



ADDITIONAL INSIGHT INTO
"THE FAMILY COMPUTER" CONCEPT



The Social
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1.
ADDITIONAL INSIGHT INTO
"THE FAMILY COMPUTER" CONCEPT [CONDUCTED IN]

Montreal and Toronto FOR

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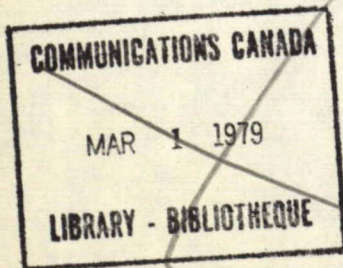
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FOREWORD

Background

In October 1970, on behalf of S.S.R.C., Dimensions Unlimited (a division of Canadian Facts), conducted a small-scale study in depth for the Department of Communications of the Federal Government. This research provided an interpretive assessment of initial reactions in Toronto both to the concept of an in-home computer and, more generally, to "life" in times of increasingly computer/communications systems usage.

Purpose

During November and December, 1970, a second phase of this research was carried out, partially in Toronto and also in the city of Montreal. The objectives at this time were:

- detecting the similarities and particularly the differences in perceptions among French Canadians to this concept
- to gain, in addition, meaningful information and insight especially from some young people (see Method) on a one-to-one basis
- to assess in particular, in view of previous findings, potential hostilities (especially in Montreal), and the extent of perceived fears about alienation

- to determine attitudes to "handling" an in-home computer, and to determine to what degree people may currently feel inadequate about this technique.

Method

Parallel to Phase One in Toronto, two focus groups, (one with women and one with men, all "heads of households", aged between 25-45), were held in Montreal.

Again the discussions were set in motion after the moderator had led off with an introductory statement about the complexities and frustrations of modern life (see Investigation Guide). At this point the focus group participants were asked to "project" themselves into an Orwellian aura of the 1980's and to "imagine" some technological device such an environment might conceivably produce to simplify life for the man-in-the-street.

In addition, ten individual depth interviews (five each in Montreal and Toronto) were conducted with boys and girls between the ages of 16 and 21. It was felt that young people of this age would respond more freely on an individual basis, rather than in a group situation, because of the prevailing degree of peer group pressure and peer group concern that exists among them.

Finally, in Toronto only, two boys (aged 13 and 8), were also interviewed individually on the assumption that these younger persons may relate more "naturally" to computerization, and indeed may even accept it as a matter of course, in contrast to the fears sometimes expressed by older people.

In conclusion, as pointed out in the initial phase of this research, the findings reflect much that is typically representative of middle-class urban attitudes. In addition of course, this phase adds similarities and differences of opinion about this concept from Montreal.

However, because of the sophistication and complexity of this subject, there remains a need to evaluate feelings and reactions among Canadians of other classes, centres and ethnic origins before a national picture on this topic can be effectively analyzed.

DIMENSIONS UNLIMITED

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A Division of Canadian Facts

GENERAL SUMMARY

- * In Montreal the concept of a home computer arouses various fears amongst people of all ages. These stem from the belief that such a service would have a dehumanizing effect on life. However, unlike Toronto, the concept is initially grasped in a broader sense as possessing the power profoundly to affect the management of life.

The basic problem is to persuade these people that, indeed, such a service is a tool of management in their hands and not, as they are prone to fear, the other way round.

- * On the other hand, younger people in Toronto, although less able to understand the broader philosophy of such a concept, are much better attuned psychologically to acceptance of it. This acceptance is in keeping with their age and the fact that their life span has been scientifically-oriented from their earliest years of environmental awareness.

* All women react more negatively than do men to such a service. They demonstrate insecurity in the face of what appears to them as a potential usurper of their usefulness (particularly as housewives). Their insecurity is aggravated by the impersonal "nature" of this "rival", which, in addition, they vaguely fear will be able to "communicate" with the men and children of their families. This threat of alienation in their very homes is particularly menacing for them.

* Not surprisingly, men are better able to imagine how this machine might be utilized. In this respect, the younger men in Toronto went furthest in this direction because they were emotionally able to consider these possibilities calmly, without feeling "threatened".

However, there are grounds for believing that in Montreal more imagination exists towards the concept if the psychological barriers could first be overcome. At present, their influence is inhibitive even in areas which are otherwise positive.

