September 1995

Drinking from the Firehose: Web Weaving and Acquisitions: How to Get Started

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Web Weaving and Acquisitions: How to Get Started

by **Anna Belle Leiserson**,
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*This column is a continuation of a discussion of the WWW and its impact on the areas of library acquisitions and collection development. **Ms. Leiserson** is the creator of AcqWeb, a WWW site specifically geared towards these areas. — EC*

As 1995 progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the World Wide Web is a force to be reckoned with in acquisitions and collection development. Even if you don't yet have access, chances are you realize this simply from the number of references to it in the literature, in training sessions and in electronic conferences.

Today's question actually no longer is, is it a force," but rather, "how significant a force is it?" Is it just an occasionally amusing tool? Will it become a critical tool? When, if ever, will it have a significant impact on collection development? And how can we control this force?

To answer these questions, one must analyze what the Web is exactly in relation to our profession. Sorry if you have heard this ad nauseam, but it bears repeating: the Web is a form of publishing. As such, and given our profession, we have two ways to use it: as a tool (comparable to tools like **Books in Print**, dictionaries, price conversion tables or publishers' catalogs); and as a commodity possibly to acquire or use in cancellation decisions. At this stage, we are more affected by it as a tool than as a commodity. That could well change. See, for example, **Stevan Harnad**'s "Subversive Proposal." URL: ftp://ftp.princeton.edu/pub/harnad/Psycoloquy/Subversive.Proposal/

Given the current reality, not to mention limited space and time, let's focus on the Web as a tool for the rest of this column.

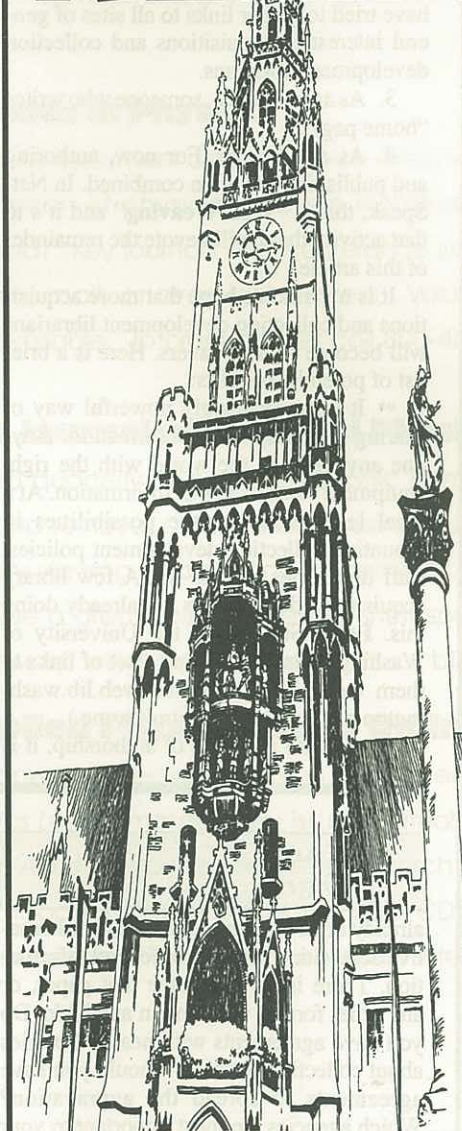As with all publishing, there are four ways we can interact with the Web:

1. Not at all. In other words, we can be Web illiterates. This is a harsh term, I realize, but think about it. We are in libraries, and this means cutting oneself off from the most phenomenal new information source in the world. Of course, many of us still can't help this. If this is true for you, I hope it's not for much longer and that articles like this will back you up as you request access.

2. As a reader. On the Web, one is usually called a "surfer" not a "reader," but it means the same thing. Actually, true surfing is probably more akin to browsing, but I'm

Profiles Encouraged:

Anna Belle Leiserson

Education: MLS: U. of Michigan. AB: U. of Michigan. Kindergarten: U. of Michigan (just kidding, but for junior high I truly did attend "The Convent" in what was then Salisbury, Rhodesia, and is now Harare, Zimbabwe).

Career: Acquisitions Librarian, Alyne Queener Massey Law Library, Vanderbilt University, 1984 to date. Until recently, I was also the Business Manager, but am now moving increasingly into Collection Development, much to my delight. Librarian, Legal Services of Middle Tennessee, 1980-1983. Librarian (but classified as Corrections Officer/Plumber (!) which helped with my salary and thus putting my husband through law school), Middlesex County House of Correction and Jail, 1978-1980. [A brief aside: this was my first professional job, but has remained indisputably the conversation piece of my career. I began shortly after the inmates had rioted, trashed the library, and the previous librarian quit to pursue a career as a trumpeter. My first week on the job, I had trouble with bouts of crying, because the books I was trying to reorganize had traces of tear gas in them. One of my assistants, who fortunately liked me, was reputedly a convicted multiple murderer, released from Tennessee prison by Gov. Roy Blanton, and had a physique like Arnold Schwarzenegger's. He was first-rate at maintaining an orderly atmosphere in the library.]

