EVALUATING INTERNET RESOURCES: CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION AS A COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT EXTENSION

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers a model for the evaluation of electronic resources by providing selection criteria incorporating those used in collection development of traditional materials with the special problems associated with electronic media. The criteria are offered as a starting point for the development of electronic collections in libraries that make the Internet accessible to patrons via the World Wide Web or networked systems.

The evaluation of traditional print resources for collection development has long been an integral part of our duties as both bibliographers and reference librarians. However, resources are now in a variety of nontraditional formats, including CD-ROM and electronic media via the Internet. As with the expansion of new nonelectronic formats, so too has the electronic grown to include graphics, databases, sound, video, and hypertext. The selection criteria for the variety of electronic formats must consider the differences among each. A all-encompassing collection development policy and standardized procedures to build and maintain a collection must be in place.

The general collection process includes selecting resources that support the university curriculum, faculty and graduate research, or that aid in library reference. Assumed within this first level of selection are second level criteria which narrow the requirements for purchase. These second level criteria are the main focus of this paper. Below, I list and discuss aspects of each criterion with emphasis on variables specific for electronic resources.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Collection Value

Any resource that is added to a library collection must meet collection development policy requirements for curriculum, faculty or graduate research or should enhance reference service. Many electronic resources offer nontraditional value to the collection. By this I mean the method of use, graphics, links to other sources, may enhance the resource beyond traditional format use. Its collection value therefore, may increase because it offers ease of use and additional
information beyond what a print source can provide. However, an electronic resource may require additional time and computer storage or availability and may not be an appropriate resource due to computer limitations in the library. Collection value is a not just a quantity vs. quality issue but an access issue.

Content and coverage

Of course content and information coverage is of prime importance when considering additions to one’s library collection. Electronic resources tend to cover new subjects or the most recent information. Archiving older information is not of primary interest to Net site developers. However, recent information may be archived and provide a wonderful source.

Resource Format

Electronic resources are not limited in formats. Graphics, movies, data files, documents, and databases are all included. The variety of formats provides resource developers many ways of offering information also gives users new interfaces that may aid learning. Linking on the World Wide Web can lead to one or all of these possible formats from a single document or site. Collecting these sites requires the technical capability of the library computer system to handle all these formats. Resources may remain in traditional format, such as encyclopedias in print format, while also offering hypertext formats.

Available Formats of Resource

The uniqueness of a resource, whether it is offered in more than one format, is an important consideration. A single resource may be offered in several formats, traditional print, CD-ROM, or as a hypertext document on the Net. The Internet is an ideal system to provide unique methods of information display and use. However, it may require special user training to fully reap the benefits. When a resource is available in a traditional form and electronically, a choice must be made. Not all formats are appropriate for every library.

Producer

When evaluating a print source a bibliographer considers the author or editors. If unfamiliar with either, other criteria become important such as the publisher’s reputation and history in producing similar work. Confidence that the book has been put together well by a familiar publisher may lead to purchasing the volume. On the Internet there are no such assurances. A resource may be found at a reputable address but this does not mean it was produced at the site or under the auspices of the institution. The very nature of the Net and the ability to link to resources all over the world does not lend credibility to a resource or to the location. In addition,
the author may be the compiler, editor, and publisher of a Net resource with little or no past history to investigate.

The resource compiler should be given credit somewhere obvious on the document. Compiler credit and the source of information used to build the resource is critical. Unfortunately, readme files, which usually give such information, are often separate from the main data and therefore, can be missed when linked by other sites.

Source of Information

The sources used to build a hypertext database or document become important in the evaluation process. A resource that does not fully define all its sources should be suspect. Contact with the compiler or producer may become necessary before recommending the resource to patrons.

Contact Person

Hopefully, and by netiquette, the source should have a contact person or location clearly defined. A name and e-mail address may come in handy if questions arise as to updating, completeness of information, source of information, accessiblity, etc.

Currency

The Net can be updated easily. An old, out of date resource should not be kept on the Net unless the original intention of the compiler was to provide archived or historical information. For example, the NABS Benthic Database has a limited number of years placed on the Net with no apparent plans to update. This is explained, as it should be, in the introduction to the database.

Availability

Availability simply means that the resource is easy to connect to regardless of time of day or high volume use. Are there enough ports for heavy use or must one keeping trying to connect or use only at off hours?

Many really good sites are difficult to connect to. The patron should be informed via an annotation if linking via a Gopher or Web site. Keeping users informed of site availability problems reduces frustration and helps make them aware of irregularities of the Internet.

Stability

We have all been connected to a Net site or bookmarked one for our own use only to have them move to sites unknown or disappear completely. Keeping the compiler or contact person's name
is helpful at these times. Making sure a resource is stable takes time and constant checking as does keeping a good bookmark file, Gopher, or Web site. It is a very important consideration when creating a Web site for resources. The patrons will expect the library to suggest sites that are stable.

User Knowledge Requirements and Ease of Use

In the sciences there are electronic resources that require the user to have knowledge of specialized software or have computers with capabilities beyond the standard PC. Also, many databases in the sciences require a knowledge of the topic beyond the undergraduate level. For example, the DNA or protein databases may require special knowledge to find, understand, and interpret the information. Additional software may be needed to be retrieved from an FTP file to complete the resource use. The patron will need to download the FTP file, uncompress it, and acquaint themselves with its use before accessing the resource. Special instructions should be annotated along with the resource if it is to be made available or suggested for use by the librarian.

Knowledge of a patron’s abilities is helpful in choosing resources with special requirements. The librarian should be familiar with the curriculum within each discipline they suggest.

Cost

There are many database suppliers now loading CD-ROM databases to the Internet. Obviously, they are not free to users. The price may be lower during an introduction option or extra incentives provided for using the electronic version rather than continuing with the CD-ROM purchase or lease. The main concern is user friendliness, accessibility, long term dependability and price stability. Owning a CD-ROM may be more economical long-term than signing on to Internet access. Also, some on-line databases are actually less user friendly than CD-ROMs. As more commercially produced databases are added to the Net prices and interfaces may improve.

Collection development and the Internet

The Internet has become part of collection development for many libraries. Access to the Internet has allowed us to widen our collection coverage, increase its size, offer and teach the use of resources on electronic media. At the University of Wyoming we are slowly adding the Internet and its resources to bibliographer duties. Time and accessibility are major issues in adding this aspect to collection development. Time because bibliographers must become familiar with the Internet and be comfortable using it. Accessibility because we do not as yet have computers available for patron use in the library or for ready reference. These, hopefully, will be available soon. Our collection is sufficient to answer the majority of the questions the old fashioned way
and will stay so for some time to come. The Internet will offer our patrons additional and up to date information for specific topics and our librarians new resources to meet the expanding needs of our university community.