

Ellen Rose**User Error: Resisting Computer Culture**

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In this rewarding and highly readable book, Ellen Rose explores the increasing enfolded of computers into almost every facet of everyday life. In particular, Rose asks what it means to be a 'computer user'. The book carefully deconstructs widely held assumptions about how prevailing modes of use arose, detailing the myriad ways in which 'the User' is socially constructed through generalized myth, software design, advertising, user manuals, rhetorics of computer related anxiety, and the marketing of affinities between computers and specific kinds of users. Those familiar with Steve Woolgar's (1993) exemplary article concerning how users are 'configured' will appreciate Rose's diverse and important explorations.

The context of the book is that debates about the computerization of everyday life revolve around the well-known dualism of enabling and constraint. For some, this is extended to debates about 'post' or 'de-humanization', often expressed through broader utopian or dystopian discourse. In *User Error*, Ellen Rose wishes to take us on an alternative route. Where others on both sides of the equation employ 'rhetorics of inevitability' to make their cases, Rose argues that there is nothing inevitable about the emergence, nature or spread of what she calls 'computer culture'. Rather, specific choices have been made, choices which are part of the social construction of computing technology more generally. The central argument of the book is that when we sit down in front of our computers as individual users, we become a User – a single subject position resulting from our enmeshment within a social network of assumptions and ideologies about who we are (and want to be). Rather than the result of conspiratorial capitalism, this scenario arises through our willing cooperation in trying to become 'smart'. I will briefly mention three ways in which this works and then turn to some minor reservations about this argument, and the book in general.

In chapter 2, Rose traces the emergence of the very idea of a computer User as part of an ongoing process of deciding who will and will not have access to computers. While we might expect this story to concern power relations between designers and ordinary users, we also find the much lauded countercultural strategies of hackers coming under scrutiny as producing a new hierarchy of those who 'hack' and those who simply 'use'. It is here that we first get a sense of the User figure as unknowing and essentially passive — an unintended consequence of the progressive drive for universal access to computing technology. In chapter 3, this idea is further elaborated through an examination of software cultures. We find here that the User is not only positioned as passive but also 'dumb' — hence the emergence of user-friendliness and the concomitant skewing of power balance between software designer and user, all in the name of 'help'. Anyone familiar with Windows software will recognize the increasing number of functions alongside an apparent simplification of the interface. Rose shows how this reflects the ongoing positioning of Users as simple creatures, prone to error. The User as idiotic is taken further in chapter 4, where an association is made between such a passive creature and that other maligned figure of contemporary culture — the consumer. Rose suggests that the User-consumer is an appropriate way of understanding a subject which is constantly fearful of falling out of touch with the latest upgrades

and accessories, while at the same time powerless to adequately reflect upon this ratcheting process of mindless acquisition as need.

In these and other cases the book provides us with fascinating substantive explorations into different aspects of what it means to be a 'computer user'. A clear narrative path is constructed and followed, where the construction and configuring of the User is traced through many contexts, the result of which is the co-opting of any decision-making power we might have as diverse individuals. Theoretically, the book wants to retain what the author sees as a 'critical' position – coming from a broadly humanist tradition of questioning technology and the implications of modernity (e.g. Ellul, 1964; Winner, 1986). At the same time, Rose pursues a line of enquiry which takes 'use' as its primary concern rather than the rather elusive figure of an 'autonomous technology'. This is now very much the standard position within much science and technology studies literature at least, where technology is taken to be congealed social relations shaped as much by use as by design. However, while recognizing this, the book has a number of drawbacks I think which all hinge upon the theoretical orientation toward technology/society distinctions.

In alerting us to the dangers of inevitability talk, Rose constructs her own set of binary myths which we are asked to believe in: human/technology; use/consumption; reflection/action; mindless/thoughtful; and so on. These are far too simplistic and are not supported by the thoughtful material presented throughout the book. Similarly, a number of casual associations between key terms are made, which set the agenda for conclusions in an important way. For example, the term 'user' is disingenuously linked with 'drug addict' in the opening of the book (this is surely wrong — drug abuser would imply addict; drug user would imply individual control). Another key idea is that the 'user-friendliness' presented to us by software corporations is better understood as 'consumer-friendliness'. This is taken to be an obviously negative phenomenon from the outset. But the figure of the 'consumer' here is rarely explored in any depth. We are to rely upon rather one-sided understandings of consumption as either the outcome of advertising or simply as thoughtless acquisition, whereas much work on consumption suggests conceptualizing consumption in terms of reflexive uses rather than isolated moments of desire, acquisition, and so on.

This difficult problem of, on the one hand, showing how imaginary Users are configured, and on the other anticipating whether actual users follow such 'scripts', is not really resolved. This problem is offset at the outset, where the author stresses that homogenous contexts of use are not being assumed, and so on. But, despite protestations to the contrary, the book does maintain an individualized stance toward 'what should be done'. There is much talk in the end of 'individual responsibility' and 'resistance' (in the title) which echo older conceptions of relations between society (reflective) and technology (mindless) – conceptions which have been shown to be oversimplified through developments in science and technology studies over the last 25 years or so. Ultimately, ethnographies of computer users provide an important corrective to the design-centred account offered here.

I think these issues stem as much from the book's reproduction of some of the problems it analyzes by configuring of the reader as 'lay', rather than from major conceptual inconsistencies. That said, the book is a useful corrective to laudatory accounts of user-centred design, where it is certainly the case that the utopian impulse within much information revolution theorizing requires more urgent critical attention than its dystopian antagonist. Both strands tend towards technological determinism.

But, for those interested in developing our understanding of technology and society relations, we are left in the final analysis with a simple reversal of this dualism, where 'society determines technology', maintaining a clear distinction between 'human rather than technological ends' (12). The majority of the book traverses this divide in very interesting ways, demonstrating the complex mutuality of sociotechnical arrangements, but simply doesn't take this far enough in the concluding sections, falling back on individualized calls for 'responsible action', as if we really were the 'mindless' Users imagined by software designers, and technology were the autonomous force imagined by critical theorists.

Martin Hand
Department of Sociology
Queen's University
handm@queensu.ca

Martin Hand has published articles on both digital culture and the sociology of domestic technology and consumption. His current research concerns the diffusion of digital imaging and photography.

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