

Feature

## Library Web Sites: Mission and Function in the Networked Organization

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by  
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Many libraries have created a presence on the Web, but have they really thought about why they want to be there? Should library Web sites be grounded in the past or look forward to the future, or both? How does the Internet change the ways that libraries perform within the networked information environment? This article will focus on various issues related to the mission and function of the library Web site.

### *Different Libraries Have Different Missions*

The mission of a library Web site is connected to the type of library represented. Thus, academic, public, and special library Web sites will all have different purposes. My own context is an academic library, so the mission of my Web site is tied to the three-fold mission of the academy: research, teaching, and public service. The academic library Web site can support research in higher education through providing access to Internet research tools and full-text databases. It can support teaching through online full-text reserves and other means. And it can support public service through allowing the general public (and other libraries) to access its online resources, including the online public access catalog.

Public library Web sites serve different purposes. The parent institution of the public library presumably is the local governmental infrastructure, but ultimately it is the local taxpayer or resident. So a typical public library might want to

provide free and open access to information for all local residents, and this could be reflected in the library Web site through links to community information resources, links to job postings, access to the library's online catalog, etc. While a public library might want to give completely free access to its Web resources, licensing restrictions on some electronic databases may limit this scenario. Password protection (perhaps through a patron's bar code number) may be necessary in some cases.

Special libraries have still another mission when it comes to creating Web sites. Special libraries generally need to service their parent companies or organizations, and the library Web sites will reflect this through focusing almost exclusively on the parent companies' staff and clientele. Sometimes this will take the form of heavily passworded Web sites; other times it will preclude a library from even appearing on the publicly available Web page, restricting itself to a locally available intranet. On occasion, the special library may wish to use its library Web site as a "loss leader" to attract more business to the company. Generally, however, the special library Web site will be an internal tool that will focus almost exclusively on staff information needs.

### *Mission, Content, Function*

Mission clearly has an impact on the content of any Web site. Mission is a theoretical construct that focuses on the abstract underlying purpose of an organization.

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*Your Web site should reflect your situation, organization, mission, and role.*

The other side of mission is function or role. Within librarianship, there is a universally accepted role for libraries and librarians: selecting information resources, organizing information resources, and disseminating (or providing access to) information resources (Berring, 1995, p. 97; Martin, 1996, p. 291; Schnell, 1995, p. 440). In addition, some have seen preservation as a fourth facet to the function of librarians (Lynch, 1995, p. 94). A key question for those of us who create and maintain library Web sites is this: How can we continue to function in our traditional role of selection, organization, and dissemination (and perhaps also preservation) within the context of the new Web environment?

### *Universal Role of Librarians*

Librarians seeking to apply their traditional roles of selection, organization, dissemination, and preservation to the Web environment can use some of the following examples in their work.

Selection of information resources can be reflected on the Web through creating links to other relevant sites as well as creating links to full-text electronic resources. In fact, many librarians are beginning to view Web "collection development" as a task equally important to traditional (print-based) collection building. It is in some ways more challenging, given the changing nature of Web resources. An excellent example of a library Web site that takes its role of selection seriously is at the University of California, Riverside (see <http://lib-www.ucr.edu>).

Organization of information resources can be reflected on the Web through proper classification of resources and links, collocation (placing similar resources together), and subject bibliographies of print resources. Some of this can be performed informally on a local level, while other pieces of this puzzle should be addressed at a higher and more formal level (e.g., the OCLC NetFirst project is a good example of formalized cataloging of Web resources). While the topic of metadata on the Web is somewhat beyond the scope of this article, it is clearly a vital issue for libraries in the coming Internet-based information infrastructure.

Dissemination of information (providing access) can be reflected on the Web through the following: internal search engines, online reference service, stable links to other Internet sites, access to the online catalog and other databases, basic information about the library (hours, staff, collections, etc.), and timely updates. Perhaps the most important of these is access to the online catalog of the library's local collection(s). While many library Web sites provide a telnet-based connection to their online catalog, a growing number are transitioning to a Web-based interface. A Web-based searchable online catalog is

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***The role of the Web site  
is the same as the  
traditional role of the  
librarian—to make  
information available.***

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preferable in several respects: It provides a consistent and standardized interface for the user, it avoids the necessity of a helper application on the client side, and (in many cases) it allows more flexibility for the user in manipulating data retrieved from the online catalog.

An interesting discussion recently took place on the listserv WEB4LIB about the place of e-mail (specifically a new Web-based e-mail resource called HotMail) in the mission and function of the library. While those arguing against providing access to e-mail resources in the library used the analogy of the telephone ("most libraries do not allow patrons to use free telephone service"), an even stronger argument was presented by the e-mail advocates. Access to and dissemination of information is strongly supported by the use of Web-based e-mail, and thus libraries should allow access to these resources if they are to be true to their traditional role of helping patrons gain entry to the world of information. While there are certainly problems to be sorted out, communication tools like HotMail

will undoubtedly become part of the fabric of future libraries as they seek to fulfill their information access function in the changing technological arena.

