Access to Federal Information on the WWW: The Public Library Perspective

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Good morning. I would like to thank Sheila McGarr for inviting me here and for giving me the opportunity to talk to you.

I was asked to speak on the subject of access to Federal information on the World Wide Web from the public library perspective. Lily Wai was the one that recruited me for this "job." I am honored to be here, and to be able to share with you my thoughts on this topic.

It seems appropriate to begin with an overview of the Internet accessibility to the public libraries in general. The question of "How the public libraries access governmental information?" becomes secondary to the question: "Can they access it?", in other words, "Are they connected to the Internet?"

According to the ALA, the United States has over 9,000 public libraries. More than one-third of them don't even have a computer, much less an Internet connection. One in five public libraries has an Internet connection, but only 13 percent of Internet-equipped libraries offer public access terminals. Much of the Internet access is restricted to library staff for administrative and reference processes. E-mail is the most frequent activity, followed by resource searches. Fewer yet provide Internet gateways that patrons can use from home. Only 17 percent of rural libraries are on the Internet, compared with 79 percent of urban libraries. I have read an article in the January 1996 issue of the Computers in Libraries magazine, the Internet Librarian section that cites the statistics from the ALA Press Release of August 30, 1995.

A recent survey conducted as part of the Public Library Data Service "Statistical Report '95" polled 369 public libraries serving populations of at least 100,000. According to the report only 23 percent of the surveyed libraries provide direct public access to the Internet and another 5 percent provide public access with staff assistance. That leaves an alarming number of almost 70 percent of all libraries that serve populations over 100,000 that are not connected to the Internet. One can only speculate on the fate of all smaller libraries that serve rural communities or libraries situated in low income areas. The survey does not provide any information on the type of access: Netscape, LYNX.

Unless drastic measures are taken, many public libraries and the communities they serve, will be left behind with the grim prospects of never going beyond the year 2000.

I want to voice my concern for this situation. Governmental information is migrating into the electronic media with the speed of lightning. Soon, only the core of Federal documents will be still available in a printed form. What is going to happen to the libraries that will not be able to afford computers? And what will happen to their users deprived of the information that is rightfully theirs? More important, what will be the role of the public library in the next century?

In view of this situation, I thought it would be appropriate to recount the St. Charles City-County Library District's Internet success story. It is an example of one avenue available for public libraries to explore in their quest for the Internet connection. If it weren't for this success, I wouldn't be talking to you today.

While less than 25 percent of public libraries provide public access to the Internet, the St. Charles City-County Library District has direct Internet access with over 100 stations in six branches, out of which 50 are for public use - six or more stations per branch. The library is one of the original sponsors of the community information system WIN. WIN, the Westplex Information Network, a freenet, grew out of a series of discussions between the St. Charles City- County Library District, the City of St. Peters, the St. Peters Fire Protection District, the St. Charles County Community College, the St. Charles County Government, and several other organizations in 1993.

MOREnet, the Missouri Research and Education Network, was selected to provide WIN with access to the Internet. MOREnet, at that time, was already successful in developing three other community networks, and the DESE project, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education project, designed to provide Internet access to all Missouri school districts.

In early January 1995, WIN opted to work with MOREnet in developing the WWW implementation of the community information network. Originally, LYNX, the textual browser, was used in the basic development stage of the network. In April 1995, Netscape was installed in most of the branches. As of now, all our branches provide access to the WWW.

Among other benefits, WIN also offers free access to the Internet to all of the county residents, and for a minimal fee of $6.00 per month, a SLIP connection. The next step for the St. Charles City-County Library District was to establish its presence on the Internet, which meant building home pages.

For me it has been a serendipitous journey that started in May 1995. I was recuperating at home from a car accident. Reading, listening to music and eventually surfing the Net kept me busy for eight long summer weeks. Inflicted with a professional preoccupation I focused on professional home pages, and after a while became familiar with most of them. I have found many superbly constructed, comprehensive sites, immaculately arranged, often detailed with annotations and with numerous links branching into endless labyrinths of the cyberspace.

Bruce Maxwell, in his presentation at last year's Federal Depository Library Conference, cites over 1000 comprehensive governmental sites on the Net. His count is probably right. What struck me while visiting these sites however, was the fact that none of them were geared toward the public library audience. And the public library does have different needs.

