

Presentation for Community Networking 99: Engaging Regionalism  
Wednesday, 29 Sept 1999  
Ballarat, Victoria

Amy Borgstrom  
Past President, US.Association for Community Networking  
Executive Director, Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet)  
94 Columbus Road  
Athens, Ohio USA 45701  
740 592 3854 voice  
740 593 5451 fax

#### Abstract

This presentation focuses on the current opportunities and challenges facing community networks in the U.S. This presentation will include a virtual tour of some exemplary U.S. community networks. The audience will be provided with a brief history of AFCN and its mission and strategic direction. Opportunities facing community networks include building healthy partnerships with community technology centers and other community improvement/inclusion projects; partnering with commercial entities; and becoming true community portals. Challenges include loss of control of content through partnerships, competition with commercial Internet Service Providers, and long-term sustainability. This presentation will provide a snapshot of the community networking movement in the U.S., and then allow all participants to discuss what might be similar and different in their countries, and establish some next steps for greater communication and collaboration across national borders.

Thanks, about me etc...subtitle for presentation, after a couple of days of enjoying fine Australian wines might be community networking in the U.S.—is the glass half full or half empty? In many ways the community networking glass in the U.S. is much more than half full, community networks are thriving, even proliferating today like never before. They are building healthy partnerships with community technology centers and other community improvement projects; partnering with commercial entities; and becoming true community portals. On the other hand, the glass can be viewed as sadly half empty. Some of the oldest community networks in the U.S. were forced to close their doors this year. We're faced with serious challenges like the loss of control of content through partnerships, competition with commercial Internet Service Providers, and long-term sustainability.

Today I'm going to discuss these developments in a little more detail, highlight some community networking projects I find particularly compelling, and then leave some time to talk together about how we might all move forward and leverage our complementary efforts, creating a global community while we strengthen our home communities at the same time.

State of community networking in U.S.

I want to start out by defining what I mean when I say community networking, since I think the term is used to signify very different meanings. As Michael Gurstein said at this conference last year, everyone lives somewhere. Community networking to me comes out of a

sense of place. Community networking to me is what happens when a group of people in a physical geographical community get together to solve problems and respond to opportunities. This can happen in a church basement, a local council office, or a meeting like this. Community networks are the electronic public spaces, the communication and information tools that we can use to facilitate the work we do to make our communities a better place to live.

The community networking movement in the U.S. has its roots as far back as the 1970s with the Berkeley Community Memory project. But it really took off in the 1980s, with lots and lots of community networks springing up as the Internet became more available, and the price of computing came down. The Greater Cleveland Freenet is often credited with being the oldest community network in the nation. It closed its doors last month, apparently unable to defray the cost of becoming Y2K compliant. The Cleveland Freenet also spawned the National Public Telecomputing Network, the first national association of community networks.

During the late eighties and nineties many community networks moved from bulletin board like text interfaces to the graphical World Wide Web. The first national conference for community networkers took place in 1994 in Cupertino. In 1997 NPTN went out of business, and the U.S. Association for Community Networking was born at a meeting in Taos, New Mexico. In the U.S. today community networking (CN) projects bring local people together to discuss their community's issues and opportunities, learn about Internet technology, and decide upon and create services to address community needs. These networks are very diverse, and might be designed and operated by one community-minded individual, an unincorporated loose coalition of citizens, an existing non-profit group, a non-profit formed to run the community network, or a for-profit company. Many find their homes in schools or libraries. Some are run out of a basement on a shoestring budget, while others have extensive institutional or governmental support.

Many but not all of the community members involved in these networks value democracy and inclusion, and are especially concerned that people with less means are still provided with the opportunities available through information and communication technologies. Some are inclusive and focus on the whole community, while others are becoming more specialized, focusing on human services, economic development, geographical and demographic information, or particular target groups, for example.

