

Libraries as local database producers

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Sale of citations retrieved from bibliographic database services began more than a decade ago. Data as well as literature citations were later made available from the same companies. Recently, other information vendors have entered the market and offered databases on such things as automobiles for sale or barter exchange of skills.

Information offerings aimed at the consumer market are beginning to be common. Perhaps the best-known service aimed at the general public is available from The Source, which sells access to databases on airline schedules and social amenities such as cultural events and restaurants in major American cities. The Europeans and the Canadians are actively developing systems designed to provide access to a variety of rapidly changing information, such as weather, stock prices, news, and cultural events. The individual consumer using the foreign system needs only a simple terminal to access whatever information is of interest. A small fee is charged for each use.

At a different level, the coming of the microcomputer and the development in home hobby computing has meant that many people now have at least limited capability not only to consume information but also to provide the organization for its storage and retrieval. The technology is present. These hobbyists are learning database collection and management as rapidly as possible. Bulletin board systems that run on modest microcomputers are a significant service activity for many a hobby computer club.

One seeks in vain, however, for an online people's information system. Nowhere can the general public find easy-to-operate systems at a very low cost that provide information about the community rather than a mechanism by which individuals can exchange information of interest to them. Until recently, of course, such an endeavor would have been too expensive. In addition, few individuals in the community had any familiarity with computer equipment. Until there are users for a database, there is very little reason to create one. Now some people have equipment in their homes that is able to access a community information system. More people will probably own such equipment as time goes by. And there are literally thousands of high school students who encounter small computer terminals in their classrooms. The next generation may well use terminals as easily as most of the current one uses television sets.

There is sufficient skill and equipment in the population that databases, if offered, would be used by at least part of the

community. What information might these databases provide? One possibility is the availability and quality of locally provided goods and services. Organizations such as Consumers' Union, the publisher of *Consumers' Reports*, provide one source of unbiased information on consumer purchasing decisions. Their evaluations are available for much nationally marketed merchandise. When a service or product is produced and sold locally, however, unbiased information on availability and quality of the offered good or service can be difficult to obtain—for example, many find trying to select a high-quality physician difficult. General guidelines can be found in consumer publications, but exactly which plumber or auto repair shop delivers high-quality service at reasonable prices is information available mostly from personal advising through one's network of acquaintances. A database that combines information on availability and quality of goods and services, then, should be of considerable community interest.

Another database that might be useful would be one offering locally significant, ephemeral information. One example of such information is prices in local supermarkets. Many people would find it useful to list their weekly grocery items and have a computer report which store or stores offer the best prices on those items. Such a service would be especially helpful to persons of limited income with a large number of household members to feed.

A different type of ephemeral information is related to social and cultural activities taking place within the community. The occurrence and availability of some of these activities can be announced through the usual channels of information, such as newspapers, radio, and television. Other organizations sponsoring activities have more limited interests and treasuries and must depend on free or low-cost channels of information, such as public service announcements. Still other groups publicize their meetings only to current members—as often because the publicity effort is excessive for the number of outsiders the group would attract as because they desire to maintain an exclusive membership. A database on local events would provide access to both heavily attended activities and those of very limited interest. It would allow a new bicycle enthusiast in town to find when and where the bicycle club(s) meet. It would also give anyone in the community a resource to consult when that person wishes to select an activity. A community database on local events is particularly likely to succeed if some organization can offer the hardware and soft-

ware to allow access. The one thing that most local groups have in abundance is volunteer labor to assist in input and maintenance of database entries. The thing they have in short supply is skill in creating the software and funds to support the purchase of the hardware. A communal effort might provide sufficient funding for several community organizations together to purchase a system, but some mechanism for coordinating the database entries would still be necessary.

Who should be providing databases of interest to a local community? Commercial services that want entry into more limited markets than the nationally vended databases are a logical possibility. Some local information has been sold by traditional media such as newspapers for many years now. Much of the information that might logically be part of a community information system is not readily amenable to for-profit providers. There are several reasons for this. The first is the collection of the information: hiring individuals to do this would be fairly expensive, and so would entering the information into the database. However, if volunteers were willing to collect the information as part of other activities (such as their weekly shopping trip) and enter it into the system, the effort could be modest. Further, personal evaluations of locally provided goods and services could be sought from anyone in the community who has used a service or patronized a shop and used for another database. Such a process would require that the appearance of unbiased evaluation be maintained if the database were to be credible to the community. A for-profit organization selling evaluations might have a difficult time gathering consumer opinion and a more difficult time convincing the public that the information gathered was not changed in any inappropriate way.

