This article, by two of the main organizers at DePaul, explains the thinking that went into the conference and sums up the results.

Report on the DePaul Conference "From Microchip to Mass Media": Culture and the Technological Age

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In the late Spring of 1995, graduate students from DePaul University's Liberal Arts & Sciences Graduate Student Council met to discuss the possibility of hosting a conference during the following academic year. Is there any single issue, it was asked, that crosses academic disciplines and unites us in common concern? Typically, academic departments at large Universities reflect the alarming tendency in American society to compartmentalize issues; each discipline operates within its own "discursive space," accessible only to those who know the code. Most Universities fail to embody any sense of shared ideas or a common spirit. How, then, could a handful of graduate students possibly organize a conference around a single, unifying theme? What matter of importance could we all talk about fruitfully?

After ten minutes of discussion the answer was clear, even obvious--Technology. Whether philosopher, historian, sociologist, or artist; whether working-class or middle-class, conservative or liberal; whether Luddite or computer geek--technology touches each of us and in ways we have not yet fully comprehended. More than ever, the time demands critical thinking about some basic questions concerning technology: What is the meaning of the new technology; how does it shape our society and its culture; and where is it leading?

The conference, entitled "From Microchip to Mass Media: Culture and the Technological Age" was held May 2-4, 1996 at DePaul University. Along with the GSC, the co-sponsors included Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, Chicago Coalition for Information Access, and Networking for Democracy. About 250 people participated in one or more of the sessions over the three day period. The conference's success was secured by a diverse group of organizers and participants. Students, teachers, and community activists worked together to plan a series of events intended both to educate and to provoke. The conference agenda was composed of individual paper presentations, plenary discussions, workshops, and small art exhibitions. Participants included scholars, graduate students, activists, artists, computer professionals, and journalists. Among those attending, in addition to those mentioned above, was a number of concerned citizens from various parts of the city, and a surprisingly large group of undergraduate students from Chicago area colleges, including an enthusiastic contingent from the Chicago DeVry Institute of Technology. The result was a truly stimulating "event," as one DePaul Faculty put it, not at all like most academic conferences. By the end of the gathering, one thing was clear: the issues at stake in a world increasingly affected by technology are recognized by all elements of the population.

The conference committee agreed from the outset to present a critical stance on technology. The banal virtues of new tools and devices are extolled every day on television, in print, and through our popular culture: technology is hip, entertaining, and it works for you. With the recent explosion of interest in the Internet and the proliferation of PCs and accompanying software, there is more than enough hype about the efficient powers of technology. What is needed today is a more active engagement with the

emerging technologies, an engagement that cuts through the corporate hype and reaches beyond the narrow intersection of technology and the elite classes. This means, first of all, analyzing the role of technology in shaping the organization and character of our society as a whole. Such a fundamental investigation must address the status of technology from multiple perspectives, not the least of which is the philosophical question: what is the essence of technology? Secondly, we must assess our collective needs and resources as a technological society approaching the turn of the century. As our needs and resources change, the old industrial-based forms of organizing and administering civil society must change with them. Finally, it must be understood that these issues affect all people, regardless of their particular status or niche in society. It is our very culture, the way we interact and do business and the way we come together as citizens, that is undergoing rapid transformation. In this sense we are all equally involved, from programmer to business executive to bricklayer.

Taken together, these three broadly defined issues formed the heart of the conference agenda. There were no definitive answers delivered at the conference, though a clear sense of urgency and purpose was present. For many in attendance, including organizers, the conference provided a forum for the collection of information and ideas necessary for creating a vision of the future determined by participation, opportunity, and freedom. Finally, the meeting was not an isolated event, but was part of a pattern of similar gathering across the country. What follows is an initial reflection on the topic of "Culture and the Technological Age," organized around the aforementioned issues and inspired by the proceedings of the conference.

