



Discussion Guide

YES! Fall 2001

Welcome to the *YES!* Discussion Guide Series

We're delighted that you've decided to take up some of the issues explored in YES! magazine in your class or discussion group. When people gather in groups to talk with mutual respect and caring about the critical issues of our time, they create a powerful avenue for constructive social change. The staff of YES! magazine has prepared this guide to help you get started. We hope you'll find it useful.

We've posted selected articles from YES! on our website at www.yesmagazine.org. You're welcome to download and photocopy them free of charge. If you'd like to purchase multiple copies of YES! or subscriptions for your class or group, please phone 1-800-937-4451 and ask for the Discussion Group Discount.

Technology: Who Chooses?

In the modern world, technology is the water we swim in. It's so much a part of our lives that we can hardly see it any more—much less contemplate life without it. And yet, there are disturbing signs that our love affair with technology may have spawned some consequences even more frightening to contemplate.

This issue of *YES!* invites you to think more deeply about our collective relationship to technology. Is technology good or bad or morally neutral? Is technological progress inevitable, its direction determined by some force beyond our control? Or is it the result of a series of individual choices—and if so, who is making those choices? According to what criteria?

To prepare for this discussion, we encourage you to read the following articles:

“Technotopia” by Andrew Kimbrell, pp 13–15

“Reclaiming Choice” by Richard Sclove, pp 22–25

“A Sustainable Energy Plan for the US” by Guy Dauncey, pp 32–36

“A Precaution Primer” by Nancy Myers and Carolyn Raffensperger, pp 43–45

Technotopia

Andrew Kimbrell makes a powerful argument that a “technological elite”—comprised of those who fund technology research and development and stand to gain from it financially—are fundamentally remaking the world to create new dependencies on their technological innovations.



The oft-cited example of Monsanto's development of "Roundup-ready soybeans," which now make up almost 70 percent of the US soybean crop, is a classic case in point. Monsanto, which sells the powerful herbicide Roundup, came up with the idea of selling soybean seeds that are genetically engineered to be immune to the Roundup herbicide. In the short term, such seeds are attractive to farmers because they allow them to spray herbicide on the fields and kill the weeds but not the crop. These seeds can mean lower labor costs, lower fuel costs, and less wear and tear on equipment. In the long term, however, they risk setting in motion unanticipated and far-reaching genetic changes that could harm the natural world. They also create a dependency on a monopoly supplier of a particular soybean monoculture, and since these seeds are patented, it is now illegal for farmers to save the seeds from one year to replant the next year's crop.

Here are a few questions to get your discussion started—and bring it home to your own life.

1. Take five minutes in silence to make a list of the technologies on which you are personally most dependent. For the sake of discussion, pick the top three that are currently most essential to you.
2. Compare notes with the other participants in your discussion group. What were the group's top three? How representative do you believe your group's choices are of: Americans? Other developed countries in the world? Developing countries? The world as a whole?
3. In what ways are you dependent on—or even addicted to—these technologies? That is, if you did not have them, how would your life be better or worse? What alternatives exist for meeting the same basic need with a different technological approach? Realistically, are those alternatives viable? If not, why not?
4. Who supplies the technologies that you depend on most? Given our current economic system, the activities of these suppliers are likely to be driven primarily by the profit motive. In what ways does this motivation work well? In what ways does it work poorly?
5. What regulations are in place to "protect the public interest" in the development and deployment of these technologies? What additional regulations might be needed? Are there any that should be removed?

Reclaiming Choice

One of the most important points in Richard Sclove's article is the idea that technologies have both intended and unintended consequences. In the case of the automobile, the intended consequences—widely publicized by the industry's promoters—were greater personal mobility and freedom. The unintended consequences, of course, include such things as global warming, suburban sprawl, and the atrophy of public transportation alternatives.

Sclove's concern is that our latest technological baby, the Internet, may ultimately have some equally ugly consequences. These discussion questions are again designed to bring the conversation home.

1. Do you currently use the Internet? If so, for what purposes? Approximately how many hours per week? How has your use of the Internet changed the quality or quantity of your face-to-face interactions?

2. Have you ever purchased anything over the Internet (i.e., engaged in e-commerce)? Used the Internet to find specific company or product information? Used it for comparison research? Has it changed your behavior as a consumer in any purchase categories or stages of purchase decision-making? Have these changes influenced your interaction with local merchants?
3. Have you observed what Sclove calls the “cybernetic Wal-Mart effect” in your local community? If so, how has it operated? If not, why not? Have you seen other examples of technologies that start out being optional but eventually displace all other alternatives? How might this consequence be avoided?
4. Sclove is ultimately concerned with the relationship between technology and democracy—and how democratic processes (as opposed to purely economic processes) might be used to make technological choices at the societal level. What do you think of the options he outlines? Which of them seem most likely to be effective in the US? Do you have additional ideas?

A Sustainable Energy Plan for the US

Guy Dauncey is an optimist. He believes we actually can create and implement a sustainable energy plan that will both meet our energy needs and reduce our planet-threatening dependence on fossil fuels. The good news is that technologically, this all seems possible. The bad news is that politically, we’re far from where we need to be to bring this all about.

Here are some discussion questions to help you think about how you might have an impact on the four elements of Dauncey’s plan.

1. *Energy efficiency:* Despite the current focus on energy conservation, the government estimates that the US demand for electricity is still growing by about 2 percent per year. What, if anything, are you doing to reduce your household or business energy consumption? What else could you be doing? What is preventing you from making those changes? What would help to overcome those obstacles?
2. *Transportation efficiency:* The first hybrid vehicles (combining electricity or natural gas with regular gasoline) are now available. When you buy your next car, what will be your purchase criteria? What kinds of energy efficiency will you expect—and how important will that criterion be? Would you consider a hybrid or other alternative-powered vehicle? If not, why not—and what would need to happen to get you to consider one?
3. *Clean electricity:* Dauncey sets a goal for 2025 of having 80 percent of our electricity produced by clean energy—specifically wind, geothermal, and solar. As a first step, he proposes that the federal government require that 10 percent of all US energy come from renewable energy by 2010. As a citizen activist, what are the best ways you can think of to encourage this shift? What, if anything, are you willing to do to move this discussion into the realm of action?
4. *Hydrogen highway:* Everyone knows that hydrogen is the fuel of the future: it’s clean, it’s plentiful, it’s technologically feasible, it’s almost economical. But how do we overcome the “chicken and egg” problem that plagues so many new technologies? That is, there must be enough demand to justify investment in infrastructure and mass production—and yet there must be enough infrastructure in place and low enough prices to generate demand. How would you help “jump start” the shift to hydrogen?



A Precaution Primer

What do you do in the face of uncertainty?

The pro-technology bias of our culture suggests that we assess the risks as best we can, mitigate the known problems, and then go forward—even into the realm of creating new life forms through genetic engineering, or creating new forms of matter through the molecular manipulations of nanotechnology.

The precautionary principle offers another alternative. It suggests that when the outcome of such technological tinkering is unknown, risk assessment is not enough. Greater precautions—like saying “no” or requiring project proponents to prove that their proposals will do no harm—may be required.

As you discuss this article, you may wish to think of a specific technology project, policy proposal, or land use action that is of concern to your discussion group. Then try to apply each of the 10 lessons that Myers and Raffensperger offer in their article on using the precautionary principle. What new ideas and insights did this exercise give you?

We welcome feedback on your experience in using our discussion guides. Email comments to DiscussionGuides@futurenet.org

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