Introduction

The purpose of this document is to outline some practical options for the use of computer-conferencing techniques to facilitate a variety of interactions between participants at a large conference/festival. 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 time and space are distorted and entirely new patterns of interaction emerge (Jacques Vallee).

This document will not give detailed background material on computer conferencing, since an explanatory survey has been produced as a special issue of Transnational Associations (October 1977). As far as the main use for which computer conferencing is advocated, namely, linking people who are geographically 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 enhances communication by making 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, conference participants may be able to send messages for exhibitors to send them documentation if a stand is busy.) Such opportunities indicate the signification 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 unanticipated, 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 memory foci points. Each succeeding conference / festival merely re-energizes the whole process.)

Description

The following description has been divided into two parts:

A : Participant's perspective

1. Entry: Participants would register or punch in the normal manner (possibly in advance to reduce queues) before this process should not be disrupted.

2. Communication environment: Various means would be used to make participants aware that they are entering an area to be used to help others in the normal manner (possibly in advance to reduce queues, etc.); this means could include preliminary write-ups, handouts to those queuing, bulletins 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. $0.25), 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 those stationed there (again, possibly for a minimum fee, e.g. $0.50). With this information the participant can then choose whether to attend any of the "open" events or involve himself further in order to participate in some — if 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 till

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

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

— Make sure you speak to Ron 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 (either 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 dictates them or fills out a message form (either when sending a telegram). The participant would normally be charged some suitable fee for each message.
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 periodicals 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:

- 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 display, and parts of it may be listed on request and/or a few 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 of any kind.
- calls for papers for a future conference/festival or at some 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 on paper):
    - list of other participants and their interests
    - the current agenda or of that mini-conference
    - the list of statements made by one or 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
    - 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 "filing 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 utilizing all the facilities available. It is up to the participant to choose the preferred mode in each case. If he is simultaneously a member of other computer mini-conferences, he may "be active in a space of minutes, or at his convenience" timing up to date his contributions to each of them.

8. 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 in a special "stand". This kind of activity helps people to see where they are in relation to other participants.

10. Involving other towns and countries: Not everyone can be physically present at a conference/festival 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, or (b) to dictate messages to be stored (for other participants 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 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 x-terminal x techniques including hand distributed message lists, telephoning messages to free terminal locations and using the telephone network) to link people and groups at distant locations into the conference festival network. Possibilities of interest to participants include:

1. 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 to 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.

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 countries. So, for example, a (ecology) game might involve participants at several US universities (e.g. the World Game group initiated by R. Buckminster — Fuller).

11. Other possibilities: The exciting thing about this new technique is that its several uniqueness lies not in what the organizer expects participants to use it for, but rather in the other possible uses which will emerge as participants recognize its possibilities for helping them 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, 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 respectable number at one location for a specialized conference. Given that some (say 5) would have to be allocated to information desks, some to »working 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, 2,000-3,000 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 genuine adjunct to the communication process.

Participants/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 unless more is known about how to balance demand against terminalcomputer availability, it is a realistic and effective approach.
3. Obtaining terminals: Since there are low costs involved for the use of this technique at large conference facilities, especially outside North America, these may well be difficult to prevent 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 there are spare equipment and are interested in the occasion as a promotional exercise;
- contact the companies leasing computer conferencing equipment.

Alternatively, or in combination with the above:
- contact the « computer under-ground » — a set in the computer world who locate and use computer « free-time » for fun and are happy to share their enthusiasm with an appropriate audience.

- 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 light of their respective costs. It may, for example, be possible to get enough terminals at an acceptable subsidized rental cost, by working with these 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 10 terminals. One approach might therefore be to use two independent sets with whatever constraints that implied.

4. Obtaining computer time: Obtaining computer time is 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 fetching 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 hard drives before and after the hour at which the conference (session) is open. Promoters 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 went well. Promotional upshots should be made after they have been successfully used and not in anticipation thereof — also the dramatic intercontinental opening link may be a complete failure.

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 dispatched and before the terminal responds. The delay extent of such delays should be determined when negotiating for computer-time.

6. Distribution and status of terminals: Mention has been made earlier of the need for terminals at conferences for which conference 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. Queueing, etc. This use of terminals is always either solitary via the assistant at the desk or — in writing on a message form handed in (like a telegram).

A distribution carefully be made between this kind of general use and assistance and a form of more specialized (and personalized) use and assistance. A second category of terminals could be scattered around the conference area to which participants could go to engage in « assisted computer-conferencing ». At such points they would find someone who would send or receive 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 convenient to a third category of terminals which could be located in groups of 3 or 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 flooding 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 conferencing, each participant does not have his own terminal. In a particular case, if he needs message writing 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 or is given via the terminal (or via an information message desk) that these be copied on a special (high-speed) printer of which one or more could be installed at the conference itself. 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 message desk, although this is not the case in this conference Realtime. There could exist 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 limited, participants should be warned in advance as to how much tied 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 governing 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 a 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 pre-payment but possibly by invoicing 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 existing 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 assess 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 encroaching on 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 whenever possible.

Clearly whenever the conference / festival is moving towards identifiability, increased participant inter-action should be facilitated, but whenever this increases beyond the ability of the occasion to contain it, then the hierarchical 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), 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 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 in 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 indices), 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 bypass protective devices on computer systems, usually in order to drain other people's 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 unusable 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 such an environment be-

" * electronic vehicle with which one could use the same 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 not very organized. One not only can you drive around a grove of certain arranged facts, and look at it from many aspects, you have the possibility of totally reorganizing that grove almost instantaneously. You could put a road right through the center of it, under it, or over it, giv-

ing 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 tree. " (Douglas Englebart).

Although this is not quite possible yet much is already practicable and avai-

able.

Conclusion

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 his difference of usage, the special problems of enhancing communica-
tion at a conference have not received attention. The only exceptions to this appear to be the experiences 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 proportions of the participants are physically together at a given meeting site. It may be of far less significance than the on-goin-
g communication via the same fa-


cility between participants who are geographically dispersed.

It is of the utmost importance that any such on-line use of computer terminals should be made as a casual adjunct to the existing communication process and the organizers should not get car

ried away with enthusiasm to the point that the equipment and its fansatics distract from the communication process which should be enhanced. The acceptabil-
ity of such an innovation may depend a great deal on superficial, « packaging », « 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 poten-

tial and the whole environment will be perceived as mere « gadgetry ».

Despite such risks, computer confer-

encing represents one of the few if not the only) available methods when-

ever a large group of people can con-

sciously meld together into an organic self-organizing whole in which each individual and group perspective is distinctly expressed and blended with others to the extent possible at the time. A.J.