Provocative challenge to Internet hype

*Stephen L. Talbott, **The Future Does Not Compute: transcending the machines in our midst**, Sebastopol Ca; O'Reilly and Associates 1995, 481pp, $39.95 (available in Australia through Woodslane Press).*

t is interesting to speculate how the author of this book, Stephen Talbott, came to be the keynote speaker at a corporate conference in Sydney in late June.

If the intention of inviting him was to throw a hand grenade into the gathering, it was successful. His address: 'Does the Internet Have A Future?', set amid standard conference fare - sessions on how to do business on the Net, security, regulation, legal issues and case studies - was, to say the least, provocative, drawing selectively on some of the issues raised in the book to challenge many articles of faith about the Net and computer culture.

According to Talbott:

- the idea that a new emergent order will somehow appear out of nowhere is 'breathtakingly naive';
- opponents of Net censorship argue for total freedom and make no reference to responsibilities attending such rights; and
- it is futile to try to predict the future, which is not a given; rather, we should make a conscientious attempt to choose the future. The most dangerous choice of all is the abandonment of choice.

Some saw Talbott's paper as deeply conservative, others as confrontingly radical. But a reading of *The Future Does Not Compute* teases out the paradoxical nature of his thesis and confirms that it deserves a more reflective approach.

Whether you agree with him or not - and many will not - Talbott's work is an important addition to the trickle of literature that has dared to challenge the utopian hyperbole surrounding much Net commentary. It is a work that makes considerable demands on the reader; not surprising, as Talbott is an eloquent critic of what he terms 'the scattered self', whose symptoms include the habit (exacerbated by computers and the Net) of skimming, scanning and failing ultimately to digest anything. A shrill concern for the 'latest information' is, he says, evidence that 'efforts ... to see the world more profoundly and with new eyes ... are giving way to a mindless accumulation of data and opinion' (p.11).

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The Future Does Not Compute is divided into four sections. The first three, 'Man, Computers and Community', 'Computers in Education' and 'The Electronic Word' are devoted primarily to aspects of the central problem. This seemed to me to be best stated in Chapter 23, 'Can we transcend computation?', as follows:

'On the one hand, there is no meaning we cannot implant within the computer, so long as we are willing to identify the meaning with a set of precisely elaborated logical structures. On the other hand, however complex and intricate the elaboration - however many layers we construct - the computer as a computational device remains outside the living polarity of truth and meaning. Within the breathing space between these two facts there is doubtless much we can achieve with computers if, recognising their peculiar nature, we make them the servants of our meanings' (p.328).

As the section headings suggest, the book covers much more than merely the Net and its ramifications. For example, it explores the notion of 'community' much vaunted by cybernauts; considers the behaviour of computer-based organisations; questions the desirability of a 'global village' in an age when villages around the world are self-destructing; and looks in detail at the extravagant claims for the educational role of computers. The extensive bibliography, ranging across writers as diverse as Aeppli and Goethe, Jung and Postman, Roszak and Tolkien, attests to Talbott's wide and thoughtful reading.

In the earlier sections I felt that Talbott overstated his case: far from finding a silver lining in any cloud, he frequently finds another cloud. Email, that modestly useful aspect of the Net, is damned for its lack of the essential components of face-to-face communication and of the immediacy of issues directly communicated; it

requires no effort, no 'inner work' in preparing a message. Maybe so: but can we claim that the letter-writers of Europe's past, hastening to catch one of several daily post services, gave more thought to what they wrote? Yet collections of some of these correspondences stand today as works of literature. Among the millions of email posts, it is surely possible that similar gems are lurking. At the very least, it seems odd to undervalue the benefits of email communication between people with common interests or fields of work.

His bleak view of the extent to which we have 'become' our machines seems not to make sufficient allowance for the resilience and individuality of the human spirit. Reading on, though, I began to see what he was up to: that extravagant assertions are needed to counter the equally extravagant claims of Netophiles, to provoke the reader at times into rage, and at times into appalled self-recognition:

'It really is amazing, this odd acquisitiveness with which hordes of academics, engineers, cyberpunks, and self-advertised 'infonauts' roam the Net looking for treasure troves of information, like so much gold. They hear the cry - "There's information in them thar nodes!" - and the rush is on. Who knows what they do with this gold when they find it' (p.195).

