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E U R I M 4

A EUROPEAN CONFERENCE ON INNOVATION IN
PRIMARY PUBLICATION: IMPACT ON PRODUCERS
AND USERS

Tomas Ohlin: "Electronic progress in publishing?"

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ELECTRONIC PROGRESS IN PUBLISHING?

by Tomas Ohlin

Comments to the EURIM 4 paper: "Electronic mail and teleconferencing: information or communication?" by Charlton R Price, Murray Turoff and Starr Roxane Hiltz

Introduction

As is usual in documents by the distinguished authors, a number of extremely interesting development lines are stressed also this time, in their contribution to the EURIM 4. (Let me, for short, refer to their paper as Emtic, from the initials of the title).

My comments to Emtic concerns mainly the plausibility, or the possible realism, in what is presented. Reading Emtic a few times gave me the impression that the authors are undertaking a linear extrapolation from the rational into the irrational..

Is, for instance, electronic messaging going to become a "Ford Edsel" experience of the 1980's? There does exist some support for such a development.

Or is, de facto, publishing capable of adapting to new technology faster than other fields?

The media continuum

One of the main points in Emtic concerns the connection between different forms of electronic communication. No medium is any longer its own, all touch each other. We are faced with an electronic continuum. Even airborne one-way communication is, for instance, to-day in certain contact with full interactivity in computer conferencing. Such things happens when microprocessing enters the field. Local intelligence can amplify any part of a communication system to-day.

This means that what yesterday was a perhaps lonely communications line, to-day is a part of an intelligent system.

This is all well noted in Emtic. My comment here is a question about when these technological possibilities will actually leave the laboratory, and get acquainted with reality. One must ask if there is a demand for the new possibilities. Who wants them?

Does Emtic try to be its own sales manager, in creating such a demand? Does it try to fulfil its own wishes?

Innovation by invasion?

Emtic stresses the importance of the so called 'technological push'. When technology is here and ready, it should be used. This may be reasonable in onedimensional environments. But the electronic media affect so much of our future society, the laser beam cuts too deep.

We can hardly expect social and perhaps political understanding quite as fast as technology is developing. And since such broad understanding is going to be needed, because of the infrastructural importance of the new communication forms, "market" acceptance is probably going to be much slower than Emtic seems to think.

As an example note the slow expansion speed of the English Prestel when counting usage of the system. And compare this with the predictions three years ago. To-day there is less than 2 000 Prestel terminals in UK, very much less than expected.

Note, the media effects on national and international data acts, on vulnerability, on balanced employment, and on network responsibilities.

In certain countries in Europe, one sees electronic communication as a new subject for widespread public debate of the nuclear type. Germany, for instance, expects this very soon. Such debates usually don't speed up acceptance and consensus around what is discussed. On the contrary.

Personally I wouldn't like a completely emotional debate around the new media. But we do need time to think and reflect. And to select the promising parts of new communication possibilities. Therefore I find Emtic jumping to conclusion when it predicts "a losing struggle" for all parties outside its own family.

Local systems

But there are exceptions to what has just been predicted. In surroundings with strong local borders, acceptance may be fast for new communication forms. But decentralization must be natural there, for this to happen.

Unfortunately there is a lack for empirical data to support statements like this. We are all guessing.

But soon, when for instance the complete 100 terminal videotex systems that are sold to-day, have been installed in quantities and put in practise, we shall know more. It will take a few years to collect usage data, though.

User influence

Emtic needs all support for stressing that "the new technology offers every opportunity to minimize the functions of "middlemen" or broker institutions between originators and users"

Information that can be handled directly, gets a value by itself. When the user is no longer dependent on systems engineers, her influence expands. This is a healthy development, and perhaps more dramatic than is usually noted. The end user handles her own values, and rates them accordingly. This new influence is a democratic asset that follows communications technology.

Integration problems

As has been hinted above, we will probably have to prepare for problems concerning when local, off-line, systems need contact between each other. A number of spots may be noted:

- Who shall define the compatibility between the local systems?

Technically, we have reason to be optimistic, terminal and systems interfaces can be standardized enough. But what about data base compatibility? This is very close to the user, and her integrity probably does not invite strangers. Still, outdoor systems spontaneously will want to reach contact. Who will control this? The telephone is always open, that is one of its main advantages. Will this have to be the case also for local computerized publishing systems? What kind of secrecy will then be needed and be possible?

- What happens to copyright in computerized publishing systems? Emtic seems optimistic here, even a bit shortsighted, saying briefly that "the orginator of an item can retain ownership rights in the item, and realize earnings based on readership and feedback". True, this would be ideal. But as access to information items is made more and more widespread even in geographically limited systems, ownership gets more and more blurred.

Copying paperbound documents in local copying machines is to-day a big copyright problem. When copying and updating is expanded to electronic publishing systems, these problems are bound to increase in complexity.

- Which is the role for the network organizer? In Europe, PTTs are fast in expanding their responsibility to-day. Certain countries are aware of this monopoly-integrity problem, but many unfortunately seem unaware of it.

Network organizers are opening value added services - like for instance semi-public videotex systems - with some speed to-day. Reasons for carefulness here are sometimes difficult to formulate, as always with investments in the future. But they are needed. Somehow too much organized concentration in publishing ought to be thrown light upon. And in time.

Libraries in the paperless society

The role and form of the information centres in future publishing seems to me to be a fundamental point. Emtic is somewhat short here, noting more or less merely that "the function of the "librarian" will change, but human helpers will be more necessary than ever"

It is perhaps too optimistic to fully and passively rely on the decentralization that new technology in itself promotes. Perhaps to-day's strong pyramids will be quick to incorporate most of what is promising.

But if not, local information spots or centres may become very important communication nodes. And if so, building these around to-day's libraries seem quite possible (now that the automobile gas stations seem to fight a losing battle with the sheiks in becoming local activity centres).

If libraries are natural future communication nodes, this will perhaps influence much of the information content in the systems, semantically as well as syntactically. If you give a message to the electronic journal, write your poem, compose your music, formalize your graphic dreams etc while you physically are with friends, like in an English pub, this influences your thoughts and achievements. Group art and group text composing may then become a reality.

But for this to happen many social barriers would have to be overcome. And such a development takes time. If it will happen at all.

Home activity?

Perhaps true creativeness touching future publishing instead will occur from the home terminal. Will this then promote isolationism, with blurred wishes in an increasingly egoistic society?

A fragmented hard core world of robotized publishing, concentrating on truncated forms of already existing material?

Or is it only at home that one feels free and easy enough to really communicate?

Whichever of these alternatives that may become realities we must be aware of the increasingly important role for the system interfaces, whether these be human or (partly) computerized. Here is the real need for innovation. To-day's communications systems much to often demand of the user to be somewhat of a wizard in formulation syntactically distinct questions, and in manipulating data.

Natural language input, direct use of the spoken word, heardata as a complement to viewdata/videotex (where can feeldata be realistic?), etc. These and other interface forms seem more and more interesting..

If any part of what Emtic suggests will occur, much more concentration and resources is needed on intelligent interface problems.

The key to successful and expansive future publishing lies probably not so much in adaption to data base methods and use of efficient data links. The emphasis will have to be put on new and much more kind, human forms for input and output of material. Selective information must be attractive, otherwise it will not be used at all.

Summing up, personally I would like to note that:

- Emtic seems to some extent to market computerized conferencing more than analyzing evolution barriers in publishing.
- Social organization and responsibility may well become central for the communications awareness very soon.
- In the 1980's, the human interface will probably be much more central than publishing efficiency.