

## Barthes, and Calling the Mundane to Account

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### Introduction

WHAT IMPRESSES ME ABOUT BARTHES is his enormous respect for the mundane and everyday. Barthes writes in a long line of art critics, who treat Art with the respect it deserves, as perhaps the supreme and most sublime artifact of our cultures. Yet in his writing about spaghetti, about wrestling, about cars, Barthes, as critic, *elevates* these topics to the same level of importance and respect, suggesting that humanity's most important cultural ideas (if not its noblest) can also be accessed through its comparatively pedestrian and everyday works.

And in so doing, he performs a neat move.

Allow me an analogy. In the Jewish tradition, when a 13 year old boy stands up and reads from the Torah in front of his community at his bar mitzvah, he becomes a Man; when a 12 year old girl stands up and reads from the Torah in front of her community at her bat mitzvah, she becomes a Woman. These statements do not mean he or she is supposed to be an adult per se, but, rather, it means he is "subject to the commandments"; subject to the *responsibilities* of an adult man or woman. Bar means boy (or, literally, son), bat means girl, a mitzvah is a commandment or law; a boy or girl "subject to mitzvah" is an adult. They are no longer a child; they are now responsible for their actions and answerable to laws. They can hold property, they can, under rabbinical law, be married. Before this occurs, they are children and their parents are responsible for their actions; now they have become subject to responsibilities.

This is the move that Barthes performs over and over again in the essays collected in his volume *Mythologies*. The world is full of mundane objects, experiences, texts and images that normally escape our attention, that can safely be ignored as, well, the mundane details of everyday life. But by treating these mundanities as first-class objects, to be questioned, to be interrogated, to be answerable to the same set of actions and laws and responsibilities to which we hold great works of art, or other *important* things, Barthes holds them responsible for shaping and changing our lives. And I think this is an awfully important strategy, because the mundane objects we interact with every day have an impact on our lives. Linguists talk about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, that the language we use changes how we act: similarly,

what we watch on television, what we read and consume, what games we play all impact our assumptions and actions about the world.

The implications of treating these mundane objects as having import is that we can and should and must take them seriously, in the sense that we must hold such objects—and ourselves—to account for the ways that shape our experiences and relationships, and how they reflect and perpetuate our priorities and blind spots. This is where the application to HCI and our sister fields of user experience and interaction design and game design and the like becomes clear. If, for example, a computer game is just a game, then we have no need to take it seriously as a cultural artifact, because, well, it's just a game. But if we perform Barthes' move on the game, of treating it *as if it mattered*, then all of a sudden we can hold the game accountable - for the way it represents women, for the issues around gun violence it raises, for the statements it makes about which kinds of people it is desirable to kill on sight, for what it says about what games are for, about who owns public space - or for that matter about the details of what a good interface is and should be. This sort of cultural criticism has become almost ordinary and expected: releases of Grand Theft Auto, for example, are accompanied not just with reviews of the gameplay but discussion of the role of women or casual violence inherent in the game. Barthes was a significant player in making such criticism of seemingly mundane objects more commonplace and accepted.

And with this, I want to try and answer the key question which this book addresses, which is why should an HCI or design researcher/practitioner care about critical theory? After all, if you're reading this book, you're most likely trained in computer science or one of its sister fields. Computer science seems to have done reasonably well without a lot of critical theory so far, so what can critical theory bring to that discussion? I suggest that - at least as far as this chapter goes - the great advantage of reading Barthes' work is that it can point to avenues of inquiry that are easily overlooked precisely because they are so mundane, and yet which turn out to be extremely important for our social lives once we do begin to explore them.

