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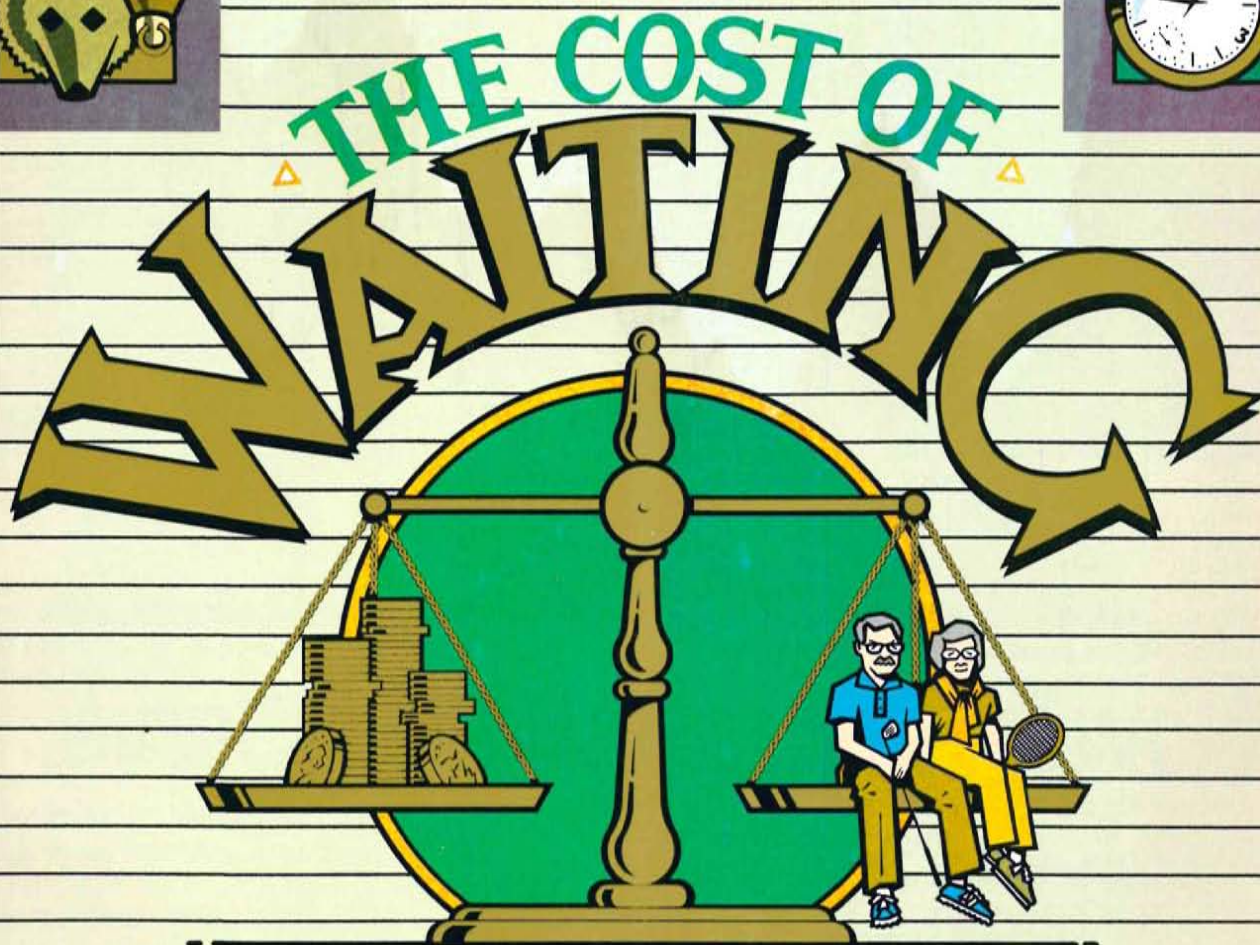
by Christopher Galvin

