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## COIN on cutting edge for public-accessed resources



Since its inception a little more than a year ago, the Columbia Online Information Network has become one of the most useful resources available to area citizens. COIN lets people use a computer to access local information, such as the minutes of city council meetings and voting information, plus the Internet — the so-called “information superhighway.”

There is no charge for using COIN. More than 7,500 people access it by using their own computers and modems or by using computers at Columbia Public Library, the Columbia Senior Center or one of 10 other sites throughout Boone, Howard and Callaway counties.

Computer systems such as COIN are notorious for their lively public discussions. You'll find local citizens debating issues such as growth and development in Boone County, overpopulation, unions, abortion, Rush Limbaugh, baseball and a host of other topics and issues.

COIN users also participate in several worldwide public discussions called news groups and discussion lists. There are many news groups available on environmental topics, including human population and carrying capacity, birding, environmental studies, biodiversity, green politics and recycling.

“Online communications broadens your reach as an environmentally conscientious individual,” Don Rittner wrote in “EcoLinking,” his book

on accessing environmental information with computer networks. “Your chances of finding people with similar interests or with the right answers to your questions increase exponentially.”

These online discussions have the unique quality that no one person or group controls or edits the content. The advantages of this somewhat anarchical scheme far outweigh the disadvantages.

“The political significance of ‘computer networking’ lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy’s monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy,” Howard Rheingold wrote in “The Virtual Community.” “The way image-rich, sound bite-based commercial media have co-opted political discourse among citizens is part of a political problem that communications technologies have posed for decades.

“The way the number of owners of communications channels is narrowing to a tiny elite, while the reach and power of the media they own expand, is a converging threat to citizens. Which scenario seems more conducive to totalitarian rule: a world in which few people control communications technology that can be used to manipulate the beliefs of billions, or a world in which every citizen can broadcast to every other citizen?”

COIN users also can also search

databases and documents: the proposed federal budget, the complete works of Shakespeare, the 1990 US census and thousands of other documents and databases are easily available.

In some instances, one can retrieve entire documents through COIN. For example, the White House regularly makes the full text of policy papers, speeches and manuals available through the Internet within hours of official release. When President Bill Clinton released his new wetlands policy last year, I didn’t have to wait a couple of weeks to receive the text in the mail or trust news reports or environmental groups as to its content. Instead, I was able to retrieve it through the Internet and read it for myself.

There are not many other communities in the US that have access to such an innovative and well-designed system. In fact, COIN was recently recognized by the White House for its high quality and community service. So if you are wondering what the “information superhighway” is, or if you are just looking for some good information, give COIN a try.

For more information on COIN, stop by the Columbia Public Library or call 443-3161, ext. 320. For a free copy of “The Guide to Online Resources for the Conservationist,” write to Dan Wendling, 9702 Merwood Ave., Silver Spring, Md., 20901-4731. Or send E-mail to danw@knowledgework.com.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.