* Overall there is genuine desire for simplification in life. In Montreal especially there are indications that some young people feel that the only way to escape the complexities of life today is "a return to nature". Consequently, a computer does not readily suggest itself as appropriate for their desires.

However, it is equally true that many of these same people are not really anxious to take up the "pioneer" life, and that in reality they know that they are part of the technological scene.

What they need is the psychological impetus to enter this new era with confidence and belief that they can control the speed and direction of progress to suit their individual needs.

A. The 1984 Syndrome

(i) A girl student in Montreal "named" the computer "le grand Dieu des années 80" (the great god of the 80's). This description sums up the essential difference in attitudes between Montreal and Toronto, especially for younger Montrealers. Nevertheless, the resultant reactions are similar in both centres.

For instance, unlike Toronto, initially men and women in Montreal do not mentally confine the in-home computer conceptually to practicalities alone. Instead, they immediately try to extend it to a total philosophical potential. That is to say, the concept is believed to go beyond automation, and to be intended to become an integral part of their lives. Thus the concept assumes a somewhat god-like image. At this point in imagination, these beliefs result in feelings of fear and alienation, concerns that also emerged in Toronto.

The reason behind Montreal's broader philosophical interpretation may well stem from French-Canada's concern for "the art of living". Articulated perhaps more clearly than in Anglo-Saxon Toronto, this "art of living" - as opposed to the admen's "lifestyle" - is typified by such environmental factors as a French-Canadian's admiration for fine cooking, the closer-knit families of a largely "traditionalist" Roman

Catholic city and a generally more "laissez-faire" attitude to life. In fact, the total environment is more spiritually oriented.

Consequently, projecting themselves into life in the 1980's can pose a bigger threat to Montrealers than to Torontonians for whom the "culture" gap is not so big. Although Montrealers are equally aware of the inevitability and speed of technological progress, its imminence looms larger and seems more ominous.

As one woman remarked: "...les problèmes se règlent autour de la table..." (we sort things out around the table...). But in the 1980's ..."évolution vers une grande vitesse...le romantisme est fini..." (...evolution becoming faster..the end of romanticism...).

Thus, the computer service concept appears to Montrealers to be not so much an invasion of their privacy, but rather an unwanted and difficult-to-relate-to stranger who may insist on living among them. Furthermore, it is believed capable of presenting another "language" problem for them and not surprisingly many Montreal French react emotionally to such a prospect.

(ii) But the 1984 syndrome for the under-21's in Toronto produced a more pragmatic approach. This group appears to be slicker, more hedonistic and much better able to "position" the computer -

clearly as a "tool" to be manipulated at their will. Like Montrealers, they do not appear to be enchanted by thoughts of the future, but unconsciously they also seem to view the situation more calmly because it seems they already feel they have less of themselves to lose. Depersonalization has already started and one 19-year-old student already conceived of "seclusion" with his computer, perhaps physically alienated from those around him, but conceptually "in communication with whoever I choose, with my computer". This attitude can be interpreted as a symptom of "withdrawal" trends prevalent among some young people at present, some of whom are seeking new ways of communication that will not result in conflict. Possibly for this reason, among others, the computer is seen as a new method to try in order to achieve such communication.

It is significant to note that, in particular, the two young boys (aged 13 and 8) relate easily to computerization. They also display more spontaneous imagination in conceptualizing its usefulness to them.

In doing so, of course, these youngsters are ready to demonstrate their self-confidence about technological developments and their psychological acceptance of it....."...it would be fun to have it, where you could get everything you want from this little machine... telephones you could see through...television by the yard, taking up the whole wall...you could go through your homework easily - a computer really isn't cheating, it's like an encyclopaedia, it's a fast way, it would be right to use."

B. Conceptual Rapport with the Home Computer

Conceptual rapport among the under-21's in Toronto already exists.

The psychological and emotional factors which make this rapport possible provide the key which will ultimately unlock the door to the viability of this concept among those who currently are shut out by their inhibitions.

Primarily, this younger group are mentally stimulated by such a concept. They are able to view it unemotionally because they already see a computer as a natural part of their scene. They welcome its (perceived) efficiency and hope they will benefit from any innovations it may bring, although they are not much more imaginative as to how this will work out than the older people.

Accustomed to change since birth, change itself does not "threaten" them; and since reactions to the concept are intellectual, rather than emotional, changes are expected to continue at a manageable pace, and not at one to which it is psychologically impossible to adjust. This means this younger group can approach the subject without undue fear or hostility.

