It's good to **talk**

Live comms developments such as online chat and conferencing services are reviving the art of conversation. Stephen Cobb sits in on meetings, discussions and celebrity interviews.

Electronic mail has become deeply ingrained in the daily life of many business people, with good reason. Email offers many advantages over other forms of written communication. It is fast, reliable, and easy to organise. On a typical working day I don't do anything until I've checked my in-basket in WinCIM and replying to messages. My replies are automatically filed for me and I can easily move answered messages into a separate part of my electronic filing cabinet.

I find that email allows me to stay in touch with far more people than fax or voice calls. It also cuts out a lot of unproductive telephone-tag. But email is no substitute for live conversation, the to-and-fro of question-and-answer exchanges. In this month's column we look at several different forms of live communication that are currently available to modem and Internet users — not high-tech videophones and teleconferencing, but online chat and online conferencing, where the input is still typed, but in real-time.

Ten four
Remember Citizen's Band radio? One of the first forms of live online communication was the CB Simulator on CompuServe.

Live and almost in person – CD Simulator on CompuServe can be an exciting way to spend online time (and money)
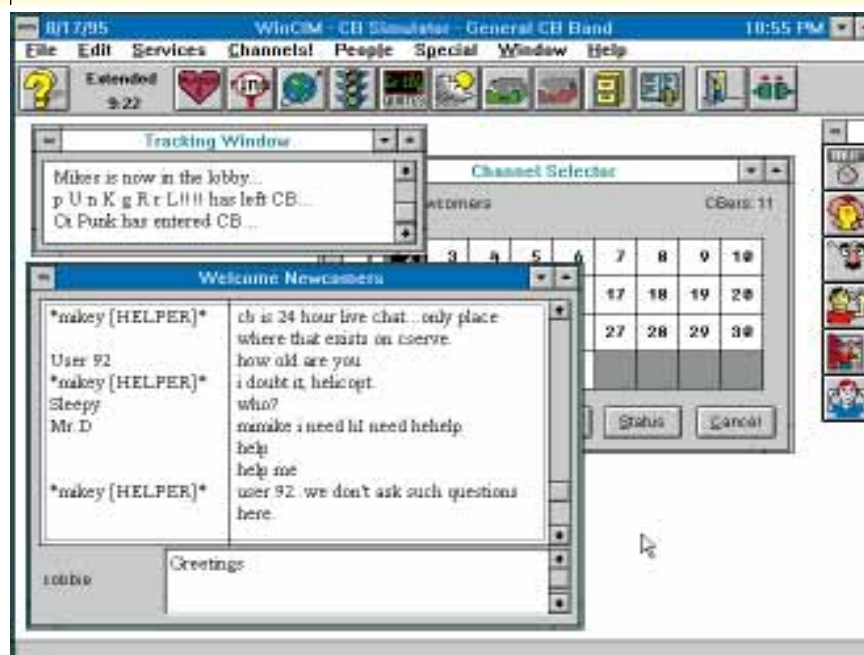
CB radio used a simple set of commands to enable many people to talk to each other at roughly the same time on the same channel. CompuServe's computerised version of this system is still operational, offering more than two dozen channels and three bands. If you use WinCIM to access CompuServe you will find CB Simulator on the Services menu.

The commands and protocols are quite easy to learn and there is one channel reserved for newcomers. Help is at hand from sysops who will respond to questions right away. This "chatting" aspect is particularly impressive. For the most part the people you encounter are helpful and polite to newcomers, although they may strike British users as overly familiar. Not everyone enjoys chatting to a wide and random range of people from all over the world, but if you do, then CB Simulator is worth checking out.

The same principle has been carried over into other areas of computer communications such as chatting on bulletin boards and the Internet facility known as IRC, for Internet Relay Chat. IRC, which has been around since 1988, was originally developed in Finland by Jarkko Oikarinen. It achieved extensive publicity during the Gulf war because it was used by correspondents in the region to file live reports. It was also used to provide up-to-the-minute news during the failed coup against Boris Yeltsin in 1993.

