

*Dal experts play key role*

# Metro community net to open soon

by Garth Sweet

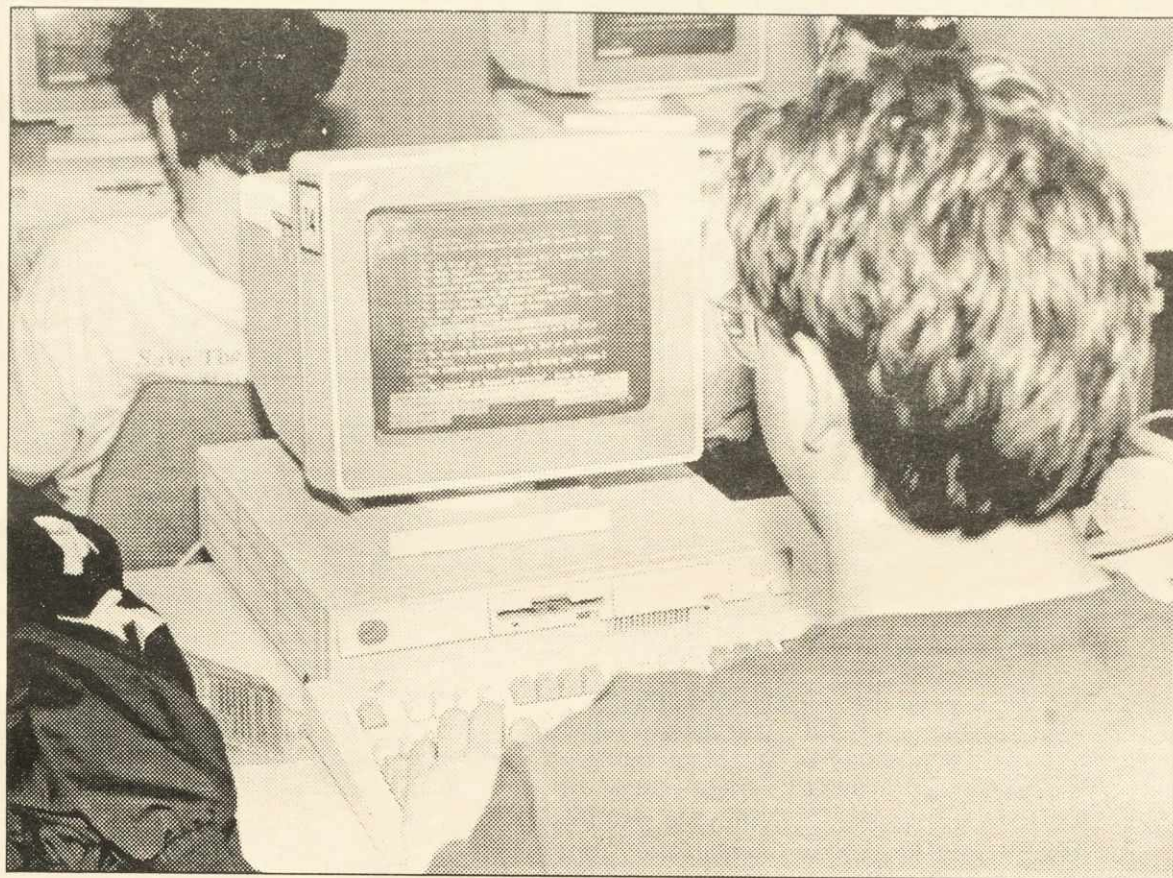
The metro area will soon get a new computer service, and Dalhousie University is playing a major role in its establishment.

For years now there has been a move afoot in many cities and areas to get more people involved not only in computers, but in information exchange. Getting people computer literate is hard, but even harder is getting proper facilities to handle all the potential users. In metro it looks like the hard part of getting adequate computer facilities will be met soon with a project called the Metro Community Network.

