

Wired to the World

by Ralph Lee Scott

Outreach

This issue of *North Carolina Libraries* is devoted to outreach, and thus this column is devoted to a paean in favor of universal access to the Internet as a means of attracting patrons to libraries. Universal access promotes the idea that individuals, regardless of economic status, have basic societal rights. Andrew Carnegie, an early advocate of this idea, established a number of free public libraries that provided access to books for everyone. His hope was that patrons of these libraries would be able to better themselves through the use of library materials.

Recently, this concept has been extended to cover basic human "public services" such as universal access to telephone, electricity, and fuel. Libraries which embraced the ideals of Carnegie have recently been looking for ways to improve their relevance to the communities they serve. As the traditional print media are replaced by virtual resources, libraries are in a unique position to enhance their offerings to the community.

The Internet provides just the source of unlimited information access that Andrew Carnegie envisioned. Libraries need to increase their public Internet access services. NC LIVE is a start in this direction. We have begun to divorce ourselves from the idea of traditional book and periodical resources as the sole means of access, and to embrace in a seamless way access to the new technologies of the Internet. FreeNets, such as the pioneering Cleveland FreeNet, were an opportunity for libraries

to offer the concept of universal access to the masses. Most libraries missed this boat. FreeNet assumes that users have computer access at home or work, but libraries need to provide both in-house and remote access to patrons.

Another way in which libraries can provide universal access is to serve as locations where patrons can send and receive e-mail without charge. A number of free Internet email services (such as Geocities) allow patrons to set up their own Web-based mail accounts. This is an ideal way for libraries to increase their visibility and become indispensable to their constituencies. Offering patrons free instruction in the use of the Internet is another way to build a loyal voter base.

Librarians can help local groups set up Web-based chat rooms on topics of local interest such as genealogy, environmental issues, or city ordinances. The local library home page can direct Internet users to bibliographies of popular local topics found on the Web. Among the features that can be included are links or information on local book clubs, scout troops, gardening clubs, and hobby interest groups. A nightly homework clinic run on the library Web server can offer local students

direction when they are stuck on an assignment and improve library visibility to families at the same time.

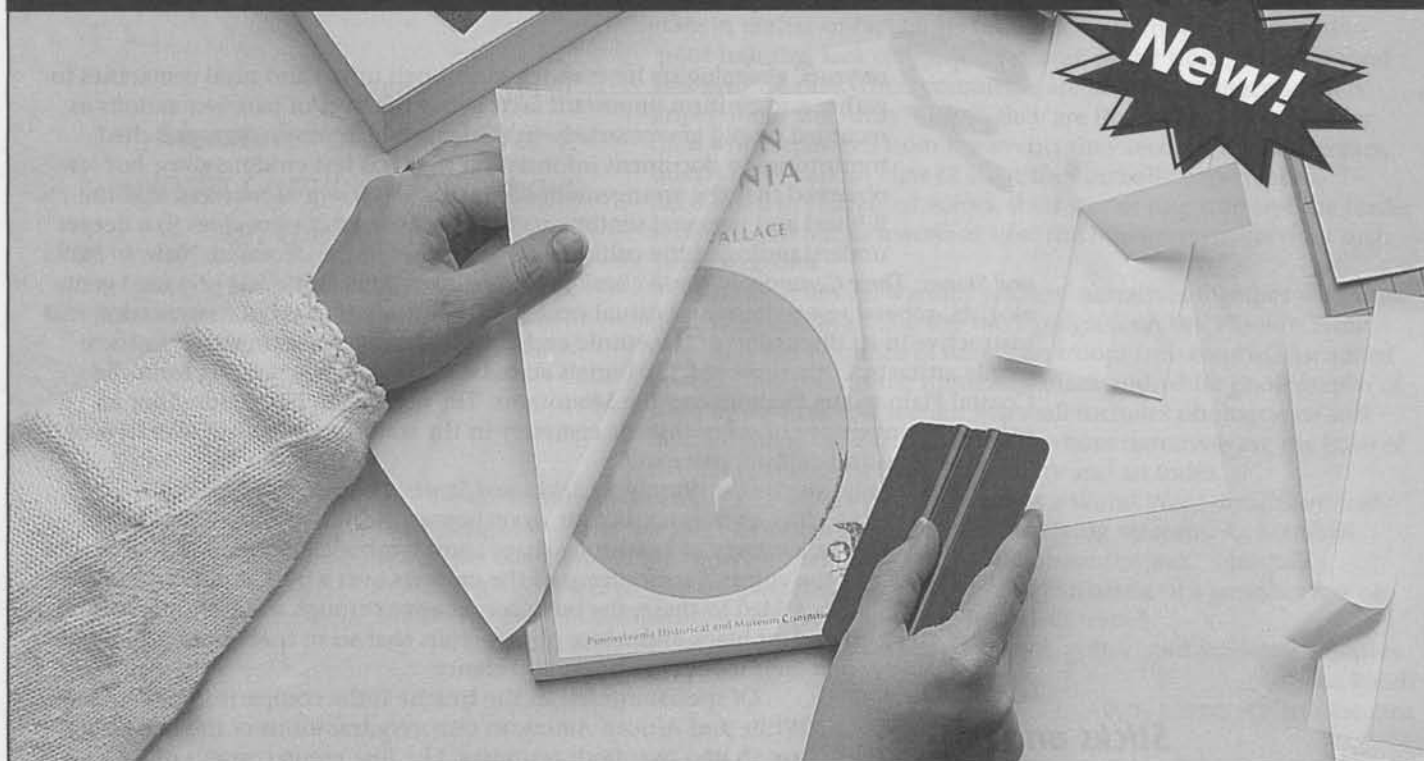
Many traditional library services may, in the future, be more Web-based. Answering reference questions, locating electronic resources, and delivering requested documents are a few that come to mind. Perhaps distance education courses, such as ZDU or various college offerings, could be taken from library-based Web work stations. A number of librarians, however, cringe at the idea of Web-based "chat rooms" jamming up library work stations.

In fact, there is already considerable competition in many libraries between traditional and virtual services. The flip side of this, however, is that libraries can and should become the coffee shops of the future. Instead of finding ways to keep patrons out of e-mail and chat sessions, we need to find ways to meet more of these universal access needs that Andrew Carnegie first tried to meet with traditional print libraries.

Libraries can best meet these needs of the future by finding ways to provide increasing levels of Internet access for those who cannot afford the price of current technologies, as well as by providing relevant links through their home pages to local resources for patrons with home computers. Libraries can become visible in the community by enabling patrons to use these technologies from their home or office, thereby gaining the support of local taxpayers.

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