## Myth Today

In this paper I'm going to concentrate on the essay which comprises the second half of Barthes' book *Mythologies*, called Myth Today. Let's start with some core terms. What we're looking at is *semiotics*: the study of signs and symbols, which originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure (Saussure used the term *semiology* instead of *semiotics*, but semiotics seems to have won that battle). Within semiotics, we talk about a seemingly simple relationship between two terms, a *signifier* and a *signified*. The signifier is the word or object; the signified is what it is intended to and understood to mean. If you use a bunch of roses to signify your passion, then the roses is a signifier, and your passion is a signified. Together, they form a third term, a *sign*, meaning these roses-that-signify-passion. In short:

signifier → signified  
[signifier → signified] = sign

The aim of semiotics is to be able to rigorously query and interrogate speech and writing, so that we can understand and talk about what's happening there. The great advantage of this distinction is that it enables us to talk in a coherent way about the difference between what is said and what is meant.

What is convenient about that notion of the sign articulating a relationship between signifier and signified is that it allows us to discuss and characterize multiple different signs. Roses-signifying-passion is one sign. But the same set of roses may signify other things, may represent different signs. If upon checking into a hotel, there are roses in a vase on the reception desk, those might be the sign roses-signifying-luxury, not roses-signifying-passion. A modernist, boutique hotel may deliberately and even explicitly eschew roses-signifying-luxury for, say, a stark-arrangement-of-local-conifer-branches-signifying-modernist-luxury. As we'll see, identifying these as different signs enables us to have this discussion.

So now we have understood the basic notion of signifier, signified and sign, let's move on to the notion of myth. In his essay *Myth Today*, Barthes discusses the idea of "myth" as a kind of speech that can be analyzed and understood using these same semiotic tools we use to understand other kinds of speech. The use of the word 'myth' that Barthes uses might be easier to think about nowadays as meaning something close to "meme"; not in the lolcats-bad-photoshop-with-Ariel-Black-writing sense, but in the original Dawkins sense of something which spreads person-to-person within a culture and has a particular meaning within the culture (Dawkins 1976).



Figure 1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Paris\\_Match\\_-\\_child\\_soldier\\_cover.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Paris_Match_-_child_soldier_cover.jpg)

Let's walk through his analysis. Barthes starts by explaining the cover of the June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1955 issue of *Paris Match*, a French newsmagazine. He starts by describing the cover: a picture of a young black soldier in a French uniform, saluting, "eyes fixed without doubt on a fold of the tricolor flag". This is the *signifier*.

Then there's the *signified*. In this case, Barthes tells us that the signified in this case is that "France is a great empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is not better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors". For now, we're going to take this statement as given, but we'll come back to it.

And then there's the combination of the two, the *sign*: this magazine cover suggesting that France is a great empire where all her sons serve under flag, etc. etc. Once again, it's important to recognize that there are potentially multiple signifieds and signs for a single signifier. For example, we could look at the same magazine cover in a graphic design class, and instead talk about the contrast between red logo

and the soldier's beret, or about the consistent use of sans-serif type. We would be considering the same *signifier*, but a different set of *signifieds*, resulting in different *signs* and even a different *system of signs* (which is close to what Barthes means by "myth"). Or we could look at a different *signifier*, say the 1952 Bastille Day Parade in Paris which included the Spahis, cavalry regiments of the French army from Northern Africa, which could be read as having the same *signified* meaning (France is a great empire, all her sons serve under her flag without discrimination, etc.), but together combining to create a different *sign*, which fits into the same myth.

