New online possibilities

Gary Hardy and Larry Stillman, VicNet, State Library of Victoria

Nearly two hundred delegates from Australia, New Zealand, and overseas attended the fourth Communities Networking Conference 'Engaging regionalism' at Ballarat University in September 1999.

Speakers described internet activities with impacts in public library and community information sectors. Andrew Cunningham, Maribyrnong Public Library, Victoria talked about multi-lingual online internet services in public libraries; and Dr Kirsty Williamson and Amanda Bow from Monash University, with Larry Stillman, VicNet, described an ongoing project into online services for disabled users in public libraries. Another session concerned the Finding Law Online Project from the Law Foundation of New South Wales, managed by Sue Scott. Links to presentations and reports are available through the conference website, and full proceedings will be published.

Many of the issues raised at the conference struck a chord with the keynote speakers, including Claire Shearman from the European Association of Community Networking (EACN) and co-chair of the UK Communities Online. She said 'Listening to the stories that people in Australian community networking were telling, it was clear that not only were we all addressing similar issues, but that there was a real energy there which we need to tap into globally.'

Quite striking at the conference were reports about the increasingly important role of women in rural and remote areas in community-building. Projects such as that being undertaken by Lyn Simpson of the Queensland University of Technology engendered great interest from delegates. She described the way rural women in her state have established WELINK — an online discussion group — which provides computer training for busy and often isolated rural women, and also offers great opportunities for socialising and supporting one another online and face-to-face.

There were a number of presentations from Tasmania describing the tremendous roll-out of online access in small communities, a result of Networking the Nation Initiatives and Telstra activity. It was also noted that a substantial proportion — perhaps more than half — of delegates were women, thus breaking the stereotype about the internet being for male 'geeks'. Many of the women now manage content development, technology, and innovation in local communities.

There was strong support for the formation of an Australia-wide community networking alliance that could advocate the values of 'community computing and networking', particularly to government policy makers who tended to only hear from the big players in government and industry.

How do public libraries fit into this new ground-swell of community access and expertise? Libraries are well-placed geographically and technologically to take on the role of hubs within community networks. This is especially the case in the regional context where many library activities are at the heart of the community. Many information activities cannot be undertaken without the assistance of a skilled helper such as a librarian who understands the vagaries of search engines, and who can take older users beyond that first experience of fear to fun in searching out family history online.

There is tremendous potential for productive relationships with community and local groups that could support further roll-out of public internet access, bandwidth aggregation and purchase, and pooling of technical and information management expertise. Libraries must be part of this process and identify where strengths and skills lie and to bring them to work in a co-operative fashion.

Details of the conference can be found at http://communityconference.vicnet.net.au/. ∎

Mary Clare Mahoney, BEc (Syd), ALAA

26 February 1925 – 12 October 1999

Miss Mary Clare Mahoney died suddenly on 12 October. Clare spent all her working life in librarianship, firstly as a junior in the New South Wales State Library Service. She was librarian of Armidale Teachers College in the 1950s, and later transferred to the Sydney Teachers College, where she was deputy librarians and head cataloguer for nearly thirty years. At a time when passing the Registration Certificate was the only way a librarian could gain qualifications for promotion, Clare was one of a very small team who set and marked the exam papers Australia-wide. After her retirement in 1985, her expertise and enthusiasm for bibliographic cataloguing was invaluable for her voluntary work with the Australian Catholic Historical Society and the Ashfield Historical Society, by whom she will be greatly missed.

Shirley McGlynn, Lavender Bay