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# As If, or, Using Media Archaeology to Reimagine Past, Present, and Future: An Interview with Lori Emerson

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Jay Kirby, PhD student in the Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media program at North Carolina State University, conducted this interview with Associate Professor Lori Emerson to focus on her research about how interfaces and the material aspects of media devices affect our uses and relationships with those devices. Emerson, who runs the University of Colorado's Media Archaeology Lab, explains how we can look at older technology that never became an economic success to imagine what could have been and reimagine what is and what could be. In the Media Archaeology Lab, Emerson collects still-functioning media artifacts to demonstrate these different possibilities. In this interview, Emerson draws on examples from digital computer interfaces, word processors, and other older media to show how their material aspects are bound up in cultural, commercial, and political apparatuses. By bringing these issues to light, Emerson shows how a critical eye toward our media can have far reaching implications.

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**Jay Kirby:**
The first thing I wanted to do is to get a sense of your use of media archeology when you are looking at media. What do you find valuable about the archaeological method? In particular, I would like to know, first, how the archaeological method informs your research and, second, how that might inform your curation of the Media Archaeology Lab.

**Lori Emerson:**
In my writing, teaching, and work in the lab I am often looking for ways to undo or demystify entrenched narratives of technological progress. It's a bit cliché or tired in the media studies world, but those narratives are so ingrained in our culture that I think all of us have a hard time seeing through what amounts to an ideology. Happily, I've found there is a recursiveness to media archeology that allows me to continually cycle back and forth between past and present as a way to imagine how things could have been otherwise and still could be otherwise—it's a fairly straightforward technique for unsettling these

entrenched narratives. Moreover, using media archaeology in this way is not a conventional way to undertake history, but rather it's a way of thinking you can mobilize to critique the present. I've noticed that as media archaeology becomes better known and gains more purchase in academia, scholars who work on media history of any kind call it "media archaeology," and often their notion of "history" is something quite different from the Foucauldian/Kittlerian lineage of media archaeology I'm invested in.

But also—to get at the second part of your question about the Media Archaeology Lab (MAL)—while it's perfectly effective to write conventional scholarly pieces on media archaeology, over the last couple of years, as the MAL has expanded and matured, I've found that undertaking hands-on experiments in the lab with obsolete but still functioning media from the past is perhaps an even more direct technique for breaking through the seductive veneer of the new and the resulting pull we feel to quickly discard our devices for something that's only apparently better. New devices are only better if speed is the primary criterion for progress. But what about a machine like the Altair 8800b from 1976? As I ask my students when they come to the lab for the first time, is the Altair really just a profoundly limited version of contemporary computers? Undoubtedly, this eight-bit machine that operates with switches and whose output is flashing red LED lights is slow and difficult (or, just foreign) to operate, but, for one thing, for almost anyone born after the mid to late 1970s, operating this machine in the lab is likely your first direct experience of computing at the level of 1s and 0s. All our contemporary devices are constantly computing 1s and 0s, but we've become utterly estranged from how these devices actually work because they've been carefully crafted to seem as unlike computing with 1s and 0s as possible. So, my sense is that as you use a machine like the Altair, your contemporary laptop gradually loses its aura of magic or mystery and you start to palpably experience the ways in which your laptop consists of layer upon layer of interfaces that remove you ever more from the way your computer actually works. For another thing, more often than not, using the Altair opens up the possibility for reseeing the past—what if the computer industry took a slightly different turn and we ended up with Altair-like devices without screens or mice? And therefore using this obsolete machine also opens up the possibility of reseeing the present and the future—if we no longer passively accept what the computer industry gives us, what could our devices look like? What do we *want* them to do?

**Jay Kirby:**
One of the things that strikes me about your work is your examples of interfaces. In *Reading Writing Interfaces* (Emerson, 2014), you use examples such as Emily Dickinson's fascicles or typewriter poets. This selection seems to be outside the dominant history and perhaps constitutes a minor history. In this sense you undo assumptions of progress because we are looking at these minor histories that existed but that weren't played out.

