PARTICIPANT INTERACTION MESSAGING

– improving the conference process (*)

by A.J.N. Judge

« What are the questions that we do not dare to ask at this gathering ? » (Anon, Findhorn, 1979).

« A summary without a problem is a bore » (Anon, SGSR, 1979).

The problem

Despite the sophistication of conference organization, there is an increasing sense of malaise (1). Even in well-organized events, something seems to be missing. There are a variety of symptoms of this, including :

- participants preferring coffee table exchanges to formal sessions.
- participants simply bored with pre-planned sessions and finding excuses to leave the conference site (whether for business engagements or tourism).
- participants intimidated by the proficiency of those who frequently participate m such events,
- small group sessions failing to bring together the people who could fruitfully interact.

(*) With some aplications for communication in complex conventional organizations

- participants frustrated in their efforts to present ideas to others, possibly because of discussion time constraints,
- participants irritated by the formality or informality of the conference process (e.g. style of chairperson, protocol arrangements, etc.),
- experienced participants « holding back - from active involvement in discussion sessions in order to give inexperienced newcomers an opportunity,
- speakers frustrated in their inability to continue a dialogue with participants after their presentation (and possibly on other topics),
- participant irritation at use of discussion time by some to publicize their interests and views in order to make useful contacts.
- participants and speakers unable to correct misunderstandings which appear to have arisen from their interventions,
- pre-planned topics preventing discussion of spontaneously emergent topics

or those of interest to a participant minority,
- participants with several interests unable to communicate ideas to sessions organized in parallel with the one corresponding to their major interest or obligation,
- ideas distorted by poor simultaneous interpretation,
- participants having difficulty in determining the people with whom discussions would be most fruitful.

Much of the interest of a conference lies in the unforeseen communication between those present. This is necessarily unplannable and independent of the conference programme. The challenge is to find ways of stimulating and facilitating it.

A simple solution : participant messaging

Many conferences make available a « message board » for the exchange of messages between participants. This is

seldom a high priority concern of the organizers and in its usual form it has little impact on the above problems. But with relatively little funds or personnel, participant interaction messaging can acquire a whole new dimension. This is all that is required :

1. Explanation : Inform participants of the availability of this new facility This can be done by verbal announcement, preferably reinforced by a single sheet explanation in each participant's folder or in the printed programme.

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2. Message cards: Reinforce the point by inserting some blank file cards or half-sheets of paper in the participant's folder.

3. Use : Invite participants to use the cards to indicate any of the following ;
   - additional issues they would like to discuss
   - comments on points made by speakers in plenary (or elsewhere)
   - questions, possibly addressed to specific speakers, factions or coalitions
   - remarks on statements in the conference documentation, or on the programme as a whole
   - initiatives on which they are seeking support from other participants
   - invitations to attend spontaneously organized meetings (whether in a conference room, or at some location such as a coffee room)
   - organizational or other queries and complaints
   - humorous observations, wisdom, meta-reflections (appropriate or otherwise)
   - comments on previous messages
   - etc. (•).

Note that the organizers can themselves insert messages, queries and announcements. The whole process may even be started several months before the conference.

4 Anonymity : Participants are free to :
   - omit their names so that remarks are anonymous

(*) Non - text messages, such as sketches or cartoons. may also be accepted

   - use a pseudonym, as appropriate
   - use their names, possibly with a pigeonhole (or hotel room) number to which replies can be sent
   - use a collective name in the case of a remark formulated by a group of participants.

5. Message boxes : Messages can then be inserted by participants in » Participant Interaction Boxes » located at any or all of the following :
   - the conference reception/registration area
   - the main conference room (outside)
   - the conference room (inside)
   - the hotel reception area.

   Placing a stack of blank half-sheets of paper by the box also encourages participants to use them.

6. Collection : One or more conference staff members must be given responsibility to empty the boxes periodically (once or twice a day, or more frequently).

7. Typing : The messages received are then simply typed one after the other on to a full-size sheet of paper suitable for photocopying (or possibly offset reproduction). Stencils could of course be used. Each message should be given a number (which can also be written on to the original message card) to facilitate reference to it in later messages.

8. Reproduction : When the two sides of a full sheet have been filled with messages, this may be treated as an issue of the Participant Interaction Bulletin. Each issue should be visibly identified by a number (from 1 upwards), but the message numbers within them should not start from 1 within each issue - they should continue from issue to issue to avoid confusion.
   Obviously, if there were many messages, several sheets could form one issue of the Bulletin. This involves stapling and collating operations which it may be better to avoid.

9. Translation : In international conferences it is desirable to be able to process messages received in any conference language. There are three possibilities :
   (a) insert the message as received without translation. This involves the minimum effort and delay
   (b) pass « other language » messages to translators, with the object of including them in the Bulletin in the « major » conference language after translation
   (c) translate all messages into each conference language with the object of producing the Bulletin in

   ferably reproduced on paper of different colours, to avoid confusion).

The approach adopted will depend on the relative importance of communication in the different languages. Obviously translation increases delay and cost, but it may well ensure vital communication (particularly when interpretation is weak).

