

“Complexity and Management”

Ursula Franklin: Tell me about the project with the city workers union.

Margaret Benston: I'm working on a project with a union of city workers to show that alternate kinds of system design not only work better but can come up with entirely new principles underlying the systems that are developed. The idea is that management presumptions about what they need are different than worker presumptions about what they need. And so if you actually listen to workers about what they want in the way of a computer system, you'll get different answers than if you listen to management.

UF: Did you develop the computer systems, or could you use the existing ones?

MB: No they're quite different, because it turns out that management's goal around the introduction of this new technology is to improve information flow for management purposes. It's to do auditing, bookkeeping, costing, fleet management—worthy sorts of goals, but what the people who work there want to do is improve service to the public. Almost none of the systems that management's introduced actually have anything whatever to do with improving service to the public. Usually these things are just sort of laid on the users. There may be token interviews to find out how work is done or what kind of forms people use and that sort of thing, but the assumption is generally made that the only legitimate way of designing a new computer system is to let an expert do it who understands how to do it, and basically to turn over everything to that expert.

The project we're working on tries to show you don't really need to do that. The systems by themselves are not revolutionary in the sense that someone else certainly has talked about similar systems, but as a whole, in context, these are tailored by the people who do the work to the work that they want to do. But the principles underlying it really are very different from the principles underlying the introduction of technology into the workplace now. The principles are that this technology can enhance work, this technology can meet people's needs, it can support the values that they find in their work.

UF: When you teach computer science, do you teach the alternate approaches?

MB: Yes, I do. I teach a course on the social impacts of computing to computing science majors at my university, and I do talk about these sorts of alternatives. There are, by the way, similar projects in Sweden, not necessarily around computing. There were similar projects in England. The whole idea of worker initiatives connected up with the idea of

worker control, connected up with workplace democracy. It's not a new idea, and there are other people trying it. So I think it's important to expose computing science people to the idea that they shouldn't be the sole arbiters, they shouldn't be the sole decision makers about computing systems, that there are other ways of viewing the world. I'm not really quite so naive as to think we're going to turn the world over and have this be the basic way things work, but I certainly think it's a principle to work toward.

UF: So you think really that the feeling that the computer takes charge and is in control is more psychological than practical?

MB: Yes, I think the computer is a mask for the real power in society. I think technological determinism generally is the idea that technology is here, it's got its own inherent logic and that the direction of social change is determined by policy that's being made behind the scenes by business, by the multinationals, by the government. And particularly the computer, with the popular idea that computers are more intelligent than in fact they are, acts as a very good mask for that kind of behind the scenes power.

UF: Now, what about the alternative of just going back to the fork in the road, just saying I won't have anything to do with that. I pull the plug, I don't play. Life was fine before the computer.

MB: This actually is something that a number of feminists have done. Technology is male dominated, male controlled, embodies principles, anti-human principles we're not prepared to tolerate, and therefore we won't deal with it. A number of other stances have the same kind of approach, and what that does is leave the power where it is. It leaves the control over new technology with the people who have it at present. And underlying, I guess it must be implicit, much of what I say, is I think there are potentially very serious problems from the new technology in terms of unemployment, in terms of loss of control of our social and political lives. And I think it's imperative that we begin to question—"we" being those of us who don't have much power in the society—to question the decisions that the powerful are making, to question the ways, for example, that multinationals are introducing electronics here in Canada and in the rest of the world, to generally have as the first step to beginning to change the way things are done, to have some sort of critical understanding. And until we got that, I think we'll continue to leave control where it is now and to have this spectre of very negative effects. So I think an anti-technological stance does not do us any good at all.

This is an excerpt from the transcript of an interview between Ursula Franklin and Margaret Benston on the CBC Ideas program entitled "Management and Complexity" which aired November 13, 1986.