The Communication Superhighway. Social and economic change in the digital age

By *Greg Hearn, Tom Mandeville and David Anthony,* Allen & Unwin, July 1998, 212 pages. Recommended retail price $29.95. ISBN number 1-86448-746-1

Producing a book on a technological phenomena in its infancy is an ambitious task especially when Moore's law of change in information technology supposedly alters the very make-up of the subject every 18 months. In *The Communication Superhighway. Social and economic change in the digital age,* Greg Hearn, Tom Mandeville and David Anthony have sought to "demystify" the new interactive communications and information age using an approach that shifts between the perspectives of technological determinism (does technology determine how we use it?) and social constructivism (do we determine what technology is created and how it is used?). These are used instead of the more critically-charged theoretical perspectives such as cultural studies, political economy and media studies which have guided much of communications scholarship on the impacts of technologies such as telephones, television, information technology and radio. In this regard it appears the authors wish to join an already crowded field of communications futureseers in developing new approaches to considering potential effects, processes and technologies that will arguably be captured by the same forces which have shaped these earlier communications technologies.

While ducking from common theoretical perspectives that are applied within communications studies, the three have sought to apply a new neo-economic framework for understanding the likely effects and uses of the Internet and its likely broadband and highly interactive future replacements. The book will be useful to those who want a guide to the "communications superhighway" without necessarily delving too deeply or critically into the potential economic, social, cultural and political implications of this new organisational system. With this gripe out of the way, the book contributes a useful Australian perspective for general consideration of the convergence of telecommunications, information technology and other communications services. It provides a platform for the issues which Australian policy makers, business interests and students should consider whenever the terms "communications/information superhighway" are bandied about.

The collaborative nature of the book is evident and strengthens its value by providing a variety of perspectives on the unfortunately dated facts, figures and trends that have been generated by governments, industries and other spruikers of the information age as they grapple with constant change. Alternately, this also illustrates a shortcoming of a printed book as a vehicle for debate on the future of the communications superhighway due to the impossibility for regular update and revision.

But what are the strengths of this book? Well, it simply explains the nature and roles of the key infrastructures and applications that will be increasingly used to manage businesses and determine personal communications in the future. The book also gives social and economic meanings to the neologisms and acronyms that fill newspapers, radio talkback and television programs which currently provide the communications and information forums for the unwired which include some 63 per cent of Australian adults according to the latest ABS figures. This is a valuable contribution that takes readers behind concepts such as the communications superhighway and gives them a grounding in a new language and approach to receiving and exchanging information. This conceptual platform is essential for understanding the likely future of digital communications including the capacity for global networks to allow instantaneous transmission across national, geographic and time boundaries of large amounts of information and data including between machines, machines and people, and from people to people.

The three part structure of the book also assists this process by illustrating the potential of technology, presenting the economic and social implications, and encouraging a more complex understanding of changing communications and organisational environments. This approach holds merit for those who will come to manage and use the new services and businesses that will emerge from this profound technological revolution that will effect both the economy and social lives of users.

In summary this book is a worthwhile resource for students and others who are seeking an initial guide to the development of information and communications systems that will radically change the way that business is conducted, resources are controlled and some people participate in the economy and social life.

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