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Is Truth Soluble in Politics?

by Peter A. Hancock
HFES President

One of the leading thinkers of the nineteenth century opined that the true job of the philosopher was not to study the world but to change it. He could well have been speaking directly for those of us in human factors and ergonomics. From my perspective as a professor, it is often all too easy to see our enterprise as one that terminates with a book, a chapter, or the traditional refereed paper. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps one reason human factors and ergonomics rarely fares well in the Academy is that at heart it is NOT fundamentally an “academic” pursuit. Indeed, I believe our real job as human factors researchers is to provide information, tools, methods, and support to those who actually effect change. Their names may not be well known, and they may have never published a scholarly paper, but it is our professionals on the front line who actually DO the job of human factors and ergonomics. Sometimes in a large way, sometimes in a small way, but always in a very real way, they are agents of change, and as such their actions are social and political by their very nature.

Although there is an invective never to discuss politics and religion if one does not wish to stir deep emotions, as president, I think the time has come to consider the place of our professional society and our enterprise in relation to our various political systems, and in essence to distill what our politics actually are or should be. From our very birth, we as a group have advocated for the user in the system. Our sound bites speak of being “user-friendly” and our major texts talk of “fitting the task to the human.” Indeed, it is the fundamental characteristic of what we do and what we are, that we believe in human-centered thinking. We try to influence designers, processes, and systems to adopt this approach in the expectation and belief that this philosophy serves both the individual and the technical system in the best manner possible. When reduced to its bare essentials, our efforts can be characterized as advocating for the worker in the system, and we are convinced that this wonderful human “machine” is capable of remarkable achievements if provided with the appropriate support.

In historical terms, this persuasion is new. The history of work, especially in the last two or three centuries, is characterized generally by the abuse of the human element. With individuals seen and represented as an operational unit, care and concern for them often was, and unfortunately often still is, sublimated to expected profit and efficiency. It is hard not to be anachronistic

and judgmental, but our contemporary viewpoint must be tempered with our knowledge of the more recent change in the character of work from a physical to an informational currency. This metamorphosis has led to more probing questions about the nature of work and what the future of work will be, and indeed, one of our recent past presidents has tried to capture the general notion of an ergonomic advantage through the expression that “good ergonomics is good economics.” Whether good economics per se is itself “good” remains a highly debatable issue.

In the partisan political arena of the United States in recent months, we have seen controversy over a proposed OSHA regulation and an intense public forum on the questions of medical error and public safety as presented in a recent issue of the *Bulletin*. In highlighting these developments, I do not want to provide further discussion of these particular issues; rather, I use them simply as examples that progressively more social interest is being focused on questions of human-technology interaction, as witnessed also by the recent scare over the interruption to e-commerce through the action of computer hackers. As these political calls to arms occur more frequently, we must be sure that our central theme of the human-centered advantage is communicated alongside our efforts to address the individual area of concern. Diverse though we may be, if we do not have an agreed-upon central core philosophy, we will not and would not deserve to survive.

All political actions are expressions of the “will to power.” In contemporary representative democracy, issues are brought before assemblies, often constituted in large part by current or former attorneys. (How many representatives in the House or the Senate possess an advanced degree in a technology-related area?) Steeped in the law and the primacy of precedent, they often have little background or experience in the highly technical areas upon which they must ruminate and rule. Inevitably, many controversial issues devolve to an emotive battlefield dominated by the armies of partisan interest. How does the intelligent, diligent, and responsible representative (yes, contrary to stereotype, there are many) decide upon such issues? In essence, can we afford to have the truth dissolve in politics? Further, when we have exceptionally fast-moving technologies such as the Web or biotechnology, how can the law keep up? Surely it is now time to unveil an ergonomics of democracy and a human factors of politics. For, as one of my colleagues

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Midyear Executive Council Report

The midyear meeting of the HFES Executive Council took place February 10–12, 2000, at the Westin Harbor Island Hotel in San Diego, California. Following is a summary of the actions taken at the meeting.