10. Wall display: The message cards may either be kept (in case of queries) or else stuck on a convenient wall, possibly where coffee is served. It is useful to display all issues of the Bulletin on the same wall in order to familiarize participants with the facility it offers.
    Some may argue that it is sufficient to display the individual messages and a waste of resources to type them. Or if it is agreed to type them, it may be argued that only a few copies are

Photo Council of Europe

needed on walls at strategic locations. This may indeed be adequate for some meetings, but much is achieved by giving participants a complete set of all messages to mull over at their convenience, rather than whilst crowding in front of a bulletin board. (See also the « image » questions, below).

11. **Distribution** ; The *Bulletin* can be distributed to participants in any of the usual ways : in pigeonholes (if available), to participant seats in meeting rooms (at coffee break), from one or more designated locations (document desk, message box locations, etc.). hand-cuts by ushers at meeting room doors, etc.

12. Continuation : The contents of each *Bulletin* should in part provoke participants to formulate further messages in reply. Other messages will be formulated irrespective of previous comments. In this way new issues of the *Bulletin are* produced and the process is continued throughout the duration of the conference and even as a postal continuation of the conference.

Organizational requirements

The above procedure is so simple that few special arrangements are required. The decision to implement the process can even be taken on the eve of the meeting. The work is mainly typing (unless there is translation) and may require one person for an hour or two per day at most. Clearly, if the volume of messages is high, much more time could be required. If it is necessary to depend upon a staff person with other commitments, it is important to ensure that this process has adequate priority. This is really a test of the organizer's commitment and if the organizer takes decisions which effectively decrease its priority and importance, this will be sensed by participants

> «Australia's suggestion - titles and abstracts of publications available from *each source - is a valuable one; it bridges the gap between pure referral and supply of substantive data. We should explore this fully». (Anon. UNEP-INFOTERRA. 1979).*

A preferred arrangement would of course be *a* specially allocated « Participant Interaction Office » where typing {and reproduction) could take place, namely a fixed location at which people working on the process could meet. Given such an office, it should be remembered that in some meetings there are participants who are enthusiastic about processes such as this and quite willing to assist.
Other possible organizational requirements are considered in connection with Additional Options (below).

> - *The SGSR should stop examining itself and get on with examining systems » (Anon. SGSR. 1979).*

Editorial considerations

The only « editorial » problems in the process as described above are :
- separation of messages on the same topic, to maintain the sense of variety
- separation of messages from the same person, if someone has enthusiastically inserted several
- mixing humorous, serious and other messages
- minimal standardization of treatment of participant name (e.g. in parentheses at the end of message)
- minimal standardization of reference to previous messages by their number (e.g. 3/59 : meaning issue 3, message 59; although 59 would be sufficient). The process can be misused. This, together with other editorial options, is discussed below.

Practical hints

1. Notepads : If participants are supplied with notepads as part of their folder, they should be encouraged to use them for messages.

2. Message boxes : These can easily be constructed on the spot from cardboard cartons used to transport documents. Cartons for photocopy paper are ideal, particularly if they have removeable tops into which a slit can be cut. Otherwise the top can be tied shut with string or ribbon. It is an advantage to cover the boxes with an identifiable coloured paper, and to mark on them something like «Participant Interaction Box ».

3. Reproduction equipment : Photocopy machines have a tendency to breakdown or to be overloaded due to other conference commitments. Since the value of this process increases with the rapidity of the cycle, alternatives should be examined, including stencil, cyclostyle, etc. An independent operation is preferable, specially if there are red tape delays in the use of the photocopies.

4. Message length : Long messages (e.g. exceeding 4 sentences) reduce the readability of the *Bulletin* and can be given a lower priority in typing or translation. Or a policy accepting only single sentence messages may be established.

5. Translation : There are varioustricks in handling messages for translation. For example, they can be numbered, such that the typed version returned by the translator can be used as a page of the *Bulletin.* As such they should not slow the handling of messages not requiring translation.

6. Simplicity : Avoid cumbersome procedures. The technique is so simple that there is no reason it should not evolve and adjust to the requirements of the meeting.

7. «Pump priming»: There is great advantage to be gained from having Issue n° 1 of the *Bulletin* available as early as possible, and preferably in the participant's folder on arrival. The reason is that it constitutes an immediately comprehensible explanation of the process (which otherwise is too easily categor-

> « Many of us would appreciate it if the people with bad coughs would sit in the viewing gallery. And we hope you 're better soon » (Anon, Findhorn. 1979).

ized as an elaboration of the conventional « suggestion box »). In order to get the issue out quickly, the « editor » should (a) request comments from those available just prior to the conference, (b) extract significant comments from pre-conference correspondence, (c) generate a few stimulating comments himself. This is unnecessary after the first few issues have launched the process.

> « The brochures and pamphlets prepared by INFOTERRA PAC should include sample specific questions on the environment that have been answered or could be answered by INFOTERRA: this would give potential users an idea of the capabilities of INFOTERRA « (L Miravalles. Philippines. UNEP/INFOTERRA. 1979).

8. Legitimation : It is very helpful to the success of the process, if on several occasions at the beginning of the conference the chairperson (or other eminent individuals) can strongly recommend its use to participants. Similarly, when good ideas are voiced in informal discussion (at coffee break), organizing committee members present can suggest .« Why not put it in the box ? ». as a way of ensuring a wider exposure.

