

Savvy searching

Indexes to Web resources by librarians

Savvy searchers know that when they need quality resources on a topic that they are not familiar with, their best bet is turn to a fellow information professional instead of rummaging through the Web using one of the search engines, or the thousands of Web directories that sprung up like mushrooms after a rainy day. Just as for a birthday cake, you may prefer the mom and pop patisserie that is a 20-minute drive away rather than the dessert section of a large supermarket nearby, savvy searchers trust the quality information boutiques more than the gigantic supermarkets of Web directories.

More is not always better

The problem with the universal Web directories is that many of them are created by volunteers and it shows in the quality. While it is a noble thing that more than 31,000 voluntary editors donate their time to create the Open Directory Project (ODP) – <http://dmoz.org/> – which now boasts to have catalogued nearly 2.8 million Web sites, it would be naïve to believe that it is being built in a consistent way, following editorial guidelines and criteria for selecting sites. From the beginning, ODP set its aim as surpassing the size of Yahoo, the mother of all Web directories. This rapidly growing directory quickly became the darling of the Internet portal sites that were eager to have a directory on their site, and their interest was not so much in quality but in quantity, and ODP represented a very inexpensive solution.

True, Google has also been using ODP to enhance its spectacularly efficient search engine, and in that incarnation ODP works quite well (<http://directory.google.com/>). This is because Google applies the same algorithm in listing the sites in the Google directory as in the Google search engines. The algorithm ranks the sites according to their popularity, measured by the number of links that a site receives, and that pretty well establishes a quality filtering process. There are exceptions, of course, and a poor, but much-hyped site gets an undeservedly large number of links, just like a poor but, much-hyped movie can

get an undeservedly large number of moviegoers, like Pearl Harbour did.

Because ODP is an open source and Yahoo does not license its directory to third parties, portal sites had only two options: ODP and LookSmart, and to a lesser extent the Wherewithal site (recently acquired by LookSmart) that is also run by volunteers who are serious about acting funny – sometimes at the expense of quality. ODP is the largest of these and free for licensing, hence it is the one that is used by the most portal sites.

Indexes by solo librarians

There are thousands of individuals who publish their favorite links on the Web, and some of them even come up with a Yahoo-like directory format instead of a plain list of URLs. However, most of them are rarely useful, and very often they are very outdated, or simply abandoned. Enter the most Web-savvy and dedicated librarians and you get excellent, hand picked collections of high quality Web sites through an index.

Gerry McKiernan, science and technology librarian and bibliographer at Iowa State University Library, was among the first to recognize the need to organise the substantial Web resources along the line of a standard classification system and launched its CyberStacks (<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~CYBERSTACKS/>) using the Library of Congress classification scheme in a limited number of disciplines. Although the site design for CyberStacks is early-1990ish, the idea proved to be seminal as witnessed by those Web resource directories and catalogues that have been built using the Dewey Decimal Classification, the Universal Decimal Classification or the Library of Congress Classification systems. Although McKiernan could not continue the original project at the pace he set at the start, he got involved in a number of innovative projects aimed at untangling the Web. One of them is an excellent index to classified Web directories (<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~CYBERSTACKS/CTW.htm>) that is a perfect starting point for anyone interested in applying the traditional tools of our trade to Web resources.

The RefDesk site of Bob Drudge (<http://www.refdesk.com/>) shows his background in library and information science. It is probably

the one that is best known to the public because newspaper and magazine articles often cited this site as the panacea for infoglut. Panacea it may not be, but it is certainly a very good palliative medicine. In LIS circles he does not seem to get the credit that he deserves. Maybe it has to do with the fact the he is the father of controversial gossip columnist Matt Drudge, of the Drudge Report. RefDesk is a solid index that even the average Web user can appreciate, and mainly contains high quality sites.

I have identified a few more outstanding indexes by individuals in the May 2001 issue of my Digital Librarianship column (<http://www.infotoday.com/cilmag/may01/jacso.htm>) that is freely available on the Web in full text and with hot links, courtesy of the publisher, Information Today, Inc.

