

PD: Politics and Prospects

Andrew Clement (moderator)
Faculty of Information Sciences,
University of Toronto, Canada
E-mail: clement@flis.utoronto.ca

David Noble (speaker)
Division of Social Sciences
York University, Canada

Diana Roose
Research Director
9to5, National Association of Working Women
Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Björg Aase Sørensen
Oslo Work Research Institute
Oslo, Norway

Morten Kyng
Department of Computer Science
Aarhus University
Århus, Denmark
E-mail: mkyng@daimi.aau.dk

PD has, since its origins, been concerned not just with improving the techniques of systems development, but also with political issues. In particular, an important goal has been to contribute to the democratization of social relations, in workplaces and beyond. How this is to be pursued varies considerably by location and is a matter for vigorous debate. The session culminates the conference by addressing this wider political character of PD practices and theory. How can we better understand the relationship between PD as a political project and as a cluster of techniques? How does PD relate to contemporary political movements, both organizationally focused (e.g. TQM and business process reengineering) as well as those more broadly societal (e.g. labour, feminism, promotion of the 'information superhighway')? When does the rhetoric of participation thwart rather than advance workplace democratization? How should developers act when 'authentic' participation is infeasible? The orientation of the session is explore where PD should now be headed.

The featured speaker is David Noble, a leading historian and critic of technology development. His principal works include: *America by Design* (1977), *Forces of Production* (1984), *A World Without Women* (1992), and *Progress Without People* (1993). David will launch the session with a short, provocative address on what he believes are some central political challenges currently facing PD (see his abstract below). The invited respondents will further stimulate the general discussion, which promises to be extensive, lively and informative.

DAVID NOBLE (ABSTRACT OF TALK)

My aim would be to indicate the limits of the participatory design approach, not so much to challenge it as to move it

onto another plane of struggle.

(1) While it is important to envision, develop, and fight for more democratic designs, what is to be done if the fight fails (which is typically the case)? I will argue that all participatory design campaigns must include contingency plans for this eventuality, i.e. plans for opposition to the other guy's design. In my view, you can't have one without the other.

(2) What if the participatory design efforts succeeds? What is the larger significance of success, beyond the immediate work environment? If you can't have socialism in one country, can you have participatory design in one workplace? From the perspective of the larger context in which the particular workplace is but a part - a perspective reflecting the rapid integration of communications systems - might not the participatory design appear as an unwitting facilitation of the implementation of the larger system, a greasing of the wheels which are running over us? Do such successes dull our sensitivity and alertness to the larger assault, subtly secure our acquiescence to the larger agenda, and retard the possibility of resistance? Does our own participation (and technical enchantment) get the better of our larger political intentions? How does the participatory design discourse (democracy, access, ...) have to change now that the dominant players have appropriated it to define and legitimate the 'information superhighway'?

(3) Participation must include opposition. How might we formulate genuine, sustained and effective strategies of opposition to laissez innover policies and dominant authoritarian designs? Must this entail an abandonment of the participatory approach or can it complement it, as its necessary reverse side? I would use the fight against a proposed field trial of home-oriented, commercial telematics applications to illustrate the possibilities.

In *PDC'94: Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference*. R. Trigg, S.I. Anderson, and E.A. Dykstra-Erickson (Eds.). Chapel Hill NC USA, 27-28 October 1994. Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, P.O. Box 717, Palo Alto CA 94302-0717 USA, cpsr@cpsr.org.