

Rural datafication: Access to the Internet

By Don Lanier

The challenge of universal connectivity

Internet connectivity and widespread electronic access to information resources are arguably the most significant developments in libraries in the last decade. As is often the case with significant technological advances, Internet connectivity has bypassed some potential user groups, perhaps groups which could benefit most.

The Rural Datafication: Achieving the Goal of Ubiquitous Access to the Internet conference was held at the McCormick Place Hotel in Chicago on May 13–14, 1993. Cosponsoring organizations of the Rural Datafication conference included CICNet, netILLINOIS, INDNet, IREN, MichNet, MRNet, NYSERNet, PREPNet, WiscNet, and WVNET. Acknowledging the success of connectivity for academic and research institutions, the conference sponsors directed their attention to the challenge of “providing similar access to the rural areas and underserved communities where expertise and money are often in short supply.”

The conference began on Thursday afternoon with “hosted discussions” for several interest groups; K-12, higher education, libraries, health care and education, agriculture, and community/government. Following a conference reception, a second Thursday session consisted of presentations about projects which “provided networked information and services to information-poor communities.” The projects described varied widely in location and targeted community and included “FreeNET British Columbia” (Roger Hart), “SENDIT” (Dan Pullen), “Big Sky Telegraph” (Frank Odasz), “PennPages” (Art Hussey), “NN/ML Community

Hospital Libraries” (Sherilynne Fuller), and the “Sustainable Development Information Network” (Miles Fidelman).

Presentations on Friday morning included “When Worlds Collaborate, I” (Ross Stapleton), “Proselytizing the Net” (Simona Nass), “When Worlds Collide, II” (Anthony Riddle), “Networking the Nations . . . American Indians/Alaskan Natives” (George Baldwin), and “. . . Play and Exploration in Cyberspace” (Rick Gates). Following lunch, a panel of facilitators for the hosted interest groups which met on Thursday afternoon reported the “thoughts, visions, and concerns” identified by the individual groups.

The titles for the projects described and the papers delivered are somewhat self-explanatory. Ross Stapleton’s presentation was especially interesting because of his perspective as a CIA employee. He pointed out that “underserved communities” applies to several U.S. government agencies and to many national governments. He characterized the information scene as one in which toll roads are being replaced by public highways and one in which national boundaries are disappearing, saying the potential for public and private diplomacy on the Net should not be lost. Religious imagery was abundant among the speakers and both Simona Nass and Anthony Riddle proved to be able evangelists for the Net. Simona focused on getting all segments of society involved in policy issues and Anthony emphasized reaching and involving community groups. Rick Gates (of Internet Hunt fame) admitted to being a novice presenter as he proceeded to outline the development of the Net. He sees the present stage of development as one in which the Net is community or user oriented.

Interesting observations and concerns from the conference included:

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lished at GPO—free of charge through depository libraries, and at the incremental cost of dissemination to others.

Rep. Gerald Kleczka (D-Wis.), who moved S. 564, said the bill:

1) provides for online access to the Congressional Record, the Federal Register, and other publications distributed by the Superintendent of Documents;

2) provides for the establishment of an electronic directory of federal public information stored electronically;

3) provides for an electronic storage facility;

4) requires the Superintendent of Documents to distribute agency electronic information at the request of the issuing agency;

5) requires that fees for access to the directory and the system, including information

stored in the electronic storage facility, are to approximate the incremental cost of dissemination of the information. The one exception is that depository libraries will be able to access the directory, and system provided for in the bill, including the information stored in the electronic storage facility, free of charge;

6) requires the Public Printer to report on the directory, the system of access, and the electronic storage facility not later than December 31 of each odd numbered year.

The report is to include an analysis of cost savings in comparison with traditional forms of information distribution.

No increase in funding was authorized in the bill. GPO is to implement the system of access, the electronic directory, and the electronic storage facility within its current budget. ■

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- Access and communication may be discriminatory if only Internet technology is utilized.

- Authentication of information/data is more of a problem with the Net than with printed materials.

- Government agencies in particular need "Welcome Centers" to provide immediate information/documentation for a plethora of public needs which could be facilitated by the Internet.

- There are real barriers to ubiquitous access, particularly for the over 50% of public libraries that serve populations of under 10,000.

During the conference references to various Internet resources and lists abounded. Registration packets included printed information from many of the presenters and a listing of all attendees with e-mail addresses for easy fol-

low-up. In addition to network personnel, the conference was well attended by systems people and librarians, with several entrepreneurs in evidence. It was very rewarding to see several Internet luminaries in attendance and to realize that these folks continue to share their vision and expertise on the Net without regard for financial profit.

From the perspective of this reporter, the rural datafication conference was an unqualified success. Of course, persons with a rural background like myself may have to change our understanding to accommodate the inclusion of any underserved community as a potential audience. In closing the meeting, Michael Staman, president of CICNet said that the conference proceedings would be published and that another rural datafication conference would be held next year. ■

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