Many community networks are re-evaluating their reason for being. For example, many of these networks started up when there was no Internet access at all in their communities. Part of their mission was to provide access. Nowadays, except for rural areas, most communities have at least one local Internet Service Provider and a broad range of national choices. Phone and cable companies are also competing to provide basic and broadband services in many communities, although none of these are affordable for all, especially outside of urban areas. And the IRS is looking askance at non-profit organizations competing with these for-profit companies to provide access. Some community networks have stopped offering dial up this year, after the IRS deemed this an inappropriate activity for a non-profit entity and, in effect, rescinded a community network in Oregon's non-profit status.

Competition also is developing in many communities in terms of content development and training. Once the sole purview of many community

networks, now local ISPs and newspapers are establishing their own online community guides, while Microsoft, AOL and others are attempting the same on the national level. In terms of training, local small business development centers, technical schools, and commercial firms are increasingly responding to the need for computer and Internet training on the community level.

The biggest challenge facing community networking projects is simply how to keep paying their bills. These projects are often first subsidized by federal, state or foundation grant funds, which have this unfortunate habit of going away. Some community networks find themselves dealing with mission drift, as they are dependent on fashions in the funding world.

In order to balance this reliance on grants, and mitigate the effects of being in the business of what I call funder entertainment, community networking projects need to find ways to increase their credibility in their own community in such a way that the community will support the network. This might mean charging for services, or it might mean an advocacy campaign resulting in more permanent local or state line-item funding.

#### The Digital Divide

The big buzz in the U.S. for the last three months has been increased attention on the so-called digital divide. In July, the U.S. Department of Commerce published its third report on the digital divide in the U.S. Now I have a little problem with the term itself, since most of the people I know who might be considered on the other side of this proverbial divide are not even aware that it exists. Nevertheless, the usage, as pejorative as it is, is now in common use in the U.S. And the half empty viewpoint has plenty of evidence in this report. The report analyzes 1998 census data, and shows that households with incomes of \$75,000 and higher are more than twenty times more likely to have access to the Internet than those at the lowest income levels, and more than nine times as likely to have a computer at home.

Regardless of income level, Americans living in rural areas are lagging behind in Internet access. Indeed, at the lowest income levels, those in urban areas are more than twice as likely to have Internet access than those earning the same income in rural areas.

Even more disturbing is how these gaps appear to be growing. The gaps between White and Hispanic households, and between White and Black households, are now more than six percentage points larger than they were in 1994.

On the other hand, this report, and the creation of new initiatives by the U.S. Department of Education, the AOL Foundation and the Markle Foundation indicate that the U.S. funding community is starting to build up some steam around the issue of equal access to opportunities through information and communication technologies. Microsoft might soon follow, and the Ford Foundation hosted a meeting in June focused on technology. The US Association for Community Networking will be aggressively pursuing these opportunities during the next year in order to grow and accomplish our mission and to assist our affiliates to do so, as we have been working to solve this problem longer than any other set of groups in the country. In other words, to the newly aware funding community perhaps we are in a position to say fill our glasses right up, since we have been on the forefront of dealing with these issues for the

last ten years.

Show n tell

Well now let's see if I can get online here and show you a couple of things. What we're going to do now is take a quick look at what's going on around the country that I'm finding particularly compelling these days. I'm finding these compelling for three different reasons. Some of these projects are notable because they are examples of community networking which is closely affiliated with community development; others because they are involved in giving voice and identity to populations who have not before has this opportunity; others because they have achieved financial sustainability. Some are national, some supported by state government, and some very local. And I'll also take this opportunity to talk a little bit about my own project at home. My own home organization, ACEnet has developed the Southeastern Ohio Regional Freenet and a network of fifteen community technology centers to provide access, training, and a place for content for the small businesses with which we work. We also train high school students to start Internet consulting businesses. Carrie Ferguson, one such student, had no intention of going to college when she entered this program, after all, no one in her family ever had. She now runs all of the computer labs at Berea College in Kentucky, and is majoring in computer engineering.

I am struck almost every day in my own office, and in the schools where we work how the use of computers and the Internet breaks down barriers of class, race, gender, age and so forth. In our community tech center I've seen a middle aged Christian radio station owner patiently explaining the ins and outs of Excel to a single mom with dreadlocks, and a high school student helping a 61 year old campsite operator get online for the first time.