A second problem with community information services is that those who are most in need of the information are not those with the resources to pay for the information. For example, information about grocery purchases is likely to be most valuable to the poorest elements of the population; and those with the most time for social and cultural events are those who are not in the labor force, because they are too young, retired, or temporarily unemployed. These individuals often have limited resources, and the organizations that would benefit from their participation can afford only very limited expenditures to attract them.

A community organization would be a sensible place to coordinate and house the community information system. It should probably be a nonprofit organization, with the ability and resources to support such a system. I would like to suggest that the public library is a reasonable choice. It has a number of advantages over other public agencies.

Let us start with technical aspects. Although it is true that the public library is no more likely than the public school or the welfare office to know a great deal about computer hardware and software, the librarian does know a great deal about the storage and retrieval of information; they are one of the most important aspects of a librarian's work. Thus, the library is one place to find expertise in local demand for information and knowledge of how best to organize it for ready retrieval in the context of local interests and approaches. Further, librarians have considerable experience in helping people locate information. This combination of skills in the creation of database and the use of the information placed in it would

make librarians and the library a strong technical base for the location of this system.

Equally important is an appropriate social climate for the system. Here also the library has distinct advantages over other organizations. The library is an agency that is not usually seen as delivering service to any particular segment of the population. It does not suffer from the age bias of the public school. It does not have to overcome any stigma to its use, as the welfare office might. It is not type-cast, as the Red Cross or the Salvation Army might be. Using a service provided by the public library would neither make the poor feel stigmatized nor make the wealthier feel that they are using a resource that should be kept for those who cannot afford to pay for it. The traditions of the library support use by both poor and wealthy.

The library also has a tradition of volunteer assistance to the provision of its services. Every library has its "Friends" organization, and there is considerable skill in some libraries in the coordination of volunteer labor. Thus the library can readily use volunteer assistance to build a community database and to keep it accurate and up-to-date.

The library has a third important strength in its tradition of full and free access to information. To have a truly useful database, someone is going to have to exercise considerable skill in deciding what will be in the database and what will not. This form of selection must not be allowed to turn into censorship, or the value of the database to the community will be defeated. Librarians begin learning early in their professional training the distinction between selection and censorship. Public libraries in America have a long tradition of being an unbiased source of information. That tradition, coupled with the skills in which librarians are trained, will be of considerable value in the maintenance of a community information system. Without some selection, evaluation of services could degenerate into a vituperative attack on a service or product provider by a few disgruntled individuals or be so bland as to provide no valuable information whatsoever.

There are still challenges to be addressed before such a service can become a reality in a library. While libraries often have a tradition of active volunteers who support their program, few libraries have the experience to organize and coordinate a volunteer effort to gather and tabulate information on the scale that a community database would require, even if the information generators assist by supplying some of the information.

Then there is the need for algorithms to consolidate opinion data on services. How can an unbiased evaluation be prepared? Can the computer's technical abilities contribute? Is there some means to aggregate many people's opinion in a routine fashion, so that it is not necessary to read a large number of comments on a product or service to determine whether it has been satisfactory? What about the differences in values among the members of the community? What may be high quality to one person may be unacceptable to another; what is a friendly attitude to one might be overbearing to another. Just how are the disparate value structures behind the evaluations to be reconciled? How can the individuals in a community be persuaded to enter their evaluations of services or goods?

What is to be done about people who want to interrogate

the database but do not have their own terminals? Should they call and have another person do the search for them? Would it be acceptable to expect them to present themselves at the database site?

There will be many questions to resolve before community

information systems become part of the expected resources of our nation's towns and villages. The resources are there, human as well as computer. Those of you who also see this as an idea whose time has come can readily contribute willingness to solve the problems and organizational effort.

