

Video Review

THE WORLD AUTHORITY ON HOME VIDEO

GREAT VIDEO GIFTS!

Capturing the Election Highlights

Decorating with Video: Award-Winning Ideas



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TEX'S ROUND-UP: PLANS AND PROBLEMS

WASHINGTON—The day when videotex and teletext are available to most American homes seems a while off yet. But major companies continue to announce plans to start their own videotex systems and companies who'd previously announced plans continue to refine them. Several teletext schemes are also moving forward, though problems abound. What follows is a summary of recent developments in both fields:

- RCA is the latest media conglomerate to plunge into plans for home videotex. Its newly created Home Information Systems division has begun devising ad-supported videotex which can be used on home computers. It's likely that the next generation of digital TV sets—themselves a form of computer—figure heavily into the plan. RCA's TV set manufacturing division will begin selling such digital receivers in the next couple of years—about the same time that RCA's Home Information System should be getting underway.

RCA will call upon other parts of the corporate family—including NBC—for news and entertainment components of the videotex system. Michael Eskridge, who had been president of NBC Radio, heads the project. According to the tentative plans for the venture, RCA will set up a network of local videotex services rather than create a nationwide system.

- Commodore, a leading maker of low-priced home computers, is staking a bigger claim on the videotex. Among Commodore's efforts is a plan to buy Amiga, a small Silicon Valley computer manufacturer which has been working on high-quality graphics devices, essential in a videotex terminal. Although Commodore encountered a legal hurdle (namely a \$100 million lawsuit by Atari, which also wanted to acquire Amiga), the venture underscores Commodore's intent to accelerate its videotex activities with better graphics and communications.

Commodore won't release details, but its objectives include development of a full-function communicating computer priced under \$1,000 with videotex-

quality graphics. That's the same range as the current "dumb" videotex terminals made by AT&T. Moreover, graphics and communications enhancements will give Commodore an edge for its next generation of home computers, which are likely to appear in a year or so just as a new wave of videotex services begins.

- "TranstexT," a videotex system which can do everything from offering pay-TV service to reading an electric meter, moves into the second phase of its testing in suburban Atlanta this fall. If all goes well, similar TranstexT systems could pop up around the US during the next few years.

The system is being offered by a consortium of companies ranging from cable-TV and telephone companies to computer firms and banks. Using a complicated data delivery system, signals are sent on cable-TV lines and in-house electric power wiring. In addition to business services, TranstexT is developing videotex information and advertising. The system also includes fire and burglar alarms and energy management systems. Standard cable-TV lines deliver images and programming in full-action video, and the system includes provisions for a variety of computer graphic and data services.

- Viewtron in Miami revised its sales campaign, offering a \$39.95 per month deal which gives customers use of the sophisticated Sceptre videotex terminal plus 10 hours per month access to the information, entertainment education and business services. The new arrangement means customers no longer have to shell out \$600 initially for the terminal. Although Viewtron has grown more slowly than expected since its introduction last fall, the new marketing approach attracted more than 400 new customers during the first few weeks—bringing the Viewtron total to 1,500 Miami-area users by early summer.

- In the Los Angeles and Chicago areas, videotex services were pushed back to late summer debuts. "Gateway," run by Times Mirror in southern California, now offers a special package for \$29.95 per month to its

first 2,000 customers. In Chicago, Keyfax Interactive Information Service is available through a \$59.95 program which can be used with many models of home personal computers and also through a special videotex terminal.

- CBS, IBM and Sears have come up with a name for their videotex joint venture: Trintex. Start-up is still targeted for 1986.

As for teletext, it may still be two, three or more years away from broad availability in the US. CBS and NBC have apparently failed in their effort to surmount the chicken-and-egg dilemma which has stymied teletext growth: Although the networks have been transmitting teletext nationwide since April '83, they haven't successfully convinced TV set makers to build receivers able to pick up teletext.

Meanwhile, Metromedia, the nation's largest broadcast group, with stations in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington and other large cities, is leaning toward a teletext service using a rival technology which is incompatible with the format CBS and NBC are transmitting. Metromedia's successful teletext ser-

vice during the recent Los Angeles Olympics encouraged it to continue teletext operations on a limited basis during the coming year.

At the same time, some TV stations are defecting from the residential teletext game. Stations in Pittsburgh, Boston, Orlando, Baltimore and a dozen other cities have agreed to transmit business data rather than consumer teletext on their teletext bandwidth. Most of these stations are public TV or independent channels, but their moves may encourage network affiliates to shy away from teletext.

Set makers such as Zenith and Sanyo will offer teletext decoders in a few of their '85 models. But those sets will only pick up one format of teletext signal, not the version being transmitted by CBS and NBC. Sony, which had promised to develop teletext receivers, has cut back its efforts. And Panasonic has been slow in bringing the price down, although it still targets a \$400 teletext decoder by late this year. Hitachi, RCA and others, which have endorsed teletext plans, are slow in delivering the sets they've promised.

So, the wait continues—amid speculation that teletext dreams may disappear entirely unless there is a quick breakthrough in equipment and service. (G.A.)

CED SLOWLY SINKS

The days of the CED disc dwindle down to a precious few. Ever since RCA announced it was suspending CED player manufacturing, interest in the discs has

dissipated steadily. Sure, there are—or soon will be—about 700,000 disc-player owners who want new releases. But that's not enough to stoke the competitive fires, and store owners are far more anxious to unload discs at distress prices than they are to acquire new inventory. As a result, the rule now governing the behavior of the major video programmers is that if a title can't be presold to store owners in sufficient quantities, the title simply won't appear on CED disc.

RCA carries the full burden of manufacturing CED discs, following the departure of CBS. As a way to revive flagging interest in the format, RCA is also willing to distribute the discs to the stores. The company said it will do the job for three years, but would stop a lot sooner "if we didn't have a commitment to people who bought players," says one executive. (S.G.)

Couchpots Luv Cable?

Its ratings have sagged, many of its program services have gone under, and customers complain about bad service—but America still loves cable TV. Five out of six subscribers found cable TV a "markedly gratifying addition" to their lives. About 80% of current customers said they were satisfied with cable programming.

Those were among the results of a study conducted by International Communications Research, a division of a publishing company that also puts out a weekly cable magazine. (L.H.)