

The Information Revolution and the Class Struggle

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The 'Information Revolution' of computerisation and miniaturisation during the past twenty years has created an 'Information Society'- or so it is said. How real has this 'revolution' been? Has it fundamentally altered relations between the ruling class and the working-class?

The phenomenon can be seen from two main angles. One concerns the technological development of the microchip. The microchip not only offered enough memory and processing power to make the home computer possible, it has come to pervade all kinds of devices like washing machines and cameras. Similarly, it has underpinned a massive and continuing wave of automation in the workplace. Information in this context is the stream of data required by a machine to perform with the minimum of human intervention; the revolution is this drive to reduce the human input.

Both in the home and the workplace new technology has been portrayed as labour-saving, freeing a person for more interesting tasks. But whereas companies seek to fill the extra leisure time we now allegedly have with increased consumption of CDs, computer games, etc., the labour saved at work is in an economic sense. Through Information Technology (IT), firms can 'downsize' i.e. sack or retire employees and increase profits by extracting the same or more work from fewer staff. The process of creating the information economy, on which the information society rests, has been seen in sectors as diverse as printing (the core of the 1986-87 News International dispute), car-manufacturing, where robots are increasingly employed and banking.

The other aspect of the 'revolution' concerns information itself. 'Information' may be seen as facts or knowledge, such as share prices in foreign markets, but it may equally be entertainment. This is because the means are increasingly being found to digitise data, and data can be text, sounds, images or any combination. Here the revolution primarily concerns the means of delivery and access, rather than the content itself, which has often existed in a prior form, thus books preceded CD-ROMs. The difference with these later developments is usually one of flexibility or interactivity given to the user, e.g. being able to search a CD-ROM by any word the user wishes rather than a book's fixed index. In another area, satellite TV, linked with digital techniques, is opening up the prospect in Britain of over two hundred channels.

With the resultant smokescreen about choice, interactivity and 'video on demand', important issues are being obscured. Yet, if anything, power, wealth, cultural, political influence, and matters of class, are magnified by the 'Information Revolution'. For who is providing these choices? What are they?

Ultimate Agenda

The trail almost invariably leads back to a small clutch of media magnates such as Rupert Murdoch, Silvio Berlusconi, Disney and Time-Warner. These have diversified amongst the fields of publishing, films, radio, TV, CD-ROMs and on-line databases. What their film and TV arms provide is a choice from the least challenging end of the spectrum: action films, light comedies, sport. Where political opinions are expressed, as in their newspapers, these tend to be of the most orthodox pro-capitalist promoting their own ultimate agenda: the increase of profits and market share. Having built up vast markets they thus have maximum influence with the distributors of such products, who are also few in number. The quantity of producers may be vast, but their underlying ideas and values are few. This media environment increasingly saturates the world.

All of this has important psychological consequences for the class struggle, as many people are left unaware of the potential alternative to 'business as usual'. If radicals' views and actions are ever reported, it will usually be either to demonise or mock. This in itself promotes resignation rather than resistance amongst those who might be feeling their way towards such positions. This is not to say that people do not fight back against their oppression anyway, but it is hardly coincidental that struggles are so often either isolated or channelled into the pathways of union and political party action. The information that would help avoid these traps, based on hard-earned experiences, is not widely and easily available. Establishment views, including what passes for opposition, are. Yet it is greater access to information which is said to be the essence of this revolution. In reality, though there is more information about than ever before, whether business statistics, news, education or entertainment, much of it is more of what we are accustomed to expect in a wider range of media.

The possible exception to this picture is the Internet. The connection effected between thousands of personal and institutional computers has produced something significantly different to the media discussed above, both in terms of the degree of individual involvement and the content of the communications. Many radical and revolutionary publishers and organisations have World Wide Web sites. Particularly in the case of campaigning groups e.g. prisoner support, news can be spread quickly to produce a prompt response.

In addition, much information is intentionally placed on the Internet to be read or downloaded without charge or as shareware. There is an implicit challenge to capitalist notions of exchange and ownership. The fierceness with which the US has pursued the issue of strictly enforced intellectual property rights i.e. copyright and patents, for example in the last GATT negotiations, illustrates the rising profile of this issue and the anxiety felt by the ruling class. Capital is increasingly seen as locked into information-based products. This is not just facts and figures or music but also applies to things like the make-up of genetically-engineered food. For if information such as a patent can simply be copied to a disk in a few minutes, what price ownership of knowledge?

