Introduction

In the week when this article was written, Microsoft announced that beginning in the year 2000, it would award an annual prize of $100'000 to the best electronic book.1 Newsweek published the results of a poll which showed that children in the United States between 10 and 15 years of age generally believed that “films and TV” were “the best teacher” they had (49%); humans such as “friends” (48%) and official “school teachers” (41%) came next.2 An article in some unappetizing glossy journal warned, under the title “Bypass against the Information Infarct,” against the estimated 1 billion internet users who would, by the year 2003, entirely clog up all electronic systems of communication.3 The Christian Democratic candidate for the position of prime minister in the North German land of Schleswig-Holstein stated that in the case of a victory, he would reform the local university system, adding: “what we will need in the future is Humboldt plus Bill Gates.”4 And simultaneously, a few hundred kilometers further south, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, an expert declared that the trend to merely virtual modes of communication seemed to have slowed down somewhat: “In the next century, we shall not see the paperless publisher or the paperless book fair—just as we have not yet seen the paperless office predicted in the early 1980s.”5

1 Press release, 14 October, 1999.
2 Newsweek, 11 October, 1999. According to this article, 49% of the 27 million U.S. children between 10 and 15 years of age are convinced that they “learn a lot” through films and other TV shows; 48% “learn a lot” from their friends; and 41% “learn a lot” from school teachers.
Universities, books, education, communication: the fast evolution of electronic tools, which touches upon all spheres of life, does not spare the very domains of our academic existence. We all notice it, make use of it, and try to keep up with it. But we are not sure whether all of it is, to put it simply, a good thing. What are the consequences, for us, for our profession, for the evolution of our scholarship, and for society at large?

Contemporary technology and its consequences do by definition not fall within the domain of Early Science and Medicine. But it is not the electronic remodeling of our environment as such that will interest us here, but instead the reaction to it by the members of our profession. For ought we not, as historians of science, technology, and medicine, be in the possession of privileged conceptual tools with which to analyze the changes we are all observing? Should not our vocabulary be particularly sharp when we speak of the ways in which new technologies affect intellectual developments, and vice versa?

To test the truth of this assumption, Early Science and Medicine has recently sent out a questionnaire to eighty colleagues, most of whom work in the history of science, medicine, and technology in the period before 1800. As a kind of control group, a number of historians of nineteenth- and twentieth-century science and philosophy were also invited to participate. We have received exactly thirty questionnaires back in time to be evaluated. The list of contributors together with their institutional affiliation can be found at the end of this article.

The complete answers may be read elsewhere, for they have been appropriately placed "on the net." The present article limits itself to the task of discussing the salient points, citing only the most poignant, characteristic, or surprising passages. As this survey does not live up to any professional standards of polling, I did not yield to the temptation of subjecting my sample to any statistical evaluations. My procedure consists merely in ordering, paraphrasing, and quoting some of the answers given to the six questions of the questionnaire.

6 The complete answers may be found on a web site (http://www.kun.nl/phil/center/revolution.html) which will remain open until May 2000.