

Submission to Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Dec 2004

by Dr Stephen J Wozniak.

Peoples Network (PN) Computers in UK Public Libraries

I have been asked to summarise my view of the costs and benefits of the PN. I am an 'interested user' both of the PN and of public libraries. Early in 2003, and in my capacity as 'an enquiring scientific author', I published an analysis of how the PN had been funded and implemented. I also addressed some of the early and more obvious consequences for public libraries.

Two years ago, I knew virtually nothing about the Internet and very little about personal computers. I used an old computer only for word processing. I now have several connected to the Internet. My website includes an analysis of the PN and of local government, as well as my own local election campaign material.

However, whilst implementation of the PN certainly propelled me rapidly into the 'digital age', (one of the few genuine examples perhaps of how 'libraries really change lives'?), I still adhere to my belief that the PN has been vastly 'over hyped'. It cost far too much, it was implemented too rapidly on a 'one size fits all' basis and it cannot possibly deliver on many of its promises. In particular, it cannot conceivably accommodate more than a tiny fraction of the possible load of 'e-government'. It also continues to exert negative impacts on both library users and front-line staff.

I gained most of the knowledge I needed to become 'Internet capable' by reading books. I obtained these from many different libraries because Sidmouth library (serving a population of around 15,000) had such a poor selection. Matters improved after I wrote a caustic letter to the local newspaper.

My analysis of the PN is now two years old but has stood the test of time. Some updating is included here on how use of the PN has developed.

Analysis of capital and replacement costs for PN computers, - and how the scheme has impacted on libraries.

Data presentation.

As a scientific author I have been interested for decades in how information should be presented. In particular, normalisation of data to the level of ordinary experience is useful in helping non-scientists 'see the wood for the trees'.

Faced with figures of £100+ million, 30,000 computers and 200 library authorities keenly involved, the natural reaction is to agree how wonderful it must be. People in positions of authority who spend that sort of public money (in this case, Lottery money) must surely know what they are doing? The history of central government computer projects suggests otherwise. Recent press comment on one initiative has included "The end result of this massively over-engineered exercise has been

limited take-up, measly savings and no small amount of hot air.....a remarkable waste of time and money." (D/Tel 7-12-04)

When the PN data is normalised, doubts appear. Whilst high specification home computers cost some £700 to £800 in 2002 (with software) the PN machines cost on average around £4000 each. In 2004/5 machines having a much higher specification cost only £400 to £600 each.

Computers at £4000 each?

To cut a long story short, some 80% of the initial capital spend on the PN was consumed in setting up administrative hierarchies and 'command and control' systems. Provision of high speed (2MB) lines to all libraries can be questioned both as a capital and ongoing revenue cost. Council legal departments were (seemingly) thrown into turmoil by the prospect of deflecting liability for perceived misuse of the Internet by adults or (more critically) children. Much effort (and money) was therefore expended on installing 'snooping' hardware and software that would record every webpage visited by every library user - and at a time when CILIP was extolling the virtues of libraries as places where you "could obtain information in complete privacy" and the Council of Europe had published guidelines stating "Those providing Public Access Points should respect the privacy of users and treat knowledge of what they have accessed or wish to access as confidential".

It is in the continuing 'administrative shambles' of the PN that the first lessons need to be learnt. Why, for a project of (supposed and claimed) national importance were matters of system configuration, software provision, filtering, printing, legal liability, acceptable use policies (AUPs) and a host of other matters left to inexperienced local staff? Lottery money was simply thrown at them with the usual instruction - "spend it by (insert date) or lose it". So they spent it - "like kids in a sweet shop" according to one IT library manager whose comments are recorded on the Internet.

Doing every job many times over, and badly?

Would it not have been better to trial systems in a few areas first - selected perhaps by their population diversity - and to solve these problems using expert staff? Robust solution(s) could then have been rolled out with confidence across the UK and with no need for local staff to muddle through on each and every issue. Is it a good use of public money ever to have local staff do a job 200 times over (and badly)? Might it have been better to find out from experience what worked and then to say "this model, this software, these systems both work and give users what they want - now go ahead and install them". Upgrades could also have been tested and then rolled out in a co-ordinated fashion. I have spoken to computer systems experts about the 'one size fits all' approach of the PN. For the larger libraries, having a central server and simple terminals would apparently have provided a lower cost solution.

Two years on - still no uniformity of service.

The provision of services is still patchy. Library users who travel across the UK report myriad problems - some of them known to me personally. USB storage devices are either allowed or disallowed, use of CD(R) is either available or not and even when available may not be allowed to be used (the lawyers say not), digital camera cards can be (or cannot be) plugged in to send images by email. Chat rooms can (or cannot) be used by adults (or children or both). Sites that are 'banned' as unsuitable for library viewing in one area are freely available in others. Children are allowed (or not) to spend time playing audio CDs on the computers much to the irritation of 'genuine' library users (howsoever defined). Copying of data to hard drives is either allowed freely (or disallowed on pain of excommunication as a library user) and in some cases (Devon for example) data and images were freely being stored on the hard drives of PN machines for months if not years and with librarians cheerfully stating that they could be when the lawyers and IT staff were insisting that it was neither desirable nor possible. Data and images stored in this way were available to all users - children included. Ability to download programs and data from the Internet continues to be severely restricted (with justification) but even downloading a zipped attachment is allowed in some areas yet in others the staff have not heard of zipping - and show little inclination to find out.

