alyse the informational class structure

If the users are called, the problem will again work its way through a hierarchy. The user, at the lowest levels, simply fills in spaces, or fields, in a prepared program. Very often the field has simply been incorrectly filled. However, if the problem is more serious, the highest echelon of all will be called — the programmers. Again, there are several levels, varying from head programmer to apprentice.

This class structure is in one sense, very rigid. At GSI, for example, there is very little interaction between operators and users. But at the same time it is fluid; computer science is sufficiently young to allow people with demonstrated ability to rise from one level to the next.

There is a clear fear by the companies that unionization will not permit this upward flow of talent. Texas Instruments, for example, is not unionized. This is clearly not an attempt to exploit the workers; TI's benefits

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are as good as many union shops. Company executives in Austin, Texas, have explained that it is to prevent the stratification of talent within the company.

Companies like IBM have embarked on vigorous programs to ensure that the best minds are rewarded, launching programs like the IBM Fellows. Here, there is no pressure to produce; proven talents are allowed to set their own hours and workloads. The degrees of success have varied, while IBM is continually marketing new products, such as the PC and PC Junior, Texas Instruments has lost the initiative it had in the fifties and sixties, abandoning both large systems like the ASC (advanced scientific coputer) and small ones like the TI-99.

The social structures and stratification being demonstrated within computer companies today significantly indicates the directions a computer based society could tend towards. A close examination of the industry obviously leaves out a large segment of society, the service industries. But this merely indicates that the tier system has more levels.

This is a long way from the technological utopia predicted by Toffler and Nesbitt. The electronic cottage, it seems, would be a privilege reserved for the few, the upper management that could afford it. The information revolution would be a revolution only to those that can afford it; consider, for example, the costs of an information network like Info-Globe, and the directions the system's advertising campaigns have taken toward business executives.

But the social stratification produced by the large computers has an antithesis in the microcomputer. These machines most certainly do not have the capacity or speed of the larger machines, but they do place computer technology within the grasp of most people. This is significant, not because of the computer power acquired, but because of the knowledge acquired.

Children today are, in ever increasing numbers, becoming exposed to computers. This is especially apparent by the marketing campaigns of several computer companies, most notably Commodore. By stressing the educational value of the small machines they combat what many parents fear most, that their children will be left behind in the computer revolution.

In a very real sense, the child that does not learn how to compute in elementary and high schools will be like the child that did not learn how to drive in the sixties and seventies — isolated and cut off from society.

But while the microcomputers allow children to obtain the knowledge of computing, it does not enable them to acquire the resources generated by the computerization of society. It's like knowing how to play the stock market, but not having the money to invest, or like knowing how to drive, but not owning a car.

Computerization, then, produces the same situation that Marx saw as a result of industrialization. The computer enables any particular worker to produce things that far exceed what was formerly produced. This extra wealth, though, is not given to the more productive worker. It is instead used to reward the owners of the computer and to promote further expansion.

For example, the computerization of a small business office will allow one person to produce, in a few hours a week, the same work a full-time employee used to do. Yet the wage paid to the computer worker will be far less than that paid to the former worker.

Corporations like to claim that the cost of the machine justifies the discrepancy, but that's absurd. The computer pays for itself within two months. What actually occurs is an increase in the wealth produced; the subsequent tussle between management and labour favours management because less labour is required and management controls the computer and the resources.

There are no easy solutions here.

