

TECHNOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS

OR

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON OUR WAY TO THE FUTURE (We Never Got There)



by R. Scott Daniels

As society enters into an age in which technology becomes more and more prevalent, an argument develops on whether technology will have a positive or negative effect upon us. What both sides of the argument tend to ignore is the ways in which technology in their debate ends up reinforcing many of the power structures already in existence. One of the major losers in this discussion is women.

What is lost in the debate is the thinking of technology as a politics in and of itself. While there is much debate over what type of vision is desirable, there is little over the ways in which technology constrains that debate. By arguing that technology is freeing or enslaving involves a vision of technology as either neutral or as evil. If instead, technology is viewed as political, one is more able to see why it might want the debate to focus on its neutrality or evilness within a society. By focusing the debate in this way, we suddenly end up wound more tightly in a politics we are trying to avoid, one in which the dominate power structures remain not only in place, but also with a stronger grip on society than it previously held. This is an especially dire effect for women.

Technology has been traditionally used as a way to silence women while exploiting their cheap labor at the same time. For example, the typewriter did not provide a chance for women to enter into the workforce as is commonly believed. Women were already beginning to enter into business in large numbers before the typewriter was fully accepted. What the typewriter was able to do instead, was to create a job in which women were kept silent, with very little advancement opportunity. Women's introduction into business allowed the owners of businesses to transform the clerk from a business trainee position into a low paying typist-filing position. This allowed businesses to hire greater numbers of people to handle the increase in paperwork without having to hire what was essentially a management trainee every time. The typewriter was instrumental in this transformation (Davies, 1979). The typewriter was also helpful in keeping women silent as they now became the conveyors of men's voices through their new jobs and in the process lost much of their own voice since it was the printed voice which was seen as the legitimate one.

In keeping with its marginalizing influence on women, computer technology was also important in many ways. Once again, as with the typewriter, the woman was used as a way to introduce new technology and cheaper labor into the workplace. Sally Hacker (1979) in her study of Affirmative Action at AT&T shows how AT&T, through the introduction of women and minorities into selected areas, was able to not only introduce labor saving technologies into its operations, but also actually decrease the number of women working at AT&T in both actual numbers and in percentage terms. As women ended up adopting technologies to try and survive, the technologies themselves were creating a situation in which it became increasingly more difficult for women to survive. Women learned to program computers in order to get low paying data processing jobs. Meanwhile men were staying largely technically illiterate and holding on to jobs that were

difficult to automate or technicize. However as soon as a job was technicized, it soon became a job done by fewer women for much less pay.

Throughout the twentieth century women have been used to introduce technology into business and into the public consciousness. Women were the first computer programmers (Wajcman 1991, p. 158), the first computer users, and the bodies by which new automating technologies were carried into the office place. And yet despite this close association of women and technology, they have consistently been denied the status of "user" in the popular perception. Not only has the user been defined as male, but the technology itself has increasingly become female. In this engendering process a masculinist power structure further writes itself upon the body.

The extent to which the woman has been denied her status as a user of technology is made apparent when one considers that most of the serious hacking against businesses is not done by the mysterious male hacker that breaks in through a series of external barriers, but by the women employees of the business world (Ross 1992). The damage and loss in time that they have done is much more than that of the popular culture "hacker," yet they are still denied a status as user, even though they have shown a competency that surpasses most men. Instead we continue in the writing the user as male and the used as female.

One reason for this is because of the noisiness of the computer. As technology has traditionally been used to silence women, the computer is a very noisy technology, a look at any electronic bulletin board will confirm this. Since computer technology gives a user a means by which they can have a voice, it becomes difficult to use it to keep women without a voice...unless you just deny that they are capable of being users. By writing women as non-users of computer technology there still remains the ability to use them for their cheap labor in using the technology while denying that what they use it for is in any way meaningful. Because the user is defined as male, the woman is denied any credibility before she even enters into a computer discussion. In this way she is silenced before she even begins to try to speak. Although she is a user, she is denied user status in favor of the male and the predominate power structure which favors males.

The old strategies of dominance are further reinforced through the eroticization of the new technology in the face of the male user. As the technology has entered into the public consciousness, there has been a shift in the popular view of the technology from one in which the computer was a companion to humans to one in which it is a mate of the (male) user. As we continue ignoring the politics involved in the introductions of technologies in our society, they have managed to cause us, none the less, to adapt to them and their processes. In the process women are made voiceless and controlled by male users. Women become the supreme objects of male desire and control. Their purpose becomes one in which they provide their bodies for the use of males.

William Gibson (1984) presents an understanding of this politics behind technology in his book *Neuromancer*. In the book technology has caused a complete transformation of the world, but the former power relations remain in place. Of primary interest here is the way in which the users have been defined as male and at what cost this comes to women.

For the main character, Case, a cyberspace cowboy, the technology is his love. "Jacking in" is the purest form of desire available to him. Technology is not merely a thing, it is a mate in which he is fully enveloped in his

interactions with it. While using it, nothing else exists for him. He is the person with the capabilities in the story, he is the one who can access cyberspace and use it for his goals. He is the user and women are excluded.

However, there is a woman in the story also. Molly is unfeminine in many ways, however she is never able to escape her feminized status. Despite being a user of technology, she is still denied a user status. Molly has enhanced herself technologically, she literally wears the technology she uses, it is a part of her. No other main character in the story has had to augment themselves to such an extent in order to survive in the new world. Yet none of these enhancements allow her to access the Net, that is purely the domain of men. Her enhancements are for the body, something the "cowboys" despise. All the cowboys want to do is escape their flesh, referring to it as meat. What Molly does is sell her body. She provides her body to do the physical work men now find distasteful. She can only find employment in jobs men deem low status. Despite the attempt to write her own identity, she ends up being used for men's purposes. She ends up selling her body for men's uses and abuses. The politics involved in using the technology keep her from breaking the strategies of dominance in which she finds herself continually bound.

The reinforcement of strategies of dominance is a major part of technology. As we live our daily lives we are constantly assaulted with symbols that reinforce our position relative to others. Those that have privileged positions (white men) within a society engage in the constant play and use of these symbols while those less privileged are the boards on which these symbols are played and employed. However, as the privileged use these symbols, the symbols become common and boring. The use of the symbols is important to maintain the strategy of dominance, however boredom in the symbols threatens the strategy by creating a situation in which the symbols are not used. Computers and other technologies help to solve this problem by creating a system in which the symbols are constantly changed. Suddenly the old strategy of dominance is intriguing again as the need to interpret the symbols becomes a constant process in the society. What the computer provides for an old system of dominance is the reproduction of the symbols of dominance through an endless variety of forms (Buckley 1991). By concentrating exclusively on whether or not technology is beneficial or detrimental to a particular type of politics ignores the ways in which that technology can privilege already existing strategies of domination. To ignore this privileging just causes us to continue the reproduction of the strategies of dominance as legitimate. Despite our desire for a better future, we instead just engage in the same patterns in which we currently find ourselves.

Not much of a future, eh?

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