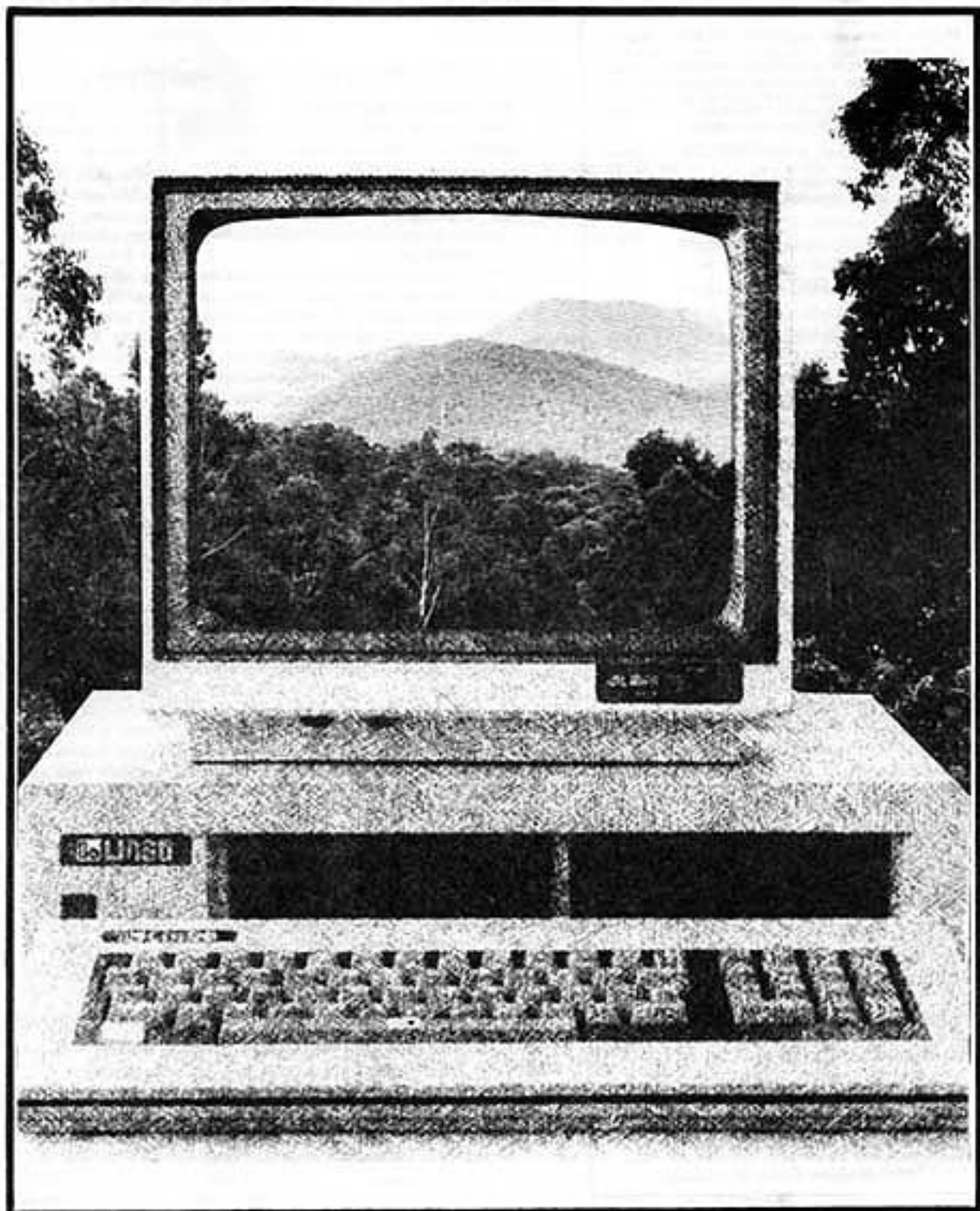


# Bogong

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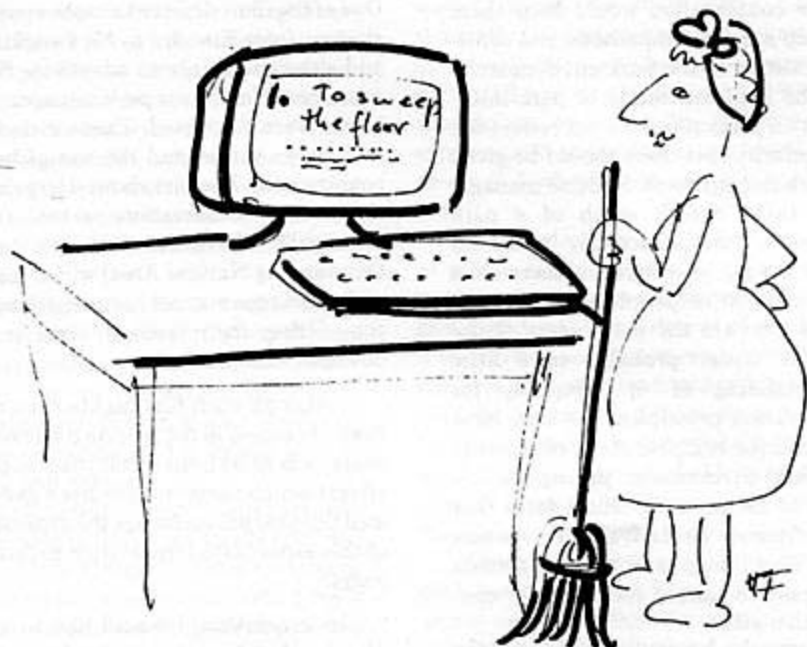
My severe misgivings about John Hill's "Computers in conservation" article (*Bogong* 5(4)) are based on our very different assumptions about the nature of "conservation", and of the section of the movement for social change which is primarily concerned with "conservation" issues. The working assumptions on which my argument rests are twofold. I assume that "environmentalism" is simply one abstraction from the broader panoply of those structural social issues which will ultimately be resolved together, or not at all. I assume further that we have an end - our "ideal" society - more or less clearly in sight, and that we shall only achieve that end if our means for doing so are compatible with it.

Thus we do not indulge in opportunistic behaviour such as the use of chemical herbicides round our Environment Centres, reducing staff numbers, or accepting advertisements from companies engaged in socially undesirable activities, even when it may make life easier in the short term. We oppose racist, sexist or other oppressive activities, even when they are not strictly "environmental" in the narrow sense. In each case we act for reasons both of ideology and credibility.

Dr. Hill's approach - implied in what he does not discuss, rather than made explicit - is a pragmatic one, whereby computers are simply a neutral tool, to facilitate the attainment of certain (administrative) ends. Just once is this pragmatism made explicit, in the concluding comments of the article where the use of computers is ultimately justified by the argument that "they" use them constantly, so we must too. But this is not an acceptable basis for action, at least under my working assumptions. Were it so, the environment movement should simultaneously adopt the systematic use of lying, innuendo, character assassination, physical intimidation and violence, just because "they" do, in order not to "handicap itself in this struggle".

(I readily acknowledge however, that my assumptions are not universally shared by working environmentalists in Australia. For instance, one of the better-known and respected groups, with an impressive track record of "achievement", has done so consistently at the expense of a trail of burnt-out volunteer corpses, justified by the results.)

This is the general framework then