Long-Range Planning Day

The first day of the midyear meeting is traditionally devoted to a discussion of long-range plans for the Society. President-Elect William C. Howell focused on past, present, and future efforts in the area of outreach. Topics included developing messages to convey to different audiences; processes and methods for responding to human-factors-related developments in the news and in Congress; and the potential role of HFES technical groups, publications, the Web site, and standards representatives in responding to such events and conveying the Society's message about how human factors/ergonomics plays a role in people's lives in diverse ways.

Communications/Publications

Council approved the recommendation of the Communications/Publications Subcouncil to name John F. (Jeff) Kelley as editor of *Ergonomics in Design* at the conclusion of John Shafer's second term (this year).

A 30-minute videotape of an interview with Alphonse Chapanis, conducted and produced by John Shafer, will be duplicated and made available for sale to members and nonmembers. The video, to be released prior to the IEA 2000/HFES 2000 Congress, will become part of the new "Pioneers in Human Factors and Ergonomics" video series. Council approved Dennis Beringer as the editor of this series.

A budget proposal was approved to produce a videotaped interview of Neville Moray to add to the pioneers video series.

John Lee will conduct the interview at the upcoming IEA 2000/HFES 2000 Congress, and the final product should be available for sale before the end of this year.

The Society will hire a publishing consultant to assist the Communications and Publications Subcouncil and Communications Department staff in setting future strategies for the publications program.

A supplemental edition to *Human Factors Perspectives on Warnings* (1994) was approved for publication. Editors for the second edition are Michael S. Wogalter, Stephen L. Young, and Kenneth R. Laughery, Sr. The book is scheduled for release by the end of the year.

Chapters

The Student Affairs Committee recommended that Council revise the Operating Rules to eliminate the requirement that student chapters submit a report to the Student Chapter Affairs chair following a Society-funded project. The rule was found to be unnecessary, given the current practice.

Student chapters and local chapters of HFES are required to link to the HFES Web site and must display the HFES name and logo on the front page of their sites.

Technical Groups

Acting on the recommendation of the Council of Technical Groups, Council reduced the minimum number of members of a technical group from 200 to 150. A TG that fails to maintain that number enters the probationary period mandated in the Operating Rules. If the TG fails to meet its requirements for membership and activity during the prescribed period, it will become a special interest group.

TG Web sites will now be required to include a link to the HFES site and must display the HFES name and logo on the front page.

Membership

Council acted to temporarily suspend the Bylaw requirement that people whose membership has lapsed must submit a new application including endorsements. The temporary suspension will be evaluated within the next three years and submitted to the membership as a Bylaws change.

HFES will now extend a 15% membership discount to members of the other IEA-affiliated societies, provided they reside in the country in which the other society is based.

The HFES staff was directed to determine what proportion of student members become transitional Associate members upon graduation and whether the proportions differ for men and women. A report will be submitted at the next Council meeting. The staff was also asked to provide statistical summaries on the number of women in the Society for the next three years.

Fellows

Council approved the following Operating Rule, to be added to Chapter 17, Fellows: "Honorary Fellows may apply for regular Fellow status at any time by submitting to the chair of the Fellows Selection Committee documentation showing that they have fulfilled the HFES service criteria. If a 2/3 majority of the Committee concurs that the criteria have been fulfilled, the

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Chair will send a recommendation for approval to Council, accompanied by the documentation, and Council will have final authority to decide whether to approve the application, based on a simple majority vote.”

Certification Endorsement

The Task Force on HFES Professional Certification Endorsement was asked to provide Executive Council with a detailed philosophical statement giving the pros and cons of endorsing certification bodies. The report will be submitted for the next Council meeting.

Budget

The following revised budget was approved:

Estimated Income	
Membership.....	\$ 560,800
Membership Services.....	79,000
Communications/Publications.....	552,435
Annual Meeting.....	335,310
HFES Institute.....	100,750
Other.....	21,300
Total estimated income.....	\$1,649,595
Estimated Expenses	
Membership Services.....	\$ 82,613
Communications/Publications.....	608,074
Administrative.....	613,448
Committees and Officers.....	96,850
Annual Meeting.....	108,450
HFES Institute.....	79,015
Interorganizational.....	26,850
Total estimated expenses.....	\$1,615,300
Estimated 2000 surplus.....	\$ 34,295

INSIDE HFES

Cumulative Indexes Now On Line

HFES is pleased to announce that the cumulative author/title indexes for three Society publications are now available at the HFES Web site (<http://hfes.org/Publications/Menu.html>). Click the link “search for titles and authors” to scan for key words or author names in all articles from *Human Factors* (1958–1999), *Ergonomics in Design* (1993–1999), and HFES annual meeting proceedings (1972–1999). Search results are listed alphabetically by first word in the article title. The indexes will be updated annually.

