

Brendan I. Koerner

Introduction

Back in the frothiest dot-com days, a magazine dispatched me to write about a wunderkind software tycoon and his burgeoning company. After an adolescence largely spent coding in his bedroom, the young man had parlayed one of his freeware programs into a fortune roughly the size of Tonga's gross domestic product. My task was to figure out what made this fresh-faced genius tick.

It was an excruciatingly boring assignment. I was allowed just 30 minutes with the mastermind himself, who, though perfectly polite, wasn't exactly a scintillating interview. (He spoke with the languid inflection of someone who'd just ingested two spoonfuls of NyQuil.) The rest of the week was taken up with meetings with marketing executives, who crowed about the company's products being as revolutionary as the bread slicer. I struggled to stay awake as they repeatedly tossed around the phrase "return on investment."

The only memorable event came during a tour of the bowels of the company's Stalinist-style headquarters, where the brainiest employees spent endless hours coding new products. I peeked into one cavernous room where a whey-faced kid sat transfixed at his screen. The company spokeswoman who was escorting me around explained that he was

the company's resident designer of "compilers," the esoteric programs that translate source code into machine language.

Correctly sensing that this description of Mr. Whey Face's job wasn't suitably poetic, she paused and tried again: "His job is to think like a machine."

Now *that* sounded interesting—a human being who, day in, day out, was paid to impersonate the mentality of a robot. I flirted with the idea of making this humble compiler designer the subject of the article, rather than his bland boss. The prospect of delving into the mind of a person who was blessed with such an odd and vital talent—a Doctor Doolittle of the computer age, as it were—was strangely alluring.

In the end, alas, I punked out and wrote the standard paean to corporate greatness that my editor demanded. But when it came time to pull together the present collection of technology writing, I vowed to keep an eye peeled for stories that recalled that think-like-a-machine piece that never was—stories that may ostensibly be about bits or motherboards but never lose sight of the human element at their core.

Finding tales that satisfy these criteria was a challenge. The vast majority of technology writing is dominated by product specifications and breathless comparisons of one MP3 player to another. Hyperbole is the norm, as writers—often egged along by headline-conscious editors—are prone to declaring the slightest hint of progress as a development that will "change everything!" And then there are the long-winded, impenetrable pieces that may contain a worthwhile nugget somewhere around the 4000th word but ultimately rival Ambien for soporific effects. Circulating amid this flotsam and jetsam of product reviews and Internet policy polemics, however, is some truly outstanding writing. What distinguishes these pieces, whether they be a narrative *Wired* opus or a lighthearted blog posting, is their authors' aware-

ness that technology, for all of its byzantine details, is essentially an expression of human desire. The need to create machines with ever more RAM or processing power is not hardwired into our DNA, but as thousands of years worth of human civilization have proved, we certainly take an instinctual interest in developing tools that can make our lives easier, facilitate communication, and satiate our curiosity about human perfection and its limits. Whether the technology in question is the plow or the \$100 laptop, the creative impulse is the same: to banish hardship as best we can.

That said, tech writers must of course avoid the still alarmingly familiar assumptions that all technological progress is innately good and that morality and ethics have no place in the discussion. The finest technology journalists possess the skeptical eye required to cut through the hype and question the long-term social and cultural effects of innovation. Had tech journalism existed a century ago, for example, we might have better foreseen the eventual consequences of the automobile: geopolitical squabbling over oil, environmental degradation, and the evisceration of cities. At the very least, an astute reporter might have lobbied for preserving the trolleys in my native Los Angeles that were ripped out to make way for freeways and that now double as parking lots most rush hours.

Fortunately, as we enter the era of ubiquitous biotechnology, we have a corps of educated writers who can comment on the potential downside of, say, genetically modifying organisms or fiddling with a fetus's DNA to improve its chances of getting into Yale. The best tech writing tackles such thorny issues head-on and in measured tones, never sacrificing accuracy for the sake of a political agenda.

The best tech writing is also frequently read online, rather than in the pages of magazines or newspapers—publications often jokingly referred to as “dead trees.” It has

been years since I purchased a hard copy of the *New York Times*, for example, yet I still spend an inordinate amount of time combing through its contents—the only difference is that I now do so on a beautifully crisp 15-inch LCD screen, without fear of ink-stained fingertips.

With this shift in reading habits in mind, we decided to take a cue from the open-source movement and let the Web-surfing public participate in this book's nominations process. Our guidelines were loose, to say the least: we asked only that the entrants had been published in 2005, that they not be rote examples of trade journalism, and that they not require an advanced degree in electrical engineering in order to be understood.

Two things quickly impressed us about the work submitted for consideration: the quality of the prose and the diversity of places in which it was published. The grace of the writing was a particular delight, given that tech journalists aren't especially renowned as great wordsmiths. In fact, the tech section of a newspaper or magazine has traditionally been the journalistic equivalent of the outfield on a T-ball team—that is, a place to stash those whose talents fall well short of enviable. But in a world where even technophobic granddads gush about how digital video recorders have changed their lives, there's an increased demand for geek writers who understand subject-verb agreement as well as what a megapixel is.