A Decade of Digital Discourse
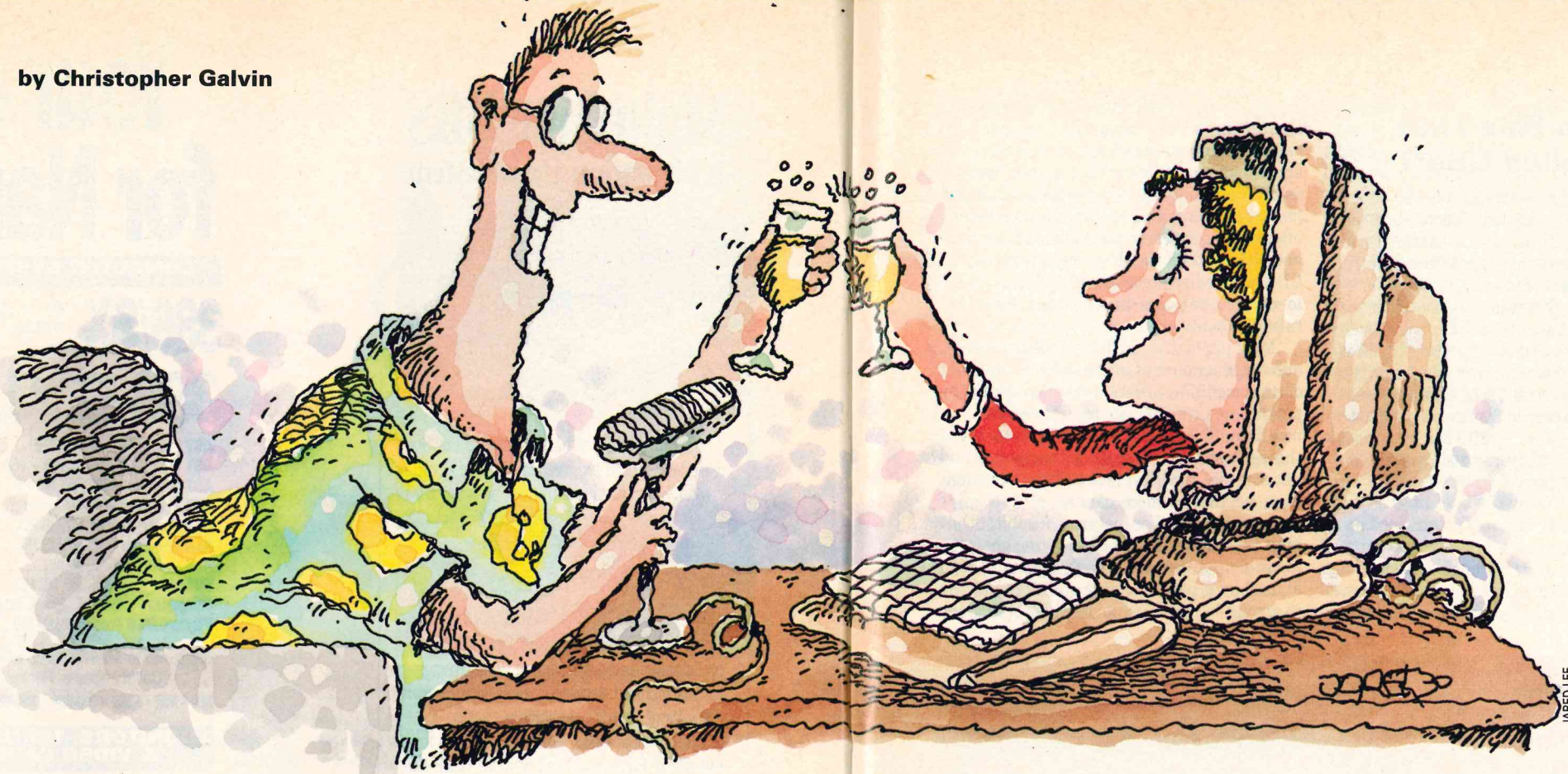
▶ **CBing has turned 10, and though it hasn't changed the world, its impact on lives is unquestionable.**

Bulstrode, it seemed, had ceased to believe in the barrier between imagination and act. And why not? What were we, after all, Walter wondered, but voices, synapses, electrical impulses? When one person touches another's body, chemicals under the skin break down and recombine, setting off an electronic spark that leaps, neuron to neuron, to the brain. Was that really all that different from what happened when fingers pushed down buttons on a keyboard that sent signals across the telephone wire to another keyboard, another set of fingers? Wasn't there, in all of that, something of a touch?

—From Equal Affections by David Leavitt

I am sitting in a room, a real one with a desk and a door and yet an unmeasurable personal space. I am strangely alone and not alone. There is only the hum of the CRT, and still there is the endlessly intertwining dialogue and subdued laughter of the people I am grouped with on Band B this night. They hug and shake hands but do not touch, in the literal sense. We step carelessly on each other's words, but no one seems to mind.

