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**The more things change, the more they stay the same...**

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**D**espite advances in high speed telecommunications, lightning fast processors, incredibly compact storage devices, inter-network linkages, array processing systems, and the ever declining cost of computer processing, librarians and information seekers face the same problems they did 50 years ago when the electronic computer made its debut.

The problem: determining how to find the data that someone thought worthy of offering up for public access.

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## The more things change, the more they stay the same...

by Gary Klein

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Stories abound in such publications as *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal*—as well as on local television news—that portray the Internet as easy enough for a child to use. Although anyone can type on a keyboard or click a mouse, effectively using any type of tools to locate useable information is something that has been elusive to mankind even before Alexander built his first library.

When our neighbors are told, "You can find that information on the Internet," they are being tossed a few crumbs without knowing whether it will lead to anything productive. If you want to watch a movie, and your neighbor tells you "I heard that they are going to air that show tonight," would you know where to find that film? Do you have a television? Do you know what time it is scheduled to start? Maybe it is only being shown on a cable channel: Do you subscribe to cable television? Do you know which cable channel will carry it? If it is a premium channel, have you paid the extra fee to get that channel unscrambled? If on the other hand you have a satellite dish, do you know where to aim your dish's antenna? Do you know what satellite channel to tune to? And you still have to find out when the movie is scheduled for broadcast!

A similar series of questions must be asked before anyone can locate information on the Internet. Without knowing what is stored, where it is located, what encoding format was used to store it, and having the software on hand to process that data—without all of those things in place—you are not going to find anything relevant to your information needs. And just as cable systems restrict certain programs to premium channels or pay-per-view, there are growing numbers of resources available on the Internet that are only available to people who are pre-registered or are students of participating colleges. Some have price tags attached to each data file.

Although television viewers can turn to program schedules in local newspapers or a TV Guide, there is no consistent place that Internet browsers can readily, quickly, or cheaply turn to in order to locate similarly concise and accurate descriptions of electronic resources.

Unlike the typical American television set that is equipped to handle 82 channels of programming,

there is no limit to the number of potential sources that a computer can connect to using the Internet. Digital Equipment Corporation claims that its AltaVista search engine can provide free access to over thirty million pages on the World Wide Web, but many experienced Internet users have difficulty in locating useable data files even when using the various Boolean search features of AltaVista or its dozens of competitors.

If an experienced Internet searcher like me (having degrees in both computer science and library science) has difficulty in locating census data, government agency expenditures, and notable quotations over the Internet, then how can we expect our neighbors to do so with less training and fewer tools at hand than we have inside our libraries?

Surveys indicate that the majority of Americans who own videotape recorders cannot use their features without referring to an owner's manual. Because VCRs are more common in homes than desktop computers, how can anyone be expected to navigate his or her way through the World Wide Web, which has never had an owner's manual or handbook! And once people physically navigate to a computer site that possesses the information they seek, do they have the site-specific or data-specific instructions to download, view, print, or store that data locally? Do they have the necessary software on their home computers to perform those duties without garbling the data?

Librarians often face these same problems when trying to locate resources on the Internet. Some encryption routines require a password to access the "secret decoder ring." At times, the data is stored in a relatively common format, but you did not have the funding to purchase each and every brand of data manipulation software available in the marketplace. In mid-May, the business librarians' discussion list (BUSLIB-L) carried several calls for assistance by librarians who had difficulty working text files that were available only in Portable Document Format (PDF) format. How does someone who does not have a laser printer manage to print these PDF files?

As we increase the utilization of computers in our libraries and in our daily work stream, we also increase our reliance on a wide variety of operational standards that allow our machines to communicate with others from around the world. When you seek information on population shifts in your home county, most people would be more concerned about the accuracy of the statistics than the data coming from a nearby computer. Whether the information comes over the Internet from the Census Bureau in Washington, D.C., or from the state capitol in Salem should be irrelevant. But how do we locate that population data file, if each regional census office puts the file into a separately created file folder? Take a look at the files that you maintain in your own office: Does your colleague from down the hallway know where to find something that might be sitting in one of your file drawers? If you were out sick, and someone had to pick up the pieces for that important meeting tomorrow morn-

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## Change

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ing, how would they know where you stored the important documents? If your colleague were hospitalized, would you know which file folders to turn to for his or her part of tomorrow's big meeting?

