

Y2K: MILLENNIUM CHAOS?

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A four-colour flyer produced by the Government of Canada and delivered to homes across the country declares, 'There's a Bug around. It's time to check it out . . . and it's time to snuff it out. With the coming of the year 2000, governments, businesses, private organizations, and individuals are wondering what is in store for them when the clock strikes midnight and the new millennium begins. This is the kind of news story that requires that we ask some basic questions: what will definitely happen, what might happen, and what will definitely not happen? Finding answers to these questions will provide a cure for the so-called bug. The larger millennium story, however, suggests the nature of human behaviour and the fear of 'apocalyptic' events, the issues of predicting and planning, and the notion of time (Start: 13:39; Length: 11:06).

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Y2K: MILLENNIUM CHAOS?

Introduction

The ease with which computers today facilitate global communication has created a situation in which no computer, nor its user, is a stand-alone entity. Computers have been compared to the cells of an organism, with that organism a global computer network only as viable as the individual cells. The enormously complex connection between computers worldwide with its limitless information has resulted in an immense technological dependency on both a personal and industrial level. Although, as with all new technological developments, there are questions and concerns, the current reason for fears about large-scale computer problems is the year 2000 software bug or Y2K bug, which could cause some computers to malfunction. The Government of Canada has assured Canadians that very few household appliances are affected by the Bug and that with the vast majority of products, you have nothing to worry about, but that it is simply a question of A word to the wise. Nonetheless, according to what many experts would call an extreme or alarmist reaction, some people fear that at the stroke of midnight on December 31, 1999, there is the possibility of a breakdown in the worldwide system. Fuelling public fear, doomsayers are predicting, among other speculations, that we will wake up on January 1, 2000, without telephones, heat, and electricity.

What is the real problem? The simple explanation is that until very recently most computer systems only used two digits, 99 for example, to represent the year in the date programmed into them. When computers that have not been programmed for the new millennium automatically move their digitized clocks ahead on December 31, 1999, instead of recognizing 00 as the year 2000 they could misinterpret it as 1900. The experts believe this could

affect any system that relies on dates to calculate business transactions or control other systems. The banking and insurance industries, for instance, might find their services disrupted if calculating mortgages, loan repayments, and life insurance policies were hindered or disrupted. The Y2K bug could also affect other industries that initially might appear less date sensitive. For example, there is some concern that machines such as elevators, critical-care equipment in hospitals, and air traffic control systems could be affected.

It may seem like a simple problem to fix, but throughout 1999 and for several years before, governments and other organizations have been working to rectify the problem. Most major corporations have implemented a Y2K policy and have provided generous budgets to hire programmers to correct the problem. Bell Canada's budget for Y2K is reported to be \$400-million. Statistics Canada expects that by the time the bug is fixed it will have cost \$12-billion in Canada alone. Economists are predicting that economic growth in 1999 in this country may be three per cent stronger than usual just because of revenue created from the potential effect of the millennium bug.

While significant, the economic impact of the millennium bug is not the only phenomenon worth noting. Y2K doomsday scenarios have given rise to apocalyptic predictions; some are even preparing for what they believe will be the end of the world. Sensational Hollywood movies about the new millennium, such as Y2K, are to be released in the fall of 1999, depicting events such as the collapse of the infrastructure in New York City on New Year's Eve. However, most experts advocate sensible precautions, believing that the new millennium will cause only minor disruptions. Whatever the ultimate impact of Y2K, it has already had an economic impact and has revealed interesting cultural and behavioural phenomena.

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Reaction or Overreaction?

In December 1998, at the United Nations, the first global convention of government representatives met to deal with the Y2K bug. The meeting ended with an informal endorsement of regional co-operation. The head of the United Nations task force on information technology, Ahmad Kamal of Pakistan, encouraged all nations to share information and contingency plans for the approaching millennium. The meeting was attended by delegates from more than 120 countries, including some that had not set up their own national projects to address Y2K. In a similar manner the International Civil Aviation Organization also reported in December 1998 that aviation bodies around the world would have to work together to eliminate the Y2K bug.