within which I believe the issue needs to be located, and it is from this perspective that I offer the following comments on the topic, under the general groupings of "ideological" and "pragmatic".

**Ideological:** Technology is not, and cannot be, value-free. Any technology can only ever be a function of the society, the historical process, that produced it. A failure to acknowledge, and internalise this basic political truth, while adopting a new technology, will lead to dangerous errors. Computer technology is essentially just another means of production, another step - albeit a significant one - in a technological continuum. It is perhaps instructive to draw the analogies between the "computer revolution" and the introduction of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, whereby many types of skilled artisan were destroyed in a generation, and replaced by the centralised factories employing semi-skilled or unskilled machine operators, who were not involved with their product. (With assembly lines and Taylorism, this process has since gone much further.)

The Luddites were not superstitious vandals; they were very politically aware artisans who knew exactly what was being done to them, their lives, and their generations of accumulated skills. The purpose of that "revolution" was to create a role for an entrepreneurial class. The essential purpose of subse-

quent developments has been to reduce reliance on the human element, the weakest link in the chain of production, given that the goal of production is accumulation of profit rather than fulfilment of human needs.

Computerisation is the next step on that path. It may have benefits to workers and consumers but they are incidental to the essential aim. In Australia, a 1980 study estimated the net computer-generated job destruction to have been 167,000.<sup>1</sup> A year earlier another one estimated that word-processors in Sydney alone had been responsible for the elimination of 20,000 typing jobs<sup>2</sup>. As to the claim that the jobs eliminated are the drudge ones that no-one wants, there are two points to be made. One is simply that, as a generalisation it is not true. Draughtspeople for instance, one modern equivalent of the extinct artisans, are being replaced by CADs (Computer-Aided Design equipment), wherein an operator shunts around pre-determined lego blocks of data. Secondly, even if the jobs lost are all menial ones, it is irrelevant unless creative alternatives are offered; the choice between unsatisfying work and unemployment already exists - it is scarcely a new benefit!

