



REACTIONS TO
COMPUTER SERVICES
IN THE HOME

The Social Survey
Research Centre

Le Centre d'Etudes
Sociologiques



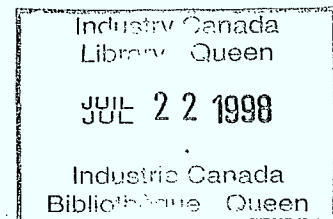
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October 26, 1970



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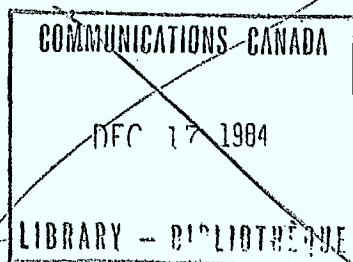
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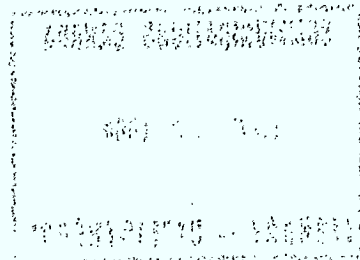
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ORDER OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
FOREWORD	
GENERAL SUMMARY	
A. Overall Reactions.....	1.
B. Perceived Benefits (Overall).....	3.
C. Concerns and Fears.....	5.
D. "Marketing" Implications.....	10.
E. The Appeal Of Specific Services.....	11.
F. Who Should Provide The Service?.....	12.
G. The Usefulness Of The Film "1999".....	13.
APPENDIX	
Discussion Outline	

FOREWORD

In the light of the increasing use of computer/communications systems in a variety of fields, the Department of Communications of the Federal Government is interested in determining public attitudes toward computers, and especially to the idea of computer services available in the home. The Social Survey Research Center is charged with the task of carrying out this investigation. As a first step, on behalf of S.S.R.C., Dimensions Unlimited (a subsidiary of Canadian Facts) conducted the small-scale depth study reported herein. The main aim of this study was to investigate the perceived effects of a computer/communications system on the quality of people's lives.

Two group discussions, (one with women and one with men, all "heads of households" between 25 and 45), were held in Toronto during the first week of October, 1970. Both discussions began with the assumption (stated in the moderator's introduction) that life in the modern world is complex, and that people sometimes find it difficult to cope with the problems of managing their homes and even their lives. The respondents were then encouraged to project themselves ten years into the future (to 1980) in order to imagine (a) what their lives might be like, and (b) what a device which could help them deal with the complex world might be like.

Finally, an early segment of the film "1999" (about 12 minutes) was shown in order to crystalize people's concept of the new device, and reactions to the device as depicted in the film were obtained. A copy of the discussion outline (which was followed extremely flexibly and freely) is appended to this report.

Although this study involved only fifteen respondents, it is likely that the ideas derived from them are, to a large degree, representative of middle class urban dwellers in English Canada. What it cannot reveal, of course, is the extent to which Canadians of other classes, other regions, other centres, and other ethnic origins are likely to have the same feelings and reactions. These still require investigation in order for the research to represent the national picture on this topic.

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October 26, 1970.

GENERAL SUMMARY

A. Overall Reactions

Neither men nor women receive the idea of a home computer (or terminal) with very much enthusiasm, despite the fact that they obviously do feel the need for some kind of guidance in managing their homes and in managing their lives. Beyond this general lack of enthusiasm, however, men and women have rather different reactions to the concept. Although they hesitate to show enthusiasm, men are much more open to the possibility of computer technology being able to solve the problems which they find most frustrating, foreseeing few serious encumbant drawbacks. The women, on the other hand, are much more negative to the idea, and seem to fear that extensive use of computer services would entail more disadvantages than advantages.

The lack of enthusiasm among men is not based on particular negative feelings, as is the case with the women, but rather stems from their unwillingness to wholly endorse what is still essentially an unknown quantity. In this regard, their attitude is probably more like agnostics than atheists; they see no reason to deny the benefits of the computer, but they do not perhaps feel they know enough to assert any positive enthusiasm or "belief" in the idea. They are very tentative in their acceptance of the concept, although they seem to be "groping in the dark", as it were, toward more complete acceptance. They reinforce each other's positiveness, in a group situation, by cheerfully imagining more and more radical technological advances that will come to be a reality in the future. Partly this may be an attempt by each man to impress the others in the group that he is technologically "in the know", that he can certainly cope with -- and appreciate -- whatever changes may come.

