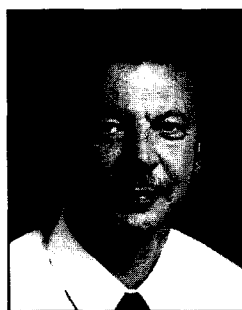


by péter jacso

digital librarianship

What Is Digital Librarianship?



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"Digitally literate librarians will steer you to both the physical shelves and the virtual digital shelves for information."

In this new column, I will write about what I perceive to be digital librarianship. Although my word processor flags this term for spell checking, I trust that it will become a mainstream phrase. Digital librarianship, in my philosophy, is a subset of traditional librarianship, and it has three major components. One is the digital collections of journals, conference proceedings, directories, almanacs, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and other ready-reference publications, plus the long-existing abstracting/indexing databases that are also growing at a phenomenal rate. Another is the set of exceptionally good finding tools and aids, the best Web directories and search tools that librarians will use and teach their patrons to use in order to search the Web effectively instead of rummaging through it. The third component is the skill to participate in creating digital resources, learning simple but powerful software tools without giving up your daytime job as a librarian/information specialist.

The Digital Collections

Librarians must become increasingly familiar with these digital collections in order to know when can they replace their traditional printed resources with the digital counterparts, either for a fee or for free. They had already been doing that, of course, when they canceled the print versions of their abstracting/indexing journals for the fee-based database versions of those, and it was not without hesitation and fear. There has been a lot of talk and many

articles written about which of the half-dozen CD-ROM editions of PsycLIT could be the best for licensing by a university library, and even more when a potential database without a prior print equivalent was to replace a series of printed publications, as was the case with the InfoTrac and EBSCO databases replacing, say, the H.W. Wilson printed indexes. Such decisions will have to be made much more often, especially when free databases can take the places of traditional printed sources and/or the "traditional" digital sources.

Some of these are of no major concern because little money is at stake. No one should lose sleep over whether or not to buy the \$40 printed *CIA World Factbook* or the *Information Please Almanac*, because their fine digital versions (<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook> and <http://www.infoplease.com>) are freely available on the Web. Others are also quite obvious. By now it is fairly clear that there is not much reason to spend money on a poor implementation of the ERIC database when any of the free versions of ERIC (such as the one at <http://www.eric.ac.net/search.htm>) has far superior search and output capabilities and now covers the whole time period from 1966.

The phenomenon of free databases scared the traditional print and digital publishers—and some ultraconservative librarians—half to death. They use every available forum to warn against the perils of free Web databases that have outdated, incomplete, redundant, or inaccurate information that will mislead you and your

patrons and bring other potentially lethal consequences. I am amused when librarians who never spoke up about standard traditional reference publications are voicing their fear of the poor quality of free Web databases. I am more amused when I read this fearmongering from someone who should really know better—someone who should know how bad some expensive, traditional databases can be.

I've never had a shortage of traditional databases to praise in the Péter's Picks and Pans column (in *EContent* magazine) for the past 5 years. I've never had enough space to write about the splendid free databases that I picked for myself, for my students, for friends and family, and for those whom I could directly reach and preach to.

Some other decisions may be less obvious, but educated librarians will recognize that the clout of a publisher may mean very little, and not even the widely reproduced testimonials can help to defend the traditional source against the new one(s). It is easy to recognize that there is hardly any reason to spend more than \$500 on a video directory on CD-ROM when the awesome Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com>) and the very nice All Movie Guide database (<http://www.allmovie.com>) have so much more complete and timely information about feature films, documentaries, and made-for-TV movies with incomparably better search features. Yes, there are some poor-quality, free Web databases, but aren't there also many poor ones that charge a fee? I will write about the best free ready-reference databases in my next column in May, then in a later one I'll cover the almost-free ones that deliver the same information at a fraction of the cost of traditional services.

Digital Finding Tools

There are zillions of directories and search engines and metasearch engines that promise to find you the Web resources you are looking for. And there are quite a few that really deliver. It is no accident that the best digital finding tools and aids come from libraries and library schools that have librarians who are well-versed in organizing, cataloging, classifying, and indexing print and non-print documents. It is no accident that Yahoo! has the best and most

comprehensive Web directory, because in its early day the company hired a librarian to start working on it. For quite a time, Yahoo! was the only organized directory tool, although the competitors were claiming that their search engines could find the needle in the haystack. By now every search engine has been enhanced by a directory, and their directories are the spitting image of Yahoo!'s.

I heavily use the reference section of the Internet Public Library (<http://www.ipl.org/ref>), maintained by the School of Information of the University of Michigan, because I see the fingerprints of good information specialists on those pages. The same applies to the Scout Report Signpost site (<http://www.signpost.org>) created and maintained by the Computer Science Department of the University of Wisconsin. It uses the Library of Congress Subject Headings and Classification to organize and present information about 11,500 Web resources (7,840 with short descriptions and 3,730 with substantial descriptions). Each site has excellent cataloging information (metadata if you prefer), including type of resource, author, contributor, publisher, LC classification, LC subject headings, date of review, and the date when existence of the site was last verified. It is also searchable, but the directory part is the more powerful segment of this finding tool.

There are many Web portals to help people, and often they want to be all things to all users. The specialty Web portals, such as the free part of the Hoover's site (<http://www.hoovers.com>) and the Dow Jones portal (<http://www.dowjones.com>), are more focused and efficient for high-quality, business-related information. There will be many more such sites for scientists, researchers, repairmen, and sports fans that librarians will have to know about as time goes on.

The Skills to Build Them

So far I have managed to avoid the term "digital libraries" because it has seemed a tad grandiose to me. But there is no doubt that digital shelves, digital carrels, and digital vertical files are being created at an amazing pace. Librarians are learning to use the software tools of the trade and are

producing impressive "Webliographies" without too much blood, sweat, and tears. The beauty of these efforts is that competent people are creating well-organized, well-filtered, and well-annotated directories on highly specific topics that are beyond the depth and breadth of the directories that cover widely popular topics, and that would not have been feasible in print format.

While fellow columnist Kim Guenther will cover the heavy-duty tools of Web site creation and maintenance, I will dedicate a column occasionally to the lighter tools that can be still quite effective for those who want to create small Web directories and databases on specific topics, as students in my summer course did. (See samples at <http://hypatia.slis.hawaii.edu/~jacso/DL/webliography/index.htm>.)

We're Headed Toward Digital Librarianship ...

Digital collections still represent only a tiny fraction of the collection of a library, but they are growing. These digital components will complement the resources of the brick-and-mortar libraries. Digitally literate librarians will steer you to both the physical shelves and the virtual digital shelves for information. They are the ones who help in organizing the conversion and indexing of brittle newspapers into HTML or SGML or PDF format, who surf the Web for useful information resources, who contribute to the design and implementation of Web directories and databases, who create Webliographies in their spare time, and who handle deftly the digital aspects of the jobs of traditional librarianship: selecting, collecting, and organizing valuable information; making it accessible in digital format; and remaining human, as flesh-and-blood as it gets. That's what I call digital librarianship, and what I dedicate this column to. ▲

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