

# Remote Control: Creating a Technology-Centered Library in Rural Alaska

*Anne Duffy*

The state of Alaska provides a particularly unique context where the timeless customs of Native Alaskans are thriving, and modern technological innovations are being employed to preserve the incomparable sociological situation that exists there. Recently, efforts have been made to develop networks and provide electronic classrooms, telecourses, and distance learning services and apply them to meet the needs of the multicultural population of the area, while retaining and enhancing the distinctive qualities of the indigenous culture.

The University of Alaska Fairbanks-Kuskokwim Campus (UAF-KuC) is based in the rural Alaskan community of Bethel. To meet the information needs of its students, the Kuskokwim Campus combined its resources with the existing local library and created a regional consortium library. To provide a breath of information, the library relied heavily upon Gnosis and other inter-library loan programs that the University of Alaska libraries, in conjunction with state-run libraries, routinely make available to their patrons. However, due to the modest nature of many of these libraries and both the extreme distances and expenses of the inter-

library loan programs involved, the delivery of information generally took a great deal of time and impeded the library's ability to provide varied resources. As a result, the local consortium was not a resource library and could not provide the community with all of the types of information that they required. The information provided was hindered by the limits of its physical location and was inaccessible to many of the people spread throughout the vast district. In direct response to this situation, the distance education program also undertook the responsibility of trying to facilitate both the student body and general community in obtaining the resources necessary to meet their information needs.

Out of the existing distance education program, created by the state government and school systems along with UAFKuC, grew the Distance Delivery Consortium. The Distance Delivery Consortium (DDC) works with schools, the regional consortium library and other agencies to assist with telecommunication support, thus helping them create the structures they need. The DDC, as detailed in its mission statement, was specifically created to "promote distance education,

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telemedicine and telecommunications resources for rural Alaska.”

To properly describe the Distance Delivery Consortium, it is necessary to understand the context out of which it grew and the circumstance for which it was created. Southwest Alaska, which is the target area that the DDC specifically serves, presents a uniquely rural environment. The facilities initially provided by UAF-KuC, have been combined with other resources offered in Bethel. The village of Bethel, Alaska already functioned as a center of trade and commerce for the region, and has become a center for DDC operations. Located on the Yukon-Kuskokwim River Delta, Bethel serves a population of 22,000 people who live in the 56 villages located on the along the river delta, an area approximately the size of the states of Oregon or Pennsylvania. This area has very few roads, and as such the most popular forms of transportation are air travel, boat, snow machine and dog sled. Most village households in the region did not have private telephones until 1985. Internet connections first became available in 1989 to the private individuals who could afford them, although the phone/data connections that were relied upon contained several satellite hops that both slowed and degraded the signal. It became apparent, according to Heidi Simmons, a DDC executive board member and representative of UAF-KuC, that by working with regional and state telecommunication providers, more could be learned about technology and how it would better support the types of information that the clientele of the region required. In response, the DDC was founded in 1990 as a way for local organizations to share staffing, knowledge, co-write grants and focus on shared goals that fulfill common needs.

The DDC integrated pre-existing community service organizations, non-profit groups and industry sponsors to form a partnership that aims to facilitate growth from within the community. The consortium meets monthly, and has a full time coordinator to promote inter-agency cooperation. The DDC has a private executive board, and general membership participation changes depending upon agency needs for shared information. Community shared e-mail billboards are enlisted to keep the various groups working together and to aid the DDC in gathering information from its clients. The current board members are divided into four groups: voting members, corporate sponsors, community service members and supporters. \* Funding for the DDC comes from a vari-

ety of sources, including agency membership dues and grants. Depending upon the size of the agency and level of participation in the consortium, the yearly dues range from \$2,600 to over \$30,000 per agency.

The DDC is, by its very nature, technology-based and must adapt to include emerging technology. Technology vendors are invited to come to board meetings and provide updates on their products. As technology changes, the membership of the DDC board and the needs represented also change. In an effort to keep the DDC responsive to the needs of the community, direct recruitment is often used to bring new members into the consortium, helping ensure that their needs are considered as well. In addition to direct agency recruitment, the methods of local advertising, public meetings, word of mouth are also utilized. The DDC board routinely makes presentations at state conferences, local village school boards and tribal meetings. They have also sponsored technology/information-sharing conferences with village, city and tribal offices in order to gather information and to receive their input.