Preservation of information resources can be accomplished in a variety of ways through the Web. Librarians can help to ensure that local Web documents are preserved in some sustainable format as computer platforms change and markup languages evolve. But a bigger concern to many librarians is the status of online journals and other electronic publications that are owned by a third party (typically a commercial vendor). Will the third party continue to support access to back issues of an electronic journal even if the financial gains are minimal? Who will take responsibility for preserving the electronic version of a publication in the future? Librarians traditionally have taken on this role, but copyright laws may prevent them from downloading and archiving information that is owned by a commercial publisher. Publishers will provide access to electronic information so long as it is economically feasible, but will they turn over the copyright to libraries (for the purpose of preserving and archiving the material) when the law of supply and demand has run its course? These are difficult questions that must be resolved if librarians are to continue their preservation role in the age of the Internet.

### *Library Networking*

What about using the Web as a library networking tool? Libraries and librarians have long been proponents of networking and cooperation. The Web allows us to help (and to be helped by) other libraries as all of us seek to support our parent organizations (which is our mission) and to fulfill our traditional roles as selectors, organizers, preservers, and providers of access to information. [*Editor's Note:* For more on the topic of Net networking, see Techman's column on page 39 of this issue.]

One striking example of cooperation among libraries on the Web is Ariel, the Research Libraries Group software that facilitates document transmission over the Internet. Ariel uses library networking to help libraries fulfill both their mission and

role. It supports the parent organization (especially in the area of research), and it allows the library to provide both access to information and preservation of information in a new, different, and exciting way.

### Summary

The mission of the library Web site will depend on its parent organization and its clientele. Academic, public, and special libraries will all have different missions, and sometimes local considerations will impact the nature of a library's mission. In any case, library Web site designers must have a clear understanding of the library's mission before embarking on construction of a site.

The role of the library Web site should be distinguished from its mission. The mission is more theoretical and is tied to the needs of the parent organization. The role of the library Web site, like the traditional role of librarians, should be one of selecting information resources, organizing information resources, providing access to information resources, and preserving information resources. All types of librarians can benefit from incorporating their four-fold function into the library Web site. The applications of these principles may look

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**D**o you wish someone would evaluate important Internet sites for you so you could spend your time more effectively?

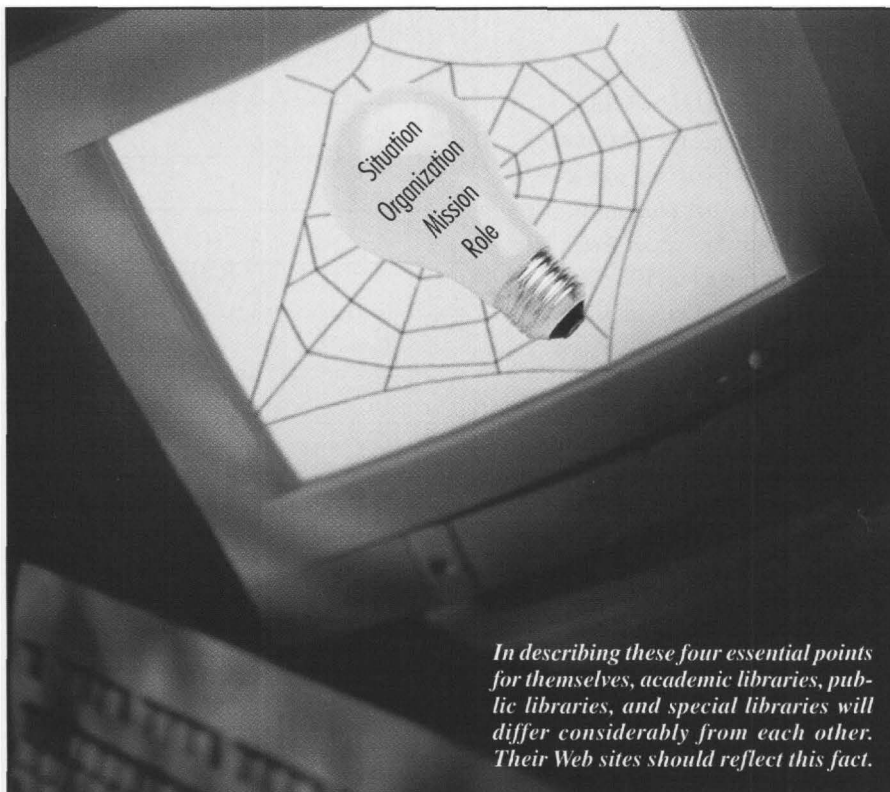
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*In describing these four essential points for themselves, academic libraries, public libraries, and special libraries will differ considerably from each other. Their Web sites should reflect this fact.*

quite different from library to library, but the end result will help us bring the rich information resources on the Internet to our information-seeking users. ▲

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