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SEP 25 1979

Computer Age Gets Personalized

WE LIVE in the era of the computer, whether we like it or not. It has brought conveniences to most of us and problems to some.

Now the drive is on to make computers in the home as common as television sets. Small businesses and farmers who may have felt they couldn't afford computers also are targets of sales efforts.

Improved technology has reduced sizes of computers, greatly increased their capacities to do a variety of tasks, and reduced price tags on mini-computers in spite of inflation.

Dozens of firms now manufacture computer elements and it is obvious competition for the growing market is vigorous. This development is another example of how free enterprise can accelerate the introduction and acceptance of new ideas.

Whether or not we are ready to adapt our personal lives to computerized directions, it looks like families of the future who do not have home computer centers may be re-

garded much like families without cars in the 1920s or without radios in the 1930s.

Potential exists for making tremendous amounts of information available in homes, as well as providing time and energy saving services.

Data banks or "infostores" now being used by businesses could be expanded to provide instant information on first aid, retail prices, recipes, laws or sports for anybody who might need it at home.

One source says more than 100 major data bases now may be accessed over a \$1,000 terminal, via video tube or printouts. It predicts that within a few years there will be 10 times as many data banks, accessible for as little as \$100 each.

Like people, computers are not perfect. A trade joke says: "To err is human; to really foul things up you need a computer."

Numerous stories have been told of people who have had their names, numbers or accounts crossed up — like the man who spent four months

trying to convince Social Security it was his wife who had died and he was still alive. His benefits had been cut off.

Manufacturers are developing self-servicing computers said to be able to diagnose and repair their own malfunctions. Maybe these capabilities could be extended to include other appliances.

It didn't take long after computers were invented for smart crooks to devise ways to use them dishonestly. They have stolen cash, company accounts, mailing lists and trade secrets electronically.

An indication that not everybody is ready for the computer age may be found in reactions to recorders used to tape phone messages. These are used successfully in many businesses and homes, but still a good percentage of callers hang up rather than talk to a "squawk box."

Computers can make incoming calls also to solicit sales of merchandise, gifts to charities or subscriptions to magazines.