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INTERNET ACCESS WITH NCSA MOSAIC IN THE SCIENCE/TECHNOLOGY LIBRARY

By Jan Williams

INTRODUCTION

Not too long ago, the science/technology librarian who wanted to travel the Internet effectively not only had to be aware of the appropriate software and procedures but also needed to know where to go and how to get there. Browsing was a tedious exercise that required at least a starting point in the form of a gopher name, ftp site, telnet address, etc. Going from one destination to another without getting lost could be simple but frequently evolved into a real challenge. However, all this changed in 1993 when the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA) at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, introduced Mosaic.

Mosaic is a World Wide Web client that functions as a front end to the Internet by integrating the major protocols into one user-friendly package. Its swirling icon, multi-colored text and graphics, and capabilities for audio and video effects present an almost irresistible invitation to browse, explore, mine, and prowl the resources of the Internet. With usage growing from over 280,000 connections during the month of November 1993 to an estimated 2,000,000 in April 1994 (1,2), no librarian can afford to ignore it as an information tool.

Getting started is easy but does require a basic knowledge of standard Internet operations: Download the copyrighted Mosaic software free of charge via anonymous ftp from the NCSA Archives (3). Version 1.0.3 (January 27, 1994) for the Macintosh was used in the preparation of this article, but it is also available for Windows and the X Windows System.

THE HOME PAGE

The first displayed window is the NCSA Mosaic Home Page which contains several options to introduce the user to the Internet. A single click on any blue underlined phrase, such as the Internet Resources Meta-Index, moves the user across cyberspace to the next stepping stone where another link can be selected and the process repeated. When the exact Internet location is already known, its Uniform Resource Locator (URL) can be inserted into the "Open URL" window from the File menu; and Mosaic will take the user directly to it.

The Home Page is such a handy device that many organizations have created their own (4). Some have been
made public (e.g., the National Academy of Sciences, SRI International, Sun Microsystems, etc.) to promote or distribute publications, press releases, services, or other information. The Home Page can also be any World Wide Web document. A librarian could install Yanoff’s *Special Internet Connections* or Morgan’s *Study Carrels* as the initial window on an open access computer so that users can choose from a wide variety of scientific and technical materials. The procedure involves only a few steps—find the desired document, select the text shown in the URL block, copy it to the Clipboard, select “Preferences” from the Options menu, paste the new URL over the old one, and click "Apply."

**THE HOTLIST**

Another special Mosaic feature, the Hotlist, serves two purposes simultaneously. First, it eliminates the necessity of keeping a detailed record of how an item was located so that the path can be re-traced at will. Second, it greatly reduces the time consumed in following this trail, cutting minutes down to seconds in many situations. Furthermore, it can be constructed with very little effort.

To build a Hotlist or add to an existing one, click on "Add This Document" from the Hotlist menu or press Command D while the document is in the display window. Its title will appear at the bottom of the menu; changing the order of the sources is not straightforward but can be accomplished through an editing operation. Standard file saving procedures will retain the list. Clicking on a stored Hotlist icon will launch Mosaic so that the item can be selected from the menu. Also, a Hotlist can be opened at any time during a Mosaic session via the menu.

Because any number of Hotlists can be maintained, the science/technology librarian can group Internet data into categories; this option can be especially worthwhile for a diverse clientele as shown in the following three examples (with URLs available upon request):

1. Hotlist of selected resources for agricultural scientists
   - *Not Just Cows: A Guide to Internet-Bitnet Resources in Agriculture*
   - *PENpages (Penn State University)*
   - *USDA Current Research Information System (USDA CRIS)*
   - *A Biologist's Guide to Internet Resources*
   - *Botanical Electronic News*
   - *Federal Register Listed by Date of Issue*
   - *Weather Machine from UIUC*
   - *NCSA Mosaic Home Page*

2. Hotlist of signposts for sophisticated browsers
   - *Macintosh Index*
   - *The Electronic Newsstand*
   - *American Universities Home Pages*
   - *Hot Hot List*
   - *Joel's Hierarchical Subject Index*
   - *Nova-Links*
   - *EINet Galaxy*
   - *The Mother-of-All BBS*

3. Hotlist chosen as a librarian’s own "desk copy"
   - *Issues in Science & Technology Librarianship*
• Index to "Webbed" Current Cites
• ERIC Bibliographic Database
• Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues
• EDUCOM Review
• The Scientist
• Discover: The World of Science
• Technology Review
• Academe This Week (Chronicle of Higher Education)
• HyperDOC: NLM
• Computer-based Interactive Literature Searching
• Chemistry Resources on the Internet
• Periodic Table of the Elements
• Document Center
• Roget’s Thesaurus
• Webster’s Dictionary
• The Lynx

If the material on a Hotlist proves to be insufficient, a quick return to the Mosaic Home Page will enable the user to begin the pursuit of alternate sources. The Home Page can always be reached via the Navigate menu, or it can be added to the Hotlist (as shown in the first example) for convenience or as a reminder for the less experienced user.

Another item on the Navigate menu that should not be forgotten by Hotlist users is "What’s New with NCSA Mosaic." NCSA updates this window sometimes as often as daily, and it is worth monitoring for potential additions to the Hotlist—such as The Lynx in the third example, an Internet magazine announced on May 27, 1994.

Without a Hotlist, the trail to a document can take many turns and may not be the most efficient way to get there. The Federal Register in the first example was at the eleventh level in the progression of NCSA Mosaic Home Page, What’s New with NCSA Mosaic, University of Pennsylvania WWW Server, American University Home Pages, North Carolina State University Home Page, NCSU Centers of Knowledge, NCSU’s Info Point, Desk Reference Tools, NCSU’s "Library without Walls," Electronic Books and Journals. Although librarians familiar with the Internet may know a shortcut, the length of the path does not matter with a Hotlist because Mosaic acts on each document’s URL which identifies its exact site.

CONCLUSION

Mosaic is not a road map of the Internet, but it functions much like a travel agent by providing transportation and directional information, assisting in the selection of guidebooks, and customizing arrangements to fit the customer’s requirements. It may still lack the comforts of first class travel, but improvements are in the planning stages (5,6). It is especially valuable for the science/technology librarian because it serves as an effective interface for the growing number of electronic publications and other subject data collections while also making available a vast array of materials related to library and information topics.

Until some future time when the Internet is cataloged and indexed, Mosaic is the best available navigation aid—USE IT!

REFERENCES


(3) Baker, Frank M. Navigating the Network with NCSA Mosaic. EDUCOM Review. 29(1) 1994; 46-51.


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