This curious hybrid of telephone lines, computer software and glowing phosphorus that makes up CompuServe's CB Simulator, or "CB" for short, has been many things to many people for the better part of 10

\<Chris/CSMAG\> So what is CB to everybody?
\<D'ArchAngel\> a place for me to appear to be witty. ...
\<Buttercup\> CB feels like an extended part of my family.
\<D'ArchAngel\> a place for banter, fun, arguments and occasionally even
\<darling\> that's the popular metaphor
\<D'ArchAngel\> friendships
\<T E X A S\> a place that maybe I can help make somebody feel better if they are down
\<D'ArchAngel\> \<nod\> tex
\<Buttercup\> I have formed some very close friendships here, ... fell in love and relocated
\<T E X A S\> or give a listen to someone who is really having it hard
\<darling\> to me it is the untimate approach avoidance for work
\<darling\> er ultimte
\<Buttercup\> \<grin\>
\<D'ArchAngel\> she means ultimate
\<darling\> or perhaps a place where I may learn to type \<g\>

years now: A forum for intellectual (and not-so-intellectual) discussion, a corner tavern, a source of moral support, an electronic singles bar (and occasionally a cheap motel), an addiction of sorts, a place to make business contacts, a lonely hearts club, a memorial oratory, even a wedding chapel. But CB has probably been best known for being one thing in the past decade: the largest and longest ongoing cocktail party in the world. You'd think the neighbors would have complained by now.

CB is fun, and its appeal is immediately apparent. You log onto a sightless world where what other people know about you is only what you choose to reveal through typewritten lines, letting you mask or extend parts of your persona. There are no prejudices except the ones you bring with you. Age, race, sex, visual appearance, handicaps, shyness and that countryclub membership are all checked at the door, thank you.

If you're able to keep up with the scroll rate, distinguish who's talking to whom, and input your comments and halfbaked humor in something even remotely resembling English, there are dozens of similarly adept people scattered across the globe anxious to talk to you. You can chew the fat, blow off steam, express an opinion, and if you can't find your topic *du jour* already in discussion, you can start a debate yourself.

"I would say the

Tuning In

In the case of CB, getting there isn't half the fun—it's not even half the effort. Simply type GO CB-1 to enter Band A of the CB Simulator or GO CB-2 for Band B, and choose a handle that's likely to provoke interest (but not revulsion) in your presence. Like the Simulator's radio namesake, each band is composed of channels (36 in all), many of which have designated topics of discussion (press Return at the "Select a channel" prompt for a list). Channel 2 on Band A is for newcomers, and helpers are stationed there from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. ET every night to answer questions and get you rolling down the electronic highway.

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opportunity to in effect touch another soul, without all of the baggage that is normally involved with our person-to-person relationships, is a remarkable and unique experience," says Alfred Glossbrenner, author of *The Complete Handbook of Personal Computer Communications* (St. Martin's Press). "The process itself is enjoyable, the chance to interact. Unlike television, it's not a passive thing. You throw something out there, and somebody else will bounce it back at you. That can't be done anywhere else."

CB has progressed a fair distance from its early days in 1980 as an unsophisticated, wayward computer program (see "A Short History with Cupcake" on page 36). Sandy Trevor, then vice president of technology, had a brainstorm that people might enjoy talking with one another in real time on CompuServe's forerunner, Micronet. It was a novel idea, albeit one that applied a reverse logic—get an increasingly insular society to expand its personal horizons by staying home with a computer. "Everyone else pooh-poohed the idea," says Pat Phelps (a.k.a. "LooLoo" on CB), product manager, matriarch and den mother to legions of CBers.

"They said nobody's going to pay money to do that. They can pick up the phone and call somebody."

Trevor persisted, however, writing the program over a weekend and uploading it the following Monday. It was in use almost instantly, although striking up a conversation involved waiting (and waiting) for someone else to show up. Says Phelps, "We've watched it grow from times when you'd access CB in the evening and there would be no one there to where you log on and there are 300 people on Band A alone, not just from all over the US, but from all around the world."

As much as CB tends to mirror the real world (the clientele is truly a slice of life: doctors, housewives, members of the clergy, celebrities), it also tends to be its own little world, complete with its own codes of behavior, rituals and conventions, dependent on the computer but existing only in the user's mind.

Research has shown that when you sit down at a computer to communicate, you act differently. A 1984 Carnegie-Mellon University study conducted by Sara Kiesler found that the typically uninhibited online discussions were more egalitarian and had greater participation, but made their participants more impulsive and assertive, more sure of their own opinions, and more resistant to social pressure to change their views. In

English: Nobody agreed much on anything.