9. Bulletin frequency : As noted above, the more frequent it is. the more significant it appears as an alternative communication vehicle :
(at At a frequency of once a day, it may well be out of phase with the speed of development of the meeting
(b) Twice a day is perhaps the easiest to manage with minimum organization
(c) If an issue is available at the end of every session (i.e. at meal and coffee breaks), it is well integrated into the conference process
(d) Under certain conditions it may be useful to arrange for collection of
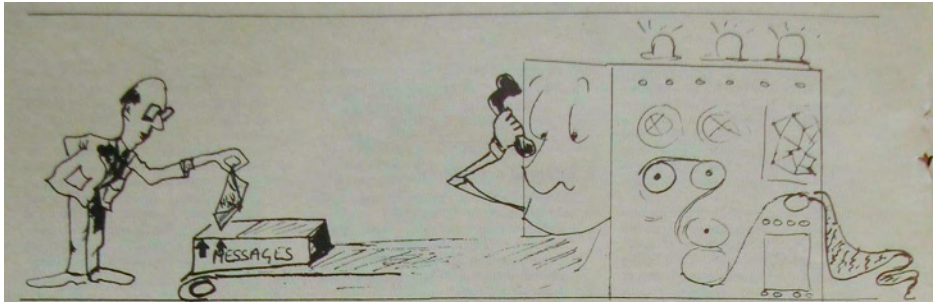
messages and distribution of Bul-*letin* issues during long plenary sessions (see below). This depends on whether the chair arrangement impedes movement of ushers.

The messaging process helps to counteract the sterilizing effect of any necessary pre-planning. For whilst careful planning eliminates the risk of disasters, by so doing it eliminates the (risk of} serendipitous breakthroughs whose emergence could be facilitated by skillful interweaving of unforeseen messages. Many conferences claim to be organized and attended in the hopes of such breakthroughs.

Problems of misuse

Misuse of the process will depend on the nature and concerns of participants. Possibilities include :

1. Excessively long messages. This question has already been discussed.
2. An excessive number of messages from the same participant on the same point. An editorial decision may be taken to omit most of them or simpfy to refer to the fact that more messages on the same point have been received from the same source.
3. Deliberately abusive impersonal messages. Again these may be omitted. But if there is a grain of truth in the statement it is worth interesting reading, possibly with an « editorial comment - attached. Some organizers may welcome the opportunity of responding to such messages in an « appended note ».
4. Abusive personal messages (e.g. criticism of a speaker). Again these may simply be omitted. But the person in

« *The Society is badly in need of anomalous behaviors, and deviation-amplifying strategies if it is to move to new levels of organization »* (Anon, SGSR. 1979).
« *How about having speakers available to the small groups ? Many questions are unresolved».* (Helen, David. Peter, and Anna. Findhorn, 1979).

question may welcome the opportunity to respond in an appended note. (Some speakers welcome hecklers; this is likely to be even more true with written comments).

5. « Stacking » the box with messages in support of a factional viewpoint. This could be more difficult to detect, but could be handled as with point 2. Alternatively, a representative of the faction could be invited to summarize the contents of the messages received, perhaps in a « special supplement » to the *Bulletin*.

6. Falsification of identity. This is only likely to arise in special cases and can quickly be corrected by a verbal announcement and a written message. The problem is more serious if the person has already left the conference. A simple solution is discussed under Additional Options (below).

7. Tampering with message boxes. Removal of messages from boxes is again only likely to occur in special situations. Boxes can be locked.

8. « Dating » messages. Again these may simply be omitted, depending on their content. A message such as « Anyone free for dinner in town after the Wednesday plenary ? » may be acceptable. Qualifications as to desired respondents may not. (This is a problem faced and solved in different ways by newspaper advertisement editors).

9. Embarrassing messages. If there are questions such as « Who is funding this conference ? » which are sensi-

tive, these may either be omitted or carefully answered.

10. Editorial manipulation. Given the « pump priming » precedent (see above), participants may wish to ensure that the process as a whole is not subject to editorial manipulation. It is in this connection that the editorial committee option could be valuable (see below). Sticking the original messages onto a wall display also allays fears.

11. Deterioration of messaging style. It seems that if messages do not fulfil the sender's expectations, subsequent messaging may deteriorate. This is a challenge to the editors to mature the messaging process so that messages reinforce each other (see below).

It is important to be aware of the possibility of misuse, but it is unlikely to be significant in most cases. An interesting parallel is the citizens band (CB) radio and the misuse to which it gives rise. The messaging process provides a « citizens band » at a conference but with more possibilities (or weaving the messages into a new pattern of significance). Using potential misuse as an argument against the process may well signal the presence of more fundamental problems.

Improving and maturing the process

It is perhaps too early to generalize, but it would appear that there are some characteristic responses of participants to the freedom offered by this process:
1. One distinct group of messages includes :
   - enthusiastic advocacy of some special course of action
   - humorous insights (possibly about organizational arrangements)
   - wise, philosophical, meta-comments.