Almost by definition, computerisation as it exists involves a new emphasis on social hierarchies - another way of describing Dr. Hill's "computer-literates" on whom we would be dependent is "technocratic elite". Is this a situation we

want in our movement? It would certainly represent a step away from the conscious trend towards decentralisation, human-orientation and grass-roots democracy that has been among our greatest strengths. Even were we to accept Dr. Hill's pragmatic arguments, and accommodate ones that I will touch on below, we must face the crucial question of how to incorporate such a Trojan Horse of hierarchical elitism into our citadel while maintaining and reinforcing those strengths.

**Pragmatic:** Even before we enter the maze sketched above, we must decide if it would really be a useful allocation of scarce resources. I have not the knowledge nor the desire to enter a detailed reductionist argument with Dr. Hill's specific points, although I do not accept them all. (For instance, I do not accept that entry procedures for a library catalogue onto a computer would or could be "much quicker and easier" than the excellent card system currently in use at CASEREC.) However there is a fundamental point to be raised here. Dr. Hill outlines a plan for two computers - one for the library, one for "other". Whether the funds for this came from accumulated capital (unlikely!) or from a special fund-

raising effort or grant application, would this be the best use of such funds. In terms of achieving our long-term environmental and social objectives?

There are other levels of pragmatics too. A major strength of our movement, as previously noted, is our human orientation. For instance, we know that our willingness to talk to people face-to-face during the Uranium Moratorium campaign of 1976 won much more sympathy and respect than the Uranium Producers' Forum high-cost blind-'em-with-science television campaign. We would want to consider carefully the impact that the image of a computerised office would have on this aspect of our credibility. (And any campaign to alter the image of computers in general, aside from being an obvious misallocation of resources, could only benefit the true controllers of the technology more than us.) When do we need mass mailouts? And even then, is a computer-generated letter likely to have the same impact as a more traditional, labour-intensive one for our purposes?

There are strong suggestions that word-processing can actually increase rigidity, rather than flexibility, because

of the storage of "standard" phrases for use in composing documents. In the US, journalists are required to use such "preferred sub-routines" in writing stories. What would it do to our creativity - that most essential of human skills - to train ourselves to think in narrow depth in order to accommodate a computer's *modus operandi* rather than in "illogical" breadth?

Could the necessary health restrictions on character-type, hours of operation, regularity of eye-testing etc, be incorporated into a one-operator office, while still allowing our money's worth out of the machine? And if not....?

What Dr. Hill has done is to point out that a convenient tiger is passing, with room on board. Before we blithely mount however, let us ponder on the fact that, like any tiger, this one was designed for a purpose, which was not an easy form of transport for us.

#### References:

1. Thornton, B.S. and Grace, J.C. 1980 *Report on computers in Australia: Pt II Quantitative assessments*. Foundation for Australia Resources Report. NSW Institute of Technology.
2. Downes, J. 1978/79 "Beware the cannibal computers" *Pol Holiday* issue.

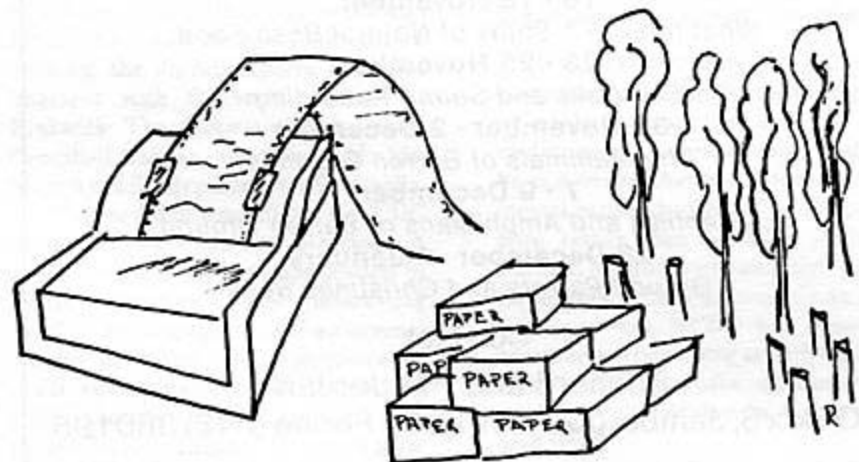
## ARE COMPUTERS REALLY NECESSARY?

