Electronic Transfer: A Good Investment

Terry W. Canup

Instead of debating whether use of computers in information offices is overrated or underrated, it may be more constructive for agricultural communicators to accept computerization as inevitable and weigh the advantages and disadvantages of jumping into different aspects of computerization now.

One aspect of computerization begs to be pursued now—electronic transfer of text to news outlets. Computer-aided electronic transfer of text entails keystroking stories into a computer terminal and transferring those stories (in our case, by telephone line) to the computer systems of newspapers. The stories can then be manipulated on an editor's video screen and incorporated into the editor's copy without being restroked.

Already at least 10 state Extension or agricultural information offices are doing some kind of electronic transfer of text to news outlets and it was among the highest of priorities when I took over management of the Virginia Tech Extension Information Office in 1982. We have since established electronic links with several Virginia outlets and we consider it an investment that has both immediate payoff and long-term returns.

It was far more than infatuation with new technology that made this such an important step in my mind. Virginia Extension information programming was in particular need of

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penetrating the major metropolitan newspapers which are the ultimate sources of state news for Virginians. An ability to deal with timely topics in a credible way, in my opinion, was a key to gaining a foothold in the metropolitan newspapers. In addition, Extension's news rel   ses and informational packet materials sailed into editor's o   :es on a sea of PR releases and feature service filler. It was too much to expect editors faced with such a flood to be discerning enough to judge Extension material on its merits.

Electronic transfer capability offered several opportunities for the Extension Information Office. First, it could allow the office to respond quickly to breaking news in a way that was particularly convenient to news outlet personnel. Second, use of electronic transfer could inherently suggest credibility to the news outlets. Third, electronic transfer could separate our materials from the pack.

In addition to these opportunities, there was a more compelling reason to jump into computer-aided transfer technology. I did not want the office to pay the price of being left behind. Drive off the interstate highways and travel down the old state roads littered with ailing businesses to see a vivid portrayal of what happens to those who don't respond to the inevitable.

I believe we should build our operations on the "interstate" if we want them to thrive. By building on the electronic transfer infrastructure now, our offices avoid the danger of being caught up in a flood of organizations rushing to access the computers of outlets. By taking advantage of the computerization capability of the land-grant universities, agricultural information offices can be among the early users of the technology and get the edge on the competition.

Establishing an Electronic Transfer Program

The Virginia Tech Extension Information Office obtained its first computer terminal in June 1982 and added three desk-top terminals in July 1983 and a fourth in September 1983. All terminals were tied into the Virginia Tech mainframe computer via telephone lines. Monthly service charges and reliance on the mainframe computer were disadvantages, but low capital investment was a great advantage to the system. Also, the office was backed by the normal university computer center personnel, and had invaluable responsive computer support from the Extension Computing Resources Unit.

Given this situation, the office was able to begin selling the idea of electronic transfer in the late summer and early fall of 1983. Several premises were established as we embarked. First, we decided that we would try to establish a proactive system; i.e., a system in which we would actively dump stories into an outlet's computer, rather than have the outlet access our computer to select stories. All accounts I have heard of passive systems told of a singular lack of success due to the hesitancy of newspaper people to seek out stories from information offices.

A second premise was that we would approach news outlets on the basis that we would customize service via electronic transfer to meet their needs. It was decided that the onus was on us to make the proposition attractive and that it would be a mistake to offer one service for all, at a time when outlets were reluctant to have outsiders access their computers. Where we could, we offered to deliver electronically those local agents' columns that were already fixtures in the newspapers. This was among the most welcome of our services.

Due to the variety of services that could be offered via electronic transfer, and the Associated Press' legendary recalcitrance on the subject, it was decided to approach as many different outlets as possible. Even if we were able to link up with wire services, we felt we might want to tranfer to newspapers information not appropriate for wire services, such as softer special-section features.

A decision was made to approach outlets with an acknowledged limited partnership with the university's public affairs office. We agreed to tell outlets that both our office and the public affairs office could use the same electronic transfer system but that an agreement could be made to accept electronic transfer from one and not the other. If electronic transfer were accepted from both, it was to be made clear that each office was separately responsible for use of the system and content of releases. Each office would clearly identify releases. Both offices benefited from this arrangement.

Finally, it was recognized that editorial people were not equipped with the knowledge about computer systems that would enable us to progress from an agreement in principal to a working electronic transfer relationship. Consequently, when we visited editors we went prepared with a technical

response sheet that could be turned over to an individual at the newspaper who was responsible for computer systems. The sheet, which was prepared by Craig Woods of Tech's Extension Computing Resources, was invaluable in making electronic transfer a reality.

Copies of our technical response sheet are available from our office on request.

Selling the Electronic Transfer Idea

Several daily newspaper editors and the wire services were visited to review our services, in general, and our delivery systems, in particular. A survey form and a technical response sheet were either filled out on the spot or left with editors. The responses were instructive.