These essentially invite participants to subscribe to a point of view which is not integrated into the subject matter of the conference at the level at which it is being discussed. At best they are alternative perspectives, introducing new dimensions which are often challenging, although possibly perceived
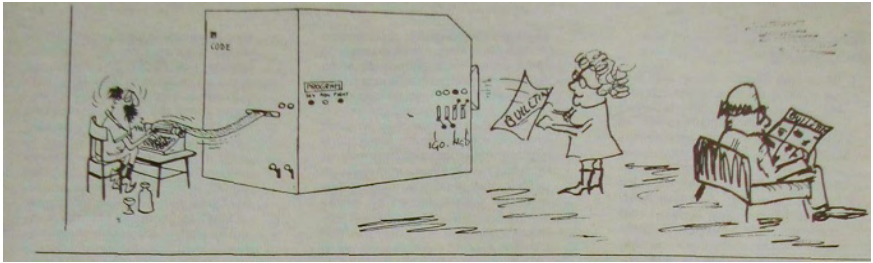
as unconstructive. But « motherhood statements - (e.g. Peace is good) may also emerge.

2. Another common group of messages includes :
   - critical comments on plenary statements and conference objectives
   - appreciative comments
   - messages reacting to the content of other messages.

«I was a little surprised by the emotional response to Barbara's talk. I saw it as an informative scientific history, entertainingly presented. | Our choices and many implications are yet to be discussed. Were we brought to our feet by lights and music?» (Helen. Findhorn, 1979).

:   *« UK NFP agrees entirely with proposal/s 41. 42. 43, 44, 45 and 46 in Bulletin 2, which could be adopted in*
',   major NFP's linked with library services to benefit users and make for better working » (W Pearson, UNEP/INFOTERRA, 1979).

Clearly these are part of a dualistic dynamic in which advocates of A or B critize or appreciate each other's perspectives. At worst, it deteriorates into emotional hostilities or mutual admiration. At best, they energize the whole discussion, define its dimensions, and stimulate its evolution.

- This conference is really about how
\   to admit the existence of god without embarrassing your friends or upsetting your concepts » (A non, SGSR, 1979).

3. As a result of messages of the previous types, a further type may emerge :
   - mediatory comments attempting to reconcile extreme positions
   - recognition of complementarities and relationships
   - evaluative comments comparing several viewpoints.
   Such statements help to weave perspectives together into a meaningful

whole, but they may fail to get beyond a superficial placatory level.

« Is there anyone who would be interested in contributing towards an evening of sharing ~ through music, poetry, song, dance, etc., to create a spontaneous spirit ? If so, please speak to Richard Frost at Cluny » (Findhorn. 1979).

4. A fourth group includes constructive proposals building on constraints and possibilities recognized in the debate. These will include some which, however constructive they are, fail to take account of how the proposal is to be initiated.
5. A fifth group of messages reflects a willingness of the participant to take responsibility and act concretely in the implementation of a proposal. But again this will include feasible projects of a kind which has been of questionable value in the past, despite the enthusiasm with which they were then carried out.
6. A sixth group of messages reflects a sense of history, of collective learning, and a recognition of recurring patterns of discussion (in relation to previous meetings or other contexts). These may be very helpful in educating newcomers and introducing a sense of strategy. At worst they may be discouragingly sterile, offering little hope for new initiatives - the sterile wisdom of those who have failed in the past.
7. One can perhaps argue that a seventh group of messages reflects a special awareness of the uniqueness and strategic value of the conference. Other groups of messages may also be usefully distinguished. (This question is explored with an extensive bibliography in réf. 3.)

Whether the above grouping is any more than a crude guideline is not important. The problem is to encourage a sufficient variety of messages to prevent a preponderance of those from Group 1 or 2, and a deterioration into - conference graffiti ». This is specially important at the beginning when the tone of the exchange is set.

A *Bulletin* editor (or editorial group) of participant status can to some extent insert messages to correct for any such preponderance and « upgrade » the process. To some extent the art of improving the process lies in allowing any such preponderance to stimulate participants to respond with corrective perceptions. But unless the interaction process « feels right », it will not be used as a vehicle by some whose comments would most help to balance and improve it (e.g. comments in Groups 3 to 7). Note however that each group of messages can have an important contribution. A preponderance of Group 7 is as unproductive as a preponderance of Group 1.

This is a problem of judgement and intuition. Too much editorial intervention erodes the value of the process. Too little intervention may lead to the proliferation of trivial or purely negative comments and lead to a « spastic - condition. Participants should be made aware of this problem by « editorial comments » as the final messages in a *Bulletin* issue. There has been so little experience with the process that at this stage it is probably better to minimize editorial intervention. But in the future, with experience an editorial group will probably be able to guide and stimulate participants quickly into mature interaction with a rich variety of comments (*). This demands a special skill and could give rise to a new conference profession. Perhaps it may then be possible to weave disparate comments into new patterns of significance as suggested elsewhere (1, 4). Possibly real breakthroughs in conference productivity could be achieved by allocating significant attention time and resources to this process (**).