The first step in any effort to comprehend or utilize what is collected under the term "technology" is to formulate some understanding of its meaning. Thinkers as diverse as Marx and Heidegger, among others, have realized that the essence of technology is far more complex than the utilitarian derived conception of technology-as-instrument will admit. Technology is not a neutral instrument of efficiency; it is socially and existentially transformative because it affects the way we interact with each other and the environment. In other words, technology is not merely an instrument of production, for it transforms the mode of our life at its core, there where the values and ideas by which we define ourselves and our human projects reside. The essence of technology resides not in machines and computers, or even in their output, but in something more profoundly human: language and forms of communication, the status of knowledge, leisure and entertainment, not to mention the structure and organization of the workplace.

Thus, any critical discussion of technology should be centered not around the latest "advance" or the newest "breakthrough." Instead the focus should be on the values and ideas of a technological society, and, ultimately, on the social structures and institutions through which such ideas find actuality and affect people's lives most significantly. We must stop believing that technology is the province of experts and technicians, and realize the technological component of our own personal values, civic institutions, and political sensibilities.

Secondly, we must re-assess the assumptions by which our civil society has functioned since industrialization. As we enter an age dominated more than ever by the influx of information and communication technology--the so-called "Third Wave"--the ideas and institutions constituting Western industrial capitalism have become increasingly problematic. Downsizing, insecurity, anxiety, and bitterness are the reality for most, while an elite few retain unprecedented, massive amounts of capital. Third Wave technology holds the promise of new opportunity on a large scale, but only if real power is accessible to non-corporate individuals.

New systems of socio-economic organization must be defined so that both human and material resources are best utilized in order to ensure the optimum level of participation and reward. To start, we must ensure that people at all levels of society have the skills, education, and services they need to flourish in a changing economy. More to the point, it has recently been argued by Stanley Aronowitz and Jeremy Rifkin, among others, that the status of work itself needs rethinking. As automation and communication technology improve efficiency in the workplace while eliminating many traditional jobs, we must ask what definition of work best serves the collective interest of society. Productivity and profits are empty abstractions if society as a whole does not benefit.

The final point of fundamental concern, as we embark on an uncertain journey toward the high-tech future, involves the redefinition of one of the key political concepts of modernity: universalism. In an age of increasing individualism and its accompanying ethics of personal choices, there seems to be little discussion about the common good or even much honest analysis about the bonds that bring us together as citizens and, more essentially, as human beings.

It is undeniable that in advanced societies like the United States more people than ever have the freedom to exercise their will in ways that they see fit. Yet the individual opportunity and well-being enjoyed by so many is itself made possible by a system of universal social and economic interconnection. A well-refined division of labor places migrant farm worker, temporary office assistant, doctor, and bank president all together on the same socio-economic matrix. In reality, of course, the matrix is skewed in favor of a small minority who take advantage of the fact that everyone is dependent on the present system. Traditionally, capital has used its power and position to exploit labor.

In itself, advanced information and communication technology does not change the current pattern of social relations; yet it does introduce new possibilities. Global communication through cyberspace has the potential to affect the socio-economic matrix in two ways. If access is limited to corporate and capitalist elites, it seems certain that relations within society will continue to deteriorate as the gap widens between haves and have nots: more downsizing and underemployment, more crime, increased racism, immigrant bashing, etc. However, if access to knowledge and information is held open and can be accessed by the majority, then a new universalism becomes possible.

Superficially, the social matrix has always been universal, since everyone is to some degree a "member" of society. Actual participation, however, has traditionally been limited to a narrow stratum of the population, a fact which has led to many corrupted forms of individualism at the heart of our society. The possibility of full (or fuller) participation in the determination of society means redefining the social, economic, and political concepts by which we understand ourselves.

The concept of freedom finds full expression only when it is defined in terms of the whole of society. After all, the rules and organization of the social body are what makes individual freedom possible in the first place. Thus, freedom must be understood not as an abstract expression of the individual will, but as a concrete expression of the interest of society. This means that genuine freedom must be determined not through the particular interest of the individual, but through the collective interest of the universal--society. Advanced technology does not change the terms of this analysis, but it certainly can and will affect the way people perceive the relation of individual to society, particular to universal. We must act to ensure that the culture of technology enriches rather than degrades the universal, and that service technology is linked to freedom rather than exploitation.