Computerized News Transmission Enhances Story Use

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Abstract

Do not mothball the typewriters yet...but... After about nine months' experience, the press section in the Department of Agricultural Communications, University of Nebraska-Lincoln is convinced that inputting news materials directly to newspapers via telephone from a small computer terminal has found its niche in the overall news operation.

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Do not mothball the typewriters yet...but...

After about nine months' experience, the press section in the Department of Agricultural Communications, University of Nebraska-Lincoln is convinced that inputting news materials directly to newspapers via telephone from a small computer terminal has found its niche in the overall news operation.

I feel that the full potential has not yet been reached in putting news stories directly into the computerized newsrooms of the *Omaha World-Herald* and *Lincoln Star* and *Lincoln Journal.* These three newspapers are the only ones among the state's more than 20 dailies that have the capability to receive news from an outside source by computer. But the three metros are strategic to the Nebraska agricultural and home economics press operation, because they reach the majority of the state's urban audience. (The Omaha and Lincoln areas comprise 43.5 percent of the state's 1978 population estimate of 1,565,729 persons. The *World-Herald* is the only paper that serves the entire state.)

"Necessity is the mother of invention," and the three papers' decision to "go on line" with two different computerized newsgathering systems (Harris and Hendricks) during the summer of 1978 made it obvious that the traditional printed "handout" releases would not be acceptable. The Lincoln papers notified Agricultural Communications that 4-H placings at the Nebraska State Fair could not be used unless they were "key-stroked" into the newspaper computer banks. After some delay in installation, the department terminal became operational October 1, 1978.

In a cooperative venture, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln University Information office, the UNL sports information office and Agricultural Communications each purchased a Texas Instruments "Silent 700 Series" computer

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terminal, with a memory-bank storage capacity of 250 lines of 80 characters each, and a phone modum.

The equipment is excellent for Nebraska's situation. Essentially, two weekly press services and selected daily spot news stories are put into the computer. All three newspapers early on gave permission to access their computers and transmit stories. This is viewed as mutual respect and confidence by the newspapers in the integrity and professionalism of the Nebraska staffs.

A special telephone number is dialed when the story has been edited on the machine and no voice communication is required. However, most transmissions are verified by calling someone on the editorial side. And, on important, fast-breaking stories, a staff member can call the state or city desk at the papers and notify them that a "biggie" is being transmitted. This has paid off in getting better acceptance on some crucial stories.

The acceptance of stories sent by computer is excellent. Perhaps the "honeymoon period" is not yet over, but in general, these stories are not edited as severely, and if cut, are most often trimmed from the bottom.

The biggest problem is an internal one—that of adjusting the workload in the Department of Agriculture Communications. Most transmitting is done by the head secretary in the press section. An early attempt to reproduce the hard copy from the Silent 700 for necessary printed releases to be mailed met with stiff resistance from print media. Some protested the readability of the computer-style type and others the difficulty in editing because all characters essentially are capital letters.

Thus, double-typing is done on stories sent via computer. This problem should be solved, however, once newly-acquired equipment in the department becomes operational. The system includes two CPT word processors linked to a Compugraphic Editwriter (phototypesetter). It is envisioned (and hopefully attempted in summer, 1979) that all stories will be typed on the Silent 700. They would be transmitted within the building by phone or hard-wire to the CPT's and stored on a floppy disc. After coding, they would go to the Editwriter to be set in type, thus eliminating the second run of the electric typewriter. Then stories planned for the newspaper systems would be transmitted from the Silent 700 memory bank in the usual way.

A drawback: Computerized News Transmission Enhanced Story In ory bank, which would have to be purged fairly often to accommodate the heavy volume of releases.

For the first time in recent years, the Lincoln and Omaha newspapers with computer capability are asking for more copy. One week, a *Journal* newswoman called and asked if the Agricultural Communications computer was down, as she did not remember seeing such material. The state editor of the *Lincoln Star* chastised the press section for not putting a large volume of placings from the state vocational agriculture judging contests into the computer. Instead, a big bundle of printed releases landed on her desk Saturday, to be sorted out and put in shape for the Monday a.m. edition.

Most major (and minor) problems appear to have been identified and are being dealt with. The Nebraska shop is vulnerable because only one trained person is available to transmit stories by computer. This base must be broadened to provide backup and also to allow transmissions after-hours, on weekends, and other times when warranted. The computer is not difficult to learn to operate, so this simply becomes a personnel management problem.

Occasionally, the newspaper computers are busy and will not accept a call-in, but this condition usually lasts only a few minutes. The Lincoln newspapers' computer banks are "down" for a short time each afternoon, so this must be taken into account.

Ag Communications news materials are identified with a slugline, so that editors calling up stories on their video display terminals can sort out university copy from newspaper staff-written copy.

In the future, we anticipate that most news stories might be inputted directly from the CPT word-processor-Editwriter combination, with the Silent 700 becoming more of a portable terminal to be used on field trips where results can be phoned from a remote location.

Special problems need to be solved in gearing up to handle the transmission of a large volume of material, such as 4-H ribbon placings, during the 1979 state horse show in July and the Nebraska State Fair in September.

I feel that the relationship with the papers has been strengthened and communications opened up as a result of the computer, which in itself is impersonal. I also feel that in the Nebraska setting, the present arrangement is highly desirable because the Agricultural Communications office is in

control of what stories are transmitted, when they are sent in, and how they are promoted or lobbied with newspaper editors. Conferences with newspaper editors to date do not indicate a concern on the newspapers' part that their computers are becoming "clogged" with outside material.

In summary, the computer terminal has become an integral part of the Nebraska press section operation.

More newspapers are expected to acquire computer capability and can be serviced, providing their computer systems are compatible with the Silent 700 and the CPT-Editwriter system. If many papers were to come on line, a burden could develop in making many separate phone calls on a regular basis. However, the calls do not take long, as it requires only a couple of minutes to transmit the equivalent of two pages of double-spaced, typewritten copy—a much shorter time than the eight to 12 minutes required to transmit the same length story by the Xerox telecopier or similar device previously used with success at Nebraska. And it beats the time-honored, time-consuming practice of dictating a story by phone.