**Lori Emerson:**
Yes, I think you're right. But I've also discovered that, for some reason, concrete poetry is now taught in some form or other in high schools across the U.S. What's not taught is how these poets were not creating poems of self-expression or poems for close reading—they were showing us how to use and *mis*use writing media. And of course, Dickinson is far from a minor poet, but, just as with the concrete poets, Dickinson's wildness is often elided or reduced to cute aphorisms we memorize or close-read.

**Jay Kirby:**
So, when you choose technologies to curate in the lab, is your choice based on how the technologies are part of a minor history, or is it based on how they are misunderstood in the same way as Dickinson and concrete poets?

**Lori Emerson:**
Now that I think about it, I don't see the oddities in the lab as minor or peripheral in the history of computing. I think of them—and I just recently came across this term from geology—in terms of their place in a branching phylogeny of technological devices. In this way, the Altair 8800b represents a branch off the main line, and it is peripheral only in the sense that it wasn't an economic success. But certainly, for most people visiting the lab, their initial tendency is to marvel at how "primitive" the machines are, or even how ridiculous or impractical they are. At that point, I try to encourage visitors to slightly reframe their experience from imposing the present on the past to instead experiencing the friction that exists between our present-day interactions with these machines and the way the producers originally imagined and even prescribed our interactions. For example, the manuals in the lab for the Apple Macintosh, released in 1984, describe in minute detail, over many pages, how to double-click, how to you train your finger to click very quickly, and what a window or a file is. Reading the manuals is akin to visiting a foreign land but from the obverse insofar as the manuals defamiliarize where you already live. All of the sudden you start to think, "Oh wow, clicking is not a natural gesture; there was a moment when people really had to think consciously about this gesture and train their bodies to adapt to this physical action."

**Jay Kirby:**
Now it doesn't seem that way at all, I guess because double-clicking has become so ubiquitous.

**Lori Emerson:**
I think so.

**Jay Kirby:**
I'd like to talk about power in relation to these technologies. How do you see the relationships between power and knowledge in the creation of these interfaces? Who are the players, and what happens when the interface is either present, as you talk about early on in your book, or absent or transparent, as with later interfaces?

**Lori Emerson:**
What do you mean by players? Do you mean people or technology?

**Jay Kirby:**
I like to think of them on somewhat equal levels. When an interface is being designed, who or what influences decisions? And how do those decisions rearticulate relationships between knowledge and power?

**Lori Emerson:**
When I was doing research for my book, I became fascinated with interfaces from the 1970s, especially ones related to SmallTalk and the Xerox Star, that were teetering right on the precipice of being designed for the novice as well as the expert. Now, I have never had the opportunity to actually use a Xerox Star—they are incredibly rare and most of them are in museums now—so I had to piece together my understanding of this machine by looking at manuals, magazines, and screenshots from the 1980s. But it seemed to me that interfaces like the one in the Star opened up possibilities for us not to have to live in the either/or scenario of being a user or an expert. This binary was a marketing ploy, advanced especially by Apple, to make people believe that you could only ever have a machine that was either for one or the other, and since most people identified as novices, so the logic went, your only choice was to buy a "user-friendly" Macintosh. Apple made the underlying workings of the Macintosh inaccessible or invisible so that you would never know how it worked. Moreover, Apple tried to nudge you into thinking that you'd never *need* to know.

**Jay Kirby:**
So, it was a marketing and design decision to create an interface that made the underlying mechanisms invisible, as a way to create a false division between novice and expert?

**Lori Emerson:**
Yes, I think so. There were interfaces proposed in the late '70s that allowed those two groups, the experts and the novices, to use the same machine; the novice could use the ready-made tools included in the system, while the expert had the ability to create their own tools or even create tools to create more tools. But, to get back to your question about the relationship between power and knowledge, I want to make clear that the design and choice of interface is not a minor technical detail—it's not just that interfaces could have been otherwise, but instead that interfaces determine how and what you create on your machine, and the choice of one over another opens up or forecloses on possibilities.

