No passport needed: Border crossings in the academic library

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Disappearing disciplinary borders in the social science library - global studies or sea change?

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For most of their development as disciplines, the social sciences were fragmented, often contested subjects in academia. Their fields of concern – humanity, society, and human relationships with the environment – have placed them in both the humanities and natural sciences camps of the academic world. Indeed, specializations in the broader field of the social sciences did not occur until the 20th century, causing a splinter of subject arenas that staunchly refused to have anything to do with one another. However, this era of retrenchment has ended, and the traditional boundaries between the social sciences have once again become indistinct. Anthropologists and historians are studying the medical field, political scientists are looking at how public policy affects society, and psychologists are working within the framework of medicine, social work, history, the arts, education, and law.

But there is one paramount concern that all the social sciences share: the need for cohesive and manageable information. How do librarians accomplish such a feat when the metaphorical sand is constantly shifting beneath their feet? Emerging technologies such as Web 2.0, social networking software, social tagging, and wikis allow librarians and data gatherers to manage the growing body of knowledge and data while also reaching an ever-changing and increasingly technologically savvy clientele. By using these emerging technologies, libraries can create "one-stop shops" that allow scholars and students to acquire and deposit information related to the social sciences as well as communicate with each other to further global scholarship.

This paper explores the planning and creation of one emerging technology – a social sciences vertical portal (vortal) – at Wayne State University, and how this vortal

fosters and supports research communities by discussing the areas crucial to the

vortal's success: content, audience, usability, awareness, and assessment.

As the academic world becomes increasingly global and integrated, traditional

boundaries between disciplines are quickly disappearing. Thus, the need for cohesive

and manageable information that traverses academic disciplines is paramount to the

success of any research project. Since 1997, *portal* has been the buzzword of the

networked age (Zhou, 2003, 120). However, librarians and scholars have often

addressed the idea of storing, sharing, and managing mass amounts of digital

information in recent history. As early as 1945, with Vannevar Bush's discussion of his

Memex machine, a machine he conceived to store, gather, and organize information

that would replace the library of his day, to the development of the National Library of

Medicine's IAIMS (Integrated Academic Information Management System) in 1983,

knowledge management has been on the minds of computer scientists and engineers.

While historically libraries have been viewed as physical storehouses of

information, consumers now require the library to be a digital storehouse as well. "Ever

increasing user demand for value-added digital resources and enabling navigation

assistance requires innovative thinking that enhances traditional physical reference

service strategies with new web-based solutions" (Somerville & Vuotto, 2005, 77).

Therefore, the library must reach beyond the building and even beyond its primary

clientele to form a broad base of knowledge management that is available to scholars

worldwide. Such a transformation, however, also means challenges: "The Internet has

gone through many changes. Old tools have been adapted and reconfigured; and new

tools are constantly being developed. The question of how to organize Web sites so users can actually find what they are looking for is a continuing problem" (Williamson, 2007, 330).

Scholars of information science believe they have solved this problem with the use of what has been termed a *portal*, though a precise definition remains nebulous. Indeed, gateways, portals, and even vertical portals (a.k.a. vortals) can all be synonymous with one another in various aspects. A portal can be simply defined as, "a gateway to the Web that allows the plethora of information on Internet and Intranet Web sites to be organized and customized through a single entry point" (Van Brakel, 2003, 594). M. Vijayakumar and A. Ganesan (2006) take this definition a step further, stating that resources should be "high-quality and evaluated" (214). Marieke Guy (2005) also provides a rather simplistic definition of a *portal*: "Portals are aggregators of third party content that present end users with a tailored view of the Web within a particular subject area" (58). As aggregators of information, portals can provide more detailed research guidance and outline essential resources and techniques.

While these definitions give a broad view of the portal, they fail to address the myriad of possibilities that portals can offer. More developed explanations of portals address customization, communication, access, and collation. Geoff Butters (2003) defined a portal as,

> A networked service that brings together content from diverse distributed resources using technologies such as cross-searching, harvesting, and alerting, and collates this into an amalgamated form for presentation to the user. …. For users, a portal is a possibly personalized single point of access where searching can be carried out across one or more than one resource and the amalgamated results viewed. Information may also be presented via other means, for example, alerting services and conference listings or links to e-prints and learning materials (1).

