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The social shaping of technology

Robin Williams ... David Edge

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Abstract

This paper reviews the growing body of research that explores “the social shaping of technology” (SST) – how the design and implementation of technology are patterned by a range of social and economic factors as well as narrowly technical considerations. It shows how researchers from a range of disciplinary backgrounds were brought together by a critique of traditional conceptions of technology (for example, linear models of innovation that privileged technological supply or restricted the scope of social inquiry into technology to assessing its impacts). Though their analytical frameworks differ to a greater or lesser extent in terminology and approach, some explanatory concepts have emerged, and constitute an effective model of the innovation process. Here, it is suggested, SST offers a deeper understanding and also potentially broadens the technology policy agenda. These claims are assessed through a review of recent research into specific instances of social shaping, particularly in relation to information technology. Finally the article discusses some of the intellectual dilemmas in the field. Though the intellectual cross-fertilisation has been creative, points of tension and divergence between its

constituent strands have resulted in some sharp controversies, which reflect upon the theoretical and policy claims of SST.



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