The key here is Barthes' meta-move: he says that you can take any given *sign*, the combination of signifier and signified, and then treat the whole thing as itself a signifier, which points to another signified, constituting a new sign, which can, once again, be treated as itself a signifier, *ad infinitum*. Let's return to the example sign I used earlier: "this rose signifies your passion." The rose-signifying-your-passion sign can in turn become a secondary or meta-sign, that is, itself a signifier for a new signified, say, the fact that you are in love, or that you want to apologize to your partner (both are conventional uses of roses of contemporary romantic relationships). Or perhaps the rose-signifying-your-passion in turn signifies bereavement, that you've lost someone you love (again, because flowers are often used to express grief). The color of the rose can also be significant. If someone is making romantic overtures to you, and you want to reciprocate, the rose-signifying-your-passion will be red; if that rose is yellow, the rose signifies mere friendship and an indirect means of communicating your romantic unavailability to that individual. But now let's imagine that we're in fifteenth-century England: now, the rose-signifying-your-passion more likely indicates your partisan stance in the civil war between the Yorks and the Lancasters, the color of the rose indicating which side you're on. The point of all these examples is to show that signification never stops with a single signifier-signified pairing, or sign, but always goes on, and when it does, cultural practices and conventional meanings very quickly get activated. In this way, semiotics offers an analytic vocabulary to connect the concrete world of individual magazine covers, utterances, flowers, slogans, etc., with the intangible world of culture, social life, and intersubjective understanding.

Let's try a diagram. What we had before was this:

signifier → signified  
[signifier → signified] = sign

Now we have this:

**signifier → signified**  
[signifier → signified] = **sign**  
sign becomes a **new signifier** for a **new signified**

**rose → your passion**  
[rose → your passion] = **rose-signifying-your-passion**

rose-signifying-your-passion → **you are indicating that you're in love (or really sorry that you were a jerk, or really sad that so-and-so passed away, or a 15<sup>th</sup> century Yorkist partisan)**

Now, when talking about myths—the cogent (and often unconscious and ideological) sociocultural narratives that comprise these constellations of signs—Barthes uses slightly different vocabulary. The secondary or meta-sign in its new role as signifier, he calls the *form* (in the example just above, “rose-signifying-your-passion”). The meaning (i.e., intention and/or understanding) of that form (i.e., “you are symbolizing that you’re in love”), the thing we would have called signified, he now calls the *concept* when we’re talking about myth, and the combination of the two is the *signification*. Why these extra words to mean the same thing? Barthes points out we can stack these significations on top of each other again and again and again in one of the key concepts of Barthes’ semiotics: *an endless chain of signification*. That *Paris Match* cover signifying “France is a great empire...” is now the object of study, the *form* we’re looking at here. We can see not only the intended imperial meaning of the original image, but also that, today, most of us would read this as a colonial and ultimately racist image. What makes it racist is the subjugation of the person of color to the white nationalist enterprise, which is the myth. Thus, the racism inheres not at the lower level of the signifier but at the higher level of this as a mythic form—and if people can grasp its racism, then they must also be grasping the notion of myth and the mechanism by which it perpetuates itself through signs. Looking at myth, taking it seriously, means that we can recognize and talk about these layers upon layers of signification.

Which then becomes the basis for the analysis of myth, as follows:

When we talk about <i>myth</i> we can do this	form → concept [form → concept] = signification <sub>1</sub>		
	And we can do this again	signification <sub>1</sub> → concept [signification <sub>1</sub> → concept] = signification <sub>2</sub>	
		And again and again...	signification <sub>2</sub> → concept [signification <sub>2</sub> → concept] = signification <sub>3</sub>

This is where Barthes expands on regular notions of semantics: we’re moving on from merely looking at signifiers and signifieds, and instead taking seriously the many ways in which these myths perpetuate themselves through the systematic conventions by which we deploy signs every day.

One more note before we go on – and this is going back to Barthes’ point about the signified of the cover, about France’s empire. Barthes distinguishes between a full versus empty signifier, and this matters because it explains in part why *Myth Today* can be difficult to follow. The *empty signifier* is just the signifier on the page: a picture of a man saluting, say. It’s a signifier devoid of context or history. The *full signifier* is the full history and context of use of that particular signifier – behind the picture on the page is a real man, a person who decided to join the armed forces, maybe because he wanted to leave home, some combination of all those things. At the same time, there’s history about French militarization and colonization and civilization, all wrapped up and assumed in that image. But – and here the difficulty comes – readers of this volume probably do not know the same information behind the full signifier that Barthes does *and Barthes assumes that his (contemporary French) reader does*. So the things that Barthes takes for granted will be understood as full signifiers might today be read as empty signifiers, and therein lies the rub.

