S-42 – Visions and Realities of Automation in the 20th century

International Committee for the History of Technology

Organizers:
1) Lars Bluma, (German Mining Museum Bochum, Germany), lars.bluma@bergbaumuseum.de
2) Timo Myllyntaus, (University of Turku, Finland), timmyl@utu.fi

Abstract:
To make sense of the twenty-first century we need to understand the profound influence of automation technology developed in the twentieth century. Automation has been as well a driving force for new social visions a revolutionary tool in the industrial practice and reality. Quite ambivalent, automation in general still embodied the anti-utopia of mass unemployment, worker deskilling and greater management control. Nevertheless, ideas and visions of automation have a long tradition reaching back before the rise of the computer; furthermore it was (and still is) a key narrative of industrialization.

This session examines the various utopian visions of automation in the age of hi-tech prophecies and will ask for continuities and disruptions of such “imaginary futures”. Furthermore, the premise of this session is to ask why the visions of automation survived such a long time even though neither vision was fully realized. In confronting visions of automation with their realities, the contributions to the session demonstrate that ideological and imaginary discourses shaped the design and path of automation technology. Thus it is important to observe the conflicting views of how automation could best address in the industrial practice. How did this application in turn influenced the way industrialized societies envisioned modernization by automation?

The session consisting of four papers combines case studies on early automation visions of the thirties, on the (dis-)continuity of these visions throughout the 20th century, on attempts to apply automation technology to coal mining in the seventies and finally on the transformation of printing technology in the eighties.

Keywords: History of Technology – Automation – Industrialisation – Utopias Engineering.

Participants:
- Karsten Uhl
- Nikolai Ingenerf
- Frank Dittmann
- Noyan Dinckal