(*) Ecologist R Margalel suggests that the - maturity - of an ecosystem is closely related to its diversity (complexity) and to the information (organizaton) that can be maintained with a definite spending of potential energy. The lower the maturity, the less the energy required to disrupt the ecosystem. Perceiving a contenance as an ecosystem which can be evolved or disrupted, oners an interesting challenge with many possibilities to be investigated

archical organization inhibited by conventional

Additional options and variants

1 Horus wall display : Rather than simply sticking the message cards to a wall in any order, an editorial group could divide the wall up into sectors corresponding to conference themes and insert the cards (possibly typed or cut from the *Bulletin*) in the appropriate sector. Coloured ribbons could be used to link related cards in different sectors. A circular display could emphasize the integrative role of concentric sectors or the central sector. A detailed descrjpton of this approach is given elsewhere (4). (Horus stands for : Holistic Overview and Representation of Underlying Structure).

2. Personal messages : The message collection procedure may also be used for personal messages (not to appear in the *Bulletin* or be displayed). The editorial - message processing office - could then make appropriate arrangements for these to be delivered or picked-up. Such messages should not require typing (but a translation service could be offered, if required). If costs are a consideration, see Option 9 (below).

3. Editorial options : The editorial group can put more effort into sorting the messages (as for Option 1). They could then be grouped within an issue of the *Bulletin* according to conference agenda item or even by message type (cf. previous section). If appropriate or if the number of messages justifies it. each group of messages could appear in separate *Bulletin* series (perhaps on differently coloured paper) and only distributed to those involved with the theme in question. The editors could also take a more active role, inviting or generating other texts, so that the *Bulletin* also has a newsletter function, or is

« *My feelings thus far about the SynCon process : How can we come up with visions to deal with our planetary problems until our problems as a group are dealt with ? » (Anon, Findhorn, 1979).*

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used for texts of draft recommandations, etc.

4. In-session messaging : Some conferences may be well-suited to periodic coltection of messages and distribution of *Bulletins* during each 1 -3 hour meeting session. Investigation of this possibility 13 very worthwhile because of the way *it* can considerably increase the sessions s productivity. For in conventional practice only one participant at a time can speak to a session, however many are listening (or not). Here there is the possibility

of many participants contributing written messages simultaneously to the session discussion, even some participants with obligations in parallel sessions ("). These contributions can be quickly scanned by participants in *Bulletin* form, may be cited and linked by speakers (particularly with regard to exact wording), may reduce the time pressure in discussion periods, and provide an immediately available written record of issues raised. Allocating the necessary typing, reproduction and collection/distribution support could even prove to be a better investment, in some instances, than simultaneous interpretation (specially if translations were made).

5. In-session messaging (to podium only) : A variant on the previous option, is to restrict distribution of the in-session *Bulletin* to those on the podium (e.g. panel members) who are thus able to select and group the points raised prior to a verbal response (although some written message responses would also be possible if the *Bulletin* issues were to be available to all participants on leaving the conference room or later). This is an extension of a practice already adopted, when written questions are filtered by the session secretary and then distributed to panelists.

6. Computer conferencing (external) :
An   increasing   number   of experiments
are being made with computer conferencing as a means of linking peo-

« *Users are interested in obtaining information easily and rapidly. Given that a referral system appears to be the only ideal system I believe that NFPs should contact the sources. This will (a) speed up the system and (b) encourage usage » (Penny Marinos, Greece, UNEP/INFOTERRA. 1979).*

- *Our understanding and communication about systems work would benefit from maintaining a clear distinction between technical action (problem solving, value exclusive) and practical action {meaning communicative, value inclusive} » (Anon, SGSR. 1979).*

- *Please correct information on the referral activity of the NFP/Egypt His 70 not 30. Thank you » (E M Abdel Megid, Egypt. UNEP/INFOTERRA. 1979).*

pie not present at a single physical location, such as a conventional conference site (5. 6). The messages typed via terminal to the distant participants in such computer - conferences », and the messages received from them, can both be incorporated into issues of the *Bulletin*. In fact, to save typing, the locally-received handwritten messages can be typed directly onto the terminal, edited combined with incoming messages, and then (a) produced from the terminal as a clean copy of the *Bulletin* issue for local reproduction and distribution, and (b) released over the terminal to the participants at distant locations, who may also reproduce it (see Case 4, below).

(•) This is one of the major arguments made in favour of

«*To Judy (Item 1/23): MAN as a generic term does not imply MALE. Your arrogance is YOUR problem. I don't want to be a PERSON or a SIBLING or a FOLK» (An unenlightened male person, Findhorn, 1979).*
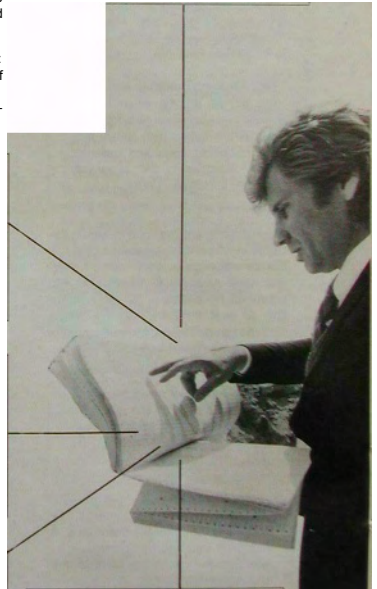
* Will we get the names of participants before Christmas?- (Anon. UNEP/INFOTERRA. 1979).

