THREADS .2

Electronic Electorate

The U.S. Senate had a major headache, and it wasn't just the Starr report.

During President Clinton's impeachment trial, senators received up to 500,000 e-mail messages a day. That load—10 times the usual amount—crashed congressional servers and left staffers scrambling to respond to the onslaught.

Even after the trial, e-mail volume remained above average. Senate administrators figured there had to be a better way to manage it. Preferably an automated one.

They turned to General Interactive Inc.'s EchoMail, which automatically reads, routes, tracks and, in many cases, replies to incoming messages, says Steve Walker, Senate manager of Web and technology assessment. As a result, Senators now respond to routine correspondence within minutes rather than days or weeks later.

The new system goes beyond generating impersonal auto-responses ("Thank you for contacting the U.S. Senate. Your comments are very important to us."). Its pattern recognition technology analyzes each message's content: support for improved school safety, opposition to e-commerce regulation, inquiries about Medicare. Then EchoMail constructs a seemingly personalized response from position papers, previous letters and other electronic resources.

Senators also use EchoMail data to test the wind on controversial issues. For instance, how many messages support tougher school-safety laws?

How many oppose online investment regulation?

Cambridge, Mass.-based General Interactive, whose other clients include AT&T Corp., IBM Corp., J.C. Penney Co. Inc., Lycos Inc. and The Procter & Gamble Co., says organizations may be able to handle up to 80 percent of their incoming e-mail automatically. That can add up to a really big corporate savings. CEO V.A. Shiva estimates that businesses pay about $5 for each human-handled e-mail response.

The cost for an automated reply: Less than $1.   —*Anne Stuart*

ILLUSTRATION BY OCTAVIO DIAZ