

Texas papers gear up for info superhighway

by Mark Fitzgerald

THE INFORMATION superhighway is under construction in the Lone Star State.

So far, Texas papers, even some of the big dailies, are spectators in the online revolution, according to the first major survey of the electronic news-gathering capabilities of Texas dailies and weeklies.

But enthusiasm is growing quickly, the survey found.

Right now, just 31% of Texas daily newspapers subscribe to an online information service, such as Prodigy or CompuServe.

However, another 44% intend to be online within two years.

And, within five years, the majority of dailies say they will be getting press releases electronically, exchanging e-mail, setting up electronic morgues and crunching numbers for investigative stories.

"The survey shows that many dailies in Texas are shifting rapidly out of first gear and into second" when it comes to using electronic resources accessible by computer, said Philip Berkebile, executive vice president of the Texas Daily Newspaper Association (TDNA).

TDNA and the Texas Press Association sponsored the survey, which was conducted jointly by the Department of Agricultural Communications and the Public Policy Resources Institute at Texas A&M University.

A total of 59 of the state's 90 daily newspapers responded, including 26 of the 31 largest dailies.

Some 116 of 450 weekly newspapers responded.

The survey found that, even among dailies that have online capabilities, access tends to be restricted — and use is infrequent.

Among newspapers subscribing to online services, for instance, just one paper makes it available to all reporters.

Another 10 reported that "clusters of reporters" can access the services. Seven papers restrict access to just one

person — usually the librarian.

Fully half of subscribing papers use their online services fewer than five times a day.

Cost is the most frequent reason given for not going online, cited by 68% of non-subscribers.

Also mentioned were lack of support staff or training (41%); too much information to process (17%); insufficient time for installation (17%) — and the possibility that reporters will spend too much time online (17%).

Cost weighs particularly on weeklies.

Just 8% are online now, and only another 17% expect to be subscribing to a service by the summer of 1996.

Journalism prof's programs teach spelling

FLORIDA A&M University journalism professor Michael Abrams has written Macintosh software designed to improve the spelling of writers of all ages.

"Style & Grammar Tutor," released last year for journalism students, is used at more than 200 schools.

"Clarence the Bee's World Championship Spelling Bee," for students from elementary school through college, was released this year. Each sells for \$35; site licenses are available to schools for \$100. Abrams said shareware trial versions of both are available on CompuServe and other electronic bulletin boards.

Abrams created the second program with his teenaged son and daughter, winners of school and county spelling bees, who helped with programming and musical content.

The educator, who awards credit to students who identify misspellings in publications and retail signs, cited "a drastic decline in the quality of business letters" and "an incredible number of glaring errors in the nation's best newspapers," in many of which, he added, "English appears to be a foreign language."

Phoenix papers' fax free guide to guests in 20 hotels

by M.L. Stein

WHEN GUESTS CHECK into Phoenix-area hotels these days, they are handed a free guide to what's going on locally, courtesy of Phoenix Newspapers Inc.

The two-page newsletter, called the *Traveler's Gazette*, also contains news briefs compiled from the *Arizona Republic* and *Phoenix Gazette*, as well as information about area restaurants, tours, entertainment, TV highlights, and nearby places, maps included, for family outings with the kids. There is even an Airport Outlook column reporting the weather at various U.S. airports.

The *Gazette* also carries a box for its Pressline audiotex service, giving readers phone numbers for getting more information on the content, plus a stock market update or sports scores.

The newsletter is currently faxed free via modem to 20 hotels, mostly in Scottsdale. Presentations for the product are being made to several other hotels, according to Chris Lavelle, associate editor/special sections and a member of the team that developed it.

Lavelle said that last spring Howard Finberg, senior editor/information technology, and Dave Gianelli, new ventures/project manager, hit on the idea of offering current daily information on what's going on around town to hotel and resorts for distribution to their guests each day.

"They ran the idea by a couple of hotel managers, who agreed to look at a prototype and consider testing it with their guests," Lavelle recalled.

She said a test phase began last May with distribution to four hotels. Adjustments in content were made over the summer, on the basis of feedback from guests, concierges and hotel management. Time also was spent in refining the information-gathering and fax systems, Lavelle added.

Today, *Traveler's Gazette* reaches more than 4,000 guest rooms, Lavelle stated. Some hotels deliver it with a complimentary newspaper while others make it available at check-in. ■ESP