Amalia Monroe

Organizing the 2008 presidential election

The creation of a custom search engine

Informing all citizens (not just library patrons) about elections is an important role libraries can play in society. Motivated by this possibility and the general public's strong interest in the 2008 presidential election, I created a Web guide[1] that includes a custom search engine (CSE) to help users find relevant, timely, and nonbiased election sources. By capitalizing on current and popular events outside of the university and using new technologies, academic libraries can also increase visibility and retain relevancy on university campuses. The CSE was developed for library users who are interested in obtaining current information related to the 2008 presidential election, but it can also be a starting point for in-depth research on U.S. elections. The guide informs users of resources, increases information literacy, incorporates new Web technologies, and raises the visibility of the University of Kansas (KU) Libraries regarding the types of information we can help people find. I wrote this piece to share my experience as a new librarian creating a user-centered guide for current KU Libraries users, as well as those not currently using library resources.

Process

Work began on the guide because of intense interest in the 2008 presidential primary season and the lack of an election guide on the KU Libraries Web site. The historic nature of the campaign as well as the strong competition in both parties, prompted consideration of how users are currently gathering information about the election. I focused on the presidential election because more specificity may be more helpful and create more interest for our users than a general site. The process consisted of two components: site development and development of a custom search engine.

To be user-centered was the guiding principle behind the design of the presidential election guide. The goal was an introductory guide for general users; one not intended for experts, though they might find it valuable. Major themes were first identified: reference and library resources, election process, campaign finance, candidates and parties, media information, public opinion polls, and voter information. This is not a comprehensive list of topics, rather it is what I considered the most popular and useful. The selection of topics was also informed by election events; the election process section includes articles that discuss *super delegates*—a term that was used consistently in news coverage but is confusing. Voter information was included because many users may be first time voters. For future elections, the topics and content can be easily changed within the existing framework.

Site design was important. An attempt was made to make the site user friendly by including individual subject pages, side navigation, and a crumb trail. However, I did not want to overwhelm users with information, which is why separate pages were created for each topic area. Online library guides are often long lists of sources, basically transfer-

Amalia Monroe is social sciences librarian at the University of Kansas, e-mail: almonroe@ku.edu

ring print pathfinders to the Web. Librarians use such guides but noninformation experts may find this approach overwhelming and not use them to their full potential. A custom search engine (discussed below) was embedded on every page to encourage users to take what they learned from the guide and continue searching for information that will fulfill their specific needs.

Content selection criteria included: usefulness, timeliness, and nonbiased information. I also wanted to demonstrate how library resources (print and subscription databases) can work in conjunction with freely available Web sources. Creating artificial boundaries between licensed library databases and freely accessible Web sources is no longer a productive way to help library patrons with their information needs, but librarians can work with both to achieve maximum results.

Internet resources provide current information that is not necessarily available or as easily accessed in subscription databases. For example, the Federal Election Commission (FEC)[2] has a campaign donor database that is more up-to-date and easier to use than some subscription sources. A researcher can then use this information in conjunction with scholarly articles and newspaper articles related to campaign finance issues. Informing library users about resources that are available if they cannot access KU proprietary resources (i.e., non-KU affiliate) was another important consideration because of the goal of helping all citizens.

2008 presidential election custom search engine (CSE)

This guide differs from other sites on the same topic because of the incorporation of a new technology. A CSE powered by Google was developed specifically for this project. After assisting David Oldenkamp (Indiana University) with the development of CSE for intergovernmental organizations (IGOs),[3] I began thinking of other applications for the technology. The IGO CSE includes URLs for more than 300 IGOs; it is user-friendly,

provides relevant search results for a difficult research area, and is easily added to any Web site. Librarians now have the ability to create interactive reference tools. Such a possibility prompted consideration of how we collected the Web for our users. As librarians, we want to organize information, and that has continued with the advent of the Internet. However, the constant expansion of the Web makes keeping up with sources challenging. It is not just the number of sources that creates difficulties, but it is also the type of information available that can make it harder for users to find appropriate sources for their research needs. Searching for political topics returns many results, such as partisan blogs, that may not be appropriate for many types of research.

By using CSE technology, a library can more effectively organize the Web. Currently, online guides that only list selected Web sources are static, and may not prove as useful for library patrons who are looking for more general assistance. CSEs also meet patrons where they are by allowing them to search the Web in an environment they are most likely comfortable (Google), but at the same time helping them to learn about different, and possibly better, information sources. Such a tool also further personalizes library services for patrons, an emerging area of interest for libraries.

