4 SUMMIT VIENNA 2015 IS4IS

Extended Abstract

Technology and social change: some shifting patterns of technological contention

Steve Walker [1*]

[1] Dept. of Computing & Communication, The Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

* steve.walker@open.ac.uk

Accepted: 27/2/15

Introduction

Feenberg (2002) analyses technology in terms of managerial autonomy to assert control over and through technological choices, implying the necessity of increased democratisation of technological relations in the workplace in achieving a more participatory and democratic society. I argue that the recent history of the relationship between organised labour and digital technologies has seen a retreat from earlier attempts to assert control over technology, most notably through the Scandinavian traditions of participatory design, to an increasingly tactical and defensive view of these technologies as tools in labour organising and campaigning. This reflects the decreasing power of organised labour in the industrialised West and global North, at least. Simultaneously, the workplace is no longer the only, or even primary, place in which the majority encounter sophisticated digital technologies. The most prominent debates about the use of ICT in social emancipation are largely outside the workplace, concerning for example, debates about surveillance, the technical and economic relations around technological infrastructure (as, for example in the US net neutrality debate), and the role of ICT in social uprisings (see for example, Castells 2012).

Information and communications technologies (ICT) have a close relation to social emancipation that long predates the digital era. Moveable type is widely seen as important in the Protestant Christian reformation in Europe [Eisenstein, 2005] . Similarly, the unstamped press, pamphlets and ballads were important in the emergence of an English working class movement in the early 19th century [Thompson, 1963]. More recently, for much of the digital period there has been a strong current of thought that has associated the emergence of computing with democratic ideas in the workplace as well as, more widely, community, civil society and public service settings. This can be seen in the

workplace origins of participatory design, and in fields such as community informatics (CI), and information technology for development (IT4D).

As is well documented, the participatory design (PD) movement has its origins in collaborations between researchers and the trade union movement in Scandinavia in the 1970s and 1980s. It was part of a wider concern of Nordic unions to develop a more 'offensive' approach to technology and work, attempting to assert a degree of control over new technologies in the workplace. It grew out of co-operation between researchers and trade unions, where values and practices of participation were particularly strong. This took place in a context of increasing workers' rights to participate in company decision-making, following Sweden's 1976 Codetermination Act and the establishment in the same year of the Centre for Working Life, to promote democracy in working life, paid for through a tax on employers [Lundin, 2010]. However, as trade union influence in the workplace declined, so did unions' ability to sustain even these relatively modest attempts to assert some control over the introduction of technology. Attempts to develop alternative workplace visions of technologies faded, exacerbated also by criticisms of early PD projects' involvement 'blue-collar' and craft unions had involved a failure to take account of changing workplaces, including most obviously the changing role of women.

In parallel, as computing technologies became more widespread beyond the workplace, unions began to experiment the use of ICT in their own organising and campaigning work on more 'traditional' unions issues such as wages, job security and occupational health and safety (see e.g. Lee, 1996). As unions became concerned about the growing power of transnational corporations in an increasingly globalised economy, communications technologies in general and the internet in particular offered the ability for unions to try to co-ordinate solidarity at a similarly global level. In some instances, this 'cyber-campaigning' involved using the web as a site of conflict itself, for example, in the organisation of email protests to companies involved in disputes. As the internet and mobile communications have increasingly become part of the fabric of everyday personal and organisational life (in the global North, at least), so ICT has almost disappeared into the everyday work of unions. This absorption has seen the playing out of different understandings and interpretations of technologies among political, industrial and organisational groupings within unions (Martinez Lucio & Walker, 2005; Pulignano et al, 2013). A distinctive aspect of the incorporation of digital communication technologies, however, has been its use in extending unions' response to globalisation (see e.g. ICEM, 1996). The emphasis in these cases was less to challenge the nature of technologies themselves but rather to exploit them in addressing more traditional union concerns .

As technology has come to saturate everyday life, and the power of organised labour has diminished, struggles between contesting views of technology are happening elsewhere. Edward Snowden and Wikileaks have, for example, highlighted the extent of state surveillance of citizens' communications. Here, technologies such as the internet have enabled radically new modes of struggle in the almost instantaneous global release of confidential information. Importantly the subject of the struggle is itself about competing understandings of the use and abuse of ICTs. More widely, 'hacker' cultures (see, for example, the Chaos Computer Club congresses, and the 'Anonymous' hacking 'groups') are now increasingly the sites of alternative understandings of technology. Such visions often strongly highlight concerns of personal freedom and autonomy. Some, for example, see market relations as important in challenging transnational corporations. For example, community broadband

movement often invokes arguments about competition and the structure of markets in attempts to build community approaches to building technological infrastructure.

Conclusion

Feenberg (2002) argues, social conflict may help us to identify possibilities for social change. This paper is not a comprehensive survey of the recent history of contention around ICT. Rather, it is a sketch of the fall and rise of some differing ways in which ICT h These cases illustrate some of the shifts in the nature of the struggle between competing visions and interests in the development and use of digital envisaged by Feenberg. Early attempts to assert control in the workplace were, effectively rebuffed and unions rather sought to exploit ICT instrumentally. More recent contention of the nature of technology have taken place outside the workplace, increasingly originating in more self-consciously 'digital' political cultures. as been enrolled in social contention.

References and Notes

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