I came across an article written by June Parker in the January/February 1996 issue of the Journal of Government Information. Parker in "Evaluating Documents Reference Service and the Implications for Improvement," suggests that there are no known statistics on who uses government documents in libraries, why they are used, and which categories of materials are used the most. The article evaluates reference services in academic libraries.

The most recent article by Richmond and McKnelly, in the same publication, March/April 1996 issue, addresses the same problem, again from the academic library perspective. The use of government documents in public libraries has never been formally surveyed, as far as I could establish.

I have spent the last ten years working as a reference librarian for two large public libraries in the St. Louis Area: the St. Louis County Library, which serves a population of over two million people, and the St. Charles City-County Library District, just west of the St. Louis Metropolitan Area, that serves over 250,000 residents. I have learned a lot. Without formal statistics I can tell quite accurately what governmental documents are used on a daily basis. I am also aware of the "document phobia" which inflicts not only the users but also my fellow librarians. The sum of these experiences proved to be invaluable in the construction of my home page.

Government documents are used by a variety of people for different reasons. Academic libraries have their own clientele, as do special libraries and public libraries. Two in three Americans go to a public library each year, according to ALA. More than one-third of all users are children. Fifty-three percent of adults reported library use in the previous year. Contrary to a common belief, younger people visit the library more frequently than the older. Two-thirds of 18-24 year olds used the public library, versus one-third of people aged 65 and older. Public libraries encounter a set of circumstances that are unique only to them. They serve a very inhomogeneous group of people. Their users come from all walks of life; they come in all ages; they come with different socio-economic and educational backgrounds; some have no education; others have some; yet there are those who are professional people, with graduate degrees and know what they want and how to ask for it; others may have problems in formulating the question; many have never seen a computer, less searched the Net; others searched occasionally but never learned the basics. Some, of course, are familiar with the Internet, with the World Wide Web, and with various methods of searching. In other words-- there is no typical public library user.

My goal is to provide an easy access to Federal documents for even the most inexperienced public library user. In order to achieve that goal I often have to repackage the information I find on the Web.

"Access, represents the customer or user and encompasses the terms distribution and dissemination... Access ... must mean one other thing. It must mean usefulness."

These are J.D. Young's words from his remarks at the fall 1995 Depository Library Council Meeting.

My definition of "usefulness" encompasses the audience, the appropriate sources for that audience, and their presentation; in the case of a home page, their arrangement. For a source to be useful, it has to be the right source for that particular audience offered in the most appropriate way.

The Federal and State Information from the St. Charles City-County Library District home page is comprised of links to documents that are most frequently used by the public library's users. When available, I offer a direct access to these documents avoiding multiple hyperlinks or a sub- menu structure. The arrangement is simple but logical--a broad subject division. I consciously avoid listing by agencies. My experience tells me that most people who use documents have no idea where they originated.

The home page that dates back to September 1995 has been perpetually under construction. For those of you who might be interested in visiting it, I have recently grouped the links together in broad subject areas, and arranged them alphabetically, hoping to provide a better and easier access to the sources. As always comments and suggestion are welcome.

The URL for Federal and State information from the St. Charles City County Library District is:

http://www.win.org/library/matls/govdocs/ homepg.htm

Over the months the page has undergone several transformations. As the number of links grew I became aware that a long list of links merely arranged alphabetically or by chronology of their "discovery" is impractical. And so, I chose a broad grouping by subject hoping that its simplicity will prove to be useful to users.

I have also included several comprehensive sites. I believe that constructing a home page can be compared to a process of collection development. The individual links can be viewed as selected items while other documents can be found going to sites like the Federal Web Locator, FedWorld, or others.

Most of my links have been harvested from comprehensive sites on the Web and placed directly on my home page. I also regularly check other sources for WWW governmental information:

- The Internet Connection: Your Guide to Government Resources by Bernan Press
- Information Today
- Computers in Libraries
- and others.

Daily, I check the GOVDOC-L, which provides the best and quickest way of finding information about Web activities.

The evaluation process of a link to be considered for my home page consists of checking its:

- user friendliness
- viability
- accuracy of information
- timeliness of information
- reliability of its point of origin.