American Views

However, there are problems with the Internet, showing that it is not the totally new community of which some dream. There is the expense of getting, and staying, on-line. Though the costs of the hardware are coming down, most people still do not possess it. This equipment, and the telephone systems supporting it, are even more lacking in poorer parts of the world. Parallel to this is the fact that much material on the Net stems from the West, especially America, and, as business interest grows, it is further skewed towards becoming a marketplace of mainly American views and products. Having begun from a government-funded and academic base, growing commercial involvement threatens to make more and more information only accessible via a 'pay as you go' route. Many theorists now speak of the distinction between the information rich and the information poor. As with the companies advancing into the new media, this reproduces class distinctions that already exist in wealth, education etc.

Governments and police forces have for some time been seeking to monitor the Internet's content and transactions more closely. In America this brought about the 1996 Internet Decency Act and several attempts at the 'Clipper Chip', a 'key' which would give agencies like the FBI

access to coded data transmissions. A strange coalition of civil libertarians and businessmen who for very different reasons united on the issue of privacy, has so far scuppered the Clipper. Similarly in Britain, the 1994 Criminal Justice Act defines the transmission of electronic data as publication, making it liable to laws on obscenity and official secrets. There have also been moves to make Internet Service Providers (the firms that connect users) legally responsible for all the material they convey. These measures have produced strong opposition. But the point here is that the authorities are determined to take cyberspace into their jurisdiction.

Finally there is the question of class within the computing world. The previously noted cost of ownership is worsened by the refinements and new programs that are continually being introduced. This reliance on built-in obsolescence is but one example of traditional capitalist thinking: wasteful of resources but it boosts up those profits. Bill Gates, founder of the software company Microsoft, has, in twenty years, become one of the richest people on the planet. In January 1997 he owned 141 million shares valued at \$83.37 each, from which in 1996 he was thus 'earning' \$30 million daily. For all the rhetorical praise of free competition that the computer industry shares with the rest of capitalism, Gates' fortune flows from Microsoft having engineered deals so as to make its software the standard for the world's personal computers: in other words, through a quest for monopoly.

'Revolution'

Companies like Microsoft and Apple make much of their relaxed working approach, in contrast to the straight-laced corporate men of IBM before them. However, hierarchy still persists, from the entrepreneurial founders, through the programmers and engineers and down to the assemblers of silicon chips. California's Silicon Valley workers suffer more occupational illness than in general manufacturing. And clearly, Bill Gates's salary and those of his peers is vastly more than that of the workers upon whom their fortunes are built. But though issues from which struggles might come are present, workers in the computer industry, and indeed all jobs that involve IT, are perhaps extra vulnerable to management's demands. This is because of the ease with which their work can be monitored e.g. number of key-strokes per hour, and switched to another part of the country or the world where lower wages are paid to equally skilled workers.

It would be ridiculous to claim that there have not been many changes in the past twenty years in the ways in which we perceive and receive information. It comes more quickly, in more forms, to more people than ever before. But its production, distribution and consumption have been based on already existing hierarchies. It is a 'revolution' only in a loose capitalist sense.

The companies which made fortunes from telecommunications and publishing in the past have been able to use these resources to expand into the newer media fields and secure substantial stakes e.g. British Telecom's November 1996 achievement of a stake in News Corporation, which ultimately will surely see Murdoch's programmes being piped down BT's cables.

Nonetheless, just as many small alternative publishers have obtained an audience in the past, devices such as camcorders and computers linked via the Internet are allowing a broader and faster distribution of dissenting views. It is only to be expected that those in authority will respond by trying to limit these new forms of expression. In the contest of opposing views of how the world is and could be, what people experience and how it is confirmed or denied by the

media is crucial. It is the class struggle within people's minds, the place where it begins. It can only end with the achievement of a real social revolution.

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At the risk of adding to information overload, readers may be interested in some of the items which were helpful in the preparation of this article.

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