

A mass communications medium which allows users to talk back has been developed in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

It is a network of terminals each equipped with a keyboard, a screen and a loudspeaker. The keyboard allows users to respond to messages.

They can ask or answer questions, change the rate at which information is presented or express opinions.

The terminals were built for PLATO, the university's teaching computer, to provide simultaneous instruction to students in a number of different subjects.

Although PLATO now has only 20 terminals, a federal grant of \$10 million is funding an expansion of the system during the next five years to include as many as 4,000 terminals.

Two doctoral candidates, Stuart Umpleby, in communications, and Valarie Lamont, in political science, are investigating the use of PLATO to create a new mass communications medium for the discussion of long range community planning. Their research will be funded by a grant of \$26,110 to the university from the National Science Foundation.

PLATO terminals will present information on a local issue. Participants in the electronic town meeting will have some control over the flow of information. They will be able to skip sections or have some part of the lesson repeated.

The effects of future local government spending on pollution control, for example, might be explored in a lesson. Residents seated at terminals could take the lesson and then recommend long range goals and spending levels.

(MORE--new medium)

"The purpose of the research," Umpleby said, "will be to find the most effective ways of presenting issues on the new medium. We also will 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."

"What we need," Miss Lamont said, "is well documented background information on an issue likely to be of interest over a period of months or even years."

Alternative redevelopment plans for part of Champaign or Urbana, an important environmental issue or a recurring issue such as local government budget priorities were some topics she mentioned.

Umpleby believes the network eventually could be expanded to give citizens a chance to participate routinely in long range planning instead of "relying only on experts and elected officials."

"In the past decade, long range planning in the United States and in other countries has increased rapidly. During the same period, numerous new groups have begun to press for changes in government procedures that affect them."

Umpleby said he and Miss Lamont also are interested in using PLATO to improve communication between groups with different interests or cultural backgrounds.

"If people are able to test their perceptions of the hopes and fears of others in the community, they may find that the views of other groups are not what they had thought," he said.

One presentation of information on a local issue <sup>Lamont</sup> ~~has~~ has written for PLATO explains two proposals for long range use of the Boneyard Creek which runs through the Urbana-Champaign campus.

~~Anyone~~ Anyone interested in seeing the Boneyard Creek program can make an appointment by writing or phoning Miss Valerie Lamont, 252 Engineering Research Laboratory. 217/233-6500 ext. 20