

Subversive Practices: The Internet as a Site of Colonialization

Book Review by **Vanessa Raney**, Student, Our Lady of the Lake University
(uranev@lake.ollusa.edu)

Gail Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe (Eds.). *Global literacies and the World-Wide Web*. Literacies Series, London and New York: Routledge, 2000. 299 pp. Bibliographic references, and index. \$28.95 (paperback), ISBN 0-415-18942-X.

Gail Hawisher's and Cynthia L. Selfe's *Global literacies and the World-Wide Web* is a collection of essays that explores the role of the Internet in non-US countries, specifically Hungary, Greece, Australia, Palau, Norway, Japan, Scotland, Mexico, Cuba and South Africa. This cross-cultural study is especially unique because the editors assigned ten teams "composed of at least one person who lives in, or was born in, a country other than the United States" to investigate how the Internet is shaped and defined within those countries. However, a common thread emerges: the writers see the US involved in subversive practices that reveal the Internet as a site of colonialization. Yet they also introduce possibilities of disruption and inchoate tendencies, which could potentially lead to changes in the structure of the World-Wide Web.

Like most teams, Hawisher's and Selfe's were given a common set of tools: Brian Street's *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography and Education* (1995) and three websites, namely, Graffiti (<http://www.graffiti.org/>), HotWired (<http://hotwired.lycos.com/>) and *International Herald Tribune* (<http://www.iht.com/frontpage.html>). While most, if not all, of the teams included additional country-specific websites, only a few developed and distributed questionnaires, and even fewer interacted directly with people living in their countries of study who were not also team members. As a whole, however, this collaboration works because in the end you get a substantive eyepiece that connects these countries as points on an axis, or like the legs of the spider US.

In Part I ("Literacy, culture, and differences on the Web"), Sibylle Gruber, of University of Northern Arizona, and Enikő Csomay, of Eötvös University, consider Hungary's cultural-specific attributes and also the technological problems that affect teachers' and students' responses to using the Internet. While Hungary continues moving forward and is beginning to identify ways in which the Internet could potentially benefit them, their goals remain tenuous. Aliko Dragona, of University of California, Davis, and Carolyn Handa, of University of Southern Illinois, Edwardsville, evaluate the Greek double identity (also referred to as "xenes glosses"), in which most Greeks are being forced to learn English even though the World-Wide Web remains largely available only to the middle and upper classes because of the associated Internet provider and telephone costs. An interesting observation is their reaction to positive interest in the *International Herald Tribune*. Cathryn McConaghy, of University of New England, and Ilana Snyder, of Monash University, however, seem more self-serving, relying primarily on personal observations and research sources than actual contact with any Australians, particularly with the Aboriginal/Indigenous who figure prominently in their discussion. Also, while some points on education remain unexplored, the claim of the Internet as a site of colonialism anticipates the next section.

In Part II ("Literacy, diversity, and identity on the Web"), Karla Saari Kitalong, of Central Florida University, and Tino Kitalong, of Chad er a Belau, Orlando, Florida, observe that at the same time the Internet has served as a bridge to Palauans since the end of colonialism in 1994, it has also in some ways eroded the idea of the global village myth as some of the websites – like those in Australia – are closed off to outsiders. As a result, the history/cultural traditions of Palauans are left unexplored, thereby reinforcing "the tourist eye." Jan Rune Holmevik, of University of Bergen, and Cynthia Haynes, of University of Texas at Dallas, include an interesting backdrop for Norway, but do not fully explore the World-Wide Web literacies as they relate to Norwegians specifically – for example, if they are so "Americanized," as they argue, then how does this play out on the Internet? Also, while they refer to the various feminist movements, how do these actually impact the World-Wide Web? Taku Sugimoto, of University of Tokyo, and James A. Levin, of University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, similarly fail to relate cultural-specific World-Wide Web practices; here the authors engage in superficialities that, while informative, do not lend a better understanding of Japan's literacy practices except to show that, indeed there are differences. Yet the various styles of smilies and e-mail greetings as contrasted between Japan and the US are actually very revealing. Sarah Sloane and Jason Johnstone, both of University of Puget Sound, on the other hand, with their focus on Scotland, offer more

elucidating points and also explain the terms they use (e.g., “patch-reading”). However, they place greater emphasis on themselves, with the most intriguing glimmers coming across as accidental.

Now Part III (“Literacy, conflict, and hybridity on the Web”) has some of the most interesting material. Susan Romano, of University of Texas at San Antonio, Barbara Field, of Simon & Schuster, and Elizabeth W. de Huerdo, of American Institute of Monterrey (AIM), pursue the AIM to get firsthand accounts of World-Wide Web experiences from students. This perspective is very much in line with the real world, as the writers connect the interests of the students with the needs of global commerce. Laura Sullivan, of University of Florida, and Victor Fernandez, of Trabajadores, Havana, Cuba, debunk the propaganda surrounding Cuba, often seen as “both pro- and anti-Castro / communism” and as “commercial and non-commercial.” These writers unravel a Cuba outside the stereotypes to show the Cubans’ technological prowess. Elaine Richardson, of Pennsylvania State University, and Sean Lewis, of University of the Western Cape, are so near the end that if you do not reach them, you will miss out on one of the best articles. Their writing is informative, with good parallels, explication and excerpts, and the terms they use explained and made cogent; I give it a solid “A.”

In the closing and curtains-dow, however, are Hawisher and Selfe, who introduce the main points in Street’s book that acts as the binding backdrop to the essays and end with the observation that the global village myth, or “the popular American belief that technology will serve to join the various peoples in the world in a global network, a cyberlandscape that will diminish current geopolitical borders and erase differences among cultures even as it restores a shared community of international spirit,” does not exist and that it should not be the goal. Yet, what of the question, What is so wrong with this idea of the global village myth? Because the “shared community of international spirit” means that all countries buy into the values and norms of the US and ignore their own. At least, this is writers’ perspective.

One advantage of reading all the essays is that you get to hear about other countries and their experiences with the World-Wide Web and, alongside, to rethink what you know. The reason for this is that the teams include American voices, and their volume is incredulous, as they, too, are surprised by what they find. At the same time, because the teams also include non-American voices, they also resonate and what you learn is that there is exciting potential for the Internet. However, as the writers observe, someone needs to figure a way to collectively bridge these wonderfully rich cultures instead of inculcating them to the values and norms of the US. Yet people like the Cubans, who refuse to buy into the US’ system of capitalism, are using the World-Wide Web as a tool for educating others, as do the Paulauans. Yet often the line of *comminqué* is internal and closed off to people outside the country of origin. Also, an example of a subversive US practice is the fact that the World-Wide Web is centered on English literacy, which, in order for other countries to compete in international commerce, they must learn English rather than choose to learn English. So the view of the Internet as a site of colonialization is not altogether farfetched, as some of the writers have identified interesting quirks within the Internet, which include exploitation and entrenched ideas of race and gender. For anyone interested in finding out about other cultures, *Global literacies and the World-Wide Web* does open a door.