Information Overload

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Welcome:

As librarians and information managers we have a responsibility to the organisation that we work for to provide the best material in the best form for use by the other members of the team/organisation. Which sounds like an obvious thing to say I know, however this can be rather one sided. Some organisations pay lip service to the fact that they have a library to maintain and to develop.

Budgets are cut at the same time the cost of books, journals and licences increase. Space is re-allocated; and our collections grow old and stale. We have little or no money for replacements (when things fall to bits or don't come back), new editions or the many new titles that will enhance the collection that we have. We rely more and more on electronic resources and Inter Library Loans to plug the gaps between what our users want and what we can provide in-house. And we are faced with answering the eternal question - if it's on the net, why do we need a librarian to manage the library?

In November 2006 (Issue 51) we looked at some of the issues surrounding fee vs. free material. Today we would like to take it one step further and look at the impact electronic journals are having on the way that we conduct our business, and the services that we provide. Are we really saving space, time and money?

We would like to thank you in advance for forwarding this edition onto friends, colleagues and other interested readers. Please note that all back issues of this edition, as well as our registrant resources edition can be read and/or downloaded from our web site – http://www.iea.com.au should any of the topics be of interest and use.

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In this Issue we will be looking at:

- Publishers, Directories and Search Engines – Where is the best place to find information?
- Goodbye traditional libraries: hello digital world?
- A Thought to ponder.

Publishers, Directories and Search Engines: Where is the best place to find information?

How far we've come in a short space of time. Long before the Internet, and the World Wide Web, searchers were accessing services such as Dialog using expensive telephone

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connections. Each minute of time, each search string and each record you requested from the database was charged for. Each database had a different fee structure and sometimes different search restrictions. Which is why you had to be an expert in Boolean language, the reference interview (what do you need and why do you need it, give me some background information), and which database could answer the query most easily and of course, cost effectively. Which is why when Yahoo came on the scene in 1994 and Google much later in 1999 seemed like an accountant's dream. No more expensive search bills.

For those of you who don't know Dialog it was *"completed in 1966 and was the world's first online information retrieval system to be used globally. Today, Dialog has more than 1.4 billion unique records of key information. The material held by Dialog forms part of the Deep Web, which is estimated to be 500 times larger than the content accessible via Web search engines, and has over 900 databases, handles more than 700,000 searches and delivers over 17 million document page views per month. http://www.dialog.com/about/"*

Which is all very impressive, it's also expensive and not available to individuals unless they have deep pockets.

Thankfully with the introduction of search engine such as Yahoo in 1994 and Google in 1999 (after IT students wondered if there was a better way of finding information), cheaper search options became available. However, you still had to know what you were looking for and the best places to find it.

One of the biggest problems faced by everyone with access to the "net" is where do you start? Unless you know the sites you need to go to then most people will go to the **search engine** of choice plug in a few terms and hope something comes back within the first one or two pages. But did you know that the first sites listed tend to be ones that have been optimised for the net, they may not have the best information; just have deep enough pockets to pay for professional assistance and/or listings. These are usually followed by sites with **.org** or **.edu** or **.gov** endings, these are classed as sites of merit and will list higher than **.co**; **.com**; **.ws**; **.info** even though the latter may have useful information to offer the reader.

Of course you may get lucky, or you may get bored trawling through the endless lists of obscure references you've been provided with. What I do know is there has to be a better way than trial and error employed by the average searcher.

Whilst you can limit your search (through the advanced search options) sometimes it is wise not to do that, especially if you are not sure what you are searching for. Why? Well take the option to search for sites in Australia only. Limiting by this option means that you won't retrieve sites that are built in Australia by Australian organisations but are domained/hosted overseas. The reason why organisations do that is because it is cheaper to do so in the main. It is also true to say that those domain names with the **.com.au** endings tend to be more expensive than their **.info** etc counterparts.

Of course as professionals we try and help our users, we provide classes on how to search the net, we may even publish a list of useful sites that we have come across in our trawl through the depths. However, as websites come and go with amazing alacrity, sometimes these lists are not worth the paper they are printed on.

So where do you go?

We all have our favourite sites, and some of the best (in my opinion) are the **directory sites**, or portal sites that open a gap into the heart of the deep web (BTW - the deep web hides behind front pages that have password protection, search front ends – for example Amazon, and frames based sites). You also tend to have to know they are there as there as they are rarely indexed by the search engines because of a perceived lack of content. If a web site appears to only have a front page, then the robots and spiders will look at the site discover they need to be able to type, realise they can't and move on!!

- The **Librarians Internet Index** – as the title suggests, librarians have tried to do the impossible and gather together in one place those useful reference tools that we all need at some point in our lives. (http://lii.org). Did they succeed? I actually don't think so, given the amount of information available – but it's a great starting point.
- Invisible Web Net – http://www.invisible-web.net/ - this is a hand compiled listing of entry points to the invisible web and was created by the sites authors as examples for their book "The Invisible Web" – *accessed 14.03.07 to be told that the site was down for re-construction!!*
- Complete Planet – http://aip.completeplanet.com - Developed by the Deep Web experts Bright Planet, this site gives access to over 70,000 searchable databases and speciality search engines. It also has 2 white papers that explain in depth what the deep (invisible) web is.

