Citizen Electronic:
Marx and Gilder on Information Technology and Democracy

Roger White
Loyola University New Orleans
Louisiana, U.S.A.

Will information technology improve our society or will it degrade our society? I would here like to summarize strong arguments for both of these positions, and then suggest how information technology might serve as a means for improving citizenship, and, thereby, contribute to the greater social good.

Karl Marx is currently out of favor among many political thinkers in light of the collapse of Communism in the East and the rise of postmodern modes of thinking among many political theorists in the West. Yet, appearances would seem to justify at least some of Marx's concerns. One need not accept his entire theory or set of historical predictions in order to appreciate the continuing relevance of some of his views.

Marx, however, lived before the advent of information technology based upon the micro-chip. As a thinker who believed that history had an order and a direction, he might well appreciate our possible the criticism of his thought, namely, that he had underestimated the productive capacity of technology under capitalism. Granting that criticism, he might still assert that we will be working harder and faster as a result of the latest innovations in information technology (Marx, 1906, p. 257).

Consider the beeper. Marx might argue that such a contraption is little more than an electronic chain around our productive necks which can be yanked just about any time and any place, or he might ask us to think about the implications of e-mail, and telecommuting. One can hear him ironically remarking that, thanks to information technology, we can now work any hour of the day whether in the office or out, and that, what is more, we will be increasingly expected to.

There is, however, another side to this story. In the wake of the micro-electronic revolution, popular thinkers such as George Gilder have argued that democratic capitalism promotes information technology (Gilder, 1989, p. 61), and that the new technology promotes human freedom (Gilder, 1989, p. 378). Gilder, who is the technology editor for Forbes magazine, argues that information technology promises more rather than less freedom thanks to the tendency towards miniaturization (Gilder, 1989, p. 82). Gilder believes that the tendency of

information technology to go micro places more power and responsibility in the hands of individuals (Gilder, 1989, p. 380). He argues that such a powerful force for individual freedom is only possible under the conditions of free enterprise because other societies, such as the late Communist regimes, are threatened by the ability of individuals to freely communicate and share ideas (Gilder, 1989, p. 367). Gilder believes that information technology is changing society, but in ways different from those envisioned by Marx.

According to Gilder, modern information technology is changing the organizational context of modern society from that of a hierarchy, which is top down, to that of a heterarchy, which is more egalitarian (Gilder, 1989, p. 345). The powerful new communications tools provided by micro-electronics, argues Gilder, require that their users be prepared to assess information, and make decisions based upon that assessment (Gilder, 1989, p. 379).

Yet, in some ways, Gilder shares Marx's optimistic belief that we are moving towards a better society (Marx, 1906, p. 837) without any of Marx's concerns about the possibly corrosive effects of technology on the human welfare (Marx, 1906, p. 708). Can we really be sure that information technology, by its very nature, will bring about a reign of freedom and opportunities for personal fulfillment? Or does information technology, somehow, need tending to in way that increases our level of freedom and welfare rather than decreases it?

I would like to suggest an alternative to both Marx and Gilder, namely, that the new information technology can be a means of civic improvement if it is advantageously placed in the service of public education. I believe that such a placement could result in a renewed sense of citizenship, and, thereby, improve the quality of public debate over the social implications of information technology.

E.D. Hirsch (1996) has argued that the latest in computing technology can be a helpful resource for public education, but that computers alone will not solve the serious problems we have today in K through 12 education (Hirsch, 1996, p. 265). My main concern here is not with education precisely, but rather with the civic good that education can provide, namely, a sense of shared responsibilities, mutual respect, and the competence and confidence required making adult decisions. I would like to suggest that the new information technology combined with a solid core curriculum could help citizens decide how they can best use new technologies.

The notion of a core curriculum has been criticized for being culturally exclusionary, bulky, and irrelevant. On the other side of the matter, such a curriculum has been supported for its promotion of excellence, intellectual breadth, and a greater ability to effectively communicate. I would like to suggest that the new information technology can be used to respond to the criticisms of such a curriculum, and also to promote its possible advantages.

Advanced information technology can make a core curriculum more widely available to those who are not in schools where such a curriculum is taught. Such a technology can also provide contemporary and powerful criticisms of the great works of the Western tradition. This will be an advantage to contemporary critics of what is sometimes called the Western canon. It is, after all, difficult to effectively communicate one's criticism to an audience that is largely unfamiliar with and, hence, probably, uninterested in the tradition one is attempting to critique.

As to the problem of a bulky curriculum, the new information technology can provide effective presentations of portions of core material in a way that will allow students to make better subsequent decisions about what to read and what not to read. No one can read everything. Making decisions about what to read subsequent to having taken a course and having the interest in making such decisions is a product of good teaching. Information technology, as it becomes capable of actually delivering lively presentations by good teachers can serve to awaken the interest of students in encountering the questions that both the tradition and its critics raise.

Finally, and most importantly, is the problem of relevance. Hirsch argues, and I agree, that an education based upon a core curriculum does not suppress dissent, but rather provides the shared understandings upon which vigorous dissent is possible (Hirsch, 1996, p. 59). People cannot disagree if they cannot understand each other in some minimal ways. It is the ability to disagree based upon shared understandings that enables us to engage in rational debate, and hence democratic negotiations over matters such as the desirable applications of information technology (Hirsch, 1996, p. 122).

Marx believed that, without a radical social transformation, technology would be our enemy. Gilder believes that modern information technology is our friend, and that it is our current economic and political order that makes it so. I believe that modern information technology can be our friend, but only if it is used to promote the shared understandings and civility that comes from common citizenship.

References

Marx, K., (1906). *Capital*. New York: The Modern Library.

Gilder, G., (1989). *Microcosm*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Hirsch E. D., (1996). *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*. New York: Doubleday.

———————————————

Dr. Roger White is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Loyola University New Orleans. He can be reached at 6363 St. Charles Ave., Box 14, New Orleans, LA 70118, USA.   Email: rwhite@loyno.edu Phone: (504) 865-2697, Fax: (504) 865-3883.