Family: My astonishingly patient better half of the last 20 (!) years, Alan, daughters Emily, aged 13, and Elizabeth, aged 7, two cats and one PC.

Activities and hobbies: Parenting, reading, computing, choir and more parenting.

Last book read: Susan Straight's *I been in sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots.* Highly recommended. The Gullah dialect is rhythmic and poetic; it is an easy page turner once you catch the rhythm; and, as the title suggests, it is horizon-expanding. A surprising example of the latter quality: I now understand the concept of the NFL draft.

Favorite pastime: If you have seen _AcqWeb_ (URL http://www.library. vanderbilt.edu/law/acqs/acqs.html) then you can probably guess — computing and surfing the Net.

Most recent accomplishment: Teaching our faculty and staff to use the Internet and e-mail. Their needs ranged from importing unencoded remote files to finding the enter key.

Pet peeve: Shipping and handling costs which are higher than the item purchased. (United Nations: please take note.)

Single most important piece of advice: Buy lots of books for children.

sure you get my drift. My best guess is that this is where most of us are (or soon will be), and where many of us will remain. Actually, there's nothing wrong with that. There's an incredible amount to explore and use. Once you have surfed for a while, I think you will agree that we left the "occasionally amusing tool" stage some time ago. There are enough major resources (the Library of Congress, dictionaries, publishers' catalogs, and so on), that it's at least a handy tool and will almost certainly be critical in the near future. By the way, if you are at a loss where to start, the best general Web index is *Yahoo*, URL: http://www.yahoo.com/ You might also wish to check *AcqWeb*, URL: http://www.library. vanderbilt.edu/law/acqs/acqs.html where I have tried to gather links to all sites of general interest to acquisitions and collection development librarians.

3. As an author, i.e. someone who writes "home pages."

4. As a publisher. For now, authoring and publishing are often combined. In Net-Speak, this is **"Web Weaving"** and it's to that activity that I will devote the remainder of this article.

It is my sincere hope that more acquisitions and collection development librarians will become Web Weavers. Here is a brief list of potential benefits:

•• It is an amazingly powerful way of sharing relatively static information. Anyone anywhere in the world with the right equipment can access this information. At a local level, consider the possibilities in mounting collection development policies, staff directories, and so on. A few library acquisitions departments are already doing this. **Peter Stevens** of the University of Washington is maintaining a set of links to them (see URL: http://staffweb.lib.washington.edu/acq/acqstaff.html#some).

•• As with any type of authorship, it is an act of creation, and thus personally rewarding. There's an incredible sense of accomplishment from getting a home page to do what you want it to. In fact, the problem here is, once started, tearing yourself away from it.

•• In order to be a good Web author, one has to be a good Web reader, which means one spends a significant amount of time surfing. One of the most delightful sidelights is that one is forever serendipitously happening on hidden treasures for friends, family and ourselves. For example, I have found women's basketball and origami home pages for my daughters and national parks and music selector pages for my husband.

•• It's an excellent PR tool, both in our local sphere and in the world at large. Not only does it promote awareness, but for now, at least, it's glamorous. Now I ask you, how often do we have a chance to be glamorous?

Finally, a few words on how to mount your own home page. I know that learning HTML (HyperText Markup Language) has many of us cowed, but honestly, it's not *that* hard to learn. It's certainly not as difficult as mastering the ins and outs of MARC, and it's vastly simpler than most programming languages. I learned it from the Web, using NCSA's *A Beginner's Guide to HTML*. URL: http://www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/General/Internet/ WWW/HTMLPrimer.html

There are many other possibilities as resources. In particular, **Eric Schnell** has recently mounted *Writing for the Web: A Primer for Librarians*. URL: http://bones.med.ohio-state.edu/eric/papers/primer/webdocs.htm

Also, I am told that there are a number of nifty HTML authoring tools. For a sizable list, see *Yahoo* at URL: http://www.yahoo.com/Computers/World_Wide_Web/HTML_Editors/

So, I hope to see you all soon in cyberspace, and may the force be with you! 🌳

already done so, you need to study alternative acquisition sources for federal information. There is no guarantee that paper, or any other format will remain available. Do you have agreements with nearby libraries about collection patterns? Should you have agreements to spread the aggravation? Which agencies are most important to your library? What parts of that agency generate material? How can you get it? Is the agency Web site adequate for the needs of your patrons? Are there mailing lists? Is there a commercial service which covers this agency? What does GPO sell from the agency? Is a jobber the best answer? Planning ahead may help your library avoid scrambling when titles drop from the usual distribution channels.

"Reinventing government" has struck hard at the provision of federal information through the depository program. Library managers need to pay some attention to the issues facing the program and be prepared to seek alternative sources for the information which has conveniently appeared in those brown boxes all these years. 🌳