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## Out of the Basement The Internet and Document Public Services

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### Introduction

One of the prized possessions in my office is an autographed copy of Chris Casey's Hill on the Net. Although I may be tracking Congressional e-mail, Chris has actually made it happen. For that we all owe him a debt of gratitude.

With a name like York, I often come in last. However, Sheila scheduled me last so I could spread the good news: Government documents and its librarians have come out of the basement.

The basement refers to two things. First, many Government documents departments have been physically located outside the mainstream of library public services. Second, its librarians have been seen as eccentrics who enjoy making endless SuDocs class corrections. That perception began changing in 1992, when we were among the first to use CD-ROMs in order to obtain Census data. Now we are considered leaders in the information age.

Today I would like to take you through the history, challenges, and decisions behind the University of Michigan's Internet site, and the dramatic impact the Web has had on our public services. Whether or not you maintain your own Web site, we're all facing the same issues. My goal is that you leave here excited and encouraged about the personal role you play both to the public and to our profession.

### History

When the Documents Center's Web site celebrated its third birthday a few weeks ago, we counted at least 200 HTML pages, 200 image files, 50 frames documents, and 1000 text files. Although some of this development happened at night, it certainly did not happen overnight. The history dates back to 1986. That should encourage those of you who received Internet connections in January and are still feeling overwhelmed. Give yourself time.

Our story begins with the Commerce Department, which inaugurated its Economic Bulletin Board (EBB) in 1985. John Price-Wilkin, a Documents staff member at the time, decided to download a few selected files and place them into our departmental e-mail account for ready reference. Cass Hartnett continued the project. My only involvement for five years was substituting when either had the temerity to take a vacation. (As an aside, I inherited supervision of the entire project in 1992 with an, "Oh, Grace, you won't have ANY problems." But back to the story.)

In June 1991 I begged John for instructions to transfer Census STF 1A summaries for Michigan into the same e-mail account we were using for the EBB. Ultimately the EBB and revised version of the Census data formed the basis of the library's new gopher in spring 1992.

My first venture with Congressional directories came in Spring 1993. Although my staff and I typed the lists, we depended on others for uploading to the gopher. I naively thought Congressional fax numbers and subcommittee assignments would remain stable for two years and saw no need for learning how to update them. Was I ever wrong!

The defining moment for me personally was a UNIX workshop in February 1994, followed by permission to maintain the Government section of our gopher. A whole new world opened because I could do it myself. The GODORT Handout Exchange was mounted that summer, thanks to Larry Romans, and in September I experimented with the first Congressional e-mail directory.

Using a combination of our own Congressional directories, data from Project Vote Smart, and CNN's television tickertape, we posted a directory of the 104th Congress at 2 p.m. the day after the election, way before any of the commercial sites. Okay, so there were a few mistakes, both with people and parties, but not many.

Everyone knew about the EBB, but the New York Times blew our cover on Congressional e-mail by listing the URL on January 6, 1995. That event really began a new era of going public outside academia. Then in March an EPA official sent a casual e-mail message, asking if I had ever listed political opponents in the 104th Congress directory. I had done that prior to the 1994 election but removed the data in mid-January. Apparently someone from America OnLine downloaded an early edition, and the EPA official kept a copy for future reference. He later decided to use the fax numbers to invite members of a subcommittee to a meeting on wetlands policy and interpreted the *v.* as staffers, so he placed their names on the same fax. An article in the Washington Post claimed the EPA was illegally keeping a "hit list" and threatened jail to the perpetrator, i.e. me. Our Web site was created two weeks after that incident since it seemed like a safer legal medium.

## **Web Site Overview**

Turning to the Web site, there are nine main sections: Federal, foreign, international, Michigan, state and local Governments other than Michigan, Documents in the News, documents librarianship, political science and statistics. The advertised entrance point is entitled Government Resources on the Web (handout, p. 1). The quick jumps at the top go directly to those nine main sections, but the list of quick jumps has grown as we've added

class assignment materials, site-licensed products, ad infinitum. There really is an explanation of content if you ever get past the quick jumps.

