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Developing Virtual Spanish-Language Resources:

Exploring a Best Practices Model for Public Libraries

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If developing and maintaining an English-language virtual collection is a daunting task, then adding issues of a second language complicates matters considerably. How should public libraries compare the funding of their Spanish-language print collections to that of Spanish-language virtual collections? Should library Web pages be bilingual when a significant percentage of a community's population speaks another language? Are subscription-based, Spanish-language electronic resources necessary acquisitions for U.S. public libraries? Should libraries link to high quality, Spanish-language electronic resources that are free? Is a Spanish bilingual interface an important feature for libraries to consider when evaluating OPACs or subscribing to electronic resources? Is the digital divide broadened when libraries choose not to develop Spanish-language interfaces on their Web pages or not to purchase Spanish-language electronic resources? Ultimately, do questions of universal access point to public libraries developing Spanish-language virtual collections in the same way that they do English-language virtual collections? How numerous must the Spanish-language population be to merit dedicating funds to these resources? If public libraries are not presently able to build Spanish-language components into their Web presence, at what point might they in the future?

There are no easy answers to the above questions. Indeed, the more one seeks published information on the topic, the more surprised one becomes at how infrequently library literature discusses it.



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In part this deficiency is understandable. Delving into areas of virtual library collection development in Spanish is an unending exercise in opening Pandora's box. Many topics most central to developing virtual library collections—liaison with library users, collection evaluation, resource sharing, budgeting, the development of collection policies and reviews—are complicated further in the context of developing virtual Spanish-language library resources. Bringing forth these issues, one naturally runs into other related and equally thorny issues, such as libraries and librarians moving into the world of content creation, the “English Only” movement rising within government and public institutions, and age, class and ethnicity as they affect public library service. Research combining these areas with questions of Spanish-language electronic resource development for public libraries approaches the non-existent. What does exist are excellent examples of what some public libraries are doing and a body of research setting forth sound guidelines for the creation of Spanish-language digital resources on public library Web sites.

Evaluation of Five Public Libraries

I have semi-randomly and fully unscientifically selected five public library systems to examine their virtual Spanish-language resources. At various times and by different people, these five have been considered leaders in the field of developing electronic library resources for Spanish-speaking populations. They are: the Multnomah County Public Library, the Los Angeles Public Library, the Queens Borough Public Library, the San Antonio Public Library, and the San Francisco Public Library.

The Multnomah County Public Library

It is refreshing and even a bit surprising to conduct a Google search on “Multnomah County Library” and to be presented with the following:



“Multnomah County Library: Multnomah County Library’s Web site including information about its services, collections and locations. Español A department of ... www.multcolib.org/ - 11k - Nov. 9, 2002.”

That the word *Español* is, I assume quite intentionally, significant enough to merit inclusion in the first few words of this site’s Google description illustrates a rare and unwavering clarity about the importance of Spanish offerings to the site’s objectives and priorities. On the site’s home page, the word *Español* is unmistakably set as the uppermost word in the upper right hand corner where no one is likely to miss it. The page “en español” is similar to but not a direct translation of the English-language page. A talking-head-like, “speaking” librarian (highly innovative, though it unfortunately didn’t work on my equipment) is found on the Spanish version but not the English one. Other differences include a far more central and prevalent placement for “Clases de Computación” (computer and Internet classes) and work and employment options.

The Spanish site’s presentation is somewhat more iconic and outline-oriented and just a bit less colorful and “glitzy” than the English site. Access to the library’s catalog from off-site computers seems nearly impossible even after a lengthy, megabyte-intensive (4.9 MB) download. A command line interface for the catalog in English was available but seemed impenetrable to anyone not trained specifically in its functionality. The Spanish language home page also included a good collection of local and national Hispanic community resources and home-country information, English learning information, and many of the same general, library-specific offerings of the English-language page.

Also remarkable on the Multnomah County Public Library’s Spanish Web site are the subscription databases available bilingually or in Spanish: Informe, a Gale product, and Ebscohost en Español, which offers various databases including Ethnic

News Watch. Along with this section of “Bases de Datos en Español” (Spanish-language databases), multiple English-language databases are listed and annotated in Spanish. Most of these databases require a library card to gain access.