Butters (2003) continues to explain that a portal, by gathering information into a single access point, helps the user avoid being overwhelmed by info glut, or being lost on the web (2).

Others define portals along similar aspects. Andy Powell described a portal not only as a single point of access but as an online service that supports the user in more than one task: research, communication, learning, and resource discovery (Miller, 2003, 2). Another scholar defines a portal within the currency of information it provides, its ability to locate highly relevant information, and a powerful search engine with instant access to full-text (Letha, 2006, 11). Moreover, it allows librarians to "switch to a more proactive, user-centered, and service-oriented model of library" (Letha, 2006, 12).

Most libraries now use portals as a means to inform patrons about resources, upcoming news, staff directories, and subject guides, and to access resources such as e-journals and databases. In the social sciences, portals have also been used to manage knowledge. In the United Kingdom, the Social Science Information Gateway (SOSIG) has been in use since 1994. This portal aimed to tame the Internet by "providing a quality-controlled directory of Web sites related to social science students, lecturers, and researchers in the UK" (Huxley & Joyce, 2004, 328). Visitors to the site can create their own account to manage information, talk with other scholars, receive training, and search a wealth of resources related to the various social science disciplines. The creators of the site decided the best way to push the information out was to join the United Kingdom's Resource Discovery Network, "a collaborative organization of subject-specialist gateway services called hubs" (Huxley & Joyce, 2004,

329). But the authors pointed out that, with regards to the social sciences, a generalized

model of user information behavior is difficult to achieve (329). Therefore, evolution and

evaluation of the site has to be an ongoing, cyclical process. Moreover, because the

social sciences have been fragmented in the past, and now cater to divergent needs,

there is a strong "need for cohesive and integrative information services to help

overcome these issues" (Huxley & Joyce, 2004, 331).

At Wayne State University, which serves a diverse population of undergraduates,

graduate students, professionals, scholars, faculty, and distance learners, the need for

an integrated site with value-added services, such as providing access to information

not readily available through the university library system (gray literature, conference

proceedings, and professional association literature), in addition to the various workings

of departments and faculty members that fall under the umbrella of the social sciences,

was seen as crucial to the success of grant-funded interdisciplinary research. It was

decided that the best way to try and reach this dispersed audience was to create a type

of portal, known as a *vertical portal* (vortal).

Vortals are narrower in definition than a portal because they are subject-specific.

"Vortals are used for information on a specific topic, but the information contained

is of a more variant nature and is usually for people who have a deep interest in and

professional knowledge of a particular field" (Vijayakumar & Ganesan, 2006, 214). What

differentiates the vortal from a portal is that it centers information on a specific theme or

audience and seeks "depth rather than breadth, aiming to present all the information of

interest to some subset of the public" (Van Brakel, 2003, 595). Vortals can allow for a

range of services: connection to users with the best materials and services, convenient

personalized services, access to subject gateways of different topics, digital reference service, and web-based user education. Due to the wide array of interactive assistance the vortal can provide to the university community, and even beyond the walls of academia, it remains the best option for librarians and libraries to reach a diverse and growing clientele of researchers. As the social sciences represent the largest aspect of academic librarianship at Wayne State University, library system professionals saw it as the perfect subject area to pilot a portal project in the hope of engaging students and scholars with respect to interdisciplinary research, thus furthering the mission of the university as a whole.

Wayne State University is a large, urban university located in the heart of Detroit's cultural center. In addition to the regular library services the university provides to students, there are also the colleges of medicine and law, both of which are integrated into the university library system. With such a large and diverse student body and faculty, the university has grappled with how to better reach and service social science faculty, researchers, students, and those disciplines that are now crossing academic boundaries such as psychiatry, medicine, and law. A majority of the university's students are commuters, which the university serves through its eight distance learning centers as well as an array of online course offerings. Not only are students and some faculty living across the state, but many also come from Toledo, Ohio, Windsor, Canada and the surrounding areas. The vortal is the means by which the library system hopes to reach this varied and scattered clientele, some of whom never set foot on the main campus during their degree program.

