BOOK REVIEWS

David H. Weaver

Videotex Journalism: 
Teletext, Viewdata and the News 
Hillsdale, New Jersey: 

Reviewed by 
Henry Overduin 
School of Journalism 
University of Western Ontario

Videotex Journalism will be of interest to all students of mass communication, but especially journalists and journalism students. It is a courageous book of solid empirical value and sound insights.

It is a courageous book because Weaver dares to dig where a McLuhan would fear to tread, assessing the impact of a anew technology before that technology is anywhere near being the mass medium it promises to become. It is of solid empirical value because it offers new research findings, not paradox-laden "probes" of dubious relevance. Its insights are sound, inspired by a concern for "quality journalism" evident throughout the book. As such, this work deserves a place next to Anthony Smith's Goodbye Gutenberg and Peter Desbarat's An Industry In Transition (Volume 8 of the Royal Commission on Newspapers) on "required reading" lists for courses in videotex journalism or in media and technology studies.
Following two introductory chapters describing videotex and teletext in general, and some particular systems -- Ceefax, Oracle, Prestel, and Viewdata -- in more detail, Weaver details his research methods in chapter three. His findings are reported in the next three chapters and the final chapter offers recommendations and a conclusion emphasizing "...the importance of substance over style, and of content over form."

Weaver's three-pronged research is designed to assess the impact of videotex on journalistic skills and work habits, its effects on the flow of news and information, and its influence on other mass media. Weaver's methods consist of interviews with key executives in teletext/videotext systems, working journalists, a comparative content analysis of British teletext systems and traditional media, a detailed questionnaire for journalists, observation and review of audience studies.

By being first in this field, Weaver has probably set the paradigm for future research, although it is doubtful that future researchers will be able to take a similar comprehensive approach. The bulk of Weaver's research was done during 1981. Since then, videotext and teletext systems have expanded enormously, especially in the United States. (Weaver had to go to Britain and the continent for most of his work.) Be that as it may, the Weaver study will serve as a useful guide for some time to come.

The research findings are fascinating. They are fully consistent with this reviewer's own experience in the videotex field. While it is beyond the scope of this review to detail or even summarize those findings, three of them deserve singling out here.
First, Weaver notes that videotex reporters are primarily editors, processing copy generated by other media or wire services. He recommends that videotex journalists do more original reporting. This original reporting, Weaver admits, will cost money but will be essential if there is to be "quality" in videotex journalism. (This same recognition, incidentally, led to the formation of Newsdat, a videotex news gathering operation, during the summer of 1982. Newsdat is conducted jointly with Westex News at the University of Western Ontario, and is supported by a Canada Manpower Grant.)

Second, the "nature of news" on most videotex/teletext systems tends to be "spot news," events that can be described by a simple statement of the facts of what happened. Videotex journalism offers little scope for background or analytical reporting. This one-sided emphasis on spot news seems, according to Weaver, to be endemic to teletext, though it could be corrected on full-channel teletext systems or in videotex. Contrary to what would appear to be the majority view in the business, Weaver recommends that videotex journalists be allowed to write their stories as long as they wish.

To this reviewer, the important point here is that the "nature of news" is once again a legitimate object of reflection, not just metaphysics. The new technology has made it so, particularly when it is seen in the context of another one of Weaver's main findings: The necessity to distinguish between news and other information. Says Weaver:

...getting more into the 'information business' with videotex systems and less into the 'news business' may mean that fewer critical controversial news
stories and editorials will be available through these systems than through the more traditional printed and broadcast media. Journalistic values may take even more of a back seat to commercial interests in videotex systems than they do in many present-day media. (p. 104)

To preserve journalistic values will require resisting this blurring of information and news, something that demands the articulation of a critical perspective on the "nature of news." Books such as Weaver's, Videotex Journalism indirectly point up the urgency of this general journalistic problem of professional autonomy. And so, in addition to providing a first-rate overview of the new technology and its meaning for journalists, Weaver's book opens the door to a consideration of these deeper, but now more immediate, problems of journalism and mass communication in the 1980's.