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O What a Tangled Web We Weave

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O What a Tangled Web We Weave

A tale of adventure—putting up a Web-based online library catalog

The science fiction writer Robert Heinlein once compared his powers of prediction to that of a man who is sitting on a hill with a view of the train track at the bottom. He sees a train on his left and a train on his right, headed full-speed toward each other. He then predicts that there will be a train wreck.

Some trends in this library and information technology field lend themselves to that kind of prediction. In the 30 years that I have been in this line of work, I have never seen anything catch on as quickly as World Wide Web online catalogs have. I would characterize my own initiation into Web page management as abrupt, to say the least.

Managing OPAC Access

In the spring of this year, we were able to convince our administration that a Web interface to our library's online catalog would be a useful addition to our plans to move toward electronic delivery of information. Upon my return from a convention in Chicago, I was startled to find an e-mail message stating that the Web interface to our online catalog had been installed, and I could find it at julius.law.nyu.edu. We had been told not to expect it for another six weeks and had not received documentation for the product, so its sudden appearance came as a surprise.

When I keyed in the URL, I found a generic-looking page with links to files of library information that we had created in the OPAC and a link to the OPAC itself. The search commands looked familiar, except that the user could now click on them instead of activating them by pressing keys.

One thing that had to be dealt with immediately was a selection of links to other libraries, which had been taken from the Z39.50 client file in our OPAC. We were alarmed to find that the entire file had been imported, including some links that were only available to library staff in the OPAC mode. Anyone who used our Web page that weekend would have had full access to FirstSearch and RLIN, courtesy of NYU. Fortunately, nobody knew we were there.

OCLC

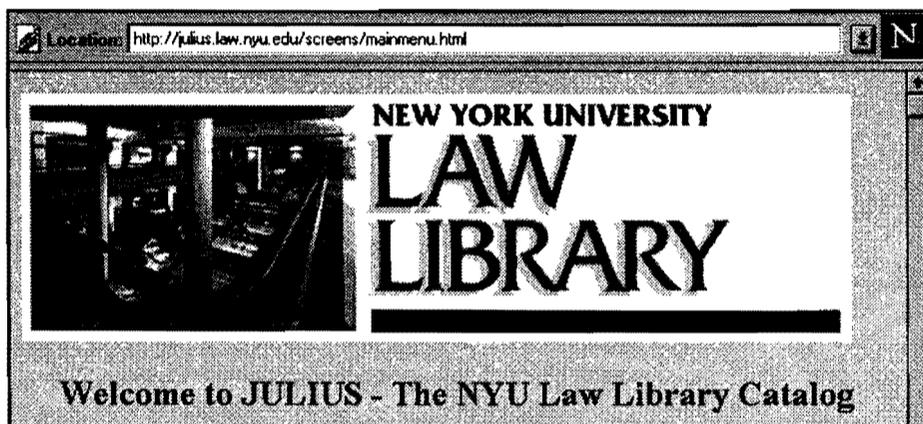
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enable users to retrieve additional relevant items that may not be easily noticeable nor accessible using traditional searching capabilities and to exploit the power of the NetFirst subject indexing and classification information without having prior experience with the DDC.

"These three enhancements extend FirstSearch's competitive edge," said Rick Noble, vice president, OCLC Marketing and Reference Services Division. "They also leverage user-requested

Managing Visual Elements

We embarked on a crash course to make the page look good before it was discovered by the world. With my assistants, I looked at 100 or so Web pages of libraries that use INNOPAC library automation systems from Innovative Interfaces, Inc., as we do, to see how other people had done things. The best sites were added to my bookmark file for further study. Within a day, we had a good idea of what could be done.



This page used some of the same graphics as the library's home page to present a unified look.

Some sites had added completely customized button clusters. A few sites added Java applets to make words march across the screen like characters in a theater marquee. About one-fourth of the sites had abandoned Innovative's approach of two main screens—an information screen leading to an OPAC screen. We decided to join the minority and take out the extra screen as well.