Throughout history many global events have had real effects on all nations on the planet: plagues, famines, world wars, the threat of nuclear war, pollution, and major economic recessions. On another level you may be aware of media products in our popular culture that predict and portray events that allegedly will challenge the world on a global scale. For example, we have seen movies about comets hurtling toward earth, encounters with dangerous aliens, nuclear holocausts, and immense natural disasters such as the melting of the polar ice caps. But these were just movies. Any reaction on the part of the public was to a fictional situation, and it must be noted that such doomsday scenarios are a very popular form of entertainment. But what is the real level of concern in the Y2K issue? With this question in mind, proceed as indicated below.

The Pre-Millennium Period

As you watch this **News in Review** report try to identify the impact Y2K is having at the present time on Canadians and on society in general.

What is the specific impact already on governments, businesses, and individuals?

What is the global impact?

How has the so-called millennium bug already changed the way we live and the way we behave?

The Post-Millennium Period

After viewing, discuss as a class, answers to the questions below. As much as possible, make reference to information you saw or heard in the video.

1. What are the potential effects of Y2K?
2. Who will be prepared for the new millennium? Who will not? In what ways are they or are they not already prepared?
3. How might government, business, and individuals be affected?
4. Some computer analysts have suggested that the Y2K bug is like renovators removing asbestos from a building. How does this metaphor assist us in understanding the potential effect of the Y2K bug?
5. In your opinion, to what extent is the threat of millennium chaos fact or fiction? To what extent is it a hysterical reaction on the part of some people?

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Y2K: MILLENNIUM CHAOS?

Part of the Solution or Part of the Problem?

Y2K has been labelled both a computer problem and a human problem. As you read the following explanation of the so-called Y2K bug, highlight key words or expressions and try to determine which label applies. Pay close attention to the verbs!

How computers follow instructions is predetermined by the individuals programmers who build computers and produce computer software. Computer programmers give a computer a set of instructions by making numbers zeros and ones represent letters and formatting information. It does not matter to the computer whether the information represented by the numbers is for word processing, graphics, computer games, or spreadsheets. For the most part it is all the same to the computer, and it just follows orders the programming numbers with the program determining how the computer interprets information.

One of the most used and important aspects of any computer program is the date. Whether it involves banking, insurance, or the airline industry, a computer has to be able to compare dates and decide which date is earlier and which date is later in order to correctly organize, interpret, and communicate the date-sensitive information stored in it. When computers first emerged a little over a generation ago, computer memory, speed, and power were much smaller than they are today. To save space, that is, memory, computers were programmed to recognize dates by their last two digits only. This might not seem like much of a saving today, but at the time it was an essential feature that maximized a computer s efficiency. Using two digits instead of four doubled the speed a computer processed dates. The computer was programmed to assume that all dates were prefixed by 19. A date entered as 77

was read by the computer as 1977. As long as the first two digits of every year were assumed to be 19, the date was recognized correctly. However, in computers programmed in this way, this now means 00 will be read as 1900.

A lot of the programming language that exists today was established and put into use more than 30 years ago. There was an assumption made by many in the computer industry that these programming languages would be long gone by the time the year 2000 arrived. This assumption has since proved to be incorrect. What the programmers appeared to have missed is that the technology would build on itself so fast that the old foundations of the programming structure would be absorbed into the rapidly developing new structure rather than be replaced by it. Once this process of building on began, the task of scrapping the old computer languages began to look like a monumental and daunting task. It was easier to adapt and continue to build onto these old languages rather than replace them completely from the foundations up. Although computer languages appeared to become faster and more efficient, the old languages were still hidden in the fundamental computer architecture. It was a structural weakness of which many people were unaware.

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Y2K: MILLENNIUM CHAOS?

Governments Respond

In Canada, government agencies and committees play an important role in regulating consumer products and industries to ensure safety as well as protection against fraud and misrepresentation. The Y2K issue is a top priority for the federal government, and the Prime Minister has charged four departments the Treasury Board Secretariat, Industry Canada, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and the Department of National Defence with special Year 2000 responsibilities. Links to the Web sites of all these government departments can be accessed at www.canada.gc.ca/depts/major/depindex.html. Each of these departments is responsible for the following critical aspects of the Y2K issue:

The President of Treasury Board is responsible for the overall co-ordination of the government's activities, and monitors and assesses the readiness of federal government departments.

The Minister of Industry ensures that reasonable efforts are made to encourage the private sector to meet Year 2000 challenges.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs ensures that Canada's partners abroad are aware of our commitment to be ready for the Year 2000, and encourages them to be ready as well.

