

Electronic City Hall

by Michele Wittig

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HAT HAPPENS WHEN "CITY HALL" allows citizens to communicate with each other, city staff, and city officials on an electronic bulletin board from home, office, and public terminals? Santa Monica, California, residents have been answering that question with their Public Electronic Network (PEN), now in its third year of operation. The stated intention of city officials who agreed to this experiment in electronic democracy was to broaden citizen participation in political and community life. Whether this increased participation will be allowed to influence city policies is about to be seen, as PEN faces its first major test.

illustration by Brad Hamann

Lisa Carlson is the Janey Appleseed of computer conferencing. I realized how ubiquitous she is when I visited a town in Japan, an hour's flight from Tokyo, logged onto the English-language section of the local conferencing system, and found Lisa there. She works for Metasystems Design Group, which has set up conferencing systems all over the world. One of Metasystems' clients, the City of Santa Monica, set up an "electronic city hall," and Lisa pointed me toward this article.

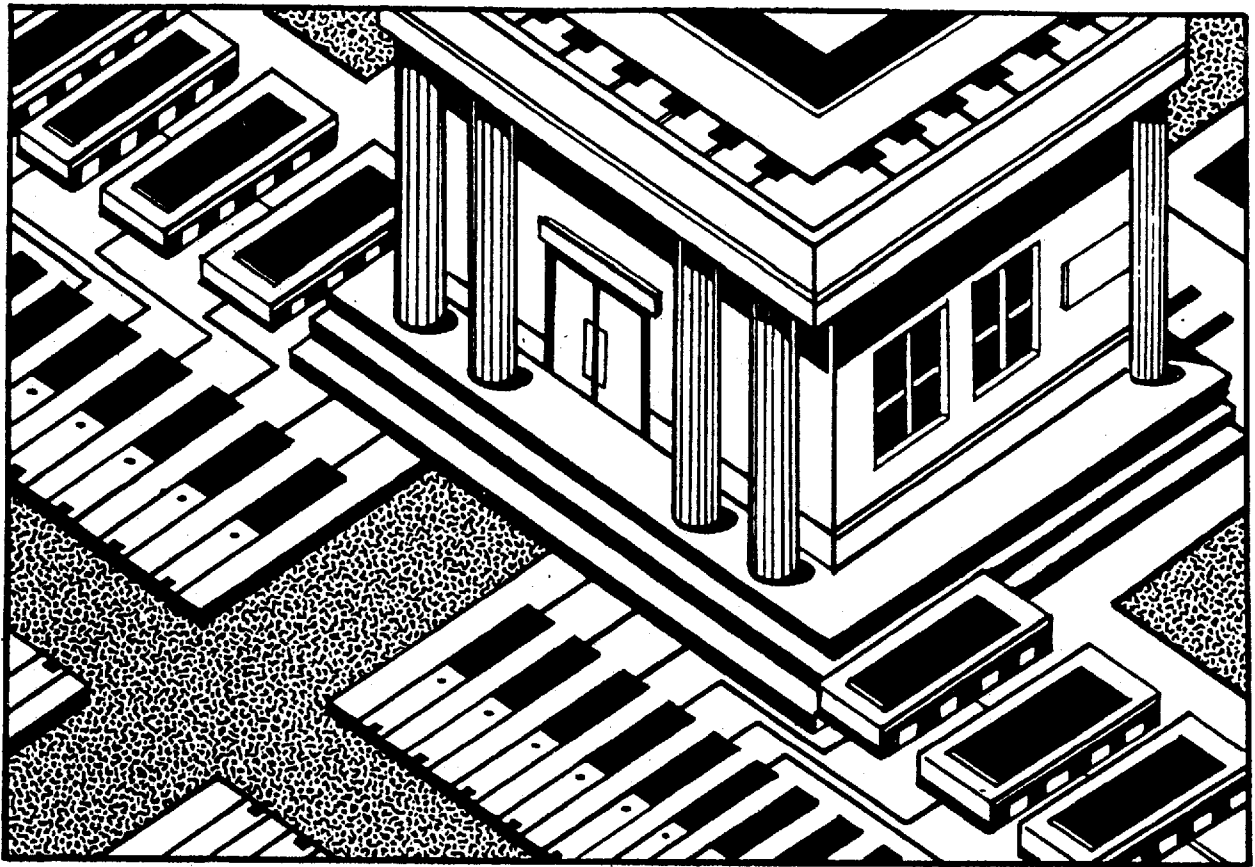
Michele Wittig is past chair of the People's Electronic Network Action Group, co-chairs the SHWASHLOCK project, and chairs the Santa Monica Commission on the Status of Women. She teaches graduate research methods and statistics in psychology at California State University, Northridge. —HR

In the summer of 1989, the Santa Monica City Council was presented with the first proposal from residents who participate in the network. The citizens dubbed their proposal SHWASHLOCK, an acronym for a program to provide early-morning showers, laundromat tokens, and lockers to homeless residents, along with a job bank.

