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Long live Videotex

Internet becomes the dominant news and information portal

by A. Michael Noll (special to Telecommunications)

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Finally, after decades of promise, the electronic newspaper has arrived and its paper-based version is slowly dying.

The basic concept of an electronic newspaper goes back to the 1970s when Videotex was first introduced. The basic idea of Videotex was to use an electronic terminal to access information stored remotely in a central computer. The home TV receiver was used for the display of text and graphic information, thereby reducing the cost of the terminal. There

were predictions that Videotex would soon lead to the demise of the paper-based newspaper.

Videotex was introduced during the late 1970s, initially in Great Britain in 1979 and then with trials in the United States in the early 1980s. The British service was called Prestel; a U.S. service developed jointly by AT&T and Knight-Ridder Newspapers was called Viewtron. In the end, both offerings failed in the marketplace. The technology was not yet ready, the home TV set was not really appropriate for the display of text, and the idea of a single large centralized database of information was flawed.



Videotex was expanded to include electronic yellow pages. Some people believed that AT&T would monopolize both news and advertising in this new electronic era. All were wrong — Videotex and electronic yellow pages were premature and would have to await cheap personal computers, the Internet, and search engines. In the ensuing decades, the old AT&T was broken apart and then reformed from SBC — but no longer with any interest in terminals or the provision of news.

So now finally after decades have passed, the Internet offers timely news that you want and when you want it. Also, the Internet makes it far easier to find telephone numbers, stores, and goods than any paper-based yellow pages could ever provide.

The lesson to be learned from all this is to be patient — it sometimes can take decades for novel services to succeed. And when they do, it might be in a modified form from the original.

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