

# Remarks for Grassroots Discussion Panel on Civil Society and Regulation

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International Communication Association annual meeting  
San Francisco, California  
May 27, 2007

## Talk Summary:

I serve on the boards of two organizations: Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR) and the Institute for Public Interest Media (IPIM), both based in San Francisco.

CPSR is a member organization for progressive technologists, with a focus on technology-related and media policy. I have been a member of CPSR since 2002. I am presently the president of CPSR, but will be stepping down in a few weeks to become acting treasurer, while our regular treasurer is on maternity leave, and handing over the presidency to Annalee Newitz, who joined the board last year.

IPIM brings labor activists together for cultural activities (LaborFest) and conferences (under the banner of LaborTech) devoted to practical uses of technology for labor and to issues in technology law and policy as they affect working class interests. I hosted and helped organize the 2004 LaborTech conference at Stanford University, where I am a lecturer and associate program director for the Symbolic Systems Program.

Of the two organizations on whose boards I sit, my day to day involvement has been much greater in the case of CPSR than it has been with IPIM, so I will devote most of my remarks to CPSR. Both organizations have relatively small budgets, and yet both have had high impact in their respective spheres of influence: high technology policy and labor communications. I will also speak a bit about my involvement with online deliberation tools, which grew out of work with the East Palo Alto Community Network.

## **Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR)**

CPSR (<http://www.cpsr.org>) is a membership advocacy organization with a strong member-driven agenda. It was founded in the early 1980s by computer scientists who wanted to get together to stop proposed uses of computers in “missile defense” applications (i.e. “Launch on Warning”, and later, the Strategic Defense Initiative). The desire among informed computer professionals to debunk Reagan Administration claims about the feasibility of automated missile defense systems was a powerful, galvanizing force that led CPSR to achieve prominence quickly in this policy space. Early members were generally united by their position on CPSR's founding issue, and energy was therefore focused on making the organization's advocacy and education effective on a consensus agenda.

As the Cold War faded with the end of the 1980s, CPSR became a locus for new issues. Electronic privacy and pro-social uses of technology were two foci that emerged and that remained important for CPSR over the past two decades. The Computers, Freedom, and Privacy (CFP), Directions and Implications of Advanced Computing (DIAC), and Participatory Design Conferences (PDC) were all started by CPSR. The organizational structure of CPSR, and its growth and persistence across the political and technology transformations of the late 80s and early 90s, together led to two types of diffusion in the organization:

- (1) CPSR is member driven, with both an elected board generally drawn from the membership (all board members must be members) and a working group structure for action that allows members to take the initiative and to participate in the formation of CPSR's agenda. As CPSR grew from its founding base, this organizational structure resulted in a shift from decisions that were made by a small group of computer scientists who knew each other in a handful of places to a more complex organizational agenda fed by a larger and more geographically and professionally dispersed membership. Knowing about and joining CPSR shifted from being an inner circle phenomenon among an elite group to being a nationwide and then international movement, with enough paying members to support a small staff. The founders saw their influence diluted in this larger organization, and the result was a more diffuse, less cohesive agenda.
- (2) Changes in the political and technological environment (a shift of public consciousness away from nuclear conflict, for example, and the spread of the Internet beyond research institutions)

meant that consensus on CPSR's agenda broke down. In its early days, CPSR's members generally agreed on the organization's focus and issue positions opposing military technology, or they would not have joined. Once a large membership was established, however, agreement on the founding issue was no guarantee of agreement on subsequent agendas. CPSR members have had long-running disagreements over issues such as whether electronic voting can be done in a responsible way, or not. Other recurring disputes have involved CPSR's structure and mission themselves: centralized versus decentralized, staff versus member driven, single versus multiple focus, and so on. Thus *opinions*, as well as the agenda itself, became more diverse as the organization aged.

CPSR managed to remain vital and effective for many years despite these diffusive tendencies, in large part because members were attracted to the opportunities for engagement with other progressive technology activists that CPSR offered, through its Journal (now defunct), chapters, email lists, conferences, and other activities. For a while, CPSR filled a void that left few alternatives for technologists looking to plug into the technology policy and progressive technology spaces. As other organizations have moved into these spaces, however, CPSR's role has become less clear, and the challenges posed by its structure and legacy, which are rooted in an earlier era, have yet to be addressed adequately.

In the coming year, CPSR will be reviving its foci on technology and war (in a conference planned for next February) and on progressive technology (in a 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary DIAC conference planned for November). Other Board members and I hope that this will be an effective use of the CPSR name and of its remaining resources. But a more sweeping organizational overhaul may be needed if CPSR is to thrive in the coming years.

## **LaborTech**

My substantive involvement with the Institute for Public Interest Media, apart from the annual Board meeting, has mostly taken place around the LaborTech conferences. I have participated in four of these conferences (2001, 2002, 2004, and 2006), and was the host and a co-organizer of the 2004 conference. I also helped organize the 2006 conference. LaborTech (<http://www.labortech.net>) began in the early 1990s, and conferences have been held in various locations in the U.S. and abroad, with one held every 1-2 years.

LaborTech conferences are opportunities for labor and

media/technology activists to get together and share both practical knowledge (e.g. how to set up a grassroots labor website) and political perspectives (e.g. legal developments in workers' rights to use email for organizing). Some important initiatives have been incubated at LaborTech conferences, such as the Workers Independent News Service (WINS).

A limitation of the conferences has been the difficulty of sustaining engagement among attendees beyond the 2-3 days of each conference. For the last four years, I have been working on a tool with students at Stanford that is inspired by these types of difficulties, and is aimed at facilitating resolute deliberation and democratic project development among like minded activists. The tool, called "Deme", has proved difficult to turn into an everyday platform, due mainly to limitations in web programming technology that have only recently been addressed. Deme has been rewritten completely in the last year, in a new framework called "Ruby on Rails", that has made possible a much more maintainable and sophisticated interface. We plan to launch the new version this summer, and I hope very much that it will be able to be used by the next LaborTech organizing committee.

## **Online Deliberation for Groups**

The difficulty of bringing grassroots groups together online inspired my work on Deme, and is the subject of much of my academic research at Stanford. Deme was conceived as part of my involvement with the East Palo Alto Community Network (<http://www.epa.net>), a grassroots hub network and web portal in the low-income community of East Palo Alto, near Stanford.

Online deliberation is a broad field of practice and inquiry, which was/is the subject of a conference I hosted at Stanford in 2005 (<http://www.online-deliberation.net>) and of a forthcoming edited volume that grew out of that conference. The CPSR DIAC conference planned for this coming November may be the next online deliberation conference. Online deliberation includes approaches such as citizen dialogue, public consultation, community organizing, learning communities, and managerial decision making in addition to Deme's approach, which is on democratic group decision making.

The impetus behind Deme is the observation that existing tools do not foster the full range of decision making activities seen in grassroots groups, in an online environment. Email lists and message boards, for example, are inadequate for producing democratic decisions and text-centered discussion in groups of more than a few people with

ordinary Internet skills (of the sort possessed by users of, say, Yahoo Groups). Students and I have written some papers and given presentations describing the motivations behind Deme in greater detail (see my website, <http://www.stanford.edu/~davies>). I believe that the coming availability of tools like Deme has the potential to revolutionize grassroots civil society, by democratizing participation and by eliminating effective excuses for inner circle decision making.