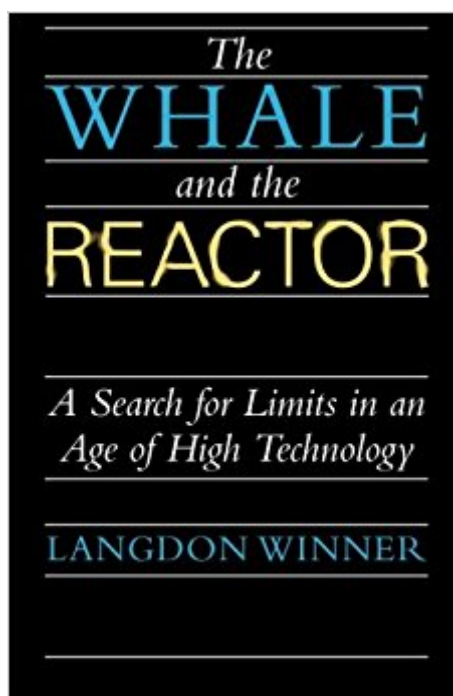


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# The Whale And The Reactor: A Search For Limits In An Age Of High Technology



## Synopsis

"The questions he poses about the relationship between technical change and political power are pressing ones that can no longer be ignored, and identifying them is perhaps the most a nascent 'philosophy of technology' can expect to achieve at the present time." —David Dickson, New York Times Book Review

"The Whale and the Reactor is the philosopher's equivalent of superb public history. In its pages an analytically trained mind confronts some of the most pressing political issues of our day." —Ruth Schwartz Cowan, Isis

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Langdon Winner is professor of political science at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and the author of Autonomous Technology.

A really interesting read on the ideological apparatus of technology. The intersections with modern political rhetoric and shifts from Keynes to neoliberal economics illustrate the conditions through which Silicon Valley tech companies and lifestyles have emerged. It is a brief, insightful read that draws from critical theory as well as hints at later developed network theories and infrastructure studies. For people interested in STS, history of communications, media studies, and political economy this is an excellent and essential read.

A popular morning radio broadcast here in Detroit has a great bit periodically entitled this, "Stop and think about it." Winner passionately writes with this theme in mind when it comes to technology. As

technology as we now know it seems steamrolling always into new area never ventured and most react with "can't stop progress," this book delivers the good gift of "we'd better start, stopping and thinking more carefully about it." The "it" is the impact of technologies upon society. Discussions of risk analysis, tradeoffs, environment and ecology, and of course, economics and politics and social sciences and philosophy are all here. I came away at times frustrated with the critique going on which didn't truly provide great alternatives, but certainly one obtains from reading this profitable work the valuable premise, i.e. shouldn't we be engaging more seriously in setting limits on technology? Stem cells, and medical technology regarding life & death issues have clearly pushed the technological envelope to the breaking point for all of society. Engage with this subject. This book is good place to enter the dialogue.

Loved it!

In *The Whale and the Reactor*, Langdon Winner asserts that technology is inseparably connected with politics, in that the technological decisions we make are often decisions significantly shaped and motivated by political forces. Some of these politically shaped technologies are obvious, such as those created for and used by the military. However, most are much more subtle. Winner provides an example early in the book about the bridges over parkways in Long Island, New York, describing how they are only nine feet tall. He then claims that these bridges were actually politically designed and built to achieve a specific social affect; to keep busses, and thus the poor and racial minorities, out of public parks. Winner's primary intention is not necessarily to restructure or provide alternatives to the role politics has in technology, but rather to first recognize it. Winner asserts that the concept of technological determinism is much too strong, but claims that currently we exist in technological somnambulism, "willingly sleepwalking through the process of reconstituting the conditions of human existence." Although it need not be, technology, driven by politics, is shaping the world in which we live, rather than a cognitive society as a whole. Winner also argues that politics also uses the promise of technology to restructure and format society to its liking. Many technologies need a specific structure around them to function at their greatest potential. By controlling technology, something society has blindly placed their faith in, politics can in turn control the structure of society necessary for technology to prosper. This does not, however, take into consideration the possibility that instead of society attuning itself to the demands of technology, technology may instead attune itself to the demands of society. The characteristics of technology may in fact be a result of cultural values rather than exclusively political ones. Either way Winner

makes a significant point in that whatever our current situation is, we appear to be sleepwalking through it. To rectify our condition, we must first recognize, and reflect on it thoroughly. Winner's book is well worth reading and at the very least sheds some important light on our circumstance at present.

We have just finished this book in our Book Club here in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The debate that we spawned from the material was intense and exciting. This book clearly defines an interesting problem that is hidden underneath a complex facade of consumerism and innovation. Winner chooses not to offer alternatives to our pursuit of unlimited technology, but instead, he describes certain aspects of technology, such as politics, that should be taken into consideration as society blindly accepts technology on a product-by-product basis. How are we being limited?? This is an important question to ponder as you read this. His way of citing examples is actually VERY humorous and embarrassing at times, which makes the book easy and enjoyable to read. Instead of being told WHAT to be aware of, he sets up a method that informs the reader on HOW to be MORE aware of the technology around us and the implications of it. I believe that this a very effective way to make people think without ranting about political views, etc. I wish they would reissue this book with a beautiful cover design, it truly deserves more attention...

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