The reason Barthes thinks myth is worth discussing is all about this relationship between the full history and the empty signifier. Here’s his key point in “Myth Today”: *Evoking the myth lets you skip all the complicated and messy history*. Barthes refers to as this *naturalization*, and I’d suggest it’s the most important concept to grasp in the whole essay, because it gets at the semiotic mechanisms that underlie the formation and self-perpetuation of ideology. When things seem natural, and accepted as natural, we don’t question them and we accept them as given. Barthes calls attention to this process, to the ways in which myths and stories and assumptions are slipped under our attention and become accepted as such, become beyond question. But if we have the tools to perceive this hitherto invisible process, we have the tools (and responsibility) to call it out for what it is and to intervene.

Once you recognize this phenomenon, you can see examples of it all over the place. Evoking, say, the all-American values of Freedom and Democracy and Capitalism lets you ignore the subjugation of American Indians, slavery, and exploitation of non-renewable natural resources that were part of bringing the country to the place it is today. Evoking the world-changing powers of massively open online courses (MOOCs) lets you ignore the necessary skills of discipline, scholarship, self-motivation and linguistic ability which are so crucial for the very people such courses might most be thought to aid. Evoking the enormous powers of Big Data lets you ignore the enormous variety of intentions and desires and needs and situations masked behind actions captured in petabytes and petabytes of database entries and logs. (Yes, I am calling MOOCs and Big Data in contemporary IT discourse *myths* in the Barthesian sense.) In each case, it is not that one of these readings is the One True Meaning and the other is naïve claptrap; it’s rather that approaching these myths with Barthes’ tools in hand lets you recognize and engage with both sets of meanings.

And this is Barthes’ aim in this essay. We could make a good case for dividing his essay into two parts. In the first, Barthes has defines his terms and frames his

argument. He's made a rigorous and logical case to explain how language is used to achieve certain socio-cultural effects. It's thorough, it's precise, and it's the bedrock upon which he rests the rest of the article, where he goes on to apply this system of thought and discourse to a variety of topics. In particular, he starts with looking at poetry, and analyzing, using this system of semiotic analysis, what poetry is and how it works. He then goes on to look at some other topics: the changing notion of the bourgeoisie, the politicized speech of the left, the politicized speech of the right. Rather than follow these paths, I think it is more immediately relevant to the world of HCI to think about Barthes' approach and what it would say about not poetry or politics or proverbs, but Science.

Science is often presented at the high school (and, unfortunately, often at the collegiate) level as a set of ground truths about the world, things that are true regardless of petty details, like who performs an experiment or where it happened. And for a few basic facts, this is true: for example, objects on earth start to accelerate downwards when you drop them, at  $9.8\text{m/s}^2$ . But most of the time, things are a little more problematic. Questions like who performs an experiment, what they're expecting to discover when they perform that experiment, who paid for an experiment – all have all sorts of impacts on the knowledge that is produced by the process of science.

Let's take an example from outside the field of HCI. I did work for a while on computerized smell output, and here's one peer-reviewed paper on smell published in a widely cited journal (impact factor for 2011: 3.968; for comparison, this is roughly equivalent to the impact factor of the journal *HCI*):

Hirsch, AR (2000) Effects of Garlic Bread on family interactions.  
*Psychosomatic Medicine* 62 p103-4.

To summarize the research: after a single-blind, 50-family study, Dr. Hirsch concludes that serving garlic bread at dinner increases positive family interactions and decreases negative interactions. Very well. Garlic bread for everyone!

So what Barthes would have to say about this exemplar of Science? The *signifier* is this two page article. And, as noted, we could use this study to signify many things. Let us conjecture that on the plane of a linguistic, non-mythic, system, the *signified* is that garlic bread improves positive family interactions, and thus if you wish to improve your family interactions then you should purchase garlic bread. The combination of these two, the *sign*, we might state as "Hirsch (2000) says garlic bread improves family interactions".

