Walk into Rockley Miller's cozy office. It's in the basement around the corner from the washer and dryer and pinball machine. Inside, you'll see a nifty computer setup that's networked to the computers in the spare bedrooms upstairs.

Miller's office, and those of his two staff members, fairly bursts with paper and the other detritus common to publishing concerns. The Videodisc Monitor is growing, and pretty soon Rockley Miller won't be able to work out of his home anymore.

Miller's newsletter, generally regarded as being the best chronicler of the videodisc industry, has gained its editor and publisher well-deserved recognition. Having tracked developments in videodisc technology since 1976, Miller has become a sought-after conference speaker and a widely quoted authority. He holds a B.A. in Industrial Management from Johns Hopkins University and an M.S. in Management Information and Technology from American University.

But it wasn't videodiscs that we wanted to discuss with Miller. We had made his acquaintance in October at the First Optical Disc Read Only Memory Forum, in Arlington, Va. Attended by experts as well as neophytes, the conference brought together manufacturers and potential users of optical-disc technology.

The entire show was fascinating; clearly, it was a seminal event for this rapidly growing industry. No question: There's a lot to learn about optical discs and their potential for educators and trainers. We asked Rockley Miller for help.

TechTrends: Educators and trainers are just getting used to microcomputers. Now comes along optical discs, and the subject of new technology once again is confusing and daunting. Please explain some of the new terms we have to learn: OD-ROM, CD-ROM, WORM, and so forth.

Miller: The new terms basically fall under the general category of optical disc. Optical-disc storage can take a lot of different forms. The initials ROM stand for Read Only Memory. That would refer to your types of discs, like the compact discs we've seen in stores, videodiscs, discs that are written once and then mass replicated, that the end user can't record any information on. The term WORM stands for Write Once Read Mostly, or Read Many. In either case, that refers to a disc that's like a blank piece of paper: You can record on it, but once you've recorded on it, you can't rerecord on it. You can't erase it. That's one more category of optical disc.

Then you get into your erasable discs that will act just like a mag-
TechTrends: Do they exist now?

Miller: They exist, but they're not really on the market yet. But they're certainly prevalent in all of the labs and have been shown by a number of companies.

TechTrends: A lot of people consider that a disadvantage, not being able to erase, write over, or record on a consumer CD. You're saying that you can do it in some of the professional and business applications?

Miller: You will be able to. You can't buy that technology yet. It's most often referred to as magneto-optic technology. But that's coming very soon. In the next couple of years that will be available at the professional level.

You're right about the fact that a lot of people perceive that as a disadvantage in the consumer market. But for prerecorded markets, such as music or movies, the need for the ability to record your own stuff is fairly minimal. You have that with videotape. This technology is not trying to duplicate or to replace videotape. It's coming into a different market niche, and it has a different purpose.

TechTrends: What are some of the advantages of CDs? I know they have tremendous memory capacities.

Miller: The basic advantage on the consumer side is high audio quality and low cost. But in terms of the impact for educators and for data storage, it is a tremendous incremental leap forward in data capacity. We're talking 550 megabytes, the equivalent of a thousand floppy disks. The real advantage is that you get that high quality, that high data density in a small package that's highly replicable. The discs are stamped out in a non-real-time replication process, which makes it very different from any of the magnetic media. And that makes it very good for any application that requires any kind of broad distribution. That's where it really comes into its greatest strength.