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The CPSR Newsletter

Volume 14, No. 1

COMPUTER PROFESSIONALS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Winter/Spring 1996

Technology and Jobs: Forging a New Social Contract?

by Jim Davis
Midwest Region Director

I do not wish to contribute in any way to selling labor down the river, and I am quite aware that any labor, which is in competition with slave labor, where the slaves are human or mechanical, must accept the conditions of work of slave labor.

- Norbert Wiener

At the end of 1995, an Associated Press poll indicated that the economy and jobs continue to top the list of concerns for many Americans. According to Challenger and Gray, an outplacement firm located in Chicago, some 3 million U.S. workers have been laid off from their jobs since the beginning of 1989, while over the past five years, Fortune 500 companies regularly announced large-scale job-cuts (10,000 or more). At one point, over 3,000 jobs were being cut from corporate America each day. And, as recently as January, 1996, AT&T announced plans for massive layoffs over the next three years, while Apple announced cuts of 1,800 jobs, with the number expected to go higher¹. These pronouncements have punctuated American's anxiety over jobs, even after three years of supposed economic recovery.

Our national anxiety is rooted in the industrial age social contract: workers sell their abilities to employers in exchange for wages and then trade their wages in the marketplace for goods they themselves, or other workers have produced. Overlaying this basic arrangement, an entire array of social institutions and agreements arose to ensure a steady flow of healthy workers who have the requisite skills. The core of this arrangement was the "job," but with the widespread application of new labor-

replacing technologies, the concept of "job" is undergoing a profound transformation. Old labor requirements no longer hold, and old ways of organizing the production of goods and services are no longer relevant.

At the heart of this transformation is computer-based technology manifesting in a variety of forms, from numerically controlled machines to robotics to "expert systems" to infrastructural developments in digital communications and transportation.

The relationship between automation and work, however, is as old as work itself. Perhaps this has been so much the case, that engineers and computer scientists have not previously felt the need to address issues of social responsibility. To the extent that the relationship of computing technology and work has been articulated, it has been done mostly in the following areas: participatory design (where workers design the tools they will be working with), job privacy issues, and health and safety issues (such as the recent rise of repetitive strain injuries). Nevertheless, the meta-issue of work itself has been largely ignored.

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ENGINEERING PERIODICAL

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A Curriculum on Jobs and Technology

by Kate Williams

Young people are inheriting a world where technology is outstripping their ability to enter the workforce and sign on to any social contract. But can they see that and take power from that knowledge?

To include them in the current debates about technological joblessness and who will decide the future, a book and curriculum have been developed to teach the relationship between technology, jobs and community. Making use of electronic discussion lists and the World Wide Web, a core of teachers plan to expand this effort and bring on-campus classes and newly-wired communities together to learn about and discuss the issues.

Job?Tech: The Technological Revolution and Its Impact on Society, edited by Abdul Alkalimat, Doug Gills and Kate Williams and published by Twenty-First Century Books in Chicago, is a

collection of presentations at the March 1995 Midwest Conference on Technology, Employment and Community which CPSR co-sponsored. A major feature of the book is a course outline and a bibliography.

Eight professors from around the country have adopted the book's course outline and are teaching it this year in classes covering the history of science, black studies, sociology, urban planning, and technology. Their experiences will form the basis for 50 sites to teach the curriculum in Fall, 1996, and they are encouraging teachers and others to advocate for local course adoption, supported by Internet links.

A companion volume of talks from the November, 1995 "Processes of Change in Nature, Science and Society" conference at M.I.T. will be available this

summer to supplement other readings. A similar conference, planned for Fall 1996, in Los Angeles, will be the basis for a third, bilingual (Spanish/English) volume.

CPSR chapters in Boston and Chicago have played a key role in organizing the voices that speak from these volumes. With members on and off campus involved in connecting low-income communities and teaching about technology, this "Job?Tech" curriculum is an important tool to take CPSR's knowledge and message further into public debates and to help answer the question, "Who decides the future?"

Copies of *Job?Tech: The Technological Revolution and Its Impact on Society* are available from the CPSR National Office for \$15.

Book Corner

Electronic Privacy Sourcebook: Documents on the Battle for Privacy in the Age of Surveillance. Bruce Schneier (Oak Park, IL) and David Banisar (Washington, D.C.). John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1995. 592 pp. Paper \$39.95 US/\$55.95 CAN

Advancements in cryptography and digital telephones could make it nearly impossible for law enforcement and regulatory agencies to monitor electronic communications, as they are capable of doing with traditional communications technologies. The government wants to use controversial new tools to guarantee such access, but these could compromise communications privacy for both individuals and companies.

The *Electronic Privacy Sourcebook* will be a useful guide for anyone whose future depends upon the emerging information superhighway. David Banisar, an EPIC employee and shaker and mover in CPSR, co-authored this important

resource text with security expert Bruce Schneier. Their 592-page *Sourcebook* serves as a definitive collection of classic and previously secret government and industry documents detailing initiatives and strategies for monitoring electronic communications.



Civilizing Cyberspace: Policy, Power, and the Information Super Highway. Steven Miller, Addison-Wesley, November, 1995. 413 pp. \$25. Hardcover.

Teacher, writer and community organizer Steven E. Miller is a member of the National Board of Directors of CPSR. In this book he examines public policy debates concerning the information superhighway, weaving together business trends, political economy, American history, and technological savvy. He maintains, all the while, a sharp focus on the issues of concern to the average citizen and policy-makers — universal service, privacy, free speech protection, democracy, intellectual property, and much more.

The book has received numerous positive reviews, including the following praises:

"Finally here is a book that clarifies the issues and lets those of us who are not computer jocks — female or male — understand what's going on behind the headlines so that we may become part of the decision-making process."

— Letty Cottin Pogrebin
Founding editor, *Ms.* magazine

"*Civilizing Cyberspace* provides the best overall perspective on information highway policy issues that I've yet come across."

— Miles Fidelman
President, The Center for Civic Networking

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