

THE SHAPE OF FUTURE JOURNALISM

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ABSTRACT

The Canadian Press, Canada's national news-gathering co-operative, is participating actively in the new technological developments in information display and distribution. CP's interests lie in exploring and analysing the shape of future journalism and guarding its position as the country's predominant supplier of information.

## LA CONFIGURATION DU JOURNALISME DE L'AVENIR

### RESUME

La Presse Canadienne, la coopérative nationale canadienne de collecte des nouvelles, participe activement aux développements technologiques dans le formatage et la distribution de l'information. Les intérêts de la PC résident surtout dans l'exploration et l'analyse du journalisme de l'avenir et dans la sauvegarde de son rôle de principal fournisseur d'information au Canada.

Developments in communications and news services coming on stream at The Canadian Press are generating a lot of interest and curiosity stemming from the growing public awareness that something is indeed happening in what the experts call Informatics--the operational mix of computers, communications and information.

Something IS happening, but what exactly it is, and where it will lead, and how long it will last are questions still begging answers.

CP's approach to Telidon, Videotex, Teletext, etc., is perhaps more conservative than some other information providers, but keep in mind that CP is concerned with the relationship of the technology to distribution of news, not with the many other classes of information involved.

Conservative approach notwithstanding, there is no arguing with the obvious: The technical developments are astonishing. The cost of computer memory is declining by 40 per cent a year; the cost of computer logic is declining by 25 per cent a year; the cost of communications is dropping 11 per cent a year. The processing power of computers has increased 10,000 times in the last 15 years and the price of each unit of performance has decreased 100,000 times during the same period. CP's first editorial VDTs, purchased in 1973, were huge machines which cost \$16,000 each. Now we have small portable models, able to do many more tasks, at a cost below \$2,000.

Applications of this low-cost computing power are seen everywhere, one of the most obvious being the large number of personal computers going into use. One report says that two out of every 100 homes in the U.S. now has a personal computer in the packaged form of a keyboard, TV screen and computing logic. By 1990 it is estimated that 1 million Canadian homes will have these devices.

With this sort of environment, it is understandable that traditional suppliers of information, latter-day entrepreneurs, database operators and operators of communications networks would look for ways to capitalize on a marriage of the technology with the public's desire and need to be informed. Add to that the millions of dollars of research and development underwritten by governments in just three countries alone--Great Britain, France and Canada--to harness the technology, and you have a form of bandwagon--creating pressure that is hard to resist even if you are just on the periphery.

You are familiar with the meaning of individual terms, but let me recap some of the main ones.

TELETEXT is one-way communications from a computer to receiving terminals. The user can "stop" for display purposes individual pages of information from a never-ending stream that hits his TV monitor. Or he can display each page as it moves by in turn. But he cannot dial into a computer and request information.

VIDEOTEX is two-way or interactive communication, in which the user can dial a computer and request certain pages.

TELIDON is the system by which graphics can be transmitted to enhance the written word; possible in both one-way/interactive situations. Telidon, of course, is the made-in-Canada system by the Federal Department of Communications and is generally believed to be the best going because of the superiority of its artwork which permits curves or arcs in the graphics and a good range of colors. Competitive systems developed in Great Britain and France are more limited in the style of graphics because the so-called curved lines are actually a series of little squares or mosaics.

Many organizations are spending large amounts of money to obtain a foothold in these new technologies. Are they wasting their money? But these organizations think it is important that they be prepared to protect their own turf as information providers and to maintain their advertising revenues if there ever arises a commercial or social need for large doses of information to be distributed electronically.

And this may be the nub of it--what is the commercial and social need for what the technology can provide us? Taking a conservative stance again, history is sprinkled with euphoric predictions that have fallen short.

Two or three years ago Editor and Publisher, a weekly trade publication of the newspaper industry, reprinted an editorial it had carried in the late 1930s which predicted the imminent demise of the daily newspaper because the technology of photofacsimile had just been invented, and it was widely assumed that this process, by which an electronic signal acts on chemically-treated paper to produce an image, would be installed in the livingrooms of the world and replace door-to-door delivery.

Sound familiar, back here in the '80s?

Today, only a small number of home computers have communications capability and are able to talk to a database. So should CP really be interested in creating two-way services at this time for a mass market?

Also, few of these devices can handle the Telidon graphics, and it is by no means clear how many of them in the future will be able to. So does CP really want to develop a videotex service that has graphics?

The most successful services or databases to date are those that cater to particular groups of professionals, not any sort of mass market. For example, a Dow Jones service and the Reuters financial service aimed at the business community, or the several agriculture databases. So does it make sense at this point to develop an all-purpose service that duplicates the general-news content of a newspaper?

Is the future Teletext or Videotex? Videotex is newer and more glamorous, but the belief is growing that whatever future exists during the next decade will be one-way teletext; except in certain specialized areas.

In order to be commercially successful in distributing current information, both videotex and teletext must count on thousands of simultaneous viewers. Two-way videotex requires enormous computer facilities at great cost so that thousands of people can get into a computer at once. Technically possible, but out of the question because no one has figured out how to get their money back on such an undertaking. Teletext services, however, simply require a computer which can generate a communications signal.

Just to complicate things a little, Reuters News Agency has been successful in making a one-way signal look like a two-way signal. Reuters distributes large amounts of detailed financial information to brokers and financial houses around the world. The entire volume of information is pumped in a non-ending stream at extremely high speed into the subscriber's terminal, moving so fast that the information repeats every few seconds. The customer has a keypad which allows him to designate numbered pages which are frozen and displayed the next time the selected information hits the back of the TV set.

