University Library Portals: an Assessment

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ABSTRACT *Web-portals serve specific academic research communities. Libraries in general and digital libraries in particular are important memory organizations that form a keystone for the development of the semantic web. Among all the library portals University library portals have a special place as they provide a gateway to an institutions resource by listing them for users and creating a direct link to the native interface of each resource. Most University library portals help the users to employ a library portal's search interface to search simultaneously or sequentially in heterogeneous resources that do not share metadata schemes or search and retrieval techniques. In such a context, the present paper attempts to make an assessment of the importance and various features available in most of the University library portals today.*

INTRODUCTION:

Library portals, the focus of this paper, are a subset of Web portals and serve specific academic research communities (Miller, 2001). Available for some time now, library portals typically provide a gateway to an institution's resources by listing them for users and creating a direct link to the native interface of each resource. Such listings are available on most library Websites today, although many sites provide only alphabetic listings while some others provide resource discovery facilities to help users identify the most appropriate resources for their searches. A relatively new feature enables users to employ a library portal's search interface to search simultaneously or sequentially in heterogeneous resources that do not share metadata schemes or search-and-retrieval techniques (Sadeh, 2003). The present paper seeks to make an assessment of the importance, content and tools used in designing any kind of library portal in general and University library portal in particular.

UNIVERSITY LIBRARY PORTALS

The library is faced with major issues relating to the management of digital resources. It is not yet a routine issue. Consider for a moment the management of materials in the print library. Librarians have evolved well understood internal practices and procedures for management, and predictable ways of presenting services for their users. In this, they have been assisted by the evolving technologies of print and publishing as well as by internal library technologies. Books and journals come in accepted formats, which support some consistency of treatment and arrangement, which allow the advance construction of shelves and processing equipment, the assignment of space, and so on. They only exceptionally require special treatment. These particular technologies have become unobtrusive, experience of them submerged in routine processes. This introduces economies: economy of processing and economy of use. However, digital resources do not always come in this reality processible and presentable form. They often require individual attention, may have different license conditions attached to them, and have different user interfaces.

An important strand of the portal discussion is the evolution of an environment which provides a more predictable management context for digital materials, the 'shelves' as it were on which we can routinely line up database offerings. At the moment, the digital environment is one that lacks consistency; it is as if each book coming into the library was a different shape and had to be read in a different way. The benefits of a more consistent environment are clear: library time and

resource should be freed to think about selection and use of the collection, not consumed merely by the mechanics of acquisition and processing. Also the user experience should be shaped by learning and research needs and not by the arbitrary constraints of interface and format. Thus, we need to achieve the economy through consistent treatment as well as the benefits of consistent access.

IMPORTANCE OF LIBRARY PORTALS

Librarians have become increasingly aware that the multiplication of electronic resources is a problem for end-users. Users find it difficult to find the most appropriate database or resource to search for information relevant to their need. Even if they locate the right resources, since each service tends to have its own unique interface, they may struggle to search it effectively. A further obstacle to access is the need to remember and enter many different passwords to access the different databases. These problems may lie behind a perceived lack of use of library subscribed to electronic services (Cox, 2002).

Librarians also need tools to manage a resource through its whole history from acquisition to presentation to users to evaluation for renewal or withdrawal. Tools exist within LMS to do this for books and journals.

In response to this need a number of suppliers of LMS systems and library products have developed sophisticated library orientated portal products. Nearly all the major systems suppliers have now entered the market, with epixtech and Tails amongst the most recent (announced during the writing of the report). It is this range of technology solutions that are discussed in the report. It should be said that the fragmentation of information resources and variations in internal layout of information has always been a problem, as anyone who has had to explain where the quarto books are in the library will be well aware. Library portal technology offers a potential solution to ameliorate this long-term problem, when combined with appropriate user training and culture change.

INFORMATION TO BE INCLUDED IN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY PORTALS

Information included in web pages is quite varied. There is no consistency of what is included and how it is presented. The provision of adding multimedia has of course made it possible to host attractive pages including images and video clippings. However, a university library portal should give relevant information without excessively taxing the end user by inclusion of large amount of textual material and unnec-

essary multimedia components. While planning university library portals, certain criteria should be worked out especially such as:

1. What is the information to be furnished?
2. How it should be presented?

Based on the study of a few university library portals on the internet, the following could be said to be some of the information items that could be included in a university library portal.