New Staff E-mail Addresses

The HFES Central Office Staff now has new e-mail addresses. Please note the following:

Lynn Strother, CAE <i>Executive Director</i>	lynn@hfes.org
Lois Smith <i>Communications Director</i>	lois@hfes.org
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IEA 2000/HFES 2000

Call for Colloquium Participants

Shirleyann Gibbs and Neil Adams of Gibbs and Associates (Australia) will conduct a colloquium entitled “Training, Attitudes, and Safety: Myth, Faith, and Reality” on August 2, 2000 at the IEA 2000/HFES 2000 Congress. The colloquium will address the pervasive influence of attitudes and other organizational culture factors that can negate any value that may inhere in training alone. Accident prevention requires an understanding of complex, interactive, and adaptive behaviors and hierarchies that influence both proximal and distal causes of unwanted events. The session will investigate the intrinsic demand characteristics of hazardous tasks and their performance effort and will consider the frequently neglected role of maintenance as it affects plant, personnel, and systems operation.

Interested Congress delegates are invited to apply for inclusion in the colloquium by providing a brief position statement by *May 31, 2000*. A maximum of 20 persons will be selected to participate, and the coordinators will notify successful applicants by June 16, 2000. For more information, contact Shirleyann Gibbs, +612-9983-9855, fax +612-9402-5295; shannng@gibbsplus.com.au.

HFES Placement Service: ENROLL NOW!

No need to wait for the IEA 2000/HFES 2000 Congress to take advantage of the HFES Placement Service. The service is FREE to job seekers! Go to the HFES Web site (<http://hfes.org>) for information on posting your résumé. If you are seeking employment, or just interested in perusing human factors/ergonomics jobs, you are welcome to enroll in our free service.

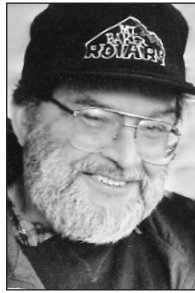
Employers looking for candidates can enroll in the service, post position information, and obtain résumé search subscriptions. Call HFES at 310/394-1811 (e-mail hfesps@aol.com) for job posting and/or résumé search prices, options, and application form. Employers and job seekers can meet informally and in prearranged interviews at the Congress. Employers may reserve booths and tables for a modest fee or arrange to meet candidates in the Placement Service.

Dieter Jahns, former *HFES Bulletin* Editor, Executive Council member, and Annual Meeting chair, died at his home in Lynden, Washington, on March 14 at the age of 58 after a seven-month battle with lung cancer. His ashes rest on Orcas Island.

Dieter was born in Braunschweig, Germany, in 1941. His family emigrated to the United States after World War II and settled in Alamogordo, New Mexico, where his father contributed to U.S. rocket programs at Holloman Air Force Base. His father's activities became the basis for Dieter's interest in flight, advanced technology, and human factors engineering. After earning bachelor's and master's degrees in psychology and engineering psychology from the University of New Mexico and working occasionally at Holloman, Dieter joined the Boeing Company in Washington, where he served as a human factors analyst for 16 years. He also worked for two years in Reinbach, Germany, at the Research Institute for Human Engineering. Dieter left Boeing in 1981 and opened SynerTec Associates, a human factors/ergonomics consulting practice, where he worked until the weeks preceding his death.

Dieter Jahns will be remembered most for his impassioned efforts to further the profession of ergonomics. With a group of HFES cohorts, Dieter formed the Board of Certification in Professional Ergonomics in 1990 and became its part-time executive director, a position he held until 1998, when he handed off the BCPE reins to a permanent, full-time executive administrator and resumed his own full-time ergonomics practice. BCPE recently received its one-thousandth application for professional ergonomics certification, a testament to Dieter's vision and dedication to his profession.