The methods through which the DDC distributes information has changed along with technology. The first consortium project (1990) dealt with upgrading the local PBS TV station so that analog programs could be created and broadcast to the schools and health corporations. In-region and statewide school districts in-service training, health and college course offerings were, and still are, aired. When analog technology switched to digital, the DDC wrote additional grants to provide digital decoders and en-coders that are a part of a statewide satellite interconnect project, allowing different regions of the state to share programming. The University of Alaska Southeast-Juneau Campus is the major beneficiary of this project, distance-delivering statewide an MBA program. Grant funding has allowed the development of a first class computer network that allows community members and agencies access to a shared network. This network has allowed the DDC to serve Southwest Alaska as well as many other parts of the state. Each agency involved in the consortium pays for and supports their own network and they are tied together through a shared server managed by the DDC Consortium Manager. Today, the information handled, in addition to private agency mail, includes community billboards that facilitate the sharing of community information such as job announcements, health information, community feedback, activities, etc. The DDC has

employed the establishment of universal funding rates to improve school district Internet access and encourage the growth of the Internet in schools. In the foreseeable future, the DDC expects the consortium agencies will be doing less live TV and more linked data and on-line course development, as these choices become less expensive and more interactive. Government provisions for inter-agency shared filing for USF telecommunication funds has the DDC also investigating wireless technology for shared network use.

The Distance Delivery Consortium serving rural Alaska is an inspiring example for other distance learning programs to model. It faces similar issues that the entire library and information science field is struggling with; particularly decreased funding with increasing demand for services, and increasingly rapid technological innovations which are both necessary, but difficult to keep pace with and afford. The agencies involved have each utilized their particular strengths and resources to work in conjunction with others to create a stronger whole, capable of meeting all of their needs and serving a population which would not have access to the valuable services it provides through any other means. Due to declining budgets and state resources, private and commercial agencies have greater success by working together and learning from each other. It is not an easy task to keep advancing and it is crucial to share and revisit inter-agency goals periodically. The greatest obstacle of different agencies working together as a consortium is responding to individual agency needs while providing a common integrated structure for the delivery of training and resources that everyone can utilize. Inter-agency cooperation also provides more community feed back and support than projects or grants created by just one agency.

Declining revenues have forced each agency to become more streamlined and focused upon primary goals and has fostered the development of relationships with other agencies. Through outsourcing and networking an information community has been created which has been able to share and learn from one another and the end result has been a tremendous benefit throughout the entire state of Alaska. With modern technology and the spirit of adaptation, innovation and perseverance, the Distance Delivery Consortium has not only been a positive force in Southwest Alaska, but the resources it provides have, via networks, benefited other areas thousands of miles from the Yukon-Kuskokwim River Delta.

Through the determined dedication of the DDC, the obstacles which previously prohibited the distribution of information in such a rustic environment and kept the residents at a disadvantage are being overcome, resulting in the development of a remarkable entity that strives to anticipate and fulfill the needs of rural Alaskans.

\* For a detailed list of the current Distance Delivery Consortium board members, please see Attachment A.

Attachment A:

### **The Distance Delivery Consortium Board Members, Spring 1999.**

Voting Members:

1. Bethel Broadcasting Inc. (KYUK TV/AM)
2. Lower Kuskokwim School District (26 Schools)
3. Lower Yukon School District (11 Schools)
4. Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (52 Villages)
5. Yupiit School District (3 Schools)
6. University of Alaska, Kuskokwim Branch (52 Villages)
7. Kashunamuit School District
8. St. Mary's School District
9. City of Bethel
10. United States Fish & Wildlife Service
11. Kwigpagmuit Community Development Corporation

Corporate Sponsors:

1. AT&T Alascom
2. United Utilities, Inc.
3. GCI
4. Bethel Native Corporation
5. Angstman Law Office

Community Service Members:

1. Tundra Women's Coalition
2. Alaska Federation of Natives
3. Bethel Community Services
4. Bethel Family Clinic
5. Orutsaramuit Native Council
6. Bethel Prematernal Home
7. Bethel Group Homes
8. Kusko 300 Race Committee
9. Bethel Evangelical Church
10. Lower Kuskokwim Economic Development Council

Supporters:

1. Alaska Army National Guard (AANG), Bethel Region