

Questioning Technology: Tool, Toy or Tyrant?

James W. King

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Questioning Technology: Tool, Toy or Tyrant?

Abstract

A review of *Questioning Technology: Tool, Toy or Tyrant?*, edited by John Zerran and Alice Carnes.

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***Questioning Technology: Tool, Toy or Tyrant?* Edited by John Zerzan and Alice Carnes. New Society Publishers, Philadelphia PA, 1991. (ISBN 0-86571-205-0). \$12.95.**

"Technology and technological decisions structure our minds and, in doing so, our relations with each other and with the natural world. Whether we use tools to control or enhance, all our relations are shaped as much by the tools themselves as by any other set of cultural assumptions or social structures."

With this charge, *Questioning Technology* takes us on an exhilarating intellectual journey. From television to computer, modern communication and information technologies have been fused into seemingly every corner of our lives. As we debate these technologies and their effects, this collection of 35 papers will enrich and deepen our conversations. The selections range from the classics of Lewis Mumford ("Authoritarian and Democratic Technics from Technology and Culture") and Jacques Ellul ("The Technological Society") to the contemporary Langdon Winner ("Mythinformation") and Jerry Mander ("Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television").

The three sections of *Questioning Technology* envelop the technological front: the history of technology and its impact on our future, computers and informed individuals, and an analysis of technology and meanings. The authors explore issues such as the development or encroachment of technology, the computer and the printing press as comparable technologies, and the evolution of technologies as a new order. Each author questions basic assumptions with well reasoned and provocative arguments. Many of the articles are, in fact, classics of the literature of technology. They include James Gorman's "Man, Bytes, Dog" and Sally Gearhart's "An End to Technology."

Several writers even dispute the sacred concept of modern learning technology, *interaction*. They challenge how and what people learn from technology and its affect on human relationships. Several critics scrutinize the notions of *information* and *communication*, closing with the controversy, "Is technology *neutral*?"

Questioning Technology's aim, of course, is to excite readers and force them seriously to reflect on technology. The editors want to "re-engage our hearts and minds in the search for truly appropriate and accountable technologies."

Although most of the book's questions and issues are beyond the control of the normal communicator, they make us confront still

basic concerns over the application of technology. The book's major limitation, and a somewhat irritating one, is its lack of the great supporters of technology such as Kirsten Hooper, Marvin Minsky, Alan Kay, or Seymour Papert. Without their voices the book is less than complete. Notably and unexpectedly absent is McLuhan, but because his arguments have been so well discussed for so many years, his exclusion is not irritating.

Nevertheless, with the flourishing interest in sustainable systems, technological roles and applications have to be questioned. *Questioning Technology* gives each of us an opportunity to face and rethink our relationships with technologies in communication as being more than simple channels. We have to consider their impacts on our audiences. The medium is itself a message.

James W. King
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Send future manuscripts to:

ACE Headquarters
University of Florida
Building 116, Mowry Road,
Gainesville FL 32611-0810