The primary objective of the vortal is to bring the branches of the social science community together in a virtual space to foster collaboration, research, and scholarly communication. The vortal provides a means by which to deliver the increasingly important gray literature of the academic world and "born-digital" content. In addition, the site will be able to correlate non-traditional sources of information for many social science disciplines, particularly important in the collection of social science data. By mixing old technologies with newer, emerging ones, the vortal becomes a virtual space for the Wayne State social science community, and those engaging in interdisciplinary research, for both work and discussion.

The project team consisted of the social sciences librarian; the next generation librarian, who deals with emerging technologies and users; and the library system web developer. The first step the team focused on was determining the crucial steps for success in the initial phase of the project. The team decided to concentrate on five steps; three centered on planning and implementation, two on post-creation:

- What type of content should be included and why?
- Who will be the audience?
- How will usability be determined?
- How will we create awareness for this campus resource?
- How will the resource be evaluated and assessed?

The content of the site was determined by the social sciences librarian. She compiled resources from both inside and outside the university, including library and departmental home pages, other university sites, and Web sites containing grey literature and material from professional associations. The audience included students, undergraduate, graduate, in addition to distance learners, faculty, and outside

researchers. In determining usability, the team decided to look at various free or open source programs that users already have familiarity with, and are widely available on the Internet. The team decided not to create or purchase software for the university for the first phase of the program. Web server space on the Wayne State University Library System's computers is a precious commodity, and the team thought it best to attempt this type of access at a later stage in the project. In terms of programs, the team reviewed five possibilities: blogs, wikis, subject guide software, social networking software, and web office suites (e.g., Zoho). The programs were analyzed for the following components: ease of use, ease of creation, capabilities, space, pricing (if applicable), and any other advantages/disadvantages.

Type of Software	Capabilities	Ease of Use	Ease of Creation	Space	Price	Pros/Cons
Blogs	Web site created and updated by one person with added comments and readability	High. Readers can read and post comments to a post.	Very. Created by one person or a team using programs like Blogger or Wordpress.	Unlimited. Allows for archiving of earlier posts	Free	Easy to use and create, but only allows one person/ or admin team to post information. Comments can be added to a particular post only.
Wikis	Web site that is readable and writeable and also allows for discussion forums, knowledge management and user editable content.	Relatively easy to use as more become familiar with wiki technology.	Very easy through programs like Wetpaint, which walk you through step-by-step.	Varies. There is a limited amount of space for free and then creators must pay for more.	Depends on size of wiki, but relatively low.	Easy to use and create. Allows for knowledge management, discussion forums, and attachments.
Subject Guide	Allows creator to organize information and lead users to other sites	Easy. Users are very familiar with this technology.	Easy to create with program.	Unlimited, but long pages are difficult for users	Free	Easy to use and create, but only allows for knowledge management. No collaboration.
Social Networking	Web site that allows a group of people to discuss specific topics and network	Easy, but requires a lot from users in terms of input.	Easy to create with program.	Unlimited	Free	Allows for a great deal of networking and collaboration, but little knowledge management.
Web Office Tools	A suite of programs that creators can use to create a site. Programs range from document and spreadsheet creators to chat functions	Relatively easy to use, but as a suite of programs can be difficult if one is unfamiliar with a particular program	Relative. Creation requires a suite of programs to be put together and administered	Limited	Free fo education	Allows a great deal of functions, but not much in way of collaboration. Requires a great deal of managing.

After reviewing the five different program options, the team decided a wiki would best suit the first phase of the project. Wikis allow for an informal communication mode, which Hobohm (1999) had deemed so important in his study on social science information gathering: "The informal communication mode has become increasingly important with the development of the Internet. The Internet, often described as the big communication machine, gives direct and rapid access to institutions and persons" (180). Moreover, information contained in a wiki can also aid social science practitioners and researchers in citation chaining, another important means of gathering information in the social sciences.

A wiki is a readable and writeable program that has the potential to allow visitors to create new pages and modify existing ones. It has the capability of pushing out ample information that is easily and constantly changeable, and it allows for users to discuss research through the use of forums. In addition, wikis allow personalization, as Farrell (2006) pointed out: "A wiki supports an organic evolution of the structure and content of the site based on the dynamics of the individuals in the community" (2). This open nature fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment not only among creators, but also among participants thus securing buy-in from scholars. Besides their obvious ability to foster communication, wikis can also become knowledge bases as they "are used to collaboratively contribute to a collection of documents that capture knowledge" (Farrell, 2006, 4). On the administration side, wikis allow for user and site management so that the library can maintain control and quality over the site.

