

Introducing the Internet in a Rural Setting

by Penny H. Welling

The opportunity to offer public access to the Internet was an exciting one for Stanly County Public Library. We serve a county with a population of approximately 55,000, 71 % of which is considered rural. The main library is located in Albemarle, which has a population of about 15,000. We had had a few questions about Internet access from patrons but had not anticipated being able to offer the service so soon. There was no money for the computer equipment in our budget, and we had no inexpensive means of accessing the Internet in our community. The chance to participate in a rural outreach project gave us the means to connect to the World Wide Web and Internet, but it presented the library with new issues to resolve. Our challenge was twofold: first, solve the internal management issues and, second, market the service to patrons, many of whom had never seen the Internet before.

We began with the technology itself, working with the staff of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) to determine the best way to connect our library to *Charlotte's Web*, selecting equipment to accomplish the connectivity, placing the equipment in the library, installing phone lines, and wiring the building. A major issue for libraries in rural areas is expensive long distance charges. In order for Stanly County to work with *Charlotte's Web*, we needed to establish a direct connection to the web server in Charlotte. The connection needed to be inexpensive so that we could continue to fund it once the grant period was over.

The technical support staff of *Charlotte's Web* met with us in Albemarle to see our facilities and to discuss the various options we had for access. The telephone companies in Stanly County did not offer ISDN connectivity at the time, so a new modem bonding experiment was devised by David Ramsey, System Administrator of *Charlotte's Web*, to offer 56K speed by bonding two 28.8 modems. We needed two direct phone lines for this option. The modem server that was selected allows us to add up to 30 computers to the lines already established. This connection has proved to be very quick and efficient. We have been down only one time in four months. This connection also has few points for failure and can be managed easily.

Another issue to be resolved was the placement of the equipment in the building. In an older library that was not designed for computers, this involves converting space already in use. We wanted the computers to be placed in the reference area, along with other computers that we use for CD-ROM searching, but we were not able to create a unified area. The Internet computers were placed on a table in front of the reference and information desk area so that they could be easily supervised by the reference staff. The table gave us room for two computers to share a printer and space to post our policies and sign up sheets as well. The area had to be wired for electricity and connected to the modem server, which was placed in a basement area out of the way. We also bought a backup power supply for the modem server.

One of the recurring problems for a small library like ours is the lack of local technical support for a sophisticated Internet connection. We also were concerned about tampering and daily maintenance, but were reassured to find that one of the goals of this grant was to design a simple system that could not be altered and that did not require a lot of maintenance. While our staff is computer literate, and we have good in-house technical support for our automation system, we were not prepared to install or support the technology required for the Internet connection.

Policies and Procedures

Another concern for our library was developing an Internet access policy and establishing procedures for using the computers in the library. We looked at the statement from ALA and at Internet policies from several libraries before developing one for Stanly County. We wanted to address the issues of accuracy of information and the potentially offensive nature of some sites. We also wanted to establish a minimum age for unsupervised Internet use. The last sentence of our policy was borrowed from Charlotte-Mecklenburg and sums up our philosophy: "The library's overall intent is to address possible misuse rather than eliminate the opportunity to use the Internet and World Wide Web as resources." We wanted the policy to alert patrons to potential hazards, but not to limit their use of these valuable resources.

When developing procedures for scheduling the computers, we decided to



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About *Libraries Online!*

In November 1995, the Microsoft Corporation, in partnership with the American Library Association, launched *Libraries Online!*, a \$3 million initiative to extend information technologies to underserved populations. Studies had shown that people with low incomes and those living in rural areas and inner cities were the least likely to have access to the Internet, multimedia technology, and current software. The Microsoft grants were awarded to provide the incentive for research and development of innovative approaches to reach these underserved groups.

Nine U. S. library systems were chosen to participate and each received a combination of cash grants, Microsoft software, computer hardware, training, and technical support to implement its project. In North Carolina, the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County received a grant for a project to extend technology and Internet access both to inner city populations and, through the community network, *Charlotte's Web*, to rural populations of neighboring counties.

The *Libraries Online!* grant for rural access, along with an additional grant from the State Library of North Carolina to cover communications costs, allowed *Charlotte's Web* to extend service beyond Mecklenburg County lines for the first time. It also provided an excellent opportunity to discover and develop solutions to meet the special challenges of providing public access to technology in a rural environment.

