Documents Home Pages:

Questions of Beauty, Practicality and Simplicity

by *William Spivey*

During the last decade, the Internet has become an invaluable source for the most current government information both national and international. Every state in the United States now maintains a home page, typically providing access to state government information. Local governing bodies use the Internet for both marketing and public awareness. International organizations also are enjoying an increased presence on the Web. Documents librarians are pivotal in providing access to federal, state, local and international governments, agencies and organization sites, and information.

One way to organize and present the wealth of government information on the Internet is by creating and maintaining a documents home page. Many libraries already have done this; others are in various stages of planning or execution. Regardless of the stage of the process, there are a number of important things to think about as you begin to create or revise your documents Web pages.

Having recently been through the process of redesigning a Documents department home page, we learned several lessons about beauty, practicality, simplicity, and the Web. During the process of reevaluating the service we provided via the World Wide Web, we asked ourselves a number of questions to provide sound reasons for the level of service we wanted to provide. Several themes emerged from our discussion: 1) our user community; 2) our collection; 3) what we provide that is unique; and 4) finding a page design that fulfills all of our requirements. This article is not so much about how we are answering these questions; rather it seeks to pose the questions in a public forum. Our answers may not be yours, but the questions are helpful ones. We hope our experience will give you some things to think about as you consider the role of the Internet, and more particularly the role of a Documents home page, in the service that you provide.

Current Situation in NC

North Carolina depository libraries appear to be providing good access to government information on the Internet. North Carolina currently is home to 43 depository libraries, of which 33 are federal depository libraries. Nineteen of the federal depositories also provide access to North Carolina state depository items, and several are depositories for international organization publications as well. Ten North Carolina state documents depositories service exclusively, or at least primarily, state depository items. Of the 33 federal depositories, 16 maintain separate documents home pages, and 9 others provide access to some federal links through the library home page, or a reference department page. (Not all of the depository libraries have separate Documents departments.) Twelve of the thirteen libraries providing combined access to federal and North Carolina documents reflect this in their pages. There are also several instances in which access to federal, state, and international links is provided regardless of any official depository status.

Coverage of federal and state information sources varies widely from institution to institution. By far, the federal information pages are much more developed, although the depth and breadth of coverage varies, probably dependent on local needs and resources. North Carolina documents do receive some coverage, largely in instances where NC documents are at an institution that is also a federal depository. Coverage varies from a brief collection description to extensive agency, information, and data links. In most instances where a separate page was not maintained by a department, links have

Figure 1: **Depository Libraries and Documents Home Pages in North Carolina**

	Primarily Federal	Primarily State	Fed/ State	Total
Depository Libraries in NC	14	10	19	43
Documents Home pages	3[1]	2[2]	13[3]	18

1 – Four additional libraries provide access to some federal government links from the main library page or from a reference department page. Three of these four also provide links to other institutions with departmental pages.

2 – Most of these libraries have collection descriptions, but do not devote a home page to NC sources.

3 – Most of the libraries in this category not maintaining a departmental page do provide some links to federal and state information, and/or links to other institutions with departmental pages.

been provided to other institutions, local or otherwise, with a separate Documents page presenting a variety of links.

Whom Do You Serve?

This brief look into the presence or absence of Documents home pages in the State is not meant to encourage everyone to jump on to the documents-on-the-Net bandwagon. What it reveals is that a number of you probably are thinking about developing Web access to your collections, or revisiting the access that you provide, given the many changes that may have taken place since you first put up your pages. That you will or will not provide Internet access through your library may have already been decided. What you do, or do differently, with your Web space deserves some careful consideration and planning.