As a result, the computer is perceived as just another useful appliance like the kitchen stove or an automatic clothes drier. In this connection, it is interesting to note that this group envisage a computer right down to the size of a transistor and

talk about its 'marketing performance' along the lines of TV (and colour TV) - initially a luxury, and tricky to service - but gradually becoming 'ordinary' both in price and design.

Another particular attitude of these young people in Toronto concerns knowledge, and storing information. Whereas in Montreal, young people evidently regard knowledge as a desirable value, a by-product of learning, those in Toronto appear to prefer a data-bank of information, on the theory that knowledge so quickly becomes obsolete that only a machine should store it. One young man in Toronto went so far as to say that books in his lifetime would come to be regarded as "confining" as a form of expression, and overly time-consuming for their value, and that computers would provide a deeper literary experience.

As already mentioned, the more hedonistic approach to life in Toronto appears to cause this divergence of attitudes between the two cities. It is more evident among the young men than among the young women and the reasons for this will be gone into in the following section.

Finally, this conceptual rapport is apparently not possible at present for the Montreal French, because of various psychological and emotional reasons (See Section 'C').

C. Fears and Inhibitions

In Montreal it seems that home computer services raise many of the same fears that emerged in the Toronto phase of the research:

- fears that the mind may atrophy from lack of exercise
- fears about being able to stay "on top" of technological progress
- the problems about using increasing "leisure" effectively
- the dilemma of the evolving role of women
- the possibility of alienation and loneliness
- the overall fear of man being "taken over" by the "robots".

As already indicated, this whole section should be prefaced by the statement that (especially at the moment in time of this study) many people in Montreal, particularly the younger ones, experience extreme difficulty in relating this concept (or any that might be meaningful for them) to the Federal Government. Their way of life, if not specifically "Separatist", is sociologically and psychologically separated. In fact, it is relevant as background to this research to note that it was conducted in Montreal at the height of the recent FLQ kidnappings, and it is evident that when these people talk of "the government" it is their own provincial government, and not the Federal one to which they refer.

Life in the 1980's, then, is also perceived with unemployment still to be in the forefront of the Montreal scene. There are fears that automation will result in a hard core of educated, unemployed individuals, holding university degrees, whom, it is said, will form a group of determined revolutionaries. For such people, the computer needs to be "personal" - "Grosse bibite qui ne se mêle pas de ses affaires" (big bug who doesn't interfere - "helper").

This "cultural" orientation lends significance to various aspects of the computer service concept. It leads to an assumption that such a computer would have to act very much as a trusted family member and not just as some impersonal machine. Something that belongs to their environment.

Consequently it should fit into the furnishings. Women are very apt unconsciously to feel that their furnishings are an expression of their sexuality and if a computer could not be envisaged as complementing this objective, then at least it should not get in the way. It should discreetly blend into the background. The "threatening" element of a computer brings with it the jealousy engendered by an interloper.

Culturally, too, women in Montreal are worried about the future of the family. They fear that the family as a unit may be disintegrating and that there is increasing need for maintaining dialogue with the people close to them.

Consequently, they tend to feel threatened by a machine which they fear could replace the talking back and forth in their homes. Because of a computer's "scientific" associations, women instinctively believe that maybe their better-educated (than themselves) children, and their husbands, may have communication with this "thing", which is a doubly-threatening fear.

Moreover, it is a fear accompanied by feelings of inadequacy about their potential lack of aptitude in this area. It should be noted that this inadequacy is not particularly related to an inability to handle the machine, but to lack of comprehension of its "language". It represents a language of, say, another planet.

The computer concept also represents another modern technique which could take care of household chores to a point where it is feared the housewife could become redundant. Naturally, this is a frightening prospect. For many women, their chores are as much an expression of love for their families as their caresses. If the "joy of baking a cake" is to be taken away, how are these women to experience fulfillment? Again, the computer seems to them a particularly sexless "helper", and not at all a possible extension of their feminine roles.

Probably because many women sense that their children will not share their computer hang-ups, they regard this machine as a

potential threat to parental authority. Like young mothers whose firstborn are off to school, and who resent this intrusion upon the home influence, so many women imagine the computer poses another "authority" in the home.

