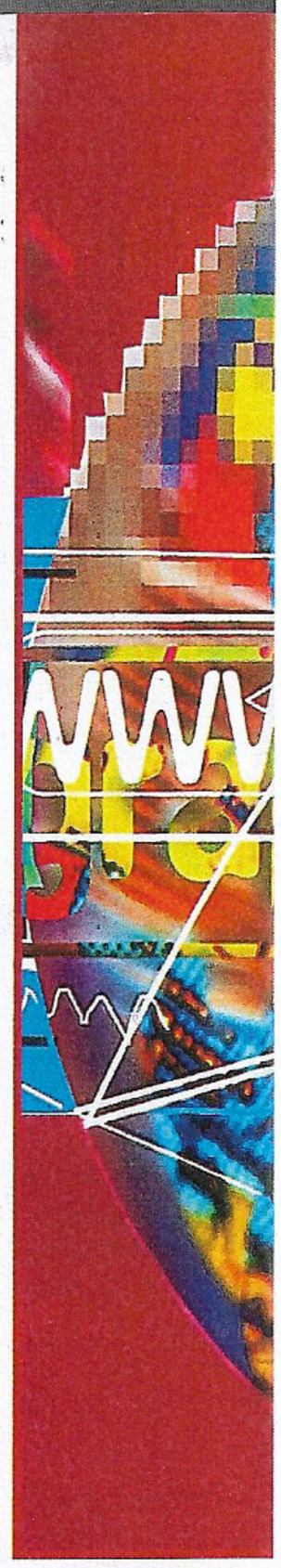
INTERNET
friend or foe?



Das Internet verändert die Welt, sogar auf Weisen, die wir noch nicht verstehen können. ANDREW MARR über Vorteile und Gefahren der neuen Technologie. *difficult*

I know the economic inefficiency and human frustration that computers can bring. I have seen three laptops die so far. One simply had a nervous breakdown. It has half a bad novel inside it, so I've never quite brought myself to throw it out. Another fell victim to my brutal, fast keyboard technique, developed on East German typewriters 20 years ago. A third caught a virus and went mad. Friends have got it sort of working again, but it is now eccentric.

More generally, I have had money accidentally removed from bank accounts, seen work disappear, wasted afternoons in offices when computers have crashed, and spent hours trying to book holidays online before realizing that what I needed was to talk to a human being.

From what I can gather, these experiences are normal. They suggest that information technology (IT) can lead to worse business judgements as well as faster ones, and can lose sales as well as gain them. This question of computer inefficiency is not, in the end, the important one. This is still an infant Henry-Ford-era industry, when you can have any laptop you want as long as it's black, possesses far more computing power than you need and falls apart easily. Better designed, more reliable and even prettier machines are coming along all the time.

But thinking about the cumbersome and inefficient aspects of IT is a useful way into the bigger questions about it. Neil Postman, a New York professor (see SPOTLIGHT 1/94), suggests that with any new technology, you should ask: "What is the problem to which this is a solution?" To which any student of public affairs would want to add: "And to whom does this solution give wealth and power, and who loses?"

The original Postman question could be answered by saying that the Internet age offers solutions to the problems of slowness in business and the power of the old political and media elite. The Internet puts consumers in touch with suppliers and makes available unimaginable amounts of information to anyone who can afford a computer — or, soon, a new-generation mobile phone. It speeds things up, and it opens them up. And if you believe the view that a third or more of Britain's commuters will become teleworkers, urban congestion and car pollution are other problems it can help to solve. These are real benefits. They are one reason why, despite the gleeful prophets of cyber-doom, the fall of dot-com shares to more realistic valuations is not a disaster or a repeat of the Dutch tulip mania of the 17th century. Tulips look nice. You can paint them. If in dire straits, you might try to eat them. But they are not a transforming technology.

When you come on to the "who gains, who loses?" category of questions, it gets harder. For another Postman point is that technology also limits our choices and removes earlier ways of living and working. Imagine, for example, a Britain in 2000 in which television had never happened — a country of ubiquitous and lavish cinemas, telephone news services and thicker newspapers; a place where piano-playing and singing were central to daily life, not marginal. To say that we prefer it our way is too easy: the technology changed us all.

So, today, with the Internet economy, the paths untaken are all around us. We are choosing an enormous social shift in which more and more banking, shopping, entertainment and working is done not face to face but by cables looping past our front doors. This ultimate privatization of the community could not have happened without tiny lines engraved on silicon.

Who benefits? People who are useful "information workers" already, who are plugged in, whose credit ratings are good. If the British government were prepared to push this, it could also be the most powerful force in regional policy for generations. Lower living costs and bigger labour pools could persuade companies to locate outside the booming south-east.