The Minister of National Defence co-ordinates emergency preparedness and contingency plans.

In February 1999, the federal government Standing Committee on Industry issued the report *The Year 2000 Problem: Canada's State of Readiness*.

Below you will find excerpts from the summary of the report. As you read this information, make a list of key points and try to identify both the government's concerns and the areas in which it believes it is well prepared to meet the new millennium. Also be prepared to explain the importance and significance of the words we have highlighted in bold face.

A Summary Of Canada's State of Readiness

. . . The time remaining to find and correct problems is growing short. Most Canadians and Canadian companies and institutions are well aware of the Year 2000 problem but many **small and medium-sized enterprises** (SMEs) and even some **larger manufacturers** are not yet addressing the issue. This is particularly distressing since many SMEs do not appreciate their legal responsibilities nor the fact that their business insurance will not cover Year 2000-related problems that they should have anticipated and corrected. **The Committee** sees an urgent need for more firms to test now and for businesses to realize they are fully accountable for failure to act. Firms also need to start preparing **contingency plans and business resumption plans** to help ensure that they remain in business in the new millennium. The Committee reiterates the need for businesses to act now and not wait until it is too late.

One of the more encouraging findings is that Canadians can likely expect that **essential services** such as electrical power and communications will not be interrupted. Nor are there likely to be major problems with the financial services, transportation sectors, and most essential public services that make up the **infrastructure** on which society and the economy depend.

Another positive sign is that the main stakeholders involved in **emergency preparedness**, including all levels of governments, are working on plans to cover many of the possible Year 2000 problems, including those resulting from the inevitable undetected glitch. The federal government has shown **leadership** in creating a National Planning Group to co-ordinate these efforts nationally and provide advice to the Department of National Defence in preparing for possible aid to **civilian authorities**. Provincial and municipal governments are **working collaboratively** with the federal government and providers of essential services to reduce the chances of problems and to develop appropriate emergency preparedness measures. Although **the extent of possible problems** will not be known until much closer to the new millennium, all Canadians should be prepared to take **whatever**

measures are recommended to prepare themselves and their families to handle possible problems and to be ready to do their part to help.

Some sectors, notably agriculture, are only now being provided with the information that will allow them to assess the impact of the Year 2000 problem and to start planning to fix them. The Committee noted that **the agricultural sector** needs additional support to become Year 2000 ready and has sent a letter to the Minister of Finance on a specific concern related to this sector.

The Committee heard how **the health care sector** is working diligently to resolve its particular Year 2000 problem. The testimony was encouraging, but given **the magnitude of the task** for health care and the limited time and financial resources, this remains an area of concern. The Committee's recommendation in this area is that the federal and provincial/territorial governments continue to **review this situation on an ongoing basis.**

The Committee was informed that larger **municipalities** are actively working on the Year 2000 problem and that essential municipal services such as water and wastewater and police services can be expected to continue to function. A potential area of concern is the smaller communities who, although they may technically have a simpler task to become Year 2000 compliant, may often be unaware of the diverse aspects of the problem and lack the necessary expertise. . . .

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Y2K: MILLENNIUM CHAOS?

Mobilization

On January 15, 1998, Colonel Charles Lemieux, director of the Canadian Forces Y2000 project announced that the Canadian Forces were planning to have 14 500 mobile-forces personnel available, in addition to as many as 4000 reserve soldiers, for whatever emergency work was required when the new millennium arrived.

The plan, called Operation Abacus, would provide military support for incidents that might arise the moment the computers reached the zero hour. Lemieux explained that during 1999 the Canadian Forces would conduct three exercises to prepare for Y2K: Exercise Mercury, March 1-7; Exercise Vigilance 2000, May 31-June 4; and a national Canadian Forces exercise September 13-17. The exercises would test what a senior military officer called our ability to operate in a degraded environment. We are going to be developing scenarios that are pretty harsh, the officer said, adding that the exercises are intended to answer a number of specific questions. If our systems go down, can we operate? What will be the essential services that need assistance? Do we have proper, reliable communications, yes or no? The Forces indicated that mobilization might be similar to the support provided during 1998's ice storm in Quebec and Eastern Ontario. The Canadian Forces believe they play a crucial role in maintaining public confidence, and the presence of troops will be seen in positive terms rather than an overreaction to the situation. In the face of potential power outages, food shortages, and health and emergency service disruptions, if the general public initially perceives that the Canadian Forces [are] effectively engaged in the situation then public confidence in the Canadian Forces and the government will be fostered at the outset of the crisis. Public confidence, however,

will erode if the Canadian Forces' only contribution towards defusing the crisis is its presence.