Unfortunately, IRC has recently developed a reputation for being rather racy. For example, when I joined a channel named Dog Lovers in order to shoot a screen for this article there was at least one person there who seemed to think the title referred to something other than canine companionship. In fact, finding a channel that deals with a topic that is of interest to you may take some effort, unless you know someone who is already using that channel, or unless spicy conversation is indeed what you are looking for. A warning to parents: exercise some control over access to IRC if you have children under 18 who are computer literate. There have been several cases in which adults have attempted to meet minors whom they have contacted via IRC.

Conferencing
More formal and public electronic get-togethers are possible with conferencing software built into CompuServe and Microsoft Network (MSN). They are usually presented in a "meet-the-celeb" or "talk-to-the-expert" format; in August Michael Jackson was on CompuServe
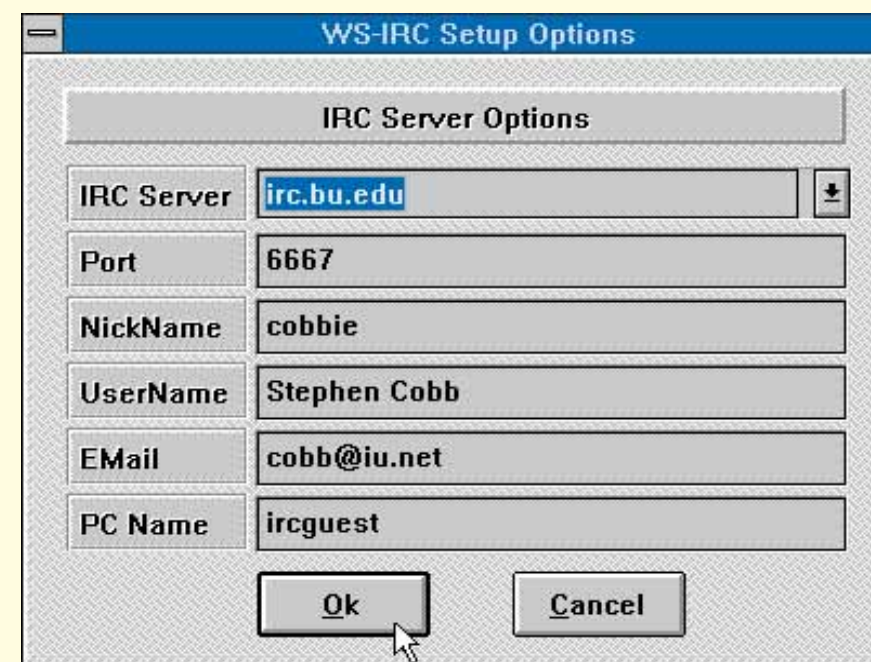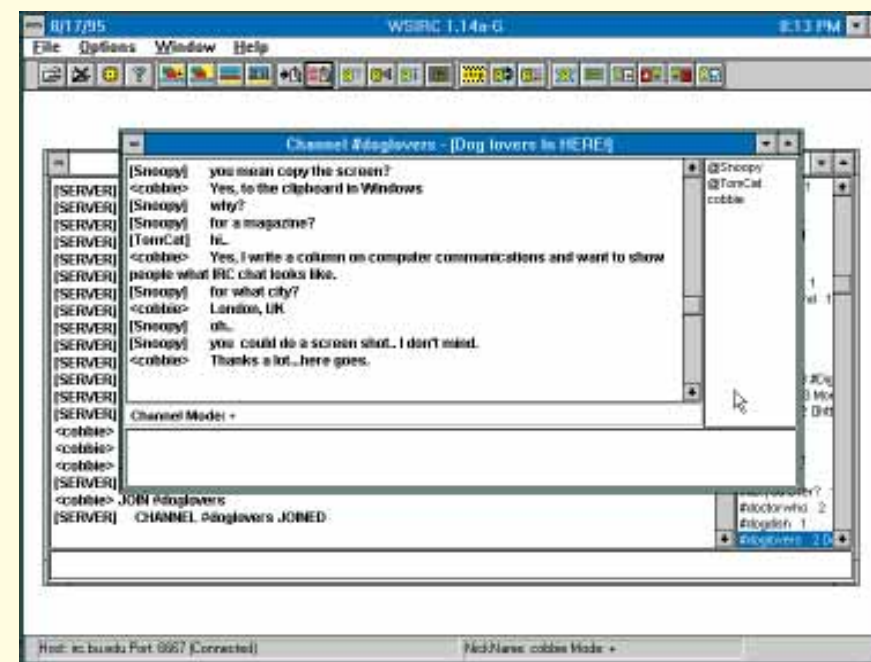
and the conference attracted 480 visitors. Like chatting online, these events are not for everyone, but there does seem to be genuine enthusiasm on the part of participants. What other medium allows you to put a question to a favourite author or musician and get a personal reply?