**Jay Kirby:**
Interfaces rearrange the relationships between power and knowledge.

**Lori Emerson:**
Yeah. While there's no doubt that Apple had its eye on the untapped market of the novice user, in order to maintain their monopoly on this market share over the long term, they had to design an interface that was not just easy to use but that also disempowered the user so they eventually came to think there was no need for them to understand how their machine worked or how it was acting on them, rather than them acting on their machine. And of course, developing this mind-set in consumers has had long-term, cross-generational repercussions as these "user friendly," out-of-the-box machines found their way into homes and schools and became the first computer that many children used.

**Jay Kirby:**
I am curious about your conception of how media technology, the interface, and the human interact. You drew on Marshall McLuhan in your book, but I felt as if Friedrich Kittler was also present. I've always read

them as being, to a certain extent, opposed, where McLuhan seems to have the user extended through media and Kittler seems to posit media as something imposed on the user.

**Lori Emerson:**
Kittler doesn't come into my book obviously, but he's very present in terms of how I'm thinking about media poetics and about rereading the history of experimental 20th and 21st century writing as histrionics of media, as expressions of the histrionics of media, as Kittler puts it. Kittler helped me read these strange photocopies of photocopies of photocopies by concrete poets from the 1960s and 1970s not for what the blurred text says but for how these texts are recordings of media facts. McLuhan was more obviously useful for the chapter on concrete poetry because he so clearly influenced and was influenced by these poets; he was one of the first to mesh together literary and media studies to argue that poets are "probes" into the limits and possibilities of writing media. I've never seen McLuhan and Kittler as incompatible, and I have to admit I sometimes think intellectually lazy simply to claim that McLuhan was anthropocentric and Kittler was not.

**Jay Kirby:**
Right.

**Lori Emerson:**
Just in the last couple months, probably from teaching McLuhan for the 12th or 13th time, I've come to see that McLuhan and Kittler are much closer to each other than you might think. McLuhan does say that media first act as extensions of "man." But if you just combine the two famous McLuhanisms, "media are the extensions of man" (McLuhan, 1994, p. 4) and "the medium is the message" (pp. 7–8), you can see there's a strange hinge moment where media first extend certain human capabilities, but then they turn back on the human and shape the human. McLuhan's entire theory of how media work falls apart if media don't come back and shape humans. I understand that his entire system for understanding media begins and ends with humans, but at the same time he knows that each medium plays a fundamental role in determining what you can do and how you can do it. Kittler, to me, comes in at that hinge point and just follows the line of thought extending from the medium to the human.

**Jay Kirby:**
You've already mentioned in our discussion the notion of user-friendliness, which seems to illustrate one part of this mutually influential relationship between humans and technology—the way in which design decisions determine how we use our computers, which in turn shape us as users. In *Reading Writing Interfaces* you note a shift in what user-friendly means. Why do you think this shift occurred?

**Lori Emerson:**
As I mentioned briefly earlier, I think most of it had to do with economics. How long were we going to go without trying to make personal computers as profitable as possible?

And the minute you try to make them profitable, you are also going to have to standardize them, which involves creating a notion of the standard user who needs their computer to be "user-friendly." I'm not

sure anything like a standard user exists—it was created by companies like Apple through persistent and clever marketing to convince people they should identify as standard users. By contrast, in the '70s, when the computer was not yet very profitable and it was still a niche market item for tinkerers and the curious, it was marketed in more philosophical terms. My favorite ad from that era is for Logo, a learning-oriented programming language. In an issue of *Byte* magazine from 1982 you can find an ad that describes Logo as "a language for poets, scientists, and philosophers" (Logo, 1982). Incredible! At this time, computers were more about learning and creativity—open-ended learning and creativity.

**Jay Kirby:**
This idea of moving from open-ended play and creativity into something more limited makes it seem as if there is some sort of power constraining us. Michel Foucault discusses this limiting and controlling aspect of power, but he also says there can be a productive element to the exercise of power. Do you think the shift away from open-ended play and creativity is entirely negative?