The "directory" is a four-page alphabetic subject list of the entire Web site (handout, p. 2). The search engine was installed prior to the demise of the ULIBRARY Gopher so that the GODORT Handout Exchange and GPO Administrative Notes could be indexed when they were transferred to the Web. The move to a faster server two months ago has reopened the possibility of a stronger indexing program.

### **Web Site Mission**

The mission of the Web site has always been internal: to assist the Documents Center staff in answering the reference questions it receives and to serve as a platform for bibliographic instruction.

### **Reference Tool**

The reference mission is reflected in content and in many little features (handout, p. 3)

Government documents are partially integrated into our library collections with the Documents Center serving as a central referral point. We have an extended Web page of Federal bibliographies because it is departmental policy to verify titles and locations before referring anyone to a North Campus bus. Ann Arbor is home of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research; hence, 22 statistics pages. Congress is handled in great detail because so many of our professional schools conduct lobbying courses. On the other hand, we scarcely cover agriculture because we depend on Michigan State.

The bullet annotations are fairly unusual. The purpose is to communicate information in a compact fashion to a reference staff without much time. At least that is the official reason. Unofficially, you can see the structured gopher influence. Had I looked at Larry Schankman's Web site before developing my own, I would have followed his pattern.

Reference pages integrate Web links with other formats to assist student staff working alone on evenings and weekends. A good example would be the call numbers for General Accounting Office paper and microfiche reports in addition to the GPO Access link for the Web version.

The Documents Center interprets its reference service broadly to include "whatever it takes." That's why you find so many references to non-Governmental sources, like Money Magazine's rating of cities.

The single most important reference feature is interactive Web development based on real questions. The cost-of-living Web page was based on numerous e-mail questions. We made a link to the Beijing Women's Conference while the user was still on the phone. When a fax machine failed, we temporarily uploaded the 1997 poverty guidelines from the Federal Register to our Web site so a hospital employee could access them from her desktop.

And sometimes we just have fun. When everyone complained of stuffy heads last year, I added a link to the pollen count, justified as a health statistic. Apparently John Downey is allergic to mold, and I am allergic to poplar. New mortgage calculators suddenly appeared last January, coincidental with my refinance application. Last November I faithfully updated football scores on the JavaScript tickertape so the Saturday desk staff would know the Rose Bowl situation.

## **Bibliographic Instruction**

A second mission of the Web site is bibliographic instruction. There are two types of pages, generic and class-specific.

Generic pages are meant for multiple classes. Examples include Legislative Histories, International Simulations, and United States Foreign Policy. There are approximately ten class-specific pages, and often these are mix-and-match offshoots of a generic page but contain specialized information for the course. Among them: Health Care Politics, Higher Education Politics, and Middle East Conflicts.

The class assignment pages are arranged in the order of my lecture (handout, p. 5). They usually start with choosing a topic, proceed to subject specific details, and end with citation guides. Sources include a combination of Web, online, paper, CD, and microform, although the emphasis is certainly on the Web. We provide public access alternatives to site-licensed products when we know our Web page is being used outside the University. Everything for a particular course is maintained on a single page so it can be printed as a handout, but I have been adding navigational guides such as frames indexes and quick-jump buttons to make the pages more interactive. Since the classes are too large for hands-on sessions, I just demonstrate concepts with a workstation and projector.

Evaluating reference Web pages is fairly easy. How many hits did we receive in proportion to complaints? Those statistics are dramatic, and I hope to present them in a few minutes. Evaluating instructional pages is much more difficult, and the results are mixed.

Faculty express undying gratitude for their Web pages, and most make suggestions for additional links. There are times when this has become a sticky wicket. Last year two faculty requested access to our server so their teaching assistants could update the corresponding pages. Fortunately for me, the library administration issued an absolute "no."

In one case, I resolved the problem by downloading the professor's bookmarks, reformatting them in HTML, sending them to the teaching assistant with instructions, and then linking to the bookmarks from my page.

One faculty member advertised the Web page for his class to the media without mentioning the library. Ultimately I placed a copyright statement at the bottom and added my name in very small letters at the top.

The reaction of students has varied with the class, individual and semester. Students in the School of Public Policy love the research version of Legislative Histories. Sophomores find it overwhelming, the reason the Legislative Histories Tutorial was created. Students in the

Arab-Israeli Conflict class use their Web pages exclusively and never enter the library. Graduate students in Public Health and Education use their pages but send me e-mail or walk in if they have difficulty.

