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Integrating Free-Net into Library Services

HEARTLAND FREE-NET

The Heartland Free-Net is a totally community-based, automated network that has been developed by Peoria-area businesspeople, lawyers, and scholars. The system permits users to search the Heartland Free-Net system and to enter questions or responses through modem-equipped microcomputers. Communicating via electronic mail, users exchange information on various topics, view and contribute to community bulletin boards and forums, seek and provide current information on local government and business developments, and make referrals to social service agencies. For a time, users were also able to search listings of the Illinois Job Service and to post questions at the Library Reference Desk, a module designed to handle not only bibliographic questions but also any questions that did not seem to fit anywhere else within the system.

The Heartland Free-Net was originally funded by agencies throughout the Peoria area, including the following: Advanced Information Systems, Inc.; Ameritech; Becker Bros., Inc.; the Bielfeldt Foundation; Bradley University; Caterpillar, Inc.; Computerland of Peoria; FOA—Illinois; Heyl, Royster, Voelker, & Allen, P.C.; IBM; the Illinois State Bar Association; the Peoria Journal Star; and Proctor Community Hospital. The Heartland Free-Net service is provided free of charge to the people of the greater Peoria area.

Individuals can visit the system, or they can become registered users. Visitors can read any item on the system. Registered users have the special privilege of sending mail to and receiving mail from any other registered user, and they can pose questions to the EIPs (Expert Information Providers). Questions are posed anonymously. There is no charge to become a registered user; the process involves filling out a brief form used for demographic analysis.

The stated purpose of the Heartland Free-Net is to enrich the quality of life and enhance the image of central Illinois. Further, the system seeks to provide an educational forum for those living in the region and contribute to the area's economic life. The actual contents of the Heartland Free-Net are changing constantly. New modules are added and seldom-used modules are deleted, and the administration of the Heartland Free-Net is willing to consider ideas from any source for system enhancement.

Heartland Free-Net users are also able to link to other Free-Net systems through limited access to the Internet. Users may link to Free-Nets in Cleveland and Youngstown, Ohio, and to the Cornell University Electronic Information Source. All of the above is accomplished through a simple menu system. Advanced users may also use the Internet to link to electronic mailboxes nationwide.

"NOT ALONE, BUT TOGETHER" PROJECT

Project Goals

The Illinois State Library *Task Force on Rural Library Services Report* (1989) stated that:

Rural libraries should be committed to providing the same level of service as urban libraries. Two levels of library service, one for urban residents and a second less complete level for rural residents, cannot be justified. All libraries should strive to provide equal access to information through available local, state, and national networks. A minimum level of service is the right of all Illinois citizens served by tax-supported libraries whether in rural or urban settings. (p. 6)

Further, the report notes that:

Rural libraries should take the lead in organizing networks of locally operating information providers, such as chambers of commerce, cooperative extension services, farm bureaus, social service agencies, and education institutions. The Illinois State Library and the library systems should take leadership roles in setting up model pilot projects for facilitating this cooperation and dialogue. (p. 6)

The "Not Alone, but Together" project, also known as P.A.T.H. (Public Access to the Heartland Free-Net), was a model pilot project designed to organize and coordinate not only local information providers but also those information providers in other communities, rural and urban, that may not have previously even known of each other's existence. The project was a technologically innovative yet cost-effective approach to meeting those needs identified by the Rural Library Services Task Force. Further, and also in strict accordance with the *Task Force on Rural Library Services Report*, the project was designed to not only "improve access to information through the use of new technologies," but also, for many of the participants, to make such access possible for the first time (p. 6).

The project was aimed specifically at improving local library service through an automated approach to the provision of information. As designed, the project permitted not only immediate access to information for citizens

at all levels of the socioeconomic scale, but it also allowed an in-depth analysis of how a shared, public access automated retrieval system could work in tandem with local public libraries to encourage economic development, coordinated cooperative development, and overall library development. The project was an innovative approach to meeting the need, stated so many times by so many agencies, of equalizing access to information for the citizens of rural and urban communities.

