

News Releases Delivered by Computer

Eldon E. Fredericks, Stephen B. Harsh,
Edward Rister, Deb Vergeson

An electronic information transfer system, called Michigan State University Information Services (MSUIFS), can store and deliver news and feature stories to mass media outlets and to Michigan county Extension offices. The program, which came "on-line" in April 1979, was begun and supported by the Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service and the Agricultural Experiment Station.

MSU news releases are entered on a standard computer terminal. Additional information is coded to include: categories and subcategories for filing the story, date entered, release date, kill date (date story will no longer be available on the system), and key word. Then the story is typed as any other. The final version of each story is sent by telephone line to the main computer. Media and county Extension offices have immediate access to the stories if they have the required computer terminal. Because many outlets are unable to accept electronic news copy we also have a stencil cutting program so that mimeographed releases can be prepared and mailed as usual.

The computer program allows media and county offices with access codes to browse through lists of our release titles. If a newspaper editor wants one of our releases he or she can transfer it electronically into the paper's editorial computer system without the delays of postal delivery or the need for retyping.

Releases are filed on the system according to topical categories and subcategories and date of entry. This filing system allows users to pick any topic of interest and gives them the ability to choose releases entered from any given date. For example, if editors wanted everything added since the

Fredericks is manager, Extension and Research Information Services; Harsh is coordinator of communication systems development and agricultural economist; Rister is a graduate assistant; and Vergeson is Information Services secretary. All are from Michigan State University.

beginning of a week, they would enter that Monday's date and receive header information on each story for the week.

The program files each article according to header information which includes: article number, key word, word count, date and title. A more detailed header is available to the editor who wants to know more about a story without having the entire story transmitted. The more detailed header is called an abstract. It includes the above PLUS the first and second paragraphs of the story.

We believe we have the first system in the nation that can link the total output of a university information office with a newspaper's editorial computer system.

The long term implications are significant. By cooperating in this developmental venture the *Detroit News* is helping speed the day when text can be transmitted to us, without editorial retyping, from any computer source, anywhere in the world.

Eventually—perhaps using techniques developed at MSU—we will receive government statistics (cost of living, consumer price index, etc.), corporate financial reports, business news (speeches, legal proceedings, etc.), labor and political speeches, sports statistics and more specialized statistical information from giant computer "networks" linked to us, and to each other, by dial-up telephone lines.¹

Why Get Involved with Computers?

We have found that reporters do not use typewriters and copy paper in many daily newspapers! Bernard Brenner quipped that he had to hunt for paper to make notes for his acceptance speech when the then American Association of Agricultural College Editors (AAACE) presented him with a major award in 1977.²

¹Mike Maharry, "Electronic Development News Distribution System," a report of the MSU program prepared by the *Detroit News*, April 24, 1979.

²Bernard Brenner, *United Press International*, Washington, D.C. at AAACE national meeting July 1977, Logan, Utah, acceptance of Reuben Brigham Award, highest honor given by the association.

Wire service news and feature copy flows onto the pages of newspapers equipped with electronic editing facilities without major retyping (keystroking) required. And, the newspaper reporter and editor still maintain control over such copy because they can edit, localize, and make other adjustments before final typesetting—all without using a blue pencil, typewriter, or copy paper. There's a technical revolution going on around us!

That same 1977 national meeting of AAACE offered much new technology for broadcast media—especially television. We were regaled with character generators, computerized cartoons and other electronic wizardry. At that meeting the germ of an idea was presented by Rod Harrington and others from Purdue University.³ They were describing a computer linkage between Purdue's Cooperative Extension Service headquarters and each of their 92 county Extension offices. They talked of reports flowing into the central office and they talked of central mailing label preparation and other potential use for such a system.

Was anybody listening? Was this a statistician's dream to expand the use of a computer? After all, computers are designed to manipulate accountants' numbers, aren't they?

Morrison has worked with the Purdue agricultural engineering department to use a computer text editing system.⁴ He believed that the myriad of changes between initial writing to final typesetting could and should be done without copy paper, blue pencil, or typewriter. Here is the forerunner of and an expansion on word processing equipment fast coming on the market, now.

At about the same time Fredericks and others at the University of Minnesota worked with that university's printing department to link early generation word processing equipment with computerized phototypesetting equipment.⁵ The goal was to encourage departments within the College of

³Rod Harrington, director, Agricultural Data Network, "Applied use of Computer Technology in Agricultural Communications," presentation at AAACE national meeting, Logan, Utah, July 1977.

⁴James Morrison, information specialist, News, Purdue University.

