Chapter 1: Community Information Networks: An Overview

What constitutes a community information network? There's no "one size fits all" answer to this question. Community information networks are projects whose goal is to provide online information about the communities they seek to document – and thus they can be as varied as the communities they serve.

For the purposes of this document, and this Community Information Toolkit, we concentrate on the "information" aspect of a community information network. As we use the term, a community information network seeks to "publish" information about a community, for its own members, and for the outside world, to examine and use on demand.

A community information network (sometimes referred to as a CI project) could be based on a number of different online technologies. As a practical matter, in order to be useful to the largest audience, a community information network will involve publishing on the World Wide Web. In earlier years, such a network might be built on proprietary dialup technologies, such as various bulletin board systems. As we move into the 21st century, virtually all information providers look to the Internet and the World Wide Web as a standard online publishing environment. Certainly over time Web technologies evolve, but the basic publishing paradigm of the Web's Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) and the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) seem certain to endure.

Many community networking projects concentrate on community-building aspects – fostering communication among members of a community and between citizens and their local governments. These are worthwhile and laudable goals. During the 1980s, the Freenet movement saw volunteer organizations arise in many cities, working to offer low-cost or free dialup access and online discussion forums among citizens. Today, a number of Freenets continue to serve their communities effectively – although their focus may have shifted a bit, with less emphasis on providing basic Internet access.

The Toolkit software includes a simple community discussion forum application, which you can use to launch community-wide discussions on any topic. However, our focus in the Toolkit is primarily on the *publishing* of information – as opposed to interpersonal and group communications. Instead, we concentrate on the processes and technologies needed to bring to life an effective community publishing effort.

Of course, such a publishing enterprise can and should foster community-building in its own way. For instance, an online record of city council meetings can help citizens know what their government is doing. Or, a complete, up-to-date community calendar can help residents take part in community activities and thus become closer to the community at large. Thus, a project that focuses on publishing information will, if it is successful, also foster communication within the community.

Who Can Build a Community Network?

There is no one model as to who undertakes a given community information network

project. Publishers could be:

- The local public library
- City (or county or township) government
- A civic organization
- The local school district
- A local community college or university
- A local newspaper – whether it's the metropolitan daily or a weekly community-oriented paper
- An Internet Service Provider or national online service offering a "city guide" service

In many cases, more than one group may undertake their own community information projects, perhaps each taking on aspects they are especially well-suited to cover.

Dr. Joan Durrance, a professor in the School of Information at the University of Michigan, observes that "the size of a community is not a limiting factor in who can start a community information project. What is the limiting factor is what is there in the community that helps the citizen gain access to the Internet in order to do research and participate in the publishing project." She points out that many community members who want to contribute to the effort may lack access to the Internet itself – and public libraries that provide Internet access may help fill the gap.

Beyond providing basic Internet access for the participants in a publishing project, a new community information project will need a Web publishing infrastructure:

- A permanent, direct, reasonably fast connection to the Internet
- Web server hardware and software
- "Authoring" tools to assist in preparing content
- Software and procedures for backup of software and content

Later chapters in this book will help a community of any size choose among many options for building this infrastructure – or leveraging someone else's existing infrastructure – to launch its new community information network.

What Kind of Information?

The scope and content of a community information project can be as broad or as narrow as the organizers choose to undertake. A community information site might seek to cover every aspect of community life, or it might limit itself to a single topic. Possible topic areas include:

- **Community calendar:** upcoming events such as elections, city government meetings, festivals and concerts, art fairs, community barbecues, etc.
- **History:** Here, a community information network can provide a unique perspective – blending local, individual and personal content with more formal kinds of published history. The CI Web site can offer everything from the general history of the

community, to the life and times of a founder of the community, to the text of newspaper articles from early in the life of a community, to a digital collection of postcards sent to residents of the community.

- **Official records of local government:** minutes of meetings, new ordinances, citizens' comments and petitions, property tax records, forms for transacting business with government.
- **Directory information:** names, phone numbers, street and Internet addresses of community service organizations, local government, etc.
- **Maps:** Online, printable maps showing key landmarks, government buildings, parks and other recreational venues, etc.

What Are the Rewards?

The rewards of launching a community information network are many:

- The sponsoring institution can enhance its role of serving the local community, and may in turn enjoy stronger support from the citizenry.
- Participants in the community information project may find their own participation rewarding, in terms of enhanced understanding of their community as well as new skills that may serve them well in their personal and professional lives.
- The community at large may enjoy an enhanced sense of citizen participation, understanding – and community. Perhaps ironically, in today's world where neighbors may not know each other, an effective online community information network may help bring people together.

The Flint Public Library's Weblinks project is a good example of how a community information project can provide benefits to *all* involved. Ten at-risk teens – those from disadvantaged backgrounds – were hired to create home pages for various social service agencies in Flint. They learned HTML, they interviewed the various agency personnel, and they created Web sites for each agency.

Cynthia Stilley, supervisor of youth services at the Flint Public Library, says the project yielded multiple benefits: "When we started, most agencies didn't even know what a home page was. We gave them a Web site without them having to spend any money." Moreover, each local site was hyperlinked to national resources, for instance linking the local Red Cross chapter to the national site.

Community agencies benefited by having a presence in the new medium. The Library benefited by enhancing its role of community outreach. But perhaps most importantly, the teens hired to do the project benefited. Stilley continues: "These young people learned about the agencies they worked with, and they picked up skills they otherwise wouldn't have learned. They thought they were cool! None of these teens were likely candidates for college before this project – and most of them did go onto college."

Stilley concludes "We keep up with these kids – they stop in from time to time to tell us how they're doing. When they come in, they act like they own the place…and they do!"

The Unique Role of Public Libraries in Community Information

Libraries in general, and public libraries in particular, have always been involved in selecting information resources and organizing those resources for delivery to the public.

Community information projects represent a change to that role: the library moves beyond the role of identifying and gathering existing information sources into the role of publishing new resources.

Gloria Coles, director of the Flint Public Library, sees this as more than just a natural transition: "It's not only natural – it is essential – it is the business we are supposed to be in…. It does not matter how much information you have in your library about the rest of the world if you can't tell people anything about the world in which they live – what is immediate, right here." Coles believes that public libraries should embrace community information projects in two ways:

- By identifying and organizing existing Internet-based information about the local community .
- By publishing online materials that otherwise would not be available.

Steve Cisler, a San Jose-based expert in community networking, elaborates on the multiple benefits:

> If libraries are involved in community networks, it's one of the best ways to reach out into the community – especially in this digital age. You can certainly do that through other sorts of programs, but this is one that people don't expect libraries to get involved in. But I've seen that [community networking] can have a major impact for the library, ever since I've been involved in such projects, starting in 1986, when our public library did a telecommunications trial with the local phone company. What was magic for me is that the library was the focal point for all these groups getting together, and talking about what they wanted to do with the technology. In a sense, it was community building at the same time it was making use of the technology.

George Needham, formerly the State Librarian of Michigan, sums up the unique role that public libraries can play in community networking:

> The web provides a unique opportunity for libraries to become publishers in their own right, instead of being the passive, pass-through organizations we've been in the past. We can take the information that's been available in many scattered forms – in card files, on little sheets of paper that we keep tucked next to the reference desk in the children's services desk – and put that information together so it can be used not only by people within

> the library, but also by people all over the world as they tie into the Web with their own computers.

The benefits of building community information networks are clear. The case for public libraries playing a key role in building such networks is equally clear.