Discussion and Analysis

What is your reaction to Operation Abacus? How does this operation define an aspect of the role of the Canadian military you may not have considered? In your opinion, what impact will the announcement of operation Abacus have on people's concerns about the approaching millennium?

Examine the following Y2K facts. As a class assess the impact each fact has on individuals and communities.

The government of New Brunswick has shifted the Christmas holiday schedule for the province's schools to ease fears of computer chaos following the arrival of the new millennium. Christmas holidays will start a week later than usual, running from December 23, 1999 to January 10, 2000.

The Dutch Airline KLM has indicated that it will not fly certain routes early in the year 2000 if there is any doubt about flight safety.

In a Gallup poll conducted in the U.S. in early 1999, nearly half of Americans said they would avoid travelling by plane on or around January 1, 2000. Many said they feared that air traffic control could be disrupted by major computer failures.

The RCMP has decreed that none of its 5000 employees will be able to take a vacation between December 27, 1999 and March 15, 2000. The Metropolitan Toronto Police has cancelled holidays from December 27, 1999 to January 4, 2000.

Statistics Canada has said that it will cost at least \$12-billion to correct the Y2K bug in Canada. Among Canadian companies that are spending the most to solve the year 2000 problem are: Bell Canada (\$400-million), Northern Telecom (\$131-million), Ontario Hydro (\$125-million), and the Royal Bank of Canada (\$171-million).

The Gartner Group, a U.S. consulting firm, has estimated that the Y2K problem will cost the world one to two trillion dollars as much as \$300 for every man, woman, and child on the planet.

In the United States, the Federal Reserve has set aside an extra

\$50-billion of currency reserves to be available at the end of 1999.

Rising concern about the Y2K millennium bug has boosted gold sales in Canada. David Madge, who supervises gold bullion sales in North America for the Royal Canadian Mint, reported that the Mint's sales of Maple Leaf Gold coins are up 20 per cent to 650 000 ounces from the total sales in 1997 of 538 000 ounces. Madge said he knew of one U.S. resident whose purchase of \$15-million, or 50 000 ounces, of Maple Leaf gold coins was directly related to the Y2K issue.

A British task force set up by the Department of Trade and Industry warned Britons to stock up with two weeks' emergency rations in anticipation of shortages related to the Y2K computer bug.

Cliff Mackay, president of the Air Transport Association of Canada, which represents commercial and charter airlines, said he plans to be in the air over Canada at midnight on December 31, 1999. In addition, David Honkanen, Y2K project manager for NAV Canada, which handles the country's air traffic control, said he will be flying to London's Heathrow Airport. Both men are confident that flights within Canada and to major foreign destinations will run as scheduled on December 31, 1999, and January 1, 2000.

According to a survey by the Computer Sciences Corporation of California, North American companies are spending more to fix the Y2K bug than companies in other markets. Firms in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region indicated they were spending \$13-million on average, while North American companies were spending about \$16.5-million apiece.

Dr. Mark Neuenschwander warns, "Nothing should be taken at face value when it comes to government assurances." He and his wife Betsy, also a physician, head the AD2000 Crisis Relief Task Force, a conservative Christian humanitarian effort based in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Because of what he expects to be potential problems in equipment such as anesthesia machines, intravenous pumps, and intensive-care monitors, which, like many complex devices, contain tiny embedded computer chips, he warns against elective surgery in the first six months of 2000.

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Y2K: MILLENNIUM CHAOS?

Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot . . .

For some people, New Year's Eve December 31, 1999, will not be a time of celebration. They believe the Y2K bug will bring down civilization, and they perceive the situation as the digital equivalent of Noah's Flood. They believe chaos will reign; electric power will shut off, airplanes and trains will stop, the stock markets will crash, governments will lose control, and banks and money will mean nothing. They fear that cities will erupt in riots and looting and that there will be millions of people fleeing urban centres in search of food and safety. Such believers, commonly called survivalists, are starting to prepare for a Y2K disaster in varying ways. Most experts consider their reactions extreme and alarmist.

