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Drinking from the Firehose

Everybody's Doin' It: The World Wide Web and Why It's So Popular

by Eleanor I. Cook (Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 COOKEI@APPSTATE.EDU)

The World Wide Web (WWW) has taken off like wildfire and apparently there is no stopping it; if you do not have a "home page" these days you just aren't cool! What has caused this phenomenon and how do you jump on the bandwagon? Are there any reasons you wouldn't want to? What does it take to access the WWW in the most effective manner? What do all these new acronyms mean anyway? Let's take a look.

While the WWW has been around for a couple of years, it wasn't until the development of the Mosaic browser that it really had the chance to become popular. However, you do not necessarily need Mosaic to access the WWW. The basics needed include the equivalent of a 386 microcomputer with 4 mgs of memory and software such as Lynx to be able to access the text of WWW sites. This is Web access at its bare minimum and frankly, it's boring. It's kind of like reading the movie script instead of watching the movie. You can only imagine the panoramic scenery! In assessing what you need at this level, consider your own particular situation and stop me if you've heard this before! (It all depends on your platform and what kind of service provider you work with.)

Ideally, you should have the fire power of at least a 486 microcomputer or better, plus 8 mgs of memory (or more), a color monitor, and browser software such as Mosaic or Netscape. Some of the newer browsers offer flexibility not available with Mosaic so listen to experts you trust. Let them teach you a few things along the way, as generally they will be very enthusiastic.

Once you've seen a web page in color, in all its graphical glory, you'll be hooked, guaranteed. I grew up without a color TV until about the age of 10, and the experience of discovering the Web is somewhat similar to seeing that NBC peacock in color for the first time. It's a leap forward, visually.

But is this all hype? Once you see a color TV you can tolerate black and white for awhile, but really, who has a black and white TV anymore? Or a manual typewriter? The point is, the technology and the applications drive each other in many ways. Once there is the computing power to do incredible things, then people will find incredible things to do with what is possible.

Some people are not thrilled by all this, even some systems people. It has to do, I think, with the overwhelming speed at which things keep changing. WWW access was barely available a year ago and now everybody wants it. If you are like me, you work in a library or business where the fastest computers are doled out in a priority fashion and not everyone has one. We still use old OCLC M300's in some areas for word processing, though I suspect they are about to be retired. Even though the price of a microcomputer with all the bells and whistles continues to drop, it is not always top priority in administrative planning to provide equal access to everyone. Furthermore, funding and personnel for training is spotty. The visionaries in the organization pull the wagon of bureaucrats and doubters across the frontier, though never fast enough, it seems!

There are so many web sites out there now (over 10,000 and

growing) I can't even begin to describe them all and I have only recently myself begun to explore. I must give a plug here for two web sites of great importance to acquisitions librarians. First there is ACQWEB, which is a compilation of web sites useful for acquisitions, put together by ANNA BELLE LEISERSON (Vanderbilt U. Law Library) in December 1994. It was originally called "Ms. Acquisitions," with the name change coming with Anna Belle's recent affiliation with ACQNET (she is now back-up editor). Subscribers of ACQNET are encouraged to

notify Anna Belle of web sites they discover that would be useful additions to ACQWEB.

Secondly, *Against the Grain* and the Charleston Conference are having home pages developed for them by MARILYN GELLER, AMIRA AARON and others at Readmore, Inc. Recently, ATG has moved to a neutral site managed by Spidergraphics. URL: <<http://www.spidergraphics.com/atg/atgld.html>>. Stay tuned for more developments about these web sites, both in these printed pages, in ACQNET and elsewhere!

To create your own home page you need to be able to work with HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) which is a derivative of SGML (Standard Graphical Markup Language). This is not rocket science but you need to have the time to delve into it. Library school students are learning this stuff now and systems people pick it up quickly, but even us regular folks can learn it too, if motivated. If you want to access the WWW in its greatest capacity at home, you can get what is called a SLIP/PPP account (Serial Line Internet Protocol/Point-to-Point Protocol) which turns your home computer into its own Internet node. This is a bit more complicated and may require knowledge of UNIX and can make your home computer vulnerable to hacker attacks if you are not careful. Be careful! I don't recommend it unless are you plan to make this a serious hobby. (Though serious hobbyists will welcome your interest.) You might also have to pay an Internet service provider for this type of access, even if you get the other stuff cheap for free.

If you have mastered the syntax of basic e-mail addresses, then WWW addresses will look strange at first, but they too have a structure. These addresses are referred to as URL's (Uniform Resource Locators). The first part of the address is the file transfer type, or protocol (i.e. it tells your client computer how to access the file you want on the server computer). This is usually "http." (Though it could also be gopher, ftp, telnet and other transfer protocols.) After the required `://`, the next part of the URL is the server computer's name or address, (such as "www.library.vanderbilt.edu"), optionally followed by the path to the file you are seeking.

Keeping up with URL links is seen as a problem, but now "Checker" software is available that automatically checks your links to other sites. Also, if people use your web page and something doesn't work right, they'll let you know. Constant tweaking

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and fine-tuning is expected.

Following are citations to a couple of basic overview articles from *Internet World* which cover everything I just explained but in more detail; following that are some URL's for WWW sites that can get you started on your journey into the Web.

Special thanks to JANIS KEIM and MARTIN MOORE (Both of Appalachian State U.) for their assistance with this topic. Thanks to MARILYN GELLER and ANNA BELLE LEISERSON also for their technical advice.

[The following all from *Internet World*.]

Richard, Eric. "Anatomy of the World-Wide Web," April 1995, p.28.

Kantor, Andrew. "Home Sweet Home Page," April 1995, p.22.

Greenberg, Kenny. "Going Graphical: There's No Place Like a Home Page," Nov/Dec 1994, p.102.

Weiss, Aaron. "Hop, Skip And Jump: Navigating the World-Wide Web," April 1995, p.41.

Kent, Peter. "Browser Shoot-Out," April 1995, p.46.

James-Catalano, Cynthia N. "Milking the Web," May 1995, p.26.

Signell, Karl. "Upping the Ante: The Ins and Outs of SLIP/PPP," March 1995, p.58.

SELECTED URL'S TO EXPLORE:

AcqWeb: <http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/law/acqs/acqs.html>
[This is the mother of all acquisitions home pages . . . of course, I'm biased!]

The White House: <http://www.whitehouse.gov>
[A good example of a governmental publicity piece that is easy to figure out]

Yahoo: <http://www.yahoo.com>
[Example of a comprehensive, popular "hot list," which is constructed to help you get almost everywhere]

Meckler Web: <http://www.mecklerweb.com>
Wired Magazine: <http://www.hotwired.com>
[Examples of commercial sites related to the publishing business]

Poor Richard's Almanac: <http://www.iaa.org/~rosenr1>
Janis Keim's Home Page: <http://www.acs.appstate.edu:80/~jak/>
[Examples of personalized home pages with more information than you expect.]

Editor's Note: See page 31, this issue for Rebecca Bauerschmidt's and Joan Griffith's article on HTML. — KS

New

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Located at: gopher.wkap.nl
IP-Number: 192.87.90.1

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