The development of this proposal has elicited intense interest among city officials, the chamber of commerce, and neighborhood associations. The PEN Action Group's proposal addresses what a Santa Monica Chamber of Commerce survey deemed "the city's number-one problem."

For those interested in the uses of teleconferencing, the Action Group provides a case study of community organizing. Unlike electronic conferencing among employees in government agencies, universities, or companies, or among hobbyists who join commercial bulletin boards to gain access





to those with shared interests, PEN has made its debut as a means of communication among people having no more in common than that they live in the same eight-square-mile patch of suburban Los Angeles County.

Political Background

Residents of this city, 80 percent of whom are renters, made political news in the early 1980s when they passed one of the toughest rent-control ordinances in the country. The renters'-rights movement also ushered in a city council that espouses the principle of broadening the base of citizens who can influence city hall decisions. Putting that principle into practice has been difficult.

The PEOPLE's electronic network (a nickname which appeals to graying political activists who settled here in the sixties) constitutes a kind of test of the forms of participation that city staff and elected of-

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officials will allow ordinary citizens who participate in the network. Will citizen participation be limited to the recommendation phases of the political process, or will it encompass setting priorities and implementing policy?

Homelessness provides the issue for this test. During the past decade, the homeless population has become more numerous and more visible. Hundreds line up each afternoon to receive a free dinner. The city attorney, meanwhile, has been criticized for his leniency in prosecuting panhandlers and transients who sleep in the parks.

The Network as a Tool for Community Organizing

Intrigued by the possibility of increasing citizen participation in civic life, the city launched PEN in February, 1989, by distributing free user accounts to residents who register with the city. These accounts can be used from one's home or work terminal, or from one of dozens of public terminals

in libraries, schools, and city buildings. Citizens can participate in three ways: 1) read-only boards posting city information; 2) private e-mail between citizens or between citizens and city hall, and 3) public postings in any of six teleconferences.

These public conferences span a wide range of issues. Popular conferences include Crimewatch (run by the police department), PENhelp (online hints on how to use the system), Planning (a forum about land use, zoning, and development), Environment (incorporating discussions of air quality, water pollution, and recycling), and Santa Monica (including rent control, neighborhood organizing, community events, and news of boards and commissions). Social issues are discussed in several additional conferences. Topics include nuclear weapons, drinking and driving, the media, abortion, gun control, foreign policy, health, intergroup relations, Jewish culture, AIDS, human rights, sexism, and racism.


Most PENners seem to be content to use the system to inform themselves or others, or to debate current issues without taking any other action. But the potential of this local system to be a catalyst for political action is illustrated by those users who organized the PEN Action Group in July, 1989. When this group began to meet face-to-face as well as online to consider possible community projects, it was soon decided that the issue of major concern to most was homelessness.

Members of the PEN Action Group communicate with each other in two major ways: online in the Homeless teleconference (in which hundreds of citizens have posted thousands of responses) and in person at monthly meetings. Several homeless PENners are among the two dozen residents who regularly participate in the face-to-face meetings.

SHWASHLOCK

One evening in August, 1989, Santa Monica artist Bruria Finkel posted an idea for closing the gap in existing services for the homeless. She called her idea SHWASHLOCK. Conversations with homeless residents online verified that an early-morning shower, clean clothes, and a place to store one's belongings are essential if the homeless are to get, and keep, jobs.

To educate themselves, members of the



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PEN Action Group made site visits to local social-service agencies and met with leaders of the social-service community. They learned that the only public showers reliably available before noon were cold-water showers outdoors on the beach. Hot showers in public parks were not open until noon, making it difficult to shower before going to or seeking work. There was one free laundry service, but it required clients to give up the clothes they were wearing in return for clean clothes from a community rack. No lockers were available because service providers did not wish to "police" their contents. Once these gaps in services were identified, the PEN Action Group decided to lobby the city to fill them.

