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Only Connect: Community Networks, Libraries, and the Case of Charlotte's Web

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Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

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Only Connect: Community Networks, Libraries, and the Case of Charlotte's Web

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Almost a century ago E. M. Forster admonished the insular classes of England to heed this deceptively simple advice. His novel, *Howards End*, delineated how the various factions of English society could integrate to form a harmonious fabric. The United States at that same time was experiencing a crisis in public policy: what to do with the hordes of aliens immigrating to this country every year. Librarians responded by reaching out to the disadvantaged in their communities and integrating them into the fabric of American society. Their method? Education—they taught the immigrant poor how to read.

Eighty-five years later Americans face another divisive public policy issue. The schism

this time centers around the information haves and the information have-nots and the power that such information provides. Librarians again are reaching out to connect with their commu-

nities. This time they're educating the information poor electronically through what are called community networks.

What these networks are and their import for librarians forms the basis of this paper. Along with other examples, *Charlotte's Web* will provide the touchstone on what mainstream community networks can and will accomplish.

What They Are

Community networks are electronic information services that enable people of a particular community or region to communicate and inform one another about current issues

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If Rumors Were Horses

Well, rumors seem to come in waves. Nothing will happen and then — whap — rumors are everywhere. Here's the latest from **Blackwell's**. The operations of **Blackwell North America**, the UK based Library Bookselling Division of **BH Blackwell**, **JMLS** and **James Bennett** (Australia) will now report directly to **Fred Philipp**, currently President and CEO of **Blackwell's Delaware, Inc.** This move is designed to bring Blackwell's global Bookselling operations under common management and thus provide the basis for further evaluation of technical and operational integration opportunities and to drive improvements across all Blackwell's Book operations. All Blackwell's international Journal Agency operations are also now to come under single management and the company is currently recruiting a global Managing Director to take responsibility for the UK and US (Readmore) operations. **Alan Smith** will remain as Director in charge of BH

Blackwell's UK Periodicals Division. Among other management changes, **Doug Fox** (Managing Director of BH Blackwell UK, a Blackwell subsidiary) will be leaving the company, having contributed valuably to future planning. **Suzanne Wilson Higgins** has been appointed to the Board of B H Blackwell and will take overall responsibility for the development and

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through electronic means. Begun in the 1970s, they expanded greatly with the advent of the **National Information Infrastructure** (NII), the growth and popularity of the Internet, inexpensive hardware and hookups, and the increasing concern about community life across the country. Community networks also are called civic networks, electronic villages, or freenets (The term, **Free-net**, with capital letters, denotes a franchise of the National Public Telecomputing Network).

The objectives and administration of community networks are as diverse as the regions they serve, but the most common reasons given for their creation are the ideals of "better living through information" and the attempt to increase the sense of community.¹ Some, such as the **Cleveland Free-net** and Washington D.C.'s **CapAccess**, evolved out of programs developed by local universities. Others, like Montana's **Big Sky Telegraph** and Santa Monica's **Public Electronic Network** (PEN), arose as collaborative responses to local economic and social needs. A few, like **Charlotte's Web**, originated out of that peculiarly American sense of grassroots enterprise.

Steve Snow, director of **Charlotte's Web**, says he got the idea "when I first began fooling around on the Internet. I saw the Peoria Free-Net online and thought it was pretty neat, but that I could do better. So I gathered some others together and we set out to do just that."² Reflecting the spirit of local participation, the name came from an online contest run in the summer of 1994. Local videographer and Web volunteer, **Sam Eneman**, suggested the name and everyone loved it, so it won the vote by a wide margin.

How They Operate

A spirit of local involvement characterizes community networks as does the vigor and inventiveness with which they operate. Like most community networks, **Charlotte's Web** operates on a shoestring budget. Its initial funding came from a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Dept. of Commerce which was matched by a \$700,000 grant provided by the **Charlotte Mecklenburg School System**, the **Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County**, **WTVI-TV** and others. Local corporations such as **Sybase Corp.** and **Microsoft** provided additional support by supplying software and computers. The **North Carolina State Library** and local donations provided the rest.

Donors provided the equipment; volunteers make **Charlotte's Web** an ongoing operation. Steve now has a paid staff of five including himself that encompasses a system administrator, **David Ramsey**; a volunteer coordinator, **Carolyn Felton**; a systems technician, **Mike Smith**; and an office manager, **Mark Cook**. Steve also has a core list of over 300 volunteers who do everything from writing software, to answering the phones, to setting up Web pages, to insuring the information provided remains current. Some of these people are programmers, others are professionals in other disciplines. All of them are committed to the idea of making **Charlotte's Web** work for the community.

