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Taking online interaction for granted

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Abstract:
The ubiquity of library user familiarity with online searching allows librarians to focus on the social and human considerations of online interaction. Librarians can be leaders in humanizing the net, in improving search engine technology, and in educating the 79% who are still not online.

Full Text:
Library users interact daily with a variety of commercial online systems, intranets, local area networks, and the Internet. We almost can take such online interaction for granted. Just as I assume my electric lights will come on when I flip the switch and the telephone dial tone will be there when I want it, incredibly complex computer network connections are becoming routine.

There are, of course, many specialists who focus on this technology and make sure it keeps working. But many more of us are free to focus on how and why patrons and staff use the information on the networks. This will be even more true in ten years.

That involvement without necessarily having the technical understanding--being able to take the technological side for granted--is a major change in the last two decades. The ubiquity of electronic resources in libraries and in society as a whole allows us to focus on the human factors in online interaction.

Expectations of interaction

Today librarians expect to connect to other libraries and to online systems and to send and receive E-mail from all over the world. Library patrons are coming to expect all that as well.

Many people also expect online interaction at home. Sometimes it seems as if everyone must be connected to the Internet, to America Online, or both. Witness the advertisements on TV and billboards and in magazines listing URLs. But expectations and reality are not always in sync; millions of Americans are not yet online and still must rely on libraries and schools for connections.

Yes, the number of Americans searching the web is growing incredibly quickly. A 1997 BusinessWeek survey estimates that 40 million people in the United States now browse the web (up from under ten million in 1996). Still, that is just 21 percent of adults--or, stated in a negative, 79 percent of adult Americans are not online.

Helping hands

Another web use survey, by FIND/SVP, found that 75 percent of current users have trouble locating sites and need help they are not getting from automatic search engines. Most of them view the web as a "selective reference source" rather than as an integral part of their daily media lives. An additional 9.3 million people beyond the 40 million regulars have tried web surfing but don't consider themselves current users, for several reasons, including lack of access and confusion over how to use the web.

Thus, libraries are essential to fulfilling the unmet expectations of interaction. Libraries provide access to those who do not have it and assist those who do. Assistance can be direct help, such as point-of-use reference service or formal classes, or it can be indirect help through good links from library homepages.

Librarians need also to point out sources and networks outside the Internet for those business and school needs that might be better met in more formal sources in all media, including print. Librarians provide a balanced viewpoint. As the October 1996 issue of PC Computing warned in an article titled "Internet Lies," one lie is that "You can find everything on the Net."

The author, Ed Bott, cautions, "If your question is very, very specific and if it's related to pop culture or computer science, you have a good chance of finding what you want. Brute-force search engines and the vast, unindexed bulk of the Internet's information store

conspire against more thoughtful questions, though."

Bott continues: "It's no surprise that career counselors say librarians will be in great demand over the next decade. They're the only ones who understand that sometimes your best bet is to look in a book." (I would add: or on a CD-ROM source, or a commercial online service.)

Most libraries, however, have not done a very good job of providing help when people at home need it. No one turns to libraries at 3 a.m. nor, in the case of my public library branch, anytime on Fridays or Sundays. The library of the near future should offer 24-hour-a-day online "SOS" services. The challenge of staffiing such services in an era of tight budgets is staggering--networked cooperation is probably the solution. This is an important untapped role for consortia.

Seeking instant gratification

Users expect more from libraries than in the past, and most of us want those expectations to grow. Also, our society generally expects instant gratification. Thus, the TV/Nintendo/fast food generation expects more and wants it faster. A two-week lag time for interlibrary loan doesn't cut it anymore.

Offering document delivery services coupled with bibliographic sources is one way to provide faster document turnaround, but there's not just one solution. Libraries must employ a variety of strategies for document access, including full-text databases, electronic-only journals, commercial document delivery services, automated interlibrary loan, and cooperative collection development.

The desire for instant gratification also affects hardware and technology. Reliable connections, high-speed modems, and assurance against downtime are all necessary to fulfill these expectations. Of course, that all costs money.

Information overload

We have gotten pretty good at solving the retrieval problem of locating information; the problem now is that we locate too much information. Automatic relevance ranking search engines provide some help, but many patrons want the best information, or the most authoritative information, or the most important information. Libraries offer the crucial addition of human judgment, providing access to directories, applying collection development skills to all media, and offering pathfinders and guides to stable, authoritative, reliable, and high-quality information. When it comes to information, too much can be as bad as too little.