But this may be a bit of false bravado on the part of the men, for they seem to refuse to believe that many of the advances they imagine will become reality (at least for the average person) within their lifetimes. In other words, they are able to feel unperturbed because they do not seriously see themselves as having to deal with all the drastic changes they suggest are possible. More realistically, they are able to realize that whatever changes do come into being will do so gradually, and they seem to feel genuine confidence in their ability to adjust to technological advances one-thing-at-a-time.

The women, on the other hand, do not like to even imagine what things will be like in the future. They are so hung up with the problems facing them now, that they seem to want to repress the future. It is still too distant, too foreign, too threatening, for them to successfully project themselves without a great deal of psychological discomfort. Furthermore, they do not readily perceive technology in any form as automatically helping to solve the problems which frustrate them at present. They can see individual, isolated benefits deriving from a home computer installation, but they seem to fear that, on the whole, the quality of their lives will be adversely affected by such a system. Partly, their fears derive from a feeling that technological advances are going to complicate rather than simplify their lives, that they are going to find it difficult to cope with the complexities they feel are implicit in the handling of as yet unknown machinery and mechanisms. The underlying reason for this fear is probably their inability to think in evolutionary rather than revolutionary terms; they do not seem to rationally envisage gradual change, but react emotionally to the concept as a fait accompli.

B. Perceived Benefits (Overall)

Both men and women can perceive and appreciate the fact that technological advances in many areas - in education, for example, in communications, as well as the as-yet mystical device for the home - could be of tremendous benefit in many, many ways. They see it, positively, as being able to eliminate many of the tiresome, routine chores that seem to require so much time presently. For example, when people think of how they would like to be helped to cope with managing their lives, both men and women tend, at first, to think in terms of physical rather than "mental" aids. Women seem to imagine a robot-like machine which could polish their floors or do their ironing. Men talk in terms of a machine which could mow the lawn or shovel snow - mechanically or electronically. Even when they begin to think in terms of a "mental" aid, they can appreciate the benefits, in a general way, of being able to get information quickly and accurately that they might otherwise take hours or days to get - or might never get at all.

Thus, whether seeing the new home computer facility as a physical or mental aid, people recognize that it will serve to save time, and in turn increase their free time, and they appreciate this overall benefit - at least to a certain extent. But the prospect of increased leisure time is not all rosy, especially not to women; their fears in this regard will be discussed in the next section.

People see the real and ultimate benefit of increased use of computer services as lying with their children. They feel, in a sense, that children are the natural inheritors of these technological advances, that they will be the ones to truly benefit from early childhood on into

adulthood. The educational applications of computer installations are the only ones which are endorsed and appreciated by all.

C. Concerns And Fears.

The single greatest fear in the back of people's minds with regard to home computer services as a mental aid, is that their own thinking and reasoning powers will be usurped. They are afraid that people will become too dependent upon a machine to do their figuring out of things, that their minds will perhaps atrophy from lack of "exercise," and thus that they will become little more than "a vegetable". Both men and women seem to harbour these fears, although only the women express them so explicitly. Even among those who realize that a machine cannot really do one's thinking for him, there is concern that people could lose their ability to learn and perhaps even to remember things, especially if they can get any information they want instantly at the touch of a button.

Paradoxically, there is also an expectation that a great deal of technological, scientific skill, or at least sophistication, will be required in order to successfully manage the computerized world of the future. Because of their inability to foresee gradual change, women especially fear that they will not be able to keep up with all of these technological advances, and thus that life will be more complex. Perhaps they foresee the ultimate frustration in having all these services and devices available, and not knowing how to use them, or at least not knowing how to use them intelligently.

Then there is the problem of free time. Both men and women are aware of potential difficulties in masses of people having a great deal of free time, and particularly in their ability to use this time intelligently and creatively to good advantage. Men seem relatively optimistic about the solution of this problem, feeling fairly confident that people will develop outside interests and hobbies with which to usefully occupy their time.

But women are more pessimistic in this regard. For one thing, they are fully aware of the many labour-saving devices they have in their homes which their mothers did not have, and yet they do not feel they really have any more "free time"; they say they are as busy and harried as ever. So, on a surface level, they wonder if the idea of more free time isn't just a myth. But for women, the whole question of leisure time is far more complicated, as it tends to be tied up with their roles as wives and mothers.

The traditional role of the woman in the home gives her the primary responsibility for the smooth operation of her household and for the physical and emotional care of her family (within the limits of the family budget). Since women do not earn money for this role, there is widespread (although undoubtedly unconscious) feeling that the worth of a woman is expressed in the effort - and time - she expends in carrying out these activities. Thus, it well may be that women do not really want their labour-saving devices to become time-saving devices. They may purposely (although unconsciously) fill their potential leisure time with a multitude of other seemingly essential activities in order to feel that they are really worthwhile to their families. Having free time available to them in sufficient quantity to enjoy themselves probably makes women feel guilty that they are somehow failing to fulfill their role.