Apocalyptic Déjà Vu

This kind of survivalist belief and predictions of millennial apocalypse have been common long before Y2K. History reveals many prophets of doom, consisting of extremist religious groups, right-wing militias, and other fringe groups. In the 19th century one of the U.S.'s largest millennial movements was led by a farmer named William Miller. In 1844, he and 50 000 of his followers took to the countryside waiting for the appearance of Christ and what they thought would be the end of the world. Some Y2K experts say that Y2K has provided an extraordinary opening for religious evangelization. As one Christian Internet site explains, Y2K is the greatest opportunity since the Tower of Babel. Some Christian survivalists believe that the Y2K bug has the potential to disrupt civilization and perhaps fulfil the New Testament prophecy of the troubles that will precede Christ's Second Coming.

Although doomsday prophecies have existed for years, the emergence of Y2K concerns have increased the ranks of such

forecasters. Highlighting extremist reactions, Chip Berlet, senior analyst with Political Research Associates, a liberal think tank in the United States, says that Y2K is generating a new solidarity among far-right factions. You may believe that in 2000 a New World Order will be ruled by Satan, or that economic collapse will be caused by Jews, or that secret elites are hiding the fact that Y2K will trigger a nuclear meltdown. No matter who the suspected villains, you can find common ground with other survivalists in practical discussions about which water filter works best. A cursory search on the Internet supports this position. In Internet discussion groups, white supremacists, militia groups, techno-geeks, religious groups, and gun enthusiasts are talking. They are debating obscure topics such as whether dog meat is edible, how to purify water, and which personal sidearms are most appropriate in defending oneself.

Among those worried about Y2K are average people who do not fit into the extremist categories. One example of this type of Y2K survivalism involves an Ohio family that has purchased a gas-powered home generator, a year's supply of dehydrated food, several guns, and ammunition. One of the most interesting purchases is a water bed for their daughter. To the uninitiated the water bed might not appear to offer any practical purpose beyond sleeping, but to the survivalist the water bed represents an extra 1100 litres of water. The little girl said, I hope we don't end up drinking my bed. In addition to purchasing necessities, the mother is teaching herself rudimentary dentistry and field medicine. She says I want to be able to stitch a wound and fill a cavity. From time to time the father runs his family through surprise drills, shutting off the power, announcing, Y2K's here!

One of the most prominent leaders in the Y2K survivalist movement is the fundamentalist Christian economist Gary North. He operates a Web site dedicated to the Y2K survivalist movement. It has become one of the main sources of information for survivalists in the U.S. North's site reports that martial law will be declared no later than January 15, 2000, and at that point things will start getting worse. North reports I think there will be a collapse of Western civilization if the power grid does go down, and I can see no reason why it won't. Rioting will be a minor sideshow. North and other survivalists are urging people to abandon cities and seek the safety and security of the countryside. They literally believe that people should head for the hills. In anticipation of Y2K, Paul Milne, a former commodities broker, has moved his family to a 10-acre farm where he and his family are learning agrarian skills, raising livestock, fitting wells with hand pumps, and storing food. They are also stockpiling guns for protection for what they believe will be a lawless world. I'm not God. I can't say definitively what's going to

happen, Milne says. What I can say is that when people don't have the basic elements for survival, they are not going to come out on their lawns and hold hands and sing Kumbaya. They're going to scratch and claw their way to survival. I put myself in a place where I would have the highest odds of being able to do that.

While some survivalists plan to ride out the year 2000 by themselves in their remote homes, there are many who have established group settlements called Y2K villages. Many of these villages are formed directly as a result of the Y2K problem, while others are religious groups who have been preparing for years for some kind of societal upheaval. Many of them are trying to stay hidden from the public eye because they do not want any more members. One of the most popular Y2K villages is a project called Heritage Farms 2000. Heritage Farms 2000 plans to sell half-acre plots to 500 families in hopes of building an independent, self-sustaining community that will not be disturbed by the disruptions in the rest of society. Located on 1000 acres in remote South Dakota, Heritage Farms 2000 offers plots with gardens for permanent or mobile homes, in addition to a 160-acre community farm and a Main Street with a general store. Heritage Farms 2000 reveals a certain idealism about what type of society is desirable. Its concept and supporters reveal a need for a new orientation of society. Many of them advocate more responsible social relationships and believe this can only happen in smaller communities. In some ways Y2K villages such as Heritage Farms 2000 appear to be similar to the communal back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s and 70s.

