radio traffic is now being processed digitally, leaving voice-channels open for dispatching, emergency talk-in and enquiries of the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) in Ottawa.

CPIC, operated since the summer of 1972 by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, has more than 800 on-line data terminals in police stations coast-to-coast – including the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Labrador.

Like the longer-established National Crime Information Centre (NCIC) of the FBI in Washington, CPIC may be conceived of as a huge, electronic file into which Canadian police forces program their latest information on wanted persons, stolen vehicles and so on. It takes three seconds from the time a policeman finishes punching out his enquiry until the answer starts coming back from Ottawa.

The system means that criminals can no longer count on geography and outmoded manual information systems to impede the police from nabbing them for an offence committed several thousand miles away in another part of the country.

Besides contributing to better deployment of field units, increasing the safety of the individual officer, and quickening response times, the new Toronto radio system has brought a much-improved performance record in the checking out of suspects.

CPIC is being widely used throughout Canada. It is currently handling messages at the peak rate of better than 500,000 a week.

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Costs of operating the service are about $4 million annually in computer hardware rental, plus $3 million for communications lines.

CPIC pays off

On July 22, 1974, a Winnipeg resident picked up a 28-year-old hitch-hiker east of Regina and gave him a ride to Winnipeg. On arrival in that city, the motorist invited the man to spend the night at his home. The next morning, the motorist awoke to find his car (and $320) missing. He telephoned

Winnipeg police with little hope of seeing the car or money again – at least not for some time.

He didn't reckon on CPIC.

At 11 p.m. that same evening, several hundred miles away, a provincial police officer in northwestern Ontario requested a CPIC plate-check of a vehicle with a Manitoba licence. Within seconds, the vehicle was identified as the missing car. The ungrateful hitch-hiker was taken into custody and admitted theft of the car and money. He turned out to be a parole violator from Ontario who was also wanted in British Columbia on charges involving drugs and failing to appear in court.

Events like this have now become commonplace, as police forces make more intensive use of digital radio transmission and computer technology in the fight against crime.

Since early 1975, the Department of Communications and the RCMP have been working together to develop a standard mobile digital data terminal for all major Canadian police forces. Such a terminal could give virtually every patrol car officer in Canada fingertip access to the power of the national police computer. The terminal, keyboard and either a printer or a small TV-type screen, would be mounted on the transmission hump or under the dashboard of the patrol car.

Gone forever would be the time-consuming procedure of getting a voice channel and having a dispatcher write down the details of the enquiry, key it in, wait for a response, get a channel again and pass the reply back over the air.

Precious voice channels would be even further conserved for emergencies, police communications would become more secure from unauthorized eavesdropping, and radio spectrum would be conserved.

The two-year program to develop the prototype terminal system is now moving close to fruition, under the general direction of an RCMP-chaired management board with representation from the department's Communications Research Centre.

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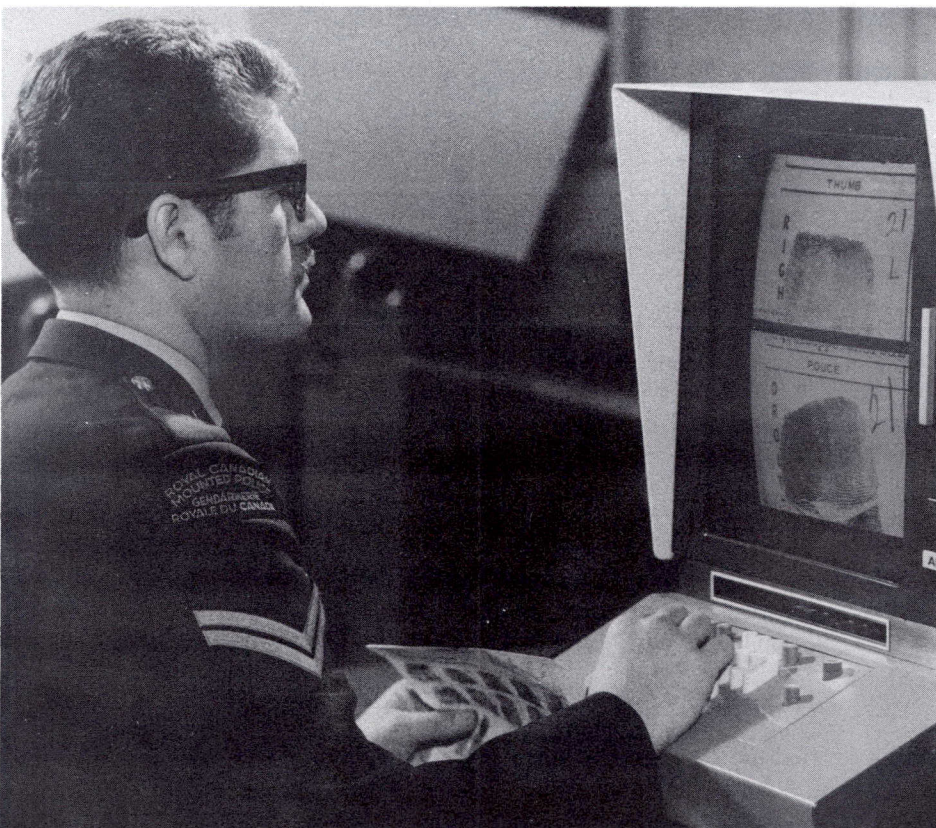
RCMP photo

Electronic equipment used to fight crime in Canada includes the computerized videofile (above) for finger-print identification in use at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police headquarters in Ottawa.