

Domain: Digital Library
Topic: The Digital Library environment now ten (10) years after the introduction of the Web
Article: “The (Digital) Library Environment: Ten Years After” (18-pages)
ARIADNE Issue 46 2006 <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue46/dempsey>
Author, Lorcan Dempsey, VP Research & Chief Strategist, OCLC

With the introduction of the Internet, one witnessed the convergence of the “human-readable” Web with increased connectivity. Presently, one observes the convergence of communicating applications and a more pervasive, broadband connectivity that encourages the streamlining of workflow and process integration in a Web services idiom. Should digital libraries transition to a central role in the information infrastructure of this novel shared space for research and learning?

Two (2) overarching and linked themes appear in this article: first, discovery to delivery, an examination of the services which mediate access between the “user” and a distributed library resource, streamline supply chains and focus on “user-oriented” process integration; secondly, the managing of large repositories of digital content and its availability (integrating emerging repository infrastructures with the evolving discovery to delivery apparatus).

In the early and mid-nineties, digital library potential received programmatic amplification through funded initiatives. Dempsey argues that the “project-based” focus is an inefficient manner of achieving systemic state-of-the-art change. He reviews the library services and organization of the last 10-years from a system-wide perspective, the attempt to create and develop at various levels an infrastructure of efficiencies and, from an institutional perspective, the evolutionary change of the “integrated library system” (more openly available indexing services, electronic journals). Dempsey is critical of the dominant delivery mode in which the common pattern of provision becomes one of multiple Web sites, where a general updating of interfaces to the Web environment conceals the fact that large databases remain “siloes” behind these interfaces.

Regarding the current environment, Lorcan Dempsey suggests that the compelling long-term issue is how technology will influence library users’ behavior and expectations. Strategists mistakenly focus on the impact of technology on libraries; libraries must co-evolve with changing research and learning behaviors in the new, evolving network space. The author characterizes the manner in which changes in the present environment will affect library responses by reviewing general systems trends, the emergence of information infrastructure around “long tail” aggregators, and the change of user behaviors and patterns of research and learning.

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Question: How is the cyber world different at the end of the “Internet decade”?

Observations:

- Systems in the Web World: Web services & RSS are important parts of a spreading connective tissue which allows users to compose services in different environments (more processes are data-driven)
- Flat applications and liquid content (the fact that the gap between the Web and business applications is narrowing) create new opportunities for workflow and process standardization, allowing organizations to consider how best to “source” activities; promote greater collaboration; and, create an upsurge in social networking services based on blogs, wikis and Instant Messaging.
- Business models and organizational structures are co-evolving with technical developments and the new services that they allow: firstly, information resources are flowing onto the network; on-demand & platform services supported by automated workflows and process standardizations are becoming viable; such interdependence suggest that services are increasingly co-created between the service provider and its users (e.g., eBay)
- Emergence of major Internet presences with strong gravitational pull (e.g., Google, Amazon, Yahoo, iTunes) that are comprehensive, integrative (location, request and deliver into original discover experience) and that alter the dynamic of markets, i.e., they aggregate supply and demand.
- Library resources are not being provided in a manner that exploits the changed network model of information discovery and usage: ensure all materials held are readily discoverable and accessible
- To better utilize information of client preference, intention and usage as regards holdings, circulation, database and resolution data to develop services: libraries need to provide services that save time, focused on user workflow, and shaped and projected into user environments in a manner that supports learning and research objectives.
- Where data and content flow freely, much of what happened in the library is pushed out into network user environments: historically, library users have adapted their workflow to the library; as the network becomes increasingly important, libraries need to adapt their services to the “network workflows” of their patrons. The patrons are developing elaborate digital identities that draw from blogs, RSS aggregators, social networks, bookmarklets, toolbars, extensions, and plug-ins into their personal spaces.

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Summary:

The second phase (the next 10-years of the Internet: Web 2.0?) involves the convergence of the programmable Web and connectivity characterized by broadband and wireless. The effect of technology on research and learning behaviors will have a greater impact than the direct effect of technology on library systems and services. The library in this user environment must respond to changing network behaviors, it cannot simply aggregate resources; it must configure and shape these behaviors to support research and learning activities that too are being changed by the reality of “the network.” Although the collective library resource is deep, fragmentation of discovery and transaction costs have reduced impact, and the need to remove redundancy and build capacity will come through collaborative sourcing solutions and consolidations so as to better focus library efforts in making a distinctive local impact on the quality of the research and learning environment.

Finally, the true relevancy of the digital-age library service as to its significance to the future of the academic library is an ongoing question as research, learning and information use are reconfigure.