Most Y2K experts do not support the idea of running to remote locales or forming Y2K villages. They say the survivalists will be shocked when they go to the countryside because that is where everyone else is going to be; the countryside is going to be pretty crowded. Instead they advocate staying at home in your community and working with your neighbours. They believe people need to stick together and co-operate as a society. They feel we need to make sure we do not panic, and any extraordinary measures we take such as uprooting ourselves and isolating ourselves from our communities will only help fuel this sort of panic. Some Y2K consultants fear that the survivalists will trigger the very chaos they are trying to avoid. They say the doomsday scenario could amount to a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we believe we are all doomed and we run to the hills, there will be no one left to work in industry or make society as a whole function. If this fear is permitted to take hold in society the doomsayers may indeed be right about the end of civilization. This end to civilization, however, would not be caused by Y2K, but by the panic and fear that is permitted and encouraged by Y2K doomsayers.

Discussion

1. In your opinion, what do the reactions of survivalists tell you about human behaviour in general?
2. What has been the effect of Y2K on this particular sector of society? How would you describe these people? Should they be taken seriously, whether you agree with their predictions or not?
3. Survivalist retreats and Y2K villages represent what the survivalists believe are better and more socially desirable communities. Describe the main elements of these communities, such as societal goals, physical description, economic base, role of government, and social relations.
4. The above information suggests that the Y2K villages seem to be similar to the communal living movement of the 1960s and 70s, the so-called hippie generation. From what you know of that period, what similarities or differences are there between these two collective social reactions? What social or political conditions from the two time periods are similar or different?
5. Should we be concerned about the doomsday prophecies of survivalists? Why are some observers concerned that their ideas might gain credibility in mainstream society?
6. In the 16th century a man named Nostradamus made many prophecies about the future. Recognized as a brilliant physician who developed effective measures to assist the plague victims of the time, Nostradamus was considered a seer, or prophet. He wrote a collection of quatrains four line poems about the visions he had during his lifetime. His quatrains have been described as enveloped in deeply obscure, twisted, nested symbolism and encryptions that are open to interpretation. Some survivalists today point to Nostradamus's prophecies as evidence of Y2K catastrophe. Research Nostradamus and determine to what extent his prophecies are credible.

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online resource guide

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Satirizing Y2K Fears

During the 18th century, printing became so inexpensive that almost any author was able to publish a newspaper. At this time there were many political publications, particularly during the American and French Revolutions. A popular method used to disarm and ridicule political opponents was the literary device we call satire. Criticisms and social commentary about politics and government were often cleverly mocked in a satirical story or poem. One of the most popular uses of this occurs in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, a book considered to be one of the greatest satires of the 18th century. In it, Swift challenged politics, society, and the philosophers of the historical period known as the Enlightenment.

Although satire as a literary form was strong in the 18th century, it actually comes from an earlier age the age of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The word satire derives from the Latin *satira*. The Latin derivative literally means medley, a combination or mixture of elements. Satires, which mix or exaggerate truth and fiction, are often humorous, but they are usually intended to be serious. The aim is to expose absurdity for what it is and make those inclined to adopt foolish or tasteless attitudes aware that they are ridiculous. A satire exposes vices and weaknesses. It employs humour and wit to criticize human institutions or humanity itself in order that they might be remodelled or improved. In this regard satire serves an important social function.

The emergence of the Internet has created new opportunities for ordinary people to publish. Today there is a plethora of online newspapers, magazines, zines, discussion groups, journals, periodicals, and newsletters. Moreover, Internet analysts report that the new publishing medium has in turn rejuvenated satire as a

literary form of writing. The following is an example of satirical writing that has been circulating on the Internet. Consider how it qualifies as a satire.

