

17 December 2008

## Read this T-shirt first

12 December 2008

By **Tara Brabazon**

At a time when writing on technology and the future is banal, Tara Brabazon discovers a new source of trenchant critical commentary



Making predictions is a mode of lazy thinking. Predictions are the academic equivalent of drinking three glasses of wine in 15 minutes and then pontificating about the decline of communism, the rise of fundamentalism or the relationship between the height of women's stiletto heels and property prices.

Suddenly, the divisions between right and wrong – attractive and ugly – are stark and obvious. Civility is replaced by overconfident clarity. Solutions to complex problems such as war, gun crime and obesity become not only blindingly obvious but also strangely connected. After three wines, sending obese people to Iraq seems an ideal option. In a war, they will either get fit or get shot.

Academic predictions are similar. We read a social moment or series of documents in our offices and attempt to shape a trajectory to a future that will not happen. Hindsight, like a hangover, is the penalty for overconfidence (and overconsumption).

While 2008 will be remembered as the end of George W. Bush's presidency and the start of international and personal flagellation about why we traded common sense for consumerism and the real for reality television, this year may also be an

important pivot in the history of technology.

We processed strange statements made by writers such as Chris Anderson, who described Google as an "oracle". Clay Shirky celebrated "everybody" being online. E-learning researcher Will Richardson described himself as "an internationally known 'evangelist' for the use of weblogs". Technology was the new religion. Google became the portal where the sacraments and shopping could be distributed.

In the other corner of this "Hell in a Cell" wrestling match over ideas was Andrew Keen. He upset millions of bloggers by noting that simply because a person is digitally literate and has some free time does not mean that he or she has the capacity to contribute meaningfully to public discourse. Keen observed: "It's hard to be good at what you're doing. In the same way that not everyone should be doctors or teachers or astronauts, not everyone should be an author. Most people do not have anything interesting to say."

He may be correct. Dull people with duller lives have always maintained delusions of fame. Such people are found not only in the blogosphere but also throughout much of contemporary popular culture. Between the men looking for a replacement religion and other men trying to destroy this pseudo-faith to reclaim notions of high culture and moral standards, the online environment is not being well served by serious scholarship.

Predictions and pseudo-religious metaphors have replaced a concrete analysis of the present. When compared with the provocative developments in literacy theory and digital ethnography – to summon two burgeoning areas of research – the online age has yet to develop critics who are as interesting and challenging as the environment they are describing. Howard Rheingold and Sherry Turkle wrote their most famous books a long, long time ago. Malcolm Gladwell is not an adequate replacement.

Commentaries on the online environment are locked on a default setting of excitement equivalent to a beagle playing with bubble wrap. Yet through 2008, software and hardware developers have released subtle, considered and intelligent products that solve intellectual and technical problems.

The smaller companies have done particularly well. Zoom's H2 Handy Recorder is intuitive to use and produces high-quality sonic files. Acoustica's Mixcraft continues to offer a service for podcasters and academics, operating in the space between the open-source Audacity and Adobe's Audition 3. Flip released its Mino and Mino HD video recorders to replace its extraordinarily successful Ultra.

While the "big" releases of Vista and the iPhone may drain all the publicity, interesting and useful products are being developed by some small firms that understand the purpose of technology beyond the evangelising enthusiasms of journalists who really want to be sociologists.

In this year when subtlety started to enter the technology market and customers moved beyond proclamations of "revolution", some of the best critical commentaries on technology have emerged from a T-shirt company. Borrowing from Wilde rather than Weber, Lennon rather than Lenin, and Groucho Marx rather than Karl, [Lush T-Shirts](#) has pierced the grand delusions of digital promises. It has relished the gap between the promises of technology and the upgrades, patches and plug-ins that have been released in their place.

Lush T-Shirts has always fed the market for naughty, drunken, sleazy and provocative clothing. Slogans such as "Don't let the glasses fool you, I really am an idiot", "Why do weirdos always sit next to me?" and "You're not drunk, I really do look this good" have ensured that its products cut through the banality of the usual Joy Division/Metallica/Che Guevara images and logos that dominate the fashion in our classrooms. But through 2008, Lush added technology-based tirades to its collection.

With its "Geek collection", the company demonstrates that we have now reached a point where the passions, pretensions and energy expended in response to the release of hardware and software can be mocked by laughter, inversion and satire.

Social networking sites come in for particular attention, with "I Facebooked your Mum" and "I'm famous on MySpace" being among the most popular shirts on Lush's site. The collection of "friends" we do not know who continue to poke us beyond e-etiquette has triggered the "I'm your MySpace Stalker" shirt.

The transformations to work and leisure in a wireless and BlackBerry-enabled culture have also been a fount for humour. Responding to those irritating automated emails that people set up after 5:30pm to tell us (surprise, surprise) that they are away from their desk and will be back at work in the morning, Lush offers more appropriate vestimentary responses: "I'm currently away from my computer" and "There's no place like 127.0.0.1". Similarly the challenges of "Living the beta" and reaching competency in a software application just as it is superseded has led to the slogan for every computer technician's dream shirt: "No, I will not fix your computer." For our more financially challenged but technologically competent students, there is "Will work for bandwidth" and "I know HTML".

The ego of Web 2.0 culture also receives some treatment. The emblazoned slogan "Nobody reads my blog :(" is a pleading comment from the underconfident, while the multi-avatared avengers can proclaim, "I am not a Geek. I am a Level 9 warlord." Similarly, the looping desires of our consumerist age are captured by an expansive request covering the torso: "I want a Wii".

Perhaps the greatest shirt, offering the blistering combination of Wilde's inversion and Weber's rigour, is "Legal downloads are killing piracy". So many words have been written about how MP3s would be the death of music. Instead, compression files have only punctured the excesses of record companies. The music business has survived. Legal downloads are increasing. But the way in which laws were used to patrol the movement of sonic files has created a fitting response through clothes, not the courts.

Billy Bragg, in one of his most famous lyrics, sings that "the revolution is just a T-shirt away". Now we need another sort of T-shirt to remind ourselves that perhaps – just perhaps – a revolution is not always needed. We should focus our attention on the useful and the productive, rather than the new and shiny. As the technology has become more useful and the writing about it has become more banal, it seems appropriate that T-shirt slogans are mocking our investment in social networking rather than society, and the Wii rather than war.

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## Readers' comments

- **Matthew Wright** 15 December, 2008

Having Craig Brown as well as Laurie Taylor, both mercilessly satirizing the excesses of the modern 'so far up themselves' academic in one publication truly is an embarrassment de richesse. Segueing from knocking others for talking tosh after overdoing the vino into a claim that some random online T-shirt store that's

jumped on the IT Crowd bandwagon can show us the way to a better world was a stroke of genius. Soon people will be claiming 'Tara' is a real person, and that a friend of a friend met her at a conference. It'll be Bel Littlejohn all over again. Bravo sir!

- **David Knight** 16 December, 2008

Makes you glad you're not on Tara's list for last-minute Christmas gifts, doesn't it?