

by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr

For Your Information



Correct me if I am in error, but the present Computer Civilization that awes us all is essentially absorbed with gathering information and sending it thither. That is

why some people speak of the age as the Information Age. Because there is so much more to this swelling age than communications, I think a more expressive term denoting the age might be Computer Civilization. If the present era of dot-com mania were only about conveying information, the instrument used for the conveyance—namely, the computer—would merely be an evolutionary leap beyond the smoke signals of the American red Indian or the sonorous thuds of some half-naked drummer diligently walloping out a message to his colleagues across the swamp and down by the giant ant hill where grandpa was buried. Hi ho, there you have it, the earliest stages of the Internet, and no electricity was needed. Which brings me to something else I have noted about the denizens of Computer Civilization: Many cherish a touching faith in cultures primitive and remote.

At Pop!Tech, a Computer Civilization conference I attended last fall, a virginal young lady of impressively nerdy mien declared to Alan Kay, a founding father of the personal computer, “I have found that the farther one gets from civilization, the more civil people are.” Nonetheless, she was full of hope for the computer. Its firmly fixed place in civilization notwithstanding, she wanted to know if it could be used to “make people more civil.” She was not thinking of applying its civilizing magic to, say, East Timor or Rwanda, but to us, presumably to the fellow seated next to her or

perhaps even to Kay. No one snickered or pointed out that her thought about the higher “civility” to be found in remote regions was as dead as the anthropologist Margaret Mead, who championed the idea a generation ago, and the New Guinean who was reported eaten by his neighbor in the last edition of the *Continuing Crisis*. Instead, Kay made an esoteric reference to the violin and wittily lamented its inability to tell time.

No, the present age so suddenly enlivened by the development of the computer is much more than an Information Age, and besides, the information transmitted is often not really worth knowing. Kay in his talk to the assembled devotees of Computerland at Pop!Tech expressed apprehension that “the biggest difficulty with the extreme democratization of the Internet is that it gives everyone a voice, but it might not give everyone a direction.” He seemed to be in sympathy with those of the Internet’s critics who worry that expression on the Internet, unattended by editors or some sort of critical mind, is often sciolistic, occasionally the conjurings of mountebanks. Then Kay returned to the cryptic. He quoted Frank Zappa’s pronunciation to that “talking about music is like dancing about architecture.” (But Frank, wherever you are, people do talk about music; people do not dance about architecture. Read Aristotle. Dance madly.)

Kay is a learned fellow. He had already referred to the works of John Sebastian Bach, H.G. Wells, a sociologist, and Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labours Lost*. Erudite, intelligent, and ambitious in his thoughts, Kay is typical of the best minds leading us into this age of the computer. He is enthusiastic about its possibilities, but being a man of science, he expects its excesses to be disciplined by science. “The most important part of science is that there are these other people out there to debug the theories. No

human being can be expected to be as tough on their ideas as their friends are.” In the end, after ruminating about such matters as creativity and the “extreme democratization” of the Internet, Kay—the engineer who invented early wireless computer systems known as Dynabook and Smalltalk and solved the problem of how to overlap windows on computer screens—returned to the discipline of science.

And well he might. The fundamental instrument of Computer Civilization the computer, is a creation of sheer science. Right now it is influencing life on earth more pervasively than any other invention in history. The computer can be used to locate information until recently accessible only at the largest libraries, and can find it faster than any librarian anywhere unassisted by computers. But that is not all. Computers ascertain conditions everywhere: in your automobile, in manufacturing plants



25 YEARS AGO IN The American Spectator

On learning of Samuel Johnson’s remark that patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel, Roscoe Conkling, a New York politician widely acquainted with scoundrels remarked that Dr. Johnson had overlooked the possibilities in the word “reform.” Some good things and many bad things have been done in the name of reform, but the worst thing of all has been to cloak any proposal for change in the seductive disguise of that ill-used word. My object here is not to attack those proposals labeled “reforms” but to criticize the labeling of all proposals as reforms. Newspapers for some time have been writing of “campaign reform.” Who could be against it? Few are, and those politicians that have expressed doubts have been castigated.

—James Q. Wilson
Abolish “Reform”
MAY 1972

n the upper atmosphere, and soon, in your very body. The tech wizards now see tiny computers being implanted in our vital organs to advise us of when we might want to get a new, improved version. Computers today predict. They counsel. Someday they might well mate. Combined with developments in medical science, they may in the next century contribute to...what? To immortality? The techies are predicting as much. Most likely Computer Civilization is in its incunabular period. No one can say how it will end.

At the end of a century in which mankind's inventions—whether scientific, political, or cultural—have caused so much pain, the immediate consequences of Computer Civilization seem only to have been salutary. George Gilder from our editorial board, Bob Metcalfe, the inventor of Ethernet and essential elements in the Internet, and Charles Simonyi of Microsoft, the inventor of such breakthroughs as WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) word processing, have by their example and occasionally by exhortation moved me to an awareness of the arrival of this Computer Civilization. Not that we at *The American Spectator* have been oblivious. Our Website, begun in 1996, has thanks to our staff's ingenious exertions become one of the Internet's liveliest, with nearly one million page hits a month. And now we have this special issue on Computer Civilization, featuring intellectual fisticuffs by Metcalfe and Gilder themselves, along with much more.