There are limitations. In the CompuServe model everyone can talk at once. As you might imagine this can lead to chaos, with new questions slicing into unfinished replies, and so on. The answer is decorum, a set of rules which, if followed by all participants, can produce a well-ordered exchange of remarks.

Typically a conference session starts out with the moderator typing a few

Top At any time of the day or night you will find thousands of users engaged in Internet Relay Chat

Above Setting up the shareware IRC program WS-IRC simply involves entering your name and a suitable IRC server

opening remarks, including the rules. The first is not to ask questions out of turn. If you want to ask a question, you simply type a question mark. This alerts the moderator who will, at an appropriate point, tell you to go ahead and ask your question. The second rule is to type the letters GA, for Go Ahead, at the end of your remarks or questions. If you don't do this it is hard

to tell whether you have completed your contribution or have simply paused.

Fortunately, the message-and-response dialogue box provided for conferencing within WinCIM make these procedures fairly easy to follow. You can enter a question mark to signal that you are ready to ask a question, then type several sentences without sending them, so that you are ready to post the question as soon as you are called on. While it might seem to be rather formal this system works well, and as long as everyone abides by the rules you can get a good exchange going. But what happens if you want to make a comment to someone who is in the audience instead of just talking to the guest or moderator?

For this you can use the regular CompuServe Forum chat function. You use the special Who's Here? command in WinCIM to pop up a list of people who are "in" the conference room. Then you can click on any name and click the Talk button. This opens up a secondary message-and-response dialogue box for a two-way chat between you and that person, without interrupting the regular conference which continues to scroll by in the main message-and-response box. Since the main proceedings tend to be slower than voice conversations there is time to maintain several discussions at once. You soon

BBS chat

Many bulletin board systems have the capability to provide online chatting between board users. However, a major limitation for smaller boards is that they support fewer phone lines. If you have only half-a-dozen lines then you can only have six people talking at once, and in fact you may not want any of them chatting as it ties up the lines. Larger boards with dozens of lines are more likely to encourage chatting, particularly if there is a time-based charge for the use of the board or chat facility. You might be surprised how fast time flies when you are engrossed in a conversation that proceeds at 30 words per minute. You might even more surprised when you get your phone bill and credit card statement.

One relatively recent development is changing the economics of BBS chatting: Telnet access to bulletin boards (see last month's column). Telnet connects with the BBS via the Internet. If you have free or low-cost access to an Internet connection

Today's BBS software provides online chat for callers, as in this WorldGroup for Windows board

you can spend longer online. Telnet also allows a board to support more concurrent connections without installing additional phone lines and modems — you can create as many as 256 TCP/IP channels on a T1 connection. In the screenshot above you can see a WorldGroup BBS accessed via Telnet. This particular BBS software comes with built-in conferencing and chat facilities.

Microsoft Network has an impressive schedule of experts in its online talk shows (grin)

learn to be succinct and quick.

The approach to conferencing on MSN is slightly different. The moderator and guest hold their conversation in a separate section, visible to members of the audience but not accessible to them. The audience members chat among themselves and ask questions in a separate window. The moderator then takes questions from that window and poses them to the guest. The replies can be read by everyone, but there is no direct response capability. In fact, for a good conference with either system it is

almost essential that the moderator and guest be in voice contact as well. This can be done by participating from the same physical location or by holding open a voice line.

