Provincial Distributed Network for Accessing E-Materials and On Line Resources

Another project that FOPL could coordinate is a pilot study to assess the feasibility of establishing a distributed network of large provincially-funded shared servers for accessing e-materials and on line resources. This approach has the potential to contribute both economies of scale and lower maintenance and support costs which could benefit small public libraries in particular.

Issue:
E-materials and on line databases, though used extensively by large public libraries as essential sources of relevant information, are not well utilized by small public libraries. At present, Ontario residents served by small public libraries tend to rely almost exclusively on hard copy collections. They cannot benefit from the wealth of information available to those living in communities served by large public libraries, which have access to an array of virtual library services and federated search capabilities.

Small libraries often face limitations relating to broadband, infrastructure and staff training and experience in managing such resources. As a result, many of these libraries cannot do federated searches because they need to access sequentially into the individual databases of vendors. A shared server approach would facilitate efficient, comprehensive searches because the data would reside on the servers, rather than coming directly from vendors.

While the core databases funded through Knowledge Ontario are intended to address this issue to some extent, the challenges noted above have limited the ability of many smaller libraries to take full advantage of these resources. This situation needs to be corrected in order to ensure equity of access to information for all Ontarians, regardless of where they live.

Vision:
We are quickly approaching a time when e-materials and on line resources will be at least as important as printed works in meeting the needs of library patrons. Ensuring that smaller libraries are well positioned to respond to the changing needs of their patrons will require a sustainable infrastructure plan. In our view, this is best achieved through a distributed network of provincial servers. We propose the adoption of a provincial government infrastructure investment strategy to equip all libraries with the technology platforms necessary to drive innovation and meet the changing needs of a knowledge-based economy.

The ability of groups of 15 or more smaller public libraries to share the same server to access e-materials and on line resources eliminates the need for each small public library to incur the high cost of hosting these resources locally. Through web applications, the shared servers could provide the means to access such tools as Knowledge Ontario's Resource Ontario databases and the catalogues of Ontario's large public libraries.

Implementation:
We propose a feasibility assessment and pilot implementation of the shared server model to evaluate how it should eventually be expanded to include all public libraries. This project would be done in partnership with Knowledge Ontario and the OLSs. Knowledge Ontario would undertake the technical assessment and oversee plans to design, purchase and install hardware and software. The OLSs would work with libraries to ensure completion of any readiness checklists, to support local integration, and to deliver the training to staff on how to effectively use data searches using the e-materials and on line researches available through the servers. FOPL would act as project manager, dealing directly with the local libraries to ensure their needs are identified and met, and to monitor project budgets and timelines.

Federation's written submission to SOLS and OLS-N during our consultation session on August 19, 2008 regarding the allocation of the $15 million grant.

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