

Enhancing communication at a large conference festival

Introduction Introduction

The purpose of this document is to outline some practical options for use of computer-conferencing techniques to facilitate a variety of interactions between participants at a large conference /festival /exhibition. The document has been prepared in response to the encouragement of the organizers of several large conference /festival events who are looking at the possibility of using such techniques in the near future.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that the advocates of this approach consider it to be a breakthrough in interpersonal communication of as much significance as was the telephone. Many new forms of interaction become possible, particularly that of making contact (possibly anonymously) with people whose names one does not know but who have similar interests and projects. This type of communication environment can support a whole new style of people-organization. However, there is a real difficulty in explaining the nature of this breakthrough into an « altered state of communication ». « Most of our intuitions about face-to-face interaction simply do not apply to this new and unusual form of communication. In computer conferencing, time and distance are dissolved... Each person's « memory » of what has been said is accurate and complete. And everyone may speak at once or listen at leisure. With such features, it is not surprising that computer conferencing might actually establish an altered state of communication in which the realities of face-to-face communication are distorted and entirely new patterns of interaction emerge » (Jacques Vallee).

This document will not give detailed background information on computer conferencing, since an explanatory survey covering a variety of viewpoints has been produced as a special issue of *Transnational Associations* (October 1977).

As opposed to the main use for which computer conferencing is advocated, namely linking people who are geo-

graphically dispersed, this document focuses on its use for linking people attending a large conference or festival. This does not exclude the possibility of linking in people at more distant locations.

It is vital to understand that a conference/festival is not dependent upon the use of this technique, if employed, but that it is a catalyst and support for new kinds of interaction. Participants can choose to use it or ignore it as they see fit.

Context

Experience with conferences of more than about 40 participants indicates that despite physical proximity people frequently do not « make contact » although they may have common concerns, interests, etc.

It is not uncommon for people to recognize their mutual interest at some closing event or even months or years after the occasion at which they were both present. Since a principal objective is to use the concentration of human resources for participants to further their shared concerns, missed contacts are a sign of sub-optimum organization.

A conference /festival which only encourages participants to maintain a role of « consumers » of exhibits, lectures, and displays does not make use of the « critical mass » of people present. Many participants would be pleased to benefit from the stimulating influence of the occasion to make other things happen, to explore shared interests with others who may be present, and to bring new projects into being. This introduces a special dimension of spontaneity and creativity which no other occasion can adequately provide. Although not essential, computer-conferencing techniques can do much to make this « multiplicative interaction » take wing and to nurture its development. It can certainly take a lot of the burden off the organizer.

It is also true that the more active or eminent participants tend to suffer from « contact overload » because of

the time which each face-to-face contact demands on such occasions. Such key people therefore normally have to « manoeuvre » to reduce the risk of new over-demanding contacts thus reducing their value to the occasion and cutting themselves off from some new contact which they would find valuable. Computer-conferencing provides a means of « filtering » contacts without « loss-of-face » to either party. It helps to improve each person's use of his own time and energy. The opportunity for anyone to send messages to anyone means that question /discussion periods at the end of lectures do not have to bear such a communication load and are not terminated at some arbitrary moment by time constraints. Those most involved can continue to interact via a computer conference. Participants can continue to ask questions of the speaker via computer without competing for question time at the end of the lecture. (Similarly participants can leave messages for exhibitors to send them documentation if a stand is busy.) Such opportunities illustrate the significance of this new communication support as a new level of subtle organizational support for people interaction. Its full significance remains to be understood.

Goals

An ideal checklist of communication requirements during a conference has been developed (*International Associations*, 1976, pp. 34-37). But this goes beyond some of the current possibilities. It is useful to note briefly the following realistic goals which a conference /festival should attempt to achieve:

- Each participant should leave with the belief that he or she has been provided with an environment which made possible the optimum number of useful contacts under the circumstances (including unexpected, serendipitous contacts) and that the limit to further contacts and sharing did not lie with communication obstacles in the conference /

festival process but with his or her ability or desire to handle more links.