When I participated as a guest on MSN there were four of us on a conference voice call, with two people from Microsoft helping out the moderator and me by cutting and pasting questions from the audience and helping us decide which questions to handle. Usually, the service provider is not so involved but Microsoft was beta-testing MSN at the time. In fact, once you have some experience presenting a conference you can do it with just two people, the moderator and the guest, provided that the guest has a reasonable grounding in computer literacy.

The art of cyber-chat

You will find that good typing skills are helpful in all these live communication formats, but most people are forgiving of typos and the slightly terse writing style that tends to emerge. In fact, you may well enjoy the mental rush of answering questions quickly and succinctly. Some people even argue that cyber-chat is reviving the

Future developments

The Internet provides such far-reaching access to a relatively high-speed communications channel that further improvements in live contact are almost inevitable. We already have the ability to hold phone calls over the Internet and there have been some experiments in live video on the Web. However, phone companies are already providing video conferencing and video phones, so it is unclear what role the Internet will play in creating the sort of ubiquitous sound and video links that are so popular with science fiction movie makers.

The next step for live Internet communications may be far less futuristic: some form of Web-based conferencing software. The ease-of-use that has made Web browsers so popular could easily be extended into this area. Of course, you would still have to type what you want to say. But if conferencing becomes a standard part of Web server and client software, I predict we will see an explosion in conference events. Companies and organisations will be able to host conferences whenever they want. Instead of expensive conference calls on voice lines, meetings could be held at very low cost on the Internet. The need to type what you want to communicate, rather than speak it, may even result in more efficient meetings. We are all apt to choose our words with more care when we have to hunt and peck for them on the keyboard, especially if someone is logging them onto a text file on disk.

art of witty conversation, just as email has revived the art of written correspondence. Furthermore, an online conference can be captured on disk and transcripts made available almost immediately. These can make interesting reading for anyone who "missed the meeting". They also provide a more accurate account of what was said than one personal recollection.

Globalisation: an object lesson

In some countries, hunting animals for sport is mainstream activity. This is evident when you visit the CompuServe home page on the World Wide Web, which advertises a treasure-hunt-style competition with a sound clip of a hunting horn rallying the hounds. If you find hunting offensive, this will strike you as unfortunate, even downright gratuitous.

The people responsible for the content of the online world, and that includes all of us who post messages in public bulletin boards, need to realise that cyberspace is an international entity. People log on from anywhere, anytime, from many different cultural backgrounds.

We should all exercise a bit of tact and diplomacy when we put our words online. Imagine yourself speaking in a crowded bar in a foreign port when all of a sudden everything goes quiet and your voice can be heard by all present. How will you know whether the words you have chosen will strike anyone as insulting? And we should also bear in mind cultural differences and try not to take offence too easily. Give others some latitude before taking exception to their choice of phrase or .WAV file.

V for vacant?

If you liked last month's storm in a teacup over American legislation to ban obscenity on the Internet (the Exon bill) you'll love the V-chip. The same mis-informed body politic, the US Senate, is pushing legislation that would require all television sets sold in America to be fitted with a special chip designed to allow parents to block out nasty programs. A ratings code would be assigned to each program and transmitted as part of the program signal, so if a program were rated V for violent and the parent had programmed the TV set to block all V programs, then the set would not display the program.

This is indicative of politicians cashing in on the current perceived moral crisis and bureaucrats turning to technology in order to solve problems that are human in origin. These problems can only be solved by humans behaving more responsibly than they do at the moment.

Questions to consider about the V-chip:
• Kids can program VCRs better than parents, so who is going to master the V-chip?
• Some parents won't block "unsuitable" shows so how do you stop kids watching at these parents' houses?
• Current TVs don't have the chip and will last for decades, so do we confiscate them?
• The link between TV content and childhood behaviour is unclear; why should the V-chip change kids' behaviour all of a sudden?
• If you can't raise your kids so that they turn off the TV when trashy programmes are on, then what difference will the V-chip make to the way those kids grow up?

PCW Contacts

Stephen Cobb can be reached on CompuServe as **72662,546** or the Net as **cobb@iu.net**