

We Get a Computer and Hate It!

The Fifth Estate Enters the 20th Century

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“Things are in the saddle and ride Man.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

One blind man
leads many blind men
Into the fire hole
hand in hand.

—Zen saying

After several years of discussing and debating the implications of a newspaper which criticizes technology obtaining computer equipment, we were finally forced into making the big leap, and now possess one. It may seem hypocritical to denounce computers while typesetting on one, but no less so than if I had arrived at our office by car with money in my pocket and began writing about the harm the automobile does and the need to abolish capitalism.

To paraphrase the opening lines of Jim Gustafson’s poem, “The Idea of Detroit,” our new computer just sits there like the head of a dog on a serving platter—a hideous object, but one too fascinating to turn away from. Actually, it’s not a new machine, but used equipment we picked up from a lawyer friend—a Macintosh IIxi, it sits on the front, and a LaserWriter Pro 600 printer, for those who are interested.

No one on our staff is particularly enthusiastic about our acquisition; we were happy with our quarter century old typesetter, our wax and exacto knives. We liked doing layout manually and took pride in our proofreading skills. We are not pleased that much of these tasks are going to be taken over by a machine—one whose introduction has had a dramatically negative impact on the world.

Many of our computer-owning friends have assured us we “will love it” once we develop operating skills, and they have generously supplied us with all sorts of advice and instruction. We doubt, however, if we will ever “love” any machine, but the situation had come to the point where our old typesetter was so antiquated, it was no longer serviceable except by a firm in Seattle.

The desire of some of our staff members to continue operating the old machine that has served us so long has proved to be unworkable. Thus, the coming of the computer hasn’t proven our critique wrong—rather, it has shown our argument to be correct that technological development bulldozes diversity and creates deepening dependencies—in our own case, painfully and infuriatingly so.

Until now, I’ve tried to avoid computers at all costs, but now having had this forced upon us, I’ve begun to consider what effect this will have on our publishing efforts and those of us who work on the paper. Upon beginning to learn their use, computers seem like fiendish apparatuses which order you about on their terms, not the reverse.

The labyrinth of programs within programs, windows within windows, macros within macros, reminds me of the infinitely descending portrait on the Morton Salt box. I’m sure the people who designed these machines would have been, in an earlier age, hobbyists who constructed large model battleships out of toothpicks.

We're always told what an "advance" computers have brought about in efficiency and accuracy, but where was the need crying to be met? Were the users of 3X5 cards—clerks, bank tellers and secretaries—calling out to have their onerous work alleviated by electronic means? In fact, was any important, human-scale, human-oriented occupation or activity restricted by the absence of computers? Of course not.

Computers, like all technical/industrial inventions before them, came from stretching the capacity of human ingenuity beyond the immediate, to produce a device theretofore unknown to be presented for sale on the market, and create a need not previously there. Or, as anthropologist Marshall Sahlins puts it in his essay, "The Original Affluent Society," "It was not until culture neared the height-of its material achievements that it erected a shrine to the unattainable: Infinite Needs" (see FE #298, June 19, 1979).

The capitalist world, defined by the religion of science and technology, has endlessly created what immediately becomes necessity. Just as today no one can imagine publishing a newspaper without computerized equipment, in twenty years (or twenty months!) we will be told that such machinery is hopelessly outmoded, too slow, inefficient, and only artificial intelligence which downloads thought direct to hologram can fulfill our needs to file recipes, plan wars, balance our checkbooks, manage production, etc.

A hundred years ago, anarchists printed weekly newspapers with handset type; none of them dreamed of desktop publishing systems to do on-screen composition. Instead, they dreamed about what the words in their paper desired: revolution, the elimination of capital and the state; a new world, not a new Pagemaker program.

A perhaps even more profound implication of technology is its connection with imperial domination. Most technological development, particularly in the modern era has allowed for the increased dissemination of empire both as a material and cultural force. For instance, the internal combustion engine not only extended capital's material base, but allowed it as well to define major aspects of culture from architecture to living patterns, while integrating its dynamic capacities to drive its weapons of war.

Another obvious example is television, which similarly became an important sector of the economy once it appeared on the market, but its real importance lies in its function as the medium for transmission of official messages, supplanting crumbling patriarchal, religious and even state forms of authority.

