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Dial-up pioneer shuts down COIN users have until end of year to switch e-mail.

By ANNIE NELSON of the Tribune's staff

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When Columbia Online Information Network, or COIN, became the first Internet access provider in Mid-Missouri in the early 1990s, it was an Internet pioneer.

Now, after 13 years, it's the slow lane on an ever-expanding World Wide Web, and COIN administrators have decided to shut down the library-based service rather than try to keep up with the changing technology.

Citing continually increasing costs and a loss of membership to broadband services such as DSL and cable, COIN ended its 56k dial-up Internet service on June 30. E-mail users have until Dec. 30 to find a new provider.

Twelve-year COIN customer Liz Schmidt said she paid \$10 a month for Internet service and \$24 a year for e-mail through COIN. "I'm sure whatever CenturyTel is going to charge won't be that," she said, referring to the local phone company. "I'll just gulp and pay it, I guess."

Broadband providers typically charge \$30 to \$40 a month for service.

The falling cost for faster service meant COIN had to compete for users, which it was never intended to do, COIN Executive Director Marilyn McLeod said.

Like the library, COIN's mission was to provide public access to information, McLeod said. The Daniel Boone Regional Library will continue to host the Web sites for COIN and some 220 local not-for-profit organizations.

COIN began May 3, 1993, before the arrival of Netscape and its graphics-based browser that brought the Internet to the masses.



Jenna Isaacson photo

Columbia Online Information Network and library Web master Nathan Pauley, left, brings up an e-mail program on his computer at the Columbia Public Library as he and Marilyn McLeod, right, reminisce about the early days of the Internet service. COIN ended its dial-up service on June 30 and will eliminate e-mail at the end of the year.



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The impetus for the service came from MOREnet, a technology infrastructure system that provides access and other services to colleges, K-12 schools and libraries across the state.

Bill Giddings recalls COIN's humble beginning. He was assistant director of instructional media services for Columbia Public Schools when a MOREnet employee came to his office wondering why his daughter didn't have Internet access at Rock Bridge High School.

"That's really what got this whole thing started," said Giddings, who is now director of education library programs at MOREnet.

A pilot project of the University of Missouri-Columbia, the city of Columbia, Columbia Public Schools and the regional library system was born shortly thereafter.

McLeod said she met a lot of blank stares in 1993 when she tried to inform local organizations about free Web space hosting.

"They didn't understand it," she said. "Three years later everyone knew what you were talking about."

The text-only Internet service COIN provided was very different than the flashy, advertisement-filled Web pages that exist today. By the end of the first year, 6,000 users were accessing the Internet through "Gopher" and e-mailing with "Pine Mail."

"One of my favorite library memories is going up the stairs and seeing a couple e-mailing their son in Asia," library Director Melissa Carr said. "They had been unable to talk to him by phone and mail took so long. They were so excited."

John Dupuy, Socket Internet co-founder, said most small Internet service providers are either going under or becoming consultants because the cost of converting to broadband is just too great.

Dupuy said COIN helped his local startup business in the early days by introducing the Internet to Columbia. "Columbia was an early adopter community," he said. "It helped us make sales."

By 1998, Columbia was tied for third with Austin, Texas, for the highest number of Internet users, behind top-ranked Madison, Wis., and No. 2 Washington, D.C., according to a survey by International Demographics.

Asked whether she believes COIN had anything to do with that ranking, McLeod gave an emphatic "Yeah."

Although COIN was never intended to last beyond five or six years, the end is bittersweet for McLeod. She's happy the library is taking over what will be left of COIN's service, but she's sad about the end of the first community information network in Missouri.

"We are getting lots of nice messages from our users thanking us for the service," she said. "It's very touching."

Reach Annie Nelson at (573) 815-1731 or anelson@tribmail.com.



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