Another project that I'm particularly proud of in my region is the Countdown to Millenium project. High school students enrolled in our Computer Opportunities Class have collected hundreds of hours of audio and video oral histories, and made them available on the web, and over the radio—an important media outlook in my community where many people don't even have phones, much less web access. I find myself increasingly interested in the concept of digital storytelling. In Appalachia we have a strong history of story telling and I am ever more convinced that our communities are our stories.

Another site that tells our stories in Appalachian Ohio is the Little Cities of Black Diamonds. There's a great little quicktime movie here called Getting Paid to Cuss that you might want to take a look at sometime. A great site to find resources to adapt for community story telling projects is the Center for Digital Storytelling. In addition, our neighbors down in Kentucky at Mountain Area Community Economic Development have designed Communities by Choice. This web page is distinguished by its design and its excellent links to projects focused on building healthy communities across the country.

I want to highlight two other national community networking sites before we start looking at some local projects. The Benton Foundation's Open Studio project enables local communities to promote local artists. It also trains the artists to maintain their own websites, and provides public access places for them to do so, and for other community members to look at the art. This is a site developed by Tracy Hawkins, a young Kentucky artist exploring the importance of place through his

photographs.

For the last year I've also been involved with the Kellogg Foundation's Managing Information with Rural America program. This is a really innovative grant program that funds teams of citizens, rather than organizations, in really small rural towns to do projects with a technology component. Ten citizen teams from a general region participate together in six workshops that they select, and then are granted \$15,000 to carry out their projects. This is the website from one of the most successful clusters, located in south Texas. Speaking of Texas, two states in the U.S. have filled the glass in a big way--supporting community networks with a line item in their budget. TIF's specific charge is to help develop the telecommunications infrastructure that connects public entities such as public schools, public libraries, two and four-year colleges and universities, and the public health delivery system in Texas.

TIF is governed by a nine-member board of directors that is charged with disbursing approximately \$1.5 billion in revenues through loans and a formal grant program. This commitment includes noncompetitive grants that provide successful applicants with a basic "community network in a box" package that can be implemented within one year. They have a conference every December, and basically, you get all this stuff for showing up. The purpose of these grants is to "level the playing field," and they are the majority of TIF Board grants.

In Missouri, Missouri Express serves the interests of community information networks and their supporters. Missouri Express is sponsored by the State of Missouri Office of Administration, the Missouri Department of Economic Development, the Missouri Association of Councils of Government, and the University of Missouri Outreach and Extension. In 1996 the state invested \$6 million dollars to support the development of community networks in the state, including \$1 million for improvement of the state backbone. There are twenty-nine CNs established across the state of Missouri. All 29 of these networks were evaluated in 1998.

Over on the west coast, the Davis (California) Community Network has just premiered the first iteration of WaterWorks. WaterWorks is a bioregional watershed decision support toolkit and civic partnership project. Richard Lowenberg, one of the organizers of this project says that the web site is the easy part of the project--the more important and difficult part has been the process of developing regional partnerships.

In Charlotte, North Carolina Charlotte's Web hosts a private web site for the City of Charlotte Police Department's Juvenile Division. Some 18 different agencies need access to confidential serious juvenile offender records. Before the system was put into place, juvenile offenders would be released from the detention center, but the school resource officer wouldn't know about it until the kid showed up at school with a baseball bat. Information could take up to two weeks to circulate among the agencies. They needed a place to communicate and also to share information.

Now any agency that has approved access can find out the status of any serious juvenile offender, as well as gain access to an arrest and adjudication history, instantly, and have updated information on the child's whereabouts within a single business day. I'm happy to report

that Charlotte's Web is now in the black through this kind of custom application development.

LaPlaza Telcommunity has also transformed itself through the development of a sustainable business model. After a painful Board-led shake-up, new management did extensive business analysis and determined that the 1,000 or so users or so would be willing to pay for the community network's services. La Plaza now charges \$17.00 per month for unlimited access. Their user base has expanded to over 2300, and it is still able to provide free training and free access to those who need it to some 1500 people per month.

