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I, User — Discipline-Based Portals: The New Content Mediators

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Libraries exist to discover, organize, preserve, and deliver relevant content. Subject expertise is an obvious and critical factor in the library's ability to perform well. Equally important is the library's ethical orientation towards dispassionate, balanced, and unobstructed access to authoritative information. In this confounding, increasingly digitized information environment, and as discovery and delivery tools are fast evolving, it is more important than ever that the library maintain its key role in the selection process. Commercial content mediators (middlemen in the distribution chain) can support or replace the librarian. Let's advocate for the former.

Current Model for Content Identification, Acquisition and Access

Content mediation in the current library environment is primarily format-based. The diagram below is an oversimplification of this format-based model, with the librarian at the hub maintaining relationships with materials vendors who sell content in specific digital and print formats. For example, book vendors sell in-print monographs in all subject areas, moving slowly now to include OP and eBooks. The library typically establishes a complex contract (subject profile) with one or more book wholesalers. Likewise, the library must maintain independent relationships with serials vendors, database providers, video wholesalers, eBook sellers, bookstores, and increasingly (again) with individual publishers. In each case, the library must make important decisions about the depth and breadth of coverage desired in each discipline. Beyond these traditional relationships, the library must establish a series of new relationships with Web-based content providers that may or may not duplicate the content already acquired via traditional sources.

Evolving Model for Content Identification, Acquisition and Access

We examine here, in recognition of the trend, a different model for the identification and acquisition of relevant content for the library. Again the library is at the hub of the process, but instead of working with traditional

format-based mediators, we observe a move toward a new kind of discipline-based mediation. Rather than book or serials vendors, for example, we are curious about the possibility of discipline-based portal providers. If the content is consistently credible, we don't care, and library patrons don't care, about its original format or distribution channel. Depending on the discipline and the local user community, certain kinds of content and interface tools would be more or less appropriate and would be included in the portal according to the library's collection development policy. These subject portals could be designed at the "selector-level," meaning that collection development librarians would determine the breadth and depth of treatment necessary for each of their disciplines. As well, subject portals should be hyper linked and cross-referenced to support wide ranging interdisciplinary activity (see the cross-hatches below).

Working Definition

When we say PORTAL, we mean a Web-based service, hosting digital content and/or digital metadata that has been "selected" from disparate print and electronic sources. The sources should include but not be limited to the local catalog, other library catalogs, vetted Websites, locally licensed fulltext databases, abstracting/indexing databases, digital images, film clips, audio files, applet archives, public domain materials, and finding aids for special and non-digital local collections. (To some extent, the degree

to which the content comes from disparate sources will help us judge the true value of a subject portal. Single publisher portals should be suspect in this regard.) The content will be selected by subject specialists for use by a specific audience, and structured to provide a synoptic view. The ongoing evaluation and main-

tenance of the content will be as important as the original selection process.

Benefits

The benefits to this approach are significant. The end user is the primary beneficiary insofar as his/her experience of library research will be dramatically simplified by way of a single search interface which is format and source blind, and a single, integrated, ranked, hyper linked search result. Authoritative selection by experts will ensure an institutionally appropriate view of the information landscape. Apt functionality (interface tools) for each discipline can be integrated with the digital text, images, and data sets available via the portal. In addition to the assumed hyperlinks and cross-references within and between all

relevant sources, these interface tools will enhance interactivity by including context sensitive help, reader software, word processors, citation support tools, course syllabi, structured discussions, various data mapping and modeling applications, simulators, and perhaps even elements of virtual reality, hereby establishing true online learning environments.

If all the material within a particular discipline was coordinated in this way, the inefficiencies of duplicated content could be eliminated. If the library were to outsource the technical development and design of their portal(s), the selector could be freed again to focus on the content rather than the various modes and costs of delivery.

