



PLA Tech Note: Push Technology

Push Technology: Pushed to the Brink

The arc of development of push technology has been an interesting one to chart. In 1997, it was *the* hot topic. In late 1998, it was pretty much trashed as tired, not useful, "a solution in search of a problem." In 1999, push, sometimes under an assumed name, found a place in companies and intranets, having metamorphosed into something people could actually use. Public libraries are beginning to use it too, as we shall see.

What is Push?

The World Wide Web is a "pull" technology. The browser you use must request a Web page before you see it. Broadcast media like radio and television, however, are "push" technologies: stuff is sent out whether anyone is there listening or not. The proliferation of Web sites and the profusion of information led some to think that people would find having Web material gathered and sent to them, instead of going out themselves to search for it, would be A Good Thing. And so push was born, a technology where users can choose content that they wish to receive.

The four types of push technology are described simply in Forrester's article (see bibliography) The one we are directly concerned with is the content aggregator type, epitomized by PointCast, which also represents our object lesson in the rise and fall of a technology. A content aggregator gathers information together and then pushes it out to its subscribers.

[PointCast](#) (now EntryPoint) was essentially an applet that could be programmed to receive news, sports scores, and other information garnered from broadcast servers. Subscribers got what they chose in their profiles delivered directly to their desktops. Lots of hype and lots of adopters in 1997 led to talks about a \$450 million purchase of PointCast. Alas, corporate network managers loathed PointCast traffic and customizable portal pages like My Yahoo filled the personal-interest niche. PointCast became part of LaunchPad (known as [EntryPoint](#)) in mid-1999 for a mere \$7 million.

A sticking point for push remains its gargantuan appetite for bandwidth and disk space. It is competing with ever-newer formats like streaming audio and video. When networks become robust enough to handle these, new applications for push will present themselves.

It's not dead yet! (with apologies to Monty Python)

There are two environments for push technology that are flourishing right now. One takes place on intranets, and the other is an old familiar friend, email. Email is the

original online "push" - you don't have to go to it, it comes to you. Email lists, commonly called "listserves" or online discussion lists, are proliferating, thanks to list hosting services like [eGroups](#) and [Topica](#). In exchange for short advertisements attached to each message, these services provide email list management on pretty much any topic under the sun. For a small fee, OneList and eGroups will even keep your list advertisement-free.

Public libraries are finding ways to use the Net to reach out to the library's public. One of these is via email, where announcements, lists of new acquisitions, and other information can be distributed via a listserv. Marnie Oakes, of [The Reuben Hoar Library, in Littleton, Massachusetts](#), recently set up such a list using eGroups. Oakes invited all patrons for whom the library had email addresses to join the list, and 119 of 668 invited did so. Response from the public has been enthusiastic, and the complaints about the advertising were resolved when the Friends group offered to pay the fees to keep advertising off the list.

"Traditional" push technology like BackWeb and PointCast is also being used on [intranets](#), those interior webblings that both corporations and libraries are building to keep their staff in touch and informed. Using push, a library can send benefits information to all its employees, target software updates to key departments, or reach administrators at all of its branches at once. Intranets can utilize plain old email, or they can use the kinds of technologies we just mentioned.

Cheryl Gustitus's "[The Push is On](#): What push technology means to the Special Librarian" was published during the height of push-mania, but it remains the clearest description of the benefits of push in general for libraries.

The push to where?

It should be obvious from the above that variations on email and messaging are what constitute the current heart of push technology. Jerry Kuntz of the Catskill Ramapo Library System noted emphatically that "Internet users like to choose their own content!" While he is certainly correct, the reincarnation of PointCast and the uses of targeted email lists do indicate a kind of "Push 2" where push content is massaged in different ways for different users. A recent article in *Forbes* by Amy Doan focuses on company intranets as the place for push. Such corporate intranets can profile push information for each employee, depending on their need and interest. Somewhat more homespun in a sneaky sort of cyber way is the kind of push utilized by book-and-everything seller amazon.com, which will send you free updates in areas of interest that you choose, like romance or science fiction. Ebay a-go-go, from the internet auction house Ebay, will, for a fee, page you if you have been outbid on your heart's desire so that you can rush back and raise your bid.

