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## new media & society

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### BOOK REVIEWS

Robin Williams, James Stewart and Roger Slack, *Social Learning in Technological Innovation*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2005. 270 pp. ISBN 1-84376-729-5, \$110.00 (hbk)

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It is probably safe to say that book review commitments tend to make their way to the bottom of 'to do' lists, only to transmogrify into a priority when the book review editor sends a gentle reminder of the nearing or passed deadline. As a consequence, I am reading and writing this during our family summer holiday in the small rural Swiss village of Marbach, situated just before the real mountains. One look at the map will tell you that it is isolated and nowhere near any tourist attraction. However, during the past days precisely these circumstances allowed me to wonder about the renowned technological innovations of the Swiss: the technology of the cable car, the omnipresent parapantes, the mountain bike, the Swiss army pocket knives, Swiss watches (along with their association with precision work). A visit to Luzern's mobility museum (or its virtual equivalent at [www.verkehrshaus.org](http://www.verkehrshaus.org)) allows one to marvel at their transport engineering. Probably because of the mountainous area and the harsh winter conditions, technology is closely associated with survival. From that perspective, Switzerland is a natural habitat for technological innovation and, as such, a fit surrounding for writing this book review. Williams, Stewart and Slack (all from the University of Edinburgh) write about appropriate contexts for technological innovation and more specifically about when these contexts are man-made rather than a result of nature.

Based on the EU-funded project on social learning in multimedia (SLIM, running from 1996 to 1999), the authors describe how social learning is essential for technological innovation. New technology is not the result of engineers drawing blueprints behind their computers, but of the 'creative confrontation' between innovations and users. Frequently usage of new products and services are far removed from the original envisaged usage. We all know the example of how Bell expected his telephone technology to be used for broadcasting, for use from one to many.

In the first seven chapters of the book, the authors describe both the context and methodology of their study, as well as the importance of social learning and the different models that are available for organizing such social learning. This relates to such concepts as the interpretative flexibility of Wiebe Bijker, or the domestication of Roger Silverstone. The authors join these constructivist perspectives on technology development and thus go beyond the older, more linear and deterministic perspectives. As such, they argue that users are a critical and often neglected stakeholder in technology innovation. Much research either focuses on technology development in the pre-market stage, or diffusion of innovations after market introduction (e.g. Everett Roger's influential work). Williams, Stewart and Slack draw our attention to the dynamics just before and after market introduction, when technology is still surrounded by a lot of uncertainty and different stakeholders experiment with it. They stress the importance of 'digital experiments' and involvement of intermediaries for successful technology innovation. They even introduce the 'reflexive intermediary' (p. 90 onwards) as a stakeholder who can theorize about their involvement with technological change.

While the authors' core arguments are recognizable and welcomed, the book does not really come to life. Others in the 'social shaping of technology' tradition have followed the development of specific technologies of artefacts to develop their theoretical framework (e.g. Wiebe Bijker and bicycles). Given that this book builds upon the European SLIM-project, one expects this book to come to life through the case studies. However, while the authors argue 'there is not space here to present a detailed account of each case (and which would, if taken together, also be rather unreadable)' (p. 39), what they do offer in terms of information on the individual case studies is disappointingly minimal. Readers have to do with a short paragraph on each in Chapter 2 and half a page later on, when a particular case is most relevant to the story the authors wish to tell. This hardly allows readers to grasp the contents of the case studies and how technology innovation was envisaged and/or actually developed in them. Consequently, this book begins to feel like a lengthy exploration of the authors' professional libraries.

In the final chapters, the authors relate their findings to policy and practice implications. While international security has sky-rocketed to the top of policy agenda, thus diminishing somewhat the sense of urgency of the European Union and different member states to take the lead in technology innovation, there is still a lot going on in this area for such a look into the practical implications of the authors' research to be relevant. While the key message of moving beyond a linear perspective on technology innovation is loud and clear, the authors unfortunately offer little that would help to construct alternative approaches. What they do offer is either close to the obvious or too multi-interpretatable to be of much help. One substantial missed opportunity here is guidance for the reflexive intermediaries the authors so welcomed in earlier

chapters. Across Europe, we see advocacy groups (e.g. the elderly or people with functional impairments) trying to become partners in technology innovation and draw industry attention to usability and accessibility. In my experience, they are eager to improve upon current practice and learn how to play that intermediary role, and would have welcomed some guidance from this book.

At the outrageous price of about hundred dollars and only slightly less in euros, this is one book you may want to read without ever considering buying. As it has taken the authors more than five years to draw the lessons on social learning from the original case studies (for which funding ended in 1999 and most of which have individually been published about shortly afterwards), their insights are hopefully sustainable enough to allow for some waiting time until you come across a library or second-hand copy of this book.

Richard Rogers, *Information Politics on the Web*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.  
216 pp. ISBN 0-2621-8242-4, \$35.00 (hbk)

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Reviewed by CLIFFORD TATUM  
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**The internet is increasingly the first**, and often only, information medium utilized to answer questions, to solve problems, and indeed, to engage in civic issues. Navigation of web content typically requires the use of search engines, as well as distributed knowledge networks that are a common artifact of online socio-political interaction. What is often overlooked in this environment of easy access are the politics of information and, perhaps more importantly, how we derive meaning from a plurality of views on the web.

*Information Politics on the Web* examines the question of whether the culture of the web can or does adjudicate information politics and to what extent the information derived from information politics constitutes a way of knowing. In this line of inquiry Rogers assigns agency to web dynamics. Through the analysis of four case studies and the use of information instruments, Rogers concludes that, indeed, the web can and does adjudicate in both back-end and front-end information politics, but often with disappointing results. In the final tally we learn that the web, in addition to benefiting civil society, may work to the betterment of the public through the particular practice of a 'web epistemology'.