EDITORIAL

COPING WITH AN EXPANDING UNIVERSE OF INFORMATION

Andrew Updegrove

If one were to compare the ten-year lifetime of the Web with the entire history of humanity, it would represent but the proverbial blink of an eye. But in that comparative instant, the information accessible to anyone with a computer and a broadband connection point has expanded by almost uncountable orders of magnitude. In these last few years, we have experienced a veritable "Big Bang" of information access.

But how does one cope with such an explosion of available information? The Googles and Yahoos of the world are doing yeoman service in their efforts to create search tools that will yield useful results. But the success of these efforts is increasing at merely sonic speed, while the envelope of web-accessible information that surrounds us continues to expand at the speed of light.

So how can we cope with this surfeit of riches? Perhaps the ultimate answer will lie not with more sophisticated search-based presentation of available information, but with a return to old fashioned, value added aggregation.

Today, the Web is like a well-endowed museum of natural history that acquires vast amounts of material, much of which is never indexed at all. Such a museum fails to achieve a balance between raw aggregation and useful presentation. Instead, it functions more like someone on a buying spree that buys more clothes than can actually be worn.

But unlike a museum, where much material disappears into locked drawers or remains boxed in warehouses, the Web allows us to bump around in the basement amid the unlabeled boxes as well as among the well-lit display cases, and to stumble unknowingly from one extreme to the other as we scroll endlessly down the page.

For all of recorded history, both aggregation and presentation have gone hand in hand in order to serve the needs of those desiring to access the wisdom of others. Libraries, after all, are simply aggregators of recorded material of various types. But unlike museums, libraries traditionally only acquire what they are willing and able to index and display.

Most libraries exist for generalist purposes, ranging from local libraries (at the modest end of the spectrum) to the United States Library of Congress (at the opposite extreme). But there are also a multitude of specialized libraries, focusing on subject areas such as music, law, medicine, theology and countless other domains.

Those who manage these specialist libraries dedicate their available resources towards specialized aggregation with the goal of offering as much as possible within a discrete subject area to an equally circumscribed audience, rather than seeking to provide something for everyone (and less of anything in particular for anyone with a specific interest).

Of course, useful aggregation involves not only acquisition within defined parameters, but applying standards of quality and relevance as well. It may also require tailored presentation, if the materials acquired are to be optimally useful. The results of well-conceived, financed and curated aggregation projects are information resources that attract visitors from all over the world.

How much should the advent of the Internet and the Web affect historical research methods? Most obviously, by allowing anyone to visit virtually what before could only be accessed physically. While there are troublesome issues that arise (will what I link to today still be there tomorrow?), the opportunities far outstrip the restrictions. Still, the concept of the "insurmountable opportunity" has perhaps never been more truly illustrated than by the enormity of the resources available on the Web.

Now that the Big Bang has occurred, we believe that it is therefore not less important, but more so to preserve the concept of aggregation. At least until such time (if ever) as search algorithms can be devised that can find just what is needed, and nothing else, aggregators that not only narrow the funnel but vet what is allowed to pass through it will provide an invaluable service.

It is therefore with great satisfaction that we announce in this issue the public launch of the *Standards MetaLibrary* -- our latest contribution to the world of standards. Made possible with the continuing support of Gesmer Updegrove LLP and a generous grant from Sun Microsystems, Inc., the mission of the Standards MetaLibrary is to identify, index and make available all of the scholarship that has been linked to the Web in the field of standards. We hope that you find it useful, and use it often.

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