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

by Terry Ballard

The science fiction writer Robert Heinlein once compared his pow­ ers 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 pre­ dicts that there will be a train wreck.

Some trends in this library and infor­ mation 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 rapidly, to say the least. We had been told not to expect it for another six weeks and had not received documentation for the prod­ uct, 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 press­ ing 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 stafl in the OPAC mode. Anyone who used our Web page that worked would have had full access to FirstSearch and RLIN, courtesy of NYU. Fortunately, nobody knew we were there.

Managing Visual Elements

We embarked on a crash course to make the page look good as it was discovered by the world. With my assis­ tants, 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 fur­ ther study. Within a day, we had a good idea of what could be done.

One more source of graphics was the Web itself—it is full of free sites contain­ ing buttons, icons, and backgrounds (the Internet section of Yahoo! is a good start­ ing point). At one of those sites, we picked up the red dot that is used through­ out 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.

Some sites had added completely cus­ tomized button clusters. A few sites added Java apps to make words march across the screen like characters in a theater mar­ quee. 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 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.

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 infor­ mation. Upon my return from a conven­ tion in Chicago, I was startled to find an e-mail message stating that the Web inter­ face 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 prod­ uct, so its sudden appearance came as a surprise.

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The jury is still out on the Web inter­ face as a replacement for the old-fash­ ioned 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 han­ dled by tool OPACS.

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OCLC (continued from previous page)

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 classifi­ cation information without having prior experience with the DDC.

“Three such enhancements extend FirstSearch’s competitive edge,” said Rick Noble, vice president, OCLC Marketing and Reference Services Divi­ sion. “They also leverage user-requested 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 biblio­ graphic 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 alterna­ tive 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 traditional searching and can be an effec­ tive method for people unaccustomed to database searching.”

The OCLC FirstSearch service, one of the library community’s fastest growing information systems, is designed for peo­ ple 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.

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