

## HOW NEBRASKA HAS RESPONDED WITH TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND LONG-DISTANCE EDUCATION

by

Timothy Lynch

Nebraska is not unlike many of its neighboring states to the west. With a large land area of 77,355 square miles, and 459 miles across, it is the 15th largest in the United States. Almost four-fifths of the population of 1,584,617 (1990 census) live in the eastern third of the state, with the two urban communities of Omaha and Lincoln containing 34 percent of the total state population. Our state government, which incidentally is the only nonpartisan unicameral in the country, struggles with the questions of rural/urban services. Our library community struggles with the same questions. The Nebraska Library Commission is charged with working with and improving all types of libraries, fostering communication and cooperation between those libraries to provide the information needed by the citizens of our state. With 269 official public libraries, 838 school districts comprising 1,485 schools, a four-campus regent-governed University system, a state college system of three institutions, and a large number of special libraries, we are hardly resource poor. Yet the challenge to improve access to these resources is always there.

In this presentation, I will, with some amount of pride, attempt to show you cause to "look to Nebraska."

Before I begin to comment on our distance learning programs, I have been asked to comment on the Public Library Board Certification program. The Public Library Board Certification Program, begun in May of this year, is a new program designed to complement the Public Librarian Certification Program which was instituted in 1987. Together these two programs are part of the Public Library Accreditation program, also instituted in 1987. The purpose

of the library board certification program is to encourage library boards to realize the importance of continuing education for themselves, to encourage cooperation within the library board, and thereby strengthen the library. The twist on this program is that the board is certified, not individual board members. The board as whole must determine how they are going to meet the requirements for recertification. As far as we know, this approach has never been tried before. To be recertified, each library board must complete 20 hours of continuing education within three years. We have defined "continuing education" very loosely, allowing for the board to have much flexibility. While these requirements for recertification may not seem rigorous, the twenty hours is twenty times more than what many of our library boards have done in the past. This program has been met with great enthusiasm by many of our librarians, especially in the rural areas. After taking our basic skills training, they felt that their library boards needed similar training. The program was endorsed by the Trustees, Users and Friends Section of the Nebraska Library Association.

For the past two years the Nebraska Library Commission has been working with Nebraska Educational Television to deliver continuing education programs over satellite. In 1990 the state of Nebraska leased a full-time satellite transponder for educational and public service programming. In 1991, the state assured the continuation of educational telecommunications services into the next century by purchasing a transponder, making Nebraska the first state to purchase a dedicated multiple channel transponder for statewide educational use involving all sectors of education. The network, NEB\*SAT, is establishing a comprehensive and coordinated network of originating and receiving sites across the state. NEB\*SAT is designed to provide four distinct and concurrent services:

Network 1 (Public Television and Radio Service)

Network 2 (Instructional Service)

Network 3 (Compressed Video Service)

Network 4 (Fiber Optic Service)

At this time, the Nebraska Library Commission uses Networks 2 and 3 as a means to deliver its continuing education program. Network 2 is a broadcast

quality channel which provides statewide distribution of distance learning and continuing education programming for all sectors of formal education, as well as in-service and continuing education. Network 3 uses compressed video technology which enables transmission of video and audio signals between origination and reception sites, allowing for 12 simultaneous one-way or six two-way interconnections. Compressed video omits certain detail, and because transmission requirements are reduced significantly, more compressed signals can be carried on the transponder.

I admit to a lack of knowledge in the area of technology, preferring to focus on how the technology can work for us. In 1991, we offered over forty hours of continuing education programming over the network. We began offering our 48 hour basic skills training for librarians without a MLS degree over satellite in 1991. In addition, the Nebraska Library Commission beams up a monthly satellite program on library issues. We have used the network for library system board training, as well as other specialized training events. With the total cost of getting the program up on the satellite under \$75 per hour, the question is no longer if we should use the technology. Instead it is, "Can we afford not to use the technology?"

