

SCI 199 L0161 Short Report #2, 2005-2006

Due by the end of the December exam period.

Please remember! Your report must be your own work, and text and ideas from others must be correctly acknowledged.

The Microsoft Monopoly

Microsoft Corporation occupies a unique position in the computing world.

Like most extremely large American corporations, Microsoft has a large effect on the economy, inside and outside of the USA: hundreds of thousands of people are affected by Microsoft's actions quite directly, and millions of people less directly. Its officials are consulted by a number of levels of government and have a significant effect on public policy. As is considered standard and appropriate in modern capitalism, its advice to the public and to government is designed to further Microsoft's vision of the future of society, and as is considered standard and appropriate, this vision includes their expansion and increasing profit and dominance. All of this is considered usual.

However, many people say that Microsoft's position goes beyond this. There are computers running Microsoft software in most organizations you deal with; in most government offices; in most homes. Decisions made by Microsoft affect the functioning of those computers and thus the functioning of those organizations, governments, and people.

Is this a problem?

Can we even manage to evaluate this completely new situation?

As with many such matters, it is likely that many of the attributes of Microsoft's position have analogues in older technologies. We may be able to learn from the past. On the other hand, we should not feel compelled to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Some of this will be the topic of your short report #2.

Your report must be less than two pages long when double-spaced and in a 12-point version of a normal font (such as Times), with one-inch margins all around (top and bottom and left and right). (The page count does not include your references (bibliography) and/or footnotes, nor a cover page should you care to make one.)

Answer a few (very few) questions such as:

- What are some factors which led to Microsoft's establishment as a "software giant"? How did Microsoft launch a competitive web browser "overnight"? Do people sometimes choose Microsoft software *even when* superior technical alternatives exist? Why do they do that?
- What fraction of web servers, e-mail servers, etc on the internet run Microsoft software? Why is there the perception that Microsoft has a greater influence on the internet than this? In what senses *does* Microsoft have a majority impact on the functioning of the internet? What are various people doing to try to increase and to try to decrease this impact?
- Why and how was Standard Oil broken up in 1911? Why was AT&T broken up in 1984? Why was Microsoft recently *not* broken up? What would this break-up have been like, what would it have accomplished? How comparable are the situations?

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- What governments are deliberately moving away from Microsoft software? Why are they doing this? How effectively are they doing it? Will it achieve their stated objectives?
- What is the relevance of the Irish potato famine? Were mistakes made in Ireland in the early 1840s and can we learn from them?
- Of what other companies can we say that one of their products is in use by most people we know for many hours of the day? (Find where it says “YKK” on your clothing.) Which of these companies are problematic and which are not? What public policy controls have been brought to bear on those other companies?

Please refer to the assignment for short report #1 (or the course web page) for advice on citing web pages.