

engineering outlook

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inside outlook:

STUDYING COMPUTERIZED COMMUNITY PLANNING
RAINFALL AND SOIL MEASURING DEVICE TESTED
REVIEW OF ELECTRONICS TO BE HELD
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CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR ENGINEERS PLANNED

ELECTRONIC ELECTORATE

If engineers could find a way to freeze Lake Michigan, Chicago would have a place big enough to hold a town meeting. The population would learn much about the internal affairs of its city at that imaginary meeting and would also be able to voice its opinions on the plans made to govern it.

The thought of large-scale community meetings is not so farfetched as one may think. At present the only means available for local governments to communicate with and inform the electorate is the local media. However, because of lack of time and space, the information carried on local radio, television, and newspapers is usually incomplete. In addition, the voice of the people is heard only at election time.

Due to the impracticality of freezing Lake Michigan, and the necessity for some type of two-way communications medium between people and government, a computerized town meeting is being tested. Stuart Umpleby, a graduate student in communications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Valarie Lamont, a graduate student in political science at the University, with the help of a grant from the National Science Foundation, have been developing a means of using PLATO, a teaching computer, in community planning.

The PLATO system consists of terminals connected to a computer which can both send and receive messages, making PLATO a two-way communications system. Each

terminal has a keyboard, a graphic display for computer-generated messages or drawings, and superimposed colored slides.

The use of PLATO seems to have more advantages than either the town meeting or mass media. With PLATO, a citizen can ask questions about an issue, learn about the issue at his own speed, and feed his own ideas and suggestions into the computer, with a guarantee that his voice will be heard.

The purpose of Umpleby's and Lamont's research is to find the most effective ways of presenting community issues through this new medium. They will also try to determine whether patterns of communication and methods of making community decisions change as a result of the availability of a new communications medium.

At this time, one method of planning has been tried, and another is being organized, to be tested in the near future. The first method allows members of the community to make choices among given alternatives. The program used to test this method, the Boneyard Creek Program, was based on a local environmental issue. Participants were given the choice between covering the Boneyard, a small creek running through the Urbana-Champaign community, and making the creek part of a park running through the two cities.

The second method involves giving participants a chance to suggest their own alternatives of action, rather than choosing between alternatives selected by a team of experts. Suggestions of topics for this type of program include local budget priorities, methods of raising revenue, and environmental issues.

As for the long-range purpose of their research, Umpleby and Lamont feel that both the frustrations of the public and the stress on public officials would be reduced if a larger part of the public was able to participate in setting goals and priorities, rather than relying only on experts and elected officials. And, Lake Michigan could remain unfrozen. ●