**Lori Emerson:**
People will always find a way to be playful and creative with the tools they're given. In terms of the shift toward user-friendly design, I think every technology should steer clear of calling itself user-friendly because of the way that term is now associated with disempowering users. Without user-friendly design, we would never be able to type. Or, perhaps I should say that even though a keyboard design such as QWERTY is not the most efficient, its utter ubiquity has turned it into a kind of user-friendly design. Also, importantly, QWERTY does not disempower users so much as it slows down their typing. The QWERTY keyboard works well because it has become naturalized and invisible as a result of its ubiquity, so you no longer have to think about the act of typing itself. So the user-friendly does have some value, but, to go back to my earlier point, that value is lost once the user-friendly disempowers us and once it's leveraged against us through the creation of a false binary between the novice and the expert user, between the creation of a machine that's easy to use and one that allows you to build more tools. The interfaces from the 1970s that I talk about in my book show this binary isn't necessary and it wasn't necessary for a while.

**Jay Kirby:**
Maybe your last point can return us to the question of what changed. You mentioned the economy. But is there something we should be doing, perhaps through pedagogy, to help people look at interfaces differently?

**Lori Emerson:**
Good question. That is what I use the Media Archeology Lab for. I sit people down at, say, an Osborne I computer, and I invite them to use WordStar, which is entirely text-based and requires you to use about 90 different commands. Next, I ask them to read WordStar against Microsoft Word so that they can begin to actually see how other word processors have different or more capabilities than Word, and hopefully they begin to realize Word isn't natural—it isn't the only, or even the best, word processor. There are other ways you can process your documents and have very different, creative results. So to me, pedagogically, the best way to get students to think critically about interfaces is to read the past and the present against each other.

**Jay Kirby:**
I wonder whether we short-circuit some sort of learning if you use an interface you immediately understand?

**Lori Emerson:**
Is there such a thing as an interface you immediately understand?

**Jay Kirby:**
I don't know. I remember *The New York Times* ran a story about technology executives sending their children to the Waldorf School, which does not use computers (Rictchel, 2011). The idea was that children should experience certain types of learning without the computer interface. Do you think these more transparent interfaces can short-circuit learning?

**Lori Emerson:**
I'm guessing the Waldorf Schools recognize that primarily what's lost when we use contemporary digital computer interfaces is a mode of learning and processing from print culture. Most of the skills we teach and test in schools are still based on print culture, so in that sense I can understand why one might think it's beneficial to keep children away from computers in their early years. For me the main problem is not whether learning takes place via digital or analog devices; the problem is the way particular kinds of interfaces become naturalized, when we start to think that there's only one way to interact with our computers and passively accept whatever the computer industry hands down to us.

**Jay Kirby:**
When I first encountered a computer, it was a command-line interface. It was MS-DOS. Many of my students have never experienced it. Is an experience like seeing a command-line interface helpful for understanding interfaces?

**Lori Emerson:**
Yes, I think so. And I also don't think that experiencing the command-line interface requires a lot of expertise. I can write out a couple commands on the board and ask students to open up terminal, and all of a sudden they can have that experience. They're accessing the same information as they might via a graphical user interface, but, through the command line, they can see how a different interface offers an utterly different perspective on the same information. So, yes, I think you should experience the command line. But I also don't think students need to take years to learn computer programming. Just typing a couple lines of code into terminal can be very revelatory.

**Jay Kirby:**
And many people aren't going to go and study computer science after that experience. So what does your average person gain from the experience of using the command line?

**Lori Emerson:**
I was recently reading about a famous conversation that took place between Foucault and Noam Chomsky[1] that made it clear Foucault was interested in finding ways to denaturalize political discourse. That's no small thing. It's no small thing to denaturalize the tools that we use every single day. So, helping the average person to see how much their access to information is determined by mechanisms that they have no control over and that shape their access to knowledge and creation is profound.