Environment

Several loosely related observations lead us to believe that the environment is conducive to this approach. First, and despite the immediate lack of clarity concerning realistic business models and workable market channels, more and more content is being digitized by commercial conversion houses, publishers, and other content owners including libraries themselves. Second, students are more and more likely to USE GOOGLE FIRST. They expect the content they need to be available on the Web, and even when it is less than adequate, they use it. Third, commercial content providers are "adding value" through links that may be richer than those provided by the library. High quality interconnectivity is critical to the scholarly endeavor, and digital con-

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nectivity has already surpassed the library's traditional (call it) organizational connectivity in terms of speed and convenience. Fourth, lots of tools and platforms are being developed to allow for the creation, operation and maintenance of discipline-based portals. Many are specific to the library and other educational environments. Finally, and most convincingly, discipline-based portals from both the commercial and scholarly sectors are already being purchased and/or accessed through/by the library.

Examples

To a large extent, the following subject portals fit our own definition and are listed here as evidence of the trend.

Books 24x7 provides integrated online access to monographic content related to information technology. It is designed for students and professional researchers.

Questia provides integrated online access to books and journal articles in the Liberal Arts, enhancing its usability with integrated term paper writing software. It is designed for undergraduates with term paper assignments.

Univ of Virginia American Civil War Collections provides integrated online access to letters, texts, images, diaries, newspapers and Websites related to the Civil War. It is intended for a broad audience.

DOE Distributed Search Subject Portals provide integrated online access to Department of Energy Reports, National Renewable Energy Laboratory Archives, and PubSCIENCE. 10-12 separate portals are each focused on a single source of renewable energy. They are designed for professional researchers.

Columbia Earthscape provides integrated online access to books, journals, datasets, Websites, seminars, conferences, modeling

systems, and teaching tools related to the earth sciences. It is designed for four discrete user groups.

MD Consult provides integrated online access to medical books, journals, MEDLINE, drug information, clinical practice guidelines, personalized clinical updates and patient handouts. It is designed for practitioners.

Xrefer provides integrated online access to a wide variety of general reference books from 20+ publishers. It is designed to meet basic reference needs.

The Scholarly Electronic Publishing Weblog provides a very current, edited bibliography of resources related to electronic publishing, including citations for print books, fulltext online, Websites, government documents, presentations, dissertations, listserv links and listserv extracts. It is designed for high-level researchers and professionals.

ElementK provides online learning tools and digital resources related to Information Technology, Business, and Corporate Management. It is designed for corporate learners.

MIT Cognet provides integrated online access to a growing number of texts related to the brain and cognitive sciences. This portal provides access to works from the MIT Press, as well as content and links to resources from other publishers, professional associations, institutions, and individuals who are willing to share public access to online work. It is designed for high level scholars and researchers.

Knovel offers online access to several highly interactive reference books in engineering and science. It is designed for intermediate and advanced researchers.

Portal Projects

Several libraries and library "communities" have undertaken major initiatives to build their own discipline-based portals. Two are described briefly:

year 2000 as reported by the U.S. Commerce Department is very large and reflects the demand for American books, but it does not resemble the IFLA attendance figures.

Future IFLA Conferences are Glasgow 2002, Berlin 2003, Buenos Aires 2004, Oslo 2005, and Seoul 2006. With the world of libraries growing closer in terms of goals, shared information, services and similar products we should all pay close attention to the IFLA Conferences.

Thanks to **Bob Schatz** (Everetts), **Don Jaeger** (Alfred Jaeger), **Steve Sutton** (Alibris), **Nancy Gibbs** (Duke), and **Mary Moeiler** (Linda Hall Library) for their first hand observations.

