OnLine at Pennsylvania Libraries

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Background

In 1991, Commonwealth Libraries, a division of The Pennsylvania Department of Education, began a project to connect libraries to the world of electronic mail and the Internet. This project started events in the Commonwealth Libraries' system that would change the way libraries and their patrons would find information.

In 1992, the Library Development Office contracted with Health Sciences Libraries Consortium (HSLC) of Philadelphia to provide text based access to the Internet. Librarians received training throughout the state to learn the new ways they would be retrieving information.

The success of this early project inspired a vision for Gary Wolfe, then director of library development, to connect libraries in rural areas to these evolving resources.

In early 1995, Bell Atlantic became interested in providing Internet access to libraries in Pennsylvania. Gary Wolfe, now commissioner of libraries, realized Bell's interest fit his vision for the future of public libraries. He actively pursued Bell Atlantic's thoughts. Gary Wolfe, along with Barbara Cole, director of library development, wrote grant proposal in the sum of $750,000. Bell Atlantic approved the proposal and funded the grant.

In April 1996, Pennsylvania's First Lady, Michelle Ridge accepted a check for $750,000 at the East Shore Branch of the Dauphin County Library System. The Pennsylvania Department of Education and Commonwealth Libraries sent out grant applications to public libraries throughout the Commonwealth. Rural public libraries could apply for a multi-media PC, modem, printer, and training in exchange for providing a phone line, Internet connection, and attending training.

The Library Development Office received one hundred eighty-eight applications. All one hundred eighty-eight applications received award letters in July 1996 and the project was under way.

The goals of the project were:

- To provide public access to the Internet through Pennsylvania's public libraries
- To provide library users with timely information
- To ensure that trained library staff are available to help the public

At the same time, an LSCA Title II grant for District Library Centers was written to provide matching funds and a parallel project to the Bell Atlantic grant. This grant would provide twenty-eight District Library Centers with

local area networks and high speed Internet connections, giving patrons multiple access to the Internet.

Also in July 1996 Commonwealth Libraries contracted with the Schuylkill Intermediate Unit to implement both projects. James S. Fogarty, Ph.D., serves as consultant to Commonwealth Libraries for both projects. The Intermediate Unit would serve as project consultants, provide technical support to participating libraries, provide training, and coordinate day-to-day operations of the projects.

By October all the pieces of the vision were falling into place. The IU ordered the computer systems. The vendor shipped the pre-configured computers to the libraries. This allowed the librarians to easily access the Internet. Instead of spending hours loading and configuring software, librarians only had to enter a few basic pieces of information specific to their Internet service provider. Training materials were also being developed for November's training. The materials were targeted to the novice user.

The libraries received the following equipment:

- IBM Pentium 133 computer booting to Windows 95
- 14 inch color monitor
- CD-ROM Drive
- Sound Card
- Headphones
- Internal 28.8 Modem
- Hewlett Packard DeskJet Color Printer
- Fortres 101 (security software)

In return, libraries had to agree to certain terms as grant recipients. They include:

- Provide a dedicated telephone line to be used only for accessing the Internet
- Make the PC available to the public during the hours the library is open
- Publicize the project to the media
- Send at least one representative to training
- Pay start-up cost and monthly Internet access fees
- Participate in the project for two years following the grant year

Two different contracts were developed with Mansfield University and HSLC to provide easy to use point and click interfaces for patrons. The

Mansfield *Cybrarian* was chosen as the home page for the libraries.

In November twelve different training sessions were held throughout the state to prepare librarians for their new challenges. All participating libraries were required to send one person to the training.

Topics for the training included:

- Project guidelines
- Do's and don'ts
- Dialing an Internet Service Provider
- Acceptable Use
- Netscape Training
- Basic Internet training
- Use of the Mansfield University Cybrarian

In April and May of 1997 advanced training is scheduled. The focus of this training is "Using the Internet to Answer Reference Questions." The training will take place in five different locations throughout the state. Again, as before, each library is required to send at least one participant. They may send up to three. Registrations have been overwhelming.

Topics include:

- Searching the Web
- Search Engines
- Subject Guides
- Advanced Searching Techniques
- Cybrarian Sites
- Government Documents
- Organizing bookmarks
- Fortres 101

In March, requests for applications went out to libraries not currently participating in the project. Up to forty additional libraries will be funded under agreements similar to the first set of libraries.

Evaluation

An evaluation of the project was designed to help the Office of Commonwealth Libraries assess the impact of Internet access in the public libraries. Commonwealth Libraries contracted with John Carlo Bertot, Ph.D, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and Charles R. McClure, Ph.D,

Syracuse University, to conduct the evaluation.

The evaluation will assess the impact of providing access to the Internet through the OnLine at PA Libraries project and the benefits to the end users. The ultimate success of the project will be judged by how much the public uses the services and their perception of its value to their lives.

Effects

Two-hundred fifteen different libraries have now installed three hundred twenty-five computer systems. Patrons of the libraries now have a path to the information super highway that would have been difficult or impossible otherwise.

Most of the libraries in the project are in rural areas. Typically, they are not as well funded as the larger libraries. Many would have never been able to afford a computer system without the grant.

This project has opened up new doors for the libraries in Pennsylvania. They now have new ways of finding information for their patrons and allowing patrons to find information for themselves. When searching for a topic, besides checking local sources, they can now check the Internet. The Internet, however, has not reduced the need for collection development in the library. It is intended to enhance the resources of the library, making it a powerful supplemental tool for the future. The Internet, just like a library's collection, does not contain all information a person may be looking for. The skilled librarian knows where to look and when.

Ten years ago a fifth grade student doing a report on comets would look up comets in the encyclopedia or in science textbooks in order to complete the report. In 1997, the same student can now, in addition to reading about comets in the encyclopedia and text books, look them up on the Internet. Imagine the excitement of finding pictures of Comet Hale-Bopp as it rotates and revolves in its orbit through space! They can also find specific up-to-date information on the movement of the comet. The new information will enhance the student's understanding of the topic by making it a real experience for him or her. They are not just reading about it in books anymore. The depth of understanding goes far beyond rote learning.

Think of an entrepreneur who has just invented a gadget he feels will make him a million dollars. He wants to patent the gadget. When he enters the local library for patent information, he finds that it must be secured through a larger library and might take up to a month to get the information. With the Internet in the library, that same person can look up patent information and get an instantaneous response by visiting the United States Patent and Trademark Office on the web.

Only twenty-five percent of Americans have access to online information services at home, at school, or at work. Yet more and more information is

becoming available only online through the Internet. Therefore, the remaining seventy-five percent must rely on their public libraries to provide access to the online information they need.

Regardless of the need for information, the Internet must be an important supplemental resource for all libraries. Commonwealth Libraries of Pennsylvania, in cooperation with Bell Atlantic, has assisted in providing for the information needs of hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvania residents.

Bibliography

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