

# Freenets help give access to all

I had never even heard of freenets or community networks before the day that I started working at one.

It was 1997, I was fresh out of university, and I had been hired as a technical writer for the Victoria Telecommunity Network.

It was my job to rewrite the VTN's user manual, an outdated document that had been cobbled together by a variety of volunteers who ran the gamut of writing ability.

Before I could even begin writing, I had to learn everything there was to know

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about freenets: what they are, who uses them, how they operate, and what benefits they offer to the community.

I had no idea where to start.

Just accessing the VTN was daunting, with its text-only interface. Trying to navigate with only the arrow keys and the Enter key on the keyboard was an affront to my point-and-click sensibilities.

My hand kept being drawn instinctively to the now impotent mouse (much as my foot always reaches for the clutch when driving a car with an automatic transmission).

I soon discovered that a freenet is a community-based computer network available at no cost or at a very low cost to users. The VTN's goals (which are similar to the goals of all freenets) are as follows:

- Computer-mediated communications among VTN users and community members;

- Easy access to information posted by community organizations, individuals, businesses, and government;

- Community events information;

- Worldwide e-mail;

- Access to selected online public access resources throughout the world; and

- Alternative news services.

What this means in layperson's terms is that via a freenet, a user can use e-mail, surf the Internet, access newsgroups, host a Web page, and belong to an online community, all for almost no cost.

At first I couldn't understand why people would want to use a freenet when they could be part of a "real" online community such as AOL.

I didn't know how to write a manual that extols the virtues of the VTN when I didn't like using it myself.

Boy, did my sentiments

## Sheri Radford



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change in the six months that I worked there. In that time I learned the VTN system inside and out.

I saw firsthand how a community comes together online.

I spoke on the phone with people who had never used a computer before, who were now confidently surfing the Internet, sending e-mail, and participating in newsgroups,

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often on 286 machines or public access terminals.

Freenets provide Internet access to those who would be unable to afford it otherwise. By linking up with public libraries and community centres, freenets aim to provide Internet access to all.

Several VTN users who expressed their gratitude to me were job seekers who used the system to search for employment opportunities, research companies, and e-mail resumes to prospective employers.

While working for the VTN, I was forced to become very familiar with Lynx, a text-only Web browser. I quickly learned that most Web sites look horrifying when viewed without graphics.

I started to notice Web sites with the Lynx-Friendly logo, even while I was browsing at home on a graphics-enabled browser. I also noticed

# VTN was the first freenet in Canada

how much faster Web sites load without the graphics.

The text-only environment was entirely strange to me. My first computer was a Macintosh and my second one ran Windows 95, so I came of age in a world with a graphic interface.

Working for the VTN, I had to learn UNIX and DOS. (I felt like I was being forced to learn an archaic language, such as Latin.)

I received support calls from people trying to connect to the VTN from both Macs and PCs. One intrepid soul phoned for help connecting using a Commodore 64 — I believe my reaction at the time was “You’re using a WHAT?” — and I actually got him connected.

One of the many advantages of a text-based system is that a powerful new computer is not required to use the Internet quickly and efficiently.

Many VTN users were neophytes in the world of computers. Whenever I received a support call from a VTN user, my first question was, “Are you using a Macintosh or a PC?” Ninety percent of the users responded, “What do you mean?”

I often had to resort to asking, “Do you see a little

picture of an apple on your monitor?” or “How many buttons do you see on your mouse?”

My favourite support call was “Who is Earl?” I received this one often, and I always patiently responded that an URL is an Internet address.

Freenets are staffed mainly by volunteers and supported almost entirely by donations. Users of freenets often become fiercely loyal and donate regularly.

I remember one user who didn’t have much money, but who once a year sent 12 cheques, post-dated for the first of each month, made out for \$5 each.

Started in 1992, the VTN was the first freenet in Canada. Since then, freenets have been growing steadily across the country, with the help of loyal users and the support of government organisations such as Industry Canada.

Groups such as the BC Community Networks Association unite these freenets, creating true online communities that span provinces and even continents.

Freenets occupy a unique niche in the high-tech world. They experience all the high-tech problems of

## Finding the freenets

**There are dozens of freenets and community networks in British Columbia. To get an idea of what freenets have to offer, visit the following ones:**

Victoria Telecommunity Network: [victoria.tc.ca](http://victoria.tc.ca)

Vancouver CommunityNet: [www.vcn.bc.ca](http://www.vcn.bc.ca)

Sea to Sky Free-Net (Squamish, Whistler, Pemberton): [sea-to-sky.net](http://sea-to-sky.net)

ValleyNet (Abbotsford, Mission, Chilliwack, Agassiz): [www.valleynet.bc.ca/](http://www.valleynet.bc.ca/)

The following community networking association sites are

worth checking out, too:

British Columbia Community Networks Association: [www.bcchna.bc.ca](http://www.bcchna.bc.ca)

Telecommunities Canada: [www.tc.ca](http://www.tc.ca)

Australian Community Networking Alliance: [www.vic-net.net.au/acna](http://www.vic-net.net.au/acna)

European Association for Community Networking: [www.eacn.org](http://www.eacn.org)

UK Communities Online: [www.communities.org.uk](http://www.communities.org.uk)

Association for Community Networking (United States): [bcn.boulder.co.us/afcn/](http://bcn.boulder.co.us/afcn/)

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an ISP, coupled with the problems of a non-profit agency. Servers go down. Expenses steadily increase every year, but donations fluctuate. Volunteers come and go. Tension sometimes exists between the few paid staff and the volunteers.

The demands placed on a freenet often outweigh its resources. Politics become involved, as a freenet must jump through various bureaucratic hoops in order to qualify as a non-profit organisation.

Despite these problems, freenets continue to thrive and grow. Some freenets are even starting to offer a graphical environment, for a fee. This fee is still far lower than any commercial ISP’s fees.

Even for an advanced computer user, there is always a use for a freenet. I still use the VTN for my email, because I have grown accustomed to the clean, simple, fast interface of Pine.

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