

Seminar cites computer effects

By Bert Halstead

Professor Joseph Weizenbaum spoke on "The Impact of Computers on Society" at the Technology and Culture Seminar last Tuesday. Weizenbaum, a Professor of Electrical Engineering, was the main speaker of the program, which also included Professors Christopher Schaefer of Political Science and Terry Winograd of Electrical Engineering.

Weizenbaum's thesis was that, to date, the computer has not had an impact on society, at least not a significant impact. He cited the arguments that are generally used to show that the computer has had a major impact. On the one hand, people point to all the good things "the computer revolution" has brought. On the other hand, they lament unemployment caused by automation and the other unfortunate effects generally ascribed to computers. Space travel is one area where computers have been a major influence, and computerized airline reservations systems are another example. Still, he contended, these either serve the computer industry itself or are controlled by the government or other large organizations. Thus only the affluent, and not "the people," really feel the impact of computers.

In any case, said Weizenbaum, the direct effects are less important than the potential side effects. He gave the example of the microscope. Who in the seventeenth century could have foreseen the ultimate ramifications of the discovery of the microscope? The discovery of micro-organisms made possible Darwin's theories, which in turn caused a profound change in man's conception of himself.

He then attacked the man-is-just-another-machine concept, or, as he quoted one of his colleagues who put it more picturesquely, the idea that "the brain is merely a meat machine." Basically, computers all obey a few simple laws. Is man as simple? Or, as Weizenbaum put it, "How do you insult a machine?" If a psychiatrist were examining a patient, and all the psychiatrist did was cough, whereupon the patient drew all sorts of conclusions about what was ailing him, one would seriously question the mental health of the patient. Similarly, all computer science has done is cough, and men have immediately drawn all sorts of deep philosophical implications, to the point where those who refuse to admit that man is a machine are put on the defensive.

Weizenbaum then turned to the problem of computer pro-

grams which have become essential, but which no one fully understands any more. No one likes OS/360, for example, but it has become indispensable, and any major revisions would probably render the whole system inoperative. This has led to a situation in which "no one is responsible for what the machine says." This raises serious issues of accountability in decision-making. There is also the specter of a future society totally dependent on complex, incomprehensible, unmodifiable programs passed on to it from past generations. This would be a static culture, bound to things set down long before, and unable to modify them to suit its needs or desires.

There is something good to be said about computers, but one must be cautious. They provide a new perspective on the world. However, their uses seem limited to those having had experience with computers, and thus might become an elitist sort of things, forever unavailable to the masses.

Weizenbaum also discussed the social responsibilities of computer scientists. Since the

public tends to look on computer science as a kind of magic, the computer professional must be modest in his claims, making clear the fallibility and limitations of his methods. In addition, there is no justification, he said, for undertaking projects whose results could be put to bad use. The argument that "If I don't do it, somebody else will," just does not apply - one must always set the example. In conclusion, Weizenbaum stated, "It is possible to ask human questions and get humane answers."

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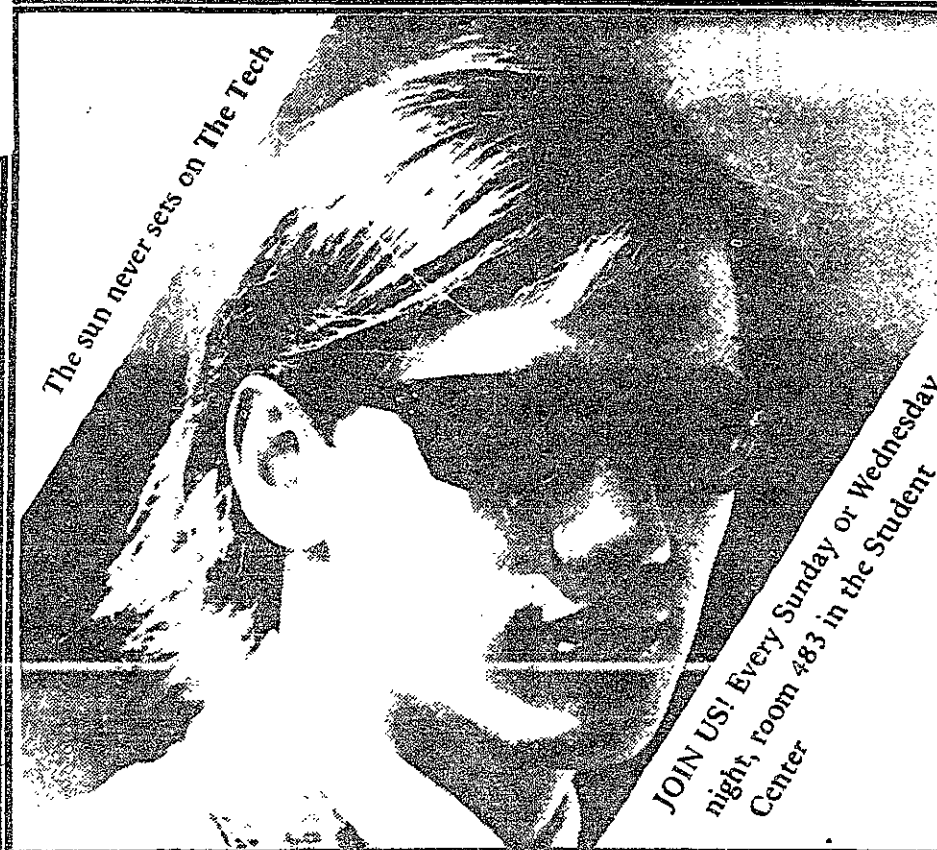
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