In fact, in Montreal especially, the computer is perceived as some sort of "supreme" being ("la savante", "machine idéale") and the implications are formidable among a people, many of whom traditionally have responded to a supremacy such as is represented by the Pope.

Men, too, share this intimidation in face of the "superpower" of the computer and talk of their need to adjust to this superstructure. Before the concept can be viable in such an environment, it will be necessary to provide the computer with some grass roots appeal with which users can feel more at home, and more in command of the situation.

As already mentioned, the whole area of knowledge and information is a sensitive one in Montreal. Similarly to Toronto, the computer is at once recognized as a resource tool. Possibly because historically in the province of Quebec, higher education has often been financially unattainable for poor (and large) families, there are indications that although a computer is seen as capable of placing education in the home, it is believed that it will be "too expensive" to own, except (again) for the

rich. Unconsciously, of course, this gives rise to hostilities and frustrations of a sociological nature, but which manifest themselves as "blame" for the concept.

However, the desire for culture is paramount. Again, it is probably French-Canadians' intellectual pride (felt to be an area of superiority over their English counterparts), which may well be responsible for French Montrealers appreciating a home computer's cultural advantages, rather than just its practical ones (like polishing floors). It is perceived capable, in part, of replacing encyclopaedias, libraries and even conferences.

But for women, (of all ages, and even in Toronto, but to a smaller degree), this information AVAILABLE IN THE HOME, is yet another problem to be resolved in their current struggle for identity. In short, it is perceived to be part of this conflict.

For example, women recognize that their intellectual development is now not only desirable, but in some cases society currently deems it is essential. This is a frightening prospect for some women who only want to be themselves, and now feel intellectually pressured. The computer would, in effect, put them "on the spot".

Furthermore, this computer provides "instant" information. If a woman is not especially intellectually inclined, it makes more sense for "knowledge" to be difficult to acquire. This, in fact, gives her "permission" to opt out - it is beyond her capabilities.

There is also a feeling that, in any case, knowledge that is hard to come by in some way is more valuable. It is akin to a second language which is "picked up" on the spot. This mastery may actually be superior, but some people feel that because the "rules" have not been painfully learned in a classroom situation, somehow their knowledge is downgraded in quality and value.

Furthermore, a computer is perceived to provide "unbiased" information. This feeling, of course, arises from the impersonal image of the machine and makes it possible mentally to exclude the bias of the (unseen) programmer. Consequently, many women are left with the feeling that this "unbiased" information is somehow more dangerous for instance, than the "biased" kind to which they are accustomed to receive via other media such as radio, TV and newspapers.

Moreover, this "unbiased" information places them in the unwanted position of decision-making. It means the onus is on them to form opinions and to select what may be the truth.

Finally, the onus is also on them to "tune in" to this information. It leaves them with the possibility of being labelled "lazy", especially by their families. It leaves them with fears about alienation even in their homes and provides another unwelcome factor which could aggravate that currently hot potato, the generation gap.

In any case, the computer is seen as a potential threat to individuality, especially with children. It is hard at this time to assess whether some Montreal French might hold the Federal Government responsible for affecting the individual development of young French-Canadians through this concept; but it is believed that the development of TV has been instrumental in undermining some children and their individuality. It is believed that as a result, many children today are less imaginative, less inventive and less enterprising than their parents. Implicitly then, a computer is capable of robbing a person of spiritual independence, the very essence of what is sacred to a committed Quebecois.

As in Toronto, the whole problem of using leisure effectively is a touchy one. Furthermore, in Montreal it is compounded by emotionalism in face of unemployment and the negatives of enforced idleness.

Because of Quebec's history of big families, Montreal French may be more sensitive to "people deprivation" than in other parts of the country. Certainly dialogue is a spontaneous part of Montreal life. The presence of a silent, untactile thing (which nevertheless is meant to communicate) may well cause consternation. It lacks humanity and sensuality. As one man remarked, it's a "circuit electronique" to which a whole family would incessantly be tuned in.

This need for dialogue is an integral part of Montrealers' concept of leisure at any point in time. Furthermore, the dialogue is perceived often as group participation. Therefore, even if a computer actually talks, it is presumed only to do so on a one-to-one basis which is not believed to be sufficient. Consequently, the concept for some Montrealers goes beyond atrophy of the mind, to atrophy of speech and fears of "isolation".

