
Public Libraries:

An Important Piece in the Community Network Puzzle

by Jennifer Seavy Pratt

A community electronic network is much more than a gateway to the Internet and its wealth of global information. It is an electronic community center bringing citizens access to informational, educational, and social activities. "Each system is locally owned, locally operated, and designed to wrap itself around the information needs of the community. They are driven by the information and communications needs of the local community. Their governance and organizational roots are in the community itself. They are dedicated to bringing the benefits of the Information Age to as many people as possible."¹ The organization of a community network is like a jigsaw puzzle; each piece is necessary and each piece has its own place. Public libraries are emerging as key pieces in the community network puzzles that are being assembled all over the country.

The public library's unique history of providing equitable access to information and its broad service mission place it in the forefront of the planning and design of electronic community networks. The public library traditionally has served as the community's information provider. This role is enhanced by the library's centralized location and neutral ground. It facilitates public meetings, cultural events, and social opportunities for everyone.

Leadership

Many community networks exist because of the leadership and advocacy of public libraries and librarians. Public libraries are collaborating with other

county agencies, citizens, businesses, and schools; forming alliances and partnerships to provide community Internet access. In a number of networks such as Charlotte's Web, Prairienet, and the Seattle Community Net, librarians have spearheaded the project or served in active roles during the initial stages of organization. For instance, the library director of Beamis Public Library in Littleton, Colorado, was directly involved in the formation of the original group, and the Web server is housed in the library. Phyllis Larison, head of adult services at Beamis, reports that she is "in charge of the government section and has developed web pages for all of the city departments as well as pages on our city council. The head of technical services has worked on the technical aspects of the network and was recently elected as chairperson of the board for the Littleton Community Network."² Jeffrey Krull, director of Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana, is the president of Infonet, the local network. The director of the Iowa City Public Library is the chair of the founding partners of the the Johnson County Community Network in Iowa, a community

network in the planning stages.

Local Information Provider

Respondents in a 1992 Gallup poll of community opinion leaders believed the two "most important roles of the public library in the community are to support the educational aspirations of the community and to provide the community with access to information."³ Community members look to the library for the majority of their local information needs. They expect to find census data, tax forms, local budgets, town and county ordinances, and building codes. Librarians have developed a variety of databases to fulfill their community-based information and referral needs. These include files listing government services; social services and human service resources; answers to frequently asked questions; genealogy files; local newspaper indexes; reading lists; and local history. The next logical step is to make this information available electronically. The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh noted that "despite the international scope of this online environment, the local information needed to galvanize our communities is missing from the

Internet."⁴ However, a growing number of libraries are taking the plunge. The Johnson County Public Library in Overland Park, Kansas, has developed and maintained a community organization database on their OPAC computers for the last four years. This database of nearly 4,000 organizations is a cooperative effort with the Kansas City, Missouri; the Kansas City, Kansas; and the

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Johnson County libraries. Susan Bogart, a reference librarian at Johnson County Public Library, describes a new project on the Internet called the CLOUD database:

"[It] is in its infancy, but eventually expects to be an all-inclusive, state-wide database of community organizations, social service organizations, avocational groups, local government groups, etc. It is mounted on a WEB-server housed at the University of Kansas Medical Center ... 'Blue Skyways' is the actual website name — <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/kansas>."⁵ A community online information center is being designed by the Saint Paul Public Library, the Hamline Midway Coalition, and the Twin Cities Free-Net. This system will provide information about housing, government services, jobs, licensing and crime statistics. It will be available through Internet workstations at the library and through the Free-Net.

