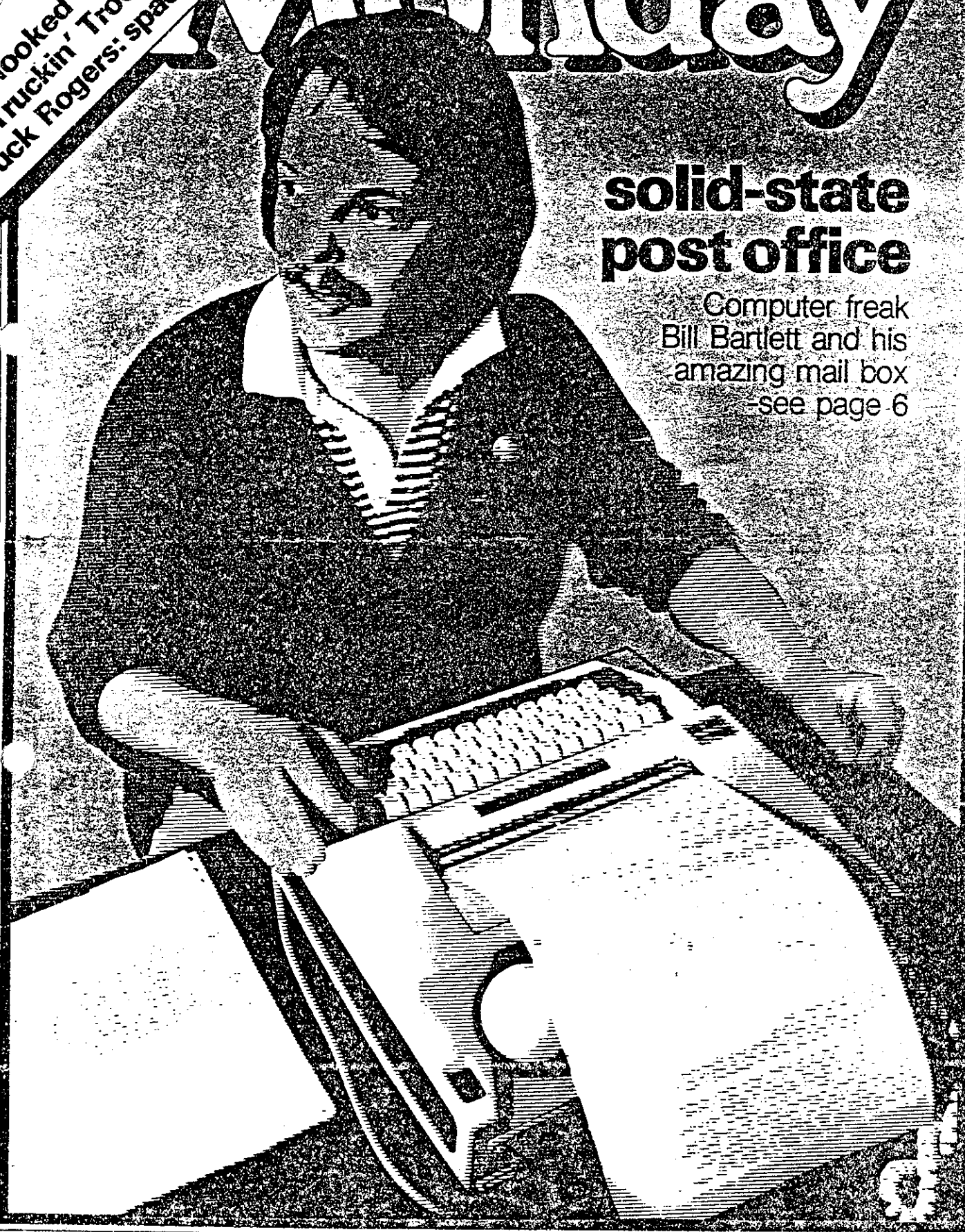Victoria's Magazine

Monday

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solid-state post office

Computer freak
Bill Bartlett and his
amazing mail box
—see page 6

Neither rain, nor sleet — nor post office — shall stop this mail

Computers demonstrate the future of world communications at special show

Look Ma, no words: slow-scan video transmits images every eight seconds to screen located in Toronto—even strip tease.

By ROD LINK

AT FIRST it seemed the perfect April Fool's joke. Mail on a Sunday. Ridiculous. Even the memories of Saturday mail are fading fast.

Yet on Sunday, April 1, Bill Bartlett of the Direct Media Association, appeared at Monday Magazine's offices carrying a small piece of equipment, and in no time, was receiving typewritten messages from Houston, Vienna Austria, Sydney Australia, Toronto, Edmonton, Vancouver, and New York City. Throughout the day, Bartlett conversed with 11 locations in Canada, the United States, Austria and Australia.