As always this column is open to all vendors, librarians and publishers who want to address any issues concerning the library marketplace. — JR

Part of the development program of the **Distributed National Electronic Resource** in the UK (DNER), is a three year project to develop a set of subject portals. "This project aims to enhance resource discovery by developing a series of portals focused on the requirements of end-users in a variety of learning environments." (<http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue29/clark/>)

"The **ARL Scholars Portal Working Group** recommends the construction of a suite of Web-based services that will connect the higher education community as directly as possible with quality information resources that contribute to the teaching and learning process and that advance research. Central to the **Scholars Portal** service is a discovery tool that enables a user to search across certain limited but diverse and distributed Websites, library catalogs, and databases of information resources to retrieve and integrate the results in a single presentation." (<http://www.arl.org/access/scholarsportal/>)

Technology in Support of Portals

Out-of-the-box portal solutions, discrete tools, and emerging standards/protocols have become prominent. All of the major library automation and Web technology firms are scrambling to help libraries manage their digital assets. Again, examples are listed here as further evidence of the trend:

System Solutions

Fretwell-Downing's Zportal allows the library to design the content of their portal to best suit their needs by including only the specific library catalogues, internal databases, intranet/Internet Web search engines, fulltext databases and online services which fit their requirements.

Innovative Interfaces MetaFind offers a meta-search capability across the library's defined information resources, including licensed fulltext or citation databases, Websites, search engines, Z39.50 databases, library catalogs, and local digital collections. The grouping of the information resources is configurable by the library; different looks can be offered to different groups within the library. **Innovative Interfaces** has partnered with **MuseGlobal** to power this product.

ExLibris' MetaLib is a platform for managing a hybrid library environment, including digital and print resources in local and remote databases. It provides a standardized user interface and portal and is powered by two new technologies—the **Universal Gateway** and **SFX**. The **Universal Gateway** ensures accurate and target-sensitive searching and employs an intelligent analyzer to convert user requests into target specifications, and target data into user formats. **SFX** provides a host of contextual links to related information after performing an intensive, automated analysis of a document.

Sirsi's iBistro is an Internet access portal for library users. Its distinguishing feature is its capacity to integrate related content in a unified display through simultaneous, broadcast searching.

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multi-lingual services and access to the Internet in one's preferred language. The Web-based out-of-print vendors were also present demonstrating the worldwide market of o.p. books. Reports were that vendors demonstrating their products on computer screen had an easier time overcoming language barriers and in some cases they even brought up BabelFish (instant translations on the Web) to help with communication. Preservation technology vendors had a large presence, reflecting the fragility of collections at home and abroad. Book vendors were looking to expand their market to all ends of the earth now that the Web has leveled the playing field. With lower air shipping rates for books, American companies can compete worldwide for business.

The export market for U.S. books for the

Endeavor's ENCompass and **LinkFinderPlus** is an independent, OpenURL-enabled linking solution, which will allow comprehensive linking of all library resources, regardless of the software or information vendor. **LinkFinderPlus** will also integrate with the **Voyager** integrated library management system and the **ENCompass** digital organization, management and discovery tool. It will function with other linking initiatives, including **CrossRef**. Available in early 2002.

Epixtech's iLibrary will allow patrons to connect to a variety of information, such as the electronic systems inside a library, integrated library systems, available databases, and community bulletins and resources, along with Internet information such as e-mail, top news stories, and a variety of other information available over the Internet. This product will be offered in a portal format and will provide library patrons with consolidated Internet information along with library information in a single consolidated view.

VTLS' Virtua ILS has been developed to serve as a central library portal, providing users with a simple and intuitive interface to search and browse through merged collections. After potentially relevant items are discovered, a user can follow the links provided to go directly to the items in their source archives.

Geac's GeoWeb provides Web-based access to internal and external Z39.50 databases.

BiblioMondo's Digital Connect is a new resource control/library portal product to allow every digital resource to be accessed and controlled from the desktop.

Northern Light's Single Point integrates, manages, and searches content from the Web,

from third-party content providers and from internal sources. It has distinctive capabilities around content integration, search, classification, and customization.

Enabling Tools

SFX is a new server-based product that allows users to search a database and click on a resulting citation to search it automatically in other databases.