7   Computer conferencing (Internal and external) : Investigations are already being made into the potential of computer supported messaging/conferencing systems at a conference site (7, 81. Technically it is irrelevant whether the computer is on-site. What is important is the effective number of terminals on-site. When there are few, this option cannot be usefully distinguished from the previous one. When there are more, participant messages can be fed into the *Bulletin* from strategically located terminals by secretarial staff. When there are many, participants will then be able to do it themselves (e.g. from hotel rooms on rented terminals, etc.). But although the basic messaging concept remains the same, many other options become possible with computer support, or are affected by it : selective distribution of messages, voting, translation and advisory services, precise charging for messaging services, editorial re-ordering and linkage of messages, etc. These have been explored elsewhere (8).

8. Specialty requested feedback : When appropriate during a meeting session, one particular question (or more) may be designated (or voted) as worthy of special written feedback from participants. In this way a variety of perspectives on the question may be quickly obtained through an issue of the *Bulletin*. If there are many such special questions, each could be given a reference number so that in effect this option blurs into that of a questionnaire. Such a set of key questions may in fact be a useful way of launching the process (see « Pump priming - above).

9. Identity and message regulation : When guarantees are required against falsification of the identity of the author of a message, there is a simple solution. Each participant is supplied with a pre-printed set of - interaction stamps » on each of which the unique participant number is overprinted. By sticking one stamp to each message card and having the number typed onto the end of the message, misuse becomes difficult. This is not necessary for anonymous messages, but does not protect a pseudonym. If costs are a consideration, partipants can be asked to pay

for a set of - interaction stamps ». It may also provide a way of distinguishing between participants permitted to interact (e.g. "full members") and those who are not (e.g. « observers »), or to ensure that their messages go into separate *Bulletins*. It may also be used to limit the possible number of written messages from different categories of participant.

10. Voting: When voting or opinion assessment is desirable, the message collection and processing service may be used. This may well avoid wastage of session time (e.g. roll-call voting, card voting, hand counting). Use of the « stamp ». procedure discussed above avoids identity problems. When the range of questions is greater, an issue of the *Bulletin* may contain (or consist of) a questionnaire/vote form to be returned as with normal messages. If necessary a procedure analogous to the « reader service reply cards » to be found in some magazines could be used (e.g. a card consisting only of lists of numbers to be ringed according to participant interest in the questions to which they relate).

11. Mapping and modelling : Participants may be grouped according to the degree of similarity in their responses to a defined set of comments. These, listed in an issue of a *Bulletin* serving as a questionnaire, may be either

statements designed by an editorial committee or statements received from participants or a mixture of both. The information is best processed by computer using matrix correlation software. From the results the network of participants may be drawn out manually for reproduction and distribution back to participants. The same data may be used to show how the structure of the network of topics is perceived by participants (a).

12. Computer graphics assistance: Investigations are being made into the possibility of using computers to draw maps of the networks of concepts or people described in the previous option. Once this is operational such maps may be used as non-textual annexes to the *Bulletin*. As such they provide the sort of overview sought in Option 1 and constitute a focusing device for comments, possibly leading to more precise maps, or alterna-

tive maps. Such maps would of course constitute non-linear aqendas.

Origin and case studies

The messaging process is so simple as a concept that variations of it are likely to have been explored in a number of contexts in the past. The following cases, experienced by the author, are a good illustration of the variety of possibilities currently being explored.

Case 1 (Professional/academic): At the first international conference of the Society for General Systems Research (London. August 1979) a « meta-conference » was launched by an eminent ex-president of the Society, Professor Stafford Beer (UK cybernetician and one-time computer systems adviser to Chilean President Allende). In an opening speech he invited the 200 participants to formulate fundamental statements relating to the theme and sub-topics of the conference ("). These were left in a box. then reviewed by an editorial group consisting of himself and two other eminent colleagues (**). The result was distributed to participants as a numbered list of 70 statements in English. Participants were invited to indicate on the document

whether they (a) agreed (b) disagreed, or (c) were indifferent to each statement. The document was then returned via the box with the name of the participant. Further comments were also invited. Using the technique mentioned in Option 11. wall maps were produced over night showing the networks of participants and issues (***). A new document was distributed incorporating a numbered list of the more central issues perceived by participants together with those new comments accepted. The cycle was repeated giving a total of three computer runs. *Comment:* The process interested participants greatly, if only in terms of the concentration on questionnaires during coffee breaks. The mam delays were due to lack of typing/data input personnel (****). There was criticism of the statistical methodology, which was accepted and partly modified. The comments reflected the concerns of an academic society in search of relevance. But more skill and experience was required to help the process to converge fruitfully. As it was the preponderance of Group 1 and 2 remarks did not lead to any concrete proposals, even when consensus emerged through the process. An excellent experiment in that it « tailed » in a way which showed the remedies required. SGSR. and its outgoing. President Richard Ericson, should be congratulated on being the first international conference to undertake it.