There are places for public libraries to go here. From notifying patrons about new acquisitions in their areas of interest or reminding them of overdues, to keeping staffers up to date on the library intranet, to posting a news ticker on the library's home page, to having daily library program announcements appear on the OPAC,

push has possibilities that can be successfully exploited.

Bibliography

Forrester, Leslie Ann. "Push Technology" in *Legal Assistant Today*. May/June 1998. p36-37.

Forrester defines the four types of push:

application distributor (like [Marimba's Castanet](#)) which allows software to be distributed to end-users, and is meant for information systems people;

content aggregators, which gather information and push it out - PointCast is the prime example;

platform providers who offer ways of creating your own content aggregator, a PointCast-like product on your own server; and

real-time data transfer, which transmits data, like stock quotes, to any number of people at once.

Piven, Joshua. "[Push comes to shove for PointCast](#)" in *Computer Technology Review*, June 1999, p10.

The rise and fall.

Tweney, Dylan. "Push: the rumors of its demise have been greatly exaggerated" in *InfoWorld*, May 24, 1999. p66ff.

Nice brief discussion of eGroups, OneList, and Topica, email list hosting services.

Walters, Daniel L. "Push Technology." American Library Association Annual Conference, Washington, DC, June 27, 1998. A collection of papers on Push from a program offered by the PLA Technology in Public Libraries Committee, including basic articles and vendor information.

Styczynski, John A. (Jack). "Make a web site sing with free push technology" in *Information Outlook* (from the Special Libraries Association) July 1999. p14-17. A nifty little article from a researcher at NBC on how to add news, weather, or other "tickers" free to your local or library Web site.

Gustitus, Cheryl. "[The Push is On: What push technology means to the Special Librarian](#)" in *Information Outlook*, January 1998, p21-24.

A positive and generous approach to push.

De Stricker, Ulla. "New Information Technologies" in *Computers in Libraries*, February 1998, p61-65. [Abstract](#).

Briefly discusses search engines, push/pull, WebTV, connected CD/DVD, and e-commerce.

Stover, Mark. *Leading the Wired Organization: The Information Professional's Guide to Managing Technological Change*. Neal Schuman Publishers. 1999. Chapter 8, "Using Emerging Technology Effectively" in the section on push analyzes Gustitus and de Stricker as two sides of the push coin.

Doan, Amy. "Push, take 2" in *Forbes*, April 19, 1999. p232-237.

Doan focuses on [BackWeb](#), whose push technology focuses on internal use within company intranets from international oil services to Rite Aid.

Peek, Robin. "Maybe it's time to push back" in *Information Today*, January 1998. p39-40.

Self-described software junkie Peek looks at browser and push technologies in Netscape and Internet Explorer.

Weinstein, Peter. "Pushing and pulling on the Web" in *Technology & Learning*, January 1998, p24-26.

An excellent early examination of what push can do for school districts.

Ginchereau, William. "The push metamorphosis" in *InfoWorld*, January 26, 1998. p80ff

General article with technical slant.

Prepared by [GraceAnne A. DeCandido](#) for the Public Library Association, August 31, 1999; reviewed April 2000. ladyhawk@well.com

The Public Library Association's Tech Notes project grew out of the desire to continue the work of *Wired for the Future: Developing Your Library Technology Plan*, by Diane Mayo and Sandra Nelson, published for PLA by ALA in 1999. Each of the Tech Notes, written by GraceAnne A. DeCandido, is a Web-published document of 1500-2000 words, providing an introduction and overview to a specific technology topic of interest to public libraries at a particular point in time. Topics were identified by PLA's Technology in Public Libraries Committee. Each Note is marked with the date of its completion and posting, and with the date, approximately one year later, when links and other information were reviewed.

The Technology for Public Libraries Committee is currently evaluating if the Committee should request PLA funding for additional Tech Notes. Readers' comments and suggestions are welcome and should be addressed to pla@ala.org. Please use *Tech Notes* in your subject line.

[Return to PLA home page](#)

[Video Teleconferencing: Here, There, and Everywhere](#)

[Metadata: Always More Than You Think](#)

[DOI: The Persistence of Memory](#)

[Electronic Statistics: Counting Crows](#)

[Wireless Networks: Unplugged, and Play](#)

[Intranets: The Web Inside](#)

[Push Technology: Pushed to the Brink](#)

Digital Disaster Planning: When Bad Things Happen to Good Systems