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EDITORIAL

Our--in many ways--uncritical transformation to an information society has attracted the attention of social philosophers such as Jacques Ellul, Ivan Illich, and Neil Postman. Ellul's injunction that we need to prepare children "to live in technology and at the same time against technology" and Postman's observation that we are "informing ourselves to death" were intended to initiate much-needed dialogue on the consequences of this radical social transformation. In this month's issue of DEOSNEWS, Don Olcott presents his perspectives on this phenomenon by drawing parallels to the social transformation described by George Orwell in his novel 1984.

DEOSNEWS subscribers who find themselves intrigued by these concepts may be interested in an upcoming conference to be held at Penn State September 17-20, 1997. "Education and Technology: Asking the Right Questions" will feature, among others, Neil Postman and Ivan Illich in an exploration of the role of educational policy in relation to the expansion of technology in personal and social life. Additional information is available from Dr. Henry Johnson, 406 Rackley Building, Penn State University, University Park, PA, 16802. Tel: 814-865-1488; Fax: 814-865-1480; e-mail: hcj2@psu.edu.

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WHERE ARE YOU GEORGE ORWELL? WE GOT THE YEAR . . . MISSED

THE MESSAGE!

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During the last decade, the proliferation of communications technologies has transformed every major social institution in our society from business, education, and government to medicine, insurance, travel, and entertainment. We can shop on television, access our banking accounts by voice mail, reserve our recreational and travel itineraries by computer, and communicate instantaneously with people worldwide via the Internet and World Wide Web.

Technology has changed the way we live, the way we work, and, perhaps most importantly, the way we learn.

Today, we embrace technology as the inevitable evolution of modern science. And yet, our preoccupation with pushing back the "technological" frontiers of knowledge has created an ostensible delusion that permeates our social conscience and conveys the message that technology is synonymous with progress. We embark

upon each new endeavor with the illusion that technology can expurgate any problem . . . efficiently, economically, and without impending social consequences.

In retrospect, recent history has shown that the advent of new technologies has been accompanied by auspicious promises of progress whereby technology would resolve our major social problems and move us into a new era. The paradox, of course, has been that with each successive technological revolution new issues have arisen whose origins emanate from the technology used to allegedly solve earlier problems. In fact, technology as a problem-solving strategy has been a salient catalyst for creating new social problems.

The examples from contemporary history are many. The Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century was heralded as the epitome of American progress. This age, however, was marked by mass industrialization, urbanization, and immigration that created environmental, housing, child labor, and discriminatory injustices as well as political and economic isolation for the rural populace (Hunt, Martin, Rosenwein, Po-chia Hsia, & Smith 1995).

During the second world war, the American government invested nearly two billion dollars in the Manhattan Project and the development of the atomic bomb. The benefits of this technology, then and now, are still arguable. What is not arguable is that the nuclear age simultaneously created a post-war era dominated by political polarization that more than once took us to the edge of

Armageddon. From the scientific laboratories of the University of Chicago and the mountainous retreat of Los Alamos, our pursuit of progress via technology left us pondering the moral dilemma: What have we done? (Goodchild 1981).

Of course, society has benefited immensely from the technological innovations of the twentieth century. This fact should not be underemphasized. The television revolutionized communications and created an indispensable venue for politics, education, and entertainment. We all enjoy the information access that television affords each of us in our daily lives.

The evolution of the computer has transformed education, medicine, business, and government and has been the single most important catalyst for moving society from the industrial to the information age. These advances, however, have also blinded us, perhaps inadvertently, to the adverse effects of technology. The "progress" axiom has become so pervasive that we no longer question whether technology may have unanticipated negative consequences.

Even the aforementioned innovations have created unforeseen consequences. Television violence is now the norm rather than the exception. Albert Bandura's experiments from the 1960s on the imitation effects of television violence on children are alive and "not so well" in today's society.

The computer (and other technological toys) has created a technological dependency that leaves one perplexed at times. Do we remember the written word and the creative imagination that was the

essence of Mozart, Bach, Emily Dickensen, and George Bernard Shaw, those whose "high tech" was simply the pen? Do we remember the gift of the hand-written letter. . . not only to receive one but to write one? If we have lost the written word to an earlier age, then we have lost much more than any of us are willing to acknowledge.

When 1984 came and went, many people dismissed Orwell's prophecy about a technologically dependent society and the inequitable dispersion of political and economic power as absurd.

Today, we are seeing the concentration of technological political and economic power manifested in unprecedented corporate mergers and the growing disparity of technological access and use between urban and rural societies across the globe (Orwell 1949). "Big Brother" and "Doublethink," while subtle and elusive, persist in the information age.

The passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act in America will, in fact, increase these trends despite the rhetoric from corporate media moguls about the benevolence of free market enterprise in the media world and its unquestionable contributions to societal progress. An illusionary progress at best and certainly not for the benefit of all.

Perhaps, as many literary critics have observed, Orwell's words have served more as a warning, rather than a prophecy, about the role of technology in modern society. The essence of Orwellian thought was about questioning the role of technology (and who

controls it) in our lives rather than a naive preoccupation with the year 1984 (Orwell 1949). But have we heard his warning? The answer is a compelling and tragic no!

Given the promises and perils of technology, what can we as educators do to harness technology? How can we as educators enlighten today's youth about their technological choices? We have arrived at the technological crossroads . . . where do we go from here?

