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The Role of the Library Web Site

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A Step beyond Deli Sandwiches

Quality reference and user service requires a combination of having the right resources, making sense of them for the user, and providing the right services in the right time and place. Reference and user services librarians' work has involved developing all aspects, and the Web has had a great impact on each one. Many articles in RUSQ have studied the impact of Web resources and questioned the implications for service. For a recent example, see Anne Grodzins Lipow's challenging paper, "Thinking Out Loud," in the winter 1997 issue of RUSQ. It seems that suddenly we are presented with great opportunities for access to resources and great challenges for how to provide service.

Because the Web offers such vast implications for reference and user services, RUSQ editor Gail Schlachter has decided to devote column space to this issue and has generously invited me to edit this column. I am excited to bring my vocational interest in electronic reference to this medium and to have an excuse to spend time considering the issues.

This column will be devoted to examining issues, resources, and technologies presented on the Web that impact reference and user service. The issues are potentially endless and will change over time: the nature of digital service, technological advances and censorship, interfaces, design, integration with other library services and resources, impact on organizations, and more. The types of resources that can be examined are equally endless: search engines, databases, reference sites, directories, training, educational sites and products, finding aids, clearinghouses, and more.

One place to start in the mix of all these choices is to consider what role the actual library Web site plays. Without examining such issues as design and layout, I would like to offer a look at some of the content and organizational issues at stake. Three to four years after putting up Web sites, both my library and my academic institution are creating and recreating guideline and policy statements for Web sites. In the course of doing so, we have (at least in the library) backhandedly learned that it is very useful to have an official sense of what role technology plays in determining what mission that technology serves and what guidelines it necessitates.

Making Deli Sandwiches

In 1997, Garry Trudeau ran a series in the Doonesbury comic strip about Mike, who was running his own fledgling Web-based company. He hired Lars, a consultant, to come in and give direction to the company, to "create paradigms for the next millennium." When Mike checked on the progress of his consultant, Lars quickly snapped, "Excuse me, but I'm not making deli sandwiches here, okay?"

With such a lofty goal, how does one proceed, where does one begin, and how does one recognize progress? For good and for bad, libraries have rushed to keep pace with the rest of the world and our own colleagues in creating a Web presence without stepping back to consider the next millennium. I suspect that if we all waited to see what the next millennium had to offer, we would not be here to see it. And by stepping in and creating sites now, deli sandwiches though they may be, we actually become more technologically prepared and have a hand in creating that future.

After making the now necessary decision to "put up a Web site," libraries then face the real issue of what to put on the site. Catalogers are rushing to provide access to a Web-based library catalog filled with records of electronic library and Internet resources. Reference librarians enhance their sites with pathfinders and road maps to simplify the maze of the Internet and pull out sources that help them answer the questions they know patrons are asking. Many are also providing forms or e-mail links for patrons to contact them digitally. Curators and archivists are digitizing the unique resources they house, allowing them to showcase their holdings to the world, as well as to provide a copy that can be used repeatedly while maintaining a carefully preserved original resource. Bibliographic instruction librarians are tapping in to distance education principles and providing courses and instruction about libraries and resources on the Web. Bibliographers are quickly changing subscriptions of databases, encyclopedias, and other commercial materials to Web-based options whenever possible. Circulation and Interlibrary Loan staff are increasingly using Web-based OPACs and other systems to allow patrons to request print material remotely. Library consortia are working with each other and publishers to find ways of archiving data that are likely to disappear from existence otherwise. And yet others in the library are anxious to use the Web simply to advertise their own existence and let the public know where they are, when they are open, and what are their policies.

Depending on how complex a library's Web presence and how complex the corresponding institution each are, the organizational requirements for supporting the virtual life may be more or less demanding. But in a sense, libraries are often in the business of making deli sandwiches in a complex environment with lots of stuff, people, and opinions. Where there are branch libraries, where there are consortia, where there are governmental, academic, or corporate environments within which the library moves, there may be differing expectations of what the Web presence should be and what role that presence plays.

Roles the Library Web Site Can Play

The library Web site can and by default does play a variety of roles. First, a library Web site often serves the role of a library workstation, both for the users and for the librarians serving them. This necessitates a presentation and organization that allows users to know all that the library has to offer electronically, and in a way that makes sense. It is a tool that will help to speed up or slow down the reference librarians' work in assisting patrons to find information. It is a tool that will help or hinder the user in expanding research or in finding the answer to a very simple question, such as how determine if the library has a particular book and where it might be found.