Library staff face another kind of information overload. When we add a new medium, a new technology, or a new option in the library, we rarely eliminate older ones. Each staff member must learn continually and constantly. Library administrators must provide time for learning, practicing, and assimilating new technologies and techniques. We all can't know everything anymore. It's more important than ever to join consortia, call on experts throughout the system, help each other, and use knowledgeable volunteers.

Humanizing the net

No discussion of the human side of online resources can ignore the humanizing that takes place on the Internet. Chat rooms are full of people who have taken on assumed identities. You don't know if you are talking to an experienced medical doctor or a high school student.

MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle has built her career studying such interactions. She interviews people face-to-face to find out who they really are and why they take on assumed personalities. She tells a story about traveling to interview the person who is known in a chatroom as "Red Hot Babe," only to find an 85-year-old man in a nursing home.

The latest craze is to have a graphical alter ego, or avatar, that represents you in WWW graphical chat spaces such as Palace or in MUDs (multiuser dungeons or dimensions). No one knows yet how this will affect society or what it all means, but one of the mundane immediate impacts on the library is long lines for workstations because MUD addicts don't want to log off.

Social agent interfaces are the other side of the avatar coin. They are characters, like avatars, assumed by the system to guide users through the search process. HAL in 2001 was a social agent interface, as is Microsoft's Bob. These haven't been used much in information retrieval systems--I don't know any library online catalog that yet has a social interface--but there are possibilities here. The humanization of networks is a trend. Perhaps we should start letting users pick an agent when they log on to the library catalog.

Humanizing helps make people feel comfortable in cyberspace. Social agents and avatars make the space familiar, comforting, or liberating. Another manifestation of this is the use of metaphors to explain interactions. "Homepage" is a perfect example.

Emotions have always played a part in our interaction with computers, What is important about these emotions is that they seem to affect how people search, interact with information retrieval systems, listen to instructions, react to search results, and probably what they do ultimately with the information they retrieve.

This is encouraging, because it reaffirms the human elements of human-machine interaction and information retrieval. It reaffirms what I've always known: the importance of the librarian's touch in all aspects of searching success.

Refocusing on bigger issues

Just because a library has decided to provide computer system access, including Internet access, questions about libraries and the Internet don't disappear. Librarians are debating whether to impose rules and policies regarding a service that lends itself to wild

experimentation and creative anarchy.

Many of the issues arise from the popularity of Internet access in a library with a limited number of workstations. Other issues are more serious and solutions less obvious. For example, some kinds of materials on the Internet may raise not just philosophical but fecal questions. Pornography over the Internet is a loaded issue right now. Libraries are struggling with whether or not to implement policies prohibiting access to sexually explicit materials and with absolving themselves of any legal liability if patrons ignore that policy.

Many libraries are trying to solve the problem by guiding use rather than restricting it. Since most "serious" library research is done on databases mounted on the library's own computer, CD-ROM network, or library catalog, some libraries just don't provide access to the Internet on the workstations that access these resources. Separate Internet workstations can be used for any purpose without interfering with the other library resources.

Having separate workstations may seem a simple solution, but it goes against the trend toward integrated information services with common interfaces that guide users to a variety of CD-ROM, inhouse, online, and Internet resources. A more sophisticated way to guide use is to point to selected sources from a main menu or provide links from a library homepage. Carefully designed menus or homepages don't necessarily prohibit unwanted uses, but they encourage more serious functions by making them easily accessible.

One librarian told me, "It is not apparent to the user that they are in fact using the Internet." These choices have been listed on menus along with the library's CD-ROM network.

A natural backlash

A final aspect of the proliferation of computer networks in libraries and society is a natural rebellion by some people against technological incursions. Many libraries, most visibly the San Francisco Public Library, have faced backlash from patrons resisting the emphasis on networked electronic information.

Backlash is a natural reaction; it is a course correction to overhype and to change. Librarians must expect backlash, understand it, and be ready to deal with it. We must continue to be enthusiastic but should not over-promise the wonders of technology. Taking online interaction for granted also means keeping it in perspective.

[This column is based on presentations for the Arkansas Library Association and Nevada Library Association.]

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