

Public Voice

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NARROWING THE INFORMATION GAP: INTERACTIVE AUDIOTEX AND FAX-ON-DEMAND SERVICES BY PUBLIC VOICE

When the readers of Macworld magazine (Oct, 1994) were asked about their expectations concerning the information superhighway, it turned out that the most sought-after service was the possibility to participate in on-line elections. Such a service could well save us the way to the polls, and it would furthermore offer the possibility to question the system about additional information on party platforms or the object of the poll and to participate in discussions via the network prior to the elections.

This is wishful thinking, but it is clearly another example showing that we are moving towards a two-class society: "the information rich and the information poor".¹ People who have found their way into the online world can obtain almost unlimited information quickly, input their views into the network, or take part in new forms of democratic co-determination. Those who do not have a computer, a modem, a telephone line, or a telephone socket, those who share a party line, and those who avoid the use of a monitor or a keyboard or are not used to expressing themselves in writing, are excluded. Computer networks are everything but socially or democratically fair: in Austria, there are no more than about 100,000 people² who can make use of on-line services, which is just 2 percent of the population!

The so-called audiotex systems are an alternative to the monitor-oriented on-line services: they have very similar functions, but transmit and store spoken words instead of letters and can also provide fax pages. They can be applied for the following purposes: private mailboxes, simultaneous and non-simultaneous discussions on certain subjects (e.g. on daily or local politics) for the general public or selected participants, data base access, provision of information, ratings, music charts, voting, even ticket reservations, banking or teleshopping.

The turnover of audiotex services has already exceeded those of on-line services by far, even though a substantial portion is generated by entertainment and erotic services. The restricted quality of language transmission does not seem to keep these services from spreading. The boom of audiotex services is due to the following facts³: universal availability - the option to easily charge higher rates through special telephone numbers and the marked decrease in storage-media prices enabling the cost-effective digital recording of language information. There have been some setbacks in countries where no legal provisions or self-regulating authorities have been established to protect children and adolescents as well as users of audiotex services. In Switzerland, the PTT minister even had to go to jail after some providers of porn phone numbers had caused public nuisance. In order to get rid of this image many countries have introduced separate series of numbers for high-charge entertainment and business services.

In Austria, PUBLIC VOICE has recently started a universal language and fax service that is very easy to operate and offers a high level of user interaction. Political, communication and media scientists were involved in supporting programs for the development of functional modules, a model of communicated and distributed knowledge was used as the basis: various functions of the audiotex system were modeled on the Internet. The service offers telephone mail boxes, group, discussion and info boxes, including an optional fax function. Each box has its own direct extension, telephone and group boxes are assigned automatically. Any telephone can be used for configuration and message input.

The PUBLIC VOICE system offers the following advantages:

- * a wide range of services due to access from any telephone (including dial phones)
- * a low inhibition threshold due to easy use
- * targeted access to various fields of information via direct extensions
- * multimediality due to the incorporation of sounds and the option of sending fax documents
- * interaction by means of telephone push buttons or voice control.

In cooperation with the Vienna Urban Planning Office, and with the support of the socio-economic research department of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, PUBLIC VOICE carried out a four-month field experiment to establish the extent to which interactive language services can be used with a view to intensifying popular participation in urban planning activities. During this period, 2,000 people called the "neighborhood telephone" established for the Aspern area and thus contributed to discussions on subject-matters such as traffic, ground-water, leisure-time activities, and much more.

At Ars Electronica 95, PUBLIC VOICE will present an audiotex service comprising the following elements: press and information service, O-sounds, an acoustic meeting point, and a symposium service that will also make it possible to listen to lectures on the phone while they are held, or at any time afterwards.

The poster features a central telephone handset icon with five lines radiating to five circular service categories: 'Kino + Theater Programmierung, Reservierungen und Ankündigungen', 'Theaterpublikum', 'Musik Live: Konzert- & CD-Einspielungen Interaktives Radio', 'Gästebücher, Web-Services, Diskussionsforen, Gruppenbücher per Telefon', and 'Fax on Demand Informationsdienste'. Below the diagram is a list of phone numbers for various locations and contact information for PUBLIC VOICE.

(0043 1) 5 8 9 3 0
PUBLIC VOICE AUDIOTEXSERVICES

Kino + Theater Programmierung, Reservierungen und Ankündigungen
Theaterpublikum
Musik Live: Konzert- & CD-Einspielungen Interaktives Radio
Gästebücher, Web-Services, Diskussionsforen, Gruppenbücher per Telefon
Fax on Demand Informationsdienste

Audiotex: 58930
Telefonbuch: 589304
Gruppenbuch: 589305
E-Karte: 5893042
Fax: 5893049
Gästebücher: 5893022
Press Radio Wien: 589302
Cyberphone: 34002 8917979
PUBLIC VOICE Info: 589309

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Internet: <http://www.public.co.at/public/>

References

- 1 Siefert/Gerbner/Fisher (eds.). The Information Gap. How Computers and Other New Communication Technologies Affect the Social Distribution of Power. Oxford University Press: New York — Oxford. 1989.
- 2 IWI/Seidel/Haacker/Alton-Scheidl (eds.). Österreich Online. Ein interaktives Handbuch. PUBLIC VOICE Vortag: Vienna 1995
- 3 Latzer/Thomas (eds.): Cash Lines. The development and regulation of audiotex in Europe and the United States. Het Spinhuis Publishers: Amsterdam 1993.