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The Systems Librarian

by Terry Ballard

Internet Reference: Just the Good Stuff

Here's how to offer quick access to good reference resources on the Web

"When you just got a new hammer, everything looks like a nail," according to Abraham Maslow, who died years before the Internet existed. Nevertheless, these words may well describe one extreme in the way that librarians relate to the World Wide Web.

The other extreme was recently expressed when a librarian at a research library in New York said, "We never use the Internet for any kind of reference—there is just too much flaky and unreliable material out there."

Between Two Extremes

Between the two extremes, you will find the rest of us, who know that the Internet is a fabulous repository of information as well as a cultural garbage dump of monumental proportions. We have all had the experience of helping a patron try to find some piece of information in the library reference area and coming up dry. As a last resort, we look on the Internet and often find exactly what the patron was looking for.

This happened to me last week when I was helping a student who wanted a book that listed the top-selling single records from past years. I knew that such a book exists, but my library did not own it. However, I remembered that I had seen a site on the Web that did the same thing (http://charter.simplenet.com/toc.htm). Within minutes, the patron was happily cruising the 1970s for song titles.

In this particular case, I got to that site because I knew that there was a link to it on my personal home page. If I had gone through the process of searching the concept on the large search engines, it would have taken me 10 or 15 minutes of sorting through irrelevant hits—a time period that translates to hours from the perspective of the student.

This gets to the crux of the matter for any librarian who wants to put the Internet into the reference mix. There must be some way to have the addresses for useful sites right at one's fingertips. Fortunately, there are a lot of ways; most of them involve building a bookmark file of useful sites.

One night recently, our CD-ROM server had its own ideas about what to do, and we couldn't get into our networked version of ERIC. I checked in Yahoo! under "education," and found that Syracuse University had mounted a Web version of ERIC (http://ericir.syr.edu) that was complete and easy to use. Following that line of inquiry, I also searched for MEDLINE and found that it, too, had been released for free Web access as Grateful Med (http://igm.nlm.nih.gov). It appears that the government has decided that the Web is the best way to distribute information to the citizenry.

Another notable example is the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* at (http://www.census.gov/prod/2/gen/96statab/96statab.html). This requires Adobe Acrobat, but the site links to a free download source. I remember working as a reference librarian at St. John's University, where the reference desk kept one copy of the *Statistical Abstract* that looked like it had been subjected to target practice by the end of its year. Now we have as many copies of the *Statistical Abstract* as we have PCs—and they never get worn.

Quality Standards

OK, you say. You can trust the government to deliver information, but what about everybody else? People on the Web can be very clever at putting bad information in impressive packages. Who sets the standards?

Again, there is good news. A number of universities and other agencies patrol the Internet for useful information and provide links. Does this mean that they are infallible? It does not. Does it mean that they will save you time by sifting through the whole thing and picking out the best stuff? It does.

My personal term for these agencies is "Web Filters." One of the most notable of these is the Internet Public Library (IPL) (http://www.ipl.org), which began as a student project at the University of Michigan Library School back in the pioneer days of early 1995. They divide their services into departments, such as reference, the virtual children's room, and a magazine room and provide such services as online texts and homework help. They have a categorized list of Web resources containing more than 14,000 links. Out of these they pick the top 30 resources each month.

The IPL is a grass-roots operation, while InterNic (http://ds1.internic.net/aldea/altframes2.html), a guide to Web resources, is sponsored by powerful institutions, including the National Science Foundation and AT&T. It is aimed at the academic user and presents icons next to each site to show what type of link it is (i.e., electronic journal, conference, etc.). Its strengths are in the sciences and education. InterNic is constantly re-evaluating all of its sites and invites users to rate them.

Many, if not most, academic libraries are involved in some kind of Web resource selection. The best of these that I have seen is at Columbia University (http://www.columbia.edu/cu/libraries/subjects), where they have organized Web resources into broad academic categories and subcategories. As with all of the sites that I have mentioned so far, it is well patrolled for dropped sites and address changes. This site list seems to specialize in the liberal arts and social sciences.

Some of the other university library projects betray the fact that they are a part-time effort—they sometimes lag in noting changes in their links. There is a new generation of software coming out now that automatically checks out all links and reports changes, so this should be less of a problem as time goes on.

The editors of Encyclopedia Britannica have put together a Web resource guide (http://www.ebig.com) that is highly selective and a pleasure to navigate. Each site is annotated and rated. My only complaint is that, if you try to search their general index, your request may be sent out of the system and into AltaVista.

This search for the best Web sites has fostered a cottage industry of Web guides and Web-site magazines. The problem with the books in particular is that, once they are set to print, they are almost immediately obsolete because of the pace at which sites disappear or change locations. One such book that I looked at the other day was about a year old. It included a CD-ROM with all of the links and, in a random check, I found that two of the first 10 sites I looked at had disappeared.

Build Bookmark Files

I remain convinced that the open Web is an important source of free information, and that it is possible to build useful bookmark files tailored to each individual library, especially if you take advantage of these existing filtering systems. There are too many worthwhile efforts for me to deal with each individually, but I hope that readers will alert me to any exceptional efforts. My own bookmark file will never be complete.

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Bardon Data Systems Adds File System Access Control, Security Features to WinU 4.0

Bardon Data Systems has announced the release of version 4.0 of WinU, a Windows 95 replacement user interface with sophisticated security and access control capabilities. WinU 4.0 features file system access control and other new options for preventing users from changing a system's configuration and installing or running unauthorized programs.

Every file system request can be monitored with WinU 4.0. Administrators can set up lists of user-specific read-only or invisible files and folders. In addition, this new version of WinU allows for per-user default desks so users can access only their own applications.

WinU 4.0 also enables administrators to block Ctrl+Alt+Del and Windows and Apps keys found on newer keyboards, so as to control access to Explorer, the Run box, the Find command, system properties, and other items.

In addition, the newest version of WinU contains enhanced network-based management, control, and remote configuration capabilities. These capabilities allow site administrators to dynamically control and update all WinU computers on the net-

work remotely from one central location.

A complete list of new features and a "test-drive" version of WinU 4.0 can be found at the Bardon Data Systems World Wide Web site (http://www.bardon.com).

WinU 4.0 costs $49.95 plus $5 shipping and handling. Upgrades for current WinU users are available at a discounted price through Bardon Data Systems. Quantity pricing options are available.

Source: Bardon Data Systems, Albany, CA, 510/526-8470; Fax: 510/526-1271; http://www.bardon.com.