"That's true. Computer-mediated communication leads to a social reality different from face-to-face communication because the emphasis is on honesty and trust," says Laurel Hillerstein, a professional staff member at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who looked into the existence of an online "community" as a graduate student five years ago. "No other form of communication allows individuals to have such an intimate exchange and yet remain so distinctively apart from the act of communicating. It requires a more complex set of skills: You have to be able to compensate for the lack of non-verbal clues, such as voice inflection and facial expressions, that many take for granted. Think of how many times you've been misunderstood online."

Hillerstein found other evidence of a recognizable CB "community": the accepted use of handles as identification; user-generated and enforced rules of etiquette ("A person using foul language will generally be chastised or ultimately ignored"); "lurking" as a means of socialization into the society, much like a child learning through observation; the helpfulness of fellow CBers ("If you've ever put up a question, you've seen how many answers come back almost immediately"); and the use of emoticons, such as <grin>, to assign the intended feeling to a message, and an exclusionary lingo. "What is 'rehi' really?" asks Hillerstein, referring to the subcultural idiom for "hi, again" which follows a CBer's brief departure from the computer or channel. "It's used all the time, and everybody on CB knows what it means. But if I say 'rehi' to my mother, she has no idea what I'm talking about."

Most important, Hillerstein learned that, due to the amount of information filtered out of the medium, CBers make up for it by putting out a richer, more detailed communication. "People are willing to talk about things on the first meeting that you would never reveal in a first face-to-face encounter. Because they're more candid, relationships progress quicker. For instance, a subject that may take many weeks of knowing someone to build up to revealing, such as having been abused by a parent, comes out more quickly in an online relationship. Because of the lack of physical presence, people put more of themselves on the screen."

Over time, the pundits and prognosticators have fretted over the CB phenomenon, or built it up beyond its capabilities: They claimed that computer-mediated communication would revolutionize society, drawing in even the computer illiterates and technophobes, or that it would breed a generation of electronic con-artists and people who prefer the anonymity of the medium to face-to-face encounters.

"I'm not convinced that it's something we should be thrilled about," wrote Vic Sussman in a 1986 essay for *The Washington Post*. "To say this typewritten 'human contact' is the equivalent of genuine friendship is something else. It's certainly the *illusion* of intimacy—instant gratification without responsibility or consequences....[It] turns conversation into a spectator sport."

Neither claim has been realized to any great degree. CB certainly hasn't revolutionized society. "Well, it's a big society. The pundits were a bit overly optimistic or unrealistic about how far we had to go," says Glossbrenner, pointing out that only a small percentage of personal computers in homes are wired. But to say that CB hasn't had a social impact among its own constituency would be a mistake. "It's been wonderful to see what CB has done for a lot of people, how it has brought them out of their shells, given people opportunities to meet with other kinds of people they might not have even thought of talking with before," says Phelps. "People have found jobs, made career changes, become friends or even lovers. We've had many couples get married. I've lost count, but it's probably in the hundreds. It's not even a phenomenon anymore."

The concerns over online swindlers hit the mark a little closer, though such episodes are by far the exception to the rule. There have been dark tales of CBers becoming emotionally involved with people who ended up being something other than the personalities they portrayed online. Although these escapades into gender-bending and other mind

by Terry Biener

A Short History with Cupcake

Looking back over the last 10 years, it is difficult to remember life before CompuServe's CB Simulator. In a major way, the interactive medium has been responsible for my present endeavors, social life and self-esteem. As author of *CB Society—Cupcake's Column*, I have witnessed and written about similar effects on the lives of thousands of fellow CB users.

My son had just turned two. As a former teacher turned full-time mother (and a computer widow to boot), I felt shut out from the outside adult world and craved mental stimulation. When my husband, Alan, prodded me to look at his "new service," I reluctantly eyed a response from a question he typed on his monitor. Someone, somewhere, had answered him. "Let me try this," I said, and began typing to someone 3,000 miles away. The rest, as they say, is history.

In 1981, a busy night on CB meant 30 people online. Most were computer techies who just happened to roll into that part of CompuServe. Female users were scarce, so the handle "Cupcake" provided me with amazing popularity. Here, I was unique, appreciated, spoken to...hooked. My first CompuServe bill surpassed our mortgage payment.

January 1982 saw the first CB gathering—a dozen users meeting at the Manhattan apartment of a married couple (Nancy and Arwen) who had actually met online. I began to suspect that this medium had far greater potential than mere entertainment.