⁵Eldon Fredericks, then publication editor, University of Minnesota, presently manager, Extension and Research Information Services, MSU.

Agriculture, the Extension Service and the Agricultural Experiment Station to purchase compatible word processing equipment. The end result could have resulted in moving a manuscript from initial typing through editing and typesetting with but one keyboarding. Department heads at the University of Minnesota have not yet seen fit to "buy into" such a centralized system. It may be that information workers are not persuasive enough as "sales people" to convince academicians who have not yet seen the need for investing in modern technology. But using that technology may help prepare our departments for the tighter budgets, yet to come.

Michigan State University Information Services (MSUIFS)

The authors were given administrative support and encouragement to investigate and develop an information transfer application for computers. The result has been the development of electronic transmission of news and feature releases by telephone lines with computer assistance.

Selected releases from the total MSU Department of Information Services (that includes Extension, Experiment Station, Sports, News Service, Medicine, and others) are placed on the electronic system each day. These releases are also prepared for routine duplication on paper. The releases selected for the system provide a variety of materials, because of their timeliness, or because of their potential for later retrieval and use.

Any Michigan media outlet with compatible editorial terminals, or a portable computer terminal, has access to this new delivery method. We give them a telephone number and their own specific code or password. We also provide those county Extension offices that have computer terminals with the necessary code. We have terminals in about 25 of 80 county offices.

When a user phones the systems (logs on) he is given several options. He is shown a display (SALT—Survey of articles on file, Abstract retrieval, List article, Terminate job) of options. If he asks to survey articles on file (S) the computer will prompt another decision—(A) survey all articles since a certain date (user selects the date) or (C) survey articles by categories.

These options provide users with a chance to get the titles, length in words, and the date the article was entered on the system. So, users might like to log on the system each day and review the electronic delivery output from Mi-

Michigan State's Information Services. Or, the user might have a specific subject in mind to research. In that case he or she surveys the system by category and subcategory to determine if MSUIFS has any articles dealing with the desired subject.

Assuming the user finds one or more articles of interest, the next step is an option to request an abstract (the first or first and second paragraphs) of the article(s) desired, or, a listing (retrieval) of the entire article without requesting the abstract.

At the completion of the user's search and retrieval the program is terminated by the option "terminate job" (T).

The MSUIFS program was activated on April 11, 1979, when the first code identifier and telephone number was provided to the Booth Newspaper's Lansing (Capitol) Bureau. The Booth chain includes eight daily newspapers in Michigan with a combined circulation of 553,839. The second user to come "on-line" was the Michigan Farm Radio Network in Milan, Michigan. This radio network reaches about 50 radio stations with sports as well as agricultural programming.

Other media have expressed interest in the system but do not have the equipment needed to gain access at this date. We plan an advertising and marketing campaign throughout Michigan.

Plans are underway to provide electronic reports and other information pertaining to the International Conference of Agricultural Engineers meeting at Michigan State University during July, 1979. We intend to make information available through computer data links both nationally as well as throughout Europe.

Initial planning for MSUIFS included a meeting of the authors with a representative of a major Michigan metropolitan newspaper. That paper was one of the first in the country to move to computer editing systems in the 1960s. From that discussion we learned of American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA) bulletins on wire service transmission guidelines.⁶ Our categories were patterned after those proposed by ANPA and currently used by the media.

Then we contacted several other major dailies to learn of their interest in such a project. We found moderate interest

⁶ANPA, *Research Institute Bulletin 1228, "High-Speed Wire Service Transmission Guides," ANPA Research Institute, Easton, PA, June 1976.*

but no great enthusiasm. We did find very quickly that at least the major dailies we contacted did not want any system developed that would place our news and feature releases directedly into their editorial system. This is unlike the response Lutz has received in Nebraska.⁷ He uses a computer terminal with built-in memory to dial a newspaper computer and directly feed articles into their system. (See accompanying article "Computer transmission enhances story use.")

The response we received confirmed our intention to build a system that provides a menu or directory of information available—a system which the media must want to call to request our releases.

We recognize a major disadvantage to this system is that the initiative must come from the media. To overcome this disadvantage we are committed to provide high quality information that is in demand and to advertise and remind media of the service.

Our biggest sales pitches include: information that is available immediately in the case of timely news; information that is readily found and retrieved from storage in the case of background articles; information that cannot be tossed in the wastebasket because the editor happens to have a full desk when it arrives. And, our electronically delivered copy will not require keystroking at the editorial office or in the composing room.

⁷Daniel Lutz, assistant Extension editor, Press, University of Nebraska.