Computer

By JOHN FUREY
Of the Statesman-Journal

The idea of interviewing Mary Robinson through a computer seemed natural.

After all, Robinson was contacted by computer when she was asked to be present at the upcoming computer conference at Chemeketa Community College.

Robinson is director of the Deaf Communications Institute in Framingham, Mass., which operates a national communications network for the deaf.

The program was started in 1978 with the aid of a three-year federal grant totaling about $450,000. The initial aim was to evaluate the uses of computerized telecommunications for the deaf in Boston.

The program has since evolved into a national network for the deaf relying on fees and private grants for financing.

Users of the program can communicate through the use of video display terminals, like those found on an Apple computer, and keyboards. Terminals in various parts of the country are linked through the telephone system.

As a reporter, I rely often on the telephone to interview people. I prefer personal contact, but time often does not allow me that luxury.

I could easily have interviewed Robinson, who was in the process of moving from Framingham to Los Angeles, by telephone.

Instead, I decided to do what a deaf person would have done, assuming he had the proper equipment. I logged in a message over the computer.

Chemeketa English instructor Lucy MacDonald, a computer buff, had the proper equipment in her Salem home. She arranged to have me contact Robinson at a home with a computer hookup in Los Angeles.

I had not met Robinson and she did not know I would be calling her at 9 p.m. one night last week.

I learned much about her and her program in our computer communication, which lasted more than two hours.

I also learned a few things about communicating through computers, including:

• The flow of information is slower than other forms of communication, and it is sometimes stilted. But once your fingers warm up, the conversation flows easily.

• Those in communications are often at the mercy of the "big computer in the sky." Mechanical difficulties sometimes interfered with the communication between Robinson and me that night.

• Computer message exchanges will never replace the personal touch of a face-to-face conversation. However, to the deaf, they open up new worlds.

A total of 156 people from 30 states are participating in Deafnet. Nearly half of the users are from California, Massachusetts and North Carolina; only four are from Oregon.

Like CB enthusiasts, users often communicate with each other by code names. Among them, Robinson

is referred to as "Mary Poppins."

Users have an electronic mailing system, which allows an individual to read his mail on a video screen. An electronic bulletin board is used to post general information, which can be read by all users on their personal video screens.

In my interview with Robinson, I realized that it would be nearly impossible to get all the information I wanted within a reasonable amount of time.

Twice during our conversation, I attempted to learn more about Robinson's educational and personal background. At one point, I believe I lost her response in the transfer of information.

Communication was slow.

In a regular conversation, an individual can ask a question and receive a response within a minute. On the computer, it took several minutes for a response.

That made it impractical to ask yes and no questions. But if my questions were too general, I often did not get all the information I sought.

I also believe it is more difficult to get personal responses through a computer interview.

Robinson refused to reveal her age. Maybe she would have warmed up to a smiling face and given me the information.

But those are the types of problems a deaf person must contend with.

Following are some excerpts of the two-hour conversation I had with Robinson, also referred to as Mary Poppins:

Mary, my name is John Furey. I am education reporter for the States-man-Journal newspaper in Salem. I am interested in your involvement with the upcoming Chemeketa computer conference.

Since your line of work involves communication by computer, I thought it would be interesting to interview you through a computer, resisting the use of a telephone.

My intent is to get a better feel for

the effectiveness and practicality of this form of communication. It also is an attempt to better appreciate the difference between the hearing and deaf.

Besides, I've never done anything like this before. Can you take some time for a brief interview?

MR: Hello, John. It's a pleasure to meet you on Deafnet and share with you some of the exciting possibilities for electronic mail for the deaf and other handicapped.

JF: I have some written material about Deafnet, but can you tell me in your own words a little about the program?

MR: The Deaf Community Center (DCC) received a government grant four years ago (in 1978) to evaluate the effectiveness of computer-assisted communication for deaf people.

I have been with the project since its beginning — first as coordinator and now as business manager (although my duties and responsibilities seem to be similar as well as growing).

Funds were available to purchase ASCII equipment (terminal with keyboard and small screen, not used before by deaf people) and loaned to families around the Boston area who could dial into a local computer message system without incurring additional phone charges.