The first important thing to consider in the earliest stages of Web development is your audience. Recent trends in library literature reveal an ever-increasing focus on the user in library transactions. This includes library patrons visiting or interacting with the library via a home page. In her 1996 article "Government Web Pages: the Lights Are On But Nobody Is Home," Julie Johnson, while applauding the general principles driving the proliferation of government information on the Internet, laments the fact that many agency Web pages are designed from the agency's perspective, and seem to pay little attention to user needs.[1] Libraries can fall into this trap with their home pages as well. Finding out about your users is not an easy task. Much of the best information is derived from the one-on-one contact that takes place in a public service environment. The difficulty of assessing your Internet audience stems from the fact that Web access is not truly site dependent. In other words, having access to a computer and a Web browser is all that is needed for users from practically anywhere to be able to access your pages. An added level of difficulty for depository libraries that are part of a larger institution is that they have to take into consideration obligations to several user communities.

Stop and ask yourself what your priorities are with regard to your users. Is your target audience the students and faculty of a small liberal arts college or major research library? Is it the people in your community? The citizens of the state of North Carolina? All of these? What types of information do they typically ask for when they come to the reference/information desk or call you on the phone? How many of them have computers at home? at work? in their department? How comfortable are they using new technologies? Answers to these questions will provide the framework for selecting links, as well as for making page design issues.

Who Are We?

Once you have decided who your main audience is going to be, it is time to take a good look at what you have to offer. If you are going to put up a home page, why not create something unique to your institution? Questions to ask yourself at this stage are: What exactly do you have in your collection? What is most heavily used? What do you not have? What is unique about your collection? I emphasize uniqueness, because only you have the in-depth knowledge of your user groups, and know how your collection meets, or could meet, their needs. Consequently, only you can put together a Web package that directly addresses your particular users' needs. How you put materials together and present them, therefore, will be more or less unique.

One of the nice things about the proliferation of government information on the Internet is that you now have access to things that you do not own, and can use electronic versions of documents, data, and other government information to supplement your print/microfiche/CD-ROM collection. You may decide that a product on the Web provides more flexibility for your users than a print equivalent. A Web document or database may offer such handy features as keyword searching and/or data that can be downloaded and manipulated in a way that is more meaningful to a patron. You may decide to provide access to electronic versions of documents simply because it means that more people can have access to the same information at the same time. As such, the Internet allows you to expand your collection, as well as increase "circulation."

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Back to Basics

At this point, you should have a good idea of who your users are and what their needs are, and some idea of the package you want to present. The next step is to look for and evaluate links. If you decide to find all of your links personally, you may feel a bit overwhelmed by the quantity of information that you find on the Internet. Be not dismayed. Experiment with different Web search engines and compare the results. Read the search help that these sites provide so that you know exactly what you are searching, and how to do a good search. Peter S. Morville and Susan J. Wickhorst have published an article entitled, "Building Subject-Specific Guides to Internet Resources," that provides a succinct and efficient method for locating resources on the Internet.[2] The article focuses mainly on the selection process for Internet sites, but also touches on design and publicity issues. It will give you more detailed information on how to do Web research, and where to find different types of materials, than space affords me here. Although Morville and Wickhorst approach Web searching more from a subject bibliographer's point of view, remember that what you are creating is essentially a resource tool or subject bibliography for accessing government information.

You do not necessarily have to start from scratch, however. You may choose to start from the documents home page of another institution to discover what they have already located that might be useful for you.

Grace York focuses particularly on government documents in her 1995 article, "New Media/Traditional Values: Selecting Government Information on the Internet."[3] York provides some insight into the application of traditional librarian roles to the use of the Internet, emphasizing our functions as selectors, evaluators, and organizers of information. She states that, "Documents Librarians have traditionally selected for their clienteles the best materials from a vast arena of print and microform sources. Selecting documents on the Internet is an extension of their role as navigators through the world of information."[4] The body of York's article outlines nine selection criteria including:

1) Projected use
2) Availability of explanatory documentation

3) How the information site is organized
4) Physical format of individual documents
5) Timeliness of updates to the site
6) Avoid duplication of effort
7) Is the site the best source
8) Is a Web document the best format and
9) Is a Web site the exclusive source.[5]

Keep the fundamentals of librarianship in mind as you navigate the Web and make decisions about what your community needs and wants, and how you want present it.