First, we must dispense with the axiom that technology is synonymous with progress. We must pause long enough to step out of the technological maze and define the social boundaries of technology in education, society, and our lives rather than creating a culture permeated by what I call "techapathy."

What is techapathy? That point where we become so dependent on technology that we forget those creative and imaginative powers that have served us so well in the past. That point where we become frustrated that technology has invaded our freedom, limited our choices, and taken control of our future. We must be willing to embark on our own personal journey across the technological maze and ask some difficult questions:

- * When is technology too much technology?
- * What are the social ramifications of a technology-dependent society?
- * What are the adverse effects of technology on our children?
- * What is our responsibility for setting the boundaries of technology

for our children's generation?

Moreover, techpathy manifests itself in controversial social and legal challenges. Today, the Internet and World Wide Web provide unprecedented access to vital information for educators, doctors, students, and families. To be sure, technology has blurred the boundaries between the workplace, the home, and the classroom.

At first glance, these appear as glorious achievements for the information age. A second look, however, tells a different story, particularly for our children: access to adult entertainment, the latest list of para-military organizations, racial and hate groups with their own home pages, and the transmission of pornographic and indecent material (supposedly illegal) to minors.

Of course, the free speech guaranteed by the 1st Amendment stretches our tolerance levels here as in other social arenas. And yet, while we appropriately embrace the heritage of these rights in a free and democratic society, one must ponder the question: What's wrong with this picture? Is technology out of control? Who controls what, for whom, and by what means?

We are the last generation that bridges the old with the new. We remember a world where television violence was the exception rather than the norm . . . a world without remote controls and channel surfing . . . an era of pencils and typewriters rather than computers . . . a world where cellular phones were the imaginative domain of Gene Roddenberry and our Star Trek characters.

Today, our children are not only technologically literate . . . they are

technologically cultured. By this, I mean their level of comfort with technology is so high and so pervasive, one must question their capacity to define the social boundaries of technology in future society. If our own generation is indifferent to these questions, what credence will our children give them?

As we gaze out across the social landscape, no-one seems to be asking these questions. Again, the axiom of "technology as progress" has created a social paralysis oblivious to these crucial questions. As educators, we must be willing to ask these questions and engage in discourse about the relative merits of technology in all facets of human endeavor, from our classrooms to our homes to our social institutions.

We need not approach technology with fear and apathy, but rather with deliberation, forethought, and perhaps even compassion.

Technology is not necessarily synonymous with progress. The sooner we consider this premise, the sooner we can collectively establish the social boundaries of technology and impart a wisdom to our children that says "just because we can, doesn't mean we should."

In the educational arena, we must continually strive to create a balance between our investments in human resources and in advanced technologies. Technology's greatest contribution to education is that it has forced us to revisit the question: What constitute effective teaching and learning?

Today, the educational enterprise is being transformed by the

promises and perils of technology. And yet, it is equally true that technology does, in fact, demand ethical and moral reflection (Reed and Stork 1990). This is self-evident by the fact that mass deployment of technology in all spheres of human endeavor affects the lives of many. The crucial questions, however, cannot be answered if they are not being asked.

We educators (particularly those who control technology) have a responsibility to reflect upon the ethical and moral issues around technology. We are a voice for successive generations, for teaching and learning, and for promoting public discourse about the relative merits of technology in education and society. Mr. Orwell would certainly agree with this assertion and would echo that "just because we can, doesn't mean we would should" is a good place to begin anew.

Perhaps George Orwell's vision is best summed up by Walter Cronkite in his 1983 preface to a reprint edition of 1984:

If not a prophecy, what was 1984? It was, as many have noticed, a warning: a warning about the future of human freedom in a world where political organization and technology can manufacture power in dimensions that would have stunned the imaginations of earlier ages.

. . . . It was a novelistic essay on power, how it is acquired and maintained, how those who seek it or seek to keep it tend to sacrifice anything and everything in its name.

1984 is an anguished lament and a warning that we may not be

strong enough nor wise enough nor moral enough to cope with the kind of power we have learned to amass.

That warning vibrates powerfully when we allow ourselves to sit still and think carefully about orbiting satellites that can read our license plates in a parking lot and computers that can tap into thousands of phone calls and telex transmissions at once and other computers that can do our banking and purchasing, can watch the house and tell a monitoring station what television program we are watching and how many people there are in the room. We think of Orwell when we read of scientists who believe they have located in the human brain the seats of behavioral emotions like aggression, or learn more about the vast potential of genetic engineering.

And we hear echoes of that warning chord in the constant demand for greater security and comfort, for less risk in our societies. We recognize, however dimly, that greater efficiency, ease, and security may come at a substantial price in freedom, that law and order can be a doublethink version of oppression, that individual liberties surrendered for whatever good reason are freedom lost.

. . . . It has been said that 1984 fails as a prophecy because it succeeded as a warning--Orwell's terrible vision has been averted. Well, that kind of self-congratulation is, to say the least, premature. 1984 may not arrive on time, but there's always 1985. (Cronkite, 1983, pp. 1-3)

And there's always 2000! "Big Brother" may be on sabbatical, but don't be deceived for he's not far away. Perhaps it's about time we got the message--if not for ourselves, for our children and their children.

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