- Each participant and group representative should leave with the belief that the communication process has facilitated (rather than hindered) the emergence of whatever new joint activities / projects were possible, between what ever possible coalitions of people and groups, with whatever degrees of coordination were possible.
- Each participant and group representative should leave with the belief that through their interaction during the conference /festival they have satisfactorily enriched the communication data base which facilitated their interaction and which can be appropriately used without loss of momentum to develop follow up contacts (mailings, publications, etc.) prior to the next occasion. (In effect the communication environment is made up of an evolving network, a new kind of decentralized organization with many focal points. Each succeeding conference /festival merely reinforces and re-energizes the whole process.)

Description

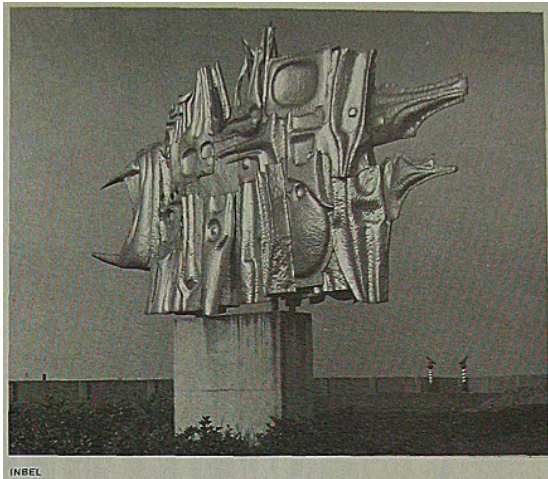
The following description has been divided into two parts :

A Participant's perspective
 B Organizer's perspective.
 Clearly unless the first constitutes a credible and desirable environment, the second is irrelevant. However, providing a description from the participant's perspective necessarily precludes a logical step-by-step explanation. Some points are therefore repeated or could be much more succinctly expressed from the second perspective.

A : Participant's perspective

1. Entry: Participants would register or purchase tickets in the normal manner (possibly in advance to reduce queuing), since this process should not be disrupted.

2. Communication environment : Various means would be used to make participants aware that they are entering a « communication environment » (such means could include preliminary write-ups, hand-outs to those queuing, leaflets in preliminary mailings, etc.). Participants should be made aware that they can choose to increase or decrease their involvement in the communication process. Clearly the minimum level of communication is to simply purchase a ticket, examine the exhibits, then leave. Greater involvement is achieved by talking to exhibitors or



trying out some of the exhibits, where appropriate. These are the conventional options on such occasions.

3. What's on: Should a participant desire to become slightly more involved in the communication environment, he may simply want to identify what spontaneous get-togethers are emerging as a result of the interaction between those more deeply involved. (Some of these get-togethers may be face-to-face meetings or lectures in rooms selected up to the last moment according to indicated attendance; others may be group discussions with stored messages via computer, particularly where face-to-face meetings are unnecessary or impossible because of the tight or incompatible schedules of those interested, or the limited availability of appropriate rooms; the latter may lead to the former, and the former may be continued by the latter). To obtain this information, the participant would go to one of several information desks around the festival area. There he could be supplied, possibly for a minimum fee (e.g. \$ 4.25), with a copy of the latest activity report relating to the general area of his interest. (Such reports could be generated every hour or so, edited with computer assistance, and then duplicated.) If he wanted more detailed or up-to-the-minute information, this could be obtained from the computer terminal at the information desk with the assistance of a host stationed there (again, possibly for a minimum fee, say \$ 0.50). With his information the participant can then choose whether to attend any of

the « open » events or involve himself further in order to participate in some - of the special interest event.

4. Sending messages : The participant may wish to limit his further involvement to sending a message to one or more identified participants, e.g.

- you left your coat in my car; I will be at Stand 42 from 10.30 til 10.45.

— I liked your lecture; do you know of J.R. Webster's book on the topic. Title : Tomorrow and Again.

— I liked the questions you asked at Smith's talk. If you are free I will be at meeting point 15 at 2.30.

— Make sure you speak to Ken Jones on Stand 29.

Such messages do not require that the participant identify himself. To send them, the participant can go to any - information desk and either dictate them to the assistant there or fill out a message form (rather as when sending a telegram). The participant would normally be charged some suitable fee for each message.

