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Computers and Society: Problems and Potentialities

I. COMPUTERS AND SOCIETY: PROBLEMS AND POTENTIALITIES

*The world has passed through an era dominated by repro-
duction 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 com-
puter will replace production machinery as the essential technology.
Computers will enable us to anticipate the future effects of scienti-
fic 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 de-
stroy the human spirit. Thus, Professor Dorsey believes the com-
puter 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 com-
puter for various administrative, legislative, and information
gathering functions, its potential is limited by the lack of imagina-
tion 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 com-
puter terminals in each member's office to receive relevant legisla-
tive 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 pro-
vides 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 Repre-
sentatives 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.