Pat Wallace and I both wrote introductory textbooks in psychology, and now both focus on the psychology of computer-based media. I am delighted then, on reading her book, The Psychology of the Internet, to find our old friends in our new context. The concepts of impression management—Erving Goffman (p. 28), cognitive dissonance—Leon Festinger (p. 122), locus of control—Julian Rotter (p. 173), and many others throw light on the behaviour of the person in our new environment of the Internet.

Or, more accurately, our new environments. The author opens with a useful taxonomy of environments on the Internet. Articles in the popular press tend to talk about life on the Internet as if it were a single environment and often even conflate experience with computers and with television on the superficial observation that they both have screens. Wallace recognizes that on-line environments can be as varied as offline environments. She takes the sensible stance that we are dealing with the same person in different settings, which bring out different aspects of the human potential: “We don’t mutate into a new species when we connect to cyberspace, but the psychological factors that affect our behavior in real life play out differently online because the environments we enter are different” (p. 236). The Internet settings may be moving targets but the person is not. This is a refreshing change from the speculative “fiction” of much discussion in the popular press ranging from the gee-whiz hopes of technophiles to the oh-my-God fears of technophobes, who both imagine our species “evolving” into some post-human superperson or monster.

Having set the stage (or stages) the author moves systematically through a comprehensive list of the now-familiar issues around life on-line, illuminating each by collecting and collating, describing and interpreting the rich and full body of empirical research conducted within each domain. How exhaustive is this list? Let the chapter headings demonstrate:

“The internet in a psychological context”
“Your online persona”
“The psychology of impression formation”
“Online masks and masquerades”
“Group dynamics in cyberspace”
“Intergroup conflict and cooperation”
“Flaming and fighting”
“The psychology of aggression on the net”
“Liking and loving on the net”
“The psychology of interpersonal attraction”
“Psychological aspects of internet pornography”
“The internet as a time sink”
“Altruism on the net: the psychology of helping”
“Gender issues on the net”
“Nurturing life on the internet”

However, some issues are neglected; for example, the esthetics of the layout of a Web page to conform to the principles of perception, and the structure of a Web site to conform
to the principles of cognition. But that is a whole other book. The domain covered here—perhaps more accurately called The Social Psychology of the Internet (take another look at those chapter headings)—is vast enough. Perhaps Dr. Wallace, who is so at home on the Internet, will write a companion volume, The Psychology of Multimedia, focusing on the storage rather than the transmission of information, that is, more on individual psychology!

The writing style is scholarly but not stiff. It is rigorous but rigor mortis has not set in. The reader is enlightened by anecdotes, for example, about the personal experiences of the author on the Internet, and by links to real-world events, for example, to the Columbine High School murders. The lore of on-line life is also included, from the on-line relationship between the producers of La Femme Nikita and their fans (pp. 176-177) to the cyberrape case of Mr. Bungle (pp. 230-232). The text is further enlivened by jokes (I particularly like the Marge Simpson emoticon on page 18). There are even cartoon captions—“On the internet, they don’t know you’re a dog” (p. 88)—and puns, such as “the waist is a terrible thing to mind” (p. 151).

The book is well supported by footnotes—211 in 264 pages. Footnotes serve two basic functions: to make side comments (which can be useful but would distract from the storyline of the argument if included in the text) and to indicate sources. I would have preferred if the second function had been served by some other referencing system, such as authors in brackets with the full reference in an alphabetical list at the end. Such a reference/bibliography would be a valuable source for scholars in this exciting, emerging domain. Sources that I wanted to follow up could not be found again (where was that reference to Sherry Turkle?) or could be found again only by going to the index (for example, a reference to Don Tapscott).

By the way, the use of Christian names in an academic publication is most welcome. Students are less awed by work done by Sherry and Don than by S. Turkle and D. Tapscott (as was the convention when I was writing textbooks). I am pleased also to see references to electronic as well as paper sources. Here conventions have not yet been established but certainly consistency is necessary. Only some such sources contain the date (an important feature considering the volatility of the Net, an issue well covered in the book) and the dating system is not entirely consistent (23 May, 1999 on page 248 and 1998, Mar 10 on page 249).

This book is a substantial scholarly contribution to our understanding of the experience and behaviour of the person on the Internet. Primary sources of rigorous empirical research within each domain are most competently summarized and collated to describe clearly the current stage of our understanding. It is a state-of-the-science message. I look forward to tertiary sources which collate this book and other secondary sources—for example, Culture of the Internet (edited by Sara Kiesler) and Psychology and the Internet (edited by Jayne Gackenbach)—into a broader framework.

One promising framework is evolutionary psychology. Steven Pinker, in How the Mind Works, places sociology within the frameworks of biology (natural selection) and then of psychology (nervous system as information-processing device to facilitate survival). The fact that a book with that title is considered perhaps premature and presumptuous, but is not dismissed as preposterous, is an indication of how far his discipline of evolutionary psychology has come. A third framework could be added using the following argument.

The extragenetic tools of memory, to store information, and speech, to transmit information, could be considered as a first generation of media, available to our species within a hunter-gatherer society. By extending our nervous systems using extrasomatic tools to store information (print and film—second generation), to transmit information (telephone and television—third generation), and now to both store and transmit information (multimedia and Internet—fourth generation), we have managed the dramatic transitions to an agricultural society, an industrial society, and now an information society.
This is, of course, once again a whole other book. However, such an organizing framework would help clarify the perspective of the person in the Internet. Although this book starts with a gorilla—conversations between Koko and Penny Patterson using American Sign Language—and ends with a million monkeys—the Internet demonstrates that a million monkeys on a million typewriters will not over a million years produce all the works of Shakespeare—there is no mention of evolutionary psychology in between. It could help in the theoretical interpretation of much of the empirical research. For example, the sections on detection of deception (pp. 49-53) and on need for trust (pp. 243-245) may make most sense in a species which must live in groups to survive in a world containing faster and stronger animals.

Note, by the way, that this book and the two mentioned above were written and edited by women. Evolutionary psychology not only provides a framework for the old questions but raises new questions. We were hunters and gatherers for most of our time on this planet. Or, more accurately, men were hunters and women were gatherers. There is considerable empirical evidence of resulting differences in cognitive skills. Will women be more at home on the Internet, with its emphasis on multiprocessing, as men were more at home with the linearity of print?

This perspective may also help deal with the frustration (which the author may share with me) in writing textbooks in psychology. Without any organizing theoretical framework, the text tends to degenerate into a catalog of findings, becoming more and more like a telephone directory with many characters but little plot (take another look at those chapter headings). One traditional metaphor for frustration is arranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic. A more accurate metaphor in this case is trying to describe the arrangement of the resulting flotsam and jetsam on the beach without mentioning the sea. This is the self-imposed task of scholars using the Standard Social Science Model, in which the mind is considered a *tabla rasa*. Evolutionary psychologists argue that this “tabla” is far from “rasa”—it has been profoundly shaped by millions of years of evolution. The story told in this book is perhaps best seen as the most recent episode in this human saga as it moves into historical time—the co-evolution of the person and media as extensions. This book is a timely contribution to this timeless saga. It is a tale well told.

References

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