News in Review

February 2000

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Y2K: Much Ado About Nothing

In light of the much touted Y2K bug, preparations on a global scale and enormous expenditures may well have resulted in what many consider a non-event. Like preventive medicine, however, planning and preparation are always preferable to disease control or crisis management. The passing of midnight at the end of the century and the announcement that all was well was not without controversy, however. Were the costs justified or necessary? Was the concern real or actually created to serve particular ends? What is for certain is that it was a spectacular party that circled the globe a celebration that in its own way once again confirmed the interconnectedness of humankind.

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Introduction

Y2K: Much Ado About Nothing

In our pop culture we have a penchant for creating catch phrases and then repeating them ad nauseam. Although there was some debate as to whether 2000 represented the new millennium or not, it was decided that the year 2000 was one to celebrate. As the world approached 2000, nothing would do but for some wag to shorten the term to Y2K: Y for year and K for thousand (as in a computer kilobyte). It was catchy and it was repeated. By mid-1999, it was embedded in our slang and already an un-hip phrase to use. Cool or not, it remained in use because it was easy to say and took up less space in the plethora of articles analyzing everything surrounding the four-digit change in date. Ironically, shortening the phrase was appropriate because a significant computer software problem had emerged. Over the decades computer programmers had shortened the date field in programs to save space. But, when the shortened versions changed from 99 to 00, would the computer interpret that as moving ahead one year or back 99? The stock market, banks, power plants, water supply and almost anything you can name would be affected by such a mistake. Armies of technicians were sent out, and billions of dollars were spent trying to change all the systems before New Year s Eve.

For some people, especially those who had endured the 1998 ice storm, Y2K represented a potential threat of inadequate food and water supplies and beds in school gymnasiums. For them, late 1999 became a time for preparation, for laying in stocks of food and hooking up generators. For others it was enough to fill

some jugs with water and buy batteries just in case. There were parties to plan large-scale celebrations that would merit bragging rights. Gigantic choreographed shows with music, fireworks and even new buildings were designed. There was also an urgency to make this particular New Year s Eve memorable. However, the majority of people ended up spending a quiet evening in. Perhaps they were worried about power failures or hooliganism. Or perhaps they were just fed up with all the hype.

The millennium computer scare, however, did remind us of just how fragile the infrastructure of modern global society can be. We have altered our lifestyles drastically over the past decade, let alone the last century or 1000 years. Around the time of the first millennium, only a minority of people were even aware of the date. Information as we know it today rarely reached the masses. By 1900, however, telephones, telegraphs, and trains had affected settlement patterns and made it easier to move information, but had little impact on day-to-day living, compared with today. In the year 2000 almost everything is connected. Computers have automated almost every task, from pumping gas to telecommunications to banking. Even for those people who try to avoid using computers, they are dependent on a network that supplies electricity, water, food, and gas. Our technologically dependent society could collapse very quickly if key systems shut down. We only have to look at areas deprived of power through acts of nature or war to see how rapidly civilization can begin to erode.

Now that 2000 has arrived, we can assess what all the fuss was about. Was it like Shakespeare s play in which intrigue, deception, speculation, subterfuge, and consternation turned out to be much ado about nothing ? The computer systems worked as they were supposed to, the apocalypse did not arrive. The giant parties came and went through the time zones. Life went on. Were the global efforts and expenses justified? Without the advance preparations, could it also have turned out to be a case of too little too late?

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Hindsight

Y2K: Much Ado About Nothing

Events come and go quickly. December 31, 1999, already feels passé. The anxiety felt at the time about massive computer failures or terrorist attacks seems quaint now. What were we so worried about? As you watch this News in Review report, let the images help you recall the general mind prevalent as New Year s Eve 1999 approached.

The Overall Picture
Use the following questions to assist you in re-creating the social, emotional, and media context.

1. What images depicted in the video suggest that we were faced with a crisis?
2. Provide an example suggested in the video of a mixed message, whereby one message is provided but is not matched by the actions.
3. How did countries outside Canada prepare for the new millennium?
4. What images and statements could be used to describe the anticipated Y2K situation as a non-event? What evidence is there that pre-Y2K preparations actually resulted in this being a non-event?
5. Although there were relatively few problems, jot down some examples of actual computer failures that occurred.
6. What problems could still occur as the year 2000 progresses?