In some more urban communities, the problem is not that there are not enough efforts to help mitigate the digital divide, but that there are lots of them and they don't know what the others are up to. In San Diego, a diverse group of players recently got together to talk about how they could better coordinate their efforts. The first meeting was a peer to peer exchange attended by about 40 people. Susan Myrland, an AFCN member involved in the process reports that the match-up of needs and resources was almost spooky -- a woman looking for volunteers was sitting next to a guy who had lots of trained kids who needed internships. The County Board of Education, which has a lab where teachers can test out software, met the Continuing Education Program that needs help selecting software.

Where to from here?

So where to from here? I'm sure it is no news to you that the environment in which local community networking projects find themselves operating today is complex and rapidly changing. Convergence, consolidation and mergers, and Internet start-up IPOs worth millions (on paper at least) characterize today's environment. The churn in the industry is so intense that we can not imagine elements of this environment a year from today. This environment necessitates new kinds of organizations, new kinds of planning, new kinds of business models.

This is where the US Association for Community Networking, or AFCN comes in. We fill the glass by facilitating a learning community across the nation, creating awareness of how community networking builds healthier communities, and serving as a policy liaison and voice for community networking projects across the country. Since AFCN's incorporation in the fall of 1997, with modest investment from two private foundations, the association has successfully grown to over 100 members, published a regular newsletter, and conducted two small conferences.

In June, we identified the generation of a business plan as our first order of business, and have almost completed that task. At this point AFCN has no paid staff. Its work is carried out by volunteers including Board members--much like many fledgling community networks! Although we've been able to accomplish much with little, this volunteer approach to building a national association is not what I would necessarily recommend--in other words I might say do as we say and not as we do and make sure you have the infrastructure such as staff in place from the beginning!

Aside from our quarterly newsletters, AFCN has published two more ambitious pieces--the proceedings from the San Jose conference, and a policy journal in conjunction with CTCnet and the Alliance for Community Media, the national association for cable access media. I have some extra copies of this and it is also available online.

AFCN serves as a central depository for model materials that are especially useful to new projects starting up. For example, Andrew Cohill and his colleagues at the Blacksburg Electronic Village just produced this excellent Community Network Briefing Book, which was provided to all AFCN members, and will soon be available online. The next year or so seems critical for community networks in the U.S. Either the glass will empty: CNs will turn out to be not sustainable and will close down one by one, or else morph into commercial services.

Our job will be doing post-mortem analysis and evaluation and document what almost moved from substinance to substance to sustainability...but not quite. Or the glass might stay where it is, half empty or half full depending on your point of view, with CNs continuing as they are, doing excellent things in their communities, but mostly in sort of marginal and struggling ways. Or we can fill the darn glass until its overflowing, of course my preferred alternative. For this to happen, community networks need to become key players in the new economy, socially responsible businesses in their own right, "fast companies" able to nimbly adapt, to scale, to thrive in an environment of constant flux. Using the power of networks ourselves is key to this process, and by that I don't mean networks of wires which certainly facilitate communication and learning, but I mean the deep and rich networks of relationships which will fuel our effectiveness into the next century, millenium, however you want to slice the future.

Community networking in the U.S. has reached a level of maturity resulting in a diverse customer base for the national association. While many community networks in the last five years or so have failed to find a successful business model, hundreds of new projects have sprang up. Some practitioners, including many on the Board of AFCN have been in the community networking business now for ten years or more. A key opportunity for AFCN is to link these community networking pioneers with the small start-up projects proliferating throughout the U.S. AFCN's plan for the coming year is to facilitate maturation in our networks through a series of face-to-face and online learning opportunities.

First, in order to build awareness and create a learning opportunity among our members we will host west coast, east coast, and Midwest tutorial workshops designed to create affordable mentoring opportunities between newer and more experienced community networkers. Training materials and proceedings of these tutorials will also be made available over the Internet.

Second, we plan to bring U.S. community networking practitioners together for a meeting of a larger scale than has been possible since 1997. We envision Community Networking 2000 taking place over two and a half days in mid-July. Part of the conference will be an "Open Space" process whereby the participants themselves will design and facilitate at least 30% of the conference time together to focus on topics with which they want to engage.

