

Book Review

Stross, R. E. (1989). *Technology and society in twentieth century America: An anthology*. Blemont, CA: Wadsworth, \$21.95 (paperback), 273 pp. (ISBN 0-534-10927-6)

Reviewed by Karen F. Zuga

This collection of readings could provide technology teachers and teacher educators with another opportunity to look at the relationship between our use of technology and our formal and informal political processes. In this book Stross has been able to assemble a collection of readings which integrates the study of technology and society. Stross' book could serve to supplement the too often technically slanted books we tend to write and use in technology education.

Stross has dealt with several important ways in which we advanced our use of technology in the twentieth century by selecting passages from published texts. Each author and topic is introduced by Stross in order to provide the reader with background information. Topics are arranged in a chronological order based upon the order in which we began to develop and pay attention to each kind of technology. Some of the topics are: the industrial organization of agriculture, corporate capitalism, the industrial state, birth control, the car culture, suburbanization, space age politics, household technologies, show business and public discourse, and computers and the human spirit.

One of the advantages of the anthology format is that each topic is treated by specialists who are able to lend their own expertise to the topic. Some of those authors are: Harry Braverman, David Noble, John Kenneth Galbraith, Ivan Illich, Neil Postman, Ruth Schwartz Cowan, and Sherry Turkle. Moreover, their best work is featured—providing the reader with the cream and saving the time of reading through all of the texts. In one text a reader can survey several authors and, perhaps, find a few to pursue in greater depth. Not all of the topics or authors will strike a responsive chord with all readers. An anthology provides a variety which can please most of the readers most of the time.

The treatment of the topics is not always one which we would like to hear, but often, it is one we must hear and we should be addressing in our own courses. For example, as we teach about construction we need to address the role that contractors play in shaping public policy by reinforcing the status quo.

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The section on suburbanization includes a discussion of the growth of the suburbs in the late 1940s and the way in which William Levitt conformed to common practice and maintained segregation in the new suburbs.

The Levitt organization, which was no more culpable in this regard than any other urban or suburban firm, publicly and officially refused to sell to blacks for two decades after the war. Nor did resellers deal with minorities. As William Levitt explained, “We can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem. But we cannot combine the two.” Not surprisingly, in 1960 not a single one of the Long Island Levittown's 82,000 residents was black. (p. 158)

The way in which Levitt built suburban housing was a technological innovation, but this text helps us to understand that it was not used as a value free innovation. In the discussion about television, communication teachers are presented with a wealth of information and insight about the medium. Again, the message is related to the value orientation of the medium.

Entertainment is the supraideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure...A news show...is a format for entertainment, not for education, reflection or catharsis...There is no conspiracy here, no lack of intelligence, only a straightforward recognition that “good television” has little to do with what is “good” about exposition or other forms of verbal communication but everything to do with what pictorial images look like. (p. 246)

Discussions such as the one above help all of us to look at our use of technology again and to see the way in which our seemingly neutral technology becomes tied up with values and biases as we interpret a purpose and make choices about how to use an artifact, tool, or process.

Stross' anthology leaves the reader with a message about how we make decisions about the use of technology and, through his selections of readings, he leaves the reader a strong message about how we make those choices from our own ideology and values. The anthology is a good counter to the technological determinist view. Moreover, the variety of selections makes it easy to read and to glean a variety of insights into the choices we make collectively about technology.

Technology and Society in Twentieth Century America should be of interest to all technology educators. It would be a good addition to the professional reading list of teacher educators and practicing teachers. It could serve as either the foundation of a general technology course or a source of readings for courses in communication, construction, manufacturing, etc. We need to think about using texts such as this one in order to balance the lopsided technical approach we take when teaching about technology. °