Greg Baker

*Bogong* 5(4) brings with it signs of a disturbing trend within CASEREC and possibly within the environment movement in general. I refer to the use of computers, mentioned briefly in Tony Stewart's "Notes from the Centre" and discussed in John Hill's article on pages 12-13. Reading between the lines it would seem that CASEREC is considering the

purchase of a computer and that John Hill is attempting to present a case for this purchase.

I submit that it would be unwise for an environment centre to spend money on computing power without a very detailed study of the functions of the centre and problems for which a computer might be the best solution.



**Records, Databases and Communications:** The fact that technology exists to maintain databases and transfer these over telephone lines between computers does not mean the purchase of a computer automatically gives this capability. The questions of cost, database availability, compatibility and privacy naturally arise.

Costs begin with the setting up of a local database. These would be significant, whether in paying people to set up the system and to transfer records to it or in time and frustration getting numerous volunteers to do it. It is not easy to determine what information should be stored and in what fashion. In particular, putting library records onto a database is a huge undertaking.

Ultimately costs would include charges levied by bodies maintaining databases. Uncontrolled volunteer access could mean a large expenditure under this head, provided any databases exist or are planned which would be of

use and accessible to the environment movement.

John Hill seems unaware of whether such databases exist or not. However, he assures us, on the basis that the number of databases is increasing, that "prospects in this area are good." This really isn't good enough as a justification for computer purchase.

There is also the assumption that the possible level of communication warrants computing power in the first place. I wonder what volume of information is currently transferred, is there anything unsatisfactory about the current methods, and are computers really the best solution?

The privacy problem arises in relation to records of individuals associated with an environment centre. I am curious how John Hill is able to make the distinction here between them (who need legal constraints) and us (who don't). It is worrying to see the proposition that a member's record be used and "organised in any way required by those using it". It is surely very difficult in an organisation using volunteer assistance to be really sure who is using this information and for what purpose.

**Wordprocessing:** John Hill also says that these records could be used by wordprocessing programs, including personally addressing mail. While it is true that with large typing workloads a wordprocessing capability is useful, some of the projected uses are dubious. For example, I wonder how often it is really necessary to produce documents which are basically the same but are varied slightly from one to the other? It is also unnecessary and possibly counter-productive to produce individually addressed letters when a number of otherwise identical letters are involved. We've all received that sort of letter from the big direct mail marketing companies and I hope we are not foolish enough to believe it was personally typed for us.

Of no less importance is the suggestion that a wordprocessor would use less paper. Probably the opposite is the case. The ease of printing copies at every stage of the production of a document could lead to more paper use.

**Calculations:** Computers certainly are an excellent way of doing repetitive calculations but does the level of financial activity really warrant an expensive computer? We need specific, precisely formulated examples of what is intended. What calculations do environment centres currently carry out where a computer would ease the workload, and what



possible activities are not undertaken which would be useful and which a computer would facilitate?

**Personnel:** Those purchasing computers should remember that skilled programmers are necessary too. There will be few, if any computers with software which is of immediate use to environment centres. To write useful computer programs or modify existing ones requires time. An environment centre would be unwise to purchase equipment without commitments from programmers to do the work. If a machine is purchased first and no assistance is forthcoming, it

would look impressive but would be a waste of the group's resources.

Also, given the health hazards associated with long periods staring at computer visual display units, it behoves an environment centre to consider this issue with respect to its prospective helpers.

**Conclusions:** The upshot of all this is that it is necessary to be more precise about which tasks a computer would perform. The best starting place would be to look at current activities and decide whether a computer would help and to look at activities mooted before the idea of a computer but which had to be left undone because of lack of resources but which could be undertaken with a computer. If an organisation does not work well it will not work any better with the extra workload associated with a new computer.

Discussions with computer people are essential, but it should be remembered that they may be mentally "locked-in" to a computer solution. Money and time spent on computers might be better directed elsewhere.

Finally, the argument that a tool is useful or desirable because an opponent uses it, is spurious in the extreme. Would John Hill arm us with tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannon, or perhaps keep dossiers on leading opponents so that we are not handicapped in the struggle with those who possess these things?

I cannot but feel that John Hill has a solution for which he is trying to find a few problems. It would have been more reassuring to see it the other way around.

Graphics by Robin Jean

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