Just as each employee has his or her own filing system at home and at work, each person who creates a computerized file has an individualized system for labeling and filing those on-line documents. In libraries, we have come to rely upon such document classification systems as the Dewey Decimal numbering system and the Library of Congress call letter system. But these systems clearly are not universal. Some public libraries use LC and others use Dewey. Many medical libraries use a modification of LC that was devised by the National Library of Medicine. Law libraries typically use yet another system. The Universal Decimal Code was devised to be the Esperanto of call numbering systems for libraries, but it clearly is not as universally recognized as its designers had hoped.

When we look at the array of files that are freely available and accessible over the Internet, there is nothing that could be comparable to a call numbering system at the file-by-file level within any computer. Most computers offer some sort of browsing capabilities for the names of each file, but there is no consistent system for browsing the contents of each and every file that is accessible via the Internet.

But what about subject access to Internet files using search engines such as Yahoo, which collates information sources together from the World Wide Web?

I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but despite the decades of familiarity that librarians have with systematic ways of describing the contents of books, the lack of uniformity within our own libraries (Sears, LCSH, MeSH, NAL, NLC and UKM) does not establish a strong likelihood of classifying and categorizing the contents of the World Wide Web.

Although many librarians are personally aware of internationally established standards such as ISO's Z39.50 for interconnecting on-line library catalogs, my research indicates that the actual number of those standardized catalogs is very low. My experi-

ence of having searched over 400 separate libraries using either NOTIS or INNOPAC brand software indicates a lack of consistency even between catalogs running on the same brand of software. The ability to customize features by turning on or off certain processing options has forced many library catalogs to operate in a stripped down fashion when connecting via a Z39.50 interface. Some library catalogs are designed to work with function keys, which simply lose something in the translation when they are connected to the Internet.

If we information specialists cannot get our own computers synchronized with on-line catalogs in our same cities, how can we expect individual's at home to overcome obstacles when they try to connect to computers around the globe? The difficulties do not stem from the computers themselves, but from the lack of communication by the people who build them, sell them, install them, and use them.

Alexander the Great built his library at a time when communicating with people was much different than today. But some things never change. The information explosion that librarians are coping with predates both Marshall McLuhan's writings, and the Alexandria Library. Electronically, you can be linked to people all around the globe in a flash. But it still is a common language that separates England from America. Just try using the Internet to find the official colors of the Labor Party's flag, and you will find out what I mean. ☐

*Gary Klein has been using Internet resources at work and at home since 1989. He has given conference presentations at ALA, LOEX, NOTIS Users Group and the Ohio chapter of ACRL, as well having journal articles published on the lack of standards among library OPAC systems and overcoming historical difficulties of problematic subject headings. Gary now works for Willamette University's Hatfield Library as their Management & Business Economics Librarian. You can reach Gary through the Web or by e-mail:*

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## OSU Web Site

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D.C.; a city planner in Virginia; and students, faculty and librarians from around the country.

Although it began as a demonstration project, with an ending date of October 1996, the Government Information Sharing Project will continue to maintain the site. With new funding from PORTALS, OSU will add several more databases and will experiment with different types of CDs, including full-text. We plan to work on improving the presentation and features as well as adding to the content of the site, developing a quality reference source on the Internet for libraries to share. ☐

## Correction

In the last issue of OLA Quarterly, we reported erroneously that Multnomah County Central Library was originally funded by a Carnegie grant. Although seven branches of the Multnomah County Library were Carnegie libraries, Central was not. The Library Association of Portland purchased the land for the Central Library, and Multnomah County levied a tax for its construction. Thanks to June Mikkelsen of Multnomah County Library for pointing out this error.