Access

One part of the National Public Telecomputing Network's (NPTN) mission statement sums up the importance of community networks: "At its heart, our business is empowerment. By providing people with affordable access to computerized information and communications services, they are able to function better not only as citizens of this nation but also as members of a global community in whose hands the future of this planet will ultimately reside."⁶ Libraries are providing access to the Internet in every state in the country, offering information services to people who could not otherwise afford it: "A country that works smarter; that enjoys more efficient, less costly government — guided by a better informed citizenry; that supports job growth through small businesses; that promotes lifelong learning — will be a country laced with a high-speed infrastructure for information with civic purpose."⁷ Citizens who lack access to electronic information will be left behind more rapidly the ever before. Poverty in America is accelerating, and one in five children is poor. "Libraries offer freely available sites for equitable access to the network, to the equipment and software needed to access it, and to the information resources available through it."⁸

An example of Internet access for the public is the CC Express project at the Cumberland County Public Library in North Carolina. Fourteen designated computers allow users to connect to

the Internet from within the main library and from their six branches. The Albuquerque Public Library and the New Mexico Technet have begun an interesting project they call "Connections 21." This collaboration has placed computers in all school libraries and some community centers, providing direct access to the library catalog and the Internet. Students can search the catalog, apply for library cards, and check out books. The materials ordered are delivered to the school and distributed by school personnel. New Mexico Technet and the library carry the entire cost of the project.

Steve Milner in his book, *Civilizing Cyberspace*, says, "Libraries are a natural starting point. Being a universal service, libraries are open to everybody regardless of the level of their information seeking expertise."⁹ Recognizing the need for patrons at public libraries to have easy access to the information on the Internet, the Washington State Advisory Council on Libraries and the Washington State Library made funds available for libraries to design a project that would simplify access to electronic information by providing a Web site tailored specifically for Washington citizens. The Seattle Public Library, with its strong relationship with Seattle Community Network, was selected to lead the project. Other active participants were the University of Washington Libraries, Ellensburg Public Library, and the Spokane County Library District. Librarians across the state provide ideas, review web pages, and develop homepages for their own collections. Librarian-designed and librarian-maintained Web pages facilitate and enhance the patrons' searching success.

Education and Training

Public library staff are trained to demonstrate and teach patrons the use of both traditional and electronic library resources: "A logical evolutionary step in the public library role is to provide training for the public in the use of networks and networked information resources, as well as point-of-use consultation, guidance, and technical assistance, as well as to develop online training and interpretative aids."¹⁰ Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, part of the Buffalo Free-Net, has offered Internet training workshops to the public since 1993. The Montgomery-Floyd Regional Library, which has a strong relationship with the Blacksburg Electronic Village in Virginia, provides user training through their libraries. The Flint Public Library supports the Kellogg Community Networking Initia-

tive in Flint: "Through Kellogg funding, they are training librarians and collaborating with neighborhood organizations to help prepare information for online resources."¹¹ The Community Networking and Training Center has trained many librarians and is beginning to train local volunteers. Their focus is to help community members to format, upload, and maintain data. The Boulder Public Library is working with the Access Colorado Library and Information Network to provide classroom-style public training sessions on Internet use.

Server hosts

Some public libraries are collaborating with local networks by physically hosting the server, modems, and the necessary hardware for the network. Providing a facility that has unlimited power sources, twenty-four hour access, and phone lines can be one of the most important pieces of the puzzle. Marian Mulla of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library reports, "The Suncoast Free-Net is housed and operated out of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library. All volunteers are coordinated out of our office. There are PPLC librarians on the SCFN executive committee. All Hillsborough County and most Pinellas County libraries provide public access computers at their sites."¹²

The Complete Puzzle

The impact of community networks upon local communities and libraries is growing. Librarians and public libraries are bringing tremendous skills and knowledge to the table, benefitting their communities and community networks. Citizens, schools, government, businesses, and organizations are prepared to use this technology to their advantage. A successful collaboration with the public library will help to focus the enterprise and organize the information so that emerging networks can fulfill their promise and established networks can continue to prosper.

Guide to Resources

<http://www.sils.umich.edu/Communiyt/libraries.html>

This page, a resource from the Community Networking Initiative, lists public libraries and the networks that collaborate. It gives a brief description and links to both library and network when available.