5. Receiving messages : In order for the participant to be more involved he needs to be able to receive messages. Such messages will be stored by the computer until he deletes them. But for the computer to store them it needs an « address » or identifier for him. The simplest address is the participant's name. This may be used for sending « general messages » when it is not known whether someone is more specifically identified. (It is not very satisfactory because John R. Smith may list himself as J. Smith, of which there



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could be several. And people sending messages to J.R. Smith would miss him. However, the organizers may arrange for someone to link such partial identifiers to precise identifiers where the messaged participant is in fact more involved.)

6. Acquiring a conference /festival identity : The next level of involvement is that at which the participant effectively fills out a « communication form », if he so desires. The form could also be sent out (and returned) in advance by mail or be included in the periodical produced by the organizers. It could be handed to people whilst queuing and would be available at information desks. Or the contents could be dictated at an information desk. The main purpose of the form

is to allocate a unique identifier to the participant (this could be the entrance ticket number, registration number, an alphabetic code, or some other number).

The participant can fill out as much or as little of the form as corresponds to his intentions and interests. The contents can be revised whenever necessary during the conference/festival. Such a form might include items such as :

- *unique identifier*
(possible pre-stamped on the form)
- *pseudonym*
(if the participant does not wish his real name to appear in the participant directory and wishes to exchange messages anonymously or with known contacts)

— *name — address*

(the address may be omitted entirely, only supplied in order to receive mailings, or also supplied for listing in the participant directory)

— *organization(s) represented*

— *topics of interest*

(topics in a standard checklist could be selected; non-standard or new topics could also be listed by the participant).

Other details could be included concerning : what he or she wants to contribute to or get out of a sharing process on a particular topic; the maximum size of group in which he is prepared to participate; preference for lecture, discussion, action, etc. Again a fee could be charged to cover the cost of inserting this information into the computer.

7. Exchanging messages: Once the participant is identified in the communication environment, his name or pseudonym is listed in a conference, festival directory which is maintained on computer. (It may be « consulted » via any terminal or information desk, parts of it may be listed on request and (or a fee for participants interested in a particular topic, but it is unlikely that the whole directory will be listed out and distributed.) The participant will now start to receive messages of various kinds. They will be stored in the computer either for visual inspection at any terminal or else he may request that they be listed out on paper every hour (or collection at a « pigeon-hole »). The nature of the messages will be determined by the information and « filters » supplied in the « communication form ». Messages may include any of the following:

- invitations automatically addressed to anyone interested in a standard topic (or combination of topics)
 - reminders to visit certain Stands
 - reminders to attend certain lectures, panel sessions, etc. at the festival or in the future.
 - reminders to purchase certain products or services (e.g. books, periodicals, etc.).
 - calls to subscribe to a declaration on some current issue
 - calls for collaborators on a joint project.
 - calls for papers for a future conference.
- invitations specifically addressed to the participant in the light of something he or she is known to have said or done at the festival/conference or previously
 - suggestions that he meet up with a group of people for an informal discussion
 - suggestion that he speak to a group on a topic (possibly of his choice), either during the conference /festival or at some later date
 - suggestion that he participate in one or more computer miniconferences (see below).
- a variety of messages from people who want to make contact with him, give him information, or pass on messages from friends (e.g. « Don't forget that Jane wants us to meet at 5.00 pm to go with the others to Bill's. Don't forget the leaflets. Anne »). The possibility of exchanging such apparently trivial messages increases the fluidity of any occasion as much as the telephone increased the fluidity of normal social life in comparison with the messenger era of the past. He may also send questions to other identified participants to which they

can respond if they so choose. Some of these exchanges between two or more people via computer may be continued sporadically throughout the duration of the conference, particularly if the people concerned have commitments which prevent them from getting together in one place.

8. Joining a computer-conference : The next possible level of involvement for a participant is to link together with up to 50 or more people in a « computer mini-conference » on a special topic on which they all have an active interest. Some computer mini-conferences may be deliberately prepared by the organizers prior to the occasion in collaboration with interested individuals or groups. Others emerge in the light of the meeting process, possibly stimulated by a particular lecture or other event, or possibly as a result of the networking activities of one individual or group. A participant can collaborate in as many of the computer mini-conferences as interest him — and in each he will be linking with a different network of people. From the participants point of view, one of these mini-conferences operates in the following way :