**Jay Kirby:**
So there is a political dimension to it?

**Lori Emerson:**
Absolutely.

**Jay Kirby:**
To return to the argument you lay out in your book, you move forward from the command line to graphical user interfaces and, more recently, to gestural interfaces. Each of these developments seems to make the interface more transparent or more difficult to perceive. Do you have to have that transparency—in the more negative sense of removing access to elements of the interface—if you move from the command line to a GUI to a so-called natural interface?

**Lori Emerson:**
No, not at all. That was the point I was trying to make in the second chapter. There are not only other interfaces but also other *visual* interfaces. It is not necessary to move from command line to graphical user interfaces. It's just a continuation of a line of thought that has come to dominate computing. Here is an example that I didn't talk about in my book. The Canon Cat computer was developed by Jeff Raskin—you remember that Jeff Raskin was on the design team for the Apple Macintosh. I think he left in 1982 because of a disagreement with Steve Jobs. Then he worked on the Cat, which Canon eventually bought. Raskin designed the Cat to have an interface that was entirely text based—not command line, not graphical user interface, but text based. This was 1987. He called it an advanced work processor, not a word processor and not a personal computer.

**Jay Kirby:**
What did that look like?

**Lori Emerson:**
It's this cute little beige computer with a handle on the back for portability. It has no mouse; instead, all the functionality is built into the keyboard. And it has all sorts of unusual functionalities like "leap," for example, which is a sophisticated version of search and find that we don't have today.

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[1] Chomsky &, 2006. Video of the debate is available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wfNl2L0Gf8

**Jay Kirby:**
Interesting. These less common computers, as you note, give insight into what could have been. Another element that interested me in your work was that your examples of people who interrogate these interfaces are artists. In a way, artists are also less common. Are there ways that nonartists can or should be interrogating interfaces? How might one cultivate a critical approach to understanding interfaces in an everyday way?

**Lori Emerson:**
The first answer that comes to mind is that tinkering, play, and creativity are open to anybody and everybody. And in fact, creating glitch art is now accessible to anyone. There is glitch software and step-by-step instructions online that show you how you can get into the code of a digital image and glitch it from within, turning it into a Word document or a text document. You can also take any function on your computer and push up against it. Anything. Ask yourself, is it possible to break it? How do I misuse it? What are some ways this function could work that the manufacturer didn't anticipate?

**Jay Kirby:**
That is a good example of an accessible way to understand interfaces differently—and related to another new development I see in computers and interfaces, which is the surge in popularity of microcontrollers like Raspberry Pis or Arduinos. How do these fit into this archaeological cut between the transparent interfaces of many computers today and these older pieces of technology?

**Lori Emerson:**
I have some in the lab, and I believe they stand as wonderful interventions into this culture of passively consuming software/hardware configurations. Our Raspberry Pi is very small and affordable. You can see how it works, and you can use it to make other computers to build on top of it. But, to complicate what I just said about how tinkering is open to anyone, I still worry about accessibility. Even if the price of a Raspberry Pi isn't much more than the price of a book, I worry especially about gender and how the culture around the machines may not be amenable to or welcoming for women and minorities. I know there are women, for example, that are incredibly adept at playing with Arduinos and Raspberry Pis, but I don't know any in Boulder. None have shown up at my doorstep. I have no doubt they exist, but at the same time, I know women are a minority in this community.

**Jay Kirby:**
As these microcontrollers look so different from what we might think of as a computer today, do you believe the aesthetics of these objects play into understanding computers and interfaces? I'm thinking of how these early computers came to us as chunks of metal, versus contemporary devices that are almost all screen.

**Lori Emerson:**
Yes. While I was teaching last week, I was thinking about how we only ever look *at* screens, and how we are never aware of how there is another world behind them. It's as if the screen was created so you would only look at it rather than think about its situatedness, its constructedness.

**Jay Kirby:**
I understand. There is even a difference between the old CRT screens that have depth—and even though that is not the computational part, there is the idea there is something back there—versus these iMacs that are sheer screen . . .

