A look ahead from 1989: Preview of communications in the 1990s

The beginning of a new year brings a host of predictions and reviews. While most analysts are solely concerned with the decade ahead, author Gordon Thompson leaps to 1989 to provide an outlook for the 1990s

Gordon B. Thompson, who is Manager of Communications Studies at Bell Northern Research, Ltd., Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, has had both the opportunity and the responsibility to thoroughly investigate telecommunications and the society it is reshaping. (See TELEPHONY, *June 26, 1978, p. 42.)*

This somewhat whimsical article reflects the range and depth of Thompson's investigations which have been published by the Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2149 MacKay Street, Montreal, Canada, H3G 2J2. The title of the report is Memo from Mercury: Information Technology Is Different. *It may be obtained by sending $1.50 (Canadian) to the above address.—Ed.*

Gordon B. Thompson

I HAVE just been asked, in this closing year of the 1980s, to forecast the telecommunication wonders that the '90s will bring. But before I can really do that I must look back through the last 20 years to get a basis for what one can realistically expect in the next decade.

The '70s and the '80s were surely the age of micro-electronics, however, although the individual circuits might have been micro, their effects certainly were not. Twenty years ago the "silicon revolution" really took hold, giving us unbelievably powerful electronic performance at almost negligible prices.

During the 1980s people began carrying their own computers around with them. Before that, computers were dumb, big, bulky and lived somewhere. They had to be "plugged in." They were dependent upon their umbilical cords. It's hard to remember how constraining that was. Imagine having to go to an old-fashioned computer or terminal to tend to your electronic mail, rather than just slipping your personalized telemail unit out of your pocket wherever you are, and getting your important messages on their way moments after you thought of them. The momentary connection to the world's networks that our telemail units require for updating is not really that limiting.

Remember when the office phone was fastened down by its tether? If you wanted it with you, you had to be where it was. Strange how long it took to share off the "wired city" idea. It was almost as if those wires had virtue in themselves. Large office buildings had installers who spent their whole working time dragging telephones behind people who had moved their offices. I suppose the idea of "communications conditioning" a building, like one air conditions it, was bound to come sooner or later. Perhaps the '90s will see an increase in the physical distance over which the cordless phones will operate, moving out beyond the serving range of one's own PBX.

The 1980s were half over before people began to realize how voice and electronic mail could be combined in very useful ways. Now that we have telephones with screens on them, it's hard to imagine why it took so long. And, remember when we had real telephone books? What an energy waste! The electronic yellow pages/want ads that grew out of the early videotext efforts are a big improvement.

It was during the 1980s that the split between the telephone and the data terminal disappeared. What we used to do with our data terminals we now do with our telemail units or with the viewscreens of our telephones.

Shopping from the home hasn't turned out quite the way the planners in the early 1980s thought it would. The big advantage was the increase in choices that became available as we started using our viewscreen telephones for shopping. The tremendous increase in access that could be gained at various additional choices was really useful. Why, before this change, it almost seemed that all stores had the same purchasing agent because they all carried the same line of goods. Real choice was very limited. Shopping was an unrewarding chore for the most part. That has all changed now.

Television during the 1970s and 1980s went through little real change, if you discount the video cassette and the video disc, although the 1970s saw the widespread introduction of subscription cable television which allowed us to see first quality entertainment free from commercial interruption.

It's funny how the furor over international satellite broadcasting of TV died down when it was realized that the only thing everybody wanted to watch was the global quality material that was already available over cable or by video disc. The lack of response to poor

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