

Cyber caution

by [Noreen Herzfeld](#) in the [October 9, 2002](#) issue

Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age. By Quentin Schultze. Baker Academic, 256 pp., \$24.99.

No matter when or where you are reading this, you have probably already used a computer today. You may have checked your e-mail or surfed the Net, or perhaps just driven to work or used the telephone. Even if you are scanning these book reviews over your morning coffee, your coffeemaker or a microwave's computer chip probably heated the water in your cup. There's no doubt that computer technology influences much of what we do and how we do it.

Quentin Schultze calls us to examine the ways in which computers have changed our relationships with other people and with the world around us. These rapid, insidious changes have not always been as benign as the media would have us believe. In an information-intensive and technique-oriented society, it is easy to get sidetracked from our core values. In fact, we may even forget what those values are.

Schultze believes we are infatuated with information, an infatuation he calls "promiscuous knowing," and he notes that promiscuity in any arena precludes intimacy. The sheer volume of information made possible through the Internet and other computerized sources often undermines our ability to assess and wisely use it. We sacrifice quality for quantity. Does more information necessarily put us in closer relationship with each other or the world? Or do computer games, instant messaging and e-mails allow us to put our neighbors and their problems—or our own—out of our minds? As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel pointed out, "Humanity will not perish from want of information, but from want of appreciation."

This cult of information can also sidetrack the spiritual life. A few months ago I asked a friend who practices Zen meditation how long he had been a Buddhist. He pondered a moment, then said, "About 13 years, but I wasted eight of those reading about meditation instead of doing it." The cult of information can easily lead us constantly to look outward rather than inward. The spiritual life calls us not to add to our store of knowledge but to change our heart and thus our way of relating to God,

each other and the world around us.

Changes in the human heart can change the world. But the gurus of cyber-culture believe that the world can best be changed through advances in technology. A recent report from the National Science Foundation and the Department of Commerce states that advances in computer technology will “enable the creation of a new species of intelligent machine systems that can generate economic wealth on a scale hitherto unimaginable. . . . It is an opportunity to eradicate poverty and usher in the golden age for all humankind.”

Similar utopian predictions for computer technology have, so far, proven unfounded. Rather than being the democratizing force computers were predicted to be, cyberspace has tended to benefit professional communicators, journalists and other high-tech symbol brokers who use it to promote their own spin on events and ideas. Instead of enlarging the possibilities for communal living, cyberspace has tended to increase our feelings of isolation from others, an isolation furthered by the ability to represent oneself falsely in cyberspace. Though it was said that computers would bring a cleaner environment, an industry that makes a product with a shelf life of three to five years produces huge waste, and we are far from the paperless society that technocrats envisioned.

It is easy to be critical of cyber-culture, especially following the bursting of the dot-com bubble and the concomitant stock-market decline. Schultze outlines in great detail the many dangers of bowing before the god of information. He has researched widely and quotes numerous and varied sources: Vaclav Havel, David Barry, Flannery O’Connor and Dilbert all are cited within a few pages. However, Schultze also tries to take the next and much harder step of moving beyond criticism to prescription. He offers tools that Christians might use to live more virtuously with computer technology.

Schultze suggests that we hold all our high-tech endeavors to the test of whether they foster shalom in the world—do they lead to wise and peaceful living, do they bring us closer to God and neighbor? Schultze’s tools for this test are varied. He asks us to consult the traditional writings whose wisdom has stood the test of time. As antidotes to the self-aggrandizing tendency of reliance on technique and the utopian claims of the digerati, he suggests laughter and the humility that comes from a clear-eyed look at human folly. He calls us to slow down, to shut off our machines and listen with our hearts to our neighbors and to the strangers we encounter.

As a professor of communication arts and sciences (at Calvin College), Schultze views the computer primarily as a communication tool. Thus his book centers on such applications as the Internet, e-mail and instant messaging. This somewhat one-sided view emphasizes the negative social effects of computer technology, since the most effective form of communication is that unmediated by any technology. That is why executives still fly long distances to meet face to face and why Christians still gather for communal worship rather than sitting at home reading books or logging onto the latest religious Web site.

But outside the realm of communication are other things that computers do well. Very well. On July 1 two airplanes collided over southern Germany, one a passenger plane carrying 49 Russian schoolchildren among its passengers, the other a cargo plane. Had the Russian pilot heeded his on-board computer, which told him to climb, rather than the befuddled air traffic controller, who told both planes to dive, 71 people might still be alive. If Schultze's book leaves the reader with a mistrust of all computer technology, it has done a disservice.

Jesus said to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Perhaps in the same vein, we need to discern which activities are rightly the computer's and which rightly belong to human beings alone. Reading *Habits of the High-Tech Heart* renewed my commitment to this process of discernment. Though I'm writing this review with the aid of word processing, I plan to have my name dropped from several e-mail lists and am trying to make a point of greeting my colleagues before I look at the latest news on the Internet or answer e-mails. Though I still plan to heat my morning tea in the microwave and thank those who developed the diagnostic equipment in my doctor's office, I do question the prognostications of those who suggest that computers will solve all our problems, from poverty, to war, to global warming. I plan to get out of the secondhand world of cyberspace and appreciate more fully the firsthand world of real space.

Schultze reminds us that even in our information age the basic question still is how to grow in love—with God, our neighbor and the world around us. The answer to that question cannot be found in the ether of cyberspace but only within the human heart.