<http://www.sils.umich.edu/Community/exampcns.html>

These are examples of community networks in the United States.

<http://www.scn.org/ip/comnet/abshome.htm>

This page has the abstracts of 11 chapters from the book *New Community Networks — Wired for Change*.

<http://www.laplaza.org/cn/local/cmcallp.html>

This page provides the online documents from the "Community Net working 96" Conference.

<http://ralph.gmu.edu/~pbaker/>

Paul M.A. Baker from George Mason University has compiled a very useful "On-Line Guide to Resources."

<http://www.inch.com/~lff/>

Libraries for the Future direct you to the Civic Library, Innovative Uses of Technology, and Demonstration Projects.

<http://state.or.us:8000/connect/con-resr>

The Oregon State Library posts a "Libraries and Community Networks" page with links to some of the above addresses plus additional resources.

http://bcn.boulder.co.us/community/resourcesCommon_Ground.html#ch1

Kenneth Klingenstein, "Common Ground: Community Networks as Catalysts," (May 5, 1995).

<http://duke.usask.ca/~scottp/free.html>

This is an international list of community networks presented by Peter Scott at the University of Saskatchewan Libraries.

<http://www.nptn.org:80/about.fn.starting.fn>

This page is maintained by the National Telecomputing Network, a non-profit organization that serves the parent organization for Free-Net community computer network systems. It provides information and links to developing community networks.

<http://www.atg.apple.com/research/proj/alot/alot96.html>

Apple computers and the Apple Library of Tomorrow provide links to and information on many outstanding community network projects.

<http://alberti.mit.edu/arch/4.207/anneb/thesis/toc.html>

Anne Beamish, "Communities On-Line: Community-based Computer Networks," (February 1995).

<http://www.scn.org/ip/commnet/workshop.html>

Doug Schuler, "Developing and Sustaining Community Networks."

References

¹ National Public Telecomputing Network, "Starting a Free-Net® Community Computer System." Available at FTP site <http://www.nptn.org:80/about.fn/starting.fn>. (no longer maintained).

² E-mail from Phyllis Larison, phyllis@csn.net, (Jul 28, 1996).

³ Georgia D'Elia and Eleanor Jo Rodger,

"Roles of the Public Library in the Community: the Results of a Gallup Poll of Community Opinion Leaders," *Public Libraries* (March-April 1995): 94-101.

⁴ Bette Ann Hubbard, Andrea Sardone, Robert B. Croneberger, and Dan Iddings, "Newest Members of the Net Set: Pittsburgh's Carnegie Cashes in on Community Info," *Library Journal* (Mar 1, 1996): 44-46.

⁵ E-mail from Susan Bogart, BOGART@JCL.LIB.KS.US, (Jul 24, 1996).

⁶ National Public Telecomputing Network, <http://www.nptn.org:80/about.fn/starting.fn>. (no longer maintained).

⁷ Richard Civile, "Internet and the Poor," paper presented at the conference Public Access to the Internet, JFK School of Government, Cambridge, MA, May 27, 1993.

⁸ Carol C Henderson, "Role of Public Libraries in Providing Access to the Internet," paper presented at the conference Public Access to the Internet, JFK School of Government, Cambridge, MA, 27 May 1993.

⁹ Steven E. Milner, *Civilizing Cyber-space: Policy, Power and the Information Superhighway*. (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1996).

¹⁰ R. Kathleen Molz, "Civic Networks in the United States", *Bowker Annual Library and Book Trade Almanac*, ed. Catherine Barr, edition 40. (New Providence, N.J.: R.R. Bowker, 1995).

¹¹ "Libraries and Networks," Community Networking: Libraries and CN's, available at <http://www.sils.umich.edu/community/libraries.html>.

¹² E-mail from Marian Mulla, mullam@csfn.thpl.lib.fl.us, (July 24, 1996).

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