

THE LINKS TO INSPIRE

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Jay Conrad Levinson (2001), the marketing guru who created the Marlboro Man, says, “A website is an island. Advertising is a bridge to that island.” Any public institution must choose carefully whether to build one or many bridges from its website.) Moreover, a library, and by extension a library’s website, is “a good association for just about anybody,” A. Paula Wilson (2004, p. 9) observes.

Most discussion of when and how to link from a library’s website treats this as a collection development issue. In a survey of college libraries (presumably conducted about 1999) over 40% mentioned resource evaluation and selection criteria as issues addressed in their website policies (Traw, 2000, p. 19). For example, the Otterbein College policy includes the statement:

The web links selection is part of the library collection development. The selection criteria specified in the Library’s Collection Development Policy should apply to the web links selection. These links are to be maintained by the page designer or by the responsible unit. Authors should check their pages to make sure links are operational, the information is up to date and appropriate to the Library’s mission (Traw, 2000, p. 35).

Northwest Missouri State University’s Owens Library included instructions for writing annotations “to describe entries in bibliographies and weblibliographies.” Among other points, these annotations should:

Provide a link to the authority responsible for the page content in the case of annotations for Internet links on a weblibliography page (Traw, 2000, p. 74).

Latham (2002) discusses some of the potential legal liabilities lurking in link-making decisions. One approach, she notes, is to include only links to (other) government agencies – a practice she contends would turn a library’s website into “an electronic brochure” (Latham, 2002, p. 21). The University of Virginia (2002) makes a distinction between sponsorship and advertising; they quote the University of Arizona’s definition of sponsorship:

‘Sponsorship’ means the provision of money, goods or services by another party to support a University of Arizona project or activity without promotion of that party or its goods or services being the principal purpose. Acknowledgment of such support may or may not be a condition of the support (University of Virginia, 2002, p. 4).

Wilson (2004, p. 77) recommends a link on the home page to subscription databases 1) because of their value, as a percentage of the library’s budget, and 2) as a way to encourage their use.

How, we wondered, do Indiana libraries handle the question of linking to INSPIRE (INDiana SPectrum of Information RESources), which provides access to commercial databases and other online resources? While the cost of INSPIRE does not affect the budget of each library, the potential utility of the resources is considerable. If libraries choose to link, do they describe INSPIRE as “the Indiana Virtual Library,” a service of INCOLSA and its member libraries? Is any mention made that the databases are funded by the Indiana General Assembly on behalf of the residents of Indiana, and by federal LSTA grant funds from the Indiana State Library? (<http://www.inspire.net/statement.html>).

OUR SURVEY

In May of 2004 we visited the websites of the academic libraries listed as INSPIRE libraries (<http://www.inspire.net/aclib.html>) and all public libraries in Indiana (<http://www.statelib.lib.in.us/www/isl/ldo/LIBDIR.HTML>). For each library we noted both links to and descriptions of INSPIRE using the following scheme:

Links to INSPIRE

- links from homepage
- links from sub page
- no links
- unavailable pages (no website was listed, database listing could not be loaded from outside the institution, etc.)

Descriptions of INSPIRE

- mention state funding
- “Indiana’s virtual library” is only description

- link directly to inspire.net (no other description) more extensive description, no mention of funding
- can't tell (link to INSPIRE is password protected)

Of the 91 academic libraries listed, five websites were unavailable. Almost two thirds of the remaining 86 had links to INSPIRE; 12 of these also mention state funding. Tables 1 and 2 give details from our review of academic libraries.

Of the 187 public library sites, five were unavailable. Some 80% of the sites we could visit did link to INSPIRE; 11 libraries (8% of those making links) mentioned state funding and 33 (23%) gave some description of INSPIRE but did not mention funding. Tables 3 and 4 provide more information on the public library links.

Links	Number	Percentage
link from home page	5	6%
link from sub page	59	68%
no link to INSPIRE	22	26%
page unavailable	0	0
Total	86	100%

Table 1. Academic libraries' links to INSPIRE.

Description	Number	Percentage
mention state funding	12	19%
"Indiana's Virtual Library" only	7	11%
link directly to inspire.net (no other description)	36	56%
can't tell (link to INSPIRE is password protected)	9	14%
Total	64	100%

Table 2. Academic libraries' descriptions of INSPIRE.

In a practice we did not observe among the academic libraries, some 33 public libraries described INSPIRE but did not mention state funding. For example, the Hamilton East Public Library description read:

The Indiana Virtual Library offering electronic magazines, encyclopedias, and other resources to all Indiana residents.