Some community networks such as **CapAccess** have an advisory board that sets policy and provides direction and fund-raising for the network. Drawn from various segments of the local community, such a structure affords a sense of ownership and egalitarianism amongst the various factions

in the community. **Charlotte's Web** started with an advisory board, but ran into some internal operational problems with it. In the Web's day-to-day operations, Steve employs a collegial approach and solicits everyone's input, but the tough decisions are his.

Because access to community networks is free, most of the money for ongoing operations comes from user donations. In **Charlotte Web's** case, Steve estimates that the cost of ongoing operations averages slightly more than two dollars per donor. He'd like to "bump that up a couple of notches [because] I think we need five dollars per user average to have an impact on our bills."³ As with most community networks, charging some government and non-profit institutions for certain types of access remains a tantalizing possibility.

What They Do

Such temptation exists because of the goals community networks set for themselves. The primary objective for Santa

Monica's **PEN** project centered around providing some kind of real assistance to the homeless people in the downtown area. The motivation for the **Big Sky Network** was to educate children in the kindergarten through twelfth grades in the far-flung parts of the region. The goal of the **Kansas Integrated Commercialization Information Network** (KICIN) was to prevent the hemorrhaging of young people out of rural areas by using rural datafication to provide jobs. Whatever their individual goals, the overriding collective objective was "to drive the initiative of the 'Infobahn' to the doorstep of every American."⁴

Steve Snow says much the same thing of **Charlotte's Web**. Of its purpose he says "we have several: to increase awareness of telecommunications and its benefits, to provide access, content, training and support for the community as a whole and underserved communities especially." Beyond these, he adds that "we are a regional communications network, so we also aim to 'convene the region.'"⁵

In a 1995 presentation to members of the **North Carolina Library Association**, Steve spoke of "achieving a presence" by providing an "electronic forum" for the Charlotte community and the adjacent 13 county **Metrolina** region. Starting with a basic bulletin board site, **Charlotte's Web's** operations have expanded to include information from local hospitals and police stations, access to **Johnson C. Smith University** and the public library collections, and job opportunities information to local shelters for the homeless.

Beyond providing digitized information, **Charlotte's Web** offers email, text-based dial up access, access to WWW sites, and limited access to Usenet newsgroups. It currently hosts a Sunday night discussion group that allows participants to interactively discuss public issues. On a regional level, the network is working with the **Central Carolina Citizens Forum** to provide shared access to citizen involvement information. Other public initiatives include a partnership with the **Carolinas Urban Coalition**, a loose confederation of regional law enforcement activities, to provide them with telecommunications access and training and a cooperative effort with the **Centralina Council of Governments** to provide connectivity to 29 small town governments in the area.

Energy and Innovation

Achieving an electronic presence on the cheap demands new ways of doing things.

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Big Sky Telegraph invented the "point disc" system of using email where users download and upload email messages at a public library terminal to be read and responded to at their home computers. **CapAccess** modeled its funding process after the strategy of public broadcasting by acknowledging certain levels of funding in sponsor lines placed on its menus.

Charlotte's Web's primary innovation occurred in the area of software technology. Mini-hubs originated out of Steve's desire to connect up with certain networks while employing older equipment. **David Ramsey**, the system administrator, devised a system of 80286 machines hooked to one another by ethernet cards. This group then is hooked to another 80286 with a high speed modem

and with "packet radio" software running on it which allows this machine to act as a router for the other machines connected to it. Hooked to a telephone line via a PPP connection to **Charlotte's Web**, the router machine causes the connected machines to work at the same time on the Internet, all working independently. With 486 machines, the same process permits the downloading of pictures and graphics as well as text. The only costs resulted from that of the ethernet cards, the cabling, and the modem. The processing units themselves were donated by a local law firm when it upgraded its office units.

Problems and Shortcomings

Despite their achievements and innovations, the shortcomings of community networks cannot be overlooked. In some in-

stances the goals set for community networks were too ambitious, misguided, or insufficiently defined. The original goal of the **Freenet Public Access to Heartland (PATH)** was to provide information to rural and small libraries that their patrons would not otherwise have. **Bryn Geffert**, in assessing the PATH, declares that "In this respect, the P.A.T.H. project has failed. Most of the libraries reporting little or no use were the rural and small libraries that P.A.T.H. was designed to reach."