I prefer to select the "official" sites maintained by the Federal agencies or from State universities and colleges. However, I will add a commercial link when it proves to be superior or in the absence of a similar site. For example, I added the Federal Jobs Digest, which is maintained by a commercial provider.

The links are added and removed depending on their usefulness. This is one of the advantages of being your own publisher - freedom of choice! I am a "one-person-operation" and experience both its benefits and its downfalls!

As I mentioned before, the arrangement of my home page is simple. The "front page" items, like the Telecommunication Act of 1996, or the links to Presidential Race 1996, are placed at the very beginning of the Federal Information section. All other items are grouped informally in broad subject areas:

1. Major Statistical Sources. (with an added statement: "Check Also Individual Topics For Other Statistical Sources!")
    a. The County and City Data Book (I am not too happy with this choice, but some people like it)
    b. The Governmental Information Sharing Project from the Oregon State University. Absolutely the most popular of all, also one of my favorites
    c. The Statistical Abstract of the United States, which I wish was key-word searchable!
    d. The World Factbook, 1995
2. Business/Economy
    a. Business Cycle Indicators: Data Extraction--a searchable site from the School of Business, University of Alabama at Birmingham that covers years 1970-1996. The BCI used to be part of the Survey of Current Business publication until 1995.
    b. Commerce Business Daily from a commercial provider, Loran Data Corp. Although the CBD is included in the STAT-USA account, I felt it was worth placing it here--it offers a free access to the most recent issue, and no password is required!
    c. EDGAR - I hope that its database will eventually cover all the companies required to file with the SEC.
    d. Information about the EE Savings Bonds. This commercial site allows the patron to calculate their bonds' value by the face value, issue month, issue year, redemption month. Years covered: 1980 - 1996.
    e. The SIC Manual - searchable; from OSHA

Other sites here: the SBA, the Statistics of U.S. Businesses, U.S. Economic Indicators, and more.

3. Census Information
    a. 1990 Census Data Lookup, a site that is used most frequently. Sometimes a bit tedious to use, nevertheless, well received and appreciated.
    b. Population Division Home Page, from the Bureau of the Census.
4. Educational/Environmental/Social Links include a. The EPA documents
    a. FannieMae information on housing, lenders, home buying, etc.
    b. Federal Jobs Digest from a commercial provider
    c. Federal Jobs Search from FedWorld
    d. GSA's Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance
    e. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, a new item covering issues that are at the heart of everyone in this country. Includes the Missing Children Database which is searchable by several criteria.
    f. Social Security Online
    g. Uniform Crime Report for January-June 1995

The environmental links will soon migrate from this list to a new environmental home page that will include numerous FEMA and related sites. I plan to cover the subject of: floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, their management, helpful tips, addresses, phone numbers, etc. As we all remember, the flood of 1993 created new awareness of these issues. I hope to be ready with this home page this summer. 5. Laws/Regulations

I have included here both Thomas and GPO Access to which I have provided three access points: access from GPO, from Purdue University and from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. You will also find here the CFR, and the Decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court.

As I mentioned before, I have incorporated several comprehensive Federal Web sites on my home page. Namely:

1. The Federal Web Locator from the Villanova Center for Information Law and Policy
2. The FedWorld
3. A link to Larry Schankman's home pages (for the brave at heart)
4. Several GPO links
5. The Spirit of UCONN from the University of Connecticut
6. The Statistical Resources on the Web from the University of Michigan Documents Center

Although I consider most of the comprehensive sites too cumbersome for the inexperienced or even the average public library searcher, nevertheless, I felt that my home page would not reflect accurately the Federal information available on the Web without their presence. Also, I had to keep in mind the experienced user who likes to visit comprehensive sites which allow him the freedom of searching.

In conclusion of my presentation, I would like to stress the necessity of diligently searching the Web for new sites, and continuously reviewing all links on a published home page. In the "age of transition" we will have to rely more and more on our own ingenuity. The core

paper collection will have to be heavily supplemented with electronic formats. How the users will access Federal information will depend on us--we are the ones that will have to provide a user- friendly access. Hopefully, the agencies responsible for their publication will provide us with user-friendly and timely documents.

Lastly, I would like to remain hopeful for the future of the public library and its access to the Federal information on the Web.