

# Compromising and Computing

Sunfrog (Andy “Sunfrog” Smith)

2000

Staff writers at the Fifth Estate collective have been vigorous critics of technology for more than two decades. Rather than isolate particular tools or situations for a contextual attack, our challenges to the totalitarian tenets of the megamachine look to the deeper motivations that propel producers and consumers to make and want more and more automobiles, nuclear power plants, computers, televisions (to mention only a few of the gadgets of modernity that have gouged biological communities).

Rather than oppose individual aspects of progress in an ideological vacuum, we confront the technocratic totality that domesticates living beings, destroys the natural world, and diminishes the meaning of everyday experience.

Within this neo-luddite, primitivist, and anti-civilization tradition, I wrote “A Treatise on Electronic Anarchy & the Net: Arguments for the Elimination of the Information Age” (see Winter 1995 FE). This article generated a spirited debate in our letters section and has been both celebrated and condemned in a handful of essays that take on the technology debates.

In fall 1997, I began using the internet for personal communications and academic inquiry as a graduate student in English at Middle Tennessee State University. One of my professors prompted my initial foray into the cybernetic abyss with electronic research assignments for a course aptly catalogued as “English 666.” Since those initial excursions, my everyday use of computers for word processing, correspondence, research, and entertainment continues to increase.

On any given day, I may log on to the Internet to write a love letter, buy a book, read accounts of international activism, or check the local weather forecast. As much as I use or even depend on the Internet these days, I do not unequivocally praise the benefits of this bad habit.

The wrist strain, back pain, and brain drain wrought by regular computing hardly confirm the advantages of my latest addiction; rather, I view my slippery descent into the techno-illogical unknown as yet another compromise with the demands of the post-industrial, information age.

Even as my fingers float across the keyboards of the future, my feet remain planted on the muddy earth. I cherish the subtle beauties of immediate experience and direct communication as much in 1999 as when I wrote my rant against the Internet in 1994.

Even when composing my poetic critique of the information age, I anticipated the response of the anarcho-futurists who heralded on-line pranks and activism with a giddy enthusiasm. How could my essay be anything but a futile gesture in naive purism or preachy hypocrisy? How could I defend my own word-processing for print media while challenging others for their postings on the web?

Interpreted through the filter of those totally immersed in cyberspace and completely dependent on computers for their livelihood, my essay must have read like a shrill warning from the savagery of past generations where romantic idealism still held both rhetorical power and creative allure. But when many great artists have traded paint brushes for mouses and darkrooms for digital cameras, could my pitch for the pleasures of primordial experience appeal to anyone outside the small primitivist milieu?

Futurist critics of the Fifth Estate position on technology should not feel vindicated or triumphant as we further succumb to the tools and temptations of the technological age.

Anything I've learned or any minor pleasures I've gained while perusing the Internet still suffer in comparison to the joys of my simpler life on a rustic, rural commune. I do not suggest that every minute I spend working on a computer is a total waste of time.

However, this is not a victory for technology's advocates and apologists, but for the machine itself and its totalizing logic that daily erases greater portions of our shared intellectual and physical aptitude.

We should criticize and question all compromises that increase technology's grip on our primal capacities. If we remain cognizant of the spontaneous urges in the depths of our bodies and memories that resist each concession, we might hang on to the threads of radical coherence we will need to break free.

Rather than turn on the lap-top to email the invitations for techno-rationalism's final victory party, we still need to seek out gestures of refusal and communities of resistance to reverse our increasing acquiescence to the status quo of the Information Age.



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Fifth Estate #354, Spring, 2000

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