

The New Technology, 1960–1980

It is sometimes difficult for people to fathom the changes brought about by science over the decades since World War II. By the 1970s, great technological advances—many barely dreamed of in 1945—dramatically changed life in the Western world.

Even prior to 1980, people in America and Europe used computers in the workplace and relied on satellites for instantaneous news reporting, accurate weather forecasts, and relayed telephone signals. Telstar, the first American-launched (1962) artificial satellite, was a communications device. It transmitted the first broadcast of television pictures across the Atlantic Ocean.

Daily life became cluttered with gadgets during the 1960s and 1970s. Consumers around the world purchased their first portable radio or tape player, microwave oven, electric can opener, electric skillet, hair dryer, popcorn popper, or automatic garage-door opener. More people became reliant on machines and so-called labor-saving devices than ever before. Such mass-market consumerism helped to further widen the gap between the richest nations and those in the poorer countries.

Although invented in earlier decades, the most influential medium of the 1960s was television. By the late sixties, the average television viewer tuned in for some 30 hours of TV each week. In the Western nations, nearly everyone had access to a television for news, information, weather reports, shopping information, and entertainment. While television in America was owned by commercial broadcasting companies, much of the television in foreign countries, including Europe, was state-owned, which allowed governments to determine the types of programs made available to citizens. In Eastern nations, television was used as a medium of propaganda. Even in the rural regions of the Soviet Union, nearly half the citizens were watching television every day. By 1980, the Soviet Union

boasted 30 million television sets.

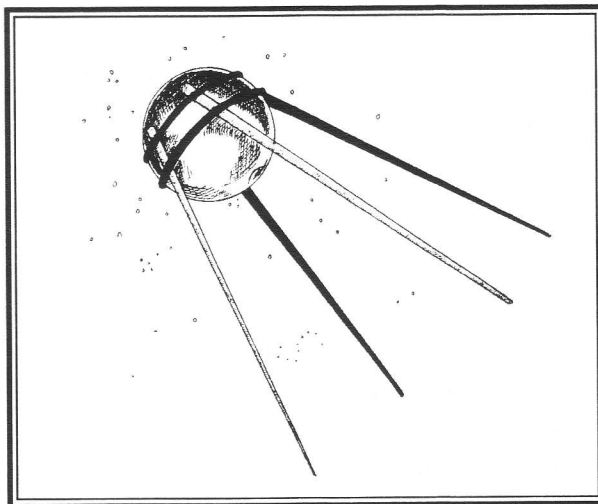
Until the late 1960s, such a state-controlled medium served repressive states well. Given the emergence of communications satellites and video recorders, state-sponsored television struggled to

combat citizen access to alternative programming. In Eastern countries, such as the Soviet Union or Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe, these innovations proved politically problematic.

Television was only one medium which helped usher in the Information Age in the second half of the twentieth century. Other devices such as personal computers, first launched in 1979, as well as hand-held calculators,

photocopiers, and faxes put people in command of information and communication as never before.

Some of this new technology of the sixties and seventies was based on the invention of the silicon chip. The first silicon chip, or microprocessor, was introduced in 1971 in the United States. Silicon chips or wafers were “printed” in the laboratory with microscopic electric circuits that all computers use to process and store great amounts of information. Such chips allowed for thousands of calculations to take place in a single second. With this new device of a generation ago, the world stood on the edge of the greatest technological explosion since the Industrial Revolution of the early nineteenth century—the Computer Age.



Telstar, the first American artificial satellite

Review and Write

What changes were brought to the world through the development of television as a major technological medium?