- he registers himself by a message to the focal person for the mini-conference, who incorporates his name in the list of members of that conference,
- the new participant may now obtain any of the following (either directly on a terminal or listed onto paper) :
 - list of other participants and their interests
 - the current « agenda » of that mini-conference
 - the text of statements made by one of more participants on any agenda item
- as a participant he may now
 - send private messages to any of the other participants in relation to any agenda item
 - make general statements on any agenda item for examination by all participants
 - propose new agenda items (e.g. projects, discussion points, etc.)
- one of the conference participants may take on the role of « editor » in order to
 - select and structure the stored statements into a draft « report » or « news bulletin », if such is required
 - amend a draft report in the light of comments from the other participants, then list it for duplication and circulation.
- as a participant he may express a « feeling /vote » on any stored statement to help the group move toward some degree of consensus.

— as a participant he could use a private « work space » to draft out a major statement, sharing it with selected other participants of that mini-conference, before releasing (or general consideration).

Clearly a particular mini-conference may range from a casual interchange (without any effort to reach conclusions or produce a collective statement) or else it may be a very intensive interchange using all the facilities available. It is up to the participant to choose his preferred mode in each case. If he is simultaneously a member of other computer mini-conferences, he may (within a space of minutes, or at his convenience) bring up to date his contributions to each of them.

9. Conference/festival networking : That last possible level of involvement for a participant is as an activator or network broker. Such key individuals may choose to make it their function to scan the conference/festival directory (possible in the light of messages exchanged with other key people) in order to propose to specific people that they meet together or that they link together in a computer mini-conference on topics they apparently have in common.

They may also chide some of their participant-friends for inappropriately defining themselves on the communication form, and thus disguising their full importance to the occasion and to others present.

Others may selectively survey participants to determine what mental models they are using which may influence the kinds of topics (and people) they believe to be mutually relevant. Such models can be distributed to participants or displayed on wall charts on a special Stand. This kind of activity help people to see « where they are at » in relation to other participants.

10. Involving other towns and countries : Not everyone can be physically present at a conference/festival some or all of the time, whether because of the cost of travel, or because of other commitments, or because they are only interested in a special aspect of it which does not justify their presence. On the other hand some may not wish to be physically present for personality, prestige or political reasons and would prefer to participate under a pseudonym from a distance. Such individuals and groups can however participate more or less directly by the following methods :

- by telephoning a conference/festival message desk (a) to see whether there are any computer-stored messages for them, and (b) to dictate messages to be stored (or other participants (possibly as members of mini-conferences)

- by a computer terminal linked by telephone line to the network of terminals at the conference /festival (e.g. a terminal already installed for other purposes at a university or some other institution)
- by telephoning to a message desk at the location of the nearest terminal (a) to see whether there are any computer-stored messages for them, and (b) to dictate messages to be stored for other participants.

It would appear that there are many unexplored possibilities (or using « intermediate » techniques (including hand distributed message lists, telephoning messages to free terminal locations and using the telex network) to link people and groups at distant locations into the conference /festival network.

11. Computer games, art and distractions : Aside from facilitating the sharing process between participants, at the conference /festival or elsewhere, the availability of computer terminals permits other (alternative) uses, either by particular exhibitors demonstrating on special stands or by participants in general.

Possibilities of interest of participants include :

- various computer-based games (e.g. ecological games, decision games, educational games, etc.), computer simulations, etc.
- computer games for children who rapidly develop familiarity with terminals and the whole environment which they render possible.
- computer art (e.g. poetry, images, cartoons, etc.).

In each case participants can become actively and creatively involved in the use of these devices — whether for serious purposes or simply because they provide an amusing form of distraction.

In those cases where more than one terminal is used, there is no reason why some of the terminals should not be in other towns or counties. So, for example, a (ecology) game might involve participants at several US universities (e.g. the World Game group initiated by R. Buckminster — Fuller).

12. Other possibilities : The exciting thing about this new technique is that its special significance lies not in what the organizers expect participants to use it for, but rather in the other possible uses which will emerge as participants recognize its possibilities for helping them to do what they want to do better. And it is the young people who open up these possibilities most quickly.

B : Organizer's perspective

1. General organization : The presence of computer terminals and the use of computer conferencing techniques need not affect the general organization of a conference /festival. Such facilities are present to assist participants if they so wish, their presence does not make the communication dependent upon them. They may however assist the organizer.

