Foreword

Virtual libraries are organic. Understanding the challenges of development is ongoing. These challenges range from content to interfaces, from digital video to geospatial infrastructures, from staffing to marketing. This book explores the dynamics of building a virtual library at the University of South Florida within the context of national developments and standards. This illustration will assist the reader in understanding and developing similar resources and services for his or her library.

Issues presented in this book are complex. The simple question "What is information" depends upon your current role. Do you need a quick definition of "genetics" or guidance in using Worldcat or need to know that the *New York Times* has a searchable archive? The qualification of "current" is equally important, since even as information professionals, we navigate as experts and as novices. At one and the same moment, we have a subject expertise and a passing knowledge of many others. Further, we have immediate needs and longer timeframes depending upon the context. However, as information professionals, there are concerns about our own roles as *librarians* and how we interpret what this means. Are we seeking to reinforce our brick presence as we expand our click presence? Where is the "teachable moment" in the electronic environment? Are we visible or invisible mediators in the provision of information? Can anyone *see* us? Do we *need* to be seen?

The taxonomy of the Internet currently includes websites, email (one-to-one or one-to-many), asynchronous discussion forums (newsgroups and mailing lists), synchronous chat (Instant Messenger, including MSN, ICQ, AIM, and IRC), MUDS (including MOOs and MUSHs), metaworlds (Virtual Reality), interactive video and voice, and is still expanding (Wallace, 1999a). This taxonomy exacerbates issues of authority, permanence, and accessibility, and introduces other issues, such as provenance. In many ways, the issue is the same: people need access to answers.

In response, libraries of all types have tried to reposition themselves in a virtual world, from providing access to their repositories and services to undertaking massive and successful digitization efforts of text, images, sound, and datasets. The response from the commercial sector includes enterprises such as About.com, Amazon, and Google. Concurrently there is the wholesale ability of everyone to

self-publish. In this digital environment, GIGO (garbage in, garbage out) has emerged as the greatest challenge, with cognitive miserliness as the second challenge (Wallace, 1999b). Humans seek to filter information; we seek to reduce cognitive inputs, and we will accept immediacy over accuracy or even relevancy.

Once upon a time, computer users debated the superiority of Macintoshes and PCs. The debate focused on control vs. surface and simulation. As librarians, skilled in command line and/or fielded searching, the ability to manipulate online catalogues and databases has remained an important value even as our catalogs have migrated to web-based interfaces. However, the majority of our users have valued surface, immediacy, and depthlessness (Jameson, 1984). They value tools which allow them to skim along the surface. This isn't to say that either end-users or these tools are second class. It simply acknowledges a preference by the user.

Each click-effort nudges another effort. We have moved our catalogs to the Web and provided access to every imaginable database either locally or remotely. However, in the process, we have created silos. Our traditional framework has required the researcher to develop an idea, articulate that concept to a librarian or simply to a card catalog, and mediate the topic in search of answers. The difficulty of this framework is that it shifts focus from the need to the resource, from the idea to the navigation. Our click-libraries have sought to replicate place and service – a difficult architecture. Each technology, however, affords us the opportunity to re-examine the matrix as we work toward a convergence of format and access.

Central themes in this dynamic involve four major issues. First, there are inter- and intra-institutional cooperative collection efforts and reference services with colleagues at different institutions in different nations, whom we may or may not ever meet. These cooperative efforts also have an impact on the relationship between distance educational resources and the libraries' role in collection development. Second, multi-modal presentations (RealAudio and MPEG3 formats next to sheet music), the integration of formats far beyond that of items held in our catalogs, and the merger of archive and access through digital formats require an increased emphasis on metadata to both describe and link resources and collections. Third, the growing awareness of a user-centered rather than system-centered perspective has an impact on both technology and services. Finally, a cognitively flexible work-force with technical skills is critical to ensure effective, reliable services to library users, regardless of where they are located.

These are merely four of a number of major themes found in this volume. The chapter contributors have done an excellent job presenting both conceptual approaches and case illustrations in building a virtual library within an academic environment. Librarians will have a greater understanding of how technology and change impacts their environments. Staff in the traditional functional areas of libraries will see examples of how emerging technologies can be most efficiently and

effectively utilized within their respective organizations. In addition, librarians in administrative positions will greatly benefit from the discussion of organizational change, the emergence of work teams, and staffing and personnel. In addition, the chapters on marketing, and statistics provide a clear picture of the importance of both of these activities to both libraries and their larger institutions. Finally, library and information science faculty will be interested in how the development of virtual libraries will re-engineer library education. This book is essential reading for those individuals currently planning or implementing virtual library services and resources within their academic environment.

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6 March 2002

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