Headstrong but open-minded, self-reliant yet compassionate, disciplined but thoroughly human, Dieter was all of these things. But most of all he was a dear friend to hundreds of members of this Society and one of its most ardent proponents of the advancement of ergonomics as a unique design discipline for the betterment of life.



Steve Casey ☒

Peter A. Hancock's lecture, "Custer and the Titanic," was presented at the HFES 1999 Annual Meeting and is a prelude to Peter's presidential address at the IEA 2000/HFES 2000 Congress. The 87-minute VHS video can be purchased for \$40.00 for prepaid orders (shipping is included). Educational institutions can purchase this video, along with the three previous videos in the Small Lecture series, for \$105.00 prepaid, a savings of 36% over the cost of purchasing each one individually. The three earlier videos are priced as follows: Jake Pauls's "The Pathology of Everyday Things" (1996) costs \$50.00; Julian A. Waller's "Injury Medicine and Ergonomics" (1997) sells for \$40.00; and Patricia F. Waller's "Societal Human Factors: Broadening the Vision" (1998) sells for \$35.00.

To obtain an order form with details, contact Small Lecture series cochair Jake Pauls at bldguse@aol.com or by fax, 301/933-5541. ☒

CALL FOR PAPERS

Transportation Research Board

Abstracts are invited for the Transportation Research Board Conference to be held January 7-11, 2001, in Washington, DC. The scope of the call is "Situation Awareness in Transportation." Paper topics include theoretical approaches to situation awareness, measurement of situation awareness, applications of situation awareness to specific transportation domains, and designing for situation awareness. Abstracts are due *May 1, 2000*. Contact Joanne L. Harbluk, Ergonomics Division, Transport Canada, Ottawa, ON Canada K1A 0N5; 613/998-1971, fax 613/990-2913; harbluj@tc.gc.ca; <http://www4.nationalacademies.org/trb/annual.nsf>.

2001 SAE World Congress

The Society of Automotive Engineers invites abstracts for its World Congress to be held March 5-8, 2001 in Detroit, Michigan. Abstracts are welcomed on topics related to automobile engineering and manufacturing, including human factors, in-vehicle networks, driver comfort and convenience, advanced vehicle control systems, standards, and occupant protection. The deadline for submissions is *June 1, 2000*. Email submissions are strongly encouraged. Contact Patti Kreh, SAE, 755 W. Big Beaver Rd., Suite 1600, Troy, MI 48084-4096; 248/273-2494, fax 248/273-2494; pkreh@sae.org; <http://www.sae.org/congress/2000/01cfp.htm>. ☒

TECHNICAL GROUPS

Arnold M. Small Lecture Videos Available

Each year, the HFES Safety Technical Group invites an individual to present an address as part of the TG's Arnold M. Small Lecture Series. These presentations are videotaped, and the fourth such presentation is now available on video.

IN THE NEWS

Diane L. Damos appeared in a CBS Evening News segment on November 28, 1999, regarding the Egyptian Air Flight 990 crash on October 31, 1999. Damos answered questions pertaining to the methods used in screening pilots for mental health in the United States, how American screening procedures differ from those employed by other countries, and whether mental illness in airline pilots is a serious problem.

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Is Truth Soluble in Politics? (continued from page 1)

recently suggested, even issues as apparently mundane as voting procedures can have a crucial impact on our collective future.

An often unsuspected but vast power results when applied behavioral research is linked to modern technology. The influence of paired-associate learning and the illusion of truth effect in memory alone, employed with modern communication, could wield a tremendous influence in electoral processes. Advertising has always turned to psychology to understand and profit from methods of mass manipulation, and it is little wonder that most political campaigns are now run by individuals steeped in that form of learning. We have the insight into such power and the knowledge of how to exploit it. In particular, we need to address the evolution of political processes and practices in a society ever more driven by technological innovation.

