

Sociology 194, Spring 1997

Developments and Critical Perspectives of Computerized Technology: Micro- to Macro-Level Analysis

Introduction

Most all of you – as students of Sociology – would agree with me that computers now and will increasingly alter how people execute their daily activities and will increasingly alter each user's lifestyle and values. Most of us have already integrated personal computers into our lives. Those of you who have not will have contact with computers in the near future. According to Chesebro and Bonsall (1989), small desktop computers made their most decisive impact in the American home during the first half of the 1980s. In 1980, less than 1 million home computers existed. Three years later, 2 to 4 million American households had personal computers and an additional 13 million families (36 percent of American households) were "very interested" in buying a home computer. The impact of computers on businesses have been more dramatic. The efficiency, organizational structure, type of employees, and all other aspects related to the economy have been altered.

One of the factors contributing to America's focus and fascination on computers stem from the way these machines have been discussed. They are not just tools like other machines. They have been described as means capable of altering interpersonal relationships, family structures, legal, economic, and political systems. In other words, computers command respect.

My purpose is to expose my fellow Sociology students to theoretical developments concerning technology, namely computers. Understanding theory is to be armed with a critical knowledge of centrally important social issues which allows us, as future sociologists, to explain and predict social life. It also provides us with a framework where we can generate new hypotheses. Since the computer age is relatively recent, the possibility of new research hypotheses is infinite. I will highlight only the main theories or paradigms which dominate the sub-sociology of computerized technology.

I am a skeptic of computerized technology. On a macro level, I believe computers act as a powerful aid to those already in powerful positions. They are an ideological weapon to control the masses. They aid the rich in becoming richer, and allow the poor to become poorer – not necessarily in monetary capital but rather information capital. No matter how useful the computer may be, it is only useful to the extent that those in control allow it to be useful. The techno-utopian myth that information will become more easily accessible and we will be liberated, thus democratized, is ridiculous. We are not in control of any information. We are only able to retrieve information that is given to us. As far as the utility of word processing, chatting, e-mail and so forth; these are useful but micro to the overall macro picture that I have depicted.