Reaction has also changed over time. During 1996/97 students were often seen using Alta Vista rather than their Web page. Faculty complained about the lack of critical analysis in their papers. The situation has turned 180 degrees since September 1997. Students are taking Web research seriously, asking for substantial help and analyzing the material.

### **Web Site Policies**

Policies for creating Internet sites barely existed in April 1995 so we made our own and are now trying them to align them with the library's (handout, p. 6).

### **Choice of Links**

Although we choose links based on scope, authority, timeliness, and ease-of-use, "whatever works" remains the predominant philosophy. We often choose two similar Web sites for the same information to guard against a server crash.

New links come from a variety of sources: GOVDOC-L, four different versions of the Scout Report, Net-Announce, colleagues, requests from Webmasters, CRL News, the Ann Arbor News, and GODORT-Michigan's Red Tape. Often I scan another meta-index, such as the International Documents Task Force Web site, when upgrading a section. As always, the best links are those uncovered while answering a reference question or updating a class assignment page.

### **Duplication**

We do not duplicate the work of another Web site already in existence. I am truly grateful for LSU's directory of Federal agencies, InfoMine's subject approach, and Uncle Sam's Reference Shelf.

It's embarrassing when a Web page created after ours is better, but decisions on handling that are made on a case-by-case basis. I did not enjoy tracking subcommittee assignments so gladly passed the mantle to Juan Cabanela and Mike Waters. The only reasons I continue to track Congressional e-mail are my list's printability and the cooperation it is fostering between e-mail list maintainers.

### **Commercial Web Sites**

University policy prohibits links to commercial Web sites requiring access fees unless we subscribe to them or they have free information. We do, however, repeat links to the commercial sites we purchase wherever they are relevant. In fact, the University Library has subscribed to so many commercial sites this past year that they have changed the Documents Center's image. USA Today told me in January that we qualified as a "Hot Site" but it only features "public access" Web pages. They may have missed something.

## **Graphics**

Graphics have always been my Achilles heel. Reviewers have variously described them as wonderful, pedestrian, or cheesy. The "cheesy" really hurt. In my mind, they are simply old-fashioned (handout, p. 7).

The graphics project was designed to entice users into the Web site and then surprise them with content. Small icons were very popular in early 1996. Fashion has changed. First there were image maps, then animated GIFs, followed by frames, colored strips along the lefthand side, and now angular, non-pictorial designs. Since I only have one month per year to work on graphics and a 200-page Web site, I worry about becoming a dinosaur. If all else fails, you can turn the graphics off and still navigate, something I do myself when using a 28.8 modem.

## **Formatting**

We usually delay the use of new HTML tags for six to twelve months so users can update their equipment and Web browsers. Although Netscape 1.22 supported tables, we delayed our dependence on them until Netscape 3.0 was introduced.

GPO's proposal to use frames seemed the most controversial issue at last year's Depository Library Council meeting. Frames are used on our Web site as an index to large clusters of pages, such as the Federal Government, Foreign Governments, or Statistics. It helps us find where we actually put those mortgage calculators. Frames are an option rather than a default because the coding permits us to maintain one page of information rather than two. A sample of optional frames coding appears in your handout on pp. 8-9.

## **E-Mail Reference**

Although we do not specifically advertise e-mail reference service, we receive about three requests per day, a far more modest number than John Shuler receives through DOSFAN. Most questions originate from the East or West coasts, but we've received questions from every continent except Antarctica. Staff divide the effort and average about 15 minutes per question. We have no problem conducting a reference interview via e-mail. Sometimes we can provide a Web source; sometimes we refer to a specific library in the user's area. The questions are taken seriously because we represent the University to the United States, and we represent the United States to the rest of the world.

For the most part users ask questions which cannot be answered by the Web. There are an extraordinary number of questions about Michigan law, which is only available through LEXIS. One person needed help in locating his missing brother. Since his brother's name didn't appear in the National Death Index, I referred him to a private detective agency. In February a journalist from Pakistan asked about American public opinion toward bombing Iraq.

