

Internet Programming at the Small Public Library

by

Vicky L. Bell, MLS

Juvenile Librarian, East Washington Branch

Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, Indianapolis, Indiana

and

Michael A. Williams, MLS

Branch Manager, West Indianapolis Branch

Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, Indianapolis, Indiana

Successful library programming of any sort requires the cooperation of everyone involved. Attempting to present something as complex as the Internet involves the highest degree of cooperation possible. Through two different programs presented at the West Indianapolis Branch of the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library (I-MPCL), the subject of the Internet in general, and the World Wide Web in particular, was introduced and explained to a variety of program attendees. Both programs were presented by librarians working together to convey accurate and relevant information gained from personal experiences as both information professionals and end users of Internet access services.

The first program was presented in April 1996 by three I-MCPL librarians — Mike Perkins, Mike Perry, and Mike Williams, euphemistically called “Mike cubed.” The program was titled “Weaving the World Wide Web: Information SuperHighway or HyperHoax of the '90s?” It dealt with the creation of the Internet, useful and useless Web sites, and public accessibility to the Internet via library terminals or personal Internet Access Provider accounts. Working from three different branch libraries, the Mikes collaborated via telephone, e-mail, and regular mail to plan the program by first assessing community interest in the subject.

A survey was developed to hand out to library patrons as they visited each of the three branches. The survey provided a general understanding of

peoples' levels of experience and knowledge of the Internet by asking questions such as: Do you have a computer at home? Did you know the library's catalog system is accessible by computer modem? Do you currently subscribe to an on-line service? Should the library provide public access to the Internet? Would you take advantage of such access if it were provided? Perhaps the most interesting finding from the survey was the overwhelming level of support for the library providing public access to the Internet. It appears that even those respondents who felt the library should not provide access, planned to use the access if it were provided.

Secure in the knowledge that there was sufficient interest in the subject to make a program worthwhile, even though at that time I-MCPL did not provide direct public access to the Internet, planning continued. Publicity posters and bookmarks were printed and distributed throughout the I-MCPL system, and the program date and time information was included in the I-MCPL newsletter, *Reading In Indianapolis*. Outside publicity was also garnered through press releases to citywide and community newspapers. A booklist of pertinent titles highlighting both pro-Internet and less enthusiastic texts such as Clifford Stoll's *Silicon Snake Oil* (Doubleday, 1995) was prepared. Technical and how-to titles were de-emphasized in favor of more literary treatments of the subject. Multiple copies of all the titles were displayed and available for loan, both before and at the program. In order to prepare the audience for a certain level of unavoidable, "techno-speak," a one-page list of "Terms and Definitions for Weaving the World Wide Web" was developed for distribution at the program.

In order to show the audience the Web sites being discussed, the Mikes brought in their own computers and utilized their own Internet accounts. The sites were selected and bookmarked only hours before the presentation to avoid any moved or down sites. An LCD video projector and scan converter displayed the colorful sites on a big screen for all to see. For better or worse, a typical Web session ensued with dropped connections and slower than anticipated response times. During the question and answer period a written list of the sites visited was requested. The list was later printed and mailed to all the participants who asked for it. The audience responded well, and program evaluations indicated a follow-up program would be welcomed.

Full World Wide Web access came to the West Indianapolis branch of the I-MCPL in February 1997. The Web's arrival brought with it anxious questions from patrons wanting to "learn to skate the net." By late spring it became apparent that some sort of presentation/training program on the Web

would be both interesting and useful. It would be interesting to expose an audience to some of the more useful or fun sites on the Web, and useful from the librarian's perspective as a training tool to help new users become acquainted with a point-and-click computer environment. An ambitious series of six sessions was planned to cover a wide variety of subjects ranging from getting started, through kid sites and fun sites, to launching your own search. A prize was offered to those attendees who came to at least four of the six sessions. The program series called "Web Treasures" was well publicized, even being featured in I-MCPL's cable television program "Between the Lines." The decision was made to once again utilize a home computer and modem to level the field, so to speak, versus the library's high speed connection. The reading list from the previous program was updated along with definitions, and each session brought forth its own list of Web sites for inclusion in each attendee's folder of material. Also included in the folders were brochures about Web access at the Library and "Child Safety on the Information Highway" from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. (The brochure is also available on-line at www.isa.net/isa.)