In brief summary, the PN machines are of a high minimum specification yet continue to be used primarily for tasks where a £40 machine (2004 value) would serve adequately - as is demonstrated in overseas libraries and some small corner shops. Full use of PN machines is deliberately prevented - both lawyer concerns and staff ignorance being major factors.

There is no particular criticism of front-line staff here. Some of the 'more interested' staff I have met say they have learnt more from knowledgeable library users than they ever did from their training courses. The idea that the PN would 'bridge the digital divide' has proven predictably false. It is used heavily by a small fraction of the population - often people with their own home computers and who know the value of free high-speed broadband access for some tasks.

Future costs of the PN.

In some areas, the pressures of dealing with computer issues as well as their more traditional front-line roles has led to staff applying to be 'regraded' - an additional cost that may, over time, dwarf any replacement costs of hardware. A recent report (Tavistock Inst. see Appendix 2) reported staff in some libraries as being in 'sufferance response mode'.

It is sometimes stated as a problem for the longer term that 'the machines will need upgrading'. This is a minor concern - and also begs the question of whether some should be removed from libraries. Even the lowest specification PN machines (for example, without CD(R) and front mounted USB) could be upgraded

for around £40 in hardware costs. Complete new base units would cost no more than £300 each - and the monitors will probably last for many years yet. Severe upgrading of all 30,000 PN computers could cost therefore as little as £9 million. The XP platform will be adequate for years to come.

Apart from 'running repairs' the existing PN machines could well be adequate for a decade or more - providing local IT departments do not feel a need to justify their own existence by insisting on expensive and troublesome replacements which (of course) only they would be in a position to implement and control.

One point needs to be stressed here. The High Street computer market is driven primarily by the requirements of gaming - the sale of ever more complex and faster games with superb graphics. There is little educational value and no need for these machines ever to be used in libraries, save for specialist tasks. All my Internet and website work is done on machines worth £40 or less and with operating systems and software that are six or more years old. My computers would be thrown away as 'obsolete' by most Councils. A few (Somerset CC for example) deserve praise for bothering to sell surplus units at local auctions - I could have bought six last week for £40 each. With prices falling all the time, every household that has any interest in IT will soon be able to have their own computer. In at least one article in CILIP's magazine it has been suggested that the need for the PN may reduce as computer ownership becomes more widespread. But I digress!

Learning from overseas.

In designing the PN, little notice appears to have been taken of how things had been done overseas where (for example, in India) Internet access is widely available in major towns and cities - a situation that is slowly being realised in the UK. The computers are (probably) merely adequate to do the job. The cost is probably no more than £200 each (often much less?) and the service to the public better than in the UK (longer opening hours, no snooping, no tedious administrative procedures and a wide choice of facilities).

In Germany, public and private libraries I have visited are a world away from the noise and clatter of so many UK public libraries - even our once hallowed reference sections have not been spared. Most public Internet access and computer training appears to be in private enterprise Internet Cafes. The prices are low enough to be easily affordable, the level of technical assistance is good (the staff are not only computer-literate they are computer-interested) and the machines cost probably around £400 each. Opening hours are typically 10 am to midnight, 6 or 7 days. Locations range from converted small shops to large 'cafes' in indoor shopping centres. In summary, libraries are still places of peace, quiet and learning. Internet cafes are places where you can (if you wish) undertake almost any type of Internet surfing free of administration and bureaucracy yet with help always at hand.

Command and control - the fear of legal liability.

There is one further major difference. In the UK, much continues to be made of the need to record each and every use of a PN machine by every user. Guest users are required to provide ID in some areas in the UK but not in others. Sometimes, I fill out a form in one illegible name after showing ID for another - no-one bothers! Some UK-Online centres do not ask for ID. In libraries, a large effort is devoted to recording data on users but in such an inept fashion that little if any of it would ever be usable in a court of law.

For example, staff in some small branch libraries have reams of paper recording which guests used computers on which days but no record of which of several computers they actually used. So how would a prosecution for improper use be mounted? Librarians have recorded their views on the Internet - so many people give false names that collecting the data is a waste of time. But the systems trundle on - winding handles for no better reason than they were once thought essential. A malevolent person wishing to email threats to blow up aircraft (for example) could simply use a coin in the slot BT Internet kiosk. No ID is required at these or in any of the thousands of small shops providing 'pay as you go' access. Coin in the slot machines work well in some German libraries as elsewhere - no ID, no hassle, no snooping, no waste of staff time, no lawyers and no problems. More discussion and photos are on my website (see Appendix 2).

At the end of the principal webpage I published two years ago questioning the rationale for the PN, I listed some "Questions for the Minister". If the Committee would care now to provide answers, I would be delighted to ensure they reach a wide audience. These questions are listed in Appendix 1.

