

THE Current

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UC Santa Barbara Staff

Conference to probe digital technology's impact on culture

The development of digital technology will affect the world in ways every bit as profound and long-lasting as the invention of the printing press, says William Warner, director of the UC Santa Barbara-based University of California Digital Cultures Project.

What some of those ways might be and whether they bode good or ill will be discussed at the UC Digital Cultures Research Conference, to be held Nov. 3 through Nov. 5 at UCSB.

"For humanists, their students and for the public at large, the shift from print media to digital media is fraught with dangers and opportunities," said Warner, a professor of English at UCSB.

The conference is free of charge and open to the public.

Those who plan to attend, however, are asked to fill out a registration form available on line at the conference Web site, <http://dc-mrg.english.ucsb.edu/conference.asp>. All sessions are to be held in Room 1003 Kohn Hall on the UCSB campus.

One of the dangers of a new means of communication, Warner said, is the development of new modes of censorship and controls that fly in the face of First Amendment rights.

That danger is very real on the Internet, where Web sites set up by hate groups and pornographic businesses have flourished under a lack of controls -- giving rise to growing demands for regulation.

Another danger is in the area of proprietary rights.

One of the strengths of digital technology, its ability to easily replicate and disseminate data, has also caused the Napster dilemma.

Napster technology makes it possible for any personal computer owner to copy and replay popular music for free.

In one sense, Napster is an advancement of artistic freedom.

Through Napster, musicians can put their music on a Web site where it can be downloaded by fans, releasing the artist from dependence on record companies for distribution.

In the absence of recording industry influence and the incumbent need to have one's music judged commercially salable, musicians can be more free to experiment and pioneer.

Listeners enjoy the wider range of music available and the opportunity to assemble their own CDs of favorite songs.

The downside of Napster, of course, is that commercially produced music can be copied and disseminated at no cost to listeners, depriving artists and record companies of compensation for their work.

University professors are concerned about proprietary interests because they heretofore have considered their class notes and syllabi to be their intellectual property.

Some universities have recently demanded that professors make those items available to students on the Internet, making them targets for unauthorized copying and wide dissemination.

But the opportunities are also great, Warner said.

Digital technology makes it possible to study and learn in many new ways. One product of the technology, virtual reality, allows psychologists to study human

behavior under all sorts of artificial conditions that would be too dangerous in a real environment.

The traditional college classroom is also being transformed with digital technology, enabling students to see and hear lectures on their computer screens at home or in other buildings and ask questions and engage in class discussions via modem.

At the research conference, more than 30 scholars in the humanities and social sciences representing

nearly all of the UC campuses will make presentations on the potential and the pitfalls of digital technology.

Warner said he has asked that the presentations be brief to accommodate full and open discussion periods.

Some sample presentation titles:

"The William Blake Archive: Problems and Opportunities," by Bob Essick, English, UC Riverside. Would Blake have approved of the William Blake Archive or would he have found it a hideous perversion of the aims he had with his works?

"The Context and Reception of Digital Archives," Aaron Potter, English, UC Riverside.

"Lurk-TV: The Space of the Webcam," Sheila C. Murphy, Film Studies, UC Irvine.

"Microcosms," Mark Meadow and Bruce Robertson, Art History, UCSB.

"The Digitalization of Gender and Sexualities," Sue-Ellen Case, Theater and Dance, UC Davis.

"Reading Digital Culture," David Trend, Studio Art, UC Irvine.

How does the promise of digital utopia compare to the real life, non-virtual world, particularly in regard to communication and education.

"Media Determinism and Media Freedom in the Epoch of Digital Code," William Warner, English, UCSB.

"Intellectual Property and the Future of Cyberspace:

Does Information Want to be Owned?" Mark Rose, English, UCSB, discussion leader.

"The Classroom of the Future:

An Open Forum," Alan Liu, English, UCSB, discussion leader.

Other presentations will be given under the broad topic banners "Collaborative Systems: Redefining Public Art in Electronic Information and Communication Environments," and "Ethics, Science, Internet."

The conference is a product of the UC Digital Cultures Project, a five-year program funded by a \$175,000 grant from the UC Office of the President to encourage research in areas where the humanities and digital technology intersect.

The grant supports a week-long summer institute, conferences, a research stipend, web-based discussion forums and the publication of research findings.

Through the project, higher education has a chance to lead and help shape discussion of the future of digital technology.

"The university lies at the center of the digital mutation in culture," Warner said.

"This group of humanists hopes to be an integral part of that decision-making process."

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About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.