We are also involved in the international Global CN 2000 and will include interactive links to other national conferences at that meeting next summer. Community networking professionals from Canada, the U.S. Spain, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, the UK, Russia, Venezuela and right here in Victoria are already planning these events, which will include these electronic linkages among national conferences in the summer, and a face-to-face meeting in the fall. I think Claire is going

to talk with you more about this on Friday morning, but I just want to say I look forward to these events immensely, and hope to see some of you there!

Leveraging our own competencies by making connections across national borders is key to filling up the glass. The Internet is global, and many of the corporations for which we are creating markets are too. It's time for us to take advantage of and build advantage with our own national and international networks. I look forward to the Year 2000 as the year we start to learn lots more from each other, and engage in lots more productive joint activities. And as much as we all focus on the opportunities that the Internet can bring to our communities, meeting each other face-to-face, having what I call extremely high bandwidth interaction, like this conference (like this handshake), is what builds learning relationships that last. So thank you again for inviting me to be here with you, and I look forward to lots of good talks with you throughout the next couple of days, and after, and maybe even a toast or two!

Resources for Community Networking 99: Engaging Regionalism  
Wednesday, 29 Sept 1999  
Ballarat, Victoria

URLs cited

U.S. Department of Commerce  
Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide  
<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/fttn99/contents.html>

AOL Foundation  
<http://www.aolfoundation.org>

The Markle Foundation  
<http://www.markle.org>

U.S. Department of Education Community Technology Centers Program  
<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/CTC/>

Southeastern Ohio Regional Freenet  
<http://www.seorf.ohiou.edu>  
ACEnet  
<http://www.seorf.ohiou.edu/~acenet>

Little Cities of Black Diamonds  
<http://spsd.k12.oh.us/littlecities/index.html>  
<http://spsd.k12.oh.us/littlecities/HTML/Corning/sherickcussmovie.htm>

Countdown to Millennium Project  
<http://www.frognet.net/countdown>

Center for Digital Storytelling  
<http://www.storycenter.org/storyplace.html>

Communities by Choice  
<http://www.communities-by-choice.org>

Benton Foundation Arts Online  
<http://www.openstudio.org/>  
<http://www.mwg.org/openstudio/loosewig/three.html>

This presentation was made at the Community Networking Conference, Ballarat, 1999-10-12  
It is presented 'as is', and rights for future editing and reproduction remain with the author and the conference  
Committee

Kellogg Foundation Managing Information with Rural America Program  
<http://www.wkkf.org/programminginterests/foodrur/mira/mira%5Finit.htm>  
<http://www.esconett.org/mira/index.html>

Texas Infrastructure Fund Board  
<http://www.tifb.state.tx.us/>  
<http://www.tifb.state.tx.us/Grantees/Grantees.html>

Austin Freenet (Texas)  
<http://www.austinfreenet.net>

Missouri Express  
<http://extension.missouri.edu/moexpress/>

Davis Waterworks (California)  
<http://www.dcn.org/waterworks>

Charlotte's Web (North Carolina)  
<http://www.charweb.org>

LaPlaza Telecommunity  
<http://www.laplaza.org>

U.S. Association For Community Networking (AFCN)  
<http://www.afcn.net>

AFCN/CTCnet Policy Review  
<http://www.civicnet.org/comtechreview/>

Blacksburg Electronic Village (Virginia)  
<http://www.bev.net>

Other Exemplary U.S. Community Networks

Electronic Alexandria Community (Virginia)  
<http://www.alex.org/>

Big Sky Telegraph (Montana)  
[http://macsky.bigsky.dillon.mt.us/g\\_ver.html](http://macsky.bigsky.dillon.mt.us/g_ver.html)

Boulder Community Network (Colorado)  
<http://bcn.boulder.co.us>

Canville Virtual Village (Ohio)  
<http://www.canville.net>

Eugene Free Community Networking (Oregon)  
<http://www.efn.org>

Greater New Orleans Freenet (Louisiana)  
<http://www.gnofn.org>

KooteNet (rural Montana)  
<http://www.libby.org>

La Plaza Telecommunity (New Mexico)  
<http://www.laplaza.org>

LibertyNet (Pennsylvania)

