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OSU Creates Web Site for Government Statistics

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In the early 1990s, as the federal government began publishing more and more information on CD-ROM, depository libraries faced many technical challenges. Figuring out how to mount the dozens of disks was the first hurdle: The 1990 Census alone was issued on more than 100 CDs. Clunky software, inconsistent user interfaces and the inability to network some CDs also presented problems. Despite difficulties, librarians at Oregon State University, who had already had success developing a network for commercial CDs, saw this as an opportunity for outreach. With data in electronic format, surely there was a way to provide remote access to libraries around the state that did not otherwise have easy access to these government databases. With this in mind, Charlene Grass, OSU's associate university librarian for technical services, wrote a grant proposal to network government CDs, and the Government Information Sharing Project was born.

The Project began in 1993 with funding from the U.S. Department of Education. The intention was to create a CD network that would be accessible via telnet and to work with software developers to create a more intuitive, consistent user interface to the many and varied CDs. As the World Wide Web emerged as the new standard for Internet access, it became clear that using a Web site would provide the best access to the CDs. The Web allowed us to develop a consistent interface that is easily accessible through popular browsers such as Netscape and Mosaic. Using standard features of the hypertext markup language (HTML) used to write Web pages, staff on the project created interactive forms and clickable maps that allow users to extract data tables from several different databases. The URL for the home page is **govinfo.kerr.orst.edu**.

The resources on the site include some of the most useful and popular government statistics in the areas of demographics, economics and education. The first database introduced on line was the 1990 Census data for Oregon and other Northwest states. This has recently been expanded to cover all 50 states. Other demographic databases are Population Estimates for counties from 1990-1992 and USA Counties, a handy reference source with social, economic and governmental statistics spanning several years.

The economic databases include the 1992 Census of Agriculture, 1992 Economic Census, U.S. Imports and Exports, and the Regional Economic Information System (REIS) from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, which has income and employment data as well as short narrative summaries of regional economies. The recently added Consolidated Federal Funds Report details federal expenditures in all states, counties and municipalities.

Finally, the School District Data Book provides a wealth of demographic, financial and administrative data for all U.S. school districts. Users can find such things as the student-to-teacher ratio in their school districts and the level of funding by federal, state, and local governments.

Although these data bases are easy to use, providing access to them is labor intensive. All of the CDs contain files in dBase III format. By adapting DButil software developed at Lawrence Berkeley Laboratories, programmers on the project wrote software to read and format the data files. CGI scripts were written for the Web pages' interactive forms. When a user queries the site, the programs extract the data directly from the CDs, which reside in drives attached to the Web server. One exception is the 1990 Census data. Because of the large number of CDs, these data files were extracted, subsetted, and stored on the server's hard drive. We have found that getting the data directly from the CD-ROMS is almost as fast as accessing the dBase files directly from the hard disk.

Project staff members have taken care to make the Web site easy to use. Keyword searching is available within each database, allowing users to pinpoint statistics on specific topics. Besides the numerical data, the complete documentation from each CD was coded in HTML and is available on the site by clicking on the "info" buttons. Users can find out how the data was compiled, look up definitions of terms, and read about sources and authority of the data. There are also help buttons to provide context sensitive help in navigating and querying the data sets.

In a related project, the Government Information Sharing Project joined with the State Library and PORTALS to fund Jumpstart, a program that provides hardware, software, and training to small, rural school libraries and public libraries in Oregon that have limited access to the Internet. Twenty-four libraries were each given a 486 computer equipped with a printer and a 28,800 baud modem, and accounts were set up with local Internet service providers. Two representatives from each library came to Corvallis for a two-day training session on setting up their computers, navigating the World Wide Web using Netscape, and using the Internet for reference service. This program complemented the work completed on the Government Information Web site because it helped to ensure that libraries around the state would have access to the government information.

Although the initial goal of the project was to share OSU's government information resources with other Oregon libraries, the Web has allowed us to reach people from far and near. Usage tracking software set up on the Web server even indicates usage by people around the world. Comments have been received from a variety of people, including a journalist in Ohio; government officials in Washington,

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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 experience 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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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.