2. Number of terminals VS. number of participants : The number of terminals which can usefully be installed needs to be explored in the light of the costs. Basically it is better to have

more terminals rather than less. For,

pectable number at one location for a specialized conference. Given that some (say 5) would have to be allocated to information desks, some to « networking stands » (say 3), some for games and art (say 2), some for the organizer (say 2), this does not leave many available for casual use at a large conference/festival. It would seem that in a large conference /festival of, say, 2,000-5,000 persons physically present, a minimum of 32 terminals would be necessary on site to enable the computer conferencing process to take wing successfully. At any lower number, some useful computer-based interaction could be facilitated and supported, but always with the danger of making it a gimmick rather a ge-

nuine adjunct to the communication



Peter-Paul Rubens — The Steen Park

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as with the telephone, the whole communication process is disrupted if participants have to wait an inordinate length of time before being able to

check for any messages received and to send messages of any kind. It would be counter-productive if only one terminal could be installed, for example, since its status as a « demonstration technique » would only impress the « hardware nuts », alienate the « people people », whilst contributing nothing to the communication process. A crowd of people around one terminal can represent a communication failure rather than a success. The availability of an unoccupied terminal is in fact an encouragement to a participant to explore the opportunities of this new medium.

Terminals : Preliminary contacts indicate that 16 terminals is already a res-

process.

Participant/users: Of those physically present, probably only a small percentage of active participants (say 5-10 %) would want to use the computer-conferencing facility several times per day. Others (say 10-20 %) would use it to exchange occasional messages, and others not at all. These percentages would of course vary with the kind of meeting and the subject matter but they can be controlled by varying the basic charges (or even by increasing the cost to reduce the demand at peak periods during the conference day). This is obviously not particularly satisfactory since it constitutes an artificial constraint on communication. But until more is known about how to balance demand against terminal/computer availability, it is a realistic and effective approach.

3. Obtaining terminals : Since there are few precedents for the use of this technique at large conference /festivals, especially outside North America, there may well be difficulty at present in obtaining many terminals for a one week period — although this should not be the case in the near future. Some of the standard ways around this are :

- contact the major hardware manufacturers to see whether they have spare equipment and are interested in the occasion as a promotional exercise.
- contact the companies leasing computer hardware.
- Alternatively, or in combination with the above :
- contact the « computer underground » of people in the computer world who locate and use computer « free-time » for fun and are happy to share their enthusiasm on an appropriate occasion
- contact large universities which have networks of terminals (and may well be using the conferencing process with students).

The problem is to blend together the various opportunities which these different kinds of contacts can offer in the fifth of their respective costs. It may, for example, be possible to get enough terminals at an acceptable (subsidized) rental cost, by working with three different contacts. The technology is developing very rapidly and, with the introduction of mini-processors, an interesting form of computer conferencing is possible with a set of « multi mini-processors » involving up to 16 terminals. One approach might therefore be to use two independent sets with whatever constraints that implied.

4. Obtaining computer time : Obtaining appropriate terminals is directly linked to the question of obtaining computer time. Whilst it may seem highly desirable to be able to link the terminals to a computer (possibly belonging to the conference centre) of which one has sole use, this is only practicable at this time at a major university — and the degree of dependence on one computer may be undesirable.

Basically the same contacts noted above should be consulted with regard to obtaining computer time. In addition, however, computer time may be obtainable from sympathetic institutions :

- corporations
- government agencies
- universities

as well as from commercial time sharing services (which may be prepared to subsidize the exercise for promotional reasons).

A special difficulty is that, for the computer-conferencing process to be completely successful, access to the

main computer is required through (and ideally before and after) the hours at which the conference /festival is open. Compromises are always possible, but this is an important constraint. It should not be forgotten that it may even be easier to support the whole conference process from a major computer on another continent. In fact it may be easier to subsidize such an innovation in Europe by doing much of the computer processing at an appropriate institution in North America — where such innovations are more acceptable and where there might be interest in « tracking » the conferencing process for research purposes. Under such circumstances, an important cost would then be the data link between continents for which there are special rates (although various « piggy-back » options may be available through sympathetic institutions.

