ForeWord Reviews

CULTURE

The Digital Sublime: Myth Power and Cyberspace
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It's tempting to think of the current era as unique. Popular culture and the news media are filled with pronouncements that society is in the process of the greatest transformation since the development of agriculture, or since the invention of the printing press, or since the industrial revolution. Computers and communication technology are said to be transforming the known world. The author considers that a myth-though a very real, very useful myth.

The author of The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal, Mosco is Canada Research Chair in Communication and Society in the Department of Sociology at Queen's University. His book is intended not as an overarching cultural analysis of cyberspace, but as a focus on myth as an entry point to a realistic appreciation of the consequences of computer communication.

Mosco engages in some preliminary debunking, observing that the wonders forecast for the computer are nothing new. Other technologies in other eras-the telegraph, electricity, the telephone, radio, television-were similarly hailed as transcendent. Repeatedly, there is a near-ritual adulation for new technology, along with a much-ballyhooed generation gap that celebrates young people for their special knowledge and castigates an older generation for its complaints.

Making the point that it is important to resist the temptation to dismiss myth as false, Mosco argues that whether myths are true or false is less important than that they are a form of reality and that they can be profoundly meaningful. Myths are stories that transcend factual grounding, animating individuals and societies, as exemplified by people's continued investment in Internet companies long after their prospects for success were exposed as being nearly nonexistent.

Mosco's stated purpose is to foster an understanding of the myths of the communication revolution in order to develop a deeper appreciation for its power and limitations. Unfortunately, he has a writing style that can be described as quantum. Arguments leap from sentence to sentence and thoughts jump from paragraph to paragraph without traceable transitions.

In the end Mosco hopes that his look at the history of technology will literally put readers in their place. In that he succeeds, identifying the rise of cyberspace as merely the most recent in a series of interesting but "ultimately banal" extensions of communication technology-profound, but not enough to warrant claims about the end of anything.