Navigating the Internet and the World Wide Web: Workshop Report

Tom Ferguson, Editor
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The half-day workshop on “Navigating the Internet and the World Wide Web” was well-organized and informative, quite a welcome preamble to the Airlie House Retreat theme, “The Fate of the Scientific Paper in a Paperless Age”. It meant coming early, but with a worthwhile program and beautiful Airlie for another day, who could complain? The 11 attendees gathered in the Learning Center, which is one of the best-designed facilities I have ever seen. Individual computer stations arranged in a circular pattern made it possible to follow the course material in a very interactive fashion.

The 3-hour workshop was conducted by Kerryn Brandt, assistant professor of Biomedical Information Sciences and Program Director for Curriculum Support at the William H. Welch Medical Library, Johns Hopkins University. Fortunately for us, Brandt is not at all as portentous as his title. He was sensitive to the diversity of professional backgrounds and to the levels of Web expertise, ranging from novice to the sophisticated user, represented in our small class. He was careful to bring us along in such a way that none of us felt either overwhelmed or bored.

His outline for the afternoon was divided into 4 sections: 1) Internet and World Wide Web overview, 2) browsing and searching the Web, 3) electronic journals and scholarly communication, and 4) biological databases. The handout materials augmented well each of these subject areas.

The 1st section covered the basics of what the Internet is, how it functions, and how it can be accessed. The discussion of the coming shift away from modems to coaxial cable and trunk lines was particularly interesting.

The 2nd section was the most valuable to me. He explained how search engines work, why some are better than others, and how to use the existing engines for different search functions. Of particular help was the material on metasearch engines (which until this course I did not know existed).

The 3rd section was devoted to looking at some online journals, such as the Journal of Biological Chemistry. There was too little time to delve into the philosophical pros and cons of Net publishing, but he gave us a good introduction to issues later dealt with during the retreat.

Digitizing Figures: Workshop Report

Grace Darling, Managing Editor
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The Digitizing Figures workshop, held immediately before the CBE Airlie House Retreat, was both timely and informative. The material was presented by a publisher, an author, and a printer, who gave us their professional perspectives on author-supplied digital figures.

Leading the discussion was Michael Held, a publisher at a university press. Held recounted how some authors now insist on submitting computer-generated files of text copy and graphics. While textual characters pose no problem, in large part because of the ASCII standard, digital illustrations bring with them an array of difficulties in their journey from the author’s desk to the printed page. For a publisher, it means that the editorial staff must deal with technical issues such as file types, storage media, and output resolution. The publisher frequently acts as go-between for the author and printer, and effective communication is hampered by a lack of common terminology. If the printer cannot use the digital files as submitted, the publisher must rely on hard copy that may be of poor quality. Naturally, authors complain when their work is not reproduced faithfully, even if their original files were unusable. The result for publishers is interrupted workflow; delays in turnaround time because of errors, reshoots, and multiple proofs; a challenge to their reputation; and, inevitably, increased costs of publication.

From the point of view of the author, digitized figures are a godsend, says Todd McGee, a postdoctoral student at Stanford University. Computers simplify enormously the task of illustrating a scientific paper. Whether the image is scanned from a photograph or x-ray film, captured by a confocal microscope or digital camera, or generated directly as a graph or line drawing, anyone who has a personal computer can create, crop, label, and revise figures. For the new generation of scientists with computer skills, the digital environment means greater flexibility, faster and easier production, and considerable money savings.