

Book Review

Technology Matters: Questions to Live With David Nye, 2006, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 298 pages, \$US 27.95 (cloth) ISBN-10: 0-262-14093-4

Reviewed by Amanda Spink, Research Capacity Building Professor of Information Technology at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

David Nye is an historian and well known in the field of technology studies, with many books and papers on the subject. This new book is another attempt, more in essay form, to synthesize complex issues regarding the development of technology, and the relationship between humans and the technologies they create. The focus of this book is fairly broad as it sweeps across past decades to the present day technologies which are so imbedded in our human cultures. Nye emphasises the evolutionary nature of the human – technology nexus and reminds us that “As the evolutionary perspective, technology is not something new; it is more ancient than the stone circles at Stonehenge” (p. 6).

The book has eleven chapters which provide eleven essays that raise important issues and research questions. In the title and text of the book Nye asserts that we live with these questions and must grapple with them more extensively. Nye asks many major questions that in themselves could be the subject of separate books. For example, Nye asks: “Should the market select technologies?” and “Is technology predictable?” Nye also raises and deals with some of the key issues in relation to technology and culture, including “does technology control us?”, “can we define technology?” and “should the market select technologies?”. He reminds us of the ‘technological determinism’ viewpoint and asks if we should continue to accept this viewpoint. The book provides the reader with a lesson in the history and philosophy of science within an ideologically and psychologically informed perspective.

As an Information Scientist who has written many papers related to the Web, I was interested to see Nye’s thoughts on the Web as a technology. Whilst he does not devote much space specifically to talking about Web technology, Nye does write briefly about the psychological effects of immersion in the Internet. He also asks the question “Is there a digital divide?” (p. 77) and points to the changing trend data on how many people world-wide have Internet access. In addition, Nye addresses some issues related to multitasking and information overload, personal information flows and single-tasking, but provides little new insights into the Web world or the relationship between technology and information behaviour that is emerging.

Overall, Nye is obviously an intellectual and a deep thinker with philosophical dimensions which are reflected quite strongly in the book. However, the book provides no clear answers to the questions raised. Nye provides a stimulating discussion, but no sweeping models or theories. As a behavioural scientist, I was looking for such theories and models, but Nye is an historian and so my seeking may have been somewhat unjustified. The book does give a good overview of the technological debates in western societies, and particularly provides valuable insights into how technology is represented, created and manufactured by multinational global corporations, and how it is used in market driven cultures. The book is easy to read and digest, but it does lack a strong overall takeaway idea - although Nye’s final message may be that humans determine how and if technology matters. I recommend the book for all scholars and students in the computing, technology and cognitive sciences.