We have learned a great deal over the past two years. Our first production was just that, a "production," the annual Nebraska Library Commission Children's Conference. It was held in August 1990. We took a great leap, not really knowing what we were getting into. We used a remote site for broadcast, had a production crew, a director, a great deal of wire and lots of jittery people. It was expensive, costing over \$3000, but as I continually pointed out to my director, they couldn't have sent me to a better workshop on distance learning.

We now use a classroom outfitted with three cameras, run by one technician. We strive to make the experience low-key to reduce the anxiety of the presenters. We view the receive sites as extensions of our workshops. The instructors of the basic skills classes put a great deal of effort into drawing the students in remote sites into the discussions. Remote sites are connected by a telephone bridge. While we are constantly thinking about new ways to increase involvement, we are satisfied that the students in the remote sites are indeed learning. This past spring, we offered a twelve hour basic skills class on

cataloging. One hundred students enrolled in the eight downlink locations. A facilitator was hired at each of the larger locations. Evaluations have been positive from all sites.

Our monthly satellite programs were designed to be a low effort, low cost delivery of programming on library issues. We have no sets, no directors, just a program. Our topics have included such subjects as the Americans With Disabilities Act, the White House Conference, and Intergenerational Programming. No registration is required. Downlink sites are arranged throughout the state to provide for those who do not have satellite dishes. Again, we try to keep the programs low key. It is difficult to tell who is watching these monthly programs. We do know that people are taping the programs and using them for staff development. Starting in July of this year, we will be packaging these programs into series for marketing purposes. Our first series will focus on Economic Development. The topics are: *Economic Development Principles and Its Language*, *Nebraska ON-LINE*, *Business Reference*, *Building Community Coalitions*, *Schools and Economic Development* and *Using Government Documents for Information*. In January 1993, we will begin a series on leadership skills development.

We primarily use the broadcast quality Network 2. However, by using Network 3, we were recently able to broadcast one of our monthly programs using speakers at two different locations in the state. Because the presentations didn't include any movement, the compressed video technology worked rather nicely.

Future plans include computer instruction over satellite. We plan to use a telecommunications software which will allow us to control the output on the remote computer screen. An overhead camera will allow the students to see what is being typed. Again using compressed video, the student and instructor will be able to see each other. We are particularly interested in pursuing the use of this technology because of the amount of training we do as an OCLC network. We also plan to broadcast a program from North Carolina and Lincoln as part of our North Carolina/Nebraska partnership.

Since September 1991, the Nebraska Library Commission has been hosting a week-end intensive graduate library science program from the School

of Library and Information Management, Emporia State University. We are currently investigating the possibilities of offering some of that instruction using satellite technology.

We continue to learn about distance learning, and by no means consider ourselves experts on the topic. We are however, excited about what the technology enables us to do. We are learning by experimenting. Watch us.

My final comments will address the development of Nebraska ON-LINE. In 1991, the Nebraska Library Commission was invited to be part of a project intended to aid those involved in economic development in our state. This initiative, the Nebraska Development Network, is Nebraska's development organizations working together to create and support community-based economic development. The Network helps communities, businesses, and local governments to link with the right resources. More than 100 public and private development organizations are members of the Network. Members are committed to helping communities focus their public resources on effective actions that create and improve the quality of the local business environment — labor, finance, business services, physical infrastructure, technology and government. The Network also helps communities train leaders and prepare strategic plans, helping to ensure that Nebraska communities can successfully compete in the global economy.

Nebraska ON-LINE is the information component of the Network providing a variety of information and communication services to economic development professionals, librarians, educators, entrepreneurs...to all Nebraskans. Nebraska ON-LINE is designed to provide access to a wide range of databases, unique information resources, directories, news services, and other resources. It also provides services designed to facilitate communication among participants, including an events calendar, electronic discussion groups and electronic mail system.