Y2K Auld Lang Syne

This traditional New Year s Eve song, which in a way creates a link between the old and the new, thus allowing us to accept the passage of time, was especially poignant December 31, 1999. If by the words Should old acquaintance be forgot we are talking about friends, then no, no one wants to forget old friends and move on. However, in just about every other category, people do like to start again, especially when it comes to a new 1000-year period. Whether it is a new school term, a new job, or a new look, people want a chance for a fresh beginning. When we are just beginning, we have not yet made any mistakes. We can try to avoid a repeat of unhappy choices or ventures from earlier attempts. People make resolutions on New Year s Day which in effect say, this year will be different.

1. What sort of resolutions do people make? Instead of just modifying our behaviour, why do we pick a particular day to signify a major change? How successful do you believe such resolutions are?
2. Unlike individual resolutions, national resolutions affect many people. Decisions undertaken by a government have repercussions that potentially are worse than the status quo. Working in small groups, create five resolutions for three levels of government: federal, provincial, and municipal. Consider the feasibility of each resolution and what its impact might be. What mistakes from the past do you hope to avoid? What is your vision for each level of government?
3. When looking back at the 20th century it is easy to identify negative events: two World Wars, the Great Depression, the Cold War, the Holocaust, the Persian Gulf War, the Rwandan genocide. Adding to this list is a relatively simple task. Identifying the positive events or movements, however, may not be quite as easy. Generate a list of good events from the 20th century. Make suggestions as to how such good events could be replicated or repeated.

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The Dating Game

Y2K: Much Ado About Nothing

Were the new millennium parties held a year too soon? Purists believe so. According to them the new millennium begins January 1, 2001, not 2000. The argument follows that people celebrate their birthdays after they have completed a year. A baby turns one, for example, at the end of 12 months, much as the first millennium was one year old at the end of the first year. A 10-year savings bond matures at the end of the 10th year. This rationale means that a millennium is completed at the end of 1000 years, December 31, 2000. However, hundreds of millions of revellers chose to mark the millennium at the end of 1999. While some people might attempt to debate the rationale behind the 2001 argument, the reasons that so many prefer 2000 are more do with emotions and the human psyche. One reason in support of the millennium ending in 1999 is that people tend to prefer round numbers. Motorists pay particular attention when their cars pass 100 000 kilometres, not 100 001. Humans tend to put more emphasis on their 20th, 40th, or 60th birthdays. We divide our centuries into decades, 10-year periods that often have nicknames like the Roaring Twenties or the Swinging Sixties.

Perhaps this fascination with numbers ending with zeroes has something to do with the 10 digits we have on our hands. This might be built into the human subconscious after eons of counting with our fingers (and thumbs). Logically, kilometre 100 000 should be no more significant than number 98 937, but we

believe that it is significant. Since human lives are relatively short, observing a change in centuries is a rare event. Witnessing the changeover to a new millennium is unique and very rare. Two thousand is the roundest number present-day humans will ever experience. For emotional reasons we believe that this event is significant and that 2000 itself is the important milestone.

The Calendar
The fascination with the year 2000 is somewhat artificial in other ways. The current calendar was developed by the Romans in the time of Julius Caesar, about 44 BC. It was reformed several times and came to reflect the beliefs of Christians as Rome and its empire were converted. The leaders of the Christian Church determined to the best of their abilities the birth year of Jesus. It is debatable whether or not they got it right. Some historians claim there may be an error of up to six years. Nevertheless, the dating reflects the significance of the birth of Jesus in the Christian community. Hence dates are marked BC, Before Christ, and AD, Anno Domini, which means in the year of the Lord. AD should precede the date if correctly used for example, AD 2000. In recent years there have been moves to desecularize the dating system, which means removing the religious aspects. This reflects the fact that religious communities other than Christians share the same dating system. One change is to use Common Era (CE) or Before the Common Era (BCE) to replace AD and BC. Regardless of any attempts at change, AD will likely be commonly used for a long time.

The first millennium, the year 1000, went relatively unnoticed around the world. Most Europeans were illiterate or unconcerned with dates during these so-called Dark Ages. Other civilizations of the time such as the Han Dynasty in China, or the Mayan and Aztec empires in Central America used different calendars. According to the Jewish traditional calendar, we are now in the year 5760. The Muslim calendar dates from the Hegira, the departure of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in AD 622. The belief then that what most of the world considers the year 2000 as an especially significant time a great new age or a harbinger of doom is a very arbitrary notion.