Founded in part by David Murdoch and Dalhousie's own David Trueman, the goal of the Metro Community Network (MCN) is to provide a free, simple, menu-driven computer information service to all people. The MCN is entirely non-profit and user-supported. It's currently scheduled to open sometime in the near future, when the last of the needed equipment is obtained. Currently the service is slated to support up to 24 phone lines, as well as the option to log on via telnet connections, and have 3 gigabytes of hard disk space. All this adds up to the capacity to maintain a huge database of information and handle many users all at the same time.

To drive this new service, the designers are using a relatively new technique called hyper-text. Hyper-text presents information to the user with embedded active 'links' to other relevant information. For instance, if you read somewhere on the MCN service that "Elephants are native to the continent of Africa", you could then select "Elephant", "Continent" or "Africa" right out of the sentence you're reading and get further information about any of these three subjects.

The MCN even takes this "Hyper" technology one step further, if you have a suitable computer connection you can get hyper links to pictures, e-mail messages or even to



*Navigating the new metro network will be as simple as reading a menu.*

PHOTO: GARTH SWEET

programs that will download information directly to your personal computer. The interface, in addition to being sophisticated, is simple to use and powerful. Plus it's been designed to conform to standards used in other global information systems such as *World Wide Web* and *Mosaic* (available on the VAX and/or UNIX systems on campus) so it will be able to share information with these systems. This will allow metro users to access information from as far away as Russia or Hawaii.

I had a chance to sit down and play with the prototype for the MCN and it was impressive. The system was driven entirely by the aforementioned Hyper-text links and was straightforward to use. As I explored the limited information available on the prototype, I had no problems navigating through relatively complex sets of documents without get-

ting lost and without feeling overwhelmed, both of which have been problems with other information systems I'd used.

*The network is interested in getting everyone using computers*

David Trueman later showed me and a roomful of interested people a demonstration of what the system will be capable of when it's completed and connected with the global systems. Using the mouse entirely he

quickly navigated through a series of documents and connected into an electronic, graphical newsletter put out by the University of Honolulu. It contained a colour map of campus, various colour graphical charts, plus several pages of relevant data. The MCN system will eventually be capable of this, he assured the people attending the demonstration, and for people with connections that won't allow the complex graphics to be displayed, the system will automatically reformat the entire document for text-only viewing, stripping the graphics out.

Presenting information to people is obviously a goal of the MCN, but more importantly is information exchange. People won't just be limited to reading information from the screen, they will also be encouraged to actively participate and add their own ideas and opinions. People can

choose to post public messages regarding a topic, or communicate privately with electronic mail (e-mail) to a specific user. Certain users will be given the chance to become 'information providers'. These people will handle the task of maintaining a database of information regarding a certain topic. Topics will be assigned to groups and organizations and they will choose their own people to become information providers. Right now the MCN is seeking more supporters. They need more groups and organizations who will agree to put information on the service and maintain it. Individuals who want to volunteer time to help with the project are also encouraged to do so.

Not everyone is happy with the MCN network, though. I talked with the operator of a local computer bulletin board service (see our November 15 issue for details of a BBS), and he expressed dismay that the organizers of the MCN didn't talk with BBS operators more before getting started. BBSs essentially attempt to provide a free service (although some BBSs do charge for their use) and a medium for information exchange too. He felt that input local operators could've given might have been helpful to the designers of the MCN service. When asked if the MCN threatened existing BBS operations he said that essentially the two services operate on different playing fields. The MCN is interested in getting everyone using computers, even those who've never used one before, whereas BBSs cater more to existing computer users who want more from their computer.

The Metro Community Network will be operating soon. Early March is the expected opening period, and we will keep you updated on when it officially opens. The service promises to bring more people into the world of computers and perhaps even bring people closer together through electronic contact. For more information, or to volunteer your help, contact David Murdoch at 427-4770 or email [djm@duncan.als.ns.ca](mailto:djm@duncan.als.ns.ca).

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