts, webpage evaluation, and search techniques, in reality these skills were not being applied to student research. The need for speed in finding information was the prevalent factor in finding web content: "In their quests for speed, students simply assigned credibility to websites that were the best organized and easiest to move around in" (p. 125). While the many advertisements and games present on search engines would seem distracting, most students seemed able to ignore them.

In the final chapter, Fabos shares some visions for a better Internet. This educational media, financed in many cases through the fervent pushing of the United States government, has become widely adopted, not only in schools, but in businesses and homes as well.

> Influenced by flashy, appealing design elements, students play into advertisers' dreams. They determine webpage credibility by the most eye catching design, not the most comprehensive content. Consequently, they overlook credible – yet plainly designed – sites such as the Internet Public Library which has one of the most comprehensive newspaper, magazine, and serial databases available online….As such, students are adopting a consumer, rather than an intellectual, mindset in their approach to information….In other words, critical thinking goes out the window. (p. 138)

The problem, the author states, is that consolidating useful information

online has not been a nationwide priority. As such, students and teachers flounder through, utilizing the best approaches known to them. Fabos recommends a full-scale overhaul of the Internet and its commercial evolution, calling for the creation of a publicly funded national educational portal, which could compete with commercial vendors. The author advocates that schools move from a critical reading of web pages to a critical literacy approach to the entire Internet: "Critical literacy acquaints students with the social, historical, political and economic dimensions of all texts" (p. 139). Another step, Fabos maintains, is to steer students away from commercial search engines, while introducing them to subject gateways. These gateways would rely on content editors to organize the information into subject categories. To this end, new protocols are being developed which make these gateways easier to search and navigate. In closing Fabos states that

> until there is a national policy for organizing educational internet content that even approaches the scale of the "educational challenge" to wire every school, vast amounts of online information will be undetected and underused. Organizing web content is the next educational challenge. (p. 160)

In this reviewer's opinion, a project of such magnitude will not happen unless a full-fledged awareness campaign is launched, educating not only the teachers, but the general public about the "misinformation superhighway" that is running rampant in the schools of America.

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AND WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY LEARNING?

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Reviewed by Michael P. Joseph

Throughout the book, *And What Do You Mean By Learning?*, Sarason makes an attempt to explain the true meaning of learning, describing it as a