Statements made in evidence on 17 November.

I have selected two highlights.

THE VALUE OF READING. This can hardly be disputed - but reading what? A library should provide material for 'betterment' if at all possible, and the conditions in which it can best be appreciated. Some users may be unable to find peace and quiet at home. In many public libraries the quiet of the reference section has been replaced by the clatter of keyboards and the banter of ill behaved children playing computer games and chatting into mobile phones. Is this the price libraries must pay to increase 'footfall' and achieve 'targets' for Internet usage and social inclusion?

IDEA STORES. The success of these few buildings serves to confirm everything that is inadequate about squeezing many different and often conflicting functions into a cramped library. The capital costs of Idea Stores were large. They are unlikely to be widely replicated because the 'social inclusion' agenda is less urgent in all but a few areas of the UK.

It is labouring the point, but it might indeed work well to incorporate a library and an Internet cafe and a job centre and a CAB all into one building provided that the privacy of different groups of users could be maintained and the disruptive influences of some kept well away from the rest.

But it is simply not practicable in an already overcrowded library that was (perhaps) never even designed as a library. By all means have 'one stop government shops' where you can do all of the above and get your pension credit sorted out as well - but there need to be separate (enclosed) areas for people wishing to discuss problems in private. Even squeezing the PN into libraries has created conflict. It has disenfranchised some 'traditional' patrons who see banks of gleaming new computers, indolent children playing games and yet a pitiful selection of books.

Dr Stephen J Wozniak
Sidmouth
December 2004.

Appendix 1 - Questions for the Minister - as published February 2003.

Appendix 2 - List of some of the relevant webpages on www.seered.co.uk.

Appendix 1: Questions for the Minister - taken from www.seered.co.uk, February 2003.

1. One of the central planks of the PN project has been to make public libraries centres for the availability of e-government. Is it true that Lottery 'health, education and environment' money has been used to set up the infrastructure for this, and should not at least part of the funding have been provided by the Treasury?
2. Provision of Internet computers in libraries, and their widespread use for e-mailing whilst detracting from core library values and resources has been likened to handing out phone cards and postage stamps at the public expense. What is the government's view here and is emailing considered to be an educational activity worthy of long term public subsidy?
3. It has been estimated that charging for use of PN machines in public libraries could produce £30 million per year, equal to the costs of providing a reasonable level of extra support staff. Will the government consider this as a long term solution to some of the problems introduced by these computers?
4. How many of the 30,000 People's Network computers have been able to be incorporated in 'learning suite' environments that would give users a requisite degree of privacy and peace and quiet needed for structured learning or private study?

5. How many of the 30,000 computers part funded by £100 million of Lottery money have had to be located in any available space in very public areas of libraries ("carefully positioned having regard to all our operational and staffing requirements") so as to afford little or no privacy to users and little prospect of serious educational work being undertaken?

6. Can the Minister comment on why the unit installed cost of People's Network computers was as high as £4000 when comparable machines can be purchased new for £1000 or less and adequate second-hand machines for £250?

7. Can the Minister provide copies of any authoritative academic reports that analyse the cost-benefit of projects run by the New Opportunities Fund, an organisation that has already spent more Lottery money than was consumed by the Millennium Dome?

8. The PN project has comprised spending over £100 million on installing equipment, much of which may never be used to a fraction of its potential and yet the project is being hailed as a great success. Adulation is being bestowed both by casual users (whose analysis generally extends as far as unquestioning delight at being given something for nothing) and by those responsible for spending the money. Is this standard of analysis the best that your Department can do to justify a major use of Lottery cash?

9. What analyses were done of the future potential of digital television to deliver 'interactive services' to the groups that have been targeted by the People's Network project? Could they have been reached more effectively and with less social exclusion because little new technology would have had to be mastered, and a range of services would have been available in almost every home?

10. How much money was spent on the Harrison Cowley PR contract including the stunts at the end of January 2003 to "celebrate" and "shout about" the PN project and its claimed success? How much did the First Findings report cost, and does the Minister consider that such material represents a useful addition to knowledge?

11. Would the Minister agree that in the public interest, the same type of logic as has been applied to the People's Network could be applied to public transport? In this model, money would be thrown at the infrastructure, it would not matter if it was never fully utilised and people could use it for free. Could we then see the makings of a genuine improvement in society?

Appendix 2 - some of the relevant web pages on www.seered.co.uk.

The SeeRed website contains over 200 webpages. The following mention public libraries and are often in the 'top twenty hits', mainly owing to high placement by internet search engines.

[/peoples_network_computers.htm](#)

[/computer_layouts_photos.htm](#) (photos and costs of PN vs Germany).

[/smart_card_surveillance.htm](#)

[/filtering_pornography.htm](#) (discussion of Council of Europe guidelines)

[/peoples_network_computers_continued.htm](#)

[/identity_cards.htm](#)

[/tavistock.htm](#) (discussion of a candid report on the People's Network)

[/total_info_aware_system.htm](#)