There are those who firmly believe that information technology is an instrument of dehumanisation and control of the majority by a minority, whilst there are similar numbers who consider it to be the champion of empowerment and freedom.

Debate is most fervent where the technology is advanced and widely applied. David Garson’s *Computer Technology and Social Issues* reviews the issues surrounding this debate in the United States and investigates the political choices associated with the application of IT.

His views are supported by a wealth of illustrative case studies and an extensive bibliography of more than 100 pages.
The recurrent theme of the book is the politics of IT. The subject is inherently political because of its link to decision making through the provision of information. There is a growing number of public information systems, administered by both government and commercial organisations, which should be the subject of public policy.

The political process surrounding IT reflects the conflicts in objectives and interests as social, market and organisational forces come into play. Garson argues that the accountability of IT resides in this complex political process rather than the legislation which is simply an instrument of the process.

Garson’s remarks concerning the potential of computing to threaten democratic values depict a bleak landscape of despotism, dehumanisation, deskilling and disemployment. He argues that the popularly held belief that IT will create such a landscape is fallacious. It will rather sustain and maybe exacerbate a landscape which already exists. Thus IT can be viewed as a reinforcement of existing power structures rather than an apocalyptic scythe. Such pessimistic views can be tempered with the realisation that IT has the potential to improve life through the support of democratic organisational structures and participative teamwork.

Within the information age there are tensions between the public’s right to know, an individual’s right to privacy, and a government’s or organisation’s right to secrecy. Resolution of these tensions will not be found in technical solutions but rather in the political processes associated with information management. Garson accepts that many of the issues pertaining to IT will inevitably remain a matter of judgement not a matter of legislation and that the adoption of appropriate ethical standards is essential. He predicts that there are likely to be several legislative reforms as the information age evolves.

It is not the specific detail of these reforms that matters but who will be the players in the political process which determines the nature of reform. From a societal viewpoint, the more diverse these players are, the better.

The social impacts of information systems are both many and varied. Symbolic use, discrimination and bias, legal and social liability, occupational health and safety, and quality of work life is the pot-pourri chosen by Garson to illustrate the societal consequences that go beyond political and economic impacts.

Education, the home, leisure and health-care are other areas where societal consequences are significant and would have been worthy of investigation. It is important to recognise that the key issues of computing are socio-political and not technological because computing affects a plethora of groups and individuals in a host of different ways.

The global economy and global community are now a reality. They are sustained, in part, by information superhighways which are expanding at an unbelievable rate. Such change has political ramifications for all countries. It is therefore surprising that Garson has
tended to be introspective and nationalistic in his approach rather than adopting a more global perspective.

The research for this book has been extensive, drawing upon material published throughout the generations of computer technology. Such material has to be used carefully as findings from the \textit{\textcopyright}litist era of first, second and third generation computing do not necessarily provide insight into outcomes of a computing era characterised by widening accessibility.

Overall, Garson provides an interesting view of American thinking on IT impact. Therefore, given the economic and technological world status of the United States, this is a book that should be read by all politicians, industrialists and academics who are involved in the application of IT.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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