The idea of electronic transfer received mixed reviews for many reasons. One important variable was the individual outlet's computer system. Some newspapers do a very good job of handling their capacity, while other are struggling to manage it. Those in the latter category view another contributor to the computer load as a liability. Those in the former category view the access request as a good way to cut down on paper.

Large newspapers that are overeager to receive anything and everything via computer should be asked what the shelf life is of materials sent this way. If a newspaper purges all incoming material every few hours, it would not be wise to send timeless file material electronically to the newspaper. It would be good, however, to send such material on paper with a note saying that it was available electronically upon request. The ease of using transferred material could make editors view the material in a better light.

Another variable affecting receptivity to the system was the respondent's place in the hierarchy. An executive editor who is concerned about the cost of doing business sees the electronic transfer of information as a means of reducing keystroking time and, therefore, a money savings. A writer sees the system as a convenience. A managing editor or a desk head, who is responsible for controlling the integrity of other writers' reporting, may view the system as a means of promoting lazy reporting.

We found it useful to approach each newspaper with several examples of material we had provided the newspaper

and explain how electronic transfer would have been a good way to deliver the information. An example of a good "react piece," information provided for special advertising supplements, and agents' columns were particularly good selling points.

Not all daily newspapers were processing words with computers and not all those who were claimed to have phone lines accessing those computers. Midsized newspapers were in the latter category. If they were not already taking electronic wire copy via satellite, they were planning to and claimed to be phasing out phone access to the computer. The larger newspapers, on the other hand, planned to keep phone line access to the computers for use by their own correspondents in the field.

Another variable relating to receptivity of the respondent was personal knowledge. We had to accept that many individuals not only didn't understand the technical aspects of electronic transfer, but were unclear about policy relating to it. Finding out about either was not often a priority of editorial personnel. Consequently, in our case, we gained access to United Press International only after confirming national UPI policy ourselves with the help of Iowa State Communication Specialist Diana Pounds.

Impenetrable AP

The Associated Press has long been adamantly opposed to local bureaus accepting access to their computers from outsiders. Overtures from universities to bureaus or from bureaus to universities have been quashed by the national office. My own conversation with the national office about electronic transfer brought a response as cold as cucumber soup.

University of Illinois Press Officer Chris Scherer, whose own efforts were thwarted by the national office, has suggested that ACE members present a united front to AP via ACE's computer special interest group.

My best response from AP was to a suggestion that AP access Virginia Tech's computer for story files upon a phone tip from our office. The Richmond bureau chief, however, finally concluded that this was impractical and suggested use of the telecopier.

Keep On Selling

The Extension Information Office was successful in gaining access to the computers of the three major metropolitan newspapers in Virginia, and United Press International. Promises of hook-ups with *Delmarva Farmer*, Virginia Farm Bureau, and WRVA (the state's only clear-channel radio station) when equipment difficulties are sorted out have been made. Indications of definite interest also have been made by several middle-sized newspapers.

We are continuing to persist in selling in a soft way. Key news outlets are beginning to receive news and information releases stamped in red with the message—"Eliminate unnecessary keystroking. These releases available by electronic transfer. Contact Extension Information (703) 961-6247 to receive releases directly through your computer."

One of the first releases sent out with this stamp prompted a query about electronic transfer from a major metropolitan newspaper that was previously reluctant to have us access its system. Apparently, the stamp delivers the message at a teachable moment.

Information Officer Mary Ann Johnson also contacts dailies with stories or packets which fulfill special needs of newspapers and offers them electronically. These are new efforts that we think will pay off.

The Payoff of Electronic Transfer

The effect of electronic transfer has been immediate. The system allowed us to market a weekly commodity market advisory report to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* that would have been impossible to offer otherwise because of the timeliness of the material. Electronic transfer itself apparently has been a message to the newspaper that we are a source to be reckoned with, as our material has appeared more regularly—even material which was not sent electronically to that newspaper.

The system has allowed us to respond to breaking stories with enough speed to be included in breaking reports of events in newspapers. Finally, we have been able to start a program of grooving existing materials to special-section editors. For example, a special section on home computers in the *Roanoke Times and World-News* included eight stories

from our office after they were electonically sent to the editor. Such use is new for us, but clearly has great potential.

Internal Electronic Transfer

Another form of electronic transfer in Virginia Extension actually preceded direct transfer to professional news outlets. During Virginia Agriculture Week in March 1983, the Extension Information Office initiated the "EIO Program" on the state Extension computer communications network to county offices.

The program offered daily news updates in print form, radio scripts, and background information. Monitoring of the system has shown that among those 65 offices hooked up to the system, most of those who have terminals with video screens will access the material. Given the fact that Virginia agents are producing 105 newspaper columns and 113 regular broadcasts, their interest is not surprising.

The electronic link to unit offices offers the Extension Information Office the opportunity to quickly get information to small dailies, weeklies, and broadcast stations via agents. Testimonials from agents indicate that some see the service as a good way to enhance their positions as information sources in their communities.

In some ways, forging a healthy working relationship between the information office and agents is one of the most exciting aspects of electronic transfer. The implications for a responsive Extension network are tremendous.