<http://www.libertynet.org>

Mountain Area Information Network (North Carolina)

<http://www.main.nc.us/>

NCEXchange/North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center

<http://www.ncexchange.org>

Nyx, the Spirit of the Night (Colorado)

<http://www.nyx.net>

Oregon Public Networking

<http://www.opn.org>

Ozarks Regional Information Online Network (ORION) (Missouri)

<http://www.orion.org>

Petalumanet (California)

<http://www.petalumanet.org>

RTPnet, Research Triangle Park in North Carolina

<http://RTPnet.org>

Seattle Community Network (Washington)

<http://www.scn.org>

Silicon Valley Public Access Link (California)

<http://www.svpal.org>

Slonet (San Luis Obispo, California)

<http://www.slonet.org>

SnoNet (Snohomish County, Washington)

<http://www.snet.org>

Tincan (Washington State)

<http://www.tincan.org>

Traverse City Freenet (Michigan)

<http://www.tcnet.org>

Twin Cities Freenet (Minnesota)

<http://tcfreenet.org>

Some International Friends

Community Information Victoria (Australia)

<http://www.civ.org.au>

Telecommunities Canada

<http://www.tc.ca>

COARA

<http://www.coara.or.jp/oldhtml/E-default.html>

European Alliance for Community Networking

<http://www.communities.org.UK/eacn>

United Kingdom Communities Online

<http://www.communities.org.UK/main.asp>

## Some Good Starting Points

Benton Foundation Cyberpages on Community Networking  
<http://www.benton.org>

Center for Civic Networking  
<http://www.civicnet.org>

Community Technology Centers Network  
<http://www.ctcnet.org>

Directory of Public Access Networks  
<http://www.clir.org/pand/>

Freenets and Community Networks page (International listing)  
<http://www.lights.com/freenet/>

Missouri Express Guides to Getting Started Pages  
<http://outreach.missouri.edu/moexpress/guides/>

The Morino Institute  
<http://www.morino.org>

Non-profit and Technology Enterprise Network  
<http://www.nten.org>

University of Michigan School of Information Community Networking  
Connector  
<http://www.si.umich.edu/Community/>

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Neighborhood Networks  
<http://www.hud.gov/nnw/nnwindex.html>

## Research and Evaluation

Civic Networks: Building Community on the Net by Scott London  
<http://www.west.net/~insight/london/networks.htm>

Community Networking: A Bibliography by Kim Gregson, University of  
Indiana  
[http://php.ucs.indiana.edu/~kgregson/main\\_menu.html](http://php.ucs.indiana.edu/~kgregson/main_menu.html)

Community Technology Centers: Exploring a Tool for Rural Development  
[http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~ruralma/CTC\\_ToC.html](http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~ruralma/CTC_ToC.html)

A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Community Computer Networks  
An Honors Thesis in The College of Social Sciences, Florida State  
University

By Kristin M. Surak  
<http://www.freenet.tlh.fl.us/surak/cross.html>

CTCnet Impact Study  
<http://www.ctcnet.org/impact98.htm>

New Community Networks: Wired for Change by Doug Schuler  
<http://www.scn.org/ip/commnet/ncn.htm>

Oregon Public Networking  
<http://www.opn.org>

This site includes much information on the U.S. Internal Revenue Service challenge

Telecommunication and Information Infrastructure Assistance Program  
<http://www.ntia.doc.gov>

Their evaluation of projects funded in 1994 and 1995 and case studies from 1996:  
<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/otiahome/tiiap/index.html>

U.S. Community Networks and the Services They Offer  
(1999 Thesis by AFCN member Lawrence Hecht)  
<http://www.internetpublicpolicy.com/communitynetworks.html>  
Commercial Community Sites

AOL Digital Cities  
<http://digitalcities.com>

City Search  
<http://www.citysearch.com>

Microsoft Sidewalk  
<http://www.sidewalk.com>