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UCSB English Professor Alan Liu Lays Down 'The Laws of Cool'

What is cool?

The answer, says Alan Liu, a professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, depends entirely upon whom one asks.

"Cool is many things," says Liu. "But right now in particular, it has to do with technology and information. What particularly interests me is what I call information cool and more generally technological cool."

In "The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information," published recently by the University of Chicago Press, Liu examines the influence of cool on popular culture, education, and the high-tech knowledge-work corporate world where what's cool is at times at odds with what is required or necessary.

Liu lays out the book's points of inquiry in its introduction.

"What is knowledge work?" he asks. "How does information work sustain it? And how might the culture of such information---self-named 'cool'---challenge knowledge work to open a space, as yet culturally sterile (co-opted, jejune, anarchistic, terroristic), for a more humane hack of contemporary knowledge?"

"The Laws of Cool" also looks at the academy and the relevance of arts and humanities classes to its students.

"This book is about our students and what the arts and humanities are training people to do," Liu says. "There is a kind of immense disconnect right now between our cool students and ourselves as educators."

Born in the jazz culture of the 1930s, the concept of cool has maintained an aloof and slightly subversive air about it as it has proliferated from one generation of youth culture to the next, from cool-cat musicians, hoods, and beatniks, to hippies, punks and rappers. And wherever cool goes, middleclass culture travels a step or two behind.

More and more Americans are employed each year in what is called knowledge work, Liu says. Knowledge work is computer-based "head work." Knowledge workers don't create anything tangible. They don't build or grow a product.

They don't pack or transport it.

They don't sell or repair it. Instead, seated at their computers, they advertise it, market it, finance it, insure it, or manage it.

"Knowledge work is very high level, very technical, very advanced head work," Liu says.

"It is in charge of the entire emerging sphere of what they call service work, which manages and insures and communicates products."

The same people who use high tech equipment to do work also use that equipment to participate in culture.

They listen to CDs, watch DVDs, play video games, visit web sites, download digital media on to their computers and MP-3 devices.

In the process of seeking what they consider to be cool, they reject things already appropriated by mainstream culture, Liu says---things like traditional outlets for culture such as literature and the arts.

In a similar way, they reject wholesale assimilation into corporate structure, adopting slightly quirky behaviors as a way of declaring their independence.

"The motto of my book is 'I work here, but I'm cool,'" Liu says. "I sort of see that as being the implicit ethos or attitude of cool today. I'm not so cool as to actively rebel

or quit, but I am just cool enough to be slightly kinky in the web pages I browse at work, I'm not quite subversive, but my behavior asserts that I'm me and not just part of this corporation or this team."

Such behavior poses a challenge for business and for education, Liu says. In "The Laws of Cool," he proposes some solutions, including finding new ways to educate the cool.

"That means trying to show them that the things society values---history, for example---can be just as cool as popular culture and media.

The book makes some suggestions for how humanists might collaborate with artists to produce software and other kinds of educational environments that are cool in some way."

Might such a collaboration produce a really cool professor?

"I don't necessarily want to seem cool to my students," Liu says. "We will never be cool enough for our students.

But it would be nice to show them that cool has a history and that historical consciousness and humanistic knowledges---literature, the arts and so on---can themselves be cool."

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