The group soon found that there was no consensus in the community for providing the services. Some objections were dealt with by revising the proposal. For example, an initial location for a facility elicited opposition because it was adjacent to a high school. When the group was unable to raise the funds necessary to lease the building, it decided this was a blessing in disguise and decided to pursue an interim plan of decentralized services. While the long-term goal of the group is to build or remodel a center in which these services are integrated with a job bank, the group decided that, in the interim, existing facilities should be adapted and made more accessible.

Another stumbling block arose when the local coalition of social-service providers expressed unease over the threat that the new group would be competing with them for scarce social-service dollars. To allay this fear, the group decided not to seek funding for itself, but to raise funds for an existing social-service agency, which agreed to administer the laundromat voucher program. Other objections were debated vigorously online, but did not result in changes in the original conception. For example, the group persisted in its resolve that the homeless should not be required to show evidence of job-seeking in order to qualify for a shower, laundry voucher, or locker.

Although over \$5,000 in private funds has been raised to initiate a laundry voucher system which will pay for 4,000 loads of laundry, so far only one laundromat is participating in the program. Nevertheless, its owners are enthusiastic and have expanded the hours during which vouchers are accepted from homeless clients, who obtain them at a local social-service agency.


A breakthrough occurred when a city council member put the group in touch with a locker manufacturer, who agreed to donate 30 lockers to the city, free of charge, for a seven-month trial period.

In May, 1990, the PEN Action Group's ten-page proposal was formally presented to the city council, resulting in a feasibility study. The following month, the council allocated \$150,000 to install lockers and showers at the restroom facilities under the Santa Monica Pier. The city has also agreed to open other public showers at six a.m.

The homeless themselves have emphasized the need for a cooperative job bank, listing employers who are willing to hire the homeless and provide them with bus fare, lunch money, daily or weekly pay, etc. The network will be used to solicit and post job listings, for perusal by anyone on the system. A homeless drop-in center staffed by job counselors has been equipped with a PEN terminal for this purpose. Two local graduate students have earned course credit for soliciting job listings from local businesspeople, interviewing job applicants, monitoring the job-placement effort, and evaluating the effectiveness of the program.

KIDS-91: A Global Electronic "Hole in Space"

With the SHWASHLOCK project under way, the PEN Action Group began to consider developing a second project. Criteria included use of the network, attracting new and different online participation, and community service. Kevin McKeown, a member of the Electronic Networking Association, suggested that Santa Monica become a participant in KIDS-91, an international effort begun in Norway to enroll schoolchildren, ages 10 to 15, around the world in electronic communication. The proposal was greeted with enthusiasm online and in the PEN Action Group's monthly face-to-face meeting at the city library. Coincidentally, PEN users and staff had been enrolling local schools on PEN. By the time KIDS-91 was proposed, a dozen classes at several public schools had been connected to PEN, each with its own school-based conference. With the advent of KIDS-91, more teachers are signing their students onto the system, so that the children's post-



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ings can be transmitted by McKeown to other KIDS-91 groups in Eastern and Western Europe, the Soviet Union, Japan, and North and South America.

On May 12, an electronic "hole in space" transmitted images of the children on the network from a dozen sites around the globe to and from the children at the other sites, on large screens. The city council, school district, and arts commission endorsed the project and committed funding and staff time to make it a success.

Group Process

Because some of the PEN Action Group's decision-making occurs on line, and all of the agendas and meeting minutes are posted on the network, it has been easy for anyone with a PEN account to observe the process by which the group has developed its proposals and to participate in the decision-making. The group has succeeded in finding a middle ground between disclosure and exposure of its plans, knowing that most of city hall, the school board, the chamber of commerce, and a cross-section of citizens are watching, if not participating in, the process. The free publicity attendant on access to the system has served the group well so far.

The city has succeeded in providing a mechanism for exercising citizenship beyond casting a ballot in a voting booth. It appears that city staff and city council are willing to act on recommendations emerging from the PEN Action Group. It's clear that two dozen residents have learned how to make their voices heard — electronically — in the halls of city government. ■

Santa Monica Public Electronic Network (Kevin Phillips, Director): Information Systems Department, Santa Monica City Hall, 1685 Main Street, Santa Monica, CA 90401; 213/458-8383.

PEN Action Group (Randy Woodland): 1023 Ocean Park Boulevard #4, Santa Monica, CA 90405; 213/396-5417.

SHWASHLOCK (Michele Wittig): Department of Psychology, California State University, Northridge, CA 91330; 818/885-2827 (mwittig@vax.csun.edu).

KIDS-91 (Kevin McKeown): 848 16th Street #E, Santa Monica, CA 90403; 213/393-3639.

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