Discussion and Activities
1. In your opinion, which date is more significant as a marker for the beginning of the millennium: 2000 or 2001? Now that most communities have held such momentous celebrations for December 31, 1999, should there be another big event for the following New Year s Eve?
2. Since the calendar has been modified so many times over the

last 2000 years sometimes arbitrarily should we pay so much attention to the rollover of big dates? Does our focus on special dates reflect an obsession with time?

3. Human beings engage in many rituals involving time, acting out important events, themes, and issues. A birthday is a recognition and celebration of an entire human life and a wish that that life continue well and for a long time. Make a list of other time-centred rituals we engage in as human beings. Suggest what the psychological or metaphoric significance is of each ritual.

4. Think back to the 24-hour celebrations that you probably watched on television beginning December 31, 1999. Although each celebration began symbolically at the stroke of midnight, what time did the first celebration start where you live? Describe the celebrations from various countries that you saw. How were they alike? In what way were they unique? How did these extraordinary celebrations unite the entire world for a brief moment in time?

5. Regardless of the accuracy of the millennium celebrations, what do you think the inhabitants of this planet achieved by celebrating this event together? How might the atmosphere and universal feeling expressed help us to live better? Why was this celebration such an important symbolic event?

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Bugs!

Y2K: Much Ado About Nothing

If anything, the Y2K scare was a good exercise in emergency preparedness. While reading the following information, consider what the world learned by this experience. For example, what did we learn about the global infrastructure?

When Peter de Jaeger, a Canadian computer consultant wrote an article titled Doomsday 2000 in 1993, critics accused him of acting like Chicken Little and of having an ulterior motive; some believed that this was a way to generate work for computer consultants. In his article, de Jaeger pointed out that programmers over the decades had designed software to use two digits for dates. They did this initially to save memory space when computers had very little to spare. It did save space but it meant that computers would not be able to distinguish between 2000 and 1900. Even when computer memory expanded astronomically, programmers neglected to change the number of digits for the date. Switching computers to a four-digit system is relatively simple, but the problem was compounded by the enormous number of computers and by the in-house programming created by each institution. A race began to ensure that all systems could be converted in time. Of primary concern were the effects that date rollover would have on essential services such as electrical power grids, communications, nuclear reactors, and water pumping stations. There were also fears that accidents would occur in vulnerable areas such airport traffic control, the stock markets, and the nuclear missile arsenal.

As New Year s Eve began in the Pacific and swept westward, it quickly became apparent that there were no major Y2K computer problems. There were no interruptions in computer-based services such as telephones, banking machines, or the Internet. Reported Y2K incidents included bus ticketing machines that briefly jammed in Australia and the U.S. Naval Observatory s Master Clock registering Jan. 1, 1900. The biggest disruptions were not computer glitches. Some telephone systems around the world were overloaded by the volume of calls made at midnight. The Y2K computer failures were such a non-event that millennium coverage on news programs, during which news anchors regularly checked with various experts to confirm that nothing was still happening, either struggled to find something to talk about or focused instead on the world-wide celebrations.

Was the Y2K problem a nearly avoided catastrophe or an exaggerated minor problem? This is difficult to determine. Corporations and government agencies dedicated large numbers of their workers to repair the flaw. Many more outside technical consultants were hired to check the systems. Dry runs were undertaken months in advance. It was estimated by the January 1 Washington Post that the cost to repair the world s computers will eventually reach $500-billion, making it the most expensive peacetime catastrophe in history. This, says the catastrophe camp, was the painful but necessary remedy that prevented disaster. Naysayers point out that the lack of problems indicates that the threat of a bug was overblown. The real test was in Russia, China, and developing nations such as Indonesia, which had older systems or could not devote the necessary resources to repair the programming. If Y2K was going to hit, it would do so most severely in those countries. Yet, Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe reported no problems. Regardless of the answer, one secondary benefit of this massive computer maintenance program is that the world s computer software and hardware are far more updated than ever. Companies and governments were forced to make hefty investments in technology, which in some cases were long overdue.

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Global Fever?

Y2K: Much Ado About Nothing

The musical artist formerly known as Prince demonstrated good marketing savvy when back in 1989 he recorded the song that said We re going to party like it s 1999. It sounded fresh and exciting then. By January of 1999, DJs had already pronounced the resurrected hit so clichéd and overplayed that it was dropped from many playlists. Were people so bombarded with messages about millennium themes, Y2K, and ultimate celebrations that they became blasé and turned off?