**Lori Emerson:**
Yes. Or, think once more about the Altair, how it had no screen and yet it was a perfectly functional computer.

**Jay Kirby:**
Exactly. Or the Arduinos.

**Lori Emerson:**
That's right. It's difficult because everything has to be—is this Apple ideology?—everything has to be "light and airy."

**Jay Kirby:**
Not only user-friendly . . .

**Lori Emerson:**
It can't have heft, or bulk, or weight.

**Jay Kirby:**
As we talk about what these computers look like and what they do, what do you look for in a piece of technology when you're thinking about adding it to the Media Archaeology Lab's collection? What makes a good candidate for the lab?

**Lori Emerson:**
I'm always looking for alternative visions of what could be, anything that is odd and unusual, as well as anything that is ubiquitous. Those two poles. It's important to have Apple Macintoshes in the lab along with the whole lineage of Apple computers because of how much they've influenced the computer industry. At the same time, you have to have the oddities or the outliers for reasons I've already touched on. I should also mention we are starting to collect analog media, or any kind of media that archaeologically underlies our contemporary media. For example, we just acquired an Edison Diamond Disc phonograph from 1912 from a used furniture store in Boulder. The phonograph came with 30 discs, and each has a large warning on the outside of the record sleeve that says something like, "You may not use this photograph disc with any other machine other than the Edison. If you do, you will destroy the needle and you will destroy the record." Once you place this warning beside any contemporary proprietary technology, you see quite clearly that the notion of proprietary technology did not originate with Apple or Microsoft; it has a long lineage going at least as far back as Edison. It's also utterly American.

**Jay Kirby:**
Yeah. That is really fascinating. I guess at that time the phonograph wasn't yet standardized.

**Lori Emerson:**
As far as I know, Edison and Victrola were competing not just for the largest share of the market but also to make their respective machines the standard.

**Jay Kirby:**
Perhaps this is a good place to talk about your current project, as you've been moving from discussing the standardization of interface technology to discussing the standardization of Internet protocols, in particular TCP/IP. Can you tell us more about what you are doing with this project?

**Lori Emerson:**
Yes, thanks for asking about that. "Other Networks" began with an innocent question Matthew Kirschenbaum asked me at the Modern Languages Association annual convention a couple years ago. He asked me whether I talk about the '90s in *Reading Writing Interfaces*, and I said no, I don't, and immediately wondered why it didn't seem to make sense to have a chapter dedicated to that decade. I think the reason is because the '90s are not so much about hardware and software; they are instead more a continuation of hardware/software design principles that had been standardized by the late 1980s. Instead, in terms of digital media, the '90s are more about networks and the so-called explosion of the Internet.

So with this new project, I wanted to see if I could extend the logic of media archaeology to look at the materialist underpinnings, the ideological underpinnings, of the Internet—to imagine how it could have been otherwise, which then led me into looking into the particulars of TCP/IP, the protocol that allows all the different networks on the Internet to communicate to each other. That in turn led me to dig through manuals and textbooks on TCP/IP and browse the thousands of requests for comments, or RFCs. These are basically a series of online memos recording people's proposals and decisions to tweak TCP/IP, and, among other things, the RFCs record the development of TCP/IP and its official adoption in 1982 or 1983. What I was trying to do was to trace the economic, institutional, and philosophical pressures that went into creating TCP/IP. At the same time I was also thinking about what other protocols were up for debate and what difference those might have made to our experience of the Internet today. As it turns out, there were alternatives and there still are alternatives, like the network architecture RINA, but my sense is that it's been difficult to convince people that a new or different protocol might be beneficial because these alternatives wouldn't make a dramatic difference to our experience of the Internet. I think people want to hear about some version of the Internet that's completely new and alien and, as far as I know, this just doesn't exist.