My assistant Kevin Ng was so taken with the possibilities that he spent the weekend designing the background and NYU banner that has been used ever since. We were also very fortunate that the NYU Law Library had been designing a Web page (independent of the online catalog) for the past year (<http://www.nyu.edu/law/library>), so I was able to borrow some of the graphics that my colleague Leslie Rich had developed. This served two purposes: First, it gave a unified look to the two home pages; second, it allowed me to have an eye-catching Web page in the first week.

investments we have made in ASCII full text and Internet navigation by making both easier to use and easier to administer.

"In addition to comprehensive bibliographic coverage, what users want most is quick, easy access to full-text articles, which the new icon provides. Users can immediately identify citations for which full text is available, then jump right to the text," Noble said. "The new browse capability provides users with an alternative means of searching NetFirst and increases the appeal of NetFirst to those who use other Internet indexes in that manner. Browsing is less demanding than

One more source of graphics was the Web itself—it is full of free sites containing buttons, icons, and backgrounds (the Internet section of Yahoo! is a good starting point). At one of those sites, we picked up the red dot that is used throughout the NYU Law catalog home page.

Working in HTML

This was my first experience working in HTML, and for the first week I was asking a lot of questions of my assistants

and the designated technician at Innovative, who went the extra mile in getting the page going. All of the library information screens from the text catalog had been transferred into the Web catalog. This created two problems. First, many of the instructions did not apply to the Web catalog, so I had to change the wording. Second, the listings of resources by call number looked more appealing when they were presented as a table rather than a flat list.

The editing format in the Innovative program could be cumbersome at times, but the good news we discovered was that we could develop pages in outside HTML-authoring programs, and then ftp them into the OPAC. For many applications this was useful, but for tables it was absolutely essential.

We were also able to add monthly lists of new titles to the Web page. This would have been simply impossible to do in the text OPAC because our library information screens had to be typed by hand.

traditional searching and can be an effective method for people unaccustomed to database searching."

The OCLC FirstSearch service, one of the library community's fastest-growing information systems, is designed for people who use libraries and requires no training or online search experience. The FirstSearch service, which provides access to some 60 databases, full text, and a link to OCLC's interlibrary loan system, can be used via the World Wide Web or a text-based interface.

Source: OCLC, Dublin, OH, 614/764-6000; Fax: 614/764-6096.

What we do for the Web page is to have the system make a list of books cataloged in the past month, save it as an ASCII file, and turn that into a Web document within minutes.

We even added links to a select group of other libraries with Web interfaces, including New York Public, the Library of Congress, and the OHIOLINK combined catalog. A feature that will probably be used heavily in the future is the ability to provide links to URLs within a MARC record. Our cataloger added a link to Yale as a test case of the 856 field, but I can see using that feature as a way to go from course reserve records to actual displays of readings.

Up and Running

Within two weeks, we decided that our Web page was good enough that we could spread the word. The compliments started arriving almost immediately. In July, I was attending a meeting at the American Association of Law Libraries conference, and the moderator mentioned NYU Law as one of the most innovative Web sites. I was rather amazed, because the Web page was only six weeks old at the time. In the high-speed world of the Web, reputations can be made rather quickly. However, the most meaningful praise came from Steve Silberstein of Innovative Interfaces, who had developed the WebPac in the first place.

When the fall semester started, we announced the Web pages to our faculty members and returning students. We also added Netscape to six of our library's OPAC terminals, so students could have the choice of Web or text. The bad news is that the page is still lightly used—only about 5 percent of public searches at NYU Law are done using the Web OPAC. Even though we took out the tool bars, students still mainly use the Web option as a chance to surf the Internet.

The jury is still out on the Web interface as a replacement for the old-fashioned OPAC, but I'll step out on a limb here. In following Heinlein's lead, this is my prediction for the year 2000: Web screens will be providing almost all library services that are now being handled by text OPACs.

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