Chaos in Canterbury

Recently, a satirical piece of writing has been circulating on the Internet about the Y1K Bug. Set in Canterbury, England in A.D. 999, the story recounts the panic [that] prevails today throughout Europe as the millennial year 1000 approaches, bringing with it the so-called Y1K Bug. The satire describes the bug as a menace and points out that prophets of doom are predicting the collapse of Western Civilization because society is based on monastic computations. The writer suggests that the potential disaster is a result of no one anticipating a change from a three-digit to a four-digit year. Grave concern is expressed that all liturgical chants and all metrical verse in which any date is mentioned will be thrown into a state of total disarray. The writer goes on to lament the fact that every formulaic hymn, prayer, ceremony and incantation dealing with dated events will have to be re-written to accommodate three extra syllables. Historical chronologies, which currently can only accommodate three columns, will now have to be converted in order to accommodate a fourth column given that with the advent of the new millennium a fourth digit will result in the need for this extra column. This detail, the satire points out, must have been overlooked by generations of scribes who, to be fair, worked long and hard on carefully hand-ruled lines on vellum sheets. The writer fears the conversions will be very costly to the kingdom and warns that the chaos and confusion will bring into question the validity of every official event, from baptisms to burials, from confirmations to coronations . . .

Brother Cedric is quoted. He exclaims, We should have seen it coming and expresses his concern about the use of the word thousand because it includes the word thou which, being the formal form of reference to God is found in almost all the prayers of the time. In addition to the state of confusion into which his parishioners could be thrown, Cedric also warns of the sin of blasphemy.

And to make matters worse, according to this satire, Stonemasons are already reported threatening to demand a proportional pay increase for having to carve an extra numeral in all dates on tombstones, cornerstones, and monuments. There is indeed serious cause for concern regarding the destabilization of the medieval economy. According to the writer of this satire, it has been rumored that people are stocking up on holy water and indulgences.

Discussion

Webster's Dictionary states satire is the use of ridicule, sarcasm, irony, etc. to expose, attack, or deride vices, follies, stupidities and abuses.

1. What is being ridiculed in this satire?
2. Is this satire simply funny or is it making serious social statements? If so, what are they?
3. To what extent might satire be used to control and influence public opinion?
4. Suggest other human behaviour observed and documented throughout modern times that suggests an overreaction or an extremist reaction to world events.
5. Create a satirical poem, song, advertisement, public service announcement, classified ad, or a medium of your choice of which the Y2K bug is the central theme.

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Y2K: MILLENNIUM CHAOS?

Discussion, Research, and Essay Questions

➤ 1. Who has had the greatest impact on the 20th century? *Time* magazine has profiled 100 remarkable people who changed the world during the last 100 years, for better or worse. Go to <http://cgi.pathfinder.com/time/time100/index.html> and investigate. Do you agree with the magazine's selection?

2. In addition to increased economic activity in computer software and the maintenance of computer systems, the Y2K issue has sparked a number of rather unique economic opportunities. For instance, *Salon* magazine reported on a woman in the United States who has sold more than 30 information kits about her \$7000 Survival Domes. What does this particular example tell you about human behaviour?

3. There are many interpretations about when the new millennium actually begins. One interpretation originates from Dionysius Exiguus (Latin for Dennis the Short) a sixth-century monk who some consider the original millennium bug. He laid down the basis for the calendar we use today by figuring how far in the past Christ was born. Today we know he was off by several years, and historians now place Christ's birth no later than 4 B.C. By that calculation the third millennium would have commenced no later than 1997. The new millennium may already be here. Research the origins of our calendar and its impact on the debate about when the new millennium actually begins.

➤ 4. Around the world, entrepreneurs are submitting, and receiving legal trademark protection for a whole spectrum of

merchandise, services, and logos, using the terms Year 2000, Y2K, Millennium, and variations including New York 2000, NY2K, and the like. Should a legal Year 2000 trademark be permitted?



5. Go to the Government of Canada Y2K Web site at <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/sos2000> and find out how Y2K will affect you. Prepare an oral report.

6. How will the law protect consumers if they bought something that turns out to be affected by the Millennium Bug? If the product purchased is promoted as being Year 2000 compliant and it is not, citizens may have legal recourse. Both the federal Competition Act and the Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act have provisions against making representations that are false or misleading. You can find information about consumer protection rights on the Internet at http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/sc_cons/consaffairs/engdoc/oca.html. Write or present a summary of this information.

7. Canada's banks have been working on the Y2K issue since 1995 and have been singled out by experts as a world leader in Y2K readiness. Go to www.cba.ca/eng/year2000_index.htm and find out how they are meeting this challenge. Can their approach be applied to other industries?

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