

Electronic Mail Service: Applications in the Pacific Northwest Region

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ELECTRONIC MAIL Service (E-mail) is an innovative means of rapidly transmitting information over a large region. The system offers low telecommunication costs (that are not distance-related), rapid speed, and accessibility through terminals used to search bibliographic data bases.

The Pacific Northwest Regional Chapter (PNRC) of the Medical Library Association covers more than 950,000 square miles extending over five time zones, and includes Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. Although this composes 27% of the land mass of the United States, the population of this region composes only 4% of the nation's total. Regular chapter committee meetings cannot be held due to the large amounts of time and money required to travel within the region.

Electronic mail service is a message-switching system designed to transmit information between appropriate terminals via an established telecommunications system. Many companies supply E-mail services across the country, including TELENET (Telemail), Digital Equipment Corporation (DECmail), BRS, and The Source. In the Pacific Northwest, the system commonly in use is ONTYME II of TYMNET.

ONTYME II was first promoted in the region in November 1980 by the Pacific Northwest Bibliographic Center, now known as the Resource Sharing Program (RSP) at the University of Washington [1]. The RSP encouraged state agencies and academic libraries within the region to subscribe to the system, and in some cases subsidized its use. The system caught on rapidly because E-mail could be accessed by terminals already used to search bibliographic data bases. Many of the hospital libraries in the chapter subscribed to ONTYME II because they already possessed terminals for searching the MEDLARS system.

Electronic mail is primarily used to send interlibrary loan requests to libraries within the region. However, it can also quickly transmit reference questions and information or messages. After a short sign-on procedure, the system provides work-

space in which to type loan requests or messages. When completed, the messages are sent to the address codes of the desired libraries. One message can be sent to any number of locations.

In addition, the user can develop shared or private files. The shared files can hold information useful to all users of the system, such as protocols for submitting interlibrary loan requests. The private files can be set up by an individual library and can hold data useful to its operation, such as interlibrary loans or titles requested from out-of-state libraries.

APPLICATION

In response to encouragement from MLA, the PNRC Legislation Committee was established in 1980 to address legislative issues. The lack of opportunities to meet forced the committee to seek other ways of communicating among its members and the chapter. The chairman decided to try E-mail. The committee began to use the system in March 1982; seven of the eleven committee members subscribed to the ONTYME II system. At first, information on legislative issues was sent to the committee members as it came to the attention of the chairman. It soon became clear that this information, although not always requiring action by the entire PNRC membership, would be useful to it. In April 1982, funds were requested from the chapter to set up a legislation committee on-line bulletin. The bulletin is now transmitted to all PNRC members with access to E-mail (more than 50% of the membership). Members without access can request that copies of the bulletin be sent via regular mail.

The bulletin is prepared monthly and summarizes information on legislative issues. It focuses on health sciences libraries, with an occasional item on general library issues. Topics covered include reauthorization of the Medical Library Assistance Act, the cost recovery amendment, future funding of the Library Services and Construction Act, private versus public control of access to information, and the recently proposed changes in regulation for hospital participation in Medicare/Medicaid funding.

BENEFITS OF E-MAIL

The current charges for the ONTYME II Electronic Mail Service brokered by RSP are an annual subscription and handling fee of \$110.00. TYMNET charges a basic on-line fee of \$3.00 per hour, with a minimum charge of two minutes per session.

BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

Those libraries in cities without local nodes must pay the added cost of a telephone call to the nearest node. There are additional charges for character transmission (25¢ per thousand) and for data storage (1¢ per thousand characters per day). Excluding the subscription and handling fee, a typical on-line bulletin of 1,800 characters typed and sent on-line to thirty-seven libraries cost less than \$1.00. Libraries receiving the messages are charged 25¢ per thousand characters transmitted plus the on-line fee. It is important to note that the costs for transmitting information are not related to distance: they are the same to send messages two blocks or 1,500 miles. The same information duplicated and sent through the regular mail service would cost the sending library more than \$12.00.

It takes only a few seconds to transmit a message through E-mail, regardless of destination. Obviously, this can be very important when legislation comes up suddenly and requires immediate response from the membership. The U.S. Postal Service can take from three days to two weeks to deliver a letter between Boise and Seattle.

Although the message is sent to the recipient library within seconds, that library must dial up and access the system to read the message. The actual delivery time for a message sent through E-mail depends, then, on how often the "mail" is read at the receiving end. The ONTYME II system notifies the user that messages are waiting during the sign-off procedure. Not only does E-mail save time in transmitting the information, but time that would normally be spent in photocopying, addressing, and mailing the information is eliminated.

The importance of local telephone networking for informing librarians of legislative issues is use-

ful and cannot be overlooked. However, long-distance telephone networking within our chapter can be very time-consuming and costly. E-mail provides the receiving library with a typed message that ensures that all members receive the same information.

Any data terminal that operates with RS232 and the ASCII character set in an asynchronous mode at 300 or 1,200 baud can be used to access E-mail. Data terminals used to search MEDLARS, BRS, or DIALOG fit these qualifications and can be used for E-mail. Many libraries are purchasing more sophisticated terminals and microcomputers that can decrease the cost of E-mail. The Idaho State Library uses a "smart" Hewlett-Packard 2624A CRT terminal with a Texas Instruments 820 KSR terminal as a printer. The CRT has 8,000 bytes of memory, which allows for editing requests or messages off-line, and subsequent 1,200-baud transmission on-line in block mode. Other libraries within the region use the ENVAX communication system, which provides memory for any terminal, so messages or requests can be prepared and stored until ready for transmission.

The Legislation Committee of the PNR Chapter of MLA agrees that E-mail has efficiently kept membership informed of current issues. Other MLA committees and activities could benefit from its use.

REFERENCES

1. Stephens D. Electronic mail in Alaska. *Technicalities* 1983 Jan;3:6-7.

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