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ESCAPE from the Tower

Moving Databases from a CD-ROM Network to the Web

BY TERRY BALLARD
Sometimes trouble can be the gateway to opportunity. In early 1998, the Quinnipiac College Library in Hamden, Connecticut, experienced trouble with a CD-ROM network that seemed to be on its last legs. Since this was the main device for distributing databases in our library, we had to do something about it.

At first, I looked for the documentation for the server. There wasn’t any, because this had been a “custom” job. People at the campus computer center developed amnesia when I asked about the machine. We could have had it fixed by flying in the one engineer who set it up, but this would cost several thousand dollars. Moreover, he lived in California and wasn’t very enthused about visiting Connecticut in February.

Accessing these databases via the World Wide Web seemed a promising alternative. That was easy to do in the short run, because all of the vendors that were providing us with networked CD-ROMs were also distributing the same databases on the Web. They were happy to switch us over to the Web versions while we sorted things out. When that happened, the Web started looking better than the other alternatives. For instance, our newspaper database on CD-ROM only gave abstracts and citations. If somebody needed the full text of an out-of-state newspaper, the only option was interlibrary loan. But our Web service delivered the full text from hundreds of newspapers.
A Natural Escape Route

A move away from CD-ROM networks looked like a natural progression that would work in the environment of Quinnipiac College Library. We had just acquired our own Web server—invictus.quinnipiac.edu. In conjunction with the law school library, we had also recently acquired a Web interface to the online catalog at qcat.quinnipiac.edu. This gave us the ability to link to online resources using 856 MARC fields. Our college had been experiencing steady gains in enrollment, and the administration was committed to computer technology. This included hiring a vice president in the newly created position of chief information technology officer. The plan was that his first duty would be overseeing a substantial upgrading of the campus electronic infrastructure. In fact, we were planning the construction of a major new library facility that would showcase the best use of electronic tools, and CD-ROM networks looked like a fading technology.

Consortia in the state of Connecticut were starting to negotiate increasingly favorable packages with online vendors, and this gave our patrons a chance to influence us in their usage of materials. At the time, they had access to both Web full-text resources through ProQuest Direct (from Bell & Howell Information and Learning) and a number of CD-ROM products. The usage reports for the first semester showed that more than 16,000 articles were accessed in a single month—and this is in a college with fewer than 5,000 students. Clearly, this was the direction that our users were ready move toward.

Because we were not using the exclusive in-house network that our CD-ROMs ran on, we mounted the databases on the campus intranet. This solved any question of unauthorized outsiders using the sources. Then we let our faculty members know that they could now get indexes and full-text articles right in their offices, and that the students could use these in their dorms at any time of the day or night. One psychology professor was so thrilled that she came to the library and gave me a hug. She was unusual, though, because most of the professors said something like, "That's nice, but when can we get this at home?" A few of them rubbed salt in the wound by telling us the names of the other colleges that already did this for their faculty members. We would just smile and say, "We're working on it."

Moving Toward Home

We started off by giving the project to our overworked college Webmaster, who investigated the possibilities of getting proxy server software, entering a database full of qualified users, and then setting up passwords for them. Finally, he would have to cut a separate deal with each online vendor and make each database work. This was further complicated by our campus firewall—all of the on-campus machines are inside the firewall, but the library server was outside. In other words, this was a very hard thing to do. As spring turned into summer, students graduated, professors went to Italy and the South Seas, and at-home access to databases still was not a reality.

Fortunately, I remembered a presentation that Dirk Klingner from Pace University made at a past American Library Association conference. He had reported on using Innovative Interfaces, Inc.'s Web Access Management software. The simplicity of this was appealing: It would run off our existing online catalog, so there was already a list of authorized users to work from. We could limit service by patron type, so we could potentially limit some services to particular users. There is one table to maintain with the addresses of all the online vendors. Klingner said that he had the whole thing going within a day or two.

The only downside that I could see was the cost. However, one thing that helped in that regard was the campus law school. The administration there was willing to cover half the cost because it would give their users research capability from home. With an extra donation for fast service, Innovative had the service up for us within a week of the purchase order.

