Technology + psychology + seduction = missed opportunity


Dr. Jeri Fink, probably known to readers of this journal from her other book (How to use computers, cyberspace in the clinical practice of psychotherapy (see review, this issue), has ventured into the intellectual kitchen and started making dishes using some less conventional combinations of ingredients. As a starting point, she has combined (evoluti onary) psychology and technology resulting in the 'radical new concept' of psychotechnology (see the author's personal website at http://psychotechnology.com/). This is however only an intermediate result for it is mixed with dr. Fink's amazement by people being seduced with virtual reality. The latter is broadly defined, ranging from more traditional media such as television and telephone to the latest technology. This results in cyberseduction, yet another new concept meriting a 300-page book. Cyberseduction is however not defined, rather it is the question (why are people seduced by virtual reality) that the author seeks to answer throughout the book.

In order to provide these answers, dr. Fink provides the reader with 25 short chapters, organised in three parts. In the first part, the author relates the distinction between virtuality and actuality to the old philosophical categories of mind and body. As such, the whole notion of virtual reality is unveiled as not being a revolution but something with a long history. In the second part of the book, the conceptual framework of ego psychology is used to reflect on technology. As such, chapters in this part focus on 'self', 'narcissism' or 'presence'. Finally, the last part of the book is 'about exercising your consciousness and taking control of cyberspace…it's about learning the psychological implications of disembodied space …':

To be frank, I did not enjoy digesting this result of dr. Fink's cooking. This was due both to the format and the contents. In terms of format, it is my humble opinion that a good text reflects the structure of a good meal: an appetiser, the main course, followed by some lighter dessert. Or, in terms of writing: an introduction to set the scene and grasp the reader's interest, a main section with the writer's ideas in full detail, and a concluding section that both summarises and reflects on the main results. Not so in dr. Fink's kitchen. You just get the main course, without any preamble, without any digestive. The book as well as its three individual parts lack both introductions and conclusions. In terms of overall structure of this book, Fink has not attempted to make it easy for the reader. The same goes for her style of writing. Chapters do not develop clear lines of thoughts. Instead, initial ideas form the starting point for sidesteps and branching after branching on the lines of thoughts. Readers hoping that all these sidelines will be brought back together at the end of chapters are in for a disappointment.

In terms of content, the book did not manage to present new ideas. Spending several hours reading it and being eager to pick up new ideas, my conclusion unfortunately comes down to still having no clear description of cyberseduction nor being able to relate any of the abundant statements of this book to my own work. Moreover, the ideas provided by dr. Fink do not seem to have been scrutinised by empirical validation or critical reflection. E.g. when writing about virtual communities, Fink states because of the constant rise and fall of communal spaces, loyalty is not particularly strong. This statement neglects to take into account the
relation between 'real' and 'virtual' communities, nor does it match the few empirical data that we have on loyalty or reciprocity in virtual communities (e.g. Wellman, 1999).

Being confronted with such a book (and as a committed reviewer, not being able to put it aside), there are only a couple of options. The initial reaction is to doubt one's own intellect and consider the possibility of not having enough knowledge to be able to understand the publication. On second thought, given my professional background, this is not a serious option.

So the second reaction is to doubt the author's capacity to bring together many new strains of thought into a coherent book. One is reminded of the dr. Fox phenomenon as described by Scott Armstrong in the early eighties (Armstrong, 1980). This dr. Fox was a distinguished looking actor with an impressive but fictitious background description. He was asked to give a lecture on a subject he knew nothing about: mathematical game theory as applied to physician education. Although the lecture was full of double talk, false logic, contradictory statements, ... none of the audience realised the lecture was pure nonsense. So Armstrong stated that: an unintelligible communication from a legitimate source in the recipient's area of expertise will increase the recipient's rating of the author's competence. In other words, if nobody understands what you're talking about, it's probably a proof of your intellect. But surely dr. Fink can't be a disguised dr. Fox! Surely a critical publisher would have done their work and checked the validity not only of the author but of the message as well. You can doubt the capacity of the author to bring together new technology concepts into a coherent whole within the context of sociology and social psychology, but I am not sure you should paint the author as a complete fraud in the field, as in dr. Fox's case. This is a little harsh and would require reading the author's other works.

Consequently, I see only one reasonable explanation for my struggle grasping the message of this book. The professional worlds of evolutionary psychology (dr. Fink's background) and that of sociology and social policy (my own background) have drifted so far apart that we are not able to talk to each other anymore. Although we both research and reflect on the same realities (e.g. digital neighbouring), we construct our own virtual realities and those do not meet each other. A sad conclusion in a time when interdisciplinary academic work is called for.

In summary, Fink has taken an unconventional but intriguing mixture of technology, psychology and seduction to cook up a book full of ideas, none of which managed to get through to me. As is clear from the above, I have not been seduced by this book, but hope Jeri Fink has enjoyed writing it and others might find it appealing. Certainly those trying to get a focus on the information society from a psychology perspective should be interested.

• Armstrong, J. S. (1980). Unintelligible management research and academic prestige. Interfaces, 10(2), 80-86.

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