

The year 2000: End of a millennium or beginning of problems?

By Andrea J. Stenberg

The year 2000. The end of a century. The end of a millennium.

The beginning of the 21st century has long held fascination. Hollywood has spent much time looking into the 21st century, trying to show us what the world will be like. Arthur C. Clarke's and Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey showed a crazed computer Hal killing the crew of a manned space flight. The Jetsons showed a world of technological wonder, where friendly household robots make life easier. Although neither scenario seems likely to arrive in four years, technology is changing so rapidly that we cannot be sure what's in store for us.

The last century has seen a rapid acceleration of technological change. There have been more advances than in all other periods of human history.

Microwave ovens and automatic bread-makers are just a few of the commonplace, computerized household gadgets that would have seemed impossible in the 1950s. And although Scotty won't be beaming any of us up any time soon, the prospect of a permanently manned space station is a very real possibility.

These rapid changes and the approaching end of the century have caused many to look at the year 2000 as a turning point. For years, charities and non-profit agencies have been aiming to achieve their goals by the end of the century. Business

has been using the year 2000 as a target for strategic planning and restructuring to be prepared for the 21st century.

Kathy Schellenberg, former lecturer on "Technology and Society" at the University of Guelph, agrees that people do expect things to be radically different in the 21st century. In the 1950s, the idea of sending a document from one side of the world to another within a few seconds would have seemed like bad science fiction. Today, many cannot imagine doing busi-

ness without a fax machine.

Dr. Saroj Challa, sociology professor at York University, feels there is good reason to fear the future. Technology is allowing people to lose touch with each other. While some see the internet as a boon for communication, Challa does not: "It's true I can talk to someone in Japan. But if I'm not talking to my daughter, what are the consequences?" Home computers, fax machines and cellular phones have sped up that pace of society at the cost of human rela-

major issue.

However, to large corporations, governments and banks that use large, mainframe computers to calculate items such as interest on loans and pension payments, this is a real headache. If the situation is not addressed, in the year 2000 the computer will think someone born in 1950 is -50 years old. Left unremedied, this could create chaos in the calculation of interest payments and pension benefits.

Business doesn't intend to be caught unprepared. It has been aware of this problem for years and is working hard to remedy the situation.

"We have a whole army of people working on this project," says Joe Barbara, Media Relations Manager at Bank of Montreal. In fact, the changes are expected to be implemented by the end of 1998, to give a year to test the system. But this isn't going to be cheap. Barbara estimates the changes will cost Bank of Montreal around 300-500 million dollars.

Not everyone is convinced that when the calendar flips to 2000, the computers will continue running smoothly. According to Doug Hopkins, a Mississauga computer consultant, business and government haven't left themselves enough time to make the changes. "There are billions of lines of computer codes

[that need changing]," says Hopkins. "If there is only one percent of errors, that's a million lines of code." In addition, large programming projects are notorious for going overtime or over budget.

An additional factor is that the year 2000 is a leap year. Everyone knows that every fourth year is a leap year. But not that many people are aware that when the year is divisible by 100, it is *not* a leap year. Even fewer people know that if the year is also divisible by 400, then it is a leap year. Thus 1700, 1800 and 1900 were not leap years, but the year 2000 is.

Unfortunately, many computer programs were written to calculate dates incorrectly and will show 2000 as not being a leap year. Recent versions of operating systems have been repaired. But older versions contain the incorrect formula, and their users aren't even aware of the problem.

In addition to technological change, concerns about the environment abound. We have a hole in the ozone layer, extinction of animals, global warming and nowhere to put our garbage. Some fear that these are signs that prophecies of Nostradamus and of the Bible regarding the end of the world are coming true. Eva Shaw, author of *Eve of Destruction: Prophecies, theories and preparations*

for the end of the world, reminds us to take these predictions with a grain of salt. "In the 1890s, it was predicted that by 1920, all the trees in North America would be used as fuel," writes Shaw.

Whether or not the year 2000 brings ecological collapse, computer mayhem or social disruption, it is clear that as the 20th century comes to a close, people will spend more time and energy wondering what's in store for the new millennium. And unless you have a hotline to the psychic network, you'll just have to wait and see.