No founding father of the United States ever saw a computer, and although there is a tendency to enshrine documents such as the Constitution, it is, and should be, a living blueprint for societal organization. Where will representative democracy be in a society in which everyone is online? What of the right of those who do not wish to be online? Will plebiscites become a common form of decision making? What are the better forms of social organization in a digitally dominated world? Diverse cultures and institutions have been changed by technology, and political institutions are certainly not immune from such influence. Our human past is one redolent with oppression. These waves of slavery have themselves evolved from physical manifestations through economic control to the present technological forms of expression (the so-called digital divide). But soon we will come to a time when all human capital will be precious, and to waste any of it on the creation of disenfranchised consumers will be not merely short-sighted but truly insupportable. I believe we are in the midst of a great enterprise in which we in human factors and ergonomics need to champion the technological emancipation of all – if not for the altruistic reasons we should aspire to, at least for the selfish reasons we inevitably retire to.

Although in our television-replete society it might appear to be the case, politics is not a spectator sport. I am sure that many will believe that as a scientific society we have no place in politics, or, at best a very small advisory role. However, I do not believe this to be true, for where there is thought without action, very soon there is action without thought. I hope what I have said is sufficiently polemic that others feel motivated to air their own perspective. After all, as I have suggested elsewhere: “in democracies, unanimous is ominous.” ☒

In the News (continued from previous page)

On January 5, 1999, **Alan Hedge** was featured on NBC's Today Show in a “Today's Parenting” segment on children and ergonomics. Hedge discussed the principles of good posture and workstation arrangement for children working at computers. Using several children on a variety of workstations as examples, Hedge demonstrated how different kinds of home office furniture could be retrofitted to accommodate children. For more information, visit Cornell University's CUergo Web site at <http://ergo.human.cornell.edu>. ☒

CALENDAR

Announcement deadlines: 1st day of the month prior to the desired issue; for events or deadlines within the first 3 weeks of a month, send information at least 2 months in advance. Items are published according to space availability.

- ★ **SAE General Aviation Technology 2000**, May 9–11, 2000, Wichita, KS. Society of Automotive Engineers International, 400 Commonwealth Dr., Warrendale, PA 15096-0001; 724/776-4811, fax 724/776-5760; sae@sae.org, <http://www.sae.org>.
- ★ **EDRA 31/2000**, May 10–14, 2000, San Francisco, CA. Environmental Design Research Association, P.O. Box 7146, Edmond, OK 73083-7146; 405/330-4863, fax 405/330-4150; edra@telepath.com, <http://www.telepath.com/edra/home.html>.
- ★ **ERGON-AXIA 2000**, May 19–21, Warsaw, Poland. Central Institute for Labour Protection, Czerniakowska 16, 00-701, Warsaw, Poland; +48 22 623 4601; fax +48 22 623 3695; oinip@ciop.waw.pl, <http://www.ergonet.net/axia2000.html>.
- ★ **2000 American Industrial Hygiene Conference & Exposition**, May 19–26, Orlando, FL. American Industrial Hygiene Association, 2700 Prosperity Ave., Suite 250, Fairfax, VA 22031; 703/849-8888, fax 703/207-3561; <http://www.aiha.org>.
- ★ **47th STC Annual Conference**, May 21–24, 2000, Orlando, FL. Society for Technical Communication, 901 N. Stuart St., Suite 904, Arlington, VA 22203-1822; 703/522-4114, fax 703/522-2075; <http://www.stc-va.org>.
- ★ **Combat Medicine – The Future of Military Medicine and Battlefield Support**, May 22–23, London, UK. SMi Group, 1 New Concordia Wharf, Mill St., London SE1, UK; +44 0171 827 6000; customer_services@smico, <http://www.smiconferences.co.uk>.
- ★ **IEA 2000/HFES 2000**, July 30–August 4, 2000, San Diego, CA. Human Factors and Ergonomics Society, P.O. Box 1369, Santa Monica, CA 90406-1369; 310/394-1811, fax 310/394-2410; hfes@compuserve.com, <http://iea2000.hfes.org>. ☒

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FLASH!

Dates to Remember:

- **May 1 – Last day to order printed proceedings for delivery at the Congress**
- **June 21 – Early registration deadline**
- **July 1 – Deadline for reserving hotel rooms at the Congress discounted rate**



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