



Seth Horwitz

I became interested in community self-indexing (though not called that) in 1976, when I became involved with the "Free University" at Penn State. The Free U was an unaccredited town-and-gown organization through which anyone could teach anything, and anyone could attend. This led to involvement with the national movement of free universities and learning networks, as well as a year-long honors program immersed in the radical theories of self-directed learning espoused by Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire and John Holt.

After moving back to Philadelphia, I met Stan Pokras, who had been active in similar projects for 10 years, and we found we were the only people we could talk to about these ideas for more than half an hour without boring the other. For a couple of years, Stan and I published the newsletter Other Networks. I married Marie Searce (we had met at the Free U), and we moved into West Philly's Life Center, affiliated with Movement for a New Society (MNS).

I received a Masters Degree in Library and Information Science from Drexel University in 1985 (and am proud to identify myself as a "librarian" even though I haven't worked in a library for 20 years). In the early 1980's I worked as a part-time reference librarian in the Ridley Township (PA) Public Library, where I created a "learning network" through which patrons could express an interest which would be cataloged, classified and interfiled into the library's card catalog. ([Click here for a fuller description.](#))



From 1985 through 2002 I worked for a company called Telebase (under various changes of management and ownership), which created user-friendly interfaces for retrieving premium (chargeable) online information. After being laid off when Telebase was eviscerated by D&B (I'm not bitter!), I decided to try to earn a living doing the work that I feel is most personally meaningful and valuable.

My personal philosophy is that information is indeed associated with power. But that simply having access to more and more information is not necessarily empowering. Quite the contrary, drowning in information can have a disempowering effect. For information to be positively associated with power on a grassroots level, people must have more control over their personal information environment. On one hand, this means that they must be able to be genuinely selective about the information they consume—which is severely challenged today by the increasingly consolidated control of mass media. On the other hand, the empowering potential of information is realized by being able to effectively disseminate information of one's own. (Other things being equal, it is more empowering to write a book than to read one.) The "effectiveness" of information dissemination is always subjective, because it is effective to the extent that it achieves the disseminator's personal purposes. Within the context of community, effective dissemination must be voluntary, convenient, egalitarian, open and respectful. This is what community self-indexing and CommuniShare are all about. They are tools for facilitating empowerment.

Feel free to [contact me here](#).