1. About Library: Brief information on the library and its services, location and collection.
2. Library Staff: Portal need not include the names of the staff. However the staff details may give an idea to the user regarding the size of the library and its various activities.
3. Departments: What are the information services and services units that cater to the user and the concerned contact persons?
4. FAQ: Frequently asked questions about the library and brief answers to these questions will be quite useful to the new users.
5. Contact: Contact persons and their addresses, including mail addresses.
6. Search Facility: If the user is looking for specific information that is not reflected in the contents page of the portal, an additional search facility will be of great help.
7. Feedback: Feedback from the users in the form of suggestions should be integral part of the library page development, especially in the initial stages it helps in correcting the design as the suggestions are the views and reactions of the end-users. HTML allows the end-users interactively to enter their comments on the site.
8. News: It there are any events and activities, there should have place in the library home page. It can be include various activities of the library.
9. Library services: A brief information about all services offered by the library.
10. Internet resources: Library portals may incorporate links to internet resources of the library.
11. e-Publications, e-journals, e-books: It explains the electronic resources offered by the library portal.
12. Online–databases: The library portal may have the link to online-databases subscribed by the library.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGNING THE LIBRARY PORTALS

Following are some of the guidelines that need to be borne in mind while designing a website.

1. The library page designed should be accessible by a variety of browsers. Do not use features highly tied to a particular browser, a browser war has pushed many browser vendors to add nifty features that work only with their browsers. Use features that are HTML specification complaint.
2. Using pretty images brings-in good visual effects. Beware; many dial-up internal connectivity users have very low transmission speeds. The page should communicate information even if some end-user is using 'text only' option of the browsers. In other words, do not put important information in images and even if you did, give the same information in text also.
3. Avoid the temptation of over using all the features of HTML; it may look immature, use blinking option very sparingly, as it irritates the viewer. Knowing HTML is one thing, using it appropriately is author thing.
4. The pages should be organized in such a way that it should convey important information briefly for a casual visitor and if one wants to know more, he can use hyperlinks to in-depth information.
5. Hypertext offers non-linear presentation of information, which is an advantage, but there is every chance of get-

ting lost easily. The organization of web pages should give a good mental picture to the users on what information he can look for and how to get it. A constant frame on the top or on the left side giving the contents lists is a good idea.
6. The contents of the web page should be well organized. Here, the tools and techniques of information analysis and consolidation will be quite handy.

TOOLS FOR DESIGNING AND DEVELOPING THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY PORTALS

The web user what is called a "Client–Server" mechanism. The machine and its server software that hosts a web page works as the server and the end-users system and its browser is the client. Protocols that link client and servers together, address the issues of handling requests and responses. HTTP or Hyper Text Transfer protocol is an internet protocol (IP) for a specific application the World Wide Web. It provides a way of communication between web clients and servers.

i. Web Servers

Any organisation or library including hosting a university web page should have server with a multi-user operating system like UNIX, or Windows NT on medium or, high-end machine and preferably an independent machine not having the load of routine work. In addition one should procure web server software of the available ones, the most widely used web server software is Apache and is free and can be downloaded from the internet.

Following list represents a few web server software's that are free:
a. Web Clients

These are the most widely used, whether somebody hosts a web server or not they can always access web, using browser software as a client. The two most popular browsers and almost having near to dominate the net are Netscape communicator and the internet explorer. They allow you to download their software for free and almost killed others venturing any browser development. Browsers use a few add-ons and other plug-in software especially to view multimedia presentations. The list of add-ons and plug-ins are endless. When any such software is required in, icon appears for you to download the necessary software, so that you can view the multimedia presentation.

b. HTML

HTML stands for "Hyper Text Markup Language" its name reflects the two key concepts that make it work. Hypertext – a way of creating multimedia documents. Also a method of providing links within and or across documents. Markey's language – A method of embedding special tags that describes the structures as well as the behaviour of the document.

The HTML provides a mechanism for putting together other internet protocols and services available though the web–link FTP, gopher, Usenet, e-mail, WAIS and HTTP. In this way, web pages can deliver many kinds of resources.

ii. Z39.50 tools

The Z39.50 protocol is becoming increasingly important in the context of web pages. Z39.50 is a standard defining a protocol for computer to computer information retrieval Z39.50 makes it possible for a user in one system to search and retrieve information from other computer systems without knowing the search syntax that is used by those other systems Z39.50 is an American National Standard that was originally approved by the "National information standards organisation" (NISO) in 1988.

iii. Web Promotion tools

Once the web site is developed, it becomes equally important to promote its use. Web promotional tools allow you to submit information regarding your web page to search engines like AltaVista, Yahoo, Lycos, and Info seek, etc. Some

of the web promotional tools are sharelt, web position, Net submitter Pro, etc.

iv. Website evaluation

Before launching the website formally, it is always a good Idea to evaluate the website designed. There are software tools which can assess broadly your site and give some idea of your site's accessibility, HTML page organization, whether there are any broken links etc.

CONCLUSION

Multiplication of electronic resources has leaves the users confused regarding most appropriate database or resource to search for the information relevant to their need. In such a scenario, library portals aid the potential users to overcome such a confusion by providing a gateway to an institutes resources by listing them for users and creating a direct link to the native interface of each resources. Thus, well conceived and designed library portals can make library services highly accessible, popular and economic. University Library's can learn from one another to build user-friendly and robust Web-portals to serve the specific needs of their internal and external stakeholders.

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