

NON-COMMERCIAL AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR ACCESS TO VIDEOTEX SYSTEMS

ACCES AU SYSTEME VIDEOTEX POUR LES SECTEURS BENEVOLES ET NON-COMMERCIAUX

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ABSTRACT

The primary thrust in the development of videotex systems in Canada is to establish their commercial viability. However, there is an acknowledgement by all parties that the social benefits of the system need to be promoted and the social costs identified. In relation to this first objective, Bell Canada has been working with voluntary social agencies in Toronto and Montreal to promote their participation in its Vista field trial alongside more commercially oriented users, to establish a basis for the entrenchment of a non-commercial sector in the development of a videotex industry and to evaluate particular institutional structures as a basis for ensuring non-commercial access to videotex systems.

RESUME

La première préoccupation dans le développement des systèmes vidéotex au Canada est d'en établir leur rentabilité commerciale. Cependant, toutes les parties impliquées savent que les avantages sociaux de ce système doivent être publicisés et les coûts sociaux identifiés. Sur ce premier objectif, Bell Canada travaille, depuis quelque temps, avec des agences sociales bénévoles, conjointement avec des usagers à vocation plus commerciale, à Toronto et à Montréal, afin de promouvoir leur implication dans son projet VISTA, de jeter les bases de l'établissement d'un secteur non-commercial dans le développement de l'industrie du vidéotex, et d'étudier certaines structures institutionnelles particulières pour garantir un accès non-commercial aux systèmes vidéotex.

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The primary thrust in the development of videotex systems in Canada is to establish their commercial viability. However, there is an acknowledgement by most of the parties concerned that the social benefits of the system need to be promoted and the social costs identified. Bell Canada has undertaken to study some of these social issues during the field trials of its Vista system now underway in Quebec and Ontario.

Bell's overall orientation stems from three sources. The first is our perception of the boundaries of corporate social responsibility. In agreement with the Bryce Commission on Corporate Concentration we endorse the position that social objectives should be integrated into the corporation's usual commercial activities and that "Corporations are not being asked to undertake novel, ill-defined and apparently irrelevant sideshows. Instead they are merely asked to consider fully the effects of what they already doing, and to treat the social effects of their decisions as seriously as they do the economic ones". As a likely carrier of videotex services, Bell is concerned, from a social, as well as an economic, perspective, that access to these services is placed on as broad a footing as possible from the outset.

Second is our belief that videotex will become an information utility not just a special service offering for the few. We are aware that the system will probably first gain a foothold in society among commercial users and among the more affluent, and will diffuse from there. The rate of diffusion will depend, among other things, on the extent to which the federal and provincial governments become involved and committed to providing public service information on the system. The recent decision of the Federal Government Task Force on Services to the Public to set up 100,000 pages of government information, is both welcome and encouraging. In the non-governmental sphere, Bell is hoping to accelerate the process of diffusion by facilitating the development of non-commercial social, cultural, community and special use applications from the outset. We see that a failure to undertake this kind of action would otherwise lead to a Canadian videotex industry based largely, or solely, on commercial considerations.

In attempting to promote the social benefits of videotex Bell has started the process of encouraging voluntary organizations to become involved as information providers. And this brings us to the third element in Bell's orientation. We operate under a doctrine of the separation of carriage from content which is a statute of the Canadian Parliament and is included in Bell's Special Act of Incorporation. It means that Bell must function as a common carrier and cannot influence, in any way, the content or the purpose of the information it

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carries. This means that we are not, nor cannot be, in the business of providing or determining the content for videotex systems. In dealing with voluntary organization, therefore, our aim is to encourage them to define their own role in the emerging information society - our role is to facilitate this participation. Specifically, we are concerned that the voluntary sector is given the opportunity now, while the videotex industry is fledgling, to participate in field trials and to influence the structure of the information providing industry as it develops. This means that the voluntary sector will need to take appropriate political action to carve out a niche for itself and to ensure that the provision of social and community information gets entrenched within the industry structure. What actually emerges will largely be a function of the political acumen of the voluntary sector itself.

