Reconsidering the Significance of Teletext for the History of the Internet in the UK

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Abstract

Histories of the internet trend towards the most successful and long-running projects (ARPANET, BBSes, Usenet, Minitel), often at the expense of exploring forgotten yet still significant projects. For example, in the UK, the BBC and Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) developed a robust analogue broadcast videotex system in the form of Ceefax and ORACLE respectively. While the standard was technically less complex than the well-regarded French system Minitel (Mailland and Driscoll 2017), teletext was an important part of the UK's proto-web history between 1974 and 2012.
Teletext functioned as a precursor for the web in two main ways. First, most households in the UK had a television set by the 1970s, so teletext reached a large audience of non-specialists in a way that nascent internet services in the UK such as JANET could not. The everyday use of teletext runs parallel to revisionist user-led histories of computing by scholars such as Kevin Driscoll (2022) and Joy Lisi Rankin (2018). Secondly, it was a versatile service, offering consumers up-to-date information on breaking news, traffic, and sports/election results alongside longer-form 'magazine' content. Teletext broadcast information at a faster speed than the early web due to its easy editing system. Rather than considering teletext as a competitor to the web, it is a closer relative to services such as RSS and Twitter.

Since the BBC and the independent television channels turned off analogue teletext transmission due to the broad adoption of digital television sets, there has been a resurgence of interest in the standard by computer hobbyists. Some have recreated the 'live' practice of data transmission using Raspberry Pi computers but from an archival perspective, the more interesting work emerges from those attempting to curate archived material from a service that was by nature ephemeral. The BBC only required two weeks of Ceefax content to be archived, but in practice, editors would overwrite pre-existing material with new headlines.

Teletext used of the Vertical Blanking Interval (VBI) of the television transmission standard. As a result, television channels transmitted data associated with teletext regardless of active use of the service or even the viewer's ability to decode the signal. Given the right recording medium and the ability to decode the transmission, it is possible for archivists to extract a corrupted version of teletext from select VHS tapes that was initially recorded for other purposes. A community has developed around this process on websites such as the Teletext Archaeologist, offering a richer history of the medium that documented in the official archives of the BBC or Independent Broadcasting Authority.

In this paper, I present a revisionist history of teletext in relation to this emerging archival

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evidence accompanied with materials from corporate archives including the BBC's. Through this analysis, I have two primary aims: (1) provide a revisionist history that ties together the history of the internet and teletext; and (2) explore this hobbyist work around preservation of teletext through video recordings and reflect on how this community work might apply to broader theoretical work around web archiving.

Dr Simon Rowberry in Lecturer in Publishing at University College London. His research interests lie at the intersection of the history of the computer and its impact on the publishing industry. His first book, *Four Shades of Gray* (MIT Press: 2022) was the first monograph focusing on the technical, bibliographical and social development of Amazon's Kindle. *The Early History of Project Gutenberg* is under contract with Cambridge University Press as an Element in Publishing and Book Culture. He is currently working on a history of digital publishing before 2000.

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