In the role of library workstation, a library Web site serves as a delivery mechanism for databases, electronic texts and journals, and often for the library catalog. In delivering these resources, the Web necessitates dialog between public and technical service librarians to determine how and where to represent access to all this information. We saw a revolution in the

interaction between these units when OPACs first came on the scene, and we are now witnessing a further entwining of these relationships. Should electronic journals be listed on the Web site? Should reference librarians attempt to categorize them? Should categorization be done instead by catalogers who will assign call numbers and standardized subject headings? Can our systems people create mechanisms for browsing these titles if, in fact, they are all simply listed in the catalog? Can we create links between catalog records, the journals themselves, and the sources that index them? Do we continue to single out and bring to the Web site electronic databases ... or again ask the user to rely on the catalog for finding them? We might have one answer when we have access to 20 such electronic resources, and another answer when we have access to 120 or 520. The very core of what our OPACs are now to accomplish and what types of materials are to be represented in them is coming into question and is causing us to consider the need for alternative and supplementary databases to track the information.

Next, a library Web site is a way of making internal resources or products available. These might be digitized copies of special collections, including manuscripts, images, or even locally created databases. They might be products, such as instructional tools, class assignments, guides, and finding aids. The option of placing electronic reserve material in a copyright secure environment is being undertaken by many libraries. The Web has allowed librarians to find new roles as information generators, as well as to continue the functions of information gathering, organization, and access.

Additionally, a library Web site can become an agent for archiving and retaining information that comes and goes on other sites. Some consortia, such as the CIC (Committee on Institutional Cooperation or the Big-Ten-plus-one) libraries, are looking at ways of retaining copies of free electronic journal sites that are not maintained by any publisher. Such activity requires agreements on copyright and access rules, beyond the technical issues of gathering and ensuring complete runs of journals. Other projects are being developed between libraries, consortia, and publishers for access to proprietary information that a library has in fact contracted. How can libraries ensure availability of materials without "housing" them directly? Sometimes license agreements can include guarantees of efforts by publishers, and sometimes library server space can archive material the publisher doesn't care to retain. My library maintains copies of encyclopedias from the 1800s, which are often called upon for academic research. However, are ever-evolving editions of encyclopedias on the Web also being archived as articles are revised, dropped, and changed? Do libraries play a role in retaining records of this sort?

Importantly, the library Web site is also a window to and a component of the Web at large. Libraries are making use of the great wealth of resources available on the Web at no cost and are examining the reliability, accuracy, and completeness of these vast resources. Where trust in a resource is engendered, and as it relates to the needs of a library's users, these resources are being incorporated into library sites as part of catalogs or in separate lists or databases created by bibliographers and reference librarians.

As a component of the Web at large, libraries are increasing their user base by making services and resources available to a potentially worldwide audience. Policy decisions may have to be made to determine the extent of services and the definitions of users in this easy-to-access environment, where internal resources may be stretched. Additionally, libraries might wish to consider what uniqueness they have to offer in this vast network when placing priorities on what is to be accomplished on the Web site.

Finally, an all-important function of the library's Web site is to serve as a communication

tool for a library and its users. It is a way to advertise when the physical presence is available and where it is located, as well as to tell users who works there and what sort of services those people provide. A library site can let people know organizational structures and missions. It can tell people how to use interlibrary loan, when there are research workshops, or what exhibits are on display. It can even encourage them to come to book sales or other fundraisers.

Even better, the Web site can allow us to hear from the users through interactive forms, chat rooms, and e-mail links. But we can also do so through examination of our log files to learn how many people visit us, where they come from, what they use, and what sort of problems they encounter. A colleague of mine once eloquently stated that libraries are not becoming virtual, the users are. And while the Web is a great instrument in causing that to happen, it can also be the tool that keeps us in touch.

Conclusion

In order to accomplish the goal of providing a complete and coherent Web presence, every unit in the organization needs to be tapped. In a Webbed world, duplication of effort is not only wasteful, it is confusing to users. There is a need to ensure that the same information is not being maintained in several different places with several different rates of upkeep. Issues of preferences in design need to be hammered out so that our users need not understand our political structure in order to understand our Web site. Yet we need to be flexible enough to realize that librarians serving very specific segments of users know those segments best and know what is going to be most effective in communicating with that population.

To solve problems when users might not be able to connect to a resource, public service librarians are learning the technical realities of such things as network structure, proxy servers, browser differences, and what licenses may be restricting access. Bibliographers can now select networked resources that assure representation but not duplication of all necessary subjects. Systems people continue to refine and develop search engines that will enhance the design layout created by those who maintain content on the Web. Reference and user service people need to be queried about what interfaces are most effective and least problematic. Administration needs to be aware of changing traffic patterns to know where best to allocate funds and personnel.

To ensure a Web presence that is coherent, deliberate, and a step beyond making deli sandwiches, libraries need to examine these potential roles and determine which are priorities for that organization. The ingenuity and ideas of librarians from all facets of the organization coupled with a vision from an institutional perspective will give meaningful direction to a Web presence.