

Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway

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Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway

Abstract

A book review of *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway*, by Clifford Stoll.

Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway by Clifford Stoll. Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., New York, 1995. (ISBN 0-385-41993-7). \$22.

The information highway. Heard the term before? Why ask? We have all heard about the information highway. Over and over and over. It's been glorified by some as the ultimate education tool. It's been lauded by others as the ultimate communication device. Still others have extolled its ultimate ability to turn the world into a global village.

It's hogwash, says Clifford Stoll. Nobody can offer utopia-on-a-stick. In "Snake Oil," Stoll illuminates a major paradox: the Internet is actually a self-contained anarchistic community with nobody in charge and no easy way in, yet public officials from Vice President Al Gore on down speak of it as a major route to knowledge with all the signposts in place.

Stoll's arguments are cogent and his credibility makes them powerful. He could be considered a networking pioneer, spending 15 years making trails across cyberspace and tracking down network hacks like a modern day Wyatt Earp (Stoll's other book, "The Cuckoo's Egg," describes how he caught German spies prowling through computers). Stoll suggests computer networks isolate individuals and cheapen the meaning of experience, work against literacy and creativity, and undercut schools and libraries.

For instance, he breaks down the argument promoting virtual communities and universal online access. The silicon snake oil here, according to Stoll, is the belief that computers and networks will make a better society. He says there are no simple technological solutions to social problems. There is plenty of distrust and animosity among people who already communicate perfectly well. People will always struggle to understand one another.

On the education front, Stoll cites scholars who say an online classroom will rekindle reading and writing skills and turn out smarter students. The problem here, according to Stoll, is the wrong things are being learned. Today's online students are mastering computerese instead of English; they are reading software user guides instead of Shakespeare; and they are talking to their computer screens instead of their neighbors.

He wonders about the value of e-mail. He says the president of a company can send e-mail to all employees but doubts if it has the

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same effect of a visit to their offices or a heartfelt congratulation. He also decries incorrect grammar, misspelled words and sloppily written prose—passed off as communication—for the sake of immediacy.

As for online databases, Stoll says network resources are chaotically scattered, lack a proven reference system like the Dewey decimal system, and provide little if any actual content. And because of the disorganization, Stoll says one never knows if a cyber search is complete or if it just scratched the surface.

Stoll wrote "Snake Oil" to wave a caution flag. He says he is interested in seeing networked neighborhoods but is even more interested in making sure the big perspective is not distorted by the silicon snake oil salesmen. When you move down the on-ramp and onto the information highway, he says "You're entering a nonexistent universe. Consider the consequences."

Indeed. As agricultural communicators, we pride ourselves on being innovative leaders in the development and delivery of information. At the same time, we sometimes focus so hard on the possibilities of the technology that we fail to notice the problems. "Snake Oil" certainly highlights some of those problems and Stoll's wisdom bears reflection as we keystone our way to the next century.

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