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The Computer as Scapegoat

By Heinz R. Pagels

Computer bashing — scapegoating, really — has become popular. In a recent minor version, a waiter at a fancy new hotel explained, after a long delay, why my breakfast was delayed: "The computer is down." I commented to colleagues at the table that we'd be hearing that excuse far more often in the future. The delay was not the waiter's or the chef's fault — not even the manager could be blamed. Only the computer manu-

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facturer, programmer or installer, all long gone, were to blame.

In a recent, far more serious version, programmed trading was blamed for the stock market crash. Traders interviewed on television described their feelings of helplessness as they watched stocks drop a point every minute on Black Monday. They complained that the market was out of control: The computers blindly obeyed orders to sell and sell more, but there were no buyers.

Pompous advertisements by brokerage houses now proclaim opposition to programmed trading — an attempt to restore the confidence of small investors. Where were these complaints when the market was going up? Those who made money during the bull market attributed

their success to financial insight and wisdom. The crash, however, was a consequence of computers having taken over decisions. Such nonsense represents an abrogation of adult responsibility.

This diffusion of responsibility serves certain interests, and it is important in each case carefully to identify those interests. Our society is in deep trouble if it cannot pinpoint the people responsible for problems and hold them immediately responsible.

Computers are profoundly changing our economy, but we have not yet learned how to use them properly. I remember, a decade ago, looking at the one-page budgets of small organizations and getting the financial picture at a glance. Now the budgets con-

sist of hundreds of line items, and it's hard to understand what is going on — the result of computer data processing.

Some intellectual prophets have declared the end of the age of knowledge and the beginning of the age of information. Information tends to drive out knowledge. Information is just signs and numbers, while knowledge involves their meaning. What we want is knowledge, but what we get is information. It is a sign of the times that many people cannot tell the difference between information and knowledge, not to mention wisdom, which even knowledge tends to drive out. It is the better part of wisdom today to make sure that people, not computers, stand behind decisions. □