Multnomah’s Spanish home page seems a bit quirky, rough-hewn and somewhat less refined than its English-language partner. Yet it is an exceptional and illustrative beginning, treating the needs of Portland-area Spanish speakers with seriousness of purpose and displaying a commitment of resources to back it up. The purchase of several Spanish-language subscription databases is an acknowledgment of their importance and sends a clear and essential message to library vendors: libraries are willing to spend money on Spanish as well as English content.



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The Los Angeles Public Library

The Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) also dedicates significant resources to its Spanish-language Web presence (<http://www.lapl.org/espanol/index.html>). Although not as immediately visible as the Multnomah County site, the switch from the LAPL’s English-language home page to the Spanish version is prominent and easy to find. A collection of additional links is unique to LAPL’s Spanish Web site. These links provide information about library



services like “Abuelos y Libros” (Grandparents and Books), funded by the Ahmanson Foundation, and other services offering readings to children by Spanish-speaking elder volunteers. The site offers a listing of “Materiales Nuevos” (New Titles) in Spanish and announces that the LAPL “will accept Identification Cards provided by the Mexican Consulate.”

A Spanish version of LAPL’s 24/7 online reference, “Bibliotecario a su alcance,” offers extraordinary Spanish-language reference support to local patrons and even users outside LAPL’s geographic area. Sunday afternoon Spanish queries from my clearly identified Madison, Wisconsin laptop brought an immediate and very thoughtful response from an actual LAPL librarian. E-mail correspondence with online reference librarian Bruce Jensen revealed that “calls have trickled in from every continent except Antarctica. A couple weeks ago a bunch of Nicaraguans were pummeling us with questions. Several have logged in from Mexico. Our largest user group by far, though, is library school students logging in using pseudonyms. Confirming once again that lib school profs are perennially hurtin’ for original ideas” (November 10, 2002). LAPL’s “Virtual Library” also offers card-holding patrons access to magazine content through Informe and newspapers through “Noticias” (a Newsbank product).

The Queens Borough Public Library

The Queens Borough, New York, Public Library, for years a recognized leader in services to non-English speaking patrons, has created both a Spanish-language and Russian-language Web presence. Its Google description, like Multnomah’s, mentioned its Spanish-language offerings, although in English:

“Queens Borough Public Library: ... <http://www.queenslibrary.org...> Description: Event calendar, information about member libraries, and online catalog. Also available in Spanish.”



Of the libraries surveyed,
Queens seems to offer by far
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interface, “InfoLinQ” by Data
Research Associates.

Scanning the site on November 10, 2002 revealed a large amount of space unfortunately dedicated to their October events calendar listing. Links to Informe, Ethnic News Watch, and Noticias en Español (News in Spanish) all require library cards for access. Access to NOAH (the New York City Health Department’s Web site in Spanish) does not.

Of the libraries surveyed, Queens seems to offer by far the best and most user-friendly Spanish-language catalog interface, “InfoLinQ” by Data Research Associates. InfoLinQ (in combination with “WorldLinQ”) is described as “an innovative multilingual Web-based information system.” Users use InfoLinQ to search the library’s Spanish-language and English-Spanish bilingual holdings from seemingly any networked computer without specific password access. Users can narrow their searches by branch library location, publication year, language (Spanish, English, German, French, Italian, or all), or numerous media. Author, title, keyword, and ISBN searching and browsing as well as searches of other library catalogs (New York Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library, New York State Library, etc.) are also available. Of those online interfaces reviewed, InfoLinQ offers Spanish-language users the easiest means to navigate and the most complete accessibility to the library’s catalog.

The San Antonio Public Library

Like the three previous libraries, the San



Antonio Public Library (SAPL) offers a very visible “en Español” link on their library homepage. Users have five options:

- **Catalog:** After navigating through a few seemingly unnecessary clicks, users can access the SAPL catalog and select a (CARL) Spanish interface. The SAPL catalog offers multiple means of browsing. Searches can be limited by keyword, author, title, subject, ISBN, ISSN, or LCCN numbers, or specific library branch.
- **Latin Collection in Spanish:** This link describes SAPL’s Spanish collection of approximately 5,000 volumes, offering details about the types of materials offered (fiction, non-fiction, reference and periodicals), subjects of major interest, lending policies, a donations request and a “box” for suggestions or comments.
- **A policies and acceptable usage page** offers information about filters, links to non-library sites, and rules of conduct.
- **General library behavior.**
- **A children’s use and adult accompaniment policy statement.**

The San Francisco Public Library

The San Francisco Public Library’s home page readily links to a Spanish language version with a host of options. Like the Queens Borough Public Library, San Francisco Public Library users are treated to an online catalog in Spanish developed by Data Research Associates. It offers similar means for limiting searches and will archive previous searches. An online help option offers Spanish-language assistance.

