

The Dangers of GIGO

Perhaps the first computer proverb I learned was the G.I.G.O. principle – Garbage In Garbage Out. Feed garbage data to a device – even the mightiest of computers – and it will produce garbage conclusions. Legendary Difference Engine inventor Charles Babbage expressed it so:

*On two occasions I have been asked, — “Pray, Mr. Babbage, if you put into the machine wrong figures, will the right answers come out?” In one case a member of the Upper, and in the other a member of the Lower, House put this question. **I am not able rightly to apprehend the kind of confusion of ideas that could provoke such a question.***

Nor I, Mr. Babbage – but such confusion abounds. Many pundits, politicians, and other wannabes take a few excellent ideas – such as computing and cybernetics – admix them with goals untested by reason, logic, or history, and trumpet the dawn of a New Age, where everything shall be Controlled to Perfection.

An account of the failure of one such effort is given by Slava Gerovitch, here: **How the Computer Got Its Revenge on the Soviet Union** — but such an account could be written of many large endeavors, driven by the multiplication of large doses of wishful thinking and powerful computers. There are people who study cybernetics (the science of communications and automatic control systems in both machines and living things) and distill from it a metaphor of ultimate control, and attempt to devise means to bring about their vision of “heaven on earth.”

It’s harder than it looks. And to bring the metaphor closer to home: you have a very fine computing device between your own ears, but if you feed it garbage, you’ll get garbage out. Much of today’s “news” is of extremely low quality; if you spend even a little time fact-checking and thinking and evaluating, you’ll realize how awful most policy prescriptions whether from Left or Right, truly are.