The Internet as a Shared Community/Library Experience

Carolyn Gaswick, Albion College
Albion, MI

Albion College has received a five year grant from the Kellogg Foundation to develop an Internet network within the Albion area. The local network will be tied to other groups to form a countywide freenet. Goals of the grant include the enhancement of communications and the sharing of information resources between the college and the community. It is my responsibility as the depository librarian to determine how government information can best be made available and useful within this local network.

Albion is a private liberal arts college with 1,600 students. We select 28 percent of the depository items. There is one other depository library in our congressional district; Jackson District Library, an 8 percent selective. However, the Albion College/Community grant is one of several grants tied to Calhoun County, and because the Jackson library is in a different county, Albion College is the only depository presence in both the local and countywide networks. As additional background, the city of Albion has a population of 11,000, and the county population is 136,000.

We are involved in this collaborative Internet project because John Kondelik, our library director, took the time to coordinate the writing of a grant proposal. We librarians all planned and wrote, but he saw to it that the parts fit together, and that we all kept to our writing schedules.

The overall planning for Internet access and training in our county has been too shared to be very efficient. Several groups have received grants, each providing some part of the necessary infrastructure or playing a role in Internet access for a specific group; and all these groups are involved in the governing body which plans and coordinates the structure and activities of the countywide network. Every step seems slow with so many people making each decision. When I agreed to speak today, I certainly thought we would be closer to having the Albion project in place and complete than we are. A related HUD grant brought everything to a halt for six months, and until HUD issues were resolved none of the money could be spent. The major Internet groups within the county which I need to keep in mind as I plan for depository contacts include:

The Great Lakes FreeNet which provides connectivity throughout the county by means of e-mail and bulletin board services.

DIAL, Distance Interaction and Learning, provides a countywide enhanced fiber optic network. It includes representatives from the countywide intermediate school district, libraries, colleges and universities, and public service agencies. DIAL will fund interactive studios at high schools and colleges, will establish distance learning to enrich secondary education, and will see that satellite downlinking for teleconferencing is made available. Albion College is a member of this group, and I see depository opportunities for distance learning with classes and demonstrations about government resources.

CCHIP, the Calhoun County Health Improvement Program, focuses on health and other public service agencies, hospitals, government units, and the transfer of medical and employment service information. It overlaps somewhat with the Albion College/Community group, particularly with respect to the community hospital and governmental agencies, and I'm not clear how to best mesh assistance with government information for this group with support for the fourth group, the Albion College/Community Project.

This project provides for the enhancement of communications and educational processes within and between the community of Albion and Albion College by use of the Internet. The mission for Albion College is to provide leadership and a model for resource sharing within the community. Clearly, there is a role here for a Federal depository library. The questions center on how to best fulfill that role.

The Albion College/Community resource sharing centers on several groups, the kinds I think one would expect in most communities:

1) The Chamber of Commerce
2) The community hospital
3) The Volunteer Center
4) City hall
5) Schools
6) The college
7) Libraries, including public, school and college libraries which will share their databases using the Z39.50 standard.

No decision has been made about where public access television will fit into this plan, only that there will be a spot for it.

I'll briefly mention two somewhat related activities. The Albion College Library, as a depository library, has for some time provided Internet access to Federal publications for patrons who come to the library for assistance or who connect to our library home page; I've maintained a depository home page for some time. However, these services are much more limited than those which will be available when the Albion project is in place.

We are also in the process of adding five years of retrospective documents cataloging records to our online catalog as well as ongoing shipping list and MARC record services. In

the past, users weren't able to tell which publications were in our library without actually searching through the collections. With the shared library databases and this cataloging project, access to the materials in our depository collection will be improved and the information will be readily available to many more people.

Initially the college/community grant provides for three public access sites for the Internet: the Albion Public Library, the Volunteer Center and the Chamber of Commerce. The college isn't included in this list because we already have Internet access. Computer equipment and phone lines are provided at those public sites as is user support. A Computer Support Coordinator has been hired to provide leadership for training and the coordination of these activities. Through the training it is hoped that we can build a core of local residents who are knowledgeable about the Internet and who can take advantage of it.

Each of the community access locations serves unique purposes. Thus far I've been providing user guides at the public access sites, the same kinds that I prepare for students, outlining ways to search the Internet for government information. I've compiled instructions outlining the steps to take to get to the documents home page, and I've recommended that people use a guide like Bill Taylor's "GPO Access Searching Tips" which I've listed on our home page.

At the public library members of the community (rather loosely defined to include the surrounding agricultural and residential areas) can sign up for Great Lakes FreeNet accounts and passwords. The public library has two computers which can be used for Internet searches, and on weekends in particular the sign-up sheets are filled. The library also provides in-library and call-in help, provides handouts with computer set-up instructions, and at cost sells First Class software for the FreeNet.

In conjunction with this project the Friends of the Public Library have made a substantial donation so the public library can provide free Internet classes. The three-session classes include information about basic applications, hardware and software needs, and guidance in using e-mail and exploring the Internet and the World Wide Web. These classes have been very popular; nine series have been given and more are scheduled.

The second site, the Chamber of Commerce, provides an Internet public access point for small businesses to encourage economic development and will, at least initially, serve as a site for small business home pages. Companies that choose to develop home pages at the chamber can transfer them to their own computer equipment when they feel comfortable with the new technology.

The Chamber also plans to serve as a site for a consortium of local businesses where Albion can be advertised as a business setting and where businesses can also advertise their employment needs. Businesses are encouraged to use this site to get the business news and information they need.

I think that in addition to popular government sources like Commerce Business Daily and the Federal Register, STAT-USA would also be useful, but I don't see how I can provide depository access at the Chamber. I understand that STAT-USA needs to make money, but I also wonder just where the figurative walls of an electronic depository library stand.

We've heard this issue raised time and time again this week, and the position I would like to take is supported in the Draft Report to Congress which clearly states in the first goal of the "Mission and Goals Statement, "...ensure that the public has equitable, no fee, local access to Government information."

The Community Volunteer Center will provide the same kinds of access services for agencies and community volunteer groups. As at the other two public access sites, funds will be available to train people in the use of the Internet, but not for maintenance or repair of equipment. It is hoped that in all three locations individuals will form user groups within the community; the initiatives funded by the grant are intended to provide the stimulus to get people started.

The Community Support Coordinator and I have been working together to see that Federal information can be found and used at the public access Internet sites, and by extension from personal PCs, as well as in our depository library. There are community members who simply don't want to take time to go to the college library to find government information, so I'm trying to make the information accessible at locations which are convenient for them. This is one of the real benefits of electronic access for users, although it makes my in-house community user statistics look rather slim.

I can see that this outreach plan could expand my job as a depository librarian beyond my limits. Our Community Support Coordinator is particularly enthusiastic about having residents e- mail me questions when they aren't able to find the answers. I know I'm not the only depository librarian who already has more responsibilities than I can keep up with, I've heard others express the same concern this week. Still, as we become more electronically connected to each other I think we will have to be flexible about adapting if we are to remain relevant. I certainly haven't worked out all the implications, and I'd like to hear what other librarians think about the issues these potential changes raise.