Implementation

Without question, the most difficult aspect of the project was the limited time available for implementation. "Not Alone, but Together" should have been spread over two years, with the first year devoted to hardware installation and Free-Net training. The second year could then have been used to actually test the efficacy of the system as a library tool, as well as the impact of an automated community-based information retrieval system on libraries, particularly in rural areas.

Delays in receiving signed contracts from the Illinois State Library delayed the actual equipment purchase until October 1990. Once the equipment was in hand and installation began, it was discovered that the installation of 28 computer systems required far more time and labor than anticipated. The primary problem was with telecommunications equipment; many libraries simply were not equipped with the appropriate telephone lines to provide a modem link. When such situations were encountered, installation was delayed until appropriate action could be taken by the telephone companies involved.

The installation of phone lines and the resolution of various telephone line problems were further complicated by the several telephone companies involved. It was often a problem just figuring out who to call for assistance. Often, phone company representatives were themselves unsure as to how to resolve the problems this project presented. Further, libraries confronted with line installations faced an unanticipated financial burden. Appropriations of funds often required board action and thus entailed further delays; therefore, some libraries were unable to begin participation until November or later.

Training

System training, in most cases, took place on the same day as installation. The Heartland Free-Net is a remarkably user-friendly system, and very little training is required. Still, the project director held a training session for staff at each participating library. Throughout the installation and training period, all involved seemed satisfied and comfortable. No calls were received requesting further training (though that offer was made to all participants). Still, when the project was evaluated by an independent research team from Bradley University, several librarians commented that they felt inadequately trained and therefore were reluctant to use or publicize the system.

Software Problems

Early on, a number of software problems were discovered. It had been decided to provide each participant with software that, when the user typed

the word *path*, would automatically dial in to the Heartland Free-Net. Further, the software would perform only that function. Significant reprogramming would be necessary for a user to modify the software to allow access to other remote databases, an act that was intentionally discouraged as it would incur unanticipated telecommunications charges for P.A.T.H. Again, the time factor worked against successful implementation of the software—there was insufficient time for testing and debugging prior to distribution. There also was not enough time to complete the programming to allow automatic statistical retrieval; all usage statistics had to be retrieved and compiled manually. A further software complication arose with the availability of “Letters from Home,” a service of the General Electric GENie network to allow users to send electronic mail to soldiers in the Persian Gulf. To enable that link, all of the software had to be rewritten and redistributed. Again, there was not sufficient time for testing, and numerous problems arose with incompatibility.

All of the above problems could have been eased with a full-time, rather than a half-time, project director. Though Yvonne Beechler-Rusch put in far more hours than her contract stipulated (all for no additional compensation), she was still unable to keep up with the myriad of software problems or to consistently respond to problems in a timely manner. To make matters worse, the individual who wrote the original software seemed to lose interest in the project and was not forthcoming with solutions or advice. In the final months of the project, a budget amendment was written to hire more help. That action eased problems considerably.

Free-Net Procedural Problems

The Free-Net software was the cause of some procedural difficulty. Essentially, the Free-Net is designed to disconnect a user after 30 minutes of use. This feature is extremely important to librarians paying per-minute long-distance fees. Unfortunately, that feature proved to be unreliable, and upon receipt of monthly telephone bills, several libraries discovered fees for hundreds of minutes. Some telephone companies were cooperative in deleting those charges; others were not.

Another significant problem arose with the Heartland Free-Net's own procedures. The Heartland Free-Net advertises a 48-hour response time for questions posed by users; however, such is not always the case. Oftentimes many days go by before an answer is posted, and in far too many cases, no response is ever posted. Another problem involved the texts of historical documents available through the Heartland Free-Net, which were retrieved primarily by students. One library discovered early in the project that the text of one document was in fact an abridged version with no warning to that effect. This oversight was not acceptable to many librarians, and the discovery made the entire module suspect.

