

CEEFAX
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and VIEWDATA

CONFIDENTIAL

BBCtv

March 1977

PAPER K.3

" VIEWDATA SITUATIONER "

by Editor, CEEFAX

Situation -

Dr. Alex Reid, of the Long Range Studies Division, of the Post Office, a friend of D.M.D.Tel and often met with on International Conference circuits, has just been appointed " Mr.Viewdata " - Chairman of the Viewdata Communication Group. Alex Reid is a very bright, academically-oriented think-tank-type boffin, in his 30's, based on Cambridge.

Viewdata has been given further go-aheads within the Post Office, and good money ! They appear to have taken almost all the technical decisions on interface with existing Post Office circuitry, including (almost certain) the revolutionary idea for the Post Office of allowing industry to build Modems and other items which then go into the Post Office circuitry. Normally this was only built to exact specifications for the Post Office.

Would the BBC like to come aboard ?

Alex Reid rang me, informally, and confidentially, to sound me out on whether the BBC would like to be one of the Viewdata Users' Group (along with some 70 other organizations such as Reuter's, Stock Exchange, F.Times, Which, etc.)

His case -

There was every likelihood of Viewdata-only terminals being made, that is, small black-and-white receivers, to go into offices, or alongside existing family TV sets, which would not get a BBC-1,BBC-2 or ITV picture, and therefore no CEEFAX. If CEEFAX were also stored in the Post Office Viewdata system, businesspersons would be able to get the BBC News on tap in their offices, or on their little terminals, while Mum watched "Coronation Street".

The BBC might recover some of its costs this way. (First thoughts were that a Viewdata page might be £5 per year, i.e. £500 for 100 pages. We would hire this space, but get an agreed share every time a viewer dialled a CEEFAX page.)

Alex Reid again stressed that Viewdata access time would be much quicker than CEEFAX, so that you could guarantee getting your CEEFAX page within 2 seconds as opposed to a possible maximum wait of 24 seconds, an average of 12 seconds.

He even went so far as to suggest that it might pay the TV industry to build sets which did not get CEEFAX, leaving the viewer to get his CEEFAX on his Viewdata terminal alongside his picture TV set.

There is no doubt that Alex Reid, and therefore I think the Post Office, are very interested in having the BBC associated with their plans. Partly, I think for our name; partly for our CEEFAX-experience and influence with the TV set manufacturers (not entirely the same people as those who make Post Office equipment); and partly as a simple paying-customer.

Present Viewdata plans are to start proper field trials in March 1978 putting 1,000 Post Office-acquired sets out in the field.

Alex Reid also thinks the Post Office will make real money in selling Viewdata 'know-how' to other countries, even though they have few patents in the system.

My own first reactions -

I think all the implications deserve a good deal of thought, and I would be grateful for CEEFAX Steering Group views and guidance before going any further. I have agreed to meet Alex Reid for a full evening exchange of ideas on April 14th.

Factors I think we should take into consideration:-

- Viewdata-only terminals will not lead to extra £18 TV Licences in Banks, Clubs, Pubs which install a set for CEEFAX.
- Less than 50% of the population have telephones in their homes, but 97% have television. Can we disenfranchise half the nation by going in with Viewdata, if this leads to manufacturers making non-CEEFAX equipped sets ?
- Although Post Office Telecommunications are exceptionally profit-making at the moment, by the simple expedient of over-charging at will, I am not sure that this is historically true for all time.
- If CEEFAX has to raise all or part of its revenue by a "commercial method", isn't this an entering wedge for the BBC as a whole ?
- Does the Post Office realise all the implications of its new role ? They are confident that a Legal Indemnity Scheme will free them from any civil actions resulting from the information they carry; and that criminal charges will be accepted tolerantly because the Post Office is deliberately refraining from being a "Big Brother" for the nation, merely a common carrier. I still would like to know who goes to Jail, or joins me at the Bar of the House.
- The last organisation I remember which was run by the Users was the Suez Canal Users' Authority, and I wonder what happened to them.
- If the BBC CEEFAX service on Channel 4 of Viewdata began making real money, wouldn't Reuter's on Channel 5 and Exchange Telegraph Racing Results on Channel 6 soon start asking for more ?
- If every one of the 13 million people who do Football Pools dialled Viewdata on Saturday evening it would 'blow' every Telephone Exchange in the country; as it would if the 20,000,000 leaving Miss World all dialled for the next TV programme.
- In fact, any real demand for Viewdata, in the kind of audience terms in which the BBC deals, would soon make a nonsense of the Post Office claims of instant access.
- Even before Viewdata, it has been known for the Post Office to give one a wrong number.
- Accessing Viewdata requires much more skill than dialling CEEFAX, and a whole new Indexing system will be needed. Viewdata will only be as good as its Indexing, and this alone will involve editorial decisions.

Recommendation -

I think we should go very warily, and maintain our present stance that the two systems are complementary. That we are broadcasters dealing with millions, that they are narrowcasters selling information to specialists. At a later date, when they have ironed out the 'bugs' in their system, we might take space to advertise Publications, file complete Cast Lists of Programmes, or sell off BBC information that we don't need for broadcasting, but someone might like.

But for the time being CEEFAX should continue to make the running alone in all Teletext, and not be publicly identified with Viewdata.