But the free time dilemma is not the only way in which the home computer concept comes into conflict with women's conception of their traditional role. They undoubtedly feel threatened by such a device because they can foresee it performing or regulating many of the household activities

which are presently their own responsibility. Rather than seeing such a device as an aid to them in performing their duties, they tend to see it as capable of usurping their role - and thus their worth - in the household, and perhaps even robbing them of their purpose in life.

Thus, there arises the possibility that women could actually feel jealous of the computer device, if it is not presented very carefully to them.

Women need to be reassured that they can make very worthwhile contributions to their families and households in other than the traditional ways.

Of course, the problems and conflicts which the advent of the home computer present are merely an extension of the current identity crises which women are experiencing in deciding whether or not they should work outside the home. Women, as compared with men, seem to be more sensitive to the problem of keeping a family together in a meaningful way. Generally, women perceive that the quality of interpersonal relationships is going to deteriorate in the future, and there is a deep concern that technological advancements are going to have a negative influence in this area. There is a good deal of emphasis on the generation gap, on the problems of discipline among children, and there seems to be a conflict between the desire to be a modern, progressive, and somewhat permissive parent and this tremendous need to instill discipline in children. Women also seem to be acutely aware of, and concerned about, the seeming inability to create and especially perpetuate a meaningful relationship with their husbands. There seems to be divided opinion as to whether having more free time and getting involved in more activities outside the home, including working outside the home, is in fact beneficial or detrimental to their relationships with other family members, and to the relationships of other family members with each other.

In other words, women can readily appreciate the value that a computer device might have in making their daily lives easier, but they seriously wonder whether it will improve the quality of their lives, from an emotional and psychological viewpoint. They seem to be asking such questions as: Will it bring me closer to my husband and my children? Or will it, on the contrary, drive each family member further apart, more into him or herself? Will it somehow destroy the fabric of human relations and thus lead to an increase in alienation?

Men, too, seem to be aware of the fact that the computer device in the home could alter interpersonal relationships, but they see the danger more in terms of social relations with "outsiders" rather than within the family. They foresee the possibility that extensive use of in-home computer services could negate the necessity of leaving one's own home at all, since people would no longer have to deal with each other on a face-to-face basis (perhaps not at all) for most of their needs. However, again their basically optimistic attitude shines through, since they seem to believe that - of necessity, perhaps - people will make a definite effort to join groups and activities in which they have an interest, and will be able to cultivate these and spend the time on them that they cannot today.

Somewhat surprisingly, there is little fear based on invasion of privacy connected with the more extensive use of computer services. Partly, this may be due to the fact that people do not fully realize the extent to which information about themselves would be available to others; some seem to have the impression (from the film "1999", at least) that all the information which the home computer stores remains within the physical confines of the home. More realistically, many realize that all basic information about

them is already available through credit rating bureaus, income tax and social security records, etc., so they do not feel that the advent of home computers is going to make any significant difference in this regard.

To sum it all up, then, it seems that the basic fear people have for the future as it pertains to computer-like devices is not directed so much to the devices themselves, but is in fact directed toward the inability of people to use them intelligently, to be in control of them, rather than vice versa.

D. "Marketing" Implications

In order to achieve acceptability of the concept of home computer services, particularly among women, it is going to be absolutely essential not only to educate people to its potential benefits, but to help them gain perspective as to its role in their lives.

On the practical level, it will be necessary to educate people both as to the uses of the device - what it can do for them - and, more importantly, as to how they can handle it. They need to be reassured that it will be simple to operate and that they need not be especially scientifically inclined in order to do so.

On the psychological level, the educational tasks are much more difficult. In the first place, a great deal of concern about the problems in coping with the complexities of this modern world has to be voiced from "official" levels. People need to be reassured that the new device is not meant to solve everything, but merely to help them cope with these complexities. They need to feel that it is still their responsibility for coping, that they must still take the initiative in handling their own lives; in short that the advent of this device will not deprive them of the necessity for having to face and cope with their own problems.

In other words, it comes down to the educational task of crystallizing goals for people, for women in particular, which will enable them to clearly see that their *raison d'être* as human beings goes far beyond the activities they do that can be replaced by a computer.

Finally, there is a need to educate people how to use whatever additional time becomes available to them through the use of the new computer services in an intelligent, creative, useful, and especially meaningful way.