It should be noted that throughout the project the Free-Net organization was very cooperative and eager to provide assistance. It would have been helpful, however, to have protocols more firmly established from the very start. It was not always clear whose area of responsibility was being called into play when problems arose. The Heartland Free-Net executive director was responsive to

these concerns and, as the project progressed, worked with Illinois Valley Library System personnel to establish better lines of communication to avoid misunderstandings.

On various occasions throughout the grant period, unannounced visits were made to participating libraries. The most common observation, and the most disturbing, was that computers usually were not turned on to display the P.A.T.H. welcome screen. Further, publicity materials and P.A.T.H. brochures were frequently not on display. It may be that better in-house publicity would have resulted in heavier use of the system. This problem, too, may have been alleviated through a full-time project director, one with the time to make more frequent site visits and to offer more one-on-one support and encouragement.

As noted earlier, shortly after the United States became involved with Operation Desert Shield, the General Electric Corporation instituted a program whereby computer users could send electronic mail to service personnel in Saudi Arabia. The program created monumental confusion for P.A.T.H. participants as it was publicized locally as an element of the Heartland Free-Net. In fact, it had nothing to do with the Free-Net. The instructions for accessing "Letters from Home" were printed in a Free-Net module, but that was the extent of the relationship between the two programs. Librarians and library patrons were led to believe that they could access "Letters from Home" through the Free-Net, and their inability to do so often resulted in frustration and anger. The P.A.T.H. software was hurriedly rewritten and redistributed to allow access to "Letters from Home," and the untested nature of that software often led to unanticipated problems. Other problems developed because the "Letters from Home" project was heavily used nationwide and was often inaccessible. Patrons would try over and over to connect but would meet with a busy signal each time. The program also had a habit of disconnecting in mid-use for no apparent reason, and the editing function simply did not work. Adding to the frustrations of all, because "Letters from Home" was handled entirely by General Electric, with no local modification possible, the project director was unable to respond to users' problems.

Publicity

Although "Letters from Home" created many problems and demanded many hours of time from the project director, the project also generated tremendous publicity for the Heartland Free-Net and for the P.A.T.H. project. It received extensive radio, television, and newspaper coverage; it brought scores of people to participating libraries; and beyond the confines of the grant project, it gave participating libraries an opportunity to respond to a national crisis in a very real, very positive way.

Publicity for a project of the magnitude of "Not Alone, but Together" is quite difficult, and much time was devoted to that aspect of the project. A packet of publicity materials generated throughout the project has been filed with the Illinois State Library. The project director created sample press releases and provided them to each participant. Though very few invitations were received, both the project director and the grant coordinator were available

to speak to local groups and community organizations about the project. The executive director of the Heartland Free-Net was also available for speaking engagements. Posters were created and distributed to each library participant, and several radio interviews were given. Television news carried the "Letters from Home" story, which was repeated on several newscasts. Participating libraries were supplied with brochures about the project, and those brochures were also distributed to community organizations throughout the Illinois Valley Library System.

During the project period, the Heartland Free-Net was the subject of a documentary videotape produced by the Ameritech Corporation. The P.A.T.H. project was very briefly mentioned in that tape.

Finally, a radio commercial was prepared for broadcast on the two Peoria radio stations with the highest listening audience. In addition, 10,000 placemats advertising the project were printed and distributed to restaurants in communities where participating libraries were located, and six billboards concerning the project were designed and exhibited. It should be noted that the primary cost of the billboards was donated by Adams Outdoor Advertising of Peoria, Illinois.