This amusing quotation nevertheless highlights some reluctance on Talbott's part to acknowledge any value in the Net. We need only think of the positive use made of the Net by indigenous peoples all over the world, human rights organisations and dis-

sident publishers in Indonesia, to take a few examples (indeed, the book's focus is firmly on the United States). Not all readers will share Talbott's extreme pessimism that the Net, and the spread of computer culture generally, is likely to result in the end of freedom, thought and meaning. The

GO BACK YOU ARE GOING THE WRONG WAY

THE SUPER HIGHWAY
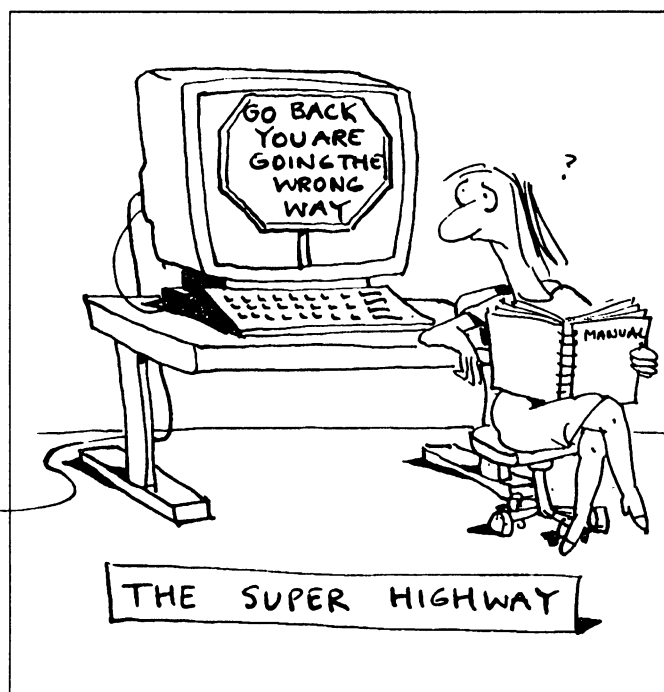
odds are that, like all new technologies for which great claims are made, the Net will settle down to be good at what it is good for.

Talbott disarmingly admits to many of the symptoms of the disease he is describing. A former editor of a scholarly journal, he is also a veteran of the computer industry, and now edits and writes programs for a publisher of computer books. He describes isolation and poor work practices which would be familiar to any telecommuter. The chapter 'Dancing with my computer' is a brief but pointed critique of the effects of writing on a computer, where 'words have become so easy and careless, so loose and aimless, so wedded to superficial logic'. If his writing tools were simpler, he asks, might not necessity constrain him to think first,

and only then commit the words to paper?

The last section of the book is indebted to the work of Owen Barfield, a little-known but important English philologist whose work Talbott believes deserves much wider currency (he appends some selected excerpts). This part of the book presents the greatest challenge to the 'scattered self' variety of reader, but it is worth persevering. The chapter on the development in the 15th century of perspective in painting and its effect on subsequent ways of seeing, is fascinating.

At some point the emphasis on deeper meanings and a kind of spirituality might lead the reader to suspect a religious message is lurking, but this would be mistaken. The message of the final chapters is complex and will allow different interpretation by different readers. Any simplistic attempt to summarise would do less than justice to Talbott's scholarship.

In some respects *The Future Does Not Compute* reads more like a collection of essays or papers than a book; indeed almost any chapter could be read independently. However, unlike so much computer literature, and despite the complexity of some of its ideas, it is eminently readable: free of academic jargon, and given to elegant metaphors. As a stimulus - or a goad - for thinking seriously about the shape of the future, it merits a wide audience.□

Gil Appleton

Stephen Talbott's home page, which contains selected chapters from this book and other writings, is at http:// rock.west.ora.com/~stevet/