The roots of Nebraska ON-LINE can be found in statewide strategic initiatives that have occurred during the late 1980's and into the 1990's, culminating in the Nebraska Pre-White House Conference on Library and Information Services. The conference theme, *Nebraska Information Partnerships*,

indicated the expectation of future initiatives. Public and private partnerships, rural issues, information resources and networking all contributed to initiatives which grew out of the Nebraska Information Partnerships conference. Early contacts with key aides to Nebraska's new governor, Ben Nelson, contributed to involvement of the Nebraska Library Commission in rural development and statewide economic development. State Senator Sandy Scofield, who became the Governor's Chief of Staff, and Steve Buttress, who became the Director of the Nebraska Department of Economic Development were among a team of Nebraskans who participated in a 1989 Western Council of State Libraries conference, *The Role of Information in the Economy of the West*. That conference contributed ideas and a foundation for the Nebraska Information Partnerships conference. A meeting with Don Macke, the Director of the Rural Development Commission, after the Nebraska Information Partnerships conference resulted in Macke's concept paper *Nebraska's Development Information Partnership*. The Nebraska Library Commission is the lead agency for this important component of the Network. Our Computer Applications Team has developed a microcomputer-based information service, using standard off-the-shelf hardware and software throughout. This allows taking advantage of the massive base of personal computer hardware and software, and its competitive pricing, and allows a great deal of flexibility in future developments. Access is via a personal computer, a modem, and a telephone line. While anyone with these can gain access to the service, a group of intermediaries, including librarians, Cooperative Extension Agents, and local public utility staff, will be trained and advertised as access points to the service.

The following services are scheduled for immediate release in Phase I:

A. Development Services Directory

A services directory of statewide or local organizations and services will connect Nebraskans with community, economic and human development assistance. This information and referral directory can be easily searched by service, city, county, organization or contact person name, or any keyword.

B. Calendar of Events

A calendar of events, open for listings from all organizations, will keep development professionals and volunteers across the state

informed about meetings, training sessions, workshops, and other events. The calendar can be easily searched by date, keyword or type of event, including Agriculture, Business, Economic Development, Education, History, Humanities, Libraries, etc.

C. Electronic Publishing

An Electronic Publishing System will create a statewide "blackboard" to encourage community-to-community and region-to-region information sharing through a computerized newsletter, announcements and press release system.

D. Bulletin Board Referral System

A bulletin board referral directory, listing other computerized communication systems, will refer Nebraskans to a wide range of information from a variety of electronic bulletin boards and other electronic services, including information on business research and development, agricultural development and marketing, educational innovations and other topics.

E. Nebraska Development Network Description

Development Network information, describing how the network creates and supports opportunities for regional and local community, economic and human development, will include instruction on how to best use the information and communication services, as well as a broad range of network information.

The following services are scheduled for release in Phase II.

A. Electronic Message Service

The electronic communication system will serve as a statewide electronic message center, encouraging the exchange of information through instant e-mail "letters and telegrams" and key-topic conferencing.

B. Informational Databases

Information Databases will be available on a wide range of subjects, including census, legislation, marketing, etc. and can be downloaded on a computer or printed on a printer.

A variety of future enhancements are envisioned including access to a wide range of additional CD-ROM and on-line databases. Nebraska ON-LINE is intended to eventually enable international communication access, allowing Nebraskans to interact with other electronic systems around the world.

Initial testing of Phase I services began in March with the library commission staff serving as the beta test group. Testing with an external test group, representing other target groups, is set to begin this month.

Nebraska ON-LINE offers a new generation electronic information service, serving the needs of statewide economic development activity and library applications. Its flexible design features allow for further development. It is expected that Nebraska ON-LINE will help position libraries as key partners in community and economic development activities and contribute to Nebraska's future.

---

*At the time of this presentation, Mr. Lynch was the Coordinator, Continuing Education for the State Library of Nebraska. He is currently serving as the Director for Circulation at the Anchorage Memorial Library in Alaska. The above speech was given June 6, 1992 at the Information and Rural Economic Development: Infrastructure jointly sponsored by the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, the National Agricultural Library, and the U.S. Department of Education in cooperation with the Department of Library Science, Clarion University of Pennsylvania.*