Promoting a Computer Conference, Continued:
The Experience of the Association of Public Data Users

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Following publicaton of Chuck Humphrey's article in the Summer 1985 issue of this journal[1], Judith Rowe suggested that readers might be interested in our experience with a computer conference for the Association of Public Data Users (APDU).

APDU is an organization of organizations, rather than of individuals, bringing together people with an interest in the development and use of public data. Because these activities center around the federal government in Washington, the membership is entirely American. Almost everyone involved in APDU uses demographic data from the census, but many other kinds of data are of interest as well, such as economic data, health statistics, and data on specific populations such as the ageing. Members are also interested in the software packages available for processing these data and, increasingly in recent years, in the potential for the use of microcomputers in their everyday work lives. Cross–cutting all of this is a concern with federal statistical policy.

The APDU electronic conference (or e–conf, as we refer to it) was the brainchild of Ken Riopelle, APDU board member. Ken had previous experience as a conference organizer and promoter for the Mott Foundation, experience that included users signing on from around the country. I was a veteran conference participant, but had never been an organizer. The Wayne State University Computing Services Center in Detroit is the "electronic home" for both Ken and I, so it made sense to set up the e–conf there. The software of choice was CONFER, a sophisticated electronic conferencing package developed for use on the MTS operating system.

The original proposal called for a pilot project, for Board members and a few others. This was a group of about 13 people. We began in the spring of 1984. A project account was established at the Wayne State Computing Services Center, the e–conf itself was created, and sign–on materials were sent to each member of the group.

The initial group was registered into the *userdirectory*, and materials on the electronic messaging system were provided as well as on CONFER. Since all were coming in on Telenet

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[1] C. Humphrey, Getting a turnout: the plight of the organizer. Experiences in promoting a computer conference. IASSIST quarterly 9(2):14-27, Summer 1985.

or Autonet, the appropriate phone numbers were provided to each prospective participant. A wallet-sized "1-2-3" crib sheet with sign-on instructions was provided. In addition, a sample session of CONFER was created, printed and reproduced.

How well did it work? Of the initial group of 13 people, seven (including Ken and myself) became active participants. Active is defined, here, as signing on at least once a month. Three board members signed on, joined, but rarely participated; the remaining three never actually joined the e-conf at all.

Two major factors seem to explain non-participation; to some degree they are interactive, one with the other. One was lack of equipment, and the other was a lack of of familiarity with using computer terminals. It appears to be necessary, to maintain active participation, to have a computer terminal available in the office, and to be in a position to use it frequently for other, routine work activities. Most non-participants either had no access to equipment or had access only at home.

However, the seven people who did participate had a great time. Items were entered on internal APDU Board issues, on federal information policy, on software and data access, and on use of the e-conf itself. Enough was going on to keep people interested, so that activity levels did not drop among the seven active participants.

After evaluation of the pilot project, the Board decided to extend the e-conf to the membership. To promote interest, a $20 credit was offered to each organizational member. In the APDU membership structure, each member organization has a primary representative who is responsible for the dues; additional representatives can be added for a small fee.

The $20 credit allowed members to sign up and try out the conference at no cost. Expenditures

in excess of $20, however, had to be paid for "up front", so that APDU would not get into financial difficulty. Additional representatives were welcome to participate as well, but were required to arrange for funding from their primary organizational representatives. The Computing Center's accounting system allows us to control the amount of money available to each sign-on ID, so there was no problem managing the accounts.

In January 1985, the entire membership received a mailing which explained the opportunity to participate in the e-conf and included forms for signing up. Unfortunately, the response can best be described as underwhelming. Between the time of mailing and the annual "people" conference in October, only ten sign-on IDs were issued; of these, only three or four became active paricipants. We picked up a few more as a result of heavy promotion at the conference in October, as well as having added some new board members.

At this point, in January 1986, 37 sign-on IDs have been issued but only 14 can be described as active participants. The number of items has grown to 121 and discussions continue to be lively. A great deal of information is being exchanged. Several specific decisions have been made "electronically". Draft resolutions, letters of comment, and the like, representing proposed positions for APDU to take vis-a-vis the federal statistical establishment, have been put into items to be reviewed by the Board and other interested parties.

And the cost? It appears that 1985 expenditures will be under the budgeted figure of $2500, primarily because there are fewer members than anticipated taking advantage of the $20 credit. By budget category, costs can be broken down as follows:

- E-conf maintenance: disk space, on-line time for organizers, printing manuals, and project accounting. These costs would

have beeen higher had the organizers not had other Wayne State accounts through which to participate and do some of the maintenance work. $425

- Use of system by executive secretary. $425

- Non-reimbursed use by Board members. Those who are in work situations in which it is difficult to obtain reimbursement are allowed unlimited access at present. This item also includes use of the system by the organizers of the annual conference, for which two people in different cities accomplished most of their work via electronic messaging. $950

- $20 credits (excluding accounts in the previous item). $250

Overall, the consensus of the Board is that the expenditure is worthwhile and justifiable within our total budget scenario. There has been some criticism of the project within the APDU membership, primarily of the cost to the members. Some feel that they cannot afford participation (since $20 really doesn't go that far on Telenet or Autonet). As in any organization, members belong for different reasons and have different agendas; not all our members find interaction with other members to be a useful expenditure of their time and/or money.

There also remains a significant problem with equipment access – several members who wish to participate have been stymied by the lack of a terminal, or a good modem and communication software. This problem should decrease over time, as more and more organizations acquire microcomputers. We are planning to have an on-line demonstration of the system at our next annual conference (scheduled for October 1986), to promote interest in the system. We are also including a

column entitled "From the E-Conf" in our monthly printed newsletter, both to provide information for those who are not conference participants and to encourage them to join.

There is another participation problem of a different kind: some participants sign on regularly, but rarely contribute any responses. This is the reverse of the "habitual commentator" described in the Humphrey article[2]. Two factors are at work here: one technical and one involving personalities. Many participants sign on and simply "dump" the conference activity to disk, to be read later, or to a printer, without actually reading it while they are signed on. This has the negative effect of discouraging responses, since they must sign on again to enter them. The other factor is, as Humphrey[3] described, the "implicit norm to say nothing." However, I think this is less a problem in our particular conference than it might be in others. The fact that most of the participants have met each other "in person" at the annual conference helps – we generally know the people to whom we are talking electronically.

All in all, APDU rates the e-conf a success and it has become an integral part of the organization's functional mechanism. We would like to see greater participation and will continue our efforts in that direction. What we have, though, is a system that works – people are communicating, and that's what an organization is all about. ■

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[2] ibidem
[3] ibidem