Process of Renewal

by Richard P. West

CNI observed its sixth birthday in March at the Spring 1996 CNI Task Force Meeting. Much has been accomplished in those six years, and we have seen a transformation in the way people perceive, consider, and use the Internet and the resources contained on it. Six years ago the popular press did not know of the Internet, and one of CNI's premises was that now that the existence of an Internet was assured, an organization devoted to the scholarly uses of networked information was timely. Little did we realize—"timely" was an understatement! Our initial business plan called for sixty Task Force members, and before the year was out we had over 150 members paying $5,000 each. We now enjoy the support of over 200 CNI Task Force members, most of which are higher education institutions, private market information content providers, and software and hardware companies.

From the beginning, CNI has been viewed as a project under the joint sponsorship of the Association of Research Libraries, CAUSE, and Educom. Funding of the program comes from Task Force member dues, and the program development responsibilities rest with the very able CNI Executive Director, Paul Peters, advised by a nine-member steering committee. The steering committee is appointed, with three members named by each of the three chief executive officers of the sponsors—Duane Webster (ARL), Jane Ryland (CAUSE), and Robert Heterick (Educom).

Consistent with CNI's charter, a review of mission and program occurs every three years. The first review three years ago caused the CNI steering committee and the sponsor's chief executives to reorient several programs and initiate some new ones, as well as a healthy questioning of the purposes of the CNI effort. I would expect the same to occur with this three-year review. ARL's and Educom's boards have already endorsed a three-year renewal of CNI. The CAUSE Board has agreed to a one-year extension of CNI, and appointed a CAUSE Board committee to determine what would be needed to extend the renewal to three years.

Although CNI will continue, all three Boards are preparing their review of CNI to provide input to Coalition programs and projects. The CNI Task Force members have been polled for comments, and the members of ARL, CAUSE, and Educom are encouraged to send any comments they may have about CNI's performance or next steps to me or to Paul Peters (paul@jni.org). The steering committee will be determining CNI's program activity for next year in late July.

Enough about process—what about accomplishments?

In the first few years of CNI the working hypothesis was that there weren't enough network resources available on the Internet and, if there were, how would one find them? Information search tools were rudimentary if they existed at all. Soon projects were identified that would assist these efforts. To provide better search mechanisms, Z39.50 demonstration projects on peer-to-peer database searching were encouraged, described, and monitored through CNI working group meetings. Creating experiments to develop new electronic-based information resources was a constant second theme in the CNI program. Examples include encouraging participation in the Elsevier TULIP Project for electronic journals (all participants were members of the CNI Task Force), and forming alliances with traditional content providers such as the American Association of University Presses. A third effort along the theme of creating networked resources was CNI's incubation effort in helping the National Initiative for a Networked Cultural Heritage get started, thereby providing a focus for the efforts of the arts and humanities communities.

At the heart of CNI, however, is a theme of collaboration. The sponsorship and makeup of the Task Force membership reflect this theme, as does the way the Task Force meetings have been structured. Traditional scholarly information managers (librarians) and technology managers cannot make networked information work by themselves. CNI's semi-annual Task Force meetings have created a forum for the intersection of technology and information in the networked world. Perhaps our most important contribution has been creating ways in which the best thinking regarding the creation and use of networked information can be shared.
Each Task Force meeting has a specific theme, and each provides opportunities to showcase and discuss projects that are not only related to that theme but also deal with innovations in creating networked resources, how to find and search these information resources electronically, and methods by which our existing campus organizations try to manage these new content-delivery mechanisms. Several years ago, an entire task force meeting was devoted to methods of finding and retrieving networked information. Such startling innovations as Gopher (you do remember Gopher?) and Archie, as well as other then-state-of-the-art search strategies (including the relatively unknown World Wide Web and NCSA Mosaic) were demonstrated by the developers.

As we conduct our three-year program review, I hear that the CNI program is no longer needed. Others comment that we have lost our strategic view. Others say we never had one! Yet, most commentators conclude that there is need to keep monitoring what is going on in the networked resources world. Although now we have many more networked information resources, the issues of how to find them on the network, how to pay for them, and how to foster still more innovation press heavily upon us. There is a new generation of challenges, many of which appear to have the same names as those on CNI’s 1990 agenda.

What are the issues on the horizon?

Networked resources and search techniques will continue to be paramount issues for CNI. New emphasis in the CNI program will be placed on projects that examine how users and institutions use the network and its associated resources. Where are the costs in this new environment for content and technology? Are we changing our local organizational behavior to benefit from the cost-saving potential of the network? Also among CNI priorities will be continuing to bring together librarians, technology managers, and others to assist in creating projects and forums about how we need to change our local behavior to benefit from the global Internet resource.

If there is a single most important theme for the next twelve-to-eighteen-month program effort for CNI, it would be planning and operating networked information resources and services in an enterprise-wide context. Projects will be identified to explore these efforts, but returning to my earlier observation that CNI is about collaboration and forming new partnerships, there will be a number of forums that bring together professionals to identify and work on solutions at the enterprise (campus) level. In addition to the Fall Task Force Meeting, which will have the enterprise-wide networking effort as its theme, there will be at least four regional conferences co-sponsored with CAUSE that will invite campus technology managers and librarians to explore how to work together better to exploit the networked information world.

When CNI started, I believed that an understanding was imperative of how networked information could transform scholarly communications and, therefore, our instruction and research missions in higher education. I believed further that librarians and technologists together could provide leadership in attaining this understanding. If there is any area in which CNI has been less successful than envisioned it has been in attracting these two constituencies in a balanced way to CNI projects and forums. The forums co-sponsored by CAUSE and CNI are one way that we are trying to remedy this situation.

Paul and I would particularly welcome your thoughts on creating an agenda that will attract technologists as well as librarians. This is a vexing challenge. Please send us your thoughts on how we can create a common agenda for developing and improving upon an enterprise-wide networked information strategy.

CNI offers a wealth of information on topics related to the challenges of the networked information environment. The CNI World Wide Web server, in particular, now offers an alphabetical index to the Coalition’s archives, including most of the reports and white papers generated by CNI Working Groups, as well as summaries of the Coalition’s Spring and Fall Task Force Meetings for the past several years.

Take advantage of this excellent set of resources by visiting the CNI homepage (http://www.cni.org/CNI.homepage.html).