Cartography

MAPS ON THE SMALL SCREEN

by David Rhind

■ The video machine might have revolutionized the television industry but other fields are also beginning to take advantage of the floppy disk. The potential for cartography is enormous. About 55,000 frames or pictures can be stored on each side of a video disk and two American papers at the recent International Cartographic Association conference examined the potential use of these as archives of maps – particularly when linked to a microcomputer.

In Britain, three important developments are in progress, all with the active collaboration of Ordnance Survey. The Printing Industries Research Association, for instance, is in the throes of producing an OS small-scale video atlas and gazetteer. Slightly more advanced is the British Telecom system which holds large scale OS maps on video disk and map up-date and other information (eg the locations of electricity cables) on floppy disks, the two being drawn out superimposed on the computer screen.

■ One of the great potential advantages of such a system is that it provides some of the advantages of holding all maps in computer form without the substantial costs of converting them into digital form: the maps are simply stored as video pictures. One substantial disadvantage is the resolution (or detail) of what can be portrayed: all the development work indicates that 4×3 km area is the largest extent of an OS 1/50,000 scale map which can be shown and all the text read easily on present technology. Other cartographic features such as roads, coastlines, and so on are, however, readily recognizable over larger areas.

■ Perhaps the most exciting development of all, however, is the recently launched BBC Domesday project. This is scheduled to be operational in September 1986, thereby marking the 900th anniversary of the original survey. Some idea of the scale of the project can be gained from its financing: the Department of Trade and Industry, Philips, the BBC, Acorn and other computer manufacturers are all involved in the £2.5 million project This collaboration effort is necessary because the Domesday project is one stage on from those of BT and PIRA. In addition to many thousands of pictures selectable via the computer, text and data will be stored on the disk. The BBC are planning nothing less than a revolution – the encapsulation of several million pages of information describing the UK, its environment, people, society and organizations in the late 20th century. Users will be able to retrieve information and, in many cases, represent detailed geographical data. Text, written locally, will describe local areas. All of this will reside on two video disks and the projected price of the whole package – computer, video disk equipment, software and disks – is no more than £1100.

■ Three particular parts of the data base will be of interest to geographers. A 'people's data base' will consist of locally-collected information, perhaps on land use, and be related to small areas such as 1 km grid squares: schools will be approached to collect some of this information and to write descriptive texts on their area. A national photographic competition is being set up, the winning photographs also being held on the disk and relatable to geographical position. Finally, statistics on population, social, economic and other characteristics are being stored together with a detailed gazetteer.

■ Final decisions on many of these matters are still being taken, especially by the editorial board which includes two geographers. Further information is available from Mike Tibbetts, Room 201, BBC TV Offices, Queens Park Rangers Stadium, South Africa Road, London W12 7PP. ■