For the purposes of the Vista field trials, Bell is attempting to evaluate one particular structural form for the establishment of a voluntary sector voice in the videotex industry. We have suggested to the voluntary groups that they form themselves into an umbrella group, one in Quebec and one in Ontario, to represent their voices. The idea of an umbrella group can be construed as an unnecessary and unwelcome centralizing influence in determining non-commercial access to the system, but I believe that in the early stages of the industry's development and for the field trials, no other structure is practicable. To deal, for example, with a host of independent information providers from the voluntary sector would be administratively cumbersome and, I believe, wasteful of limited manpower resources. More important, though, is the scale of the capital investment required to set up the information market-place, and it is this that suggests that only a centralized umbrella-group structure will allow for an effective representation of a social and community voice in the development of videotex. One recent estimate for a 1 - 2,000 page social and community data base to be set up and maintained during a single year would require about \$140,000. This includes start-up costs, office space and furnishing, and manpower for the gathering of information, for the design, page-creation and updating of the information. It does not include costs for page creation terminals or other hardware. Under these circumstances I believe that a centralized structure reflecting a unified stance from the voluntary sector is the only way to maximize the effective use of scarce financial, manpower and equipment resources, at least for the present.

In addition I believe that an umbrella group approach would place the voluntary sector in a better position to take the necessary political action required for them to establish themselves in the videotex industry on a permanent basis. For example, the voluntary organizations will need to determine their

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own long term viability in the information market in a financial as well as institutional sense, and they will need to develop a relationship with existing centralized structures in governments and in the commercial information-providing industry. Commercial information providers are numerous, competitive and independent, but have their own 'umbrella group' in VISAPAC - the Videotex Information Service Providers Association of Canada. Non-commercial information providers will need to determine a community and social voice in relation to this commercial world and I believe it can be more easily accomplished if there is an umbrella group representing their interests.

In Toronto, where the English language part of Bell's Vista field trial is running, we have had discussion with a large number of voluntary social agencies, and through the good offices of the Ontario March of Dimes the idea of an umbrella group was spread around. The major options in forming an umbrella group were to create an entirely new organizations for the purposes of representing social and community information providers or to use an existing organization, preferably one that had experience with providing and disseminating information to the public. The various social agencies in Toronto chose an existing organization, the Community Information Centre of Metropolitan Toronto to function as the umbrella group there. CIC is well-established, having been in Toronto for over 20 years, and was already operating as an information provider in a non-electronic sense, acting as a broker between nearly 3,500 social agencies and the public. CIC has provided a content plan for a social and community data base in the Toronto field trial and is currently seeking funding from a number of sources to get this information up on the system. Bell Canada is providing some funding as well as training in page design and inputting for information provider terminal operators; we are also providing free pages on the data base, free access to an information provider terminal for entering the information and Bell staff support as needed.

In Quebec the focus of the French language Vista trial is on a smaller community, Cap Rouge, where Bell will be installing about 75 in-home Vista terminals. A smaller number of terminals (between 15 and 20) will be installed in public locations in Montreal. The provision of social and community information in Cap Rouge is being undertaken by Le Soleil with the cooperation of local organizations. This arrangement, in fact, constitutes an alternative to the umbrella group approach, but, in my opinion, offers the disadvantage of casting the provision of social and community information within a commercial context from the outset. It does not address the problem of the needs and institutional requirements of the non-commercial sector in ensuring access and a continuing voice in the development of a videotex industry.

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In Montreal no umbrella group has yet been formed, although several meetings have been held and the prognosis looks excellent. As with Toronto, Bell will provide some funding, free training in the use of information provider terminals, pages on the data base, access to an information provider terminal for inputting the information and Bell Canada staff support needed.

For both umbrella groups, in Toronto and Montreal, the matter of complete funding for their participation in the field trial will be determined by the group themselves. The matter of funding for non-commercial and voluntary sector information provision in the long-term, when videotex is fully operational, is uncertain and will be a very important component of the umbrella groups to-be-negotiated relationships with commercial IPs and governments.

Whether the non-commercial and voluntary sector will be successful in their endeavour to establish a voice in the videotex industry is known. Whether the umbrella-group is the appropriate institutional structure for entrenching a non-commercial voice is also unknown. To reiterate, what actually emerges will very much depend on the political acumen of the groups involved. It is important, however, that some action is taken today, during, and not after, the current field trials. As Lewis Auerbach has recently argued, "the precedents being established in the infancy of videotex technology will persist for a long time, just as they have in television"*. The entrenchment of a non-commercial voice in the industry while it still is an infant will go a long way toward ensuring that the social benefits of the system are adequately promoted.

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REFERENCES

- *L. Auerbach. The distinction between carriage and content.
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