

# Videotex takes Gateshead Teleshopping into the home

Since October 1979, when a study of shopping problems of disadvantaged or disabled consumers was commenced by Newcastle University, sponsored by Tesco, progress has been made in the development of an experimental computerised shopping service for the relatively housebound of Gateshead. Resulting from the formation of a working party between Tesco, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) and Newcastle University, various trials were initiated and a number of outlets opened, followed by negotiations with Rediffusion Computers Ltd on the introduction of a videotex system. Early in 1984, Gateshead MBC approved a 12-months trial of a videotex system as a basis for new outlets, incorporating individual households, and in May of this year the videotex system opened for business in a private home and in a sheltered housing development. This article looks at the progress being made in this third phase of development, and the way it is being used by the consumers.

The Gateshead experiment in computerised teleshopping for disadvantaged sections of the community, which has grown to international prominence over the past three years, has embarked on a third and crucial phase of development. It is progressing from its base in neighbourhood centres across the threshold into individual homes with the installation of a videotex system loaned by Rediffusion Computers to Gateshead MBC.

Colour videotex televisions have been placed in peoples' homes as well as at community points in sheltered housing in the Salt Meadows and Bill Quay areas of the borough. These are used directly by the elderly or disabled occupants - or by the local street warden on their behalf, to order groceries from Tesco's superstore in the town centre, as well as bakery or pharmaceutical products from, respectively, Greggs's of Gosforth and a local chemist who also provides a prescription service. The television also gives access to information of a community nature, such as bus timetables, opening times, welfare benefits, and the names and telephone numbers of local councillors.

A joint initiative involving Tesco Stores, Gateshead MBC and Newcastle University, the Gateshead Shopping and Information Service as it is known officially, arose from a study commissioned by Tesco from the University in October 1979. This showed that 25% of the population in the Tyne and Wear area were sufficiently constrained financially to inhibit their travelling to the larger city-centre stores that generally provide the largest selection and cheapest prices in groceries. A further 3% were classified as 'neglected consumers' on the grounds that they were physically or socially impeded from shopping outside their immediate home environment.



A Rediffusion Computers television-style videotex terminal of the type used in the Gateshead experiment. The particular installation shown here being checked by Sir John Barren, Head of Videotex Services at the Central Office of Information and Michael Aldrich, Managing Director of Rediffusion Computers, was used as an electronic news and message service for journalists covering the June 1984 Economic summit meeting in London.

The service, as it has been developed since April 1980 when it began on a trial basis from a single outlet in a community centre near the Sunderland Road library, comprises two kinds of operation to suit the different requirements of the two sets of disadvantaged consumers.

First, for those people with less serious mobility problems, special shopping and information outlets were established at three focal points within selected neighbourhoods of the borough. The principle is that registered consumers can visit their nearest outlet and, with or without the help of a Shopping and Information Service (SIS) assistant, order goods from certain town centre shops and have these delivered at no additional cost. Alternatively, they can use the outlets to obtain information about forthcoming events, exchange local news with their friends, or seek advice on problems of social or welfare kind.

The second type of service operates from the headquarters of the Social Service Department in Gateshead. Here, a telephone centre acts as a special communication link to several hundred 'at risk' people who are literally housebound, including many who are bedridden or in need of personal care and attention. These people can transmit their shopping orders over the telephone and have their goods delivered or, as in the neighbourhood outlets, they can treat the telephone centre as a source of information on many other activities. Shopping orders go via the telephone centre, rather than direct to the stores, because of the special social relationship that has built up between the operators and the clients.

At present there are 430 consumers registered to use the SIS service, either from a neighbourhood outlet or from the telephone centre.

## Network system

When visiting an outlet, or communicating by telephone, a consumer first consults a catalogue that lists the prices, sizes and weights of 1000 grocery items, together with 50 bakery products and 300 pharmaceutical goods. Alternatively, such information can be called up on the outlet's television set which also provides further details on special offers, the choice available with particular commodity lines, and items that would best suit people on restricted diets. Each item is allocated a code number and it is this, together with the quantity of goods to be ordered, that is transmitted through to the store.

At existing outlets - those provided under the earlier phases of the SIS scheme - the coded orders are typed into a microcomputer which is linked to a similar microcomputer (Commodor PET) at the Tesco store via the telephone network. In the two new outlets operating the videotex system, the coded orders are typed into keypads connected to the outlets' television sets, and the information is then directed to the store via a minicomputer housed in the local authority's computer department. Each of the two computerised systems leads to the orders being printed out in the store, usually in a series of batches rather than for individual cases. The Tesco store currently receives orders for the bakery and chemist, but these will be furnished with their own printers as and when the level of demand for their more specialised goods warrants the investment.

The orders that come through to the store are printed with a carbon copy that is passed back to the customer at the time of delivery. Each batch of orders is also reprocessed in the computer to produce 'picking lists', and it is this picking-and-choosing process that is a time-

consuming aspect of the service which, by virtue of the fact that assistants are effectively shopping on the customer's behalf, is also labour intensive. The assistants who undertake this work and contribute to other parts of the service have been provided by the Manpower Services Commission.

Two delivery vans are employed throughout most of the day to transport the ordered goods to the customers. Payment is made at the time of ordering, except in the case of those housebound customers who place orders via the telephone centre and who pay at the time of delivery.



A specially adapted television linked to a Rediffusion videotex computer system being used by a disabled person who relies on the system to provide goods and information without her leaving home.

## DoE sponsorship

The SIS service has been supported since April 1982 by a £100 000 grant from the Department of Environment under the Inner City Partnership Scheme. It has enabled the service to expand into new outlets and bring in new retailers, but it remains limited in scale. There are about 7500 people throughout the borough of Gateshead who are in need of shopping assistance, 5000 of whom are concentrated in the inner city areas, and Ross Davies of Newcastle University is now looking for further funding to expand the project's horizons after the current grant runs out in May 1985.

Newcastle University, Gateshead MBC and Tesco have shown that, to use Ross Davies' words, 'the principle of using technology to channel the resources of a town centre into small neighbourhoods is one that is workable and of considerable help to those who are absolutely, or relatively housebound'. With the coming of cable TV networks, the lessons learned at Gateshead could have implications for all sections of the community.

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