In many key locales on New Year s Eve, the answer was most definitely no. From a television point of view, the party was the ultimate global media event. Never had so many international television networks collaborated to the extent they did as the new millennium was celebrated in continuous stages around the planet. Technically it was an amazing phenomenon that highlighted incredible international co-operation. CBC s program, hosted by Peter Mansbridge, was on the air for 24 hours.

Sydney, Australia, put on the largest fireworks display on the planet, incorporating city buildings, bridges and the Sydney Opera House. The streets were jammed with roughly one million people. London, Tokyo, and Paris also staged dazzling artistic displays. Major events were also staged at Greece s Acropolis, Egypt s Great Pyramids and at the Vatican. The focal point for North Americans remained Times Square in New York City. Celebrants began staking out space over 24 hours in advance.

The large crowd celebrated hour after hour as New Year s Eve crossed each time zone. The New York party culminated, of course, with the dropping of the new and improved Waterford crystal ball at midnight. The great cities of the world each brought the world glimpses of its eternal cultural landmarks. It was a multicultural event without precedent.

The majority of people, however, avoided the public events and celebrated quietly at home. Television brought the party to them. According to Time magazine, 72 per cent of Americans stayed home on New Year s Eve. While large events were staged in cities across Canada, the gala concert event at the Corel Centre in Ottawa was cancelled because of poor ticket sales. Perhaps people were concerned about the possibility of power failures or disruptions in essential services and decided to play it safe. Another possibility is that people tire of the New Year s excess where each party has to be bigger than the previous year s. One of the reasons for a subdued millennium though, may be that people were just plain fed up with the whole idea. By late 1998 articles about the new millennium began appearing in the popular media. People were inundated with articles, television and radio programs, and advertisements in the 12 months running up to December 31. A party would seem anti-climatic after such a build-up. A wonderful summation of popular feeling about the Y2K aspect of the new millennium took place on the CBC s Royal Canadian Air Farce. A recurring skit on the show revolves around shooting pictures of celebrities with a large rubber chicken cannon. The final target of the New Year s Eve show was shooting a large Y2K sign. The studio audience cheered.

Discussion
Many of the world s largest cities vied for centre stage in the global millennium show to see who could have the largest or most innovative New Year s Eve function. Several Pacific nations went to great lengths to be the first to ring in the new year. Tonga shifted to daylight savings in order to beat out New Zealand s Chatham Islands by 15 minutes. Both were outmanoeuvred by Kiribati, which successfully applied to have the international date line moved in 1995 to take in one of its islands. Many couples entered contests and tried to time their pregnancies to have the first babies in 2000.

Suggest reasons why for television networks, major cities, and entire nations, this was an opportunity that could not be passed up. What might have been gained by each? In your opinion, was it worth the massive organization and expense involved? Did a minor computer bug create a global fever that got way out of

proportion or was it an appropriate catalyst for the world having a rare but great time?

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A Fragile Network

Y2K: Much Ado About Nothing

For almost two decades governments and corporations have emphasized the global village and the interconnectedness of the world s economy. The adjective global has been applied to many different sectors in society. Big corporations are global or multinational, moving their production facilities and capital from country to country to gain the greatest advantage. Borderless communications systems that have expanded with satellite and digital technologies and the Internet make it much easier to transfer information, which in many ways is the prime commodity of the new millennium. Nations have undertaken trade agreements to reduce both economic and political barriers. The advantages of such interconnectedness can translate into more international co-operation, increased profits, and more ventures explored. At the personal and local community level our lives have also become more interconnected electronically. Sophisticated telecommunications, fibre optic cable networks, and accelerating Internet tools provide us with more options and convenience to connect in ways that were not possible before. Consider, for example, how friends and families can connect visually and through sound whether they are next door or thousands of kilometres away. Consider also the converse: the potential for electronic communication to promote solitary activities, aloneness, and separation. As has been said many times, technology is only as good as the way in which it is used and the reasons for which it is used.

The global village network is like a spider s web, an amazing aesthetic and engineering feat that is only as strong as its individual elements. The engine that makes such global interconnectedness possible today is the computer, and the Y2K test case demonstrated both the potential for failure of such a network but also, as it turned out, the ability of all nations of the planet to connect simultaneously.