The creation of a CSE is simple. Products are available from Google, Rollyo, Yahoo! Search Builder, and more. The Google Custom Search Engine product was chosen because of its flexibility; it allows many more URLs than the other products. The basic compilation process is not difficult; it is choosing selected URLs so that the CSE will only search those sites. However, it can be become a larger and more time-consuming project, depending on the desired types of results. More than 150 sites containing presidential election information were selected after reviewing hundreds of political Web sites, online election guides, and news sources. An added benefit of this process was an increase in my knowledge of the

breadth and content of American political Web sites.

Another possibly time consuming feature is the ability for the creator to truncate URLs and many other search options. Many hours were spent creating the election CSE because of a desire for more refined results. However, I would like to reinforce that creating a CSE is a fruitful and enjoyable activity; it gives surfing the Web a purpose. For more specific guidance, read Eric Enge's "Creating a Quality CSE-Tips and Tricks."[4] This article outlines steps and considerations for those creating CSEs; it is a good reference source to use during the compilation process.

CSEs also allow for collaboration between librarians across the globe—truly collaborative collection development. The Google CSE product allows for different contributors, which enables groups of librarians to work together in a convenient and effective manner. By collaborating with Web collection, we can help teach one another and expand our own knowledge of Web resources.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the CSE can be partly measured by the statistics provided by Google. Since March, the 2008 Presidential Election CSE has been searched more than 400 times, most of those coming after receiving publicity university-wide in May. The program also tracks the most popular searches, which enables one to gain a sense of what people are searching and further helps the compiler to improve the product.

Information literacy

Users are visiting libraries beyond physical buildings. Instant messaging, texting, e-mail, and library Web pages are popular access points for library resources. It is possible to make each of these access points instruction opportunities. Online guides are one tool that can increase information literacy skills by helping users teach themselves. The 2008 presidential election guide and CSE were designed with such opportunities in mind.

The ACRL Law and Political Science Section (LPSS) "Political Science Research

Competency Guidelines"[5] informed the development of the guide and CSE. These discipline-specific information literacy standards include performance indicators that are further explained with specific outcomes and then illustrated with concrete examples. The election guide and CSE address several of the outcomes, including "identifies the value and differences of potential resources in a variety of formats" and "recognizes prejudice, deception, or manipulation."

The structure of the guide shows users the different types of resources, including print, subscription databases, media sources, and government information. It also illustrates how all of these resources can be used when gathering information about the different aspects of the elections. Ideally, patrons will use these various information sources to achieve their research needs, such as writing a paper or to help with making informed voting decisions.

The CSE can also assist with increasing the information literacy skills of users. When conducting searches with the product, the goal is to retrieve results from reliable political sources. But the CSE also enables users to conduct the same search across the entire Web. The change in results shows differences between searches in a similar way to example searches done in instruction classes to illustrate the concept. By seeing how certain types of Web sites are removed, such as partisan blogs and organizations, users have the opportunity to develop stronger Web evaluation skills. If that patron takes the time to look at the results in the Web search closely, he or she may become more aware of the manipulative or prejudicial elements of some political Web sites.

CSEs can also increase knowledge of the breadth of quality sources available online and how all of these may be relevant for research (i.e., news sources, professional resources, campaign finance). While some of these types of sources are available in the guide portion of the project, not all of them could be included. The CSE assists with finding a balance between informing patrons and overwhelming them with a large amount of

information; that is how the two components of the project work together.

Conclusion

The 2008 presidential election guide has been a fruitful project. Including the custom search engine CSE has resulted in news releases on both the KU Libraries homepage and the KU homepage. The publicity raised the visibility of the guide at a university level; therefore, patrons did not have to consult the library homepage to learn about the resource. The guide was also featured in a workshop on elections I conducted for the KU community. The guide structure served as a foundation for the workshop by using the thematic categories to teach users about all levels of elections. It is also now linked from a course on media and the elections class page.

While CSEs , or any other new Web technology, may not be lasting components of library services, they are useful for showing library patrons that we are willing to meet them where they are rather than expecting them to come to us. How we present infor-mation for our users is as important as the information we provide. Therefore, we need to continually change our approaches as the Web is a fast-paced, important, and dynamic information source for users.

Creating online guides is not a new activity for librarians. They serve several functions and goals for libraries. By making timely guides that combine a multitude of resources and new technologies, we have the opportunity to reach out to current library users and to those not yet using library resources.

Notes

1. www.lib.ku.edu/election2008/.

2. www.fec.gov/DisclosureSearch/mapApp. do.

3. www.libraries.iub.edu/index. php?pageId=4173.

4. Eric Enge, "Creating a Quality CSE-Tips and Tricks," (2006), www.customsearchguide. com/creating-quality-cses.shtml.

5. www.ala.org/ala/acrlbucket/is /projectsacrl/infolitdisciplines/political.cfm. ⌇