It actually took me a few days to input the database vendors' URLs into a table in the OPAC software. (See Figure 1.) Next, I had to phone the vendors and arrange for them to recognize the new IP address as a valid campus user. Most databases fell right into place. Some required days of experimentation before they would work. But once they worked, they stayed working.

"Students do not want to hear that printed indexes and abstracts were all we had in the 1960s."

Library director Charles Getchell and I were the first two users. Within a week, all of the librarians were using the services from home. Nobody reported any problems setting the proxy in their browsers, but the real test would be faculty and students. A memo went out to faculty, and the usage counts went from a handful to several dozen. I had been concerned that the requirement of typing in a 14-digit barcode would be a big barrier. I'm happy to admit that I was wrong. When the motivation is there, users will put up with a lot.

The way people get to the service is by going to the library's public Web page at http://www.quinnipiac.edu/librmain.html and choosing the first button on the screen, which goes to a page of instructions relating to specific browsers. Once they have seen that, they click to a link that takes them to icons and buttons linking to the databases. (See Figure 2.)
they are valid users, and if they have set their proxy correctly, the system asks for their name and barcode. Once validated, they can use all of the services for the rest of the session (or until midnight) with no further identification.

I had also been warned that this extra usage might slow down the online catalog’s other functions. However, this problem did not materialize when students started using the service, and we showed up to 300 connects a night. The main reason seemed to be that students were most likely to use the service late at night when the technical services staff at the library were not at their posts.

One of the strong points of Innovative Interfaces, Inc. products has always been the report capabilities. Since Web Access Management is a part of the new suite of “Millennium” services, the reports were particularly good. We could get a comparative chart of the usage by vendor (Figure 3), or a comparison of patron types (Figure 4). Our CD-ROM server was never able to produce usage reports that even approached adequacy. Now that we are in a mostly Web environment, we are getting excellent usage reports from most of our vendors. The standout is the JSTOR report, which affords us virtually every bit of information that we could conceivably want.

An Imperfect Escape Plan

The most thorny problem seemed to be with America Online. We were told that release 4.0 of this software had an option for setting an automatic proxy. After considerable frustration on the part of our AOL users, we finally got to the right answer. To be sure of the facts, I got an AOL guest account myself. It turns out that the AOL users have to use that service as an Internet Service Provider, and then minimize it. If they also have Internet Explorer or Netscape, they can set the proxy in the prescribed manner and use the databases. Mac users are still a question. I have heard from other schools that the software runs fine on a Mac, but I have heard the opposite from one of our users. One teacher called me and reported that he was running AOL on a Mac—I wasn’t sure where to even begin solving his problems.

Changes in the network structure (both ours and the vendors’) can complicate access. One vendor was going through a merger and restructuring at the time we were changing our IP numbers. It took a few days to straighten that one out!

Another problem actually arose from having an excellent reputation for online service. One day I got a call from the father of a student who had graduated from Quinnipiac College. Even though the student was pursuing her graduate studies at Brand X University, she wanted to use our electronic databases because they were better than those at her new school. Of course, we had to explain that our contract with the vendors limited usage to current members of the college community.

Finally, we’ve had to face the problem that the Web sometimes goes down for one reason or another. Since we have had occasions when the Web was down but the net was up, we installed a back-up system that allows our users access to OCLC’s FirstSearch databases. If that fails, it’s back to the paper indexes and abstracts. Students do not want to hear that printed indexes and abstracts were all they had in the 1960s.

There are a few CD-ROMs that have not made the transition to the Web; these are locally mounted on special PCs. Most of these are multimedia CD-ROMs for the health sciences.

Finally Free from the Tower

I must say that any problems we have had have been overshadowed by the success of our transition. As of this writing, our users have had home access for 10 months, and we have had more than 6,800 successful home connections. In peak months we’ve seen our users accessing 30,000 online articles on campus. Everything we have learned in the last year bolsters our view that the Web is here to stay. Our job now is to make the most of it.

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