INSPIRE - magazine index with resources such as a biography index and Medline access.

The Westfield Public Library presented this description: Welcome to INSPIRE, the Indiana Virtual Library. INSPIRE offers electronic magazines, encyclopedias, and other resources to all Indiana residents for your information needs. Research current events, science, business, health, notable people, hobbies, and much more from your library, school, home or office.

Links	Number	Percentage
link from home page	90	48%
link from sub page	55	29%
no link to INSPIRE	37	20%
page unavailable	5	3%
Total	187	100%

Table 3. Public libraries' links to INSPIRE.

Description	Number	Percentage
mention state funding	12	19%
“Indiana’s Virtual Library” only	7	11%
link directly to inspire.net (no other description)	36	56%
can’t tell (link to INSPIRE is password protected)	9	14%
Total	64	100%

Table 4. Public libraries’ descriptions of INSPIRE.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Some libraries made a special effort to draw attention to INSPIRE while leading readers to databases of interest, rather than simply linking to the INSPIRE site and letting users find their way around. In general, academic libraries provided more of this support than did public libraries; but there is room for improvement, both in terms of acknowledging and publicizing support for INSPIRE and from a service standpoint. This is particularly important for off-site users, whose frustrations cannot be noticed by helpful reference staffers. These examples are certainly worth consideration:

This information was provided by Hussey Mayfield Memorial Library, Zionsville, <http://www.zionsville.lib.in.us>:

INSPIRE (INdiana SPectrum of Information RESources) is a collection of commercial databases. These databases can be accessed 24 hours a day, free of charge by any Indiana resident through any computer with an Internet connection and a Web browser such as Netscape or MS Internet Explorer. Your Zionsville Library has multiple computers with dedicated access to this important research tool.

Access for Indiana is provided through a project of the Indiana State Library and INCOLSA. In the next general assembly (January to April 2003), requests will be made to continue the funding for this project. To further understand the situation, please read this page: INSPIRE information.

The Anderson Public Library (<http://www.and.lib.in.us/reference/databases>) lists INSPIRE databases by name and other databases with for in-library use by name with annotations.

The Franklin D. Schurtz Library at Indiana University South Bend (<http://www.iusb.edu/~lib/>) lists databases by name, with the INSPIRE icon next to those this project provides. Databases and categorized and annotated.

The Jackson Library at Indiana Wesleyan (<http://www.indwes.edu/library/Reference/>) allows databases to be searched by subject, vendor, and title. Each view lists the vendor or source of the database plus an annotation.

Manchester College’s Funderberg Library (<http://www.manchester.edu/OAA/Library/files/libper.htm>) lists annotated databases; those provided through INSPIRE are indicated by an asterisk.

INSPIRE use in 2003 approached 10 million searches (INCOLSA, 2004). If these were distributed equally among the libraries we surveyed, just over one fifth of the searchers would not know the source of funding for the INSPIRE databases. Consequently: 1) searchers may not value the INSPIRE resources if they are seen as equivalent to what is freely available on the Web; 2) Indiana taxpayers and voters may not see their “tax dollars at work” and be less inclined to support continued funding for INSPIRE.

It is possible to speculate on why libraries have created and annotated INSPIRE links in such a variety of ways. Wilson’s (2004, p. 76) observation may explain one consideration: “Unfortunately, some vendors have titled databases in a manner that does not promote awareness and understanding of these resources.” The name “INSPIRE,” even with the tag “Indiana’s Virtual Library,” does relatively little to encourage awareness or understanding; hence the felt need to write extensive annotations.

An alternative response to this potential confusion would be to elide INSPIRE from the picture and concentrate on connecting “every reader to his database” (to give Ranganathan a contemporary spin). This has the unintended consequence of leaving users in the dark about funding and support for INSPIRE, but, one might argue, most library users are unaware of the funding (or costs) of most library resources.

We doubt that Indiana libraries refuse to mention or link to INSPIRE because this would be seen as

improperly advertising a commercial or non-mission-related organization.

In May 2004 the Google search engine identified 1,270 links to the www.inspire.net site; nearly all are from libraries in Indiana. There is, however, the occasional exotic, such as a report from Fulbright scholars (Gaudet & Lieber, n.d., online) who describe INSPIRE as “composed of a bouquet of databases and other digital resources.” We might wish more people would be encouraged to stop and smell the roses.

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