5. Computer failure and delays : Despite enthusiasm for the computer-conferencing process, it should not be forgotten that computer systems fail. Under some circumstances back-up systems are always available, but in other cases everything is frozen. Failures of this kind can constitute a most unpleasant experience for all concerned. For this reason it is important not to make a « big prestige thing » out of the presence of computer terminal facilities. They should be treated in a low-key manner, whether or not all goed well. Promotional splurges should be made after they have been successfully used and not in anticipation thereof — else the dramatic intercontinental opening link may be a complete flop.

Less serious, but nevertheless disruptive of the communication process, is the tendency for the central computer to be overloaded at certain peak periods. This leads to delays at each terminal before a message is accepted and before the terminal responds. The likely extent of such delays should be determined when negotiating for computer time.

6. Distribution and status of terminals :

Mention has been made earlier of reserving some terminals for special use. Aside from terminals reserved for the organizers and those using them for special purposes (demonstration games, art, etc), a decision must be made about how to facilitate participant access to them.

Clearly it is important to have enough terminals at enough information / message desks to avoid crowding, queuing, etc. This use of terminals is always either — verbally via the assistant at the desk or — in writing on a message form handed in (like a telegram).

A distinction may usefully be made between this kind of general use and

assistance and a form of more specialized (« personalized ») use and assistance. A second category of terminals could be scattered around the conference/festival area to which participants could go to engage in « assisted computer-conferencing ». At such points they would find someone who would send or retrieve any messages for them for whichever conferences they were currently active participants. As the participant acquired familiarity with the procedure he could perform the operations himself (with occasional questions to the assistant). Finally, he could switch whenever he felt confident to a third category of terminals which could be located in groups of 3 to 5 (say) with only one assistant per group. Note that the computer conferencing systems are designed to help and prompt the participant whenever he is in doubt so assistants are only, really necessary to overcome the initial (but very important) psychological barrier.

7. Distributing messages on paper (« hard copy ») : In conventional computer conferencing, effort is usually made to avoid listing out messages on paper; in many cases the messages are flashed onto a screen for visual inspection and can always be retrieved from computer memory. However it is not practical to encourage this message browsing process when there is a constraint on terminal availability — and when, in contrast to conventional computer conferencing, each participant does not have his own terminal. In a particular case, if he needs browsing time, an economic alternative is for the participant simply to indicate at the terminal which messages he wants to examine in detail. He then requests via the terminal (or via an information /message desk) that they be listed on a special (high-speed line) printer of which one or more could be installed at the conference /festival. The collection of messages listed onto paper for each participant can easily be separated, folded and pigeon-holed by participant number until he comes by to pick it up from a special message distribution desk. Note that this is an option available in conventional computer conferencing systems but is less favored, because the terminal is usually a considerable distance from the (high-speed) printer — which is not the case in a conference festival. (There could even be several such message distribution desks at different locations, each with its own printer, and the participant could specify to which he wished his message sent at any one time).

When there are many communications stored, participants should be warned in advance as to how much text they will receive in response to any request for such messages to be listed. In this way a participant can refine his request

rather than run the risk of receiving a kilo of paper, appropriately charged.

8. Charging and subsidizing costs

(a) Equipment and general costs and subsidies : As discussed above, it may well be possible to obtain considerable assistance from different kinds of contact. In addition to those mentioned, there is always the possibility of getting foundation support to reduce the effective costs. It is however usually difficult to obtain general support of this kind and it may be easier to obtain support for specific kinds of communication as discussed below.

(b) Charging and subsidizing participants for enhanced communication : One advantage of computer-assisted communications is that by its very nature the computer is capable of providing a precise count of all the elements which make up the cost of linking two or more identified people.

In conventional computer conferencing each person is usually given a budget (if the particular mini-conference is subsidized) via the organizer of that mini-conference. Or else each participant pays in advance for a fixed amount of computer use, in both cases the computer then deducts from the person's account every time he makes use of the facility. Charges are automatically made, for example, for:

- time at the switched-on terminal
- number of characters of message sent, stored, and received
- number of lines printed onto paper.

The participant can then recover unused funds, if appropriate.

