Organizing Internet resources
Edited by Laurie L. Thompson

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INTRODUCTION*

This symposium is based on a program, "Acquiring and Organizing Materials Available on the Internet," which was held at the Ninety-Fourth Annual Meeting of the Medical Library Association, San Antonio, Texas, May 16, 1994, under the joint sponsorship of MLA's Technical Services and Collection Development Sections. When planning for the program was in its infancy in the spring of 1993, skeptics from both sections doubted that there would be any response to the call for papers. After all, the Internet is inherently disorganized. Its phenomenal growth has been facilitated by the ease of connectivity and the spontaneity and serendipity with which its users can locate information. However, it has no structure, no rules, and no one to control the information that is made available. Anyone with access to a computer and an Internet connection can become a "published" author merely by posting a message to an online discussion group. Information appears on the Internet one day and can be altered or even disappear the next. How can librarians expect to organize such chaos, let alone help library users locate the information they need?

As you will see in the following articles, the chaos is being tamed in a variety of ways. Despite this variety, however, there is a universal theme that recurs in each paper. The very nature of the Internet has forced the library profession to reevaluate the delivery and utilization of information. The instability of information resources available on the Internet is the antithesis of more traditional information resources distributed in printed, audiovisual, or even computer-based formats. This volatility poses unique problems and requires creative solutions.

The cataloging world is just starting to face the issues involved in using finely tuned rules and codes designed to describe and organize traditional library materials for this very untraditional medium. The wheels of the cataloging bureaucracy grind exceedingly slowly; will they move quickly enough to accommodate the Internet, which is growing and changing faster than ever? Flannery discusses a project undertaken at Rice University to apply traditional cataloging processes to information resources found on the Internet. She will provide some insight into the decisions that must be made and speculate on catalogers' attempts to tame the Internet beast.

Another popular approach to organization of Internet resources is the Gopher. Librarians have embraced Internet Gophers wholeheartedly. Three of the papers in this symposium discuss the philosophies and processes involved in constructing a Gopher. McFarland et al. describe the efforts at the Health Sciences Library at St. Louis University Health Sciences Center, where the Gopher was built and is maintained solely by the Health Sciences Library. Riley and Shipman discuss the universitywide committee approach taken at the University of Minnesota. Finally, Dutcher and Arnesen describe the development of two subject-oriented Gophers housed at the National Library of Medicine. Each of these papers discusses familiar concepts such as information formats and producers, currency, relevance, and reliability. But these familiar concepts take on new meaning when applied to Internet resources.

The Internet discussion groups known as listservs can be another important source of information for the health professional, but the number of listservs available and the means to access them can overwhelm a busy practitioner. Montgomery and Keenan describe a public-domain software program used at the Medical College of Pennsylvania and Hahnemann University to manage the flood of information that comes with listserv subscriptions.

A central theme that resounds throughout these five papers is the importance of the human resources required for the undertakings described. The new world of the Internet demands innovative methods to organize it in a meaningful way. Librarians have the training and skills necessary for the task. They must be willing to assign personnel and make the time to accomplish the goal of accurate and timely information delivery.

Like Panizzi, Cutter, and Dewey before us, librarians are attempting to organize the world of knowledge, a world that has expanded far beyond the walls of individual institutions. Thanks to the Internet, information is available at the press of a key on a computer keyboard. If library users are to find relevant, current, and accurate information, librarians must continue to organize it, even if it does seem a bit like organizing chaos.

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