**Jay Kirby:**
So for whom or for what would these alternative protocols make a difference?

**Lori Emerson:**
Well, this computer scientist I have been talking to—John Day, who is at Boston University—his argument is that a different structure for TCP/IP might have made the entire Net neutrality debate moot. He believes that a particular layer in TCP/IP, the transport layer, is flawed. The transport layer is what makes possible the entire discussion about slow lanes and fast lanes, because there the Internet has a longstanding

problem with congestion. So, if the designers of TCP/IP had managed to put together a different set of layers and a different configuration—maybe not even layers—there wouldn't be a congestion problem and we wouldn't need to have this discussion about Net neutrality.

**Jay Kirby:**
This seems to relate back to the idea of interfaces, too. The interfaces can affect the relationships of knowledge and power. Do you conceive of TCP/IP along the same lines as an interface? Rather than a person interfacing with technology or writing, TCP/IP allows for computers to interface with each other. Is this correct?

**Lori Emerson:**
On the surface there is a perfect corollary to the way TCP/IP is structured and the way interfaces were designed for personal computers, both of which were developed around the same time. TCP/IP is structured according to layers. This model of layers was apparently imported from models for how operating systems were conceived of in the late '60s, and then it was just carried over from operating systems into networks. However, there seem to be significant differences in how terms like "interface"—and even "black box"—are mobilized in the two spheres. For example, the layers that constitute TCP/IP are separated by what engineers refer to as interfaces, so I first assumed this meant those interfaces function in the same way that an interface does for us as users. It turns out this isn't the case. What the designers of TCP/IP have done is create interfaces that allow the layers to communicate with each other insofar as one layer picks up the task of conveying bits where the lower layer left off. The interfaces between layers also black box the layers from each other—the idea is that if any one of the layers stops working, the entire system should not be affected because the layers have been separated from each other.

**Jay Kirby:**
This is a positive use of black boxing.

**Lori Emerson:**
Yes, exactly. I understand now there's a way in which black boxing and layering is sometimes very useful, whereas I had previously assumed that black boxing and layering only insert more barriers to access for the user.

**Jay Kirby:**
This speaks to what you said about how users don't always want the interface to be present. Sometimes users want it to recede from view.

**Lori Emerson:**
Fade into the background.

**Jay Kirby:**
As a way to wrap things up, what do you believe people should be attentive to when they are using an interface? Or what should people hope for in an interface?

**Lori Emerson:**
I am wary of any system, any interface, that claims to do things *for* me and doesn't allow me to either do it myself or to understand how it's been done for me and then intervene in some way so that I can do it in whatever way I think is appropriate. This patronizing attitude toward the user is harmful.

**Jay Kirby:**
So that's what people should be wary of. And you've implied an answer to the second part of my question, about what you want from an interface.

**Lori Emerson:**
I want an interface that is configurable and flexible according to my needs. It may come with certain defaults, but I need to be able to configure it to do what I want it to do.

**Jay Kirby:**
That's an interesting idea. Not long ago *TIME* did their Person of the Year as "You," by which they meant that the individual can now get whatever they want. But at the same time, there is this idea that someone else will give you exactly what you want. It seems a sort of preemption. Rather than "I want *x*, *y*, or *z*," companies state that "you want *x*, *y*, and *z*."

**Lori Emerson:**
Oddly, though, I think both positions usually amount to the same thing, as companies such as Facebook offer you the appearance of a proliferation of choice, the illusion that we can make our experience of Facebook exactly as we'd like it—when, of course, we're only ever offered predetermined choices. If *TIME*'s Person of the Year is "You," then this "you" is a corporately controlled version that leads you to believe you're somehow an empowered user with the freedom to customize anything and everything.

**Jay Kirby:**
Yeah. It's the commodification of choice rather than choice as choice.

**Lori Emerson:**
That's right. Rather than open-ended choice, it's like choosing between Coke and Pepsi, which really isn't a choice at all.

**Jay Kirby:**
No more RC Cola.

**Lori Emerson:**
Yeah. And no more Fanta. It's like the 1980s standardization of the personal computer all over again!

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