At a conference /festival there are a number of possible approaches to gov-

erning the costs of computer use. A combination may be offered so that the participant can choose between them according to his needs. Those below are listed in approximate order of the sums involved :

(i) Cash payment for minor services :

When a participant only wants to make casual use of the communication enhancement, cash payments may be made to the person at the information / message desk :

- to whom he gives a message to be sent
- from whom he receives information obtained from a terminal by an assistant
- from whom he receives messages on paper (via the high-speed printer)

(ii) Establishment of a participant account : When the participant plans to make more frequent use of the facilities offered, and especially when he plans to use a terminal himself or participate in a mini-conference, then it is better to open an account. This may be done preferably with a fixed prepayment but possibly by invoicing from the person after the conference /festival. A normal procedure when opening an account is to link it to the participant's identify number (described earlier). In addition, however, it is usual for the participant to specify a password for himself which the computer will recognize via a terminal so that only he can use that account. A similar procedure is adopted by anyone using a terminal, including an organizer, to ensure appropriate accounting.

(iii) Terminal rental : Some exhibitors or groups of participants may wish to rent one or more terminals for their sole use for a period of an hour, a day, or for the whole conference/festival. A special charge would have to be made for such exclusive equipment use, but it does not affect the need to charge for actual use of computing time as described above.

(iv) Subsidized usage ; Some organizations or individuals may wish to encourage the communication enhancement by partial or complete subsidy. This might be negotiated in advance of the conference /festival or because of a chance proposal made in response to circumstances during the event. Subsidies might be made for :

- any computer use, in order to reduce the effective unit rates of computer use to any participants
- computer use by specific individuals or groups; this would normally be achieved by opening an account for those concerned with whatever funds were available (or paying the amount into an already opened account). This procedure might be adopted by the organizer or other groups to encourage computer use by key individuals because of the kind of communications they will initiate.
- computer use by any individuals concerned with a specific topic or groups of topics. This procedure might be adopted by groups or exhibitors to further communication around the main topics of interest to them. (This option may be more difficult to incorporate into available software, unless it is treated as a subsidized mini-conference).
- computer use by any individual communicating with a specific



group. This procedure might be adopted by groups or exhibitors wishing to encourage participant interaction with them. It is similar to the « reverse charge » telephone call. For example, an exhibitor might in this way encourage participants to give their name/address and specific questions which could be answered via computer or by mail at a later date. (This option may be more difficult to incorporate into available software, unless it is defined as a mini-conference in which communication is only possible with its sponsor),

- if the number of messages each participant receives in such an environment becomes excessive, it is possible to envisage that a participant's account would be credited if he agreed to receive a certain message. This would be one way for a participant to filter commercial publicity releases to his own benefit. (This option may be more difficult to incorporate into available software.)

9. Event organization : An advantage from the organizer's point of view is that this approach enhances the self-organizing capacity of the conference / festival. It facilitates the emergence of any participant initiative and it facilitates the process whereby participants group together for some spontaneous activities (discussion, lecture, display, etc.) in preference to others felt to be less valuable. The organizer can use the facility to blend spontaneously emergent activity with pre-planned activities.

Eventually, such facilities should make it possible for organizers to be able to re-schedule during the course of the conference / festival on the basis of information received at that time :

- the allocation of pre-planned sessions to particular rooms, according to the number of persons who indicate they will attend. (This might include the cancellation of some sessions to give place to others)
- the allocation of rooms to sessions proposed at the last minute on the basis of interests that have emerged during the course of a particular session.
- the allocation of audio-visual equipment and simultaneous interpretation facilities to meeting rooms according to revised requirements.

Attention will at some stage have to be given to the need for organizers to be able to exert the optimum degree of control over the flow of communications in order to maximize inter-participant contact and formulation of new activity without completely disrupting the conference or exceeding the possibilities of the available facilities.

For example, the balance of communication patterns may have to be shifted between :

- an essentially hierarchical mode
- a small group sessions mode
- an amorphous meeting mode.

In order to achieve the advantages of the network mode wherever possible.

Clearly whenever the conference / festival is moving towards sterility, increased participant inter-action should be facilitated, but whenever this increases beyond the ability of the occasion to contain it, then the hier-

and can identify which forms of such communications should be subsidized to facilitate certain types of communication essential to the healthy dynamics of the conference (e.g. on a low or zero cost per communication basis).

