In recent issues of Transnational Associations reports have been published on communication as a constraint on social innovation. These articles showed how the complexity of world problems was not matched and contained by an appropriate network of concepts, information systems and organizations. And, even more seriously, it was pointed out that our antiquated approach to organizing meetings seems to obstruct any efforts to focus effectively on complex issues without dangerously oversimplifying them, alienating potential collaborators, or inhibiting our ability to act.

The same issues of Transnational Associations have also contained articles on the emerging use of organizational networks and their significance as a response to our complex rapidly evolving social environment. However, as with conventional organizations, the activities of such networks are, for the most part, currently governed by the communication costs, rules and delays associated with document production, the intercontinental postal service and occasional use of the telephone and telex.

In this issue of Transnational Associations, we have gathered together a number of articles to explain how a new and little known technique — computer conferencing — is likely in the immediate future to change radically the way that people can meet and work through national and international groups. It is a technique which provides direct support to organizational networking — possibility of an yet unforeseen kind — and without necessarily requiring and reinforcing some of the antiquated structural features which we seem to be currently obliged to build into our organizations for legal, administrative, political or prestige purposes.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that those familiar with this technique consider it to be a breakthrough in person-to-person communication of as much social significance as was the telephone. This is best illustrated by the fact that it can facilitate (possibly anonymous) contact between people or groups on the basis of common interests or projects but without requiring prior knowledge of the identities of those who can usefully be contacted. (The table on p. 403 may help to explain how computer conferencing differs from more familiar forms of communication). Although the technique is relatively easy to describe, it is however quite difficult to understand the radical nature of its implications:

- Most of our intuitions about face-to-face interaction 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, entirely new patterns of interaction emerge.


It should be stressed that such patterns can be significant in terms of clarifying action decisions between many bodies as is illustrated by the fact that the first computer conferencing system was developed for the U.S. Office of Emergency Preparedness. It should also be stressed that such patterns of interaction blur the distinctions between a meeting and an organization and the roles and activities normally associated with each. The need for the physical presence of people, files and records at a particular location may rarely be necessary. The internal rules governing any computer-based organizations may simply by-pass current legislative provisions and rigidities concerning "statutes."

Those who doubt the future relevance of such a technique to their own activities should reflect on how the operations of their organizations are limited by dependence on telephone (post/airmail). On how quickly low-cost "pocket" computers have become common in office and home, on the sophisticated games that can now be plugged into a television set in the home or a cafe, and on the forecast that computer terminals will soon be as cheap as colour TV sets. Those who perceive the technique as irrelevant to their relations with developing countries should consider the current worldwide developments in in data networks and satellite communications and their own problems of communication with such countries.

A number of international associations have used the technique for their own programmes (see page 445) as has the Kettering Foundation which is investigating its use. Several articles included here report on the active support being given by the U.S. National Science Foundation to groups of scholars wanting to keep in computer-based liaison. Already groups of scholars concerned with specialized areas are making use of this technique as a substitute for their normal communications (and for the professional organization?). Soon an individual will be faced with the question of whether he or she can afford not to link into the special interest network(s) of those with whom he or she normally interacts — whereas this is a factor, for many the choice between a TV and a computer terminal will not be difficult, particularly since the latter is a guarantee of non-directive interaction rather than programmed passivity. Groups, associations and institutions will be faced with the same question — with the flexibility and re-
There appear to be three different styles of computer conferencing (aside from the distinctions made in the article by Jacques Vallée): (a) offering the conferences every conceivable automated means of conferring and interacting and using the computer to prevent them from being overwhelmed (This is the approach of the NEWIES system); (b) restructuring the conference to include low-key computer communications and guiding the moderator with analytical feedback to facilitate the exercise of any necessary leadership to ensure participation (This is the approach of the PLANET system); (c) Determining the basic concepts about which information is exchanged during the conference and using participant computer input to refine the interrelationships between the concepts as a guide to determining with whom it would be most fruitful for each to interact (This is the Conference Facilitation approach). The articles printed here stress the importance of the technique for maintaining links between a relatively stable network of people dispersed over a large geographical area. Most of them neglected to point out the flexibility inherent in conferences where people have difficulty in getting together. It is the technique which so much activity takes place. The technique did not become obvious. On the other hand, computer conferencing could really constitute the much needed major breakthrough in international and transnational action. It creates a unique communication environment which facilitates all aspects of organization and meeting activity, whilst giving greater precision to what, in the past, was rather imprecise. The technique will be made available in many countries. If the value of the technique is satisfactory demonstrated by such grass-roots initiatives, a new era in transnational communications will be launched and a further question mark may be placed over organizations and meetings as currently structured.

In a special sense computer conferencing gives form and structure (however subtle and dynamic), for the first time, to the Sixth Continent — the transnational, non-territorial world — over which so much activity takes place. The technique involves multiple and group energy which could be "unlocked" by the catalytic effect of such a communication environment. What would be the effect on a transnational association if all its members were so linked? What would be the effect on an international agency if all its secretarial offices and members were so linked? What would be the effect on the network of NGOs in consultative status with UNESCO if they were so linked? What if a transnational centre was established in each city? What is its significance for the organization of a transnational university in a multilingual, transdisciplinary environment?

It may well be that conventional organizations will be unable to respond to the possibility of the perceived threat to their traditional structures. (One should for example, evaluate carefully precisely what new kinds of exchanges, if any were permitted during the UNESCO experiment in kilo-conferencing reported on page 420). But new groups, and coalitions of transnational groups, may well take to this non-directive technique «like a duck takes to water» it is not difficult to foresee the possibility that alternative communities around the country (and across continents) will shortly link themselves through many such computer conferences into a rich and active network whose characteristics and potential are already beginning to emerge.

Already, for example, the London Festival for Mind and Body (100,000 participants) is investigating its use to foster, share and spread transnational interaction of people and groups through a multiplicity of computer conference «conferences» whose number will grow, interconnectedness, and subject matter change constantly in a bewildering variety of configurations in rapid response to the issues and insights of the day. The majority of such conferences will have no need to make use of a conventionally structured organization base — they will have been born free of the territorial requirement. Whether such conferences are «organizations» or «meetings» or neither is an academic question — it is through them that the majority of transnational action is likely to occur in the future.

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