(a)One technique for doing this has been decribed In a previous issue of *Transnational Associations (9)*. Another is outined as Case 1 (below) and will *be* described in a future issue

and stability of social systems

(**) Although not clear it seemed as though the « review « consisted of slight editing and « rejection » of *some* comment» which were simply stuck up on a special wall

(***)It is appropriate to record that a seredipitous contact made by chance proved to be the unknown participant whose responses to the questionnaire most closely coresponded to my own

Case 2 (Intergovernmental) : At the second network management meeting of the UN Environment Programme's information referral system, INFOTERRA (Moscow. October 1979), it was agreed on the evening before the opening session to implement a straight forward messaging system, but working in English. French. Spanish and Russian. The chairman of the meeting AshoK Khosla (Indian director of INFOTERRA) drew the attention of the delegates (120 from 100 countries) to the messaging facility on every appropriate occasion, A total of 6 *Bulletins* were produced (in each language) carrying 98 messages in all The English version was posted on a wall after typing and before translation. *Comment:* Participants were slow in responding to this unexpected facility. The explanation was only distributed on the second day. As the person responsible, I solicited messages from colleagues on the first day, A typed first issue was Quickly produced and displayed, but despite every assistance in translation, delays of 18 to *24* hours occurred before distribution (because photocopying was done on the other side of Moscow). The mix of messages was much better than in Case 1 since the *Bulletins* were also used as a vehicle for early proposals. Later formal proposals had to bypass *Bulletins* because of typing, translation and photocopying delays. In commenting on the facility one delegate stated he - would have gone daft without it ». Another said he first thought it was a - Mickey-Mouse relating process - which turned him off. although he had subsequently changed his mind. The chairman declared that it had - saved the meeting ». It is interesting that on the final days messages were being received in all 4 languages, despite the early predominance of English. Without the delays the process could have been even more significant to the meeting.

Case 3 (Alternative community) : At the 4th Onearth Gathering (*) of the Findhorn Foundation 300-member international community (Scotland. October 1979). it was agreed a day before the opening session that a straight forward messaging system should be implemented m English. A one-sheet explanation was folded into the printed programme distributed at registration time. Message boxes were located both

« *How can interaction between NFP's m a region be encouraged to share problems and experience in NFP. source and user community development ? - (Zambia/NFP, UNEP/INFO-TERRA, 1979).*

at the conference hall and at the main residence for the 120 guest participants. The first *Bulletin* issue was available at the end of the morning of the opening day. although it included a number of editorially generated messages to provoke interaction and indicate its possibilities. By the even-

ing of the second day 05 messages had been carried in 4 issues of the *Bulletin*. By the end of the 6-day meeting, 8 issues had been produced with 185 messages. Messages were posted as-wall after typing. The *Bulletins* were also discussed after typing.

Comment : The community is avowedly anti-intellect oat and perceives itself (with Marshall McLuhan) as - post-Gutenberg »and thus, except for inspirational writings, disapproves of use of line-media, or none at all (**). Thus although guest speeches were available for purchase on cassettes the following day, aside from the programme leaflet, the *Bulletin* was the only conference document distributed(***) The number of one-sheet messages was therefore very encouraging and the *Bulletin* clearly met a need of many (non-member) participants. A few made extensive use of it. What proportion perceived it as valuable or session proposed that a post-conference *Bulletin* issue be produced for « afterthoughts ». One of the convenors wrote that the process » seems to have substantially « taken off » into what became the equivalent of a participant-produced newspaper. Which, in view of the virtually zero time available to people, was nothing short of amazing». As claimed, it operated in parallel with the formal conference, but it did not seem to generate direct inputs into it. One participant suggested thai for such an essentially expressive environment, the Chinese « dazibao » wall-poster approach would have been better. Both could well be used. Irrespective of what the non-member participants felt, more important is how the community felt about the effect of this form of expression within their highly pre-planned conference format. The test will be whether they use

*«I am interested by the phenomenon thai when someone asks about a particular speaker, I can barely remember a word that was said. Verbal overload, the essence cannot be experienced in words... or what?"
(David G, Findhorn, 1979).*

the facility for their 1980 gathering and whether a means can be found to facilitate the progressive « maturation » of messaging style and to ensure that messages build on each other rather than to each other.

Case 4 (Academic workshop) : At the first workshop on networks of the UN University's project on Goals. Processes and Indicators of Development (Brussels. May 1979), summaries of the discussions of the 13 participants were typed (and edited) via terminals into the EIES computer conferencing network based in North America (Option 6/7. above). External messages received were incorporated with the summaries into a Bulletin distributed to the participants m Brussels.
Comment: This was just an experiment but it demonstrated the ease with which such a process could be organized and carried out. The summaries were only prepared infrequently but is was clearly possible to have them prepared (with any messages) by continuous input into terminals and much more frequent reproduction for the group. The final report was also drafted via the terminal for discussion.

The alternative community gathering (Case 3) raises the important question of the preferred communication mode of

conference participants. Conventional conferences are primarily aural events, although there is occasionally « audio-visual » assistance for the communication process. There is always the temptation to « read » papers to the audience. Not to go to the trouble of preparing one is perhaps a guarantee of spontaneity. It certainly ensures that participants must « listen » to their totality if they are to « hear » the message, whereas documents may be quickly scanned to determine what is worth hearing. What happens to the productivity of a non-aural person in an aural conference process, or to that of an aural person confronted by documents? Do individuals switch between modes and when ? When is which mode appropriate and what constraints does each impose or conceal ? Is the real potential for non-linearity achieved in audio-visual settings, or is this argument used to disguise weaknesses ? What are the inter-cultural implications ? It is probable that a clearer perspective on these questions would show the valuable intermediary role of a participant messaging process.