The following components were judged to be critical to the success of the rural project:

1. An economical communications solution that would be affordable by the partner library after the grant funds ran out
2. Technical help to assist in setting up equipment and installing software
3. Training for staff and volunteers
4. Enthusiasm and a willingness to provide the new service on the part of the rural library's staff

Charlotte's Web would order and set up the equipment and provide the technical expertise, training, and grant administration. Together, *Charlotte's Web* staff and the partner library staff would develop a plan that would be easy and economical for the partner library to maintain after the grant period. In addition, the partner library was responsible for providing space, necessary furniture, willing staff and volunteers to train others, and marketing for the new services in their community.

Partnership with the State Library of North Carolina was essential to the success of the project, not only for the additional funds provided but also for help in selecting those counties which would make strong partners. Several libraries were identified which could provide the necessary support for a successful project. Final selection also was based on the potential for a low-cost communications solution and the rural character of the county.

Stanley County Public Library was the first rural site to be established through the project. Library Director Penny Welling and her staff were ready and eager to begin offering access to *Charlotte's Web*, the Internet, and Multimedia CDs in their community.

— Pat Ryckman

treat them like any other equipment that was available for public use. We offered two options for scheduling the computers. One can be reserved up to 24 hours in advance, and one is available on a first come, first-served basis. Each computer is scheduled in blocks of one hour, with the option to continue if no one else is waiting. These computers have been in almost constant use since we began the scheduling in May. There has been some use of the reservation system, but most patrons come in and even wait in line. We have not encountered any problems related to the policy. There have been some questions about children under 12 being allowed to use the computer, but parents have complied with the request to supervise them.

Training

As soon as the technical questions had been resolved and plans were underway to install the equipment, the next step was to train staff members and volunteers to assist the public in Internet searching. Our reference staff already was using the Internet to answer some reference questions and to access OCLC. Many were using Lynx to access the Internet and were familiar with the overall concept of the Internet. The addition of the grant computers, however, allowed us to learn the graphical interface. Carolyn Felton, Volunteer Coordinator for *Charlotte's Web*, saved us a lot of time-consuming preparation by offering a one-hour training session to everyone who worked at the library and to volunteers recruited to assist with the project.

We were encouraged to recruit volunteers that could be trained to assist patrons as they used the Internet computers. In two sessions, 18 volunteers were introduced to the Internet and *Charlotte's Web*. Most of these volunteers had little computer experience. They attended the one-hour training and then were scheduled to practice on the computers for a month. A follow-up session was scheduled to answer questions or address concerns that arose from the practice sessions. While volunteers were diligent in practicing, we did not have a good turnout for the follow-up session. The success of practice times varied greatly as well. While some took to browsing immediately, others were frustrated with their lack of success. One big difference between staff and volunteers was the fundamental understanding by library staff about what to expect from Internet searches. Volunteers tended to be unsure about what they would find, and often were disappointed that the Internet could not do more. Regardless of their positions in the library, our staff members were able to develop better search queries. For volunteers I added more training on the best ways to enter queries or search terms using

various Internet search engines.

In practice, the volunteer program at our library has not been highly successful. With only two computers, we frequently have patrons that need no assistance, leaving the volunteers with little to do during their scheduled time. The volunteer training has created some enthusiastic Internet users, but our reference staff has actually assisted most patrons. Volunteers also will be helpful with marketing and when teaching programs such as "Using the Internet to Search for Jobs." Having volunteers lead this type of session will be a more productive use of the trained volunteers in our setting.

An important element of training for both staff and volunteers is the willingness to explore. Some staff and volunteers were concerned about needing to acquire a certain level of knowledge about the Internet by a given date. After the computers were installed and everyone had been trained, we allowed staff and volunteers the exclusive use of the computers for a month to give them adequate time for practice. Our goal here was to create an atmosphere where risk-taking and exploration are valued and encouraged.

Marketing

One of the most effective marketing tools for our library was the enthusiasm of staff members for public access. During the time that the computers were available for staff and volunteers to practice, our reference staff answered many questions for the public about what the computers were for and when they would be ready for public use. They also were using the Internet to answer reference questions and began to educate patrons about how they could answer their own questions once the computers were available. Signs were placed on the computers announcing the opening date for their use.

We held a Grand Opening Day when we thanked our grant partners and began to schedule the computers for public use. The grant included support for this type of marketing activity. PLCMC provided us with tee shirts for volunteers to wear on that day. We wore "Stanly County Online" buttons, which were a takeoff on the Libraries Online! project. We offered refreshments and the chance to see demonstrations of Internet access. The opening was featured in the local newspaper.

