

Information for tomorrow

Greg Saville

They call themselves "the information providers" and they paint what could be a very different picture for tomorrow's cities—a future immersed in the age of information.

Many of the information providers gathered at York recently during the co-sponsored Urban Studies and Computer Science Dept. symposium, "Communications, Computers and Human Settlements."

About half of Canada's gross national product comes from people who manage information, claims Jerome Durlak, coordinator of the symposium and York Environmental Studies associate professor.

Prof. Durlak feels what's needed in the future is a communications system developed "that allows each one of us to use our creative ability to communicate."

But some attending the symposium expressed worries that technological progress in this area is increasing faster than people can absorb.

"Technology is increasing so fast," voiced a concerned

onlooker. "I can remember one communications system that went obsolete in only eight months."

Others at the symposium had their doubts. "The manner in which technological development is used in weapons systems makes me think there must be something wrong in the way we're planning the future," stated one delegate.

The last round of the symposium focused on the new Telidon communications system which basically consists of terminals with a computer linkup that can be placed in residential homes, private businesses, or wherever.

One experiment dealing with a system called videotext is the "VISTA Trial Program" by Bell Canada. It is one of many such programs and, reports Bell Canada representative Nicole Leduc, will be conducted next year by installing terminals mostly in residential homes around Toronto to "see how people react to not only the technology of videotext, but also to the many different types of content you can have on videotext."

Users in the VISTA program

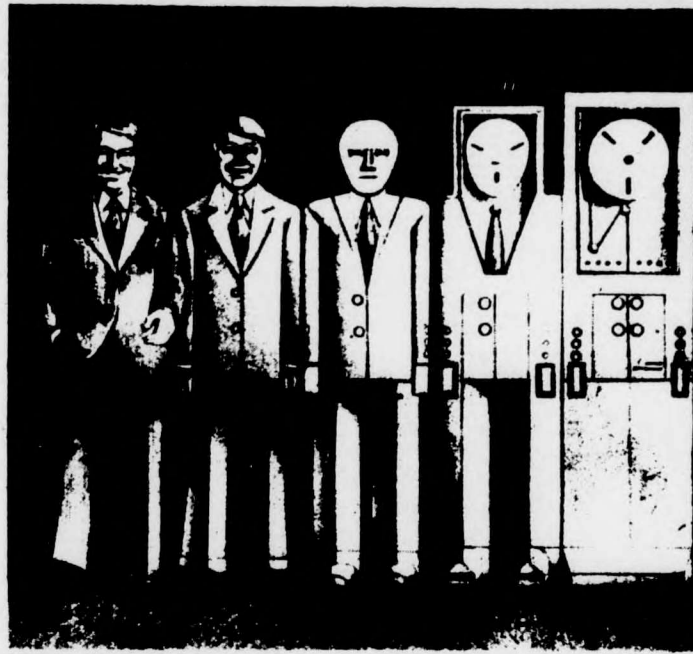
will be able to retrieve information, transact business and communicate messages. It might sound like a souped-up telephone but it's much more.

Imagine being able to get applications from the government, maybe income tax forms, and send them back almost instantly without leaving your home. Perhaps you'd like to do business with your bank or you require information from a book for an essay? Or maybe you'd like a recipe for tonight's dinner? Computer games, anyone?

"Don't forget, people tend to think of this only as an information medium and it's not," says Leduc. "It's also a communications medium."

It brings to mind a future which modern soothsayers claim will be a world of extra-accessible information. Shades of 1984? Think how drastically the rapid rise of television has changed our society in the past 30 years.

"I don't see this communications system being widely used in the future," says Leduc. "I see certain percentages of the population wanting to use this, but I don't think this is going to rise nearly as fast as TV in the late



1950's." However, she admits, "there is a very big problem trying to get people to understand the implications of the technology and what it can do for them."

"Hopefully, we'll get that sort of thing back in (survey questionnaire) comments, but you can only probe to a certain level. Beyond that, they (the users) just don't know."

Hence, the VISTA program.

Will VISTA be testing for

psychological changes in people? How it affects the way people live? Their family?

At the center of discussions was Prof. Durlak's goal for the symposium to help people, "the information providers", work out future problems such as this. Certainly the problems discussed at York show a step in the right direction and if errors during technological advances in the past are any indication, the symposium must be called a success.



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