Computers too play an enormous role as a commodity within the world economy, but their larger purpose, according to computer pioneer Joseph Weizenbaum, was to "conserve America's social and political institutions. It [the computer] buttressed them and immunized them..." Capital's world empire, following World War II, had developed to such a degree of complexity that it could no longer administer and coordinate its apparatus without the introduction of methods appropriate to its size, geography and structure.

The stock market, the board room and the Pentagon war room could not function without the sophisticated technology of computerization. The vertically and horizontally integrated super-state, capable of shaping planetary life is what social critic Lewis Mumford designated as the Mega-machine. Rather than fascism being defeated in World War II, it triumphed after WW2 with the victory of the U.S. and its allies (their enemies were cut in on the swag almost immediately). In other words, the Third Reich suffered only a momentary setback with the defeat of the Nazis. The totalitarian state triumphed and expanded throughout the world.

At the dawn of the machine age, people knew that the new devices being forced upon them would fundamentally alter their lives in a way they did not want and fought back against the use of power looms, the factoriums, and the work discipline which was demanded by them. This resistance to industrialization and mechanization has often been superficially criticized as being only a reaction to the job loss which was entailed in the shift from small craft shop to the new factories. But those involved sensed (quite correctly) that a new, much less human world was evolving, one which would destroy what decent aspects were left of an earlier age. In England, artisans and mechanics, peasants and craftsmen smashed machines, burned factories, and assassinated mill owners.

This late 18th/early 19th century movement of British machine-breakers, the Luddites, was so successful in mobilizing the population against industrialism, that the destruction of equipment was declared a capital offense and often a dozen men were hung at once for the "crime". In Lancastershire, power loom woolen production could only commence with the stationing of 20,000 British troops in the district. Contrary to the predictions of a glowing new era which the new machines would herald, the opponents of the new system were right. Industrialism ushered in an era of unmitigated misery for people and a destruction of the environment, an era which continues unabated throughout the world today.

Where are the exceptions that technology enthusiasts can show? Which radical doubts that technology and industrialism must be centrally administered and requires a world-wide material and political grid to produce their splendors? Where is the utopian who has a vision of steel and concrete, plastic and computer chips, which does not require a robotized working class toiling at extraction and manufacturing, and whose effluent does not poison the earth and its inhabitants?

Show me the non-polluting, convivial, democratic, peaceful model in which industrialism and technology could exist after a revolution. I don't think it can be done.

Well, yeah, that's all true, they agree, but at least the computer will save us time, they assure us, in the production of our paper. Maybe it will, although we never thought we had a problem with slow techniques. As Thoreau and other critics of industrialism pointed out in the 19th century, we "save time" by killing eternity.

The Chicago anarchists of a century ago, who produced a weekly paper, depended on a mass movement to provide enough able hands to publish frequently. Now, one anarchist publisher told us, if it wasn't for computers, his paper wouldn't exist since so few people work on the project. The same is true with many single-person zines. It is debatable whether this is an argument for computers or a statement about the weakness of a movement.

That machines are the proper response to a movement's malaise brings to mind John Locke's prescient statement, "There is no such thing as a labor saving device." However, his idea usually needs explanation since his statement does not appear to be accurate on the face of it. For instance, it seems obvious that one can dig a ditch faster with a mechanized back hoe than with a hand shovel.

However, that equation is based on the social assumptions of technology which always neglect the totality of aggregate labor needed to excavate with a machine. Perhaps a better example would be the sewing machine which unquestionably is faster to sew with than hand stitching. Yet, when considering every aspect of production—mining, drilling, manufacturing, assembling, transportation, sales points, repairs—the whole world-wide technological grid needed to bring such a machine to market (and then have machine sewing arise as a labor-intensive industry)—a massive amount more total social time is spent in sewing than when it was done by hand.

Similarly with computers. Whereas some tasks may be reduced in time expended by certain individuals and job categories (almost exclusively in society's upper echelons), in general, computers link up increasingly more people into a dependency on the world-wide industrial grid for activity which was previously accomplished with paper and pencil. Again, aggregate labor has increased, not decreased. The production of computers creates a growth industry which utilizes toxic manufacturing processes and extends into Third World countries where women and children are employed as microchip assemblers under slave-like conditions.