We have posted signs announcing the availability of a volunteer one afternoon per week to give demonstrations of the Internet. This has been a successful feature of the volunteer program and a good way to introduce people with no previous experience to the possibilities of the Internet. There are still many people who come into the library that have heard of the Internet and want to see what it is or what it will "do." A demonstration is the best way to answer this question.

For patrons ready to browse, we have discovered that providing Web addresses is a good way to begin. This fall we will begin publicizing an "address of the week" for young people, which will be featured in the local newspaper and posted at the computers. Staff will be advised about this address and what they can expect to find there. Instructions for using the Open feature to locate the address will also be posted at the computer. This will allow us to educate our patrons and to remind the community of the public access option at their local library.

Benefits of Public Internet Access

The ability to offer public access to the Internet has brought many benefits to the library and its patrons. We have attracted a new group of users; a study of our computer sign-up sheets indicates that we have scheduled people that have

not used other library services. Our information services manager has been able to cancel some expensive print and CD-ROM sources that are now available on the Internet. For instance, we have located several ways to search for phone numbers on the Internet and will no longer subscribe to our telephone CDs. The Internet has proved to be a good source of medical information as well. We don't have an extensive medical information collection because of the expense of updating frequently. Now Internet access allows patrons current information.

As more businesses and organizations add World Wide Web addresses, we find many patrons come in with addresses that they want to visit. Of particular interest is the ability to do job searches on the World Wide Web. Stanly County has a high unemployment rate and job seekers have been using the Employment Security Commission job listings on our reference computer for some time. There is much more information on the Web, and searchers can pinpoint jobs and locations better using these resources. The only disadvantage we have found is the inability of some users to comprehend the written instructions on these pages. While computer access to the Internet offers many advantages to the information seeker, it is still necessary to have a basic level of reading comprehension to use this method successfully. Our staff has spent time assisting some patrons as they read the material they have retrieved.

Evaluating public access to the Internet is another management question for Stanly County Public Library. We had attempted to control use by scheduling and policy decisions. We found that the scheduling of the computers has been successful as planned, with few exceptions. An element of evaluation in the original Libraries Online! grant is the tracking of user demo-

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graphics, looking primarily at age, gender and race. The original funders want to see who benefits from Internet and World Wide Web access in a rural or low income area. We also want to answer that question. In the first three months of the project, we have had many young people using the computers. This use could be due to summer vacations or it may be a pattern that continues into the fall. Our library has heavy after-school use, and we will be evaluating the success of computer scheduling during this time of year.

The ease of operating the equipment and the amount of time it is functional are other areas for evaluation. Installation was in the hands of the Charlotte's Web representatives, but has been timely. We have had no attempts at vandalism so far. From a technical standpoint, the system that was designed and installed by the PLCMC representatives has been easy for us to manage, with little need for adjustment or input by their staff.

Another evaluation issue for this library and all others is the cost of providing the service. We are tracking telephone charges and print cartridge costs, as well as the staff time required to manage the equipment. Charges for the tele-

phone lines will have to be added to the constantly growing expense of telephone connections that we require for telephone, fax, and online catalog connectivity throughout our library system. This new service will also change the way our budget is allocated for reference and information services in the future. We will buy fewer print resources, especially expensive, seldom used materials that contain information we can locate on the Internet, but we will have more telephone charges and greater staffing needs for computer support.

Determining the needs of patrons and tracking how they use the equipment will also be important. We have many teenage patrons who enjoy playing games. Senior citizens are doing genealogical research on the Internet. Have we expanded to an even greater degree the all encompassing mission of a public library? How much do we want to encourage this use? How does it fit into our overall mission to provide library services to our community? These are questions that we will continue to address as we evaluate this service.

Overall, our experience with public access to the Internet has been a positive one. Several elements contributed to this outcome. The Public Library of Char-

lotte and Mecklenburg County worked with us to design a system that required little technical maintenance and support on our part. They also offered training at just the right time to help us launch the project quickly. Our library had staff members that valued computer technology and took the lead in promoting the Internet computers and assisting patrons with their use. Our community was very enthusiastic as well, from the trustees who were willing to create a "user-friendly" Internet policy that did not overly limit or restrict, to the patrons who were receptive to the opportunity to use new technology. Offering new technological services to library patrons seems to be a given for library managers now, whether it be online public catalogs, CD-ROM databases, or Internet access. For libraries, what used to be considered a once-in-a-lifetime switch from card catalog to computer has now become an on-going process as formats and technologies continually change. For rural or urban libraries, planning, training, financing, marketing, and evaluating are steps that apply each time we introduce a new technology. Patrons and staff alike can then enjoy the benefits of having added a new and valued library service for the community.

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