The process was simple. Bartlett merely plugged in a typewriter-like keyboard with a roll of paper for print-out copy, phoned a local telephone number and placed the phone receiver onto an acoustical coupler, which transformed the telephone from a voice transmitter into a data (typed character) transmitter.

The local phone call connected to a computer service company's data communications line to a mini-computer in Vancouver. From Vancouver, Bartlett's keyboard signals went by data communications line to a main processing computer in Toronto and then by telephone lines to the other 11 locations in the four countries. Messages travelled back to Victoria on the same route.

Billed as a computer communications workshop, with Bartlett as coordinator and I.P. Sharp Associates donating computer time and communication lines, the workshop was an attempt to initiate discussion on the use of two-way electronic communications, electronic mail and just plain communicating with others around the world.

Initial "conversation" centered on the weather. We learned it was cloudy and in the 70s F in Houston, −12 C and nighttime in Vienna. Asked by one location if the hookup was an April Fool's joke, Vienna replied it hoped not, as "Central Europe is grim enough."

"A person with a portable keyboard can plug into a telephone line anywhere in the world, type in his five-letter code, and receive his mail stored in electronic data banks."

The future is now: Monday editor Derry McDonell gets some 'mail' from Vienna— but no stamps

One of the topics discussed was the Harrisburg Pennsylvania reactor trouble and related nuclear issues. When one of the people in Victoria mentioned our proximity to the Trident nuclear submarine base and asked if anyone would like a couple of Trident subs, Edmonton said no thanks because "how many Trident subs can you anchor on the Prairies anyway?"

Bartlett's Direct Media Association operates on a Canada Council grant and is seeking to educate people on the uses of computer communications for artistic purposes and to provide public access data information banks. He described the workshop as interesting but a bit "frustrating and disappointing."

Partway through the linkup, a foul-up occurred and Victoria was temporarily cut off from the main workshop conversation concerning the future of communications networks.

The demonstration did however, give an example of group two-way communications and proved the feasibility of electronic mail. The two-way communication linkup is more or less like a telephone conference call. Active users are tied together, with a typewritten record of the proceedings replacing the spoken word.

Electronic mail in particular, using the Mailbox service of I.P. Sharp Associates, not only provides an alternative to paper mail but a new dimension to sending messages.

David Smith, local representative for Sharp Associates, says the company's Mailbox service addresses mail to the person, not a geographic location, as with paper mail or telephone calls.

"A person is assigned a five-letter code and any mail ad-

dressed to that person goes only to that person," says Smith. Thus a person with a portable keyboard can plug into a telephone line anywhere in the world, type in his five-letter code and receive mail stored in electronic data banks.

For businessmen or vacationers, this means mail does not have to pile up at home or the office, with the possibility of missing urgent messages and the inconvenience of not receiving mail for extended periods of time. In addition, Mailbox provides fast communications and equally fast replies.

Bill Bartlett gives an interesting example of the person-not-

geographic aspect of Mailbox. "One night I was late for the ferry to Pender Island and while waiting for the next ferry, decided to see if there were any messages. I pulled into a telephone booth with an electrical outlet nearby, phoned in, set up my terminal on a trashcan and received my mail."

The cost of sending a letter is amazingly cheap. Buying time on Sharp Associate's network is $1 an hour for computer time, 35 cents a CPU ("An arbitrary unit of computer resources based on the amount of time the computer spends working on your problem" explains Smith) and 60 cents for 1,000 typewritten characters—including spaces, periods, etc. A 500-word letter will cost $1.10, 50 cents in CPU expenses, 30 cents for the sender to transmit the 500 words, and 30 cents for the recipient to receive the message.

By contrast, the Canadian post office has a service called Telepost. To send a letter by Telepost, you phone the local CP-CN Telecommunications office, and they will Telex your message to the nearest post office indicated by the address on your message. It is then hand delivered. The cost is $2.40 every 50 words in Canada and $3.00 to send 100 words to the United States.

While it's inexpensive to send letters, electronic mail today has one big drawback. The price of the keyboard. Purchasing a keyboard can run from $1,500-1,800 for a basic portable, to $2,700 for a fancy portable, to $5,000-6,000 for a standard desk-top model. But mass production and competition from manufacturers will certainly bring the price down in the future. They can also be rented from the computer companies.

Exactly when the benefits of electronic mail will be available to us all is not clear. David Smith says you can "blue sky all day long on [technological] advances," but he does not want to make a prediction. The technology is there, he states, and the rate of achievement is accelerating.

The problem, Smith feels, is getting public acceptance of home computers providing electronic mail, among other services. Essentially, it's a marketing problem.

Another hurdle to clear is, who will provide and control the new services. Telephone companies now handle all data transmission lines and make a lot of money from them. Coaxial cable, providing cable TV can also transmit data, without cutting down on TV service. If cable companies can break into the data field, it will decrease telephone company profits—something the latter naturally will try hard to prevent.

For now, buy those 17 cent stamps, hope for the best and watch the corporate battles.