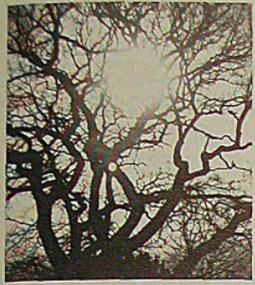


## ENHANCING TRANSNATIONAL NETWORK ACTION



In recent issues of Transnational Associations reports have been published on « complexity » as a constraint on social innovation. Those articles showed how the complexity of world problems was not matched and contained by an appropriate network of concepts, information systems and organizations. And, perhaps 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 over-simplifying 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, rates 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 — possibly of as yet unforeseen kinds — and without necessarily requiring, and reinforcing, some of the

visions 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/travel, 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 café, 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 world-wide development in data networks and satellite communications and their own problems of communication with such countries.

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 ».

(J. Vallee et al. The Computer Conference : an Altered State of Communication ? The Futurist, 9, 3 June 1975, pp. 116-121).

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 computerbased organizations may simply by-pass current legislative pro-

A number of international associations have used the technique for their own programmes (see page 446) 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 — where cost 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 ra-

plicity of computer conferencing contrasting as sharply with the uncertainties and rigidities of current postal and telephone communications as did the telephone with the messenger and pigeon post services in the past.

There appear to be three different styles of computer conferencing (aside from the distinctions made in the article by Jacques Vallee) : (a) Offering the conferees every conceivable automated means of conferring and interacting and using the computer to prevent them from being overwhelmed (This is the approach of the new EIES 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 will be 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 neglect its potential impact on a large conference where people have difficulty in making significant contacts to benefit from the presence of unforeseen groupings of people who share a concern that none of them had necessarily expected to be expressed on that occasion. The technique can facilitate the emergence of such groupings or coalitions within a relatively unstable and rapidly changing network of people and issues, whether present at a conference or linked to it from distant locations. It offers considerable advantages as a means of facilitating communication in a multilingual environment (with no limit on the number of languages) since any message can be passed via the appropriate translator(s). And it is an ideal technique for facilitating the transformation from plenary session configurations into a multitude of small groups and back again — particularly when the number, concerns and room allocations of the small groups need to be flexibly determined up to the last minute, or when many such groups can usefully be conducted without need for face-to-face contact. (1)

There should be no illusions about the difficulties of obtaining the full benefit from this technique. One article (page 436) reports on the legislative and re-

gulatory problems which will be created by the PTT administrations unfamiliar with or resistant to it. There are still political problems to be solved in the establishment of the European On-line information Network (EURONET) and the compromises made will not necessarily facilitate computer conferencing particularly in those countries which tend to inhibit person-to-person contact and group formation. Meanwhile multinational enterprises are rapidly expanding their own US-based data networks and services. We are about to witness a subtle battle between those offering access to data bases via networks, with all the political and economic implications of dependency incurred by acceptance of any one of them. There are problems of data base monopolies and data network cartels, information is power and undoubtedly many intelligence agencies will wish to monitor data links as an extension of their focus on telephone calls. It may even be that the full potential of this person-to-person technique will be made available only in some countries or only within specialized conference centres, think-tanks, or other elite institutions. The considerable advantage it gives to such places will rapidly 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 whatever controls and structuring are felt by participants to be really necessary. An individual or group with many interests is freed to interact, virtually simultaneously, with many different networks, rather than being restricted by the need for attention to only one of them. It is the ideal technique to by-pass intergroup and intra-institutional communication blockages.

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. We can but speculate on the individual 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 intergovernmental agency if all its secretariat offices and members were so linked ? What would be the effect on the network of NGOs in consultative status with IGOs if they were so linked ? What if « transnational centres » established in each city were so linked ? 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 appropriately to this opportunity because 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 « tele-conferencing » reported on page 423). 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 for 1978, and the Humanity Foundation is planning its use during a satellite link-up between simultaneous meetings in Los Angeles, Toronto and London of 3,500 persons each. If the value of the technique is satisfactorily 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.

Whilst conventionally structured bodies will of course continue to exist (and may even permit themselves minimal use of this technique), we may witness widespread transnational interaction of people and groups through a multiplicity of computer « conferences » whose number, 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 broken 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.

A.J.N. Judge

(1) For a feasibility study of this application see : A J N Judge, *Computer conferencing as a means of enhancing communication at a large conference/festival, Brussels, UIA, 1977, 20p.*