I am pleased to introduce a new column which will appear frequently in upcoming issues of QS and which I will edit. This column will focus on the question: What can computing technology do for research in sociology using qualitative methods? Within this focus, there won’t be many limits. We’ll have product reviews, discussions of different classes of products and their uses, descriptions of research projects, and discussions of methodology from a computing perspective. Since there’s not very much space in a column, supplementary materials, such as ratings of programs, will be used. Finally, I hope the column can act as a clearinghouse so that researchers concerned with the methodological implications of computing can get in touch with one another easily.

We’ll have “guest” columns and reviews as well. Because there is a lot of help available for beginners, and very little concern to date with the special problems of social science research, we will concentrate on the latter. At Tremont, we use IBM PC’s, so I tend to concentrate on software for that machine. To balance this, I’m going to have other people review software for the Macintosh and other popular computers.

One thing we’ll certainly do is explore the value of computing for all the different kinds of research work. So far, there’s been a natural tendency to concentrate on text editing and simple retrieval, since these are the jobs which take the most time and are most irritating; they’re also the things which the current state of the computing art does best. But there’s more to qualitative research than processing field notes, and programs are getting more sophisticated. So it’s time to examine some of these newer possibilities and broader problems. It’s time to consider the different kinds of support we need at each phase or major task in a research project. In the earliest phases, we need help with the planning, proposal writing, and detailed design problems. As the study gets under way, emphasis shifts to dealing with field notes. Later, we are more concerned with the complexities of analysis and interpretation. The final stages of a study focus on drafting reports.
After wrestling with these issues for a year, I have come to the conclusion that no single program currently available is adequate for both indexing field notes and analyzing them. At this time (Summer, 1984) the best strategy is to use an indexing program which works with files prepared by your usual word processor to support data collection and preliminary analysis. Other programs should be used to support detailed analysis, systematic comparison, and development of formal theory. We will look at a few programs to support the data collection phase.

When we're preparing and handling large volumes of raw field notes, we often don't have a very specific theoretical model in mind. Rather, we're searching for regularities and patterns in the data. Word processing aside, the most useful kind of program for this is one which will index the mass of notes conveniently, and let us retrieve points of interest for detailed analysis. There are now several such "bulk indexing" programs on the market for the IBM PC, and some run on other operating systems as well.

Probably the best known of these is FYI 3000, which was sold under the name "Superfile 2000" in an earlier version. FYI indexes up to 99 files produced by a word processor, and retrieves paragraphs on the basis of keywords you supply. Since the program indexes every word of the text (you can exclude words like "of"), no preset list of keywords is necessary. Retrieval is extremely fast, and the program is very simple to use—a few menus, each with a small number of clear choices. If you change one of the data files in any way, you have to reindex the file, which can take several minutes. This is not a problem with field notes, which don't change once they are written.

Flexibility of retrieval is very poor. The program finds only exact matches of keywords, so it won't find a plural if you give it a singular. It supports boolean searches (e.g., "Smith" OR "Jones" AND NOT "Robinson") in its own rather rigid format, but does not allow searching on ranges, e.g., "find everything between 03/23/1983 and 04/23/83." FYI recognizes only one kind of data, "words."

The paragraphs retrieved (or their first lines) may be saved to another file or printed; this provides a way of consolidating all the materials in field notes pertinent to a given point. Each entry can be tagged with the name of its source file, which is a very important feature. The version we tested has a few minor bugs in the output facility: the menu selections don't quite work right.

The manual is xeroxed from typescript, covers the material adequately, and takes step-by-step clarity to an extreme. The program is copy protected. Using it on a hard disk is very awkward, a significant point if one uses it on a large body of notes. Multiple