

EVENT REPORT

The Dark Side of Technology: Some Sociotechnical Reflections

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In 2010 Jeff Baker proposed a panel for the 2010 ICIS Conference in St. Louis on the topic "Technologies that Transform Business and Research: Lessons from the Past as we look into the Future?" (Baker *et al.*, 2011). He invited Frank Land to be a member of the panel. Frank sought to explore some topics that were receiving a great deal of attention from the media and in particular the computer press as well amongst IS practitioners, management and academia. The topic was the apparently rapidly growing threat coming from the misuse or criminal use of information and communications technology (ICT) as well as the use of the technology in warfare (Cyberwarfare). The issues were discussed under a variety of labels but usually included terms such as security, privacy, risk and piracy.

However, though these topics were receiving a great deal of attention and indeed academic research, most attention was paid to ways of defending users and systems against the threats looking at the issues as primarily technical

matters of technical concerns needing technical solutions. There was little recognition that the problems were of a socio-technical nature.

In his contribution to the ICIS panel Frank Land thought to raise awareness of the IS community that technology is neutral in value terms but that entrepreneurs and innovators using the technology do not all share the values which seek to use technology to enhance the lot of mankind.

In 2011 the British Computer Society's Sociotechnical Specialist Group arranged that one of its regular series of lectures on socio-technical issues at the Westminster University Business School should be a panel devoted to the further exploration of the issues raised by Frank Land at the ICIS panel. The panel was chaired by Dr Elayne Coakes, Senior Lecturer at Westminster University Business School and Editor-in-Chief: the International Journal for Sociotechnology and Knowledge Development and included as panelists Frank Land, Emeritus Professor, Information Systems and Innovation Group, London School of Economics, Antony (Tony) Bryant, Professor of Informatics, Leeds

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Metropolitan University, and Andy Phippen, Professor of Social Responsibility and Ethics in IT at Plymouth University Business School. This event report recounts the panelists' presentations. It is set out as follows.

An overview of two issues by Frank Land largely based on his ICIS presentation. The first is of the opportunity provided by the omniscience of ICT for people and organisations to engage in a large variety of anti-social or dubious practices as well as practices which defy authority in what many regard as the public interest of which Wikileaks is one example. The second is how the use of ICT, often regarded as the mainspring of what has been labeled the '*knowledge society*' has nevertheless led to a '*knowledge paradox*', with counter-knowledge (Thompson, 2008) rivaling 'true' knowledge in its prevalence.

The second contribution from Tony Bryant puts the increasing complexities into the context of sociologists view on modernity and helping in this way to understand the diversities of practices and the values which drive them. Thus in the age of the internet, which appears to offer new and virtually unlimited ways in which people can be in touch with each other, the reality seems to be centred on suspicion, self-regard, and transience. It has clear that there is a dark side to these rapid and far-reaching technological developments – exemplified for instance in the 3rd volume of Manuel Castells' trilogy (Castell, 2001) with its chapter on the internet and organized crime; also the ways in which the 'adult entertainment' industry took a lead in the development of on-line interactions and transactions – graphics, on-line credit card payments etc.

But rather than lamenting the ways in which promise has turned to peril with regard to the internet, it is more fruitful and important to begin to grasp the many-sided nature of digital existence in its liquid modern context.

Andy Phippen follows illustrating some of the issues by looking at specific socio-technical domains. Andy Phippen's area of interest is File Sharing illustrated with the example of the sharing of music. *Filesharing* is often held

up as one of the evils of the Internet and is regarded by many as a form of piracy. The US prosecution and closure of Napster and, more recently, the Digital Economy Act in the UK have highlighted industry and legislator's fears regarding such practices and attempts to shut them down. However, one might argue that firstly trying to close or legislate against what is essentially a benign technological concept is entirely fruitless and, secondly, perhaps file sharing practices are challenging what one might suggest are unethical business practices themselves. The recording industry has had the monopoly on the production and distribution of recorded music for around 50 years, with artists tied into exclusive contracts and tight copyright control. Prior to Internet based file sharing this was arguably the best option for artists wishing to distribute their music. However, is this still the case? Is file sharing killing the music industry, or is it putting the control of an artist's gifts back into their hands, rather than allowing corporate business to own "talent"? Is what is needed a new business model rather than attempting to keep the clock from moving forward?

THE ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE OF ICT ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION

Frank Land

IS scholarship and research had failed to adequately tackle two important but related themes: Both themes underline the continued increase in the capability of computing and communication technology and the fact that the technology itself is value free.

First Theme

The first relates to what has become a major concern to IS practitioners, IS users, Governments and the citizen at large – the problem of computer security, embracing issues of privacy, identity, cyber warfare, cybercrime, citizen surveillance, plagiarism, and including such grey areas as pornography and controversial

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