

BOOK REVIEW

Reset: Reclaiming the Internet

Deibert, R. J. (2020). *Reset: Reclaiming the Internet for Civil Society*. House of Anansi Press. 304 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4870-0808-6.

Review by Joey Merritt, Merced College

Reset: *Reclaiming the Internet for Civil Society* is a book about society and culture, primarily American society and culture. The author's premise is that the internet is primarily a marketing tool and that is it designed to create a toxic addiction in our minds. He uses the term "surveillance capitalism" often to depict what he sees as the race for our data and ultimately our minds. He makes a good case for this in his first four chapters. His fifth chapter, Retreat, Reform, Restraint, makes the case that we can resist this marketing of our minds if we can show proper restraint.

While this book is easy and entertaining reading, he quietly creates an atmosphere of anxiety with examples of how our phones are designed to spy on us, our cameras turn themselves on and social media exists to sell our data. By the end of chapter four, the pervasive sense of being spied on by an industry spawned by tech giants and a world being destroyed by Chinese rare materials mining has become overpowering. He is an excellent writer because at no point during the time spent reading this book, did the reviewer feel the need to stop reading. In fact, this book was hard to put down. The major strength of this book is that it enables us to see the author's premise while being entertained with light-hearted writing and engaging examples and he supports it with 68 pages of notes. One example makes us wonder what the carbon footprint size of this review might be –

when one Google search has the equivalent carbon footprint of driving an automobile 55 feet. The book falls short, however, when Deibert starts to outline his solution to the problem posed by the collection of all this data. The fifth chapter begins with a spy vs. spy problem between his Citizen Lab and an Israeli spyware firm, NSO Group and moves into an assertion that is black and white. Either we fight for “human liberty, security, and sustainability” or we allow the devices we use every day to “belittle and even endanger” our lives. What has, to this point, been an excellent economic and cultural history of the internet devolves into a moral dilemma that can only be solved by our own restraint in using our devices. There are three answers. One is “retreat,” a deliberate digital retreat from the constant use of the internet as a kind of romanticism and back-to-nature answer. The second response is “reform.” This is the attempt, using governmental regulations, to fine-tune social media. This could also be done by adding new apps or new oversights. This requires that we give some of the autonomy that we should be taking away from social media and handing it to the government – the same government that Deibert claims is using our data. The third solution is “restraint.” Restraint would require that we limit our own usage, basically from self-control. It does not address the data collection and use by the villains of high tech described in the first chapters of the book. Ultimately, he suggests that we “reset” our tech use. Reset is a term used in the computer field when a computer is turned off and restarted, sometimes even reset to factory settings. It refers to a fresh start, a chance to begin again with a new premise and a new foundation. This, however, is where the book falls short. Deibert leaves us with lots of things to think about but not much concrete advice with which to move forward.

I would recommend this book to general readers who are interested in the field. Although the notes are extensive, there are no footnotes which make finding and using the source material more difficult. The conclusion leaves us looking for answers but finding more questions instead. This was an ARC with as yet no index, so possibly a more academic reader will find this book to be a better fit when the index is complete. It is the type of book that a student at a community college or an undergraduate at a university will find resonates with their general discomfort of “the establishment.” It is entertaining as a history of high tech and its effects on the economy and ecology of the world but with few solutions to its problems.