Computer technology increases at a dizzying rate; there is a new generation of computers roughly every two years. The astronomic expansion of disk storage and memory size has meant most tasks are now handled, at least in part, by computers. Efficiency and convenience have increased, but so has our dependence and, consequently, vulnerability. A similar vulnerability is apparent when a natural disaster strikes. When the ice storm struck Quebec, Ontario, the Maritimes, and the Northeastern U.S. in January 1998, millions of homes and businesses were blacked out, some for up to a month. People became refugees in their own towns. The loss of the power grid forced many to camp out in schools and other public buildings just to stay warm and fed. The loss of telephones meant that many people were isolated in their homes. The economy in these areas ground to a halt.

Another crisis revealed the vulnerability of global interconnectedness. In 1998, Asia s economic crisis spread like the flu to other nations. Asian nations experienced local economic problems that blossomed into a regional recession. Many nations currencies such as those of South Korea and Japan were devalued as a result. Since Asia had less money, it spent less on foreign goods. Other regions such as Latin America and Russia underwent recessions and their own currency devaluations. Canadian exports declined in markets outside North America, but Canada, the U.S., and Europe were able to ride out the storm. However, the fear of worldwide deflation and recession was very real. This crisis reinforced the reality that no nation can operate in isolation, nor can they be insulated from other nations crises.

The loss of computers would produce many similar problems. Computers are used to control or monitor essential areas such as power systems, water supplies, traffic control, banking, and communications. Regardless of the debate on how serious a threat the Y2K bug actually posed, it certainly made people aware of how integral computers are to modern society. The global effort to avoid a Y2K bug could therefore have been a case of global preventive medicine as opposed to potential disease.

Follow-up Discussion

Suggest other cases of global bugs that can destabilize international efforts. For example, what effect have recent scandals in international sport had on the local community? Why is an international trade in illegal drugs like an infectious disease?

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Discussion, Research, and Essay Questions

Y2K: Much Ado About Nothing

1. It is one thing to list a top choice for Person of the Year/ Century, but quite another to defend it. Choose either the category year or century. Do some preliminary research to determine who the notable personalities were over this time period. Decide who you believe to be the number one individual in your category. Write a comparative essay that defends your number one choice.

2. In 1918, John B. Bogart, the editor of the New York Sun wrote When a dog bites a man, that is not news, because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, that is news. With reference to this quote suggest why the Y2K problem may only have been a problem of perception.

3. Much of the excitement about the new millennium focused on the passage of 2000 years. However, the establishing of Year 1 was determined by religion, culture, and perhaps human error. Write a report on the development and evolution of the calendar. This topic can be subdivided into smaller ones. For example, you could research religious calendars: Egyptian, Roman, Chinese, Julian, or Gregorian. And because a recurring problem throughout history was how to deal with the fraction of a day (approximately 11 minutes) that moved calendars out of sync, you might also research how modern time is measured and maintained.

4. Life in the year 1000 was radically different from today s world. Choose an area of the world and research the lifestyle of the people of that time. How different were they in terms of life

expectancy, health, food, housing, communication, government and law, conflict, and entertainment? What similarities or parallels exist between the lives of people living in the 11th century and those in the 21st?

5. It is amusing to look at articles and images created in the 1950s describing life as they thought it would be in the 21st century: people operating flying cars, robots doing all the work, the absence of poverty. It looked something like the Jetsons cartoon show or the 1968 movie, 2001: A Space Odyssey, in which one of the characters was HAL, a computer with artificial intelligence. Many of these predictions were way off. As well, other innovations appeared that were not foreseen 40 or 50 years ago. Currently there are predictions being made in popular magazines and journals about what life will be like 20 to 50 years from now. Research one of these predictions and write a short essay assessing the likelihood of its occurring. Is the prediction a logical extension of the technology and attitudes we have today or is it speculative fantasy?

6. The Y2K bug was not a bug but rather an oversight in programming. The software performed the way it was designed. The programmers simply assumed that fixes would be made as the hardware and memory sizes improved. The only reason that we had a crisis is that the changes were left to the last minute. It does not compare to the disruptive or malicious viruses that are created and planted every year. Research and write a report on the current viruses, how they work, and the damage that they do. You may also wish to research techniques used to combat viruses and to track down their creators.

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