We experimented with a flow of information — a very important ingredient for deaf people who cannot get radio news, etc. Bulletin boards containing local, national, and international news were maintained daily.

Updated bulletin boards with medical, legal, consumer information were started. Specific information pertaining to social gatherings, interpreted meetings, legal decisions of importance in the lives of deaf people were also built into the data base.

Our statistics and evaluation showed us that there was some merit in continuing such a system. Therefore, when the government grant money ran out, we needed to look elsewhere for funding.

JF: How did it get started? How is it funded?

MR: Deaf users and several interested hearing users formed an ad hoc committee which formally incorporated Deaf Communications Institute — DCI — for the purpose of providing telecommunications services to deaf people. The services would primarily be electronic mail and bulletin board information services.

DCI changed message systems — a major decision in September 1981 when GTE (General Telephone and Electronics Corp) first began its telemail message system. This offered DCI the opportunity to reach out on a national basis to deaf people to offer them a national network of communication.

We wrote several proposals for funding and were fortunate that GTE corporate foundation wanted to help DCI with seed money for the new network. We have received a second year of grant money from GTE and are actually in a postion where obtaining additional funds from corporate or private foundations is a major task.

JF: Tell me about your background, your age, your educational experience and family. How did you get involved in deaf education?

I was told you have a daughter who is deaf. Could you share some information about her?

MR: Mary Poppins is ageless! Her background is undescribable! And she never reveals her age!

After completing an interpreter

training course (taken because I was frustrated in attempts to communicate with my 11-year-old daughter), I needed a job! Fate and good fortune brought me to DCI when I learned of the job opening. I was hired on the basis of my (limited to say the most!) ability to sign, and my business experience.

Several years ago one of the deaf users on the network (Charlie Brown, actually), dubbed me "Mary Poppins." The nickname has stuck!

Several of the deaf users picked up fun nicknames for themselves and we've had a good time with names.

Last February a group of 'hearing' computer buffs asked to join our network. They had become close friends on another telemail account that was closing and they wanted to 'keep in touch' with each other.

A lot of the friends are in business — consulting, selling equipment — and electronic mail is a communicating tool for them.

Just picture small businesses with a branch office in another city and a salesman out of touch with his office playing 'telephone tag' and missing his secretary and his sales calls! Tsk Tsk.

But with electronic mail, he has a chance to dial in any city — just a local call — and can get the most recent update on business transactions.

Some users have children going off to college, and the kids have access to computer equipment at college. With a mailbox on Deafnet, they can keep in touch with home easily and cheaply.

JF: What major problems have you encountered with the program?

MR: Difficulty in getting ASCII equipment for deaf users who would like to join the network but cannot afford the equipment; difficulty providing user training and support for new users on a national level; difficulty improving the bulletin boards (who will gather the material and input it and maintain current files on a volunteer basis?)

Difficulty reaching out to national subscribers who might financially support the network in the growing years until the user base can be large enough to support the network; difficulty in selling the concept to national deaf leaders so they in turn will act as "change agents".

JF: Can you tell me about a few of users?

MR: These are a few special stories:

Like the young man I met in St. Louis who just hugged me and said, "Thank you, thank you for Deafnet, you have opened up my whole life and put me in touch with so many friends."

Like the special man who is very, very sick with cancer, and when he's feeling a little chipper he calls Deafnet and gets messages from friends all over the country — takes a little of the loneliness away from a sickroom.

JF: What's the future for Deafnet?

MR: In the middle of a computer explosion, a little innovative seed has germinated to take advantage of all of modern technology and make it useful in a very basic need of mankind — communication with one another.

I believe we could see a 'revolution' or 'evolution' in the ways people communicate by using modern technology and equipment. But it will take more time before we really see

electronic mail used extensively by deaf people.

JF: Mary, thanks for your time. Who knows, maybe I'll call again on Deafnet. John.

MR: It's been a pleasure participating in this. One can begin to get the feeling of the time it takes to communicate when you are deaf. It's really difficult — but possible and worthwhile.

Computer opens the world of talk to the deaf

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