

Book Review : Videotex: Key to the Wired City by Michael Aldrich

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Videotex: KEY TO THE WIRED CITY by Michael Aldrich, Quiller Press, London, 1982, 115 PP. (with glossary and bibliography), £4.95 U.K.

This slim, handsome volume is a most interesting work of non-fiction. It's a combination of insights and analysis, ranging from sociology to business, built on a style that ranges from dissertation to interior monologue. The book is, in many ways, Aldrich's personal record of the viewdata industry, making it all the more poignant. Aldrich clearly and succinctly tracks videotex from its introduction, defines its potential without the usual blue-sky hype, cites problems as well as potential, and defines his own company's role in a schemata that ranges from the home and office to local, national, and international levels.

By education and vocation, Aldrich is an engineer, but his style is simple and clear enough for any average person to understand the concepts explained, defined, and analyzed. And perhaps that's what makes this book so important. It should be required reading for any university course in mass communications, indoctrination program for new employees in a viewdata business, and for anyone you've tried to explain viewdata to in plain English but couldn't.

Accolades aside, 21 short chapters make up this text, each offering a concept of new twist thereof as the narration proceeds. Basically, Aldrich sees information technology as the most significant development since the invention of the telephone a century ago, and the most significant force in reshaping Western economies from industrial, workplace-based societies to electronic, cottage-based societies. This transition is made possible by what Aldrich calls the "human interface" technology of videotex linking highly sophisticated computers with easily-accessible and familiar TVs and telephones.

But these "four technologies" aren't the sum total of the new media explosion. On the contrary, it was Aldrich's personal vision here that led to the development of Rediffusion's Teleputer, a kind of super plinth that combines six technologies including a personal computer and color TV with capabilities for multi-mode telecommunications (phone, cable), videotex interface, videocassette recording and videodisk storage.

While critics may argue the book is merely justification for product promotion, the Teleputer is, as Aldrich puts it, "a new interactive communications medium." Yet, even critics must agree the teleputer is unique -- perhaps the only machine to truly recognize and take advantage of the information technology-based society we're becoming, and to help pave its

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way toward becoming reality. (Notwithstanding its price of £4,000 to 5,000, this writer could find a multitude of uses for such a device that would not only make life easier, but drastically modify lifestyle as well).

The book is also a plea to the British Government for further deregulation of the mass communications industries, particularly for cable. For in Aldrich's schemata, interactive cable plays a key and vital role in development of the wired city -- to some extent more so than TV and telephone now. Recognizing the implications of Orwell's 1984 in all this new technology, Aldrich also pleads for democratic restraint and the protection of personal and individual privacy in the course of our becoming wired.