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## Collaborative bibliography

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### Abstract

A bibliography is traditionally characterized by the judgments, bounded by explicit selection criteria, made by a single compiler. Because these criteria concern the attributes ascribed to a work and the needs of readers, bibliographic work is largely conceptual even across technological eras and domains. Yet, the development of networked information services, made possible