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Shaping the Web "As We Want It"

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Abstract:

The 1998 Online World Conference, sponsored by Online, Inc., was marked by president of Alexa Internet Brewster Kahle's speech. Kahle feels that libraries should 1) a collection with selection; 2) easy and open access; 3) organized materials; 4) preservation of the valuable and rare; and 5) aid to patrons. Other highlights of the conference are presented.

Full Text:

IT USED TO BE THAT, if you couldn't attend a conference, you couldn't access the content unless there were a proceedings volume. It's still best to be present at the meeting, but audiovisuals for most of the presentations made at the 1998 Online World Conference--sponsored by Online, Inc.--are available <www.onlineinc.com>. Online World was held in mid-October in Washington, DC.

Archiving the web

Usually I learn the most in the break-out sessions, not the plenaries, but Brewster Kahle's keynote talk was a genuine highlight. Kahle, now president of Alexa Internet and best known for creating the wide area information system (WAIS), has launched a mission to preserve and archive the web. During the Online World conference, Kahle presented the Library of Congress with a downloaded "snapshot" of the web, covering January and February 1997. Although the gesture was mostly symbolic (the 12-terabyte archive is on magnetic tape, presented in a box complete with a commissioned sculpture), Kahle's concern over capturing our digital intellectual legacy is real.

He pointed out that more than ten million people in the world now create material for the web, a "tremendous outpouring of creativity." Web content doubles about every eight months. Kahle cited Michael Lesk (Practical Digital Libraries: Books, Bytes, and Bucks, Morgan Kaufman, 1997), who reports that there are now ten net searches conducted for every person who walks into a public library in the United States.

Though Kahle believes "now is the time to build a digital library," the library "as we want it" remains in its infancy. Kahle reminded the audience that a library should include five elements: 1) a collection with selection; 2) easy and open access; 3) organized materials; 4) preservation of the valuable and rare; and 5) aid to patrons. The web "as we have it" provides only the second of these elements, while his company is actively pursuing the fourth, he said.

Much of the rest of the conference featured talks by information professionals who work daily on these elements of electronic selection, access, organization, preservation, and patron aid. While Kahle urged librarians to "get back in the loop" most of the presenters never felt out of it, whether they operate in the immense environment of the web as a whole or in the middle of their own library or company.

Collection with selection

The good news about the web, according to Kahle, is that "the collection is huge"; the bad news is that "selection is difficult." Several speakers described efforts by academic librarians to tackle the latter issue.

James Rettig, university librarian at the University of Richmond, VA, and Cheryl LaGuardia, coordinator of the Electronic Teaching Center at Harvard University Library and LJ Database&Disc Reviews columnist, presented their guidelines for "Beyond `Beyond Cool'"--a follow-up to Rettig's 1996 presentation/article on web evaluation criteria, "Beyond Cool." Rettig and LaGuardia said librarians must evaluate, point to, and select web sites more seriously than do commercial evaluation services, which often focus on how "cool" or fun a web site appears.

They said library OPACs and other finding aids, using consistent and thoughtful evaluation criteria, should lead patrons to the best sites. They proposed that all librarians apply the following criteria to web site evaluation: audience, authority, content, internal evidence, design, and medium.

An information resource should demonstrate a clear sense of the intended audience, display an understanding of the needs of that audience, and be on an appropriate level for it. Authority--perhaps the most important criterion--remains quite difficult to apply in the web environment; "the resource should offer evidence of its creator's authority and qualifications to provide information on the topic(s) the resource treats."

Web resources should include content that is subject-specific, current, and both broad and deep enough "to meet the audience's needs." By internal evidence, Rettig and LaGuardia recognize that many web sites fail to include basic bibliographic information. Web resources should "provide internal evidence that allows users to assess credibility and reliability" including creation and update dates and identification of ownership.

Design and medium are the criteria most commonly associated with web page evaluation but must be evaluated in context with the other factors. Good design includes appropriate content links, links for downloading auxiliary software that is necessary to use the resource, and a pleasing aesthetic appearance. As for medium, Rettig and LaGuardia believe that web resources should include integrated text, audio, video, and images and "should leave the impression that information could not be conveyed as well through any other medium."

Bookmarked sites

Hal Kirkwood, librarian at the Purdue Management and Economics Library, IN, provided an overview of librarian-created sites that provide substantive reviews of Internet resources. Some of these are archives of web reviews that appeared in print journals; others are cooperative evaluation and cataloging projects. Both small- and large-scale projects are included.

Small-scale archives of published reviews include C&RL News: Internet Reviews; Choice; and Online: Bookmark Central. Large-scale projects rely on continuous submissions of cataloging or indexing records of web sites selected by librarian volunteers. Three such projects are OCLC's InterCAT (with 46,000 web sites cataloged by 1000 member libraries); Librarians' Index to the Internet (with 4000 web sites submitted by 68 volunteers); and, InfoMine (with 9000 web sites cataloged by 30 volunteers). These totals have undoubtedly increased since October.