Weeks later I was hospitalized for food poisoning, and word spread over the channels. Phone calls and cards arrived from all over the country, many intercepted by nurses who questioned why I had so many friends with "strange accents" and even stranger names.

Alan and I attended CB parties in Baltimore, Boston, and even hosted one in our own home during that first year. I watched relationships evolve: friendships, romances, business ventures. Spending an enormous amount of time online, I began to know of all the happenings.

As my insight grew, so did my CompuServe bills. My exasperated husband even programmed my computer to say, "Ha-ha, you lose!" when I tried to log on. (It took me four days to undo this, experiencing major CB withdrawal in the interim.) I had to find a way to justify my online time.

Bringing CBers together with a publication seemed an ideal solution. Eventually, I hit on the idea of writing a newsletter with interviews, profiles, party reviews, event announcements, news about CBers, and witty one-liners and anecdotes. *Cupcake's Column* was launched in November 1982.

Unlike conventional reporters, I've felt joy, elation and sadness when "getting the scoop," because I am personally involved. I was thrilled when "Haku" and "Flash" discovered they were long-lost cousins; giggled while writing about how "LadyBug" had her shawl eaten by the motor of a hotel fountain, causing her to fall in; was proud of "Mr. Vid" when he won an Emmy; and was devastated when I announced the passings of "Bi-Lady Juggs" and "Cuffs."

Valentine's Day 1983 marked the first truly online wedding. "Mike" (Texas) and "Silver" (Arizona) typed their vows from one computer while a minister typed from another. Seventy-seven invited CB guests were present in "scramble" (an early version of "group"), some acting as members of the wedding party. I was the maid of honor. The reception lasted for hours, punctuated by the <click> of phantom cameras and the silent whoosh of airborne "rice" < ' ' ' ' >. Alan just shrugged when I bought a new robe for the occasion.

When Jeff Jarvis of *People* magazine approached me online for an interview, I was floored. Over the years, I have found myself and other CBers in many major publications, on radio and television. For example, "Chrisdos," founder of CBIG (now the CB Forum) appeared on *Donahue*.

As the world began to hear of computer CB, the variety of people grew as quickly as the number of users. The mayor of Ft. Lauderdale, a comedian in Philadelphia, a screenwriter in Burbank and a blind teenage pianist in Boston were some of the many professionals I interviewed.

While anonymity has always been the initial intrigue of CB, many users have been courageous enough to shed their identities in person. Since 1984, CompuServe, with help from loyal CBers, has sponsored annual CB Seminar/Parties, the first four in Columbus and the last three in Las Vegas. From as far as Australia, users of all ages, occupations, cultures, shapes and colors gathered for socializing, feasting, drinking, dancing and softball games (and the occasional unscheduled ice cube fight).

Over the past decade, many handles have come and gone, and the software has undergone many modifications. But some things have not, and will never, change. I, like many users, see CB as a window to the world—a unique way to have "mind to mind" communication. Affinity runs deep among CBers, even as their friends and families have a difficult time understanding the fascination. They can travel to any city and find friends to chat with, dine with, and even ones who offer a place to stay. The CB Society has come to mean unconditional acceptance. Day or night, a friend is just a keystroke away.

Terry A. Biener is a free-lance writer based in Valley Stream, N.Y., and has written the CB Society column for the past seven years.

Chronicler of CB society's people and places: Biener

GARRY BURDICK

games are usually found out quickly by CBers who have become proficient at spotting cracks in the deception, they represent CB's anonymity taken to an unfortunate extreme, the murky underside of an online freedom.

"I think the anonymity is precious," says Glossbrenner. "I don't know of any other way to make it available than to do so warts and all. CB is reflective of all of society, so there's the possibility that you'll sign on to a channel and hear words you don't want to, or be lied to. It shouldn't be censored, because once

you do that, you ruin this delicate flower. CB is wonderful, but as with all things, *caveat emptor*." Let the CBer beware.

And what of the hordes of CBers chained socially to their perpetually gleaming terminals, spooked at the slightest prospect of having to step into daylight and interact with real human beings? Oh, come on. True-blue CB friendships have never just stopped at the screen; if CB has been anything, it's been a facilitator of more personal communication or face-to-face encounters, merely

another means to a friend.