CrossRef is a collaborative (DOI-based) reference linking service through which a researcher can click on a reference citation in a journal and immediately access the cited article. To date, there are 88 publishers participating in **CrossRef**, accounting for over 5,410 journals with over 3.7 million article records in the database. There are also a number of affiliates and library affiliates participating.

Threaded Discussions are online, text-based discussions on a particular topic or within a particular discipline. Dozens of software packages are available now to support threaded discussions, which are specifically non-linear. A message can either kick off a new thread or serve as a reply to a thread already posted. The user can pinpoint and respond to specific messages and responses, expand or collapse threads, skip over tangential conversations, and view thread headers as a quick way to grasp the gist of a discussion.

Web Logs are sites of personal or non-commercial origin that use a dated log format, updated on a daily or very frequent basis with new information about a particular subject or range of subjects. The information can be written by the site owner, gleaned from other Websites or other sources, or contributed by users.

Relevant Standards/Protocols

Z39.50 is a search and retrieval protocol that integrates access to information maintained in distributed databases.

The **Digital Object Identifier (DOI)** is a

proposed standard that supports the use and management of increasingly granular content.

Open URL is a proposed syntax for packaging metadata and **DOIs**, and for pointing to a user-specific resolver that can accept this packaged data, combine it with user information, and resolve the data into actual links.

The **Open Archive Initiative** is a proposed protocol, which governs the exposition of metadata, providing a framework for cross-repository interoperability.

Dublin Core is a fifteen element standard for cross-discipline metadata, intended to aid resource discovery on the Web.

ONIX is the international standard for representing and communicating book industry product information in electronic form.

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We patrons already know a lot about the potential benefits of working with fully integrated and immediately accessible digital content. We already choose Web content over library archives. Technical solutions exist now to provide the broadcast search and consolidated retrieval services that we want, integrating content and tools from a wide variety of disparate sources. If libraries fail to take the lead here, commercial entities will step into the breach, perhaps changing the character of relevant content discovery and delivery.

Librarians should indeed step forward and remain central to the selection process, but they need not stand alone. They need not reinvent the wheel (subject portal) in every library. The commercial tools, protocols, and taxonomies mentioned above can be well utilized to build the next generation of library-governed collections. New and inspired partnerships could emerge here, between for-profit mediators and not-for-profit scholarly and research institutions. We just all need to remember (and do) what we're good at.

In Search of Equitable Fund Allocations

by **Norman Desmarais** (Acquisitions Librarian, Phillips Memorial Library, Providence College, Providence, RI 02918; Phone: 401-865-2241; Fax: 401-865-2823) <normd@postoffice.providence.edu>

The arrival of a new library director for academic year 2000-2001 brought **Providence College** an opportunity to analyze its collections and to re-examine its operations and budgetary allocations for library materials. The Acquisitions, Periodicals, and Government Documents departments reviewed their collections to determine the appropriateness of what they were acquiring and to identify items that had outlived their usefulness. The library also examined its circulation statistics to determine whether it was overspending in areas of little use. This analysis was expected to result in a re-allocation of the budgets for library materials.

Institutional Background

Providence College is a liberal arts college with approximately 3800 undergraduates and a total student body of about 5000 full time equivalents. The monographic budget is apportioned among thirty-five fund accounts according to historical spending patterns. The academic departments and programs represented by these fund accounts generally receive allocations totaling between 50% and 60% of the monographic

budget, excluding monographic standing orders. Prior to 1996, these allocations were made by the Vice President for Academic Administration. When the vice presidency changed in 1996 and the library implemented the Innovative Interfaces, Inc. acquisitions module, the library director and the acquisitions librarian began taking part in the allocation process. Within a few years and another change in the office of the Vice President for Academic Administration, the allocation responsibility had shifted entirely to the library.

The academic departments exercised total control over the funds allocated to them. As some departments failed to spend their allocations by the end of a fiscal year, the library often had substantial unspent funds — sometimes as much as \$20,000 — that returned to the general fund.

This situation was brought to the attention of the Faculty Senate

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