

Week 2 - Reading Response

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According to a study by the US Department of Commerce study,¹ in the year 2000, fifty-one percent of US homes owned a computer and forty-one percent of homes had Internet access. These numbers leave no doubt that the personal computer is a recognizable feature of American society; it is also well accepted that computers are largely a tool for word processing, email, Internet access and similar tasks. To what extent has the computer reached a state of “closure” as defined by Pinch and Bijker?²

I believe that the computer has reached a state of ‘temporary’ closure; A majority of US families agree on the “purpose, meaning and physical form” of the ‘computer’ (which has come to mean the personal computer in American society).³ This consensus on the computer’s physical form is remarkable given the dramatic transformations computers have undergone in their short history. Computers have reached closure despite these dramatic transformations because of the short time frame during which computers have become popular. This closure will be short lived, however, as computers shrink in size, grow in number,

¹<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/fttn00/contests00.html>

²Edwards, 7

³Edwards, 7

and eventually disappear from sight. How does one define ‘computer’ when one’s refrigerator, car, jacket and cell phone are all computers? A single, coherent definition of a “computer” will soon become impossible. While the idea of closure may be an interesting theme to apply to the development of new technologies, the nearly limitless applications of computers makes it difficult to gain anything from understanding the development of computers via the idea of reaching a “closure.”

In Mahoney’s article, he relates the historical analogy that compares the development of the computer with that of the automobile.⁴ That the computer will eventually leave its current temporary state of “closure” points to a flaw in a comparison of the automobile to the computer. While the physical realization and purpose of the automobile has remained virtually unaltered in its entire history, the computer has already dispersed itself into every aspect of modern life.

The effect of the computer may be more comparable to the effect of the printing press. Both opened up a new level of access to “knowledge.” While the printing press democratized access to information, the computer has performed a similar role with censorship: today it is the people not the State that decides what is and is not acceptable and accessible. Another analogy preferable to the automobile is the train, which was the first great revolution in transportation. Trains immediately shrunk the physical space separating distant cities. Likewise, the Internet has shrunk the “cultural space” separating the four corners of the world.

⁴Mahoney, 14

1 Wired

For many years I have read Wired, a magazine devoted to the technical. However, I have never approached Wired from the perspective of genres as discussed by Kling. What genre best matches Wired and how has its genre and tone changed through the dot-com bust?

Launched in 1993, Wired prophesied an eminent technological utopia. However, Wired was transformed by the dot-com bust; A magazine previously several hundred pages thick is now usually half that (with twice the amount of advertising). Has the bust's effect reached beyond simple page counts?

I am convinced that I have witnessed a significant change of tone since the dot-com era. While it is clear that both the pre- and post-bust eras of Wired journalism employed utopian/futurist views of computing, Wired's unbridled enthusiasm has been attenuated by a modicum of reality.

As a classic example of the utopian genre, a January 1994 article, entitled "The Other Revolution in Health Care," describes a future world (2004) improved by technology: in one scene, a man collapses due to a heart attack, immediately triggering an automatic emergency call and the forwarding of his medical records to the EMT unit en-route; Upon arriving they already know his full name, wife's phone number, and his allergy to penicillin. In another future scenario, a young girl has a conversation about puberty and sex with her computer, helping her get through troubled times.

According to Kling, the utopian genre is incapable of addressing the reaction to new

technology in a social context.⁵ The existence of a technology is insufficient to guarantee its successful integration into and improvement of a situation or society in general. In the first case of a utopian idea of medical network, the fact that the such a scene would require a massive collaboration between relatively stubborn and stagnant corporate and governmental entities is totally ignored. In the second example, the author completely ignores any issues that parents may have letting a child be educated on issues of sex by a computer.

The Wired of 2004 still subscribes to a utopian view of technology. The best example of this is the “Found” section which occupies the final page of the magazine with an “image from the future:” this month, valentine candies that also cure common psychological problems. However, Wired’s enthusiasm and futurist leanings are on the tamer side: a recent Wired (December 2003) insert titled “Unwired” expounded the future of wireless technology. However, the most exciting utopia they could muster was one in which all of one’s wireless charges would appear on a single bill.⁶ Of course, an extensive study is necessary to show any real trend in the genre of Wired’s journalism.

⁵Kling, 8

⁶Wired December 2003, “Unwired”