After deciding to use a wiki, the team then focused on determining which wiki program would best suit the needs of the Wayne State social science community. The

team chose Wetpaint, a free wiki creation program that has a sophisticated look along

with an array of features important for the vortal's success:

- Page level discussion threads
- Ad free
- Lockable pages
- Site statistics
- RSS and email updates
- Social networking features
- Widgets
- Clickable keyword tags
- Site search

Once the program had been determined, the social science librarian compiled

the information needed for the first phase of the vortal project. Information would be

pulled from the Wayne State University library home page, social science data sites,

social science bibliographic sites, and professional associations. The vortal would

feature recent research from within Wayne State University, recent research from

outside the university community, tutorials, new books, subject guides, featured subject

descriptions, access to databases and online journals, data sets, a discussion forum,

and access to Ask-A-Librarian and other library related services.

With the site search capability of a wiki, the lack of a clear demarcation between

disciplines becomes moot. The uniqueness of disciplines in the social sciences is still

intact while being prevented from their own downfall, which can be their nebulous,

vague nature of study. "In the social sciences this seems to be common: a multitude of

schools of thought [that] live quite independently, dealing with the same social problem

and very often not coming to a single solution" (Hobohm, 1999, 173).

The original template for the project was created using Apple's iWeb program. This program allowed the social science librarian to arrange the content in a way that was user-friendly. It also illustrated what pages should be hyperlinked and the depth of content allowed for usability. During this planning phase, the social science librarian determined that two separate areas should be created, one for scholars and the other for students. Although there is some overlap between the two areas – particularly in locating resources, tutorials, library services, and the discussion forum – other aspects of the vortal that were important for students were not applicable to faculty and vice versa. The scholar area of the vortal would contain the following pages:

- WSU Research
  o Faculty publications
- Recent Research outside WSU
- WSU Resources
- Internet Resources
- Professional Associations
- Discussion Forum
- Library Services
  o Tutorials

The student area of the vortal would contain areas that are more pertinent for graduate and undergraduate students:

- Subject Guides
  o Course Specific Subject Guides
- WSU Resources
  o WSU Digital Commons (an institutional repository)
- Internet Resources
- New Books
- Featured Subject
- Discussion Forum
- Library Services
  o Tutorials

Even within library services, the scholar and student areas would differ, with the scholar area focusing more on contacting subject liaison librarians and research support and the student area highlighting reference and frequently asked questions. Both areas would have tutorials within the library services section. Tutorials would address how to set up a journal alert, how to set up an RSS feed, how to search social science data sets, how to write a thesis, how to search databases, and determining primary sources, as well as provide links to citation tools. The basic layout of the template is the standardized left-hand navigation bar.

The layout of a wiki is in much the same format except the navigation is both to the left as well as above the page. The wiki also gives more freedom than the iWeb

urban studies anthropology economics development studies sociology psychology linguistics history area studies education law women studies international relations political science geology communications criminology government library science

Welcome to the Social Science Portal

The mission of the Social Science Portal is to provide students, faculty and scholars a place within which they can conduct research, learn about new library materials, and engage in scholarly communication with one another.

Recent Research

WSU Research

Social Science Data on Web

Tutorials

Databases by Subject

Online Journals by Subject

Subject Guides

Featured Subject:
Sociology

Recent Faculty Research

Nicole Trujillo-Pagán's current research is on Latino incorporation in a recovering New Orleans . Her article "From 'Gateway to the ' to the ' Chocolate City ': The Racialization of Latinos in New Orleans " will appear in the forthcoming book Racing the Storm (Rowman & Littlefield).
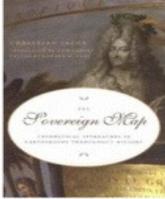
Featured Book:

The Sovereign Map
An analytical, epistemological look at maps ....