I am a willing co-conspirator with the heralds and wizards of Computer Civilization. The high culture of this country has been dead for years, polluted by a stiling ideology that might call itself liberal, but is actually simply infantile collectivist. Call it a Kultursmog. Few have been able to breathe any life into it at all. The radiant minds that created the personal computer and all the advances that have come with it constitute the most liberating influence to come to the culture in generations. They might well depollute the Kultursmog. At Pop!Tech there was a sense of optimism and a respect of innovative imagination. As Kay's remarks suggest, the wilder vagaries of their minds are disciplined intellectually by their expe-

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rience with science and engineering. The techies of Computer Civilization are relatively free of the *Weltschmerz*, the anti-Americanism, and the hatred of the West that we see in the Kultursmog. Though the mental illnesses of the 1960's do pop up occasionally—for instance, the virginal lady enthusing over the civility of the faraway. And at Pop!Tech John Perry Barlow, a writer of some sort for the Grateful Dead, was abundant with apocalyptic pish posh. At one point he compared

Stalin and Hitler with American politicians, and he was not kidding.

By and large, however, the techies of Computer Civilization bring to our culture a breeze that is shaking things up. They are bringing products that expand culture and make it more accessible. Through their wealth they are joining boards of educational institutions that need a rebirth, and owing to the techies' relatively free-market orientation they are causing that rebirth to be more libertarian. Talk of global markets is talk of free markets, and that too is a breath of fresh air in the Kultursmog. Unlike successful industrial movements in the past, the rise of Computer Civilization is being led by eggheads with enthusiasm for art, ideas, music. Kay, for instance, plays the organ seriously. Simonyi collects art and is an enthusiast for modern architecture. Metcalfe maintains a farm devoted to breeding nearly extinct farm animals. This is a world that is a genuine threat to Kultursmog. And it is only the beginning of the thing. ❧



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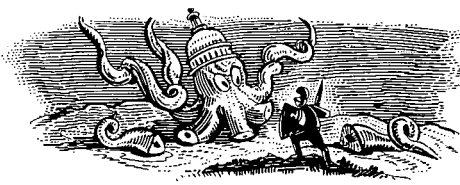
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Back to the Future

Does more efficiency mean smaller profits?

I remember, around 1970, wondering what the year 2000 would be like and whether I would still be here. When you do that, you imagine the future in a very hazy, unfocused way, but at least it is *different* out there. Now here we are. And why is everything so much the same? That's what I didn't foresee. There is Ann, walking her dog. Here is the D.C. bus, lumbering up the hill, still belching smoke. This too-solid flesh (and more of it every year!) imposes its own continuity to a greater extent than futurists ever imagine. The small adjustments brought by the new technology seem rather minor by comparison.

As it happens, 1970 was the year of *Future Shock*, a much hyped book by Alvin Toffler. He argued that "change" was coming too fast for mere humans to absorb. Therefore, "we may submit masses of men to demands they simply cannot tolerate." He used the phrase "information overload." The book was a marketing triumph, for it was a dull read—a carload of abstract nouns. Many a sentence went like this: "The speeded up flow-through of situations demands much more work from the complex focusing mechanisms by which we shift our attention from one situation to another."

Although he was careful to distance himself from the neo-Luddites, Toffler viewed new technology as an intimidating thing that would have to be "tamed." Almost everyone thought that way at the time. That has now changed (except that

nuclear power is feared much more than it was). Today, we take a benign view of the new information technology, computers, and the Internet. And no doubt they will greatly simplify our lives—almost the opposite of what Toffler foresaw. Meanwhile we're harried; perhaps at the stage of maintaining a horse and buggy in the barn, with a still-unreliable Model T in the garage.

Then again, maybe that is misleading. Take e-mail, for example. It's a great invention, but sometimes I think: My God, the telephone became commercially available, when? In 1920? Imagine that we had e-mail all through the twentieth century, and then, in about 1990, there was this amazing new invention, the telephone. People would be marveling. "You can sit at home and actually talk to someone hundreds of miles away!" "You mean you don't have to type it out?" "You can recognize the other person's voice?" "You mean I can throw away my keyboard?"

When you read books like *Future Shock* thirty years later you are apt to think that "change" has been exaggerated. Nonetheless, the digital revolution surely will upset many a going concern. And it will increase economic efficiency. Ten years ago, when I wrote an article, it practically had to be hand-carried to the editors. Then it would be laboriously retyped into the magazine's computer. Now I double as writer and typesetter. All over the country, the gains must be huge. Why, even as I write, office workers are playing Solitaire and other computer games on the job. Charles Krauthammer is playing chess in cyber-

space. So much more work is being done (Just kidding.) For many, the sheer novelty of the Internet transforms work into play. Or is it all just play, period?

I do worry about libraries. I live with in a few hundred yards of the American University library, and for a modest fee can check out books. University libraries are one of the joys of life, but what will the Internet do to them? The students, I am told, increasingly work from computers in their own rooms. In the library itself, students seem to spend much of their time using terminals for private e-mail. Who would have guessed, in 1970, that students a generation hence would become letter writers? Book circulation must be down, and book budgets will surely plummet before too long. Then again, maybe the torrent of academic rubbish, which has been flowing freely for a generation, will dry up. At the University of Texas at Austin, the *New York Times* reports, "circulation is down," and "turnstiles are moving at a slower pace."

Now comes word that the *Wall Street Journal's* Ray Sokolov is reading Stephen King's e-novella in bed with a laptop. There I will not follow. I have kept up with technological change to date, and am happy to find things online. But if real reading is involved, I want it printed out and bound. By the way, if there's a computer that can scan the front section and turn the pages of the *Washington Post* at the speed of hand and eye, which takes a couple of minutes, I want to hear about it. As far as I'm concerned, the online paper doesn't come close to the one delivered to your door. The horse and buggy is still way ahead.

Tom Wolfe applied a nice dash of cold water in a recent *Investor's Business Daily* Q & A. He was commenting not on the value of computers as such, but on the

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