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ABSTRACT

Prestel, Oracle, and Ceefax are telephone based video text systems currently in use in Great Britain. Rather than being considered as competitors, they should be viewed as complementary media with separate functions based on their differences. All use home television sets to receive information in print, and all broadcast on spare TV lines in the vertical interval, or space between the pictures. Prestel is an interactive system in which viewers can send messages to a computer and interact with the system. After viewing a table of contents, viewers can request specific pages from the computer. Prestel has the capacity to carry hundreds of pages dedicated to special information needs of consumers, such as a specific sector of industry. Oracle and Ceefax are teletext systems sponsored by ITV and BBC, respectively, in which the viewer can only interact with the receiver and must wait for the page wanted to come around on the cycle. A hundred page cycle now takes about 22 seconds: improvement of access time is planned. Teletext is now a broadcast service with no charge that provides entertainment pages and television related information such as serial updates, film reviews, and program listings. Future possibilities for the teletext systems include supporting television with advertising, subtitling, regionalization of services, and increased telesoftware programs.

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Teletext - Prestel's Big Brother

A Background Paper

prepared by

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Contribution to Plenary Session

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Members of IIC who receive their journal Intermedia will no doubt have read the excellent issue of last May which deals in some depth with viewdata, or 'interactive videotex' systems, but with only glancing references to teletext.

In his editorial the editor justifies this unilateral approach on the grounds that the interactive system is 'more substantial' and so I have called this short paper 'Prestel's Big Brother' in order to redress the balance a bit. Teletext has been providing a public service for very nearly five years now and I don't think its unfair to say that Prestel has yet to prove its substance in the marketplace.

But first, a bit of history. At functions like this where we both appear, BBC and ITV are inclined to argue about who got there first. I shall content myself with stating chauvinistically that, while the BBC were the first to announce the development of Ceefax, IBA were the first to demonstrate their ORACLE system, in the early spring of 1973. By May of 1974 the two broadcasters and the TV set manufacturers had got together to publish a unified specification for teletext and in September of that year the Home Office granted a two year licence for an experimental public service.

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The specification was revised in September 1976 to take account of some further developments in the editorial capability of the system and that is the specification to which the broadcasters and manufacturers are now working.

The BBC started public transmission of Ceefax within days of the licence being granted in 1974 and ORACLE, which had been developed by engineers of the IBA, was then handed over to the ITV companies, under their joint association, the ITCA. The federal nature of ITV demanded a somewhat different configuration for ORACLE from that installed at the more monolithic BBC and so by July of 1975 ORACLE was on the air with its own service. And there, despite the odd industrial hiccups, the two services have remained. Both broadcasters have now upgraded their equipment and software to make their systems more reliable and more flexible and ORACLE at least has taken the decision that, since for a public service reliability is a prime consideration, we must install backup computers and insertion hardware. This process should be completed by the new year and we expect then that technical breakdowns will at worst last no longer than it takes to throw a switch and bring the backup computer into operation.

I shall not take up time describing the services that ORACLE and Ceefax are currently providing. Those of you who weren't familiar with them before this conference will have ample

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opportunity to question the receivers outside this room over the next day or two. But since this session is described as 'The Experience of Prestel', it would be worth looking at some of the ways in which teletext relates to its brother service.

The first and most obvious difference is that a viewer questioning a teletext receiver can only interact with that receiver. When you press the buttons on your teletext keypad, you are talking to the set. When you press the buttons on your Prestel set, you are interacting directly with the computer. The broadcaster has therefore to transmit a number of pages in a continuous cycle and the viewer simply instructs his decoder to wait until the page he wants comes round, to decode and display it and to store it for as long as he needs to read it. In fact each page takes a bit less than a quarter of a second to transmit and a hundred page cycle gives you a worst-case waiting time of about 22 seconds. We can increase the amount of information available to the viewer, either by making him wait longer for each page, or by using sub-pages which are changed by the broadcaster's computer after a predetermined reading time. Currently both broadcasters have around three or four hundred pages in their systems. You get there a bit faster on Ceefax, but you may have to change channel to get the information you want.

So in terms of speed and number of pages available, Prestel obviously has the edge on teletext. But the fact that teletext

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