New Books

template in terms of discussion forums and discussion threads, and allows for more content to be placed on a page. However, when designing either a web page or a wiki, it

is important not to barrage the reader with too much information on a single page. Information should be laid out in a manner that is pleasing to the user and does not contribute to info glut. As seen in the template above, there is a great deal of white space between features and information, and the layout is rather simplistic in nature, allowing for a clean, crisp feel to the portal that provides easy usability. After designing the template, the social science librarian reviewed it with other team members and, after

approval, began to populate the WSU Social Sciences Portal Wiki.

Content for the Wiki that was not already located on the Internet or the library system's web page was compiled into various documents by the social science librarian. This method, although time consuming, allowed the team to better plan for organization along information architecture lines. Portraits of the users were created to better ascertain their needs and deliver the necessary content. After creating Word documents, information within them was cut and pasted into the wiki using Wetpaint's edit toolbar.

Most of the information could be contained easily on one page. For those pages that required copious amounts of information to be listed, a separate page was created and the two were hyperlinked. The wiki has a hierarchical structure with a subset of pages falling under the umbrella of the main topic page. For example, the topic heading

"Research at WSU" has a subpage entitled "Recent Faculty Publications." The entire

site is searchable using Wetpaint's widget tool, which allows for the creation of a site

search button.

Once content was loaded onto the wiki, the next goal of the team was to make

the site visible to the faculty and students at Wayne State University. Space on the

Wayne State University's library homepage is extremely limited and under scrupulous

control. The team decided they did not wish to approach the director of library and

media services, which oversees the website, until they had the requisite user statistics

to warrant placement in such a prominent place. Thus, the team considered the subject

guide page, the digital initiatives page, and the For Faculty and For Students pages as

alternate locations. After considerable deliberation, the team decided to place the vortal

on both the digital initiatives page and the For Faculty and For Students pages because

they were the most highly visible. The library system is working on persistent left-hand

navigation on the home page, which would allow pages that are buried to have more

visibility. The vortal would then be placed along the left-hand navigation bar.

After the vortal was created and implemented on the digital initiatives page, the

team, in conjunction with the library system's marketing advisor devised a plan for

promoting the WSU Social Science Portal. Although the portal is in fact a vortal, for

marketing and usability purposes it was decided to officially call it a portal since more

people understand that particular term. For marketing, the team tried a two-pronged

approach. First, the portal was promoted through the library homepage under its "News"

tab, which not only highlights digital initiatives, but also other projects and resources

available through the library. Also, the team was able to promote the portal campus-

wide by putting up a promotional message on all the desktops located in the three main campus libraries, advertising in pipeline – the University's portal for students and faculty, and emails, discussion lists, and fliers to faculty. Advertising the portal through the library homepage, pipeline, and computer desktop's are the best ways to reach students here at Wayne State University. To reach the faculty, emails, discussion lists, fliers, and effort by subject liaisons that would make faculty aware of this new tool were also vital.

Assessment of the portal will be an ongoing project. For the first phase of the portal, the team is interested in how many people are aware of the site, how many people have visited the site and the reason for their visit. As the portal becomes more of an integrated part of the library system other assessment opportunities will arise, such as determining if the portal is used to access library resources, how well the communication tools are used, and addressing other needs of scholars/students through feedback questionnaires. The site was beta-tested by faculty, students, and library staff before implementation to determine if we were meeting the basic needs of our clientele.

The social sciences represent the largest aspect of academic librarianship outside of medicine and law at Wayne State University. Each social science discipline has separate distinctions, yet each also has the possibility to work in tandem with others to create engaging, multifaceted scholarship. Because the social sciences have the unique ability to traverse academic boundaries, their resources require special care. With the advent of emerging technologies, academic librarians now have the tools to

promote the similar and divergent qualities of the social sciences by using these technologies to create a virtual space for research and collaboration.

Wayne State University's solution to disappearing academic boundaries within the social sciences was to create a vortal that would bring the branches of the social science community together to foster collaboration, research, and communication while also providing a means to reach the increasingly important grey literature that is not always formally published. By creating a portal wiki, Wayne State University now has a place where social science scholars from both within and outside the campus can virtually meet, gain access to nontraditional sources of information, and experiment with new research methods all within a safe haven. This haven provides a much-needed means by which to manage information, and make the social sciences more cohesive. Also, by offering active and dynamic services in a virtual environment, Wayne State University hopes to meet user demand for value-added services while also combating information overload.

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