

Pacific Neighborhood: The Past-and the Future

Curtis Hardyck
Executive Director, Pacific Neighborhood Consortium

This is a special meeting of the Pacific Neighborhood Consortium-set to discuss ways in which the PNC can be reorganized or even reinvented

The PNC was originally formed as a way to help scholars on the edges of the world's Largest ocean share interests, materials, resources and ideas as easily as if they were in the same neighborhood. In so doing, PNC preceded some of the outlooks now common among many academics--the close colleague who may be literally thousands of miles away, but who is as close a collaborator as if he or she shared physical laboratory space. PNC began with a group of university presidents listening to a proposal that they all work together to develop ways to share and improve their scholarly resources, using this new development in information technology known as the "Internet". They approved the idea and PNC began.

Looking back, it seems strange now to think of the idea of evangelizing the Internet, given its current level of intrusion into our daily lives. However, whether we marvel or express dismay no longer really matters. The capacity for rapid information exchange will continue to improve and, although we may never be able to access anywhere in the world at any desired speed, we will probably get reasonably close.

Now that we have at least the potential, even though not fully realized, of easy information exchange, it is now time to think about how PNC can adapt and change its focus to make use of these new capacities. We need to think more about providing content in this system. My colleague, Professor Lewis Lancaster, is of the view that it is now time for the information technology people to step back and let those scholars who develop content databases step to the forefront. As a person clearly identified with information technology, I am in complete agreement with him. We need to think about how databases can be made easily available--how they can be organized—how queries can be effectively simplified--and how those people who can gain the most benefit from a particular database can learn about it.

Let me offer one example from my own campus--the University of California, Berkely. In the course of presenting a series of lectures on Viet Nam, one of my colleagues found nine Ph.D dissertations in progress, all related to Viet Nam, in such diverse areas as Political Science, Economic Geography, Economics, Plant Pathology and Architecture. Each student was working in isolation, unaware of the efforts of the others. When placed in contact with each other, a tremendous benefit was realized from the opportunity to share information. As a result of that experience, we now have a database on the Berkeley campus of dissertation topics approved for degree completion available to all dissertation candidates. Candidates can examine the topics list and find who may be working in areas similar to their interests.

Yet another advantage of providing more access to content databases is the avoidance of duplication. My aforementioned colleague, Professor Lancaster, reported the disheartening experience of completing the electronic input of over 2000 pages of Sanskrit text, only to find that a colleague in Korea had just completed the identical effort. Whatever efforts we make to avoid this duplication of scholarly effort will be worthwhile.

To accomplish these kinds of goals, PNC has to change focus. In the following sessions, particularly on Wednesday afternoon we will discuss how PNC should establish relations with scholarly societies to accomplish this. We need to think of the kinds of services that PNC can offer to scholarly societies both in the humanities and the sciences. We need to develop a way to decentralize PNC and bring about a regional focus. Academic Sinica has provided the means and the organization to bring about this meeting and I hope they will take a lead position in establishing a strong Asian presence in a new PNC with regional center. Each of us attending this meeting needs to think about how his or her institution can best participate in these new activities. I hope you will discuss this among yourselves and seek out members of the organizing committee of this meeting (Simon Lin, C.C. Hsieh, Lewis Lancaster, Michael Keller and Curtis Hardyck) and make your views known to us.

Finally, you need to think about selecting a new executive director. I have done this for several years and I think a reinvented PNC will be better with a new director. Thank you.