

User Services for Digital Libraries

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Overview

Digital libraries have been defined in the literature as being collections of electronic resources, serving a community of users, and services offered to those users. In this, the definition of digital libraries is little different from a definition of a physical library. Most actual digital libraries, however, are primarily collections, with little attention given to services that may be offered to increase the value of those collections. Indeed, in the Institute of Museum and Library Services'

(IMLS) Framework of Guidance for Building Good Digital Collections

(<http://www.ims.gov/pubs/forumframework.htm>), “services have been deliberately excluded as out of scope” of the discussion of building good collections.

This is beginning to change, as digital library projects are realizing the value of services to the digital library’s user community. The IMLS Framework document goes on to state that “it is expected that if quality collections, objects and metadata are created, it will be possible for any number of higher level services to make use of these entities.” As digital library projects mature, some are beginning to integrate human-intermediated services. The National Science, Mathematics, Engineering, and Technology Education Digital Library (NSDL), for example, may have been the first digital library project to integrate a reference service for patrons to submit questions to the librarians and experts behind the project; this service is called AskNSDL (<http://www.nsd.org/asknsdl>). The Library of Congress’ American Memory Project is one of the most extensive digital library projects affiliated with a physical library, and the Library of Congress was an early player in the digital reference community, developing an application that is now called QuestionPoint.

On the other hand, many digital reference services have created collections of materials to support their primary task of human-intermediated question answering. Some of these collections are archives of previously-answered questions (for example, the MadSci Network, <http://www.madsci.org>), while some are digital libraries of materials that the service’s human intermediaries may use in answering questions, or the users may use and then not submit a question to the service (for example, the Internet Public Library, <http://www.ipl.org>).

To date, digital libraries and online user services such as digital reference have evolved independent of one another. As both continue to evolve, it is clear that, as physical libraries and user services are necessary counterparts, each maximizing the value of the other, so too digital libraries and user services are necessary counterparts. This panel will explore issues involved in the integration of digital libraries and user services, the implications of providing human intermediation in a digital library environment, and directions for providing automated intermediation. The panelists will focus on the challenges in offering such services, and their latest thoughts on how digital libraries may address these challenges.