Doing it right: Successful library-related Web sites

Today we are witnessing the proliferation of library Web sites. But how successful are these sites? Who knows what a successfull library web site should look like? How do we define sucess in a new context, the context of the World Wide Web? Or, maybe - the Web itself is a huge library?

In my presetation I shall try to answer some of these questions.
The traditional task of libraries - to facilitate access to information - is still valid in the Internet world. Technical progress has changed how libraries do their work, not why. The difference is that, with the information technology, the library can fullfill the task better, expand it's functions, improve the performance and raise the quality of the services.
With th WWW

- the library has changed it's role from being a mere depository of books/printed material to a gateway and reservoir of globally accesible knowledge resources
- from being mainly a provider of information on demand for a limeted number of users to an active dessimitator of informations to a widespread audience and clientele
- the libraries are gaining a new and exciting market - a chance to communicate information, to present and promote theirselves and the opportunity to attract new patrons.

The environment of the WWW is relatively new, with yet no established fixed rules, standards or certifications. Anyway, a the Web matures, people are playing more attention to the developement of well-designed pages. There is some agreement about some of the features that are necessary on a library site: these aspects where considered when the Web site of the NUL in Zagreb was redesigned this year.
After studying these features, the Web team has developed general guidelines of the NUL Website (reflect what is necessary on the Site):

- clearly visual identification of the library
- good overview of the library's information sources
- access to online catalogues and other online databases
- useful links that meet the stated selection criteria
- means by which visitors can contact the library staff
- presentation of activities (exibitions, conferences, presentations) and news: people will be encouraged to use the page on a ongoing basis if they always will find something new when they are visiting the page
- proliferation of interactive content (requests, reservations, suggestions for the aquisitions of new books)
- educational aspect (learning materials, tutorials)
- presenting unique features of the national culture

The last guideline meets the national function of the library, which preserves the national cultural heritage, unique in the world: the Web is a perfect mean to present and promote this treasure.

The NUL faced the problem of many other libraries: the lacking know-how in design and HTML programming. So this work was outsourced: a studio for Web design was engaged. The result, which is actually just the first step, is accessible on the adress http://www.nsk.hr. The new, redesigned site is a result of the attempt to make the library more "visible", to present it's history, the new building, all the departments and services. Even some elements of the national cultural heritage are incorporated: on the homepage as well as on the other pages glagolitic letters are used to create the visual identity of the library, which is very convenient because a glagolitic letter is also the logo of the NUL.

In order to guarantee the future developement and the maintenance of the site, a Website policy is just been written to formalize this whole process of creation and maintanance, which is necessary in such a huge mechanism like the NUL is. The policy incorporates a strategy for the future developement: the plan for the upcomimg period covers pages in english language, a search engine (now it just contains a index), as well as the compilation and structuration of accession points in the Internet for specialist areas (this would be done by our libraries subject specialists). This kind of value-added service places appropriate information in the correct context and provides targeted and relevant informations.With this aspect we reached a very important issue, a factor of success of library-related Web pages. Nowdays libraries are using the benefit of the online environment providing links to other information sources that are "somewhere out there" on the Internet and not actually physically stored in the library. There are some very good reasons to do this. Despite the optimism and enthusiasm about the wealth of information accessible via the Internet the researchers felt at the "awakening times" of the Internet, recently phrases and expressions like information overkill, information anxiety, overload and disorientation describe the "dark side" of the Internet. By guiding users through the confusing array of sources, selecting and evaluating them, the librarian can play an important role in reducing this kind of frustration of the modern researcher.

Being able to find good resources on the Web is an increasingly important skill to have. Librarians have good experience in selecting and building collections of books and printed material. This kind of traditional skills are proving to be highly valuable in the Web environment, and librarians can use them in selecting and building collections of Internet resources.

Some of the basic selection critera for Web resources may be:

- Scope: breadth or narrownes of the resource, it's depth and level of detail, restriction of the information to a particular time period, whether there is an indicationthat the page is completed
- Content:
    ⇒ accuracy of information (chequing aganinst other resources, does it contain grammatical or typographical errors)
    ⇒ authority (is it clear what organisation or who has produce this page, reputation of the institution, can the person/institution be contacted)
    ⇒ currency (if it is updated ofr static, if update frequency is indicated)
    ⇒ uniqueness (availability at other sites, printed material or CD-ROMs)
    ⇒ links to other resources (how appropriate and up to date are they)
    ⇒ is the information factual or opinion
    ⇒ quality of writing (does it communicate the content clearly)

- Graphics and multimedia design: whether it is interesting to look at, with effects that enhance it rather than distract from the content
- Workability
    ⇒ user friendliness (menu design, screen readibility, help information)
    ⇒ required computing environment (usable via different browsers, what equipment do you need to use the resource)
    ⇒ searching (is a search engine provided, is the resource indexed)
    ⇒ interactivity (does such form work and add value to the site)
    ⇒ connectivity (does the page load quickly, password requirements)
- Costs: Internet infomation resources have been perceived as free, but user may have to pay for the ISP, so connection costs have to be taken into account

A more informal, but very usful criteria may be the ability to explain the decision of selecting or exluding the source (try to recommed it to someone).

Library-related Web sites should provide annotated links - a short description, features and recommendations for this resource - this way library Web sites will differ from other sites with endless lists of links. This service adresses the user's need for a intellectual access to distributed information resources.

I would like to close my presentation by responding to a question which was stated in the invitation to this conference: IS THE WEB A LIBRARY?

There is no doubt: yes, the Web has changed and enhanced the basic foundations of information access. Yes, today the user can get information without the assistance of another person or librarian. But still, THE WEB IS NOT A LIBRARY. Why?

- Incomplete set of information (the proportion of available digital content is tiny compared to the amount of printed material)
- Lacking standards and validation (materials published by individuals without peer rewiev, without reliable institutional context)
- Minimal structure, minimal organization and cataloguing, content or form destription
- No effective or relevant retrieval (results usually depend on search engines and this tools are usually to simplistic for effective information retrieval)

When visiting a library, users are usually experiencing following situation: they see books on the shelves, and this books are classified and orderd according to a system.

I think we don't have the same situation on the Web.

At this state of evolution the WWW is not comparable to a huge library, eventually to

one with books lying arround and thrown on the floor, without any organization, quality orientation means and limited options to find relevant information.

A succesfull library Web site can help.By creating successfull Web sites the librarian has used the advantage of the Web environment not just for promoting highquality services, but also for organizing and untangling the vastly expanding and confusing information field of the Internet.

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