



TELEVISIONARY TECHNOLOGY

By ELISSA S. FREEMAN

Videotex. In Canada it's known as Telidon, in Britain Prestel, in France it's Antiope.

It's a computer home information system that experts say has the potential to radically alter our lifestyles. Someday, they say, every home will have a videotex terminal and we'll all be doing our shopping, banking, and newspaper reading by television.

Videotex involves a two-way interactive technology that allows the user to select information from a large computer storage system, called a "database." With videotex, you send or receive information using your TV, a home computer, and a modem (a device which allows computers to communicate with each other via telephone lines).

Not many of us do our shopping and banking at home—at least not yet. So, as one means of introducing videotex to the general public, Infomart—a government-subsidized company (owned by Torstar and Southam) that markets the development of videotex—has created the familiar Teleguide terminals. Currently, there are more than 480 Teleguide terminals located around Toronto alone, with a number on York's campus. The Teleguide database provides a blueprint—although admittedly a sketchy one—of where to stay, eat, shop, and play in Ontario.

Although advertisers pay to be included in the Teleguide database, Infomart representative Peter Zimmerman says Teleguide is not "an advertising system, but an information system. It's not forcing something on someone. You ask for what you want—it's a service medium."

How popular is the Teleguide system? Figures provided by the federal Department of Communications (DOC) show that the summer tourist season registered the highest monthly "hits" or number of "pages" (screenfuls) of information viewed. Last June, 11.5 million pages were viewed. Entertainment and restaurant listings proved to be the most popular.

Teleguide advertising salesmen concentrate on two areas: tourism groups, and retail shops and restaurants. Advertisers pay an initial subscription fee of \$200 and an additional \$150 per year to cover the cost of storage and maintenance. But the process of page creation is the biggest source of income for Infomart—advertisers are charged \$45 per hour for the creation of pages, and a single page can run anywhere from \$15 to \$300, depending on complexity.

Infomart not only regulates what information is presented on the screen, but it also has guidelines for the type of information it deems acceptable. When asked if Infomart would create a package for a gay bar, Zimmerman said "there would be no reason why not—unless there were illegalities in the information." However, several massage

parlors seeking to become "information providers" (Infomart's name for Teleguide's advertisers) were turned down. Apparently their text included "suggestive proposals" with explicit wording, something Infomart steers away from.

But despite Teleguide's success, it is the vision of a videotex terminal in every home that pervades the atmosphere at Infomart. "Right now, Teleguide is where the money is, but we aren't exactly cleaning up," admits Zimmerman. He says most of Infomart's government subsidies have run out, and the firm suffered a staff cut two months ago.

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Clearly, the way of the future lies in household use.

From May 1982 to September 1983, Infomart and Bell Canada ran a home field trial in which about 250 terminals were placed in homes in Toronto and Cap Rouge, Quebec. But the prospective home market did not flourish the way Infomart had hoped.

Infomart surveys of Teleguide users claim that 96 percent would like to have such a system in their homes. However, in the surveys, the cost of owning such a system was never mentioned.

Cost has, in fact, proven to be a major hindrance in the widespread implementation of videotex. "In Canada, the decision was not made to force all television manufacturers to put decoders into the TV sets as has been done in England," explains York Mass Communications professor James Durlak. "This means that if people want to buy a decoder, they have to spend a substantial amount of money." A decoder costs about \$600, and although technological advances are certain to cut that price, subscribers must also pay a \$26 monthly user fee. It all means that videotex technology is readily available to only an elite class, what some call "the information rich." They're young, affluent, urbanized, and heavy media users—and they make up only 15 percent of the population.

Some videotex observers wonder whether it is possible to ensure equal usage of this technology for all sectors of society. Those involved with the practical use of videotex, however, tend to play down the problem of the information rich versus the information poor. Zimmerman feels that people are willing to learn how to use the system and

those who cannot mentally grasp the technology can learn about it from their friends. On the other hand, Robert Cousins, from the DOC, believes there "will always be a gap of some extent, but schools are a way of bridging that gap."

However the problem of affordability remains: the people who could benefit most from videotex information can afford it least.

"We are looking at a defined public in that only so many people can be computer programmers, or doctors, or engineers," adds Cousins. "Since the work force is showing a tendency to become quite specialized, people are mainly interested in information that is of their own concern."

There is information that some would consider very useful, but would not be made available in the public database. For example, "political toy" information concerning the nature of contracts let out to the public sector, patronage, and investment tips would be privy to certain people, "or those who would be shrewd enough to get into the database," says Cousins.

Instead of becoming a public service utility, there is the risk that videotex will be reserved for an elite class (the information rich), or become another tool for the rich to amass greater wealth.

The regional office of the DOC lists many contradictions of Infomart's ideals. For one, they believe that conventional advertisers would be "slitting their own throats" should they depend solely on Telidon's tele-shopping. While Infomart reports that home shopping worked very well in its home trial and that eventually one would be able to order a whole list of products from department stores, such a technology would probably deter in-store traffic. Often, customers are attracted to various marketing displays and buy products they originally did not intend on purchasing. And people would probably not order a major item (like a stereo) without investigating the product in person anyway.

Infomart prides itself on its graphics, but there are those who denounce graphic designers who think of themselves as the "Michelangelos of 1984." Many think that content, not graphics, should be the main basis of videotex. "For example," adds Cousins, "concerning the 'travel text,' it is highly unlikely that one would choose a hotel for a vacation based upon a Telidon graphic." Moreover there is the problem of the time it takes for the graphic to be "drawn" on the TV screen—a complaint registered by a number of the home trial users.

Another major point that separates Infomart and the DOC is their view on the emergence of a regulatory body. Peter Zimmerman of Infomart feels that there will be no need for a regulatory body. He reasons

that eventually more databases will emerge, and there will "not just be two or three databases controlling the market." Thus the market would set its own "standards." The opinion of the regional office of the DOC is quite the contrary. The general feeling is that the DOC will arise as the governing body to oversee videotex's applications (advertising, banking, shopping), content, and fee structure.

Advertising in this new medium will likely be different in form and content. Subliminal advertising or content that violates existing ethics and standards would have to be scrutinized. Rates would also become regulated. One database may charge \$20 per minute for certain information and \$20 per hour for another sort of information; there would certainly be pressure to stabilize such rates, in addition to implementing separate rates for business and domestic applications.

Beyond the statistics and the overly optimistic forecasts of those trying to market this technology, however, there are still a number of doubts concerning a viable application. There are those who feel that so much time has passed since videotex's introduction seven years ago that it will never

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create a long-term impact on society. "Even television didn't take that long," adds Cousins.

Videotex technology is being exploited for all it's worth. Home trials have come and gone, surveys churn out hopeful statistics, yet there are few practical results.

"It does seem to be working for very specified kinds of user groups mainly in business," says Durlak. "It has also been relatively successful as an advertising medium for tourists and people living around the city."

There are also a number of applications that would aid the handicapped, such as close-captioning for the deaf, and Blissymbolics, a visual symbol system allowing the speech impaired to communicate. The Blissymbolics project is currently being funded by the DOC.

But Durlak is negative about widespread public use: "First of all, you need a lot more people around with personal computers. But once people have personal computers—will they need videotex?"