

against the weak. The only thing that can stop (this) is a vigorous revival of the political process and an insistence that changes, both major and minor, be analysed thoroughly and argued out in a spirit of passionate scepticism.

Over the next few years, computers will be used on nearly every office and school desk, and in most other occupations. Already computers can be purchased for less than \$30 in the U.S.A. and quite powerful systems are less than \$100. French Telecom is supplying videotext terminals free of charge because they can replace annual phone directories more cheaply. Computers will be incorporated in domestic TVs, stereos and videos. They will enter most homes as "part of the furniture".

Most new books, newspapers and periodicals are typeset using computers. Their full text can easily be placed "on line" along with the extensive indexing and abstracting database services already available. Optical character recognition now makes it possible to quickly add the entire backlog of all printed matter in all the world's libraries. The public library service, already established as publicly funded and free to all, can be made all embracing and instantaneous, and can largely replace commercial publishing, through direct access over the phone.

A single "compact disk" costing less than \$20 can hold the equivalent of more than 1000 paperback books, and can be accessed through the digital audio Hi Fi systems that will soon be cheap enough to replace turntables in most homes. That's 2 cents per book.

For \$2000 each, "middle management" can now have software for organizing and processing information, so simple to use, that even a business executive can handle it. For \$100 per hour, they can access most existing public databases. In a non-copyright system, the costs could be \$20 for software and \$5 per hour for information.

The rapidly falling price of computer hardware is an inevitable "spin off" from the most massive publicly funded research and development effort in the world — US military electronics, which has bypassed the stifling effects of patent laws. Prices of software, and of public information will fall too, but how much and how quickly depends on the legislation now being drafted.

If a "user pays" copyright system is established, those 1000 paperbacks will still cost hundreds of dollars instead of \$20.

Access to knowledge, capital or wealth is roughly equivalent and there is a widening gap between the information-rich and the information-poor whereby the unskilled become an intellectual proletariat.

If a "public domain" system is retained, society will still have to pay the research and development costs for computer software, and the costs of creating literary works and other information stored in public databases. But instead of erecting a blanket around computer information, for the same total cost, a much wider range of people will be able to use it.

Allocation of public funds could involve contracts, whether performed by public institutions or by private firms as in the publicly funded US military industrial complex. Grants could come from a variety of funding bodies, as in scientific research, literature, and the arts etc. A "market" system

could be used, similar to "public lending right" for authors, based on surveys of useage. (If we *must* have a commercial broadcasting system, as well as the ABC, why couldn't a portion of sales tax be paid to broadcasters directly in proportion to audience ratings, instead of requiring us to put up with ads as well as paying for them?)

Well over 90% of software royalties are paid abroad. We could simply pay for U.S. software in kind instead of in cash, just as we do for scientific research. An equivalent tax levy would pay for Australian public domain software that would also be useful abroad.

Legislation prepared behind our backs, with no public inquiry first, would pre-empt all these options — if people don't act now.

(Quotations are from "Sleepers, Wake!" by Barry Jones, who as Minister for Science and Technology, ought to be able to insist on an inquiry.)

* Albert Langer
Software Liberation

FRANCIS FELLOWSHIP

The College of Law is the tertiary institution in NSW which is responsible for the practical legal training of law graduates prior to their admission as solicitors. It also conducts an extensive programme of continuing legal education for legal practitioners throughout the State.

Recently the College announced the award of the first Francis Fellowship. The award will allow Peter Underwood, an instructor at the College, to have a period of 6 months free from teaching, to investigate possible applications of computer assisted instruction within the College. After a preliminary survey of CAI in other like institutions in the USA and Canada, Peter proposes to effect 2 projects, one in the area of accounting and the other in the area of administration of estates.

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