

Computer 'Toys' Invading Household

COMPUTERS probably are not a major cause of inflation, but they seem to be keeping up with it better than most people keep up with either.

We have learned to accept computers as a reality of life, just as we took to automobiles, airplanes, tractors and television. Computers have shown up in all types of businesses, government, education, research, entertainment, word processing and electronic mail.

But shut the windows and lock the doors. They are coming into our homes in swarms of relatively inexpensive devices that may change our habits more than ever. Their potential for doing things we humans have regarded as personal responsibilities is so great that perhaps we ought to worry about them out-thinking us.

These devices are being sneaked into our homes as games and toys, but that's only the beginning. Texas Instruments has announced a \$75 talking toy that pronounces words and prompts children to spell them.

By the time these youngsters become workers, they will be accustomed to using them to obtain li-

brary lists, airline schedules, merchandise prices, sports information and emergency medical or other advice.

"A popular toy will sell a million units a year, while an industrial application is measured in tens of thousands," said a TI spokesman in a magazine article. Of course, they expect to sell more sophisticated, higher priced business and home equipment later.

It was only five years ago that the microprocessor came on the scene, but we already have forgotten what life was like without it.

Costs of these devices have come down greatly, and further reductions are ahead. Bell Telephone Laboratories Inc., is reported to be ready to introduce a "magnetic bubble memory" that will be much cheaper and more reliable than present systems.

The bubble memory can store as many as 500,000 characters (4 million bits) in a single fingernail-size chip, compared to semi-conductor chips that store 8,000 characters.

Customers pay little attention to electronic scanners used at checkout counters which help cash regis-

ters add up their bills and help stores to maintain inventories. What they may not know is that these devices also can be used secretly to monitor purchases and compile market research data on items bought by thousands of families.

This is a small local application of electronic devices that are carried in unmanned satellites to "scan the land". Russia uses them to observe our country, and the United States uses them to monitor military installations in the Soviet Union.

Businesses use such devices to control entries or to watch for shoplifters. Our government uses them, too. Forbes magazine reports that the Environmental Protection Agency has used satellites to monitor industries in "enough detail to allow trade secrets to be derived from the pictures."

Possible applications of these "Big Brother" secret eyes are awesome. Should we resist these space age devices, welcome them into our homes or look for a "scrambler" to defend ourselves?