And then there are the **subject specific hubs:**

- Public Library of Science - http://www.plos.org/ (this site is classed as Open Access – namely there is no charge if you want to read and/or download information)
- INTUTE (formerly) Resource Discovery Network – http://www.rdn.ac.uk (now - http://www.intute.ac.uk/ - this is a subject hub covering topics such as Life Sciences, Law, Engineering, Health and Medicine. A network of UK universities and partners created Intute, with subject specialists responsible for the selection and evaluation of the websites in the database, which currently contains 115,952 records.
- Science portal - http://www.science.gov.au/Pages/Home.aspx

However, like most things, if you want premium content, the most up to date information and research you are going to have to pay for it. Why give it away when you can make money from it, lots of money!!

Whilst you may be able to find some articles available free of charge using services such as Google scholar http://scholar.google.com and find articles http://findarticles.com et al, more often than not, you can accept that sometimes you are going to have to pay for the material that your users need, transcend the gateways and password protected sites not accessible to the computer generated information gatherers and delve into the deep web. Whilst we no longer have to use expensive telephone connections, using modems that drop out at the first sign of a long search string to access Dialog and its counterparts, we still have the same kinds of problems we had when we first started trawling through bibliographies, indexes, abstracts, table of contents services. It takes time and sometimes a considerable amount of money.

If time is money, and we are often told that it is then consider if everyone spent half an hour searching for information on the Internet every day (and lets face it, that's likely to be a considerable under estimate) you have a massive drain on your organisations time and

output. Most people (despite what they say) cannot multi-task that well, and will waste time reading copious amounts of material that have little or no bearing on what they were supposed to be looking for, or for that matter what they were working on.

However, it is also worth noting that not even the publishers have all the material available electronically yet either. Did you know that one of the major publishers *"Blackwell Publishing is undertaking a major digitization project to make the complete backfiles of up to 500 scholarly journals available online. The project began in January 2006 and is scheduled for completion in 2008. It will cover all disciplines and is expected to comprise 6.5 million pages in total. It encompasses all issues of each journal from Volume 1, Issue 1 to December 1996."* (http://www.blackwellpublishing.com) Why stop in December 1996? Well from then the material is available online and does not need re-digitizing. And Blackwell's is not alone in the race to digitize their information.

The reason why publishers are desperate to get their material online is so they can re-sell it. Whilst there is a market in reprints, and back issues, more revenue can be generated from the online model. As most researchers know, sometimes the best work is created from the work that has gone before, sometimes many decades before, and if you have ever tried to search back issues of hardcopy journals and indexes it is a very time consuming process. Thankfully with the digitising of material comes better search capabilities and therefore more informed decisions can be made as a result.

Goodbye traditional libraries, hello digital world?

Advantages of Online Access:

- You can search multiple sources at the same time.
- Your users can do their own searching – and can do so from their desktops (if the system has been set up in that way).
- You can service your remote users in the same way as your residents. Given that Australia is a very big country with a lot of operational sites, this alone could make a big difference to your organisations output and productivity (assuming you can get Internet access in the remote regions of course).
- Storage of the material is handled by the publishing houses and not by the end users.
- Journals don't tend to go missing. Down time may occur because of power outages and maintenance, however these tend to be minimal.
- More than one person can read the journal at the same time (although this may depend on your licence)
- You get slightly better value for money buying the electronic resource to the hard copy version. You can also bundle the option that you want at either an article level or the journals that you would like to subscribe to. For example – Blackwell has a three tier pricing structure:
    - **Premium:** Print subscription with extended online access rights. Access to the full list of issues and remote user rights.
    - **Standard:** Print subscription with online access rights to current and two previous years volumes – 90% of the Premium subscription price.
    - **Online Only:** Online subscription providing full access rights as per Premium package – 85% of the Premium subscription price.

Disadvantages of Online Access:

- As with all other digital records, the same concerns over longevity of material remains.

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- Poor search skills may mean that some information is not found by end users.
- Your users have access to more information; they may spend more time searching for and reading material and less time working;
- If you stop subscribing to the journal titles you may lose access to the resource. For example Blackwell's Crystallography journals, where subscriptions include online access to all back volumes for only as long as the subscription is maintained.
- Not all journals are available electronically
- Decisions may be made without having all the facts. This has happened in the medical world and people have died as a result of poor end user information gathering skills.
- You may end up paying more for printer maintenance, toner and paper as users print out the items they want to read, rather than reading them on the screen.
- The powers that be may decide that because the library is no longer required to store hard copy information, then it may not be required at all, and if there is no library to maintain why should they pay for the services of a professional librarian either!

Advantages of Hard Copy:

- Unless the item is stolen you will always have a copy, even if you decide to stop subscribing to the item at a later date.
- You don't have to sit at your desk to read the item. Nor do you have to read it on screen.

Disadvantages of Hard Copy:

- They take up space – lots of it.
- Each journal can only be read by a single person at any one time.
- They get damaged, lost and stolen.
- They are expensive to produce and purchase. As libraries cut their print subscriptions, the cost increases to compensate for smaller print runs.
- Libraries who choose to bind back editions have the additional cost, plus the journals are not available for use for a considerable period of time.

A Thought to Ponder:

"The desire of knowledge, like the thirst of riches, increases ever with the acquisition of it"

Laurence Stern, 1713-1768
British Writer and Clergyman

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