These writers aren't just working for the usual suspects of tech journalism, such as *Wired*, *Technology Review*, or the Circuits section of the *New York Times*. They're also spouting off in the pages of *Slate*, *Salon*, the *New Republic*, and a host of other publications, both dead tree and digital, which are usually associated with political and cultural junkies more than hardcore geeks. And then, of course, there are the bloggers, who churn out some surprisingly well-crafted

commentaries in exchange for zero compensation, aside from the warm fuzzies proffered by readers in their comments sections. Though I confess that this doesn't bode well for my future financial prospects, many of these unpaid writers produce more perceptive, well-informed pieces than my colleagues who make a living by opining on the social impact of Blackberries.

Ultimately, though, the majority of pieces selected for this volume came from the more traditional standard-bearers of technology journalism. One favorite is *Wired* contributing editor Joshua Davis's "La Vida Robot," the absolutely enthralling tale of four Mexican American teenagers—each of them an undocumented immigrant—who banded together to build a killer underwater robot. Davis doesn't skimp on the technical details of the machine the quartet constructed, describing in depth, for example, the team's decision to use PVC pipe in lieu of foam. The real joy of the article, however, is the way in which Davis fleshes out each character, so that by the end our hearts sink upon learning that Oscar Vazquez, the team's leader, is hanging Sheetrock rather than attending college. "La Vida Robot" may be a *Rocky*-like yarn, but it's also a painful reminder of our nation's myopia about the importance of educating engineers. If there's any justice in this world, Vazquez will get that degree and end up working on NASA's Mars mission someday.

Several strong pieces were recommended from *Slate*, including Daniel Engber's hilarious account of meme creation, "Crying, While Eating: My Sad, Hungry Climb to Internet Stardom." An entrant in a contest to see who could create the most visited Web site from scratch, Engber and his colleagues came up with a truly off-the-wall idea: a collection of videos showing various folks, um, crying while eating. (Example: Engber himself sobbed while scarfing

down *soba*, ostensibly because he “ruined Passover.”) What ensues is a whirlwind trip through the online universe, as word of the odd site spreads from BoingBoing to Norwegian-language blogs in record time. It’s an insightful lesson on mob psychology, not to mention the effects of cheap, ubiquitous DSL.

The availability of all that low-priced bandwidth is undoubtedly changing the way we process information, and several of our contributors focused on what’s next for old-school mediums such as books, newspapers, and even clipped-out recipes. Take David A. Bell’s “The Bookless Future,” an examination of the post-printing press world by a distinguished scholar of French history, which first ran in the *New Republic*. Peppered his narrative with personal anecdotes about his Napoleonic research, Bell manages to explore a wonkish issue with just the right modicum of wit. He obviously knows his gadgets, too, and his expert deconstruction of what’s gone wrong with e-readers so far will please bookworms and gearheads alike.

And that is really the hallmark of a great bit of technology writing—something that you needn’t be a bona fide member of the digerati to enjoy and, more important, “get.” There were many promising nominees that passed through the transom but were ultimately judged too esoteric for inclusion. With all due respect and love to Slashdot, the Google of geekdom, we didn’t want writing for the Slashdot crowd; we wanted writing that might bring a mainstream audience a little closer to (someday) appreciating Slashdot itself.

That meant seeking out nuanced writers who could think like machines when need be but could also express themselves in the vernacular. In practice, that also meant accepting some works from writers who were more than a bit surprised to hear themselves described as tech journal-

ists. Among those who were slightly flabbergasted to be selected for a technology collection was the *New Yorker*'s Alex Ross, whose "The Record Effect" describes how the invention of the phonograph forever altered the way music was composed and performed. At first glance, Ross's piece does seem to have more in common with intellectual history than, say, a *PC Magazine* laptop review. But in between his learned comments on Chuck Berry and Arturo Toscanini, Ross deftly comments on the unstoppable MP3ing of the world's music: "Would Beethoven or Billie [Holiday] ever have existed," he asks, "if people had always listened to music the way we listen now?"

I'll leave it to you to discover Ross's answer, just as I'll leave it to you to discover why *Legal Affairs'* Jay Dixit believes that feline cloning needs to be regulated, why blogger Koranteng Ofosu-Amaah thinks that Yahoo's photo technology stacks the deck against Africans, and how *Japan Focus*'s David McNeill came to meet the humble (and seriously undercompensated) inventor of the karaoke machine. All of these revelations are so entertaining, you'll probably forget that, yes, you're reading technology journalism, a genre that is too rarely associated with enjoyable reads. And that's exactly the point. No one can dispute that tech writing is important, given technology's central role in reshaping the world around us. But being important shouldn't condemn it to dour and lifeless prose. Just as writers like James B. Stewart (*Den of Thieves*) and Michael Lewis (*Liar's Poker*) once proved that even business journalism could display literary flair, so the authors in this book demonstrate that tech writing too can be beguiling, compassionate, and graceful.

Here's hoping that the stories in this volume inspire other skilled writers to try their hand at writing about technology, regardless of whether or not they can tell HTML from XML or a microchip from a nanochip. Though a dash

of geekiness never hurts, great tech journalists don't need to have grown up coding into the wee hours and obsessing over specs. The only real requirement is an awareness that the best technology writing isn't always about the guy who occupies the corner office and sits atop \$200 million dollars worth of options; it's often about that kid in the basement who can think like a machine.