## **Maintenance**

Is this venture time-consuming? You bet! Over the past three years I have spent 2000 hours developing and maintaining the Web site, at least half done from home on evenings and weekends (handout, p. 10). My excuse for gaining weight is not middle age but the location of my home computer, wedged between the basement stairwell and the exercise bike. Until last November, I was spending between eight and fifteen hours per week simply adding new links. The number of relevant new Web sites relevant seems to have slowed in recent months so the pressure has eased.

Those 2000 hours are my time only. So many people have believed in the project and contributed to it. John Downey maintains the foreign country links. John Brandt created several guides and transferred all of our graphics to an image file. Three School of Information students used the Web site as an independent study project. Barbara Perles scanned our first 22 graphics. Maria Schieda spent 400 hours scanning the JFK Executive Orders. Mike Seadle created the Legislative Histories Tutorial.

### **Impact of the Web Site**

Has it been worth the effort? Absolutely!

The most tangible impact of our Web site and the Internet at-large has been the dramatic change in how our unit is used. The statistics we maintain may verify the changes you are seeing in your own libraries.

Between FY 1996 and FY 1997, use of our Web site increased from 2.2 million to 12.8 million hits or 500% (handout, p. 11). I should quickly add that "hits" includes graphics, and we have a heavily graphic Web site. However, the percentage increase reflects the use of the Internet as a whole. Although Web hits are still increasing, the pace has slowed a little. Comparing the last six months of 1996 to 1997, the increase was only 250% rather than 500%.

While Internet use was increasing, Documents Center in-person, telephone, and e-mail reference dropped 25% (handout, p. 11). Comparing the last six months of 1996 to 1997, reference use dropped another 15%, so the pace of decline is slowing as well.

Although the reference numbers have declined, the length of time spent on questions has increased (handout, p. 12). Extended reference questions, those requiring over five minutes, only rose from 23% to 26% of the total between FY 1996 and FY 1997, but they have comprised a consistent 38% of the total every month since July.

The statistics lead to a remarkable conclusion: **people who have access to the Internet are using the Internet for an initial information search but coming to the library for more complex research.** The data is verified by staff anecdotes, the seriousness with which students are now using their class assignment pages, and the e-mail reference questions we receive.

### **Implications**

This is fantastic news for all of us. It disproves the soothsayers who relegated libraries to archaeology and librarians over 40 to Dr. Jack. **Libraries are here to stay!** We simply need to repackage what we do in libraries and market it. Here are some ideas:

1. People who have access to the Internet are clearly going to use it. That's okay. Decide what is unique about your own unit and promote it, whether it is Internet access and training, e-mail reference, historical material, one-to-one research consultations, or tax forms. Be confident that you are important to your community.
2. For those of you just developing a departmental Web page, give yourself time but learn at least the basic maintenance skills, whether or not you use outside help. Knowledge is empowering.
3. For senior Webmasters, consider adding something special that no one else has done. There are wonderful document Web sites that receive extra funding, but many others are the work of individual librarians with a crazy idea: Berkeley, Denver, Idaho, Kansas, LSU, Memphis, Michigan State, Northwestern, Penn State, Yale, and too many others to count.
4. Grab the credit for what you are already doing. Count it, whatever it may be, and regardless of whether NCES or ARL ever revise their statistical measures. Let me give you an example.

The Documents Center's reference statistics dropped 25% in one year to a mere 8000. On the surface the data looks gruesome. But what about the Web hits? One day I cleared the cache on my computer and pretended I was a user. I immediately got lost in my own Web site and didn't find my answer until the seventh page. The items in my cache suggested a mere 1-1/2% equation between Web hits and reference questions. However, using that equation in FY 1997, the Documents Center answered 192,000 questions remotely, 2400% higher than the in-person questions (handout, p. 13). The department's overall productivity has risen 2000% since the advent of the Internet (handout, p. 14). That's just the data for one library unit. Can you imagine the impact of an entire library's statistics on an academic administration or a public library's governing board? Use it!

You know, we Government documents librarians sometimes quote James Madison to excess, but the truth is that we also live it. We go through extraordinary measures to serve the public, and, by some miracle, the public appreciates it. So, after this meeting concludes, go back home, be proud of your profession, and keep climbing those stairs!