As with other aspects of the project, publicity required far more time than was available. A full-time project director might have been able to spend more time both publicizing the project from the system standpoint and working with individual participants to assist them with local publicity efforts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LIBRARIES

The "Not Alone, but Together" project represents a significant step forward for automation and networking within the Illinois Valley Library System. As a direct result of this project, 28 public library sites are equipped with computers, printers, and modems. Further, wiring and telecommunications links in each library have been installed or modified to allow simple access to virtually any remote database. Library staff have also been trained in the use of telecommunications equipment, and it seems likely that any initial apprehension has been overcome. As a by-product of the project, the Heartland Free-Net has registered hundreds of new users and received enormous amounts of free publicity.

Perhaps of greatest importance, the participating libraries have been, and continue to be, capable of providing a unique and valuable library service. The P.A.T.H. project was originally conceived in response to the feeling that although the Heartland Free-Net is a very worthwhile endeavor, it runs the risk of being elitist; that is, those most in need of the information provided by the Heartland Free-Net may very well not have computers and modems in their homes. There was a strong feeling at the Illinois Valley Library System that public access needed to be provided to the system and that public libraries were the best vehicle to provide that access. As a result of this project, patrons can walk into virtually any public library in the Illinois Valley Library System and access the Heartland Free-Net anonymously and free of charge. (At the conclusion of the project, only two libraries, the Pekin Public Library and the Kewanee Public Library, decided to discontinue the service.)

Accomplishments have been tremendous, but they have occurred primarily in the realm of physical infrastructure improvements. The computers have been installed, training has been completed, and patrons have grown accustomed to using the system. What has not been resolved are the philosophical and experimental aspects of the project. As noted in the original grant application: "As Heartland Free-Net becomes available, and as the systems it will engender nationally also become available, it is imperative that libraries respond and participate. Those libraries that ignore this logical step in automation may expect to see their roles as information providers eroded and eventually supplanted." The veracity of that statement has not been tested through the "Not Alone, but Together" project. More time and study are required, and that continued study is currently taking place. An article about the Free-Net P.A.T.H., by Bryn Geffert (1993), recently appeared in an issue of *Public Libraries*. That article continues an evaluation of the project from the perspective of someone not directly involved in the P.A.T.H. project. It offers many observations, often highly critical, that are not noted here.

There seem to be two levels at which the Heartland Free-Net can be viewed in libraries. It can be seen as a viable information tool, a link both to community functions and expert information providers. The other level is essentially that of entertainment, an electronic mailbox and forum used, to a great extent, by teenagers sharing nonsense. An examination of the teen forum, for example, reveals hundreds and hundreds of messages that have no purpose other than entertainment. Often, the messages are virtually unintelligible gibberish. Faced with ever-increasing costs of telecommunications and storage, librarians must wonder if such is an effective and efficient use of tax dollars.

There was, throughout the project, little feedback from participants. Calls were received by the project director only if there were equipment malfunctions or if there was confusion about reimbursement or some particular element of the Free-Net. In fact, for a project of this scope and size, there were remarkably few calls to report problems. At the same time, however, it seems that most library participants simply installed the computers and gave the patrons access. The participants then seem to have stepped back and let the project take its course. There were no reports of any librarians at participating institutions actually attempting to use the Free-Net as a reference tool. There were no attempts to establish the Free-Net in lieu of any print material, and there were no suggestions for system enhancements. Essentially, there seems to have been no particular interest on the part of the participants to do anything more than have the computer available; that is, to fulfill their individual requirements, with no attempts at creative use.

This observation is not derogatory. At no time either before or after the project began were the librarians led to believe that experimentation was expected. In fact, it was not. Experimentation was to be the province of the grant coordinator and the project director. As noted throughout this paper, however, there simply was no time for extensive experimentation.

CONCLUSION

The effects of the "Not Alone, but Together" project are significant and will be long lasting. Much experimentation and development remain to be

done, and it is hoped that the Illinois Valley Library System and the Heartland Free-Net will maintain close ties. It is further hoped that this project will lead to even more experimentation with the networking of small, rural libraries, especially with the Internet.

REFERENCES

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