But there are uses for two-way videotex. Typical examples are InfoGlobe or CP's NEWSTEX, in which library-type information is retrieved on demand from a computer. There is not a mass demand for these historical services, but the database is extremely large and can't reasonably be fed in a non-ending stream. Videotex is the technology used in the financial services which compete with Reuters--such as Dow Jones, Telerate or Combined Market Quotations. It is also the technology used in the Infomart projects, such as Grassroots on the Prairies.

It should be noted that many of the successful specialized services have no requirement for the Telidon graphics.

What approach has CP taken to test the waters but avoid the whirlpools?

We are an organization that provides news to a wide variety of markets and, no matter who the ultimate user is, there is going to be a continuing need for basic information which must be collected before it is distributed. That's our business.

However, at the same time that we are working to improve our editorial product, we are adjusting to changes that include new distribution methods, primarily in order to protect our position as a predominant supplier of news in Canada.

We may choose to be an active participant in electronic news distribution, not simply providing our news wires for a fee. That means we will undertake special packaging of information if the opportunity arises, and if it makes economic sense.

We are actively pursuing all opportunities and market possibilities, but, we will not be a sharing participant with equity or investment other than with our chief asset--a huge reservoir of current and historical information in both English and French which grows each day by a quarter-million words, or the equivalent of 300 newspaper columns.

Our basic service in the Videotex field is the CP Business Information Wire, which serves a large number of corporations and commercial houses. It is a continuous stream of stories from 18 categories--mining, banking, agriculture, government and the like--augmented by give-times daily headline summaries. Subscribers may choose to receive only selected categories based on their particular requirements. However, headlines from all categories are transmitted to all subscribers, and news items from a category not normally received may be requested.

The Business Information Wire may be obtained through CompuServe, North America's largest videotex distributor, located in Columbus, Ohio. Users dial a local phone number from almost anywhere in Canada or the U.S. using a low-cost terminal, microcomputer or communicating word processor. A menu-driven system directs the user to stories required. Headlines from each of the 18 categories may be scanned and the full text of any story either read from the screen or printed out.

The Business Information Wire is also part of Combined Market Quotations. CMQ, the Canadian distributors of Telerate, provides the business community with on-line financial, money market and stock quotation services, direct from major exchanges across North America. The Business Information Wire is an important part of CMQ's Telerate service.

Later this year we plan to make the Business Information Wire available through QL Systems, Canada's oldest and largest on-line database publisher, located in Kingston.

A feature of this arrangement will be "Selective Dissemination of Information", which allows users to enter a "profile" of their interests and information requirements. Each time a user subsequently signs on to the database, all stories containing selected words or topics will be retrieved.

The Business Information Wire is also available on Infomart's Grassroots and Novatex, a database being created by TeleGlobe Canada to serve Canadian Business interests around the world.

We are considering developing a Telidon-enhanced version of the Business Information Wire, although we are not convinced yet there is a market for it unless cable television companies eventually express an interest. Most users want the information, not the graphics.

However, we are developing a Telidon-enhanced general news service for cable. You may be familiar with our recycling package of news on Cable-TV which we have had for about nine years. We currently are market-testing in the Toronto area this sort of service with full-colour graphics added. It is delivered in a recycling package in Teletext form with provision for local information providers, such as newspapers, to add local content. Local newspapers may be interested if the day ever comes when they can include advertising. Interest so far is minimal. This new service is called Infovision. It will be available in French, as well.

Our most ambitious project is NEWSTEX, which we believe is the world's largest archival database of news information, growing, as I said earlier, by 300 newspaper columns a day. It now contains our complete file for the last two years and soon we will have entered the file going back to 1974.

Anyone with a word processor or computer terminal which has communications capability can dial through the telephone system into NEWSTEX, and simply by entering words or phrases that are likely found in a story, can find what is wanted within seconds. The material is current up to the previous midnight.

But again, NEWSTEX is not a service that appeals to the general public, other than students using it on terminals located in public libraries. The chief users of NEWSTEX are researchers, librarians, speech writers and, of course, journalists. It is an important addition to newspaper libraries as well as CP Bureaus.

Finally, what is the shape of future journalism?

A common question today is to what extent the new technology threatens the existence of the daily newspaper. If photofacsimile didn't put the newspapers out of business 45 years ago, will videotex do it in the 1980s and '90s?

Dodging the question somewhat, perhaps there should be more concern about the impact of content and credibility than about technology. There could be a greater threat to industry institutions from failures and inattention in that direction than from any new method of delivering information.

Legitimate questions are being asked about our professional performance, and how journalism responds to the public perception of what we are doing.

The news industry faces great social and public responsibility, and there is a lot of internal soul-searching going on in responsible news organizations--getting down to the basics of accuracy, fairness, balance and a recognition of the difference between reporting and commentary.

The bells and whistles and bits and bytes, with all their glamor and enticement, must be put into perspective when we consider the future of journalism.

And that place is second to carrying out, with skill, the fundamentals of the profession.

There is no question that the traditional information distribution systems will survive if they can improve their relationship with their constituents.

A question more to the point is whether mass-market computer-based electronic information systems which distribute news will themselves survive in the next decade, not whether they'll put anyone else out of business. Presstime, which is the monthly magazine of the American Newspaper Publishers Association, recently explored the questions in depth, quoting optimists and pessimists at length.

Presstime posed the question and then drew its own conclusion. The answer, it said, as to whether these news systems will survive, is a very clear . . . maybe.