

I. COMPUTERS AND SOCIETY: PROBLEMS AND POTENTIALITIES

The world has passed through an era dominated by reproduction to the present age of production and is about to enter an era in which information will occupy the pre-eminent position. In this new epoch, Professor Gray L. Dorsey suggests, the computer will replace production machinery as the essential technology. Computers will enable us to anticipate the future effects of scientific discoveries so that we may better control our society. With computers, we can simulate the values, obligations, and institutions that would be appropriate in a society that encouraged a particular scientific discovery. We can then determine at the outset whether a certain course of action will permit a more satisfying life or destroy the human spirit. Thus, Professor Dorsey believes the computer will provide the means with which we can intelligently direct and control, rather than be engulfed by, the age of information.

Dr. Frank B. Ryan, on the other hand, identifies two major problems with computer use which may prevent it from becoming the control mechanism envisioned by Professor Dorsey. First, although the House of Representatives is currently using a computer for various administrative, legislative, and information gathering functions, its potential is limited by the lack of imagination of its users. Thus, a fully automated administrative system is impossible in the House of Representatives because of the narrow perspective of numerous members, each guarding his or her own power base. In addition, although it is possible to install computer terminals in each member's office to receive relevant legislative information with which he or she might intelligently govern, who will decide what information will flow through the centralized computer information system? Who will define "relevant" and how will the system continually be updated? The computer provides the means to control and direct technological and social change; however, its potential can be exploited only if we are capable of controlling it. The experience of the House of Representatives suggests that we have far to go.

Finally, John Randall examines the effect of computers in the age of information on the legal profession. Computer research will enable lawyers to devote less time to research and more to public service projects. Nevertheless, unless lawyers closely monitor the application of computers to legal research—i.e., promote continuing education in computer research and discourage the conversion of law libraries to data banks—the environment in which lawyers work will inevitably be transformed. Only large law firms will be able to absorb the high fixed cost of computer facilities and thus the family lawyer may be forced out of the profession entirely.