Also, no work day has been shortened, and no worker's pay has been raised due to increased efficiency. In fact, computers preside over the acceleration of work, as more is expected in a shorter amount of time from workers who have their outputs monitored by bosses demanding increased production from these new miraculous machines and their human appendages. Workers are experiencing more stress, physical injury, pay reductions, and a further de-skilling of work as well as its accelerated pace.

First Issue on Computer

This is the first edition we've produced solely with computers (although for at least four years friends have provided copy for us using them), so it is too early to evaluate what impact its use will have on the social process involved in publishing our paper. All of us look forward to working together and the most exciting period is always at the conclusion of an issue when our office is teeming with people doing last minute layout, proofreading, graphics and re-writing.

To say the computer will have no effect is to misunderstand the nature of technological change, and to be ignorant of history. Obviously, the world has changed greatly because of expanding technology, but sometimes it can be demonstrated with little stories rather than repeating the well-known impact of larger technologies such as the changes the automobile has forced on society.

Very few would argue that ice boxes are superior to electric refrigerators, but introduction of the latter in the early 20th century had a decided impact on rural communities. Across such regions as Michigan, Ontario, New York

and the Northeastern states, ice cutting for the summer supply would always occur on the coldest day in January. Whole communities would gather. The men would hitch up teams of horses, go out to the frozen pond and cut great kegs of ice. These would be dragged to ice houses where they were stored in sawdust and often lasted until August providing what was needed to keep food cooled.

The women of these rural communities would assemble in the largest house, do quilting, trade the latest news, and prepare a large, sumptuous, communal meal followed by a social and dance. With the advent of electric refrigeration, all of this came to a halt and rural isolation was intensified. Today, whoever is left in farming communities sits in places like rural Iowa or Nebraska and watches hip-hop music videos on MTV. And, hey, how do they get those incredible special effects that move so fast and continually. Computers!

No one knew in 1898, when a Ford horseless carriage chugged down Woodward Avenue in Detroit, what profound changes the internal combustion engine would cause in human life and the health of the planet. However, people who have desires for a revolutionary transformation of the world have been forewarned about where the technology of computers is heading.

Its giddy proponents speak unashamedly about creating a “global computerized information network, one grand Communicopia” linked by a “seamless worldwide network” which will usher in an “Age of Information Transparency,” as Arno Penzias of AT&T defines a new world dominated by a merged ultra-technology of computers, television, cable and telephone systems.

The question is, will this benefit anyone other than the elites, the rich, and the supranational corporations? As the latinamericanization of society continues apace (20% affluent; 80% impoverished) this information age obviously isn't going to have everybody linked in. The average prole shouldn't expect to have a pocket fax machine and computer wrist watch. (In any event what would they need them for?) The technoid dream is of a world dominated by machines, transmitting the empty “information” of commerce and entertainment, with decreasing privacy and increasing speed, filled with ubiquitous screens, flashing digital displays, and constant machine beeps and noises.

Even though their dream is our nightmare, at least, they assure us, we'll be able to produce our paper faster. Beyond the fact that I'd be willing to have a John Henry-type contest between us doing manual composition and lay-out and a steam drill/computer, I'd like the cheery advocates of computers to consider the following: On June 13, 1993, the *New York Times* reported that three giant computer and entertainment corporations announced a merger to create the equivalent of software for cable television called Cablessoft. Such mergers and joint ventures dominate the news of late for “communication” corporations as they gear up for a new stage.

According to its salesmen, when it comes to fruition, this will mean “the transmission of coming generations of interactive programming.” This is explained by James F. Moore, of Geopartners Research, Inc., as a process which will be “the gateway for popular culture” and “the substitute for newspapers and magazines and...gives it enormous economic potential for those who control the gateway.” (emphasis added)

In other words, boosters of computers, who have all assured us what an “advance” they will be for us, have set the context whereby our newspaper will soon become an antiquated medium, a picturesque Smithsonian curio unrecognizable by any except those outside of capital and technology's net.

So, thanks, guys. For nothing!

fifth Estate

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