San Francisco Public Library’s Spanish home page also connects users to annotated links of numerous Spanish-friendly search engines. A classified subject listing links to selected non-library Web sites. The site provides access to San Francisco Bay area

social services, other local organizations (some only available in English), and access to electronic magazines and newspapers for library cardholders. Users can review new titles in Spanish (an option under construction at this writing). They can reserve computer time at the main library (and soon at other branches); access library classes, exhibitions, and programs; view usage policies and information; and even review questions from a U.S. citizenship exam. An “Ask Us a Question” (info@sfpl.org) link allows users to pose short, precise questions to librarians in Spanish via e-mail.



It is somewhat surprising that the home pages of many very large library systems serving extensive Latino populations do not have an immediately visible option available for Spanish-language access.

Other Libraries with Significant Spanish Speaking Populations

It is somewhat surprising that the home pages of many very large library systems serving extensive Latino populations do not have an immediately visible option available for Spanish-language access. Some include the New York Public Library, the Miami-Dade Public Library, the Chicago Public Library, and the Los Angeles County Public Library. Although their home pages do not offer this option, these library systems do dedicate significant resources to their Spanish-speaking patrons in other ways. The Dallas Public Library’s home page offered one of the most disappointing Spanish-language offerings. A link in “en Español” takes users away from the library system’s



Web site and connects them directly to the city's Web site (dallascityhall.com) which has a Spanish-language version.

Guidelines for Creating Public Library Web Sites with Spanish Language Information

Following up on the work of Hal Bright of the New Haven Free Public Library, Wanda Reinford, reference librarian at the San Antonio Public Library, compiled a list of Spanish-language public library sites from around the country. These are posted at the REFORMANET Web site along with Reinford's observations on building a Spanish Web presence:

- If you're providing Spanish-language information on your library Web site, don't expect your Spanish-speaking patron to dig deeply to find it; a link directly from your home page is ideal.
- If you provide a variety of Spanish-language resources on your Web site (catalog, library card application, recommended Web links, etc.) please provide one page where all resources are linked together. To me, sites that offered a variety of such resources scattered throughout their site, but did not provide "one-stop" access to those resources, were very frustrating.
- Try not to use the terms "Spanish" and "Hispanic/Latino" interchangeably in categorizing your recommended Web links. And if you are providing annotated Spanish-language Web links for Spanish-speaking patrons, provide either bilingual or Spanish annotations if at all possible ... I found libraries in 40 of the 50 states with Spanish-language online information. Not surprisingly, states with a high percentage of persons of Hispanic origin such as California, Texas, and New York also have numerous libraries providing online information in Spanish. Some-

what more surprising to me was the fact that some libraries in places such as Alabama, Indiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee, in counties with relatively small Hispanic populations, provided Spanish-language information online, yet I didn't find Spanish-language information online from many libraries along the Texas-Mexico border or in Florida or in cities such as San Diego, Sacramento, Albuquerque, and Denver with relatively large Hispanic populations (<http://www.reforma.org/spanishWebsites.htm#IN>).

REFORMA's Information Technology Agenda

Perhaps the best outline detailing the myriad challenges and opportunities of Latino and Spanish-language digital collections in public libraries is offered by REFORMA's "Information Technology Agenda." This extensive document, prepared by REFORMA's Information Technology Committee in June 2000, discusses demographics and the "digital divide" as they relate to the Latino population. It discusses the impact of new technologies, awareness and instruction, digital preservation and access, and potential partnerships while presenting recommendations for each of these subheadings. Although more than two years old, the document's bibliography is an excellent collection of resources on the subject.

Summation

This review of electronic Spanish-language resources at five public libraries reveals a broad array of services, functions and applications that public libraries might make available to Spanish-speaking library users. Clearly, no single library offers all of the possibilities, but by detailing what some libraries have accomplished and exploring some of the guidelines, I hope that public libraries can gain a better understanding of developing virtual Spanish-language content. 