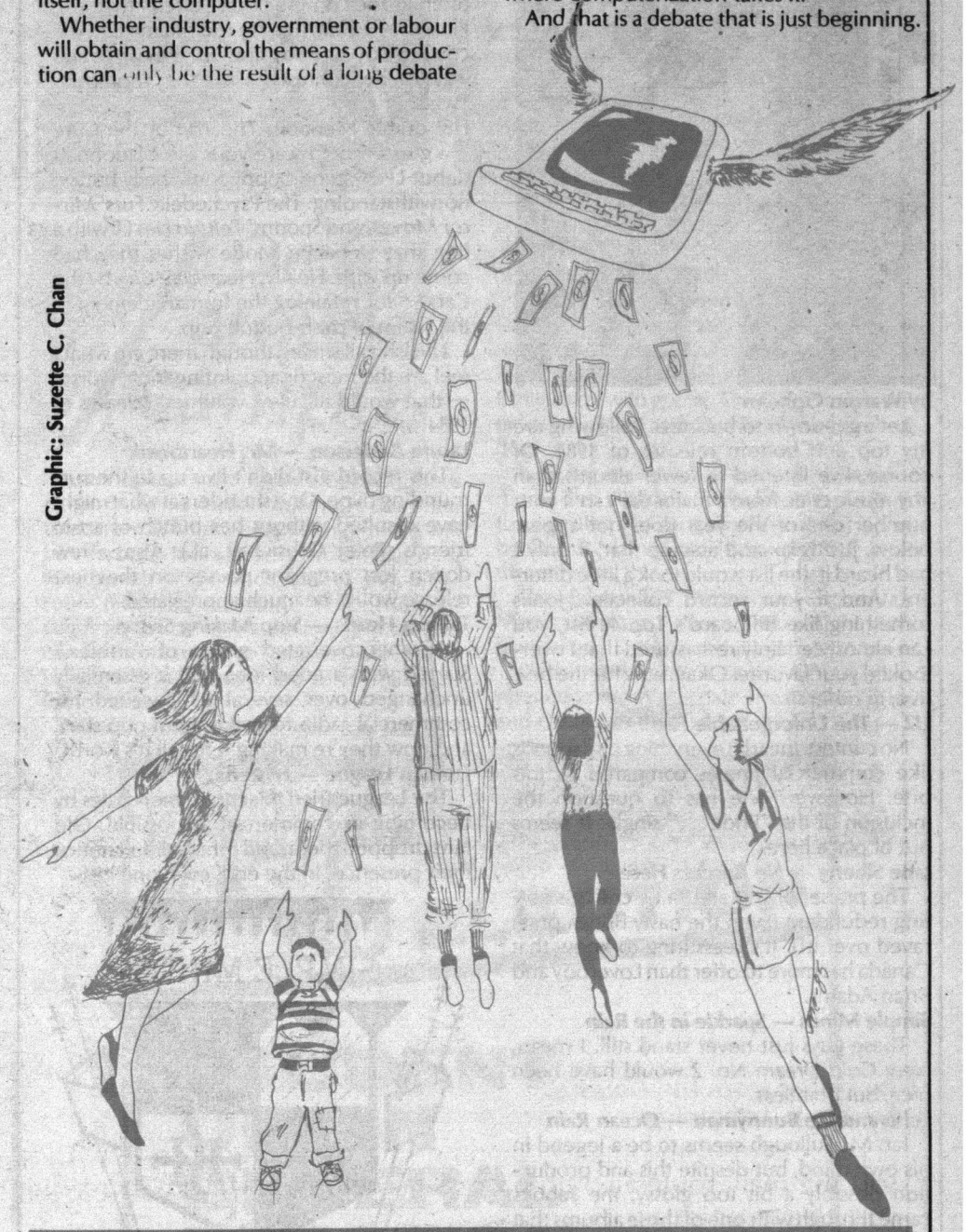
Nonetheless, the problem of the impact of computerization has been placed in a context. It's not a class struggle, because the individualization permitted by a greater degree of knowledge will prevent the classes from forming single, unified voices on all issues. But it is a variation of the age-old struggle between rich and poor over the resources society can provide.

The future of computerized society, then, is not a future that will be decided by the characteristics of computers. The directions society travels will be determined by society itself, not the computer.

Whether industry, government or labour will obtain and control the means of production can only be the result of a long debate and struggle for power. In the end, the result may be similar to what happened after the industrial revolution: the three will divide the power in some places, government will sieze it in others, and management and labour in others still.

The future is up to the people today, living in this time of change. Society will decide where computerization takes it.

And that is a debate that is just beginning.



Graphic: Suzette C. Chan

Computerization is a variation of the age-old struggle between rich and poor over the resources society can provide.