Attitudes towards the messaging process

It is a fact that organizers have had little or no interest in promoting contact between participants outside the framework of the planned programme, receptions and tours. The low status of any « message board » is an example of this. The sterility of the conventional » suggestion box » is another.

A special effort is therefore required to distinguish this process from such « low status, insignificant » initiatives. Some participants will immediately recognize the opportunity it offers. Others will respond to encouragement from the chairperson in a formal announcement. Others will wait to see the extent to which their colleagues make use of it, Some participants, often the more eminent, consider it beneath their dignity to be seen to be examining scraps of paper on a message board. Some will not even be seen to examine typed *Bulletins* on a wail display. Hence the value of personal copies in some way related to the formal conference documentation. The presence of amusing comments may ensure that the *Bulletin* are read during boring moments in plenary sessions - but they may also reinforce the disdain with which such - unsanctioned » perceptions are viewed by « serious » participants. Participants may recognize that they can use « doodling-time » moments fruitfully in order to formulate additional comments of their own.

There is however a tremendous problem of passivity which traditional procedures have instilled into participants and which has been reinforced by the conventional attitude of organizers. It would be interest-

ing to explore the possibility that conventional! speaker-oriented conferences. dominated by masculine influences, require and engender a féminine passivity on the part of the audience. In this sense, participant interaction messaging may be seen as a feminine (networking) communication process to counterbalance the masculine (hierarchically structured) use of microphone/amplifier systems. It could also be argued that the latter provides a channel for collective conscious expression whereas the former may provide a channel for a less visible, and more sensitive, form of awareness (″). Many participants expect to experience a conference like a set of television programmes amongst which they can choose by - changing channel ». They are quite content that organizers should provide few occasions for unplanned . interchanges and are thus unsure how to behave when such occasions occur. It is not clear what proportion of participants perceive themselves as contributors to the exercise, as opposed to consumers of what is offered. Unfortunately there are many conferences where such passivity is a guarantee of the unproductivity of the event. The condition is often appreciated by organizers who count the obedience with which participants follow the programme as an indication of the success of the event. Participant initiatives are perceived as threatening. But worse than passivity is the unquestionable, all-pervading acceptance of the programme and organization as established months beforehand. This turns participants into actors in a play whose script and direction are governed by the creativity of the past. Until participants recover the ability to take un-preplanned initiative in the present, it is unlikely that the conference as a whole will fa) be able to take any collective initiative of consequence, or (b) fulfil the potential tor fruitfulness of the human resources assembled, or (c) match the hopes and expectations of newcomers to such events and of the outside world(**). Change does not result from planning but from action in response to plans. If planning monopolizes creativity and inhibits the ability or desire to act and innovate together, then plans become empty formulas, however successful they may be made to appear on paper. This is the tragedy of many conferences quickly forgotten, and of the United Nations vain efforts to engender - the necessary political will to change » (2).

(*) I am indebted to Tatiana Globokar for these insights
(**) Note Charlerton's effort « to overcome the mental

nantly landing them in the strange predicament of born seeing a thing it When people s perceptions are *in* this condition, they must, m the structest sense of the word be made to renew their acquiarance with things They must be made to see them a new as it for the first time » Hugh Kenner. *Pasador in* Chesterton. London. 1948. p 43) Also Edward de Bon's advocacy of « Po »

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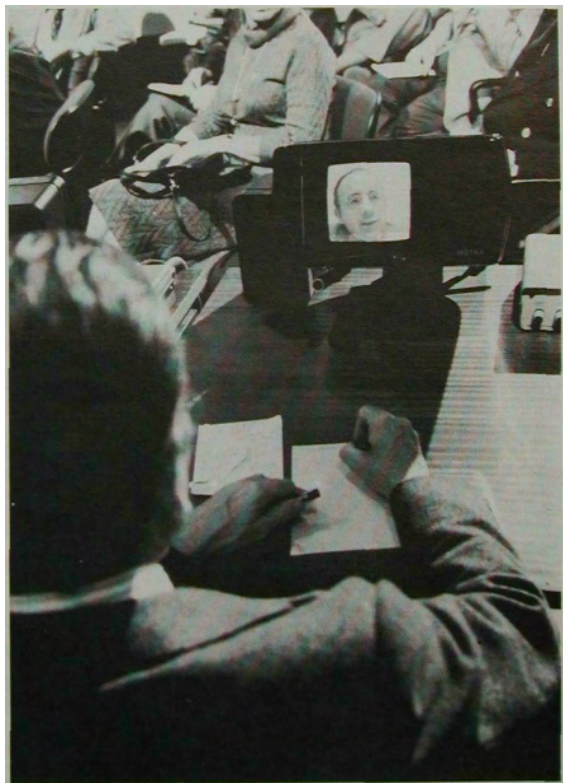10. Groupware configurations of challenge and harmony Transnational Associations, 3 1 , 1979. 10. pp. 467-475.

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