

Media Failure Benefits the Next Generation

The financial and cultural failure of videotex technology smoothed the way for the wild popularity of the internet and other related media in its wake. It was one of several inventions that was produced because it *could* be, not because it needed to be. Advances in technology and the anxiety to “stay modern” influenced companies’ decisions to invest in building, advertising, and populating this new and untested medium. Hopes were high – “By midyear,” said Jack Taub, backer of a videotex service called ‘The Source’ in 1980, “we’ll be in the home like Tupperware!” (Banks, 43). These hopes never came to fruition, and instead videotex faded into obscurity. Yet the lessons learned from this expensive, disappointing result allowed other, more thought-out media to succeed. Developers assumed that videotex would follow a similar trajectory as the telephone and television did, forgetting that it was an inherently new medium with an entirely different use and culture. The blunders videotex made in regard to customer usage, accessibility, and pricing were not repeated by the personal computer and the smartphone, and in many ways prepared the public to be more accepting of them. Not every new technology will be a hit – and videotex was the technology that was sacrificed to make mistakes so the next ones would not have to.

Videotex’s most crucial failure was its inability to understand its consumers wanted. It provided a broad spectrum of information in the form of access to enormous databases, assuming that the public would find this service frequently useful. In fact, this was not what people wanted or needed in their lives. The narrow focus of books and other media was actually preferable to the wide, confusing, and pricey new environment of videotex. The benefits of the new technology were not considerable enough, nor were the drawbacks small enough, to justify the adoption of a

new medium. Books, print newspapers, the radio, television, and telephones all provided information in a way that was comfortable and reliable. Videotex, meanwhile, was dry, complicated, and did not have much space in daily life. People wanted entertainment and socialization, not pages upon pages of information. The developers of videotex severely misunderstood their market when they outlined their business plan. By centering its purpose on educational and functional programs, it lost the attention of the public. There were a few social options, such as email and bulletin boards, which made up the majority of consumer use despite being secondary to the device's main intent. Entertainment was seen as too frivolous to invest in – which, had they studied the market better, they would have learned that in fact it was the complete opposite. Even at the time, others were noticing this problem – “Successful marketing of videotex will be contingent upon the development of interactive transactional services and not...as an information retrieval or publishing technology,” writes Wilson (17). By forcing a neat, glamorous new technology to have a purpose, rather than fulfilling a consumer need with a specialized product, videotex was bound for failure from the start. Yet we can see in our current media that these problems have been corrected – phones have room for games, music, and social media, and educational material such as ebooks is secondary. Laptops can have thousands of functionalities and are not limited to information browsing. By opening up the kinds of uses for their technology, new media learned from videotex how not to fail.

Accessibility was also an enormous hurdle for videotex to try to (and not succeed at) conquering. Videotex was impersonal, existed in an awkward cultural space, and, most deadly of all, could not find its way into a comfortable household routine. Unlike a newspaper, videotex users had little to no options as to how they got *to* their information. Physical media and well-linked websites allow for personalized browsing and searching, but videotex had an extremely

rigid data flow that made it uncomfortable and tedious to use. It was also restricted to a single room of a private house, tying up both phone lines and the television monitor. Telephones could be made accessible at a drugstore and an extended family might have just one television set to share between homes, but videotex was not marketed nor made available as a community technology. Instead, it languished in living rooms as people used their much more comfortable media and was eventually abandoned when the price of maintaining it got too high. Worst of all, it did not have the same habitual pull of a telephone or newspaper. Newspapers could be picked up at the same place every day or delivered by subscription to your home, making it an automatic and quotidian routine. Telephones, too, effortlessly extended casual social conversations with neighbors and nearby loved ones. Videotex, meanwhile, was clunky and nonessential. It required a lot of engagement per use, considerable effort to begin each session, and so people ended up hardly using their sets at all. Habits were not built and therefore the medium could not be incorporated into a part of a person's standard day. Personal computers did not repeat this mistake. Instead, they were separated from all other forms of media and existed in their own space. Smartphones, always in one's pocket, are quickly addicting and are always pulling at our attention in creative, habit-forming ways. New media has learned from old media how to make itself temptingly accessible and effortlessly available.

Last but not least was the barrier of price. Fees for videotex added up quickly – there was a per minute and per page fee, as well as the price of renting the equipment and using the phone line. Flat rate subscription was not offered and the resulting bill was fairly extravagant for a middle class household. Consumers, already unengaged and disillusioned with the product, slowly stopped trying to use it and eventually stopped entirely. Instead of being the media sensation its creators had imagined, it dribbled out of popularity and refused to expand. Today, internet

companies know to charge a flat fee for a month or year of service. Computers are purchased once, just like groceries, and software is also a one-time purchase. Cellphone and data plans are a little more complicated, but generally offer the consumer options of per-minute or flat-fee plans to fit best with their lifestyle. Videotex's technical and creative failures meant that people were unwilling to deal with the financial difficulty of keeping it active. New media now knows to keep prices low, if they are able, or to at least make it a one-time deal that encourages the consumer to spend *more* time using the medium rather than less.

Videotex was a new technology that could not seem to find a place in the homes of consumers, and yet it brought the first truly interactive, data-rich experiences to our living rooms. It prepared the public for internet and smartphones by introducing them to basic computer navigation, the possibilities of interactive technology, and the profit opportunities of advertising and content creating. Its considerable shortcomings, too, helped make the next generation of new technologies better and more suited to become popular with the public. Videotex did not fulfill any consumer needs or desires, it did not fit in with daily life, and it was financially prohibitive. It's "not a 'new technology,'" said Wilson. "It represents, instead, a coming together of existing technologies" (15). This product failed because its producers failed to understand this core, essential fact about the medium and assumed it would be as predictable as last generation's new media of telephones and televisions. Instead, it crashed, carving a way for the next wave of media that stunned the world and changed it forever.

Works Cited

- (1) Banks, Michael A., and Orson Scott. Card. "Dis-content and Conflict." *On the Way to the Web: The Secret History of the Internet and Its Founders*. Berkeley, CA: Apress, 2008. Print.
- (2) Wilson, Kevin G. "The Videotex Industry." *Technologies of Control: The New Interactive Media for the Home*. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin, 1988. Print.

Notes:

Introduction– *Videotex, arguably a failure, nevertheless foreshadowed later media*. Explain how it did and why

- Popularized bc businesses didn't want to be left behind

- Had the tech

- No need or desire

- Financial failure (# facts)

 - british post office Investment of 150 million dollars (PaP)

- Information vs communication (not what people wanted)

 - One-way entertainment transmission

 - Narrow vs broad information

- Accessibility

 - Habit

 - Variety

 - Communal

- Price

- Conclusion

 - Took a different path than tv or phone

 - “Not a ‘new technology.’ It represents, instead, a coming together of existing technologies.” – 15

 - “Successful marketing of videotex will be contingent upon the development of interactive transactional services and not...as an information retrieval or publishing technology,” - 17