E. The Appeal Of Specific Services

The following services were spontaneously mentioned (before the film was shown) as possibilities for the home computer device:

- access to all library materials stored at a nearby university
- instructions for do-it-yourself repairs to car, appliances, etc.,
- teleshopping
- maintaining a check on other household appliances in order to detect potential breakdowns
- menu preparation
- home surveillance to guard against prowlers, etc.
- babysitting

There is some hesitation in accepting the idea of teleshopping. While some people obviously feel it would be a real boon, others fear that they can only judge a product in person, and that there would be too much opportunity for merchants to misrepresent their merchandise if the only sensing device were a television screen.

F. Who Should Provide The Service?

There is general agreement that a home computer device which could supply a variety of services would be most efficiently provided by a group of independent companies working together in co-operation, not by the government, which is deemed "too inefficient." However, there is a widespread desire for the government to exercise control over the service in order to ensure impartiality and accuracy. There is absolutely no indication of any feeling that government participation in such a scheme smacks of "Big Brother" interference. People seem to have confidence in the honesty and motives of their government; they only suspect its efficiency.

G. The Usefulness Of The Film "1999"

There is no doubt that this film helps to convey the many possible uses of a home computer device, but it has many drawbacks which might be kept in mind for future use. In the first place, it depicts much more in the way of technological advances than just the services of the computer itself, and thus may confuse the issue, if reactions to this device alone are desired, by distracting attention away from it. Also, there are so many radical departures from today's typical home depicted in a relatively short space of time, that the total impression received by the viewer is "It's too much". It is all shown and explained so quickly that the viewer finds it difficult to absorb and finds himself bewildered instead. It is undoubtedly this aspect of the film which gives women the idea that the advent of the new technology will make life more, rather than less, complex.

Furthermore, the scenes in the film are restricted to the interior of one house, showing no contact with the outside world, and this tends to raise fears about the antisocial effects of the new devices.

In view of women's fears about the negative effects of technological changes on interpersonal relationships, it seems essential to show the film in its entirety, despite the fact that a number of scenes and episodes have little to do with depicting this technology.

APPENDIX

Discussion Outline

1. Introduction: I think we would all agree that life in the modern world is pretty complex. Many things that happen are hard for us to understand. In some ways, we find it difficult to cope with the problems of managing our homes and even our lives. We've probably all had the experience of being thrown into situations we weren't prepared for, or having to make decisions without knowing all we felt we should. In other ways, we may feel that we are not in control of decisions which affect our lives...

Let's try to think ten years into the future - to 1980 - and imagine what life is going to be like then. Do you think life is going to be more or less complex? What sorts of problems do you imagine that you'll have to cope with? Do you think it will be easier or more difficult to cope with these problems?...Why?

2. Still thinking about what life will be like in 1980...let's suppose that you could have an instrument - a little machine - in your home that could help you by providing - almost instantaneously - the information and other services that you require to make life a little easier, more interesting, and more worthwhile. Just like most people today don't really know how a television or telephone really works, but they make good use of these instruments, we don't know exactly how this instrument-of-the-future would work, but let's just suppose that it does work, that it can do anything to help you that you would like it to.

- (a) --what do you suppose it would look like...what instruments that we have now would it be most like
--where in the house would it be found...why think that
--how would you like it to be able to help you...what kind of information or services would you want from it...why
--suppose it could provide information and services that you presently have to leave your home to get...what sort would you like to get in this way? (library, doctor, theatre tickets, school, bank)
--how could it improve the information and services you now do receive in your home? (mail, newspaper delivery)
--how could it improve on the instruments we now have at our disposal (telephone, television, telegraph, typewriter, tape recorder, cameras..) where they fall short of providing you the help you need

2. (b) --now, thinking about the other members of your family, in what ways could they use this amazing new instrument...
--who in the family would make the most use out of it...why?
--how do you think they would feel about an instrument like this...why?
 - (c) --what sort of people do you think would be most likely to have this instrument...why?
 - (d) --how do you suppose people would obtain the services of this instrument...who would provide it...(private co., government - which branch)...why?
--how would it be paid for (buy, rent, lease, taxes...)
--how much do you think people will be willing to pay for it?
 - (e) --what would you call this instrument...why...is there a better name.
3. Now I'd like to show you part of a film which might help to give you a better idea of what this instrument-of-the-future might be like.
(10-MINUTE SEGMENT OF FILM SHOWN. EXPLAIN IT'S TOO LONG TO SHOW THE WHOLE THING)

--spontaneous reactions to film: what did you think of that? why?
--what do you think it will be like to have an instrument like that... will you like it...in what ways...why/why not
--do you think the instrument would make you feel more or less in control of the things that affect your life than you do now... why
--what sort of people do you think will be dead set against having something like that in their homes...why...what would bother them about it.



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