Real Savings—Real Benefits

by Richard P. West

As the scholarly communication and publishing process moves from being print-based to being network-based, a significant question has been the potential impact on costs. CNI has sponsored an important project to represent this process as a “value chain,” identifying each of the component functions in the process, determining who performs each function, and assessing the costs related to each function.

From the writing and composition of the scholarly work to editing to distribution to archiving and every step in between, each major step or function in creating, communicating, and storing a scholarly work is being explicitly stated. Once they are identified, it can be determined who performs those functions in the value chain. For example, for print-based documents, scholars create the individual works, but the publishers of the works edit and distribute (sell) them. Libraries, and of course individuals, buy the works, and also organize, classify, circulate, and archive them.

The next step is a more difficult task—assigning costs to each of the functions. At this conceptual stage, it doesn’t matter whether absolute costs are calculated or whether simply a percent distribution is developed for each part of the total cost of creating, disseminating, organizing, circulating, and storing scholarly information. What is important is to show how the introduction of networked information technology can change the cost distribution among the functions of the scholarly information process.

A major challenge of this process has been that as the distribution medium moves from print-based to information-network-based, there are winners and losers, both perceived and real, since different players can perform the functions of the electronic distribution process than was true in the print-based process. Obviously if a journal is transferred from print to the network, the distribution process is handled by the Internet and not, for example, by the U.S. Postal Service. Other shifts in responsibility and profitability can be imagined as scholarly information becomes available in electronic form.

I have described in earlier columns the functions of the scholarly information process. This CNI-sponsored project on the costs and measures in the “value chain” of networked information will result in a report, expected in July 1997, which should shed significant light on these important questions of changing costs and players. And understanding of the “value chain” has helped us understand how another CNI-sponsored project, nearing its debut, can help generate real savings and real benefits by the intelligent application of networked technology.

The dissemination of government information, particularly from the federal government, has long been accomplished through the Federal Depository Library Program, an effective distribution strategy that uses a collection of libraries nationally to provide users no-fee access to government information. Many university libraries are part of this system of government information dissemination; as part of this public service role we organize, store, make available, and archive large amounts of government information. We do not charge the federal government for this service because we recognize that this function is critical to our public service and research missions.

Unfortunately, this program of federal information dissemination is now in a state of flux, ironically because of the ubiquity of the Internet. Federal agencies feel they can now disseminate their information to the public by posting some or all of it on a Web page. No longer do all agencies prepare all of their information in the more traditional printed format—which is good—but neither do they disseminate all of their information to the libraries in the depository library program—which is problematic.

If the information is on the Net, what is the rub? A quick examination of the “value chain” demonstrates that network-based distribution of government information does not perform all of the functions of the current print-based distribution system. The key change has been a shift from a static to a dynamic environment; when only current information is available on the network, there is no provision for archiving old versions. This shift has far-reaching implications for the collections themselves as well as for providing access to service and storage of these materials.

CNI is about to publish a white paper examining the current state of distribution and use of electronic federal information. While endorsing

CNI Report is a regular CAUSE/EFFECT department that provides reports about the activities of the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI), formed by the Association of Research Libraries, CAUSE, and Educom in 1990 to promote the creation of and access to information resources in networked environments.
the concept that government information can be distributed more efficiently by a network-based strategy, the white paper argues that significant service and policy questions need to be addressed, and soon. Primary among these is the need for third parties, such as libraries and other institutions, to develop strategies for providing long-term access to and service for this information. The tendency to place only current information on agency Web pages does not provide for all the functions in the value chain of scholarly communication.

University libraries involved in this program believe that the program is no longer working. Do I dare say it? This is a process made obsolete by new technology. Access to federal information desperately needs to be reengineered. The technology of networked information changes roles and methods of performing the same functions. Patching the old system or embracing only a part of a new system is no longer viable.

There are several opportunities in having the higher education community endorse a new network-based approach to disseminating, using, servicing, and storing federal information previously made available in the Federal Depository Library Program. Among them is the continuing responsibility to our public service mission, but we could also achieve savings in storage of government information by moving to digital storage rather than print-based storage that takes up yards and yards of library shelf storage. If your library is part of the federal depository program, go to the library and see how much storage these documents require.

There are real savings to as well as benefits for us by changing this program, and at the same time continuing to make government information available for educational and research purposes.

CNI’s “Access to and Services for Federal Information” white paper was released for public review in November, and it can be found on CNI’s Web site (www.cni.org). I encourage all to become acquainted with these issues. How often can we be on the right side of an issue as important as a citizen’s right to information published by his or her government and at the same time demonstrate that real savings and real benefits can come from the intelligent application of networked information? It will require a different approach from the traditional strategy. Here is an opportunity for delivery, not proof, of concept. If we miss many of these opportunities and our investment in network technology is used only for mail and yellow pages, the dollars invested were misplaced. I encourage your comments.

———

“The tendency to place only current information on agency Web pages does not provide for all the functions in the value chain of scholarly communication.”

———

In Memoriam
Paul Evan Peters, 1947-1996

The following is a news release from the Coalition for Networked Information.

We deeply regret the loss of this dynamic, creative, and sensitive colleague and friend.

We are very saddened to report the death of Paul Evan Peters, 48, Executive Director of the Coalition for Networked Information. He died suddenly on November 18, 1996, while he walked on a beach with his wife during a trip to Florida. Paul was the founding director of the Coalition for Networked Information and served as its head since March 1990. Highly respected in the library, information technology, and scholarly communities, he sought common ground for many constituencies in order to develop global networked information resources. A true imagineer, his vision and his ability to pull people together to build new realities were unique.

Paul led CNI through two cycles of formal evaluations by the sponsoring organizations and as recently as September saw it move from the status of a sunset enterprise to one of an ongoing nature, recognizing the achievement of its essential role in the North American dialogue to advance scholarship and intellectual productivity.

Before founding the Coalition in March 1990, Paul was Systems Coordinator at the New York Public Library from 1987 through 1989, and was Assistant University Librarian for Systems at Columbia University, where he also earned a master’s degree in sociology in 1986. From 1970 until 1978, Paul was a principal in a variety of research and development projects and he earned a master’s degree in library and information science at the University of Pittsburgh. Paul worked briefly as a Retail Systems Engineer for the National Cash Register Corporation immediately following the completion of his undergraduate studies in computer science and philosophy at the University of Dayton in 1969. Paul was a former president of the Library and Information Technology Association, was a former chair of the National Information Standards Organization, and served on the editorial boards of a number of networking, networked information, and library technology journals. He also served on the Council of the American Library Association.

He is survived by his wife, Rosemarie Kozdron; his parents, Austin and Mary Peters; and a brother, Philip Peters.

CNI Steering Committee Chair Richard West expressed his sentiments: “We do not yet comprehend how much Paul will be missed. His leadership, insight, and quiet competence has had an impact on all who have benefited from the CNI program. The many who had the chance to work with Paul know of his contribution and influence on our professional scholarly and technological activities—I cannot imagine his contribution being replaced any time soon. For me, this is also a great personal loss, for Paul was a trusted colleague and a close and wonderful friend.”

A condolence book will be available on the CNI Web site at http://www.cni.org/