Librarians need to bring their skills in evaluation and cataloging to keep these projects up-to-date to continue to help patrons identify the best web information resources. The problem is both one of quality--pointing to the best resources out of all the millions on the web--and quantity--how can we ever keep up with all of the new materials added daily. Some believe the human approach can never work because the web is just too big, but so far the human is the only reliable judge of quality.

Creating better web pages

All of the criteria and initiatives above concern web sites created by others. But librarians also must know how to evaluate and improve their own sites. Jeanie Welch, a librarian at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte (UNCC), said that, besides evaluating the content and design, web creators should monitor access and link statistics to make sure their sites are being used and to see how they are being used. UNCC receives patron feedback via E-mail, periodic questionnaires, and citations in student papers.

Scott Mellendorf, reference and Internet librarian at Saginaw Valley State University, MI, advocated going "beyond the homepage" to create additional web-based services. His library provides many Internet services, including a newsletter, online bulletin board, online instruction, and Internet reference assistance. In a survey of 150 other academic libraries, Mellendorf found that 84 percent provide access to Internet resources through the library, about half have web-based online catalogs, 37 percent provide Internet instruction, 36 percent have a bulletin board service, 25 percent offer electronic reference, and 13 percent have a web newsletter.

A variety of Internet services benefit libraries. They show the library's commitment to provide information, demonstrate leadership and expertise, and promote multidepartment cooperation within the university. Mellendorf quoted a Saginaw Valley student, who said, "I can find nothing useful on the Internet! But I found great assistance through this program that you have set up. Thank you for taking the time to do this for the students!!!"

Online or web?

You may wonder why a conference titled "Online World" is focusing so much on the web rather than on traditional online resources. Mary McCarty, director of research and Internet services, Edelman Public Relations in Washington, DC, summarized the situation nicely by reminding us that "the division between 'traditional online' and web doesn't exist anymore. It might be better to describe the difference in costs as straightforward 'fee' vs. hidden 'fee.'" This is because "traditional online services are choosing the Internet as their delivery platform." Even some traditionally no-fee web services are beginning to charge for web access. For example, according to the Newspaper Association of America, more than 100 newspapers are now charging for access to their web archives.

Web access is the medium of choice for end user searching. In a 1998 survey by RHI Consulting, 29 percent of companies with more than 100 employees reported offering end user access to the Internet. My own survey of university libraries ("The Digital Reference World of Academic Libraries" Online, July/August 1998, p. 22-28) shows that nearly all offer end user web searching.

Patron aids

Such reliance on end user searching highlights the role of librarian as a patron aid. A session on filtering even referred to "carbon-based filtering" to describe the corporate librarian. Leslie Wood, corporate librarian at Hagler Bailly of Arlington, VA, said that the librarian's role has changed from that of guardian to gatekeeper, coach, and, finally, to captain. "The librarian's role changes as she becomes a champion of distributed resources. Rather than guarding information, she steers her clients through the overload of available resources, guiding them to appropriate resources and helping them to make the best use of the information retrieved."

McCarty offered tips for both information professionals and end users to become better online searchers. She recommended that information professionals remember the "5-4-3-2-1 Internet" solution: 5) apply to web resources the same five criteria used to evaluate print resources (currency, authority, scope/intended audience, tone, and ease of use); 4) try at least four search engines for every search, because the top search engines have little overlap and each includes only a small percentage of the total web; 3) "triangulate--use three sources to verify suspicious Internet information" and use web pages created by librarians to get higher quality information; 2) cost and speed are the two factors most important to employers; and 1) always go back to the one original source if a web source refers to other information or is a reposting.

McCarty reminded the audience that ongoing marketing and end user education are the keys to librarian success. She recommends we teach end users five rules as well: 5) always ask five questions about any web source: Who? What? Where? When? and How?; 4) search at least four search engines; 3) the three fairly reliable web domains are .gov, .mil, and .edu; 2) "go back 'two' original source"; and 1) follow the one-hour rule--"if you can't find it within one hour, go to an information professional."

Librarians: skills needed

Whether fees are direct or hidden, or whether databases are commercial or not, the web is the online resource base of choice today for librarians, vendors, and end users. Still, the library (or librarian) as pivot point remains crucial in helping to shape the amorphous web into a useful tool. The web is too big and too pervasive to be the exclusive domain of any one group of professionals or any one approach to organization. Librarians bring knowledge of their user groups and evaluation skills that can help shape the web into more of a digital library as we'd like it and less of a mere conglomeration of cool stuff.

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