Book Review


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It is perhaps a sign that a technology has entered the mainstream when the user base rapidly expands so that the majority of users are relatively new users, who previously had little or no experience with the technology. This is clearly the case with both the Internet and mobile phones, which in little more than a decade have grown from an elite technology used mainly by scientists and other academics to almost a household necessity, combining with the mobile phone as key requirements for navigating through life in the 21st Century. Such rapid expansion means that many of the current new breed of users have come to the technologies with little understanding of their history, and subsequently no understanding of the myriad of technical terms, acronyms and jargon that have been a part of their development. It is for these users that books like A Glossary of Netspeak and Textspeak have been written.

In 197 pages, David Crystal guides readers through the sometimes confusing world of what the author refers to as 'Netspeak' and 'Textspeak'. Many of the most common terms are covered, from MUD (Multi-user Dimension) through to flaming (aggressive electronic messaging), as well as a host of more obscure entries, such as newt (the act of sanctioning a player in a virtual world for committing some kind of offence). The book also contains a detailed reference guide to the numerous abbreviations used in communicating via SMS (Short Message Service), as well as an interesting guide to what are commonly referred to as emoticons, the insertion of particular characters to convey emotion.

The introduction to the book states that it has been written to provide 'definitions and examples of the way this terminology has been adopted by the young (and young minded)' and this seems to effectively summarise its intended audience. The book seems to have been written primarily for parents, who are presumably confused by the electronic communication styles their children are adopting. However, while this might constitute the books primary audience, there are several other groups who might find it useful. In addition to providing descriptions of common colloquial phrases, the book also provides concise definitions of many technical terms used in discussions of Internet and other communications technologies. As such, the book might prove useful to anyone who frequently finds themselves dealing with such terminology.

There are however a couple of issues which may limit the usefulness of the book, at least for some users. The first of these is the fact that the book is very Western in its descriptions, meaning that many of the entries may not be appropriate in other cultural contexts. While the Internet, and to a lesser extent mobile phones, are international in their reach, this does not mean that the languages that are developing in relation to these technologies are universally understood. This is perhaps most true of the abbreviations used to communicate via SMS, the majority of which are based on the English language.

The other limiting factor is the speed with which the terminology is developing. While many of the terms listed in the book have shown surprising longevity, many come in and out of fashion as the user community continues to evolve. More importantly, new terms are continually entering into the common language of electronic communities. While online dictionaries and glossaries are able to quickly add new terms as they become common, hard
copy resources like Crystal's book are doomed to become dated, and very quickly given the speed with which the subject matter evolves. This is not necessarily bad news for the author and the publishers as it presents the opportunity for frequent updates, but for the reader a book that is already a year old may be too dated to be considered current.

With a recommended retail price of around $20, *A Glossary of Netspeak and Textspeak* is not a huge investment, and would probably be useful to a range of readers. However, it faces some tough competition, from the very medium that it surveys. The Internet contains many excellent dictionaries and glossaries which are both free and frequently updated, the only drawback being the requirement of an Internet connection to access them. In this respect, Crystal's book seems to occupy a position similar to that held by the *Internet for Dummies* and its clones: hardcopy guides to an electronic world, produced for those who are not yet familiar enough with its facilities to make full use of them.