Indexes by groups of librarians

The disadvantage of the Web-resource indexes created by a single individual is that they are so very dependent on one person. These very talented librarians also have a life, they go on vacation, they have to tend to their other responsibilities, and occasionally they may have to put the maintenance of their indexes and link collections on the backburner. The indexes created by qualified groups of Web-savvy librarians solve this problem.

One of the best classified directories is the BUBL LINK component of the BUBL Information Services (<http://bubl.ac.uk/>) maintained by librarians at the Andersonian Library, at Strathclyde University, in Scotland. It covers more than 12,000 Web sites, focusing on the information need of students in higher education. It uses the Dewey Decimal Classification System to classify the sites. It was an excellent idea when the team expanded the project and offered access to this superbly annotated collection of quality Web resources through subject terms that are modified (simplified) versions of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). It is also browsable by country (as the subject of selected sites) and by Internet resource type. It exudes professionalism in all aspects. In another educational institution in Scotland, the Heriot-Watt University Library is the host to the *Pinakes Directory*, which is an excellent source of about 50 acclaimed academic subject gateways ([\[www.hw.ac.uk/libWWW/irn/pinakes/pinakes.html\]\(http://www.hw.ac.uk/libWWW/irn/pinakes/pinakes.html\)\).](http://</p>
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The University of Michigan – sponsored by Bell & Howell – was among the first to incorporate Internet resources in daily reference work, and to publish the collection for others. The Internet Public Library (<http://www.ipl.org/>) is a top-notch site about quality resources for all kinds of users. Its latest additions are the IPL pathfinders created by students of the university's School of Information (<http://www.ipl.org/ref/QUE/PF/>). It is a nice touch that students are acknowledged for their excellent work that benefits so many.

The public library approach also characterizes the Librarians' Index to the Internet Directory (<http://www.lii.org>) which is enhanced by an appealing California touch. It originates from Carol Leita's bookmark collection that she created on the side while working as a public librarian in Berkeley. It has become the labour of love of some 60 (soon to be 100) librarians from California, but it is not merely an Index Californiana. It is smaller than BUBL, covering about 8,000 Web resources in all walks of life. It also uses modified LCSH terms for assigning index terms to sites. There are more than 40 major categories which in turn are divided into topics. For example, the Education category has 32 topics, including charter schools, public schools, private schools, school violence and safety, student aid, and many others.

Lesser known, but equally impressive, is the index to academic Web resources by librarians and faculty members at the Louisiana State University (<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/weblio.html>). The webliographies integrate traditional print and online resources, and in the latter category, free and fee-based ones. It would be better for those who are not affiliated with LSU if there were a filter to limit the search to entries that are freely available to anyone.

The INFOMINE Directory (<http://infomine.ucr.edu/>) provides links to more than 20,000 informational academic sites on the Web, and its new Version 4.0 makes navigation even better and conducive to exploring the reviewed sites. Its advanced search page is rivaled only by the sophisticated but still intuitive search capabilities of the Librarians' Index to the Internet.

There are similar indexes for specific subject areas and, hopefully, the number of discipline oriented indexes created by librarians will keep growing. Currently, many of these indexes are created using grant monies. It takes a lot of effort to create and maintain a select directory of the best 10-15,000 sites, especially since these sites change so dramatically and frequently.

Funding may be a problem in the future for such indexes and directories. That was certainly not an issue with Elsevier's Scirus project, still it managed to pollute its resource database meant "for scientific information only" with hundreds of thousands of sites that are so full of vulgarities that it would make

sailors blush as I illustrate at <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~jacso/extra>. Elsevier perhaps should have assigned some librarians to the project. On the other hand, an outstanding directory of Internet resources, the Scout Project, had to do away with some of the project components (such as the superb SignPost annotated directory that classified the sites by LC Classification Codes, and assigned to them LCSH terms). Creating and maintaining such high quality finding tools takes significant time and money. Using them saves significant time and money for savvy searchers.

Péter Jacsó

University of Hawaii at Manoa