Maintaining quality service on uncertain, minuscule budgets affords the greatest, most obvious pressure, but there are others. As **Steve Snow** points out, "We work 85 hours a week and it isn't enough." While **Charlotte's Web** has enjoyed more than its share of successes, Steve listed five areas of disappointment:

1) It is hard to keep high quality volunteers engaged and active. People have their own lives and want to lead them.

2) The community still does not "get it" about the enabling value of the technology although they gamely believe they should somehow engage it. Our outreach efforts require constant returning for refresher training and so forth to keep the fires lit. It is an uphill struggle.

3) We have been unable to reach a point of real collaboration with our partners, which I find a major source of personal disappointment.

4) I wanted to have 10,000 users online by now. We have 4,000.

5) Local politics and lack of corporate support may eventually do in community networking; the amount of energy required to deal in both arenas and deliver high quality services is very high and draining.⁷

Causes and Solutions

The solution for many of these problems could come from the employment of fee-based services to information. Charging those agencies and institutions that can afford it would support the usage of those segments of the community that could not. As part of its financial sustainability plan, **Charlotte's Web** plans to offer fee-based consulting services to libraries, governments and other interested communities in the fall of 1996. This could spark increased levels of hostility from commercial information vendors "because commercial services view civic networks as a threat, real or potential, to their markets."⁸

The conflict is fundamental: ownership versus free access, exclusivity versus universality. **Jane Williams** summarizes it best: "The view that information is still a service, not a commodity, makes civic networkers and networks subversive." If access to civic information and communication resources promises to become, in Steve's words, the "digital tobacco" for North Carolina and the

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About Charlotte's Web

<<http://www.charweb.org>>

by **Steve Snow** <shsnow@charweb.org>

On the information side, Charlotte's Web currently has more than 6,000 Web pages of local and regional information online, plus hundreds of direct links to other types of information worldwide. Some broad information types include:

*One of the most comprehensive collections of useful job listings on the Internet, with local, regional, state, national and international listings. In addition, we offer businesses the opportunity to post without charge any job openings they have. We also allow any user to post, again for free, their resume online. All of this is done electronically. We double-check all job listings for accuracy before making them public. In both the resume and job listing areas, we link to information about doing good resumes and area job training and job-readiness seminars available.

*A new genealogy section that allows families to post their family history information online to share and link with others around the world who also have similar information.

*The region's most complete collection of links to commercial businesses. While we don't host the pages ourselves, we link to any business that wants to link from our site, and allow businesses to fill out a form to post their listing electronically. We double-check the listings before we make them live.

*A 13-county regional guide to HIV/AIDS resources, directing people to those resources in their communities.

*Access to a very comprehensive collection of education, children's and library resources worldwide.

*The region's most complete collection of organizational and nonprofit Web pages — growing all the time!

*A strong and developing collection of arts & entertainment Web pages, including a complete listing of performing arts groups in the region and their current performances.

*A comprehensive collection of government and politics Web pages that provide the community with increasing 24-hour access to government and government resources.

*A developing collection of international resources, including links to international companies based in the region.

We also have extensive help online, link to special information about our Electronic Neighborhood project so other communities can use our training materials, and provide information about many of our projects online so others can use them. We provide free access to electronic mail, of course, and to World Wide Web resources.

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Southeast region, there are those in the private and government sectors who feel they should become the sole harvesters.

Where Libraries Fit In

Libraries are a long way from being the salvation of community networks in this conflict. Even in its own sphere, "The library is not at the top of the food chain when people are looking for information."⁹ But, in terms of being professionals with knowledge of information technologies and ability to instruct in its use, "librarians are seen as a valuable interface between the networks and the public served by them."¹⁰

For **Charlotte's Web**, the **Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County** has provided space and funding for its operation. Several people who participated in its inception and continue to make it a viable operation are librarians. When asked his opinion about the library's role in the operation of **Charlotte's Web**, Steve considered it to be "a partner in this project, a significant partner, and a great nurturer of the concept of electronic information sharing. Libraries are the last bastions of democracy in this country and so can provide a good working model for some aspects of community networks."¹¹