At the same time, there are many other things going on here. The acknowledgement notes that the research was sponsored by the Campbell Soup Company, who no doubt sponsor significant amounts of research on topics of interest to them. But as the reader of this text probably knows, there is a space between doing science and getting things published in a peer-reviewed forum. So what additional value is



coming from the fact that this paper is published in a peer-reviewed journal? So let's give it the Barthes treatment. We can now treat that *sign* we discussed in the last paragraph as a *form*, and then propose that the *concept* is that the publication of Hirsch (2000) in a peer-reviewed journal means that this research is more scientific, more valid, more validated, more correct, more true, than if it were merely an internal research study. And the *signification* is that this combination of article and publication venue, is a story, a myth about scientific quality and hence reliability. It is a myth that says that *because* this research is good and valid and scientific, *because* it's published in a peer reviewed journal, *then* you should buy garlic bread if you wish to improve your family interactions, *because Science says so*.

Now, one of the myths about Science is that is the ultimate truth, that it has the final say on things, regardless of situation or context. You might recall Donna Haraway's addressing this myth in her essay *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, in her description of the omnipotent, omniscient view given by visual scientific instruments:

Vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all perspective gives way to infinitely mobile vision, which no longer seems just mythically about the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice. And like the god trick, this eye fucks the world to make techno-monsters." (Haraway 1991, 198)

So what does Haraway mean in this glorious, grad-student-delighting paragraph? She is making a point about a new way of knowing which is in contrast to assumptions about the myth of all-knowing Science: *situated knowledges*. These are knowledges – or ways of knowing - that are unabashedly un-objective, that recognize that they are from and part of a particular time and place, and that they reflect that particular time and place. In many ways, Haraway is continuing Barthes' project of resisting normalization, of actively resisting, in this case, the myth that Science is where all the answers lie.

The myth of Science here is that power, that intellectual supremacy over all other ways of knowing – local knowledge, tradition, intuition, etc – regardless of situation and context. And that's where Barthes' meta move comes in: it points out that *Science doesn't get to have the final say*. Science has to have a conversation like everyone else does; it is answerable to the same questions and conversations and discussions. Science is not "natural"; it is situated and contextual and answerable as much as any other system of knowledge.

I choose Science rather than poetry or some other collection of meaning-creation because it is perhaps the most egregious offender in HCI of claiming ultimate knowledge. As such, in treating this myth about Science as one that we can and should analyze and hold responsible, we can start to ask questions about how knowledge is produced and legitimated, and how it thereby has influence in how IT actually gets designed and evaluated.

Let's go back to the garlic bread. Do you think this result is valid? More specifically, for the fifty families studied, in Chicago in, say, 1999, do you think there were more positive interactions at the dinners where they ate garlic bread? Do you think that, in general, garlic bread really makes for happier families? Are there families for whom this might not be true? People with celiac disease, perhaps, or with allergies to alliums? This study was performed in Chicago. Do you think the results are valid in Los Angeles? In Jaipur, India? In Jeddah, Saudi Arabia? In Suzhou, China? Did your thoughts on this work change when you notice that it was sponsored by the Campbell Soup Company<sup>1</sup>, makers of Pepperidge Farm® Garlic Bread? How does this make you feel about the value of "peer-reviewed" as a mark of quality or scientific validity?

And that is the power of Barthes' approach to analyzing myth. He's not content to let sleeping myths lie: he picks them up and points them out and shakes them and tries to explain what they're made of, and in so doing enjoins you the reader to do the same. He holds forms, things, objects, and experiences accountable for the myths they engender. His contribution is not his analysis of this or that magazine cover or ad: it is the analytic strategy that he teaches us and exemplifies for us, so that we can do this work ourselves.

