



Technological Angst

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To cite this article: Anne-Marie Willis (2008) Technological Angst, Design Philosophy Papers, 6:1, 1-4

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871308X13968666267031>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



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EDITORIAL

Technological Angst

Anne-Marie Willis

All the papers in this issue indicate anxieties about technology, or to be more specific, how the technologies of the everyday are bearing us along, to be deposited, at some future point, we know not where.

There's the sense of life speeding up; a tyranny of endless information, of limitless choice of the inconsequential; of being constantly on-call; of seemingly everything being possible in an infinite digital universe, yet it all adding up to not very much at all.

Specifically, the contributors voice concerns about: unquestioned belief in the efficacy of information technologies in everyday life (Christensen and Östlund, Olsson and Jönsson); the uncritical belief that unsustainability can be absolved by technology (Fry); and about researchers who cannot go beyond solving technological problems to see a bigger picture of how technologies are transforming lives (Stolterman and Croon Fors). The latter problem is symptomatic of the dominance of instrumentalism (Fry) and the way in which the technological has become inscribed as a mode of thinking and acting, in fact, in a whole mode of being – named by Heidegger as technicity (discussed by McNeill and Christensen).

For all the contributors, seeking a deeper understanding of the ways in which technologies transform lifeworlds needs to be high on the agendas of design research and education, as well as a matter of political debate. Implicitly and explicitly, they make the move from lifeworld to ‘the good life’ (thankfully bypassing the exhausted notion of lifestyle). This, of course, is an idea that goes back to Aristotle and which crucially welds desire to ethics in seeking to harmonise ‘goodies’ with goodness or ‘what I want for myself’ with ‘what I believe to be for the general good’. This concern thus extends our previous issue’s theme of ‘everyday life as the locus of sustainment’.

As foreshadowed, we bring you a dialogue between philosophers **William McNeill and Carleton Christensen** that grew out of the latter’s *‘What is so sustainable about services? The truth in service & flow’* in the previous issue (and which we re-run here for ease of reference). One of the questions they debate is what is meant by the everyday and the extent to which wisdom might be found in pre-philosophical thinking or whether ‘everyday reasoning’ is always historically and culturally over-determined. This then leads to discussion of different kinds of reason. As it is a lengthy and complex exchange, ranging over many other issues (such as technology, technicity, instrumentalism, Aristotle’s notions of ‘practical wisdom’ and ‘the good life’). To assist readers not totally familiar with the debates I have provided a separate ‘sign-posting’ introduction to the exchange.

Britt Östlund, Annika Olsson and Bodil Jönsson in their paper ‘The liquid drop: exposing and utilising difference in the design process’ confront the inevitable gap that exists between designers/researchers and projected users of products. Rather than trying to eliminate the gap, which they argue is not possible, they suggest that “the tension of difference” (which they characterise via their extended metaphor of ‘the liquid drop’) should be expected in any design research situation and be taken up as an opportunity for mutual learning. They advocate an ‘action research’ model in which “the user is involved in the interpretations and reflections of their own needs.”

The area they discuss is research on the ‘needs’ of ageing people, something that is gaining more attention with the expanding aged populations of many affluent nations. The specific examples centre on information technologies – TV watching, mobile phone use, home shopping terminals and the issue of elderly people ‘keeping up with technology’. Their examples, though brief, provide fruitful connections with, in fact almost examples of, what Stolterman and Anna Croon Fors advocate in their more general arguments about HCI researchers needing to develop critical approaches and focus on the technology-lifeworld relationship. ‘Technology and the everyday’ is very usefully grounded in Östlund, Olsson and Jönsson’s examples (particularly one concerning an elderly

woman's resistance to a domestic technology that would have led to a diminishment of social interactions that she valued – perhaps an example of what McNeill and Christensen name as “everyday reasoning at its best”?)

Erik Stolterman and Anna Croon Fors in ‘Human Computer Interaction: Towards a Critical Research Position’ take a critical stance against “unreflective acceptance of digital technology” and argue that most IT research is leading to radical changes in everyday lives “without taking responsibility” for its consequences. Drawing on Borgmann and Heidegger they suggest that research in this area needs to acknowledge “people's *lifeworld* as a core focus of inquiry.” They raise important issues about the ultimate purpose of human-computer interaction research – whether it serves only the proliferation of devices or whether it can become an activity that is aimed “at revealing the way digital artifacts change the preconditions for life”.

A critique of instrumentalism which is foregrounded in Fry's article and in the McNeil-Christensen dialogue, is implicit in some of what Stolterman and Croon Fors argue. This also connects to their advocacy that information technology researchers could benefit by becoming familiar with design critique, an activity routinely carried out by designers and design teams in the course of their work; this because, unlike the way scientific research disarticulates things in order to study them in isolation, design critique focuses on perceiving quite quickly, overall qualities.

In ‘The Gap in the Ability to Sustain’ **Tony Fry** discusses a different kind of gap than that between researchers and users as discussed by Östlund, Olsson and Jönsson. His title indicates something more like a vast chasm that exists between the rapidly arriving problem of climate change and the snail's pace, extremely moderate measures being put forward by government, business and even many environmental NGOs to address it.

What do we find in the gap between rhetoric and action – confused articulations of the actual problems by those seeking to solve them. We also find a big investment in keeping things as they are – the market economy, forms of political organisation, bodies of knowledge and modes of thinking perpetuated through educational institutions. Instrumental thinking bolsters these investments – uncritical faith in the technofix legitimises the notion that the global economy can continue on a constant growth path while sustaining finite resources and reducing environmental impact. Fry argues that technology's role in turning around unsustainability can only be minor, because unsustainability is not ‘out there in the environment’ but within us, ourselves; it is deeply structural; it infuses mind and culture. ‘Solutions’, then, need to be cultural and political. Fry doesn't claim to have instant answers for effective political and cultural action, but he does lay out some practical starting points for designers, educators and those who seek to be

change agents. Central to such action is the development of an ethos and a reworking of the idea of ‘the common good’ defined in terms of contribution to sustain-ability; sustain-ability (the ability to sustain), in turn rests on the idea of sustainment, “drawn from understandings of the vastness of what needs to be sustained in, but well beyond, bio-centric considerations.”

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May 2008