Design Issues

Your users' needs should be the force that drives your home page, and as Johnson goes on to state, "It is the content being delivered, not the technology."[6] Keep this in mind as you make content decisions, select your links, and organize your pages. Remember that your home page also will be a public face for your department or unit — a face that will be seen by a very wide audience, as well as a means of access to useful information. Later in her article, Johnson points out that, "At present the Web is most appropriate for public relations or for distributing information to an international market."[7] (I would disagree with her choice of the phrase "most appropriate," substituting "most often used" instead.) This concept should influence you as you make design decisions. Try to develop a design that will meet your users' needs and be pleasing to the eye, thus giving a favorable impression of your library. (I always say that I want my home pages to be practical yet beautiful, and that there is much beauty in simplicity.)

General Guidelines for Web Site Design

- Use small, simple graphics. Large graphics take a long time to load and can force important information out of view.
- Try to fit important information about content and navigation on one screen. This will be the first screen that your users see. Give them right away the tools and information they most need in order to use your pages effectively.
- Include a scope note and general content description on the first page of your site. Keep it brief, but let users know what you have to offer and what they can expect to find on your pages.
- Use brief annotations for links. Give users some idea of what they can find at other sites and, to some extent, indicate why the site is on your page. Annotations also clarify the context of the link to a page.
- Consider making your site searchable. Place your search mechanism in a place that is easy to locate.

Once you have seen the wealth of information that the Internet can provide, you may find yourself battling an initial tendency to put anything and everything up on your home page. Resist the temptation! Keep your collection in mind and remember to ask yourself if Web access is really the best form of access for an item. Just because it is "out there" does not mean that you have to put it on your page. Keeping this in mind will help you avoid unnecessary clutter and pages that are too long.

Address maintenance issues early in the process. Who will be responsible for the pages? How will you continue to locate, evaluate and add links? How will you decide when a link should be removed? Who is going to check links periodically to be sure that they are still active? How often will you check your links? Asking yourself these questions will help you limit the scope of your pages and really focus on the best information. Unless you have a database that allows you to keep track of a large number of links and their locations on your pages, having too many links on your site becomes a maintenance nightmare. Try to keep it simple and concise — but thorough.

Some Notable Examples

Several documents sites provide excellent examples of the kind of finished product you can have by investing a lot of thought, planning, and the fundamentals of librarianship. These examples have been chosen because they are good examples of well-developed, individual approaches to maintaining a documents home page. The first of these is the University of Michigan Documents Center (*http://www.lib.umich.edu/libhome/Documents.center/index.html*). Of note on their main page are the simplicity of the layout, the sparing use of graphics, the inclusion of a scope note, and the fact that their main navigational links appear on the first screen. Further down on the main page, additional links are available, providing access to basic contact and service information for the Documents Department, collection overviews for the Documents Center and main campus library, access to related campus libraries with documents collections, and access to documents on the Internet. Federal information on the Internet has been organized by broad subject and branch of government. The sub pages include bulleted links with brief annotations. Most of the pages are only three to seven screens in length, with a few being slightly longer. To facilitate navigation on each page, "Quick Jumps" have been provided to take you to a section of interest without having to scroll. Throughout the pages, the use of concise text improves legibility.

The Federal Web Locator from Villanova's Center for Information Law and Policy (*http://www.law.vill.edu/Fed_Agency/fedwebloc.html*) uses a different organizational scheme for the presentation of its government information. Again on the first screen, a relatively simple graphic is used, and although it is large, the basic information still appears on the first screen. This information includes the basic navigational tools and a brief statement about the purpose of the site. The second screen provides more information on the purpose of the site, stating that the site is "intended to be the one stop shopping point for federal government information on the World Wide Web."[8] A link to a page explaining the structure of the site indicates that its organization "matches the structure found in *The United States Government Manual*, which is published by the Government Printing Office of the United States Congress."[9] This organizational structure essentially groups links by branch of government or type of agency or organization within the governmental structure. Very few of the links on these pages are annotated, as they are mostly direct links to agency and organization home pages. The first page is rather long, but each section contains useful links to access the information on the subpages, e.g., "Quick Jumps," a section for latest additions to the site, and a search engine. What follows is a listing of the direct links by branch of government. This site is thorough in its coverage of federal government sites, but does not offer an explanation of governmental structure, or assistance from someone with that knowledge.