## Myth in HCI

So let's explore taking Barthes' system of analysis and applying it to HCI. I've picked two sub-fields of HCI that I think are ripe for such analysis: HCI4D and sustainable HCI. Both are quite aware of the role they play as sub-fields of the larger field of HCI, but I think both benefit from some thoughtful analysis of the myths upon which they rest and which they engender.

First, let's look at ICT4D: information and communication technologies for development. ICT4D is one of the more reflective parts of HCI: it has spent a lot of time thinking about itself and the work that it does. Michael Best's paper (2010), for example, is a reflective look at ICT4D, taking a thoughtful look at epistemological differences between computer scientists and social scientists publishing in the same field, and concluding that one of the fundamental problems of the field is that it has failed to become a progressive enterprise, one in which work in the field builds on previous work in the field, learning from their successes and mistakes. We can read Best's analysis as a way to encourage us to look further at myths in ICT4D— to a greater and lesser degree in different research groups and fields and situations, but myths we can see and identify. This is far from the first attempt to look at the mythology inherent in ICT4D. Best's article is reflective from the inside; Irani et al. draw very similar conclusions in their paper *Postcolonial Computing* (2010).

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<sup>1</sup> Full disclosure: I consulted on two occasions for the Campbell Soup Company, in 2003 and 2004, as an expert on kitchens of the future.

So what do myths of ICT look like? Here are some proposals:

- Technology itself is universal: the assumption that a technological solution, like an laptop, which works and solves a problem in San Francisco will do the same in Tokyo – or Lima, or in the Kalahari desert.
- Technological solutions will solve problems, without change in accompanying social structures, infrastructure, support and assumptions<sup>2</sup>.
- Research methods are universal: for example, participatory design, an approach developed in Scandinavian countries, will work as well in South Africa (c.f. the issues discussed in Toyama 2010).
- We can solve major problems, like ongoing systemic poverty, by technological intervention.

Barthes gives us a way to analyze these situations in a constructive manner. For example, let's look at the myth that problems can be solved by implementing technological solutions. Best describes the solution to that as "Avoid the pitfalls of fetishistic techno-utopianism that, regardless of our rhetoric, is a far-too-common reality." Let's look at how we might represent that:

technology → solving problems

[technology in developing country → solving problems in developing country] = ICT4D

Best proposes replacing this myth of technological solutions with a replacement mythology of long-term and constructive intellectual engagement ("Spend time on fundamental innovation and work; this means, in particular, to and patient money supporting multi-year initiatives"), relegating this particular myth to merely a component part of a bigger (and hopefully more powerful) supportive myth of long-term engagement, funding and innovation.

A note: it's easy to cast stones here, and that's not something particularly useful to do – and I enthusiastically apply these criticisms to my own work in ICT4D as much as anyone else's. Indeed, it's easy to point the finger and say *thou shalt not* – in fact, it's almost impossible not to as a way to make sense of the situation. Myth making is a powerful part of creating narratives and consciously doing so is arguably part of responsible scholarship.

Let's continue this look at another subfield: sustainable HCI. Sustainable HCI is concerned with bringing HCI's focus and expertise to bear on the problems of environmental sustainability. Once again, I would consider it one of the more

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, troubles with rolling out a cellphone-based RFID system in Haiti (Kaye et al. 2010): users complained "You need a depot", meaning a location with spares, replacements and support for these technological systems.

reflective subfields of HCI that has spent time thinking about its own impact and epistemological approach. But let's try and identify some of the myths of sustainable HCI. For example, they might include:

- There's a technical solution to sustainability problems.
- It is in our power to do something around the problem of climate change by doing HCI as usual, just with a different focus.
- We can solve sustainability problems with individual interventions.
- Sustainability is a problem that can be addressed with HCI; furthermore, it is a problem that can be addressed by changing individual behaviors; even furthermore, individual behaviors will change if only we can bring people's attention to their own practices.

