

# GIS/Mapping

## Case Study: Free Press

*Written by Stephanie Lindenbaum  
for the OSI Information Program*



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## **OSI - GIS/Mapping Project**

**Case Study:** Free Press

**Person Contacted:** Ben Byrne

*ISSUE: A small non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to the establishment and maintenance of a democratic media aims to involve the public in media-related policymaking, and to let policymakers see how passionate and involved the public actually is.*

*SOLUTION: Develop a database of community Internet projects nationwide and present it to Congressional leaders via a readable, informative interactive map.*

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*(Adapted from an interview with Free Press' Creative and Technical Manager, Ben Byrne.)*

Founded in 2002, Free Press is a small but voluble non-profit organization based in Northampton, Massachusetts focusing on public participation in media policy. With an outpost in Washington DC, Free Press also monitors policy debate on, among other topics, the democratic nature of American public media and the availability and ownership of internet access, and "free" radio and television. Drawing on the strength of its supporters nationwide, Free Press frequently presents white papers and petitions to Congressional staffers in order to inform policy on these media-related issues.

In 2005 Ben Byrne, Free Press' Creative and Technical Manger, was tasked with the project of building a database of community Internet projects around the country. Byrne felt this was in line with much of Free Press' work, with a strong "advocacy-oriented motive." Yet his colleagues impressed upon him the importance of presenting this database in an accessible format. "State legislatures and members of Congress weren't aware of going on, in terms of how many people and communities were developing their own free Internet networks, and we worried that they would make policy decisions that might actually hamper this progress," says Byrne.

Working with a limited budget, Byrne sought to present the database in a way that would demonstrate the variety of approaches and locations involved in community Internet. The Washington office in particular impressed upon him the need to generate an innovative representation of data, knowing full well that most Congressmen or their staffers don't have the time or inclination to read charts with 300+ entries.

Byrne ran some Google searches for map-making software and came upon John Emerson (formerly a designer with Human Rights Watch)'s DIY map, a freeware product designed to assist in the

production of activism-oriented maps. "I'm the web guy, so the challenge fell to me," says Byrne. "I'm a graphic designer who has taught myself databases for the web site, but mapping is a whole other specialty." Without the funds to acquire an ArcView license for the organization, Byrne felt that Free Press, which had coincidentally worked with Emerson on previous projects, would actually take to the notion of a free, Flash-based map more than a complicated GIS project, anyway.

Once he got over the initial learning curve, Byrne found the DIY maps fairly simple to use. In order to customize the maps and have them meet Free Press' functionality requirements, the organization ended up paying a small sum to Emerson for tailored adjustments, but far less than an official GIS license would have cost. "We were using the maps in a way that hadn't been intended, but John was more than happy to make upgrades." Emerson has since posted revision notes on his site, which Byrne is pleased to see. "If one of our grassroots activists wanted to be able to create his or her own maps, I'd point them to John's website - he does a thorough job."

At Free Press, Byrne has yet to hear what sort of concrete impact the map has made, but internally he has received a great deal of positive feedback on the project. The Washington-based has been "ecstatic" with the map and its functionality, claiming it has been seen as effective in public policy circles. In Northampton, the organization has felt encouraged enough by the map to replicate and modify it for other projects and parts of the organization's web portal, [freepress.net](http://freepress.net).

By trying to illustrate "Community Internet: Broadband as a public service," Byrne believes that he has presented an image that is "must more vibrant than a document." After a good deal of trial and error and poring over Emerson's documentation, he "understood the basic architecture [and] can connect it to other maps on the site," for instance a new map on Radio Payola.

Yet aside from being cost effective, Byrne questions how well the DIY maps will serve Free Press for newer mapping projects. "We are putting together the 'Action Squad,' a whole cadre of people that are much more active than 'point and click' activists. It would be great to have an interactive map, linking people, but I'm not sure how well the DIY map is going to handle this new project." Acknowledging that the software is "not the most robust tool in the world," Byrne still admits that in employing it, Free Press is "a lot further along than we were before."

For the community Internet map, Byrne has trained Free Press interns to fact-check and update data, but largely remains the sole employee with the ability to maintain the map. Yet without having to develop their own program or to hire an outside

consultant to create the maps for them, Byrne believes that Free Press has come out ahead. "We know that there is a tendency to say 'that's cool, let's do it,' but just because [a technology] may be cool doesn't mean it's a good use of resources." Byrne is currently investigating the GoogleMaps API, but insists that he'll adopt it only if it can do exactly what he wants and in a cost effective manner.

