

Computers in libraries '97: Looking for quality

By Sean Maloney

Getting a handle on the Web

The 1997 Computers in Libraries Conference held March 10–12 in Arlington, Virginia, evidenced a tremendous concern with evaluation and quality of the Internet. There was a sense among the 3,558 attendees that the world is finally aware of this thing that some of us have known about and used for a decade and more. But the question is, how can we tread through the morass of information and guide our patrons/clientele/students to find the nuggets of gold? There was a sense that the techies had unleashed a monster, and it was now up to the grunt in the trenches to find a way to straighten out the mess.

Pushing and pulling information for clients

The "Filtering the Internet & World Wide Web" session had a huge overflow, with people sitting in the aisles, standing along the walls, and spilling out into the hallway. The panelists presented sophisticated strategies for taking the enormous amount of electronic information available and making it more accessible to their clientele, and for evaluating the information once it is retrieved. Peter Banholzer of the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center described how they wrote a filter to convert ISI's Current Contents tape information into HTML format to make the data more usable. Paul Pinella of Individual, Inc. described his company's software product that uses in-house intranets to filter information out on the Web in both push and pull modes. The aim is to create a highly relevant, ranked daily briefing document about a firm or company's industry, profiled to each person's organizational requirements, that takes

no more than ten minutes to read. The information is gathered from the Internet, internal company sources, proprietary databases, and files the company subscribes to; the most relevant items are "pushed" into the person's e-mail box, with links for the subscriber to then go out and "pull" more information if desired.

The panel on "Evaluating the Quality of Information on the Internet" presented criteria that users need to apply to all of this information that is pushed and pulled into their sight and sites: timeliness, authority, stability of information, appropriate format, clarity—all of these are qualitative hallmarks that librarians have applied to print sources since our beginnings.

Dead technology

Much of the love/hate ambivalence for the Internet and high technology was manifest at the session called "Dead Technology: A View From Tomorrow." With everyone relaxed and in a jovial mood, Eric Flowers hosted a roast-like discussion of technologies—dead, dying, dead-on-arrival, and still-born—some of which are still regarded by many as the here-and-now, up-to-the-minute cutting edge. In Flowers's view, dead technology is "anything less than" 155 megs/second, fiber optic, and time and distance insensitive.

Dead also are services that provide only "meta-information," i.e., indexing rather than full text; text-based catalogs; periodicals in academic libraries; and seats in academic libraries. In keeping with the festive mood, Flowers also said that "top ten lists are dead."

Katie Hover, from Microsoft Corp. library, took some good-natured ribbing from the Macphiles and cheers from the die-hard PC-ers. To her suggestion that floppy disks were dead, hoots of laughter about "there go the freebies from AOL" were voiced. Another endangered

species is any product not Internet-enabled, as are proprietary online services. She did not spare Microsoft products—Bob, Microsoft Scenes, modular windows, and others were buried.

Memory is cheap

Greg Notess of Montana State University-Bozeman declared the death of “comic book” search engines—read Archie, Veronica, Jughead, et al. Vanderbilt University’s Marshall Breeding illustrated a scenario where there was an old, huge IBM mainframe that they had for years, limping along, patching and bubble-gumming, that had (relatively) very little memory. They had to be very parsimonious with every bit of program to accommodate the limits of the machine. Eventually they were able to purchase a cutting-edge Sun machine that took up only a small portion of the space of the IBM, but had a huge memory. However, they have had to constantly upgrade the machine’s memory because the

new programs are memory hogs—there seems to be little concern on the part of programmers to be efficient because memory is so cheap. Marshall also took a hack at hackers, who don’t seem to need jobs or worry about tenure. All our technology will be dead unless security improves, and much of the software is inherently insecure.

Richard Hulser of IBM had on his obsolescence list “secure jobs” (met with nervous, groaning laughter), all operating systems, Web search engines, mice, and water-cooled mainframes.

Scott Brandt of Purdue University excoriated the current search engines that give a searcher thousands of “hits” despite their seemingly scientific “relevancy” rankings. Some other sessions that also addressed the search for quality were “The HTML Monster: Is It Really Necessary to Learn?” “WebPAGES: Graphic Design Principles and Navigation,” and “Web Site Evolution: Controlling the Monster.” ■

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