Clearly organizers are faced with the problem of handling flexible evolving conference / festival programs rather

than the traditional pre-determined conference / festival program. This can be perceived as an exciting challenge.

10. Maintaining contact with partici-



Marc Maeken « Le Passeur d'Eau » Inspired by a poem by Emile Verhaeren.

archical mode should be used to a greater extent.

The advantage is that the organizers can invoice participants according to their precise use of the conference dynamic facilities (e.g. on a cost per communication or per contact basis),

participants : A great advantage is that the organizer (like any other participant) is always able to maintain contact with specific participants or groups of participants identified only by a common interest. Participants, if they involve themselves at all, identify themselves

in the conference /festival directory maintained on computer.

Whether or not such a directory is actually printed (in whole or in part, during or after the event, and with or without topic indexes), the information on computer constitutes a very valuable mailing list. It may be used as such by the organizer (in preparation for the next such event) and selectively by exhibitors or other groups (e.g. publishers, etc.).

11. Possible abuses: It should not be forgotten that any new development runs the risk of abuse, some of it quite imaginatively destructive. Aside from casual abuse, there is a special kind of computer genius that can by-pass protective devices on computer systems, usually in order to drain other peoples funds into his own account.

More serious is the possibility of someone wishing simply to be destructive by destroying information stored in the computer or making the system unuseable in some unforeseen way — if only by blocking the telephone lines.

12. Concluding overview : There is no doubt that the use of such communication enhancement facilities offers the possibility of a really new and exciting kind of event. When the special characteristics of such an environment become better known, it is likely that participants will be prepared to pay the cost penalty to benefit from what it makes possible in terms of furthering and developing their interests. One of the pioneers in this area sees it as follows. As a participant using a terminal one in effect has an :

** electronic vehicle with which one could drive around with extraordinary freedom through the information domain. Imagine driving a car through a landscape which, instead of buildings, roads, and trees, had groves of facts, structures of ideas, and so on, relevant to your professional interests ? But this information landscape is a remarkably organized one not only can you drive around a grove of certain arranged facts, and look at it from many aspects, you have the capability of totally reorganizing that grove almost instantaneously. You could put a road right through the center of it, under it, or over it, giving you, say, a bird's eye view of how its components might be arranged for your greater usefulness and ease of comprehension. This vehicle gives you a flexible method for separating, as it were, the wood from the trees » (Douglas Englebart).*

Although this is not quite possible yet much is already practical and available.



Conclusion

Univac/Uniscope visual display

Although considerable investments are being made in the development of computer conferencing systems at this time, these are primarily directed towards servicing geographically dispersed terminals, whether across a city, a country, or between continents.

Distributing terminals around a large conference /festival site has not been considered of special interest or significance. Although the computer software requires little modification for this difference in usage, the special problems of enhancing communication at a conference have not received attention. The only exceptions to this appear to be the experience with the PLANET system, and the experimental use of the CONFER system at the 1976 Congress of the International Society for Technology Assessment (see *Transnational Associations*, 1977, 10, pp. 412-417). Either CONFER or PLANET could be used to acquire more experience with this approach. And it should not be forgotten that such use of the facility permits absent participants to be linked into the communication process of those physically present. In fact it is not of great importance what proportion of the participants is physically together at a given meeting site. It may be of far less significance than the ongoing communication via the same fa-

cility between participants who are geographically dispersed.

It is of the utmost importance that any such on-site use of computer terminals should be made as a casual adjunct to the existing communication process and the organizers should not get carried away with enthusiasm to the point that the equipment and its fanatics detract from the communication process which should be enhanced. The acceptability of such an innovation may depend a great deal on « superficial », « packaging » and « psychological » factors such as the setting given to the terminals and the message handling desks, the « style » of the assistants, and the presentation of any descriptive material and identity cards. These may either be encouraging or discouraging. If the latter, then no matter how sophisticated the facility, it will not be given a chance to demonstrate its potential and the whole environment will be perceived as mere « gadgetry ».

Despite such risks, computer conferencing represents one of the few (if not the only) available methods whereby a large group of people can consciously meld together into an organic self-organizing whole in which each individual and group perspective is distinctively expressed and blended with others to the extent possible at the time.
A.J.