
James S. Fogarty

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The Role of Libraries in the Emerging Information Highways, Pennsylvania's Experience

Presented to: Senate Education Subcommittee
Senator Paul Simon, Chair

James S. Fogarty, Ph.D.
Director of Curriculum & Technology
Project Consultant to Commonwealth Libraries
Schuylkill Intermediate Unit
P.O. Box 130, Maple Avenue
Mar Lin, PA 17951
Phone: 717-544-9131

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(Press highlights attached as last page)
Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, good morning. My name is James S. Fogarty, Ph.D. I am Director of Curriculum and Technology for the Schuylkill Intermediate Unit, a regional educational service agency in Mar Lin, Pennsylvania. In my job, I also serve as the Consultant to two of Pennsylvania's largest technology projects run by the Department of Education and Commonwealth Libraries.

The first project, the ACCESS PENNSYLVANIA Database, electronically combines the card catalogs of 1,141 school, public, academic, and special libraries onto compact laser disc (CD-ROM). Each year we train about 1,400 librarians, media specialists, and others to use this database. These individuals, the trainers, go out and train students, teachers, library patrons, and others to use it. This "train the trainers" model has worked well for us for almost nine years. Eighteen million library holdings have become directly findable by library patrons, and instruction on how to search the database occurs in 94 percent of Pennsylvania's school districts.

Training is the reason that the project is successful. For the emerging information highways to succeed, training must be provided for all of the users so that people can learn to use the technology in a meaningful way.

The second project we have helped implement is the Pennsylvania Electronic Mail/Internet Project. It grew from the vision of our Commissioner of Libraries, Sara Parker. She wanted libraries in the Commonwealth to have a system of electronic communications and full access to the resources of the Internet. By providing LSCA funding, we now have 214 school, public, academic, and special libraries connected. We trained almost 600 library/media people to access the Internet and to use its resources. We learned a great deal from this experience which may be of help in National planning.
The first lesson was that the training needs of the trainers themselves, varied greatly. Trainers with extensive computer experience did a better job of teaching others to use the Internet. But even the experts found some parts of the Internet difficult to use. Using the Internet must be made easier for everyone.

We learned that the computer abilities of the patron also varied greatly and suggest that a successful federal program must be ready to deal with the varied backgrounds of the end-user. This can't be a highway for just the computer experts. Everyone who uses the information highway will need training, and the federal government must consider this fact in its planning. The library/media centers of this Nation should serve as the access points where that training will occur.

Technologists dazzle us with the glitter of the technology. If you remember anything from me today please let it be this: It is not the technology itself, it is what you do with it that is important. I am suggesting to this committee that the same principle be applied to the information highways. To accomplish the dreams, we need a program, not just a technology. A program implies a vision, goals, objectives, activities, training, and evaluation. Without such a federal vision and program, the information highways will be nothing more than a giant electronic department store catalog and home shopping service. That is fine for business, but is of limited social value.

The next lesson learned from our Internet project was a plain and simple one. The Internet needs librarians to organize it. Presently, there is no standard method of classifying information so that people can find anything. Our Library of Congress provides this leadership role for all libraries, but that influence is not strongly evident on the Internet because computer people, like me, are doing the classifying. Imagine searching for information about the birth of our Nation when one computer person listed it under
Philadelphia, another under Phila., and a third under City of Brotherly Love, then listed the related articles under the names Washington, George Washington, Father of our Nation, or did not list them at all. A librarian would never do that! But, that is what the majority of the Internet is like today.

I really hope that my computer guru counterparts can understand the desperate need we have for the library community to apply its professional skills to the problem. They can get and keep all this information organized, so that people can find it and use it in an intelligent way. The current tools for searching the Internet lack this organizational structure. We want the federal government to help build the information highways of the future. But we must let the library community be the cartographers, the map makers of the information highway system so that the average person can get to all the places he or she needs to go, obtain what is needed and return home again, without getting lost.

The final lesson. A large part of our expenditures in the project went to pay the costs of the phone calls that connected the libraries to our Internet provider. We need to find alternate, inexpensive on-ramps to the information highway. From the birthplace of cable television, Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, I urge you to consider the role that cable can play in providing the on-ramps for libraries.

Thank you for this opportunity.