

Prairienet: Shaping the Electronic Future



Greg Newby

“50 Years of Community Computing”

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The Future is not what we Envisioned



- ❧ Some of Greg's Prairienet motivations:
 - ❧ Access is key. This was a major inequity: computers, modems, phone lines, training, and basic knowledge of what's out there
 - ❧ Belief in self-empowerment through information access and electronic communication
 - ❧ Recognition that while large Universities were networked, network access elsewhere (including in the cities of Urbana and Champaign) was spotty or missing
 - ❧ Desire to inform people about the great utility of the Internet
 - ❧ Desire to provide means by which individuals and community organizations could become contributors, not just consumers
 - ❧ Belief that the the world was changing, thanks to the ability of technology to reduce barriers to communication and information

Prairienet Mission: Nearly 20 years old, and still relevant!



“Prairienet's mission is to:

- ❧ Strengthen community organizations by helping them provide and retrieve networked information.
- ❧ Empower individuals by providing access to networked information and by teaching the skills necessary to access and use this information.
- ❧ Facilitate information and resource sharing in support of community development efforts.
- ❧ Promote equity of access to computer resources for everyone in the community.” (www.prairienet.org)

“For the record...”



- ❧ Prairienet timeline from 1992-2003:
<http://web.archive.org/web/20041011115440/http://www.prairienet.org/about/phistory.phtml>
- ❧ Early highlights:
 - ❧ 1992: First prototype of Free-Net system
 - ❧ 1993: Initial U-C meetings, organizing, fundraising
 - ❧ June 17 2004: Official grand opening, with many users and over 70 community information providers already online
- ❧ Some of Greg's reflections (from 2004):
www.petascale.org/prairienet/pnet-history.html

A Sense of Pride



☞ “When I look back from 2004 to 1994, I see that we managed to seize great opportunities. Many lives were changed for the better, by using Prairienet to communicate across time and space with other people of similar interests. Today's online world is pretty different -- at first, the Internet looks like a huge flashy shopping mall. But when you dive a little deeper, the same types of communities are still there in great profusion. Just as Ann and I realized in 1992, it's the power of instant, cheap and only slightly-mediated communication that brings people to the Internet.

I'm proud of Prairienet, of the past and the present. The many thousands of hours invested by thousands of people over the span of a decade have built a powerful example of how technology can be humanizing, entertaining and informative. In the future, we will certainly see new technologies and fancier ways to communicate, but it will be the sense of community and human involvement that makes the electronic world go 'round.”

☞ Greg Newby, “My Prairienet Story” (<http://web.archive.org/web/20040530012041/www.prairienet.org/stories/mystory.php?id=14>)

Many Synergies



- ❧ U-C and UIUC's high tech culture: lots of creative, experienced, well-meaning participants
- ❧ GSLIS library basis: open approaches to content, access; non-judgmental provision of information and communication forums
- ❧ Internet culture: early leverage of NSFNet Acceptable Use Policy; information sharing with other Free-Nets and the burgeoning Internet communities in universities and elsewhere
- ❧ Community organizations: missions and motivations in support of community building & information sharing, technology & information literacy, and individual & collective empowerment augmented by new information tools

Your Presenter...



- ❧ Greg Newby was Assistant Professor in GSLIS at UIUC (with a joint appointment as a Senior Research Scientist at NCSA) from 1991-1997. He is currently Chief Scientist of the Arctic Region Supercomputing Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks
- ❧ Dr. Newby has managed to pursue a career as a generalist scientist. His greatest professional fulfillment has come from building things, and giving them away.
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- ❧ This presentation and a few other Prairienet items are online at www.petascale.org/prairienet/