Chapter XIII

Subject Access to Quality-Assured World Wide Web Resources: Strategies for Information Professionals

Robert Newton and David Dixon
Robert Gordon University, Scotland

The development of the Internet, and in particular the World Wide Web, has offered students, teachers and researchers a rich new scholarly resource, allowing unprecedented ease of access to local, national and international information. However, the World Wide Web is badly organized, much of the information found there does not meet the rigor normally expected by academic discourse, and the technologies developed to cope with the vast explosion of online information have proven to be inadequate in a number of ways. Subject catalogues of Internet resources, compiled by information professionals expert in the information retrieval systems which have proven successful in libraries over the last hundred years, are increasingly important in ensuring easy access to high quality WWW resources. After a brief general discussion which expands on the need for well-organized subject gateways to Internet resources and outline some of the problems their development and coordination present, the chapter will examine in some detail three examples of subject gateways, two of which were developed to support teach-
ing and learning by the School of Information and Media at the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland. A final section will deal with the implications for information professionals of developing effective Internet subject gateways.

INTRODUCTION

Over little more than this last half decade the Internet, and in particular its rapidly developing graphical interface the World Wide Web, have developed to become a major resource for teaching and learning within the higher education sector. Students as well as teaching staff and researchers are now able to access tailored learning materials, bibliographic and other datasets, OPACs, reports and official publications, scholarly articles, conference papers and on-line reference works with unprecedented ease from their desktops almost regardless of their geographical position.

The rise of the Internet as an educational resource has taken place within the context of its general explosion in terms of the extent of the network, the speed of its technological development, the quantity of information found there and the numbers and diversity of the network’s users. The same few years has also seen the rapid expansion of home use of the Internet and the commercialization of the World Wide Web, so it is now no longer mainly the preserve of the academic community but a burgeoning and largely uncontrolled information economy. The huge increase in the number and diversity of Internet resources, and the opportunities for publication presented by the Web, has come with a price: much of what is found there is of poor quality, is ill designed, lacks reliability or is offensive to the point of illegality. For academics and academic librarians, seeking both to exploit the possibilities of new information and communications technologies and to maintain the traditional rigor of scholarly discourse, the Internet presents a perplexing challenge: how can the wheat of reliable and original on-line information be separated from the worthless chaff?

BACKGROUND

This challenge is made more daunting by the inadequacies of the information retrieval tools, notably search engines, which have developed alongside the rapidly exploding WWW. Novice users of search
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