The first session went well, using a team presentation by librarians Vicky Bell and Mike Williams. The first part of the session covered the history of the Internet and experiences with Internet Access Providers. For the second half of the session, a group of carefully chosen fun sites was presented. Learning from prior mistakes, the Web sites and each opening Web page was saved, for presentation with or without a live hookup. As it turned out the audience for this first session even included some of the technical support staff from a local ISP (Internet Service Provider) who attended for a fresh perspective on teaching Internet access. Questions from the audience ran the gamut from the profound "where is the Internet?" to the more basic "what is clicking?"

Successive sessions were also team taught when possible, but some were solo presentations. The audience ebbed and flowed with some new faces being added as late as the fifth session. By the sixth and final session, a core group of five remained in the audience and the program had moved from the library auditorium to actual Web access on the branch's two public computers.

The lessons we learned through public programs include the absolute need for terms to be defined and used consistently by presenters. Providing a list of site addresses is equally important. While a booklist and display, along with an in-depth knowledge of the books in it, is important for discussion

purposes, Internet program attendees do not seem to be big Internet book readers. A strong publicity effort is vital. Both programs drew participants from areas of the city that were far from the branch's typical service region. While the Web is more than complex enough to require months to understand even partially, six weeks is too long to sustain a program's momentum. The team presentation format allows for a much more knowledgeable exchange of information between the presenters and the audience. People learn the operational basics much more quickly in one-on-one working sessions with computers. Regardless of age or experience, anyone who is willing can learn to use the World Wide Web.

When the Web comes to your library, it will bring changes with it. Website addresses appear in nearly every publication and on many products we bring into our homes. For many patrons, the library represents their first way to touch this new source of information. Sharing what we as information professionals have learned through programming, is a natural extension of our services. When sensational stories blaze across the front page, as *USA Today's* "Sex on the Net" did in the midst of our "Web Treasures" series, it becomes even more important to present the positive story of the library as the on-ramp to the Information Superhighway. While fully incorporating Web-based resources and their usage is our ultimate goal, programs like these have an important role in introducing the public to the Internet.

An Internet Reading List

Canter, Laurence A., and Martha S. Siegel. *How to Make a Fortune on the Information Superhighway: Everyone's Guerrilla Guide To Marketing On The Internet and Other On-Line Services*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

Gates, Bill, with Nathan Myhrvold and Peter Rinearson. *The Road Ahead*. New York: Viking, 1995.

Gilster, Paul. *Digital Literacy*. New York, Wiley Computer Pub., 1997.

Krol, Ed. *The Whole Internet: User's Guide & Catalog*. 2nd ed. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly & Associates, 1994.

Levine, John R., Carol Baroudi, and Margaret Levine Young. *The Internet For Dummies*. 4th ed. Foster City, CA: IDG Books, 1997.

Moore, Dinty W. *The Emperor's Virtual Clothes: The Naked Truth About Internet Culture*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 1995.

Negroponte, Nicholas. *Being Digital*. New York: Knopf, 1995.

Otte, Peter. *The Information Superhighway: Beyond the Internet*. Indianapolis, IN: Que, 1994.

Papert, Seymour. *The Connected Family: Bridging the Digital Generation Gap*. Atlanta, GA: Longstreet, 1996.

Rheingold, Howard. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993.

Stoll, Clifford. *The Cuckoo's Egg: Tracking a Spy Through the Maze of Computer Espionage*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.

Stoll, Clifford. *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.

Sullivan-Trainor, Michael. *Detour: The Truth About The Information Superhighway*. San Mateo, CA: IDG Books Worldwide, 1994.

Vicky L. Bell can be contacted at: vbell@imcpl.lib.in.us

Michael A. Williams can be contacted at: mwilliams@imcpl.lib.in.us