Overall there is a feeling of helplessness in face of this new "power". Younger women in Toronto hinted that it represents a final blow for male dominance in the home. The computer represents a "silent master". Presumably because computers themselves are perceived as sexless, women are reluctant to identify with their own (already considerable) participation as workers in this field.

To sum up, it appears that the greatest inhibiting factor to this concept is a "closed mind" attitude. Unlike the young people in Toronto, people in Montreal feel overwhelmed by this omnipotent machine on their horizon. Instead of viewing it as a new piece of the scenery of the future, to be enjoyed and, more important, to be developed by them, these men and women react with fear and its attendant negatives.

Thus, the positives, particularly the "cultural" ones previously mentioned, tend to be swamped by the negatives which are more psychological than real, and consequently will require understanding if they are to be overcome.

D. Aids To Viability

The marketing implications outlined in the report for phase one of this study are also generally applicable to Montreal and for the younger people in the sample. However, this second phase produced evidence that handling such a machine is not believed to be a problem. Previous experience with items, such as colour TV and tape recorders, leads to the conclusion that "technology" can design something "simple enough for any fool to operate".

There seems a real need for this machine to be visually attractive, particularly for women. It must be acceptable as part of the furniture that to her is home. Colour will be essential and the effect must provide warmth and, if possible, tactile enjoyment. This machine has to bridge a "friendship" gap, and needs to appeal to all family members. This may mean a separate set of controls for the children, with picture instructions on the "keys" rather than words.

Freeing the "resource" function of this computer from the conflicts it presently suggests may mean introducing it as a whole, new media adventure and one in which it is fun to participate, rather than a mandatory exercise. As old-fashioned geography has been presented as travel involvement in current TV and movie films, thereby revitalizing

viewers' interest, it is also possible to "win friends" by presenting the computer's information bank in a personalized way.

In this way, people can feel creatively involved in their home computer, and the information they obtain will be seen as voluntary enrichment to their lives, and not as repairing an "ignorance gap" in order to "buy" the love and respect of those around them.

It is essential to reassure women that they are indeed "people", in their own right. This is to say, they do not need to feel that their computers are making demands on them but rather that as intelligent people, obviously they are going to be making demands of their computers in order that they will have more time in which to be themselves, if this is what they want. In any event, they must know that the choice is theirs.

It may well prove advantageous to examine the connotations surrounding the word "leisure". There are already indications that people feel that "work" should be a pleasure as much as it is a job. In fact, life is beginning to be perceived as total involvement. In this way a computer could help people program a whole package - their commitments to family, professional, educational, cultural and "outside" interests.

Perhaps a computer should be seen not so much as a family member, but as a family's link with their community. There is a trend which is a counter-movement in face of urban crowding towards close-knit inner core communities, dovetailed into the big, impersonal city. Therefore, regarding a computer as a link out to the community, could help overcome fears about isolation, and the belief that use of this computer leads to atrophy of muscles and of mind. It would be an invitation to become involved in the area of any individual's choice. In short, it would be something like being on the old "party" telephone lines in the country, but without the drawback of everyone listening in.

Such a computer should be available to everyone, which may mean on a rental basis. This latter course in any case is envisaged because of models becoming quickly obsolete. Interestingly enough, although many people fear it will be prohibitive in price, it is not perceived as a status symbol and in the long run this fact speaks well for the concept.

Ultimately a computer may have its part to play in freeing people from the bondage of time. If it can help people "program" themselves effectively, perhaps it can eventually tune them into "timelessness" - still enjoyed by Navajo Indians.

This concept of timelessness, or in fact having time to do as one feels inclined, is an answer to the pressure often experienced now of being expected to do everything for which there is never enough time. In other words, there is vague evidence that a computer is recognized as a selective force, and this attribute is one that holds excellent potential.

In any event, to make this concept universally viable, it is necessary to present it as a positive, and as something which need only develop at the pace desired by its users.

A P P E N D I X

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)

- 2(a) -- 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
- (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.
- (f) -- how about handling such a machine...would it need to be taught...degree of confidence/not about this?
3. ...would there be any disadvantages...why...what nature ...for whom specifically (watch for hostility/alienation pertinent to the Montreal scene).
4. One last thing. As the years go by, all of us are working for a shorter number of hours at our regular jobs. How do you feel about this? How will you go about adjusting to more "leisure" time? Is "leisure" an appropriate description? How does this sort of computer fit it, this trend in society? What are its advantages/disadvantages. Who might especially benefit?

