

THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF COMPUTERS

(Originally published December 1978)

The insidious and exponential increase in the amount of computerized mail arriving at homes, offices and post office boxes every day is an example of modern technical efficiency feeding on itself to the extent that it becomes inefficiency. The less than a dozen catalogues and brochures that used to arrive at Christmastime twenty-five years ago not only have multiplied a hundredfold, but now often come in duplicates, triplicates and quadruplicates. The button pushers have taken over.

Last month, Dr. S. Lounge (M-S-09/78-2983382) received a credit account application from Sears, Roebuck and Co. urging him to take advantage of a Sears Credit Card. Mr. Frank H. O'Reilly, Sears' National Credit Marketing Manager, personally listed six important reasons why Dr. Lounge shouldn't be without one. In the same mail, the Dreyfus Service Corporation encouraged D. Lounge (86173-200T250) to send for an information folder and prospectus on its Dreyfus Tax Exempt Bond Fund. Jerome S. Hardy, of the Dreyfus organization, personally listed eight desirable features (one of which was "visibility") that should appeal to D. Lounge.

In both instances, the addressed and signed letters were enclosed along with several full color brochures, prepaid return envelopes and toll-free telephone numbers, in case S. and D. Lounge became impatient and wanted to call for additional information. The Lounges, naturally, were pleased that the computers had finally seen fit to recognize them.

We've had mixed emotions about this wonderful age of computers ever since it began to blossom a couple of decades ago. Undoubtedly, computer technology has revolutionized the business of record keeping, data processing and information retrieving. In doing so, it has also created a vast army of experts, specialized technical assistants and keypunch operators, essential for the care and maintenance of these electronic mechanical marvels. At the same time, it has eliminated an even greater number of clerical, secretarial, bookkeeping and desk-bound drudges who used to struggle through the same sort of work at an infinitely slower pace. Whether or not society as a whole can continue to afford its new extravagance and whether or not it is better off as a result of all this are philosophical questions that probably won't be answered until the day when Western Civilization either survives or disintegrates completely.

The impersonal brains that feed the impersonal computers, which mail those personalized messages to the thousands of newly discovered impersonal addressees may someday overwhelm us all. However, until the final day of reckoning appears, without computer aid and utilizing only a hunt and peck system on the fifty-year-old Remington typewriter that once saw service in our father's office, Dr. S. Lounge and his wife want to wish you a Very Merry Christmas.