Let's look at this last myth in some detail. For example, I recently received a letter from my local town council asking me to cut back my water consumption by 10%.

[Cut personal water use by 10% → saving water] = aggregate personal action resulting in positive change.

This is because in California, where I live, there is a significant water shortage. A Sustainable HCI response to that problem might be, for example, to put a display on my showerhead showing the water usage (e.g., the one reported in Kuznetsov & Paulos 2010).

But the problem with this myth is that the vast majority of water consumption in California comes from agricultural uses, particularly for high water-consumption crops such as rice or beef: as much as 80%, by some estimates, with additional significant usage coming from private lawn (and particularly golf course) sprinklers. There are assumptions inherent in these myths about power and agency that simply aren't true. In a situation like this one, I simply cannot make a significant difference in California's water consumption as an individual householder, but other people, who have more power over the policies that govern that consumption, can indeed have an impact. But the latter point seems to let me off the hook. Perhaps the best agency I have to contribute to a solution to the California water shortage is not an ambient display in my bathroom, but a commitment I could make to spend that time contacting appropriate politicians and decision makers to encourage changes in policy. That might be an effective replacement for the existing myth, and one which recognizes the potential danger inherent in such assumptions.

## Discussion

Barthes repeatedly describes the construction of myths as a negative criticism: for him, myths are a way of articulating that people are doing something bad or doing something wrong. But I think in HCI, with our emphasis on building and creating as a form of knowledge production, we can be more conciliatory and say it's pretty

difficult *not* to create myths, and that the creation of myths is itself productive of a certain kind of thought. It is easy to stand on one side of the fence and point fingers; in HCI, the problem becomes how to build something which does, in one way or another, make positive change in the world. This is perhaps the great dilemma of critical HCI approaches: how to recognize the tensions exposed by the myths in a field and yet to build something that contributes anyway.

More than anything else, I think the role of Barthes and his analysis of myth is to make us reconsider our notions of failure. A core underlying myth of HCI is that very myth of individual action: the myth, that, for example, someone can build a new app or device, deploy it, and thereby solve a major problem. What an enormous burden to put upon ourselves! If you go to an underdeveloped country for a few weeks or months, build a system and deploy it, and it doesn't solve a major problem, then we consider that to be failure.

But failure itself can generate insights – as shown explicitly in Best (2010), again, or in a carefully argued piece, Gaver et al. (2009). The myth of success, particularly individual success, is perhaps the most pervasive myth in human-computer interaction research, and arguably a larger myth of Silicon Valley, and even of science and capitalism in general. It's a myth that individuals are responsible for their own success or failure; that ultimately unsustainable approaches – a dependence on fossil fuels, on ongoing economic growth – are unremarkable elements of success. There are no easy answers here, and pulling out elements of these myths is itself a disturbing thing to do: where do we draw the line? How can we avoid concluding that it's all a pointless exercise?

I would argue that the field, and our own work, benefits from the context and awareness that actively identifying myths brings to a research practice in HCI. What matters is being alert to recognizing and confronting myths, and, in the context of HCI, to hold programs and websites and research studies and research papers accountable and responsible for the myths that they leverage, reference, encourage and engender and, tacitly, legitimate themselves with. Such a task is much more likely if we have analytic tools to help us do it, and that's what Barthes provides in the excerpt included in this book. All of us have been taught to be suspicious about how dominant discourses—be they Hollywood movies or articles in elite science journals—perpetuate assumptions, e.g., about the roles for women, the notion of family or citizenship, the “best” ways to make knowledge. But in practice, this is actually a very difficult thing to do—few scientists want to perpetuate bigotry or unexamined assumptions about knowledge-making. What Barthes gives us, then, is a technical vocabulary and methodology that is suited to this task of revealing the mechanisms by which these assumptions enter our language as natural-seeming semiotic structures that—like a magazine ad selling spaghetti sauce—seem unworthy of our attention.

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