Redefining Our Outlook

Flattering as this portrait may be, it leaves librarians and librarianship in something of a quandary in regards to community networks. Steve's model of partnership resembles **Taylor Walsh's** assessment of **CapAccess** providing "a kind of incubator for future and more intensive electronic services."¹² The model primarily is a passive one, particularly so for those who purchase for libraries. Basically, the role calls for providing space and equipment and getting out of the way to let others develop the network. **Freda Mozenter**, a bibliographer

at UNC-Charlotte and section Webmaster on **Charlotte's Web**, confirms this assessment. "I don't see where materials or equipment purchasers for libraries matter, unless the library is willing/wants to play a high community role and provide equipment and/or server space to the area freenet."¹³

The antidote to this perception is to look beyond the quantitatively-based criteria. **Bart Harloe** and **John M. Budd** suggest that the library look beyond being "a repository for packages or a link to meta-information" and "become a vehicle or conduit for content."¹⁴ This means that libraries and the people who purchase for them must become less "stuff" oriented and more use-based. Product needs to be redefined from what the library has or has access to toward "content that might be needed at a particular place and time."¹⁵

Ms. Mozenter agrees that a change in approach is needed. As Section Webmaster for the Education/Libraries page on **Charlotte's Web**, she has "a feel for what people want/need and [I] know where to find it. The important thing we can provide as subject specialists ... is a knowledge of what resources are important/useful and how/where to find them."¹⁶

This moves collection managers and library purchasers away from purchasing stuff and toward decisions on resource-sharing and delivery via electronic means, including community networks. They need to "take the next logical step and define areas of mutually interdependent selecting responsibility" and work "toward the formation of collection development cooperatives serving the mutual needs of two or more institutions."¹⁷

Conclusion

In the last ten years community networks have grown from bulletin board message centers to interactive electronic forums. They provide access to all kinds of information: local, regional, national and worldwide. They've originated and improved upon new technologies, opened up new avenues of support and funding, and changed the way we work, think and play. In an arena "most notably poor ... for forging chains,"¹⁸ they've managed to draw together historically distinct communities such as schools, libraries, social and health services. Community networks, by their "subversive" nature of extending information service to everyone, continue to perpetuate what **Ronald Doctor** calls "Information Democracy" where all people in the sociopolitical system "are guaranteed meaningful opportunities to benefit from access to information resources."¹⁹

Public librarians enabled immigrants to assimilate into this country at the beginning of this century. As we move into the 21st, librarians again are heeding the call to become "pro-active neo-librarians to make citizens aware of their needs."²⁰ The example

of **Charlotte's Web** and other community networks provides the model for libraries and librarians to reinvent themselves and their public commitment by connecting the information poor in their communities electronically.

Footnotes

¹R. Kathleen Molz, "Civic Networking the United States: a Report by Columbia University Students," in *Internet Research*, v.4, no.4, Winter, 1994, p.56.

²Steve Snow, Interview of August 4, 1996.

³Steve Snow. Interview of July 24, 1996.

⁴Harry Willems. "The Infobahn: Community and Economic Development." Paper presented at the Rural Datification Conference. Minneapolis, MN. May 23-24, 1994, p.5.

⁵Steve Snow. Interview of July 24, 1996.

⁶Bryn Geffert, "Community Networks in Libraries: a Case Study of the Freenet P.A.T.H." *Public Libraries* March/April 1993, p.95.

⁷Steve Snow. Interview of August 4, 1996.

⁸Christinger Tomer, "An Overview of Civic Networking," p. 10.

⁹Harry Willems, "The Infobahn: Community and Economic Development," p. 7.

¹⁰R. Kathleen Molz, "Civic Networking in the United States: a Report by Columbia University Students," p. 57.

¹¹Steve Snow. Interview of August 4, 1996.

¹²R. Taylor Walsh, "Development of a Community Information Service," p. 49.

¹³Freda Mozenter. Interview of August 19, 1996.

¹⁴Bart Harloe and John M. Budd, "Collection Development and Scholarly Communication in the Era of Electronic Access," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, May, 1994, p. 85.

¹⁵Ibid, p.86.

¹⁶Freda Mozenter. Interview of August 19, 1996.

¹⁷Harloe and Budd, "Collection development and scholarly communication in the era of electronic access," p.86.

¹⁸Jack Richard, "One man — one vote — one program," in *Boardwatch Magazine*, Nov., 1993, p. 3.

¹⁹Ronald D. Doctor, "Cyberspace for everyone," p.1.

²⁰R. Kathleen Molz, "Civic Networking in the United States," p.60.