Larry Schankman's "US Government and Politics" page (*http://www.clark.net/pub/lschank/web/gov.html*) takes yet another approach to providing access to government information. Schankman provides a variety of ways to access different types of government information. Most of Schankman's pages are organized by the format of the information, including starting points

and guides; directories and locators, with additional access by agency; level of government (for state and local resources); and a few broad subject headings (international and area studies, government in general, legislation and regulations, etc.). Although Schankman does not offer a scope notes, he does provide excellent annotations with embedded links to take you to still more information sources. His content analysis of the sites included is unique and enriches the quality of his service.

The University of Virginia Library's "Government Information Resources" page (*http://www.lib.virginia.edu/govdocs*) is unique in that it not only offers access to government sites and publications, but also provides direct links to the Social Sciences Data Center and the Geographic Information Center, other institutions at the University that collect and disseminate bodies of federally produced (and non-federally produced) data. The "About" page states that, "The Social Sciences Data Center and the Geographic Information Center are affiliated with Government Information Resources. The Social Sciences Data Center assists researchers with the location and analysis of data from both government and nongovernment sources. The Geographic Information Center offers both electronic and print versions of a variety of maps and other cartographic products."[10] As such, Virginia's page provides a good example of collaboration among campus institutions to provide more in-depth access to government information. The pages maintained by the Government Information Resources staff provide good examples of brevity and clarity in their annotations. Almost every page and section include brief scope notes indicating the type of information or document(s) you can expect to find. These pages are not long, but there is evidence that this is because the links have been closely examined for content and usability before being added to a page. Access to federal, state, and local information is available from the main page, and all of the links on Virginia's pages are browseable from an alphabetical list of titles. The federal information is made accessible on subpages by branch of government with selected sites, and through "Gateways to Official U.S. Government Information Sites."[12] A list of non-governmental sites relating to government and politics is provided as well. Virginia also maintains a "U.S. Government Information Reference Shelf," that is a "selected list of Internet sites ... based loosely on titles in the print reference collection in the Government Information Section of the University of Virginia Library. It is a mixture of both government and nongovernment sites,"[12] which provides us with an example of providing additional electronic access to titles in a print collection.

Conclusion:Looking Back and Planning Ahead

Even though the format has changed, librarians are still in the business of contributing to a more informed citizenry. Creating a home page for government documents quickly and easily provides a wealth of government information to your patrons. There are a number of important issues to think about and discuss before you undertake or revisit the service that you provide through access to government information on the Internet. Who your users are, and what their needs are, should be the driving force behind any decisions that you make about your home page. Use the basic skills of librarianship — selecting, evaluating and organizing — to help you present information in a way that serves your patrons thoughtfully and effectively. Throw a little marketing savvy in your design (but keep it simple!), and you will have a quality educational and promotional site for your institution. Wrestling with the answers to the important questions that you need to ask, and continuing to ask those questions as you develop a documents home page, are all part of the creative process. Taking the time to think through these questions carefully will result in a better product and more satisfied users.

References

[1] Julie Johnson, "Government Web Pages: the Lights Are On But Nobody Is Home," *The Electronic Library* 14 (April 1996): 151-152.

[2] Peter S. Morville and Susan J. Wickhorst, "Building Subject-Specific Guides to Internet Resources," *Collection Building*, 14, 3 (1995): 26-31.

[3] Grace Ann York, "New Media/Traditional Values: Selecting Government Information on the Internet," *Collection Building*, 14, 3 (1995): 4-11.

[4] Ibid., 6.

[5] Ibid., 8-9.

[6] Johnson, 152.

[7] Johnson, 153.

[8] Kenneth P. Mortensen, "The Federal Web Locator." 2nd ed. *http://www.law.vill.edu/Fed_Agency/fedwebloc.html* (May 8, 1997).

[9] Ibid.

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