

04. [Introduction] Men, Machines, and the World About

Norbert Wiener began working toward cybernetics while engaged in a World War II research project. This project, like the atomic bomb, was funded and organized by Vannevar Bush's (000) academic/industrial/military "iron triangle." In response to the dropping of the bomb and other horrors of the war, Wiener decided that a new type of scientist was required, a scientist engaged with the consequences of scientific work (as Wiener argued eloquently in the open letter "A Scientist Rebels"). In the following essay he explained some of the history and concepts of his new cybernetic science, while simultaneously attempting to be the new scientist for which he had called.

Cybernetics is perhaps most immediately recognized for bringing the "cyber" prefix into English usage in terms like "cyborg" and "cyberspace." Other, less immediately obvious terms were also introduced into common speech by Wiener's writings on cybernetics—including "feedback," "input," and "output." These words had existed in English, but for very narrow technical purposes—for the description of engineering problems, the description of machines. Now they are used to describe human interchanges, as when one asks for "feedback" from a colleague on an idea.

Cyberneticists sought to create an overarching study of "communication and control in the animal and machine." The work of the cyberneticists was extremely influential, redefining the object of study for many scientists and technologists. Before cybernetics, technology was largely defined in terms of mechanics. Studies involved movements of power and accompanying observable physical changes such as one might have found inside Vannevar Bush's memex: its operations of request, recording, calculation, and display moving like an intricate jukebox or clockwork. When "communication and control" became the object of study, the ground shifted. Communication and control involve power differentials and have physical manifestations, to be sure, but are more akin to the workings of a digital computer: most observable, not with a voltage meter or the gaze of the naked eye, but from the inside, from within the system. And these systems tend to overflow the boundaries of any single object. As a result some previous studies of isolated objects seemed outmoded in a cybernetic context, while cybernetics created a framework for studying communication and control systems that spread across multiple entities. The first of these studied, and perhaps the defining case of cybernetics, was the subject of the WWII research project on which Wiener worked: the system of a bomber, an anti-aircraft gun, and the human operators of each.

As Katherine Hayles points out, this type of study has the effect of eroding liberal humanist ideas of subjectivity. That is to say, if we humans are simply parts of systems—our skins not boundaries but permeable membranes, our actions measured as behavior rather than by introspection—the autonomous, sufficient "self" begins to seem an illusion. This anticipates some poststructuralist positions, and echoes, in some ways, Zen Buddhism. However, anticipating many U.S. reactions to poststructuralism and Zen, Wiener did not embrace this thought.

Wiener's devotion to social justice—to becoming a scientist engaged with the social outcomes of his work—is particularly notable in the McCarthyite context of the 1950s. After World War II Wiener refused to take any military funding for his work, and his figure of the new scientist has become an important model for many. Since 1987, Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (notable opponents of "Star Wars" space weapons and proponents of ethics in high technology contexts) has given a yearly Wiener Award to recognize outstanding contributions toward "social responsibility in computing technology."

As Heinz von Foerster writes in volume four of Wiener's Collected Works (800):

A quick comparison of curricula offered in departments of electrical engineering in the early fifties with today's will convince even the skeptic of the significance of [these] ideas; although then almost all that was taught was "power," today almost all that is taught is "communication."

For more on the cyborg, see the next selection by J.C.R. Licklider (005) and Donna Haraway's manifesto (035). For more on cyberspace, see the article by Chip Morningstar and F. Randall Farmer on (045).

Of Men Machines

Rachel Sandford



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