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## Where Sharing Isn't a Dirty Word By Michelle Delio

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CHAPEL HILL, North Carolina -- Want to sit in on a Tibetan monks' science class?

Perhaps you're curious about how [kudzu](#) grows? Maybe you'd like to listen to some classic Southern folk music, hear a Nobel Prize-winning poet read his work, learn how to upload your mind, tend bees, speak Japanese or heal with herbs?

Or you might just want to download some free software.

[Ibiblio](#), one of the Web's oldest and largest digital libraries, has all this and much, much more -- and all of it is completely free to visitors, thanks to backing from the [University of North Carolina](#) at Chapel Hill and technology companies like Linux distributor [Red Hat](#).

"Making the invisible visible is what ibiblio does best," said ibiblio director Paul Jones.

Ibiblio's staff and contributors rescue documents, videos, audio and image files from dusty archives or attics where few could view them and put them on the Web, where anyone with an Internet connection can retrieve the information.

The library also gives Web space to those who can't host their own sites due to political or financial considerations.

Housed on a couple of racks of thin-client servers tucked into a corner of the University of North Carolina's huge computer room, ibiblio averages about 3 million information requests per day, and the contributor-maintained collections are expanding daily.

Visitors aren't restricted to just browsing the collections, either. They can

critique or add information to an existing collection, or create and manage their own collection of information.

"Basically, if you want to share information about almost any subject, ibiblio will be happy to host you for free," said Jones. "The only rules are that whatever you want to share must be noncommercial, legal and have some value to other people."

Ibiblio began its life in 1992 under the moniker SunSITE, with funding from Sun Microsystems and a mandate "to share software and other things of interest," according to an October 1992 press release. SunSITE became MetaLab in 1997, after Sun stopped funding the project. But Jones had a problem with the new name.

"I'm dyslexic. Every time I'd type MetaLab it'd come out as 'meatball.'"

Happily, MetaLab/Meatball was re-christened ibiblio in 2002, when it received a multimillion-dollar grant from the Red Hat-affiliated Center for the Public Domain. Jones occasionally mangles the spelling, but at least it doesn't come out as a recognizably silly word.

Users still flood ibiblio when a new upgrade is released for one of the many open-source software projects that the library hosts, but ibiblio is now much more than just a download site. Jones and his staff want to create a 21st-century library based on open-source ideals.

"We'd like to demonstrate that the best way to protect and preserve so-called intellectual property is to share it freely with everyone," said Jones. "Shared information is enhanced and improved, so its value can only increase. Hoarded knowledge just stagnates."

Ibiblio's mostly part-time university student [staff](#) is as eclectic as the library's collections. Jones carefully picks people who he believes can bring interesting new perspectives to the project. The current staff includes majors in French lit, filmmaking and philosophy.

"Most of us have tech skills but aren't majoring in computer science," said ibiblio staffer Patrick Herron, a poet and philosophy student who is now majoring in information science. "Paul tends to pick staffers who are really interested in making information accessible to users, as opposed to people who are primarily interested in computers."

Jones, 52, also writes poetry and teaches journalism classes at UNC. He

considered becoming a journalist, but his dyslexia made it difficult for him to write quickly. So he decided to major in computer science.

"This was back in the days of punch cards, and trust me -- dyslexia and punch cards do not mix well. Happily, my teachers didn't know enough about computers to know I was clueless, that I spindled, folded and mutilated virtually every card that I laid my hands on. But after a while I learned to compensate."

Jones started at UNC as a systems programmer in 1978. An ecumenical hippie geek at heart, he takes equal delight in fast computers and slow-cooked barbecue. But the driving force of his life is sharing information -- about anything and everything.

Over a plate of North Carolina's finest pulled pork, Jones told us about a Colorado conference on file sharing he spoke at a few years back. Music industry executive Don Grusin was also on the panel.

"Grusin kept calling music downloaders pirates," said Jones. "I thought that was just awful. I told him the people who care about music enough to download it are the people he should love the most.

"If the record companies reached out and showed some love and respect to downloaders, then everyone could work together to find a way to peacefully coexist."

It's odd to hear a college professor talking with not even a twinge of irony about showing the love, but it seems to come naturally to Jones.

"My life now is still like it was in the '60s, but without all the sex and drugs," Jones said. "I try to be happy and love everybody. Usually, I succeed."

*(Michelle Delio and photographer Laszlo Pataki are midway through a four-week, geek-seeking journey along U.S. Route 1. If you know a town they should visit, a person they should meet, a weird roadside attraction they must see or a great place to fuel up on lobster rolls, barbecue, conch fritters and the like, send an e-mail to [wiredroadtrip@earthlink.net](mailto:wiredroadtrip@earthlink.net).)*



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