Maybe one of our grassroots activists wondered how to use it. I'd point them to john's website - he does a thorough job. I wouldn't write code for them to make it work. We're happy to give guidance.



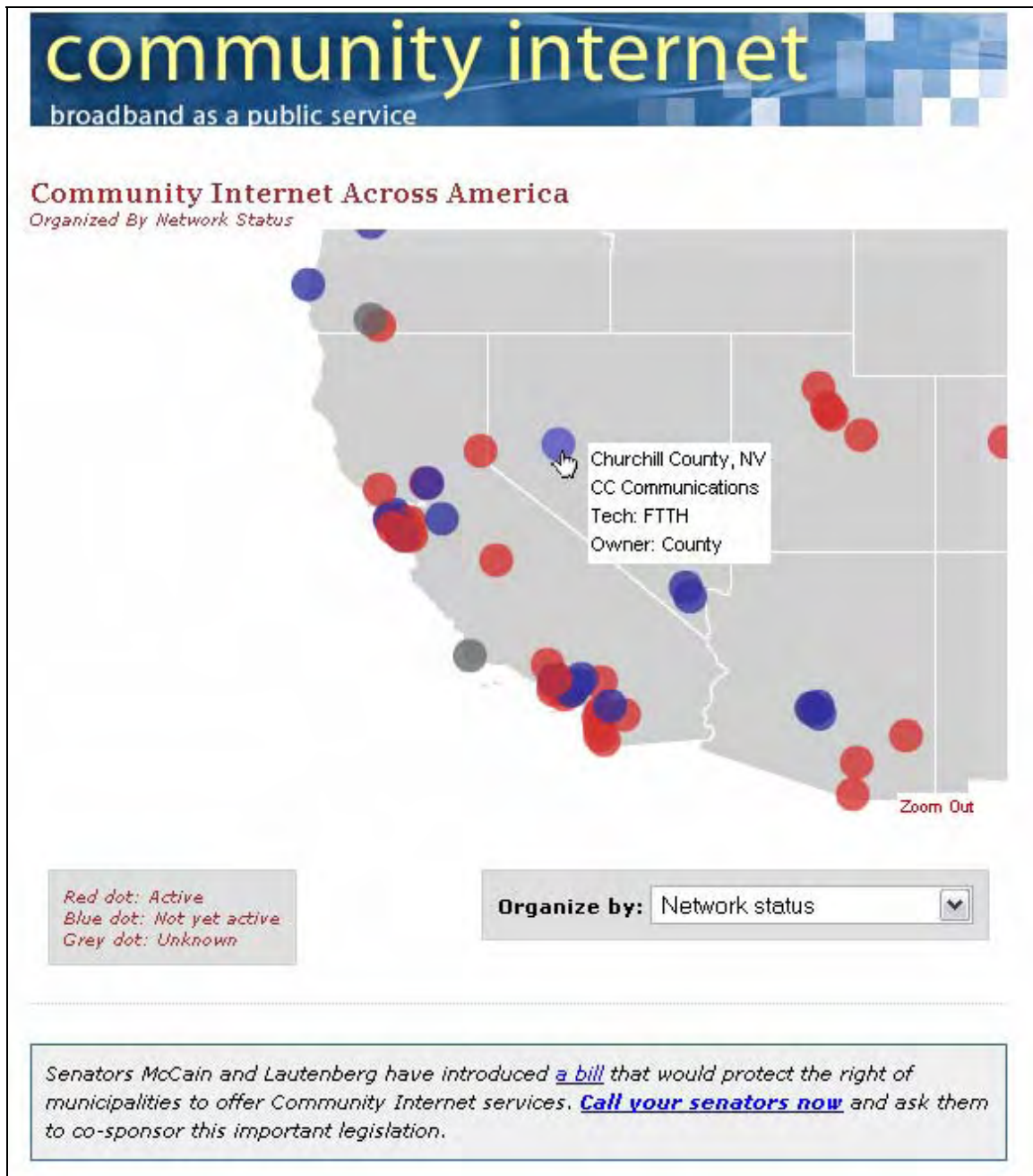


Figure 2: Community Internet Map, zoom on a municipal broadband network in Nevada; the Community Internet Glossary, accompanying the map on [freepress.net](http://freepress.net), defines FTTH as "Fiber to the Home: The installation of optical fiber from a telephone switch directly into a subscriber's home."