Pictures are exchanged, cards and flowers sent, phone calls made, favors performed, dinners arranged, brunches, get-togethers and outright bashes attended regularly. The purpose of the parties is twofold: to gain the reassurance that there *is* a face, a real name, and a person with some of the usual human foibles behind the handle and, of course, to have one heck of a good time.

"They're like family reunions—you get those <hugs> in person again, and spend some time with each other," says Phelps. "Some of the people haven't been to one before. You could be timid, unsure of yourself,

but as soon as someone sees you walk in that door, you've got people all over you, welcoming you before they even know who you are. It really is a society, and once you've had that first hug, the ice is broken."

What do the next 10 years hold for CB? Two significant changes have already begun. One concerns the presentation of conversation on your screen. Software such as the CompuServe Information Manager (CIM) promises to make CBing less arduous for the less technically dexterous among us. (See "CB and CIM," below.)

The people will change as well, even though that's always been a CB given.

"CompuServe is available in more and more countries around the world," says Phelps. "The way you now go next door to borrow a cup of sugar or call someone down the street to babysit, you can get on CB and ask a man in Tokyo to translate a Japanese expression you've heard, or ask someone in Sweden for his recipe for Swedish meatballs. It's absolutely a global village.

"When I step back and get that perspective of what's really going on here, even after all these years, I still find it awesome." ◀

Christopher Galvin is an assistant editor of CompuServe Magazine.

CB and CIM: The Next Generation

The CompuServe Information Manager for IBM PCs and compatibles and Apple Macintosh systems provides special features for the CB Simulator. Among them are:
▶ A built-in split screen to allow messages to be composed away from incoming text.
▶ Separate screen windows for monitored channels.
▶ A bar cursor to interact with pull-down menus that take the place of "slash" commands (such as /USERS and /MONITOR).

When signing into CB with the Information Manager, you are first taken to a kind of CB "lobby," where you may either tune to or monitor a channel, join an existing group conversation, or start a new group conversation and invite others to join you.

Tracking keeps you informed of those who come and go on CB. Tracking messages usually report who has tuned in, tuned out, switched channels, changed handles and so on (such as, "<BLUEGRASS> has tuned to channel 14").

Channel Selectors let you:
▶ Tune to the selected channel, where you can exchange messages with others already there.
▶ Monitor a selected channel. Here the Information Manager splits its screen into multiple windows, giving you separate areas to see the conversations.
▶ Find out who else is in CB with a list of the handles of those currently tuned to se-

lected channels. The software provides a dialog box so you can search for a specific group of users.

Besides tuning and monitoring channels, the Information Manager provides a group of "People" commands such as:
▶ Who's Who, a list of people on the channels. You may retrieve Profile information about selected users, including User ID numbers and names of towns from which they are calling. (Some subscribers also choose to file additional Profile data online, such as ages, types of computers being used and interests.) The Information Manager also provides a Talk function here with which you can ask another subscriber into a private one-to-one message area.
▶ Invite, letting you ask other talkers to join you in a private group discussion. It is private, like the Talk feature. Unlike Talk, however, Invite is designed to permit privacy between more than two people.
▶ Squelch, which blocks messages from other talkers you specify.

Another section of the Information Manager's CB feature, called "People," lets you change the handle under which your messages currently are appearing. The "channel" feature lets you let you instruct the system to automatically turn down Talk and Invite requests temporarily.

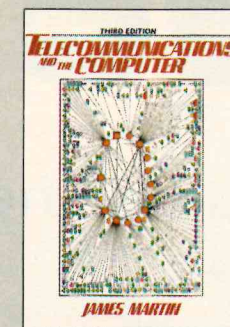Two unique Information Manager fea-

tures in the Special command group are:
▶ Tracking, with which you control what types of information appear in your tracking window. You may direct the system to track people entering the CB band you are using, people leaving the band, those changing locations, or changing handles.
▶ Recording lets you save on your disk a copy of discussions. If you select Record while tuned to a channel, the conversation that occurs from that point on is stored in a file; if you select the option while in a group, the conversation that appears on your screen is stored in a different file. The recordings are cumulative files, so each time you use Recording, that session log is appended to logs of past sessions. You also can create new names for the log files.

Finally, newer versions of the Information Manager further enhance CB. Version 2.0 for IBM PC and compatible systems, for example, adds a Friends option, a new concept for conferencing. A kind of electronic address book for CB acquaintances, the Friends feature opens a dialog box with which you can add and remove names and User ID numbers. Then, while in CB, you can use the Friends list to save time when searching who's online, squelching other talkers and setting up private discussion groups.

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