Mythinformation (1986)

By Langdon Winner
Presented by Waleed Manzoul
About the author.

• Professor of Political Science in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
• Known for his work in the philosophy of technology
Background.

- At the time of writing (1986), technophiles were hailing the emergence of the “computer revolution”, describing how computers would fundamentally alter modern life.

- In *Mythinformation*, Winner takes a critical (and rather acerbic) perspective on this “revolution”. 
What is a revolution, really?

- What are its goals?
- Will there be a shift of power? Where?
- Will the revolutionaries seek to uphold a set of social ideals?
- Will it change class structures?

Through questions such as these, Winner attacks the lack of thought put into the social and political ramifications of computing by what he calls ‘computer romantics’.
The great (un)equalizer.

• Technology will bring about innumerable positive social change, according to these ‘romantics’.

• He argues that social changes will occur, but not the good kind.
  – Technology will replace people’s office and factory jobs and new jobs will come from “menial service occupations paying relatively low wages” (592).
  – Technology will only benefit those already capable of taking advantage of it, such as transnational corporations, public bureaucracies, and intelligence agencies.
No utopia without a fight.

• Technology can elicit powerful positive social change, but it won’t just happen as a by-product of its presence.

• The institutions of the information age must be constructed “in ways that maximize human freedom while placing limits upon concentrations of power” (593).
Participatory Democracy.

- The ‘computer romantics’ are particularly enticed by the idea of electronic information access facilitating participatory democracy.
- Winner argues that this notion is based on faulty assumptions:
  - People are bereft of knowledge.
  - Information is knowledge.
  - Knowledge is power.
  - Increasing access to information enhances democracy and equalizes social power.
Point & Counterpoint. (1/2)

• “People are bereft of knowledge.” / “Information is knowledge.”
  – Incorrectly posits that the abundance of information equals the ability to gain and use knowledge.

• “Knowledge is power.”
  – …only if you have the means to act on it.
  – “At times, knowledge brings merely an enlightened impotence or paralysis” (594).
Point & Counterpoint. (2/2)

• “Increasing access to information enhances democracy and equalizes social power.”
  – Democracy isn’t based on information access; it’s based on the capabilities of citizens to self-govern.
Is all this even necessary?

• Winner doesn’t completely hate technology; he agrees that there are some domains in which quick information access is quite necessary.
  – Stock market prices, military intelligence, etc.

• He does question whether it needs to pervade all aspects of life.
  – Education, politics, sports, the arts, etc.
Everywhere and Nowhere.

• Lastly, he brings up three areas of concern as computers and technology begin to pervade our lives.
  – Surveillance and privacy.
  – De-socialization.
  – Transcendence of space and time.
Food for thought (and discussion).

• The use of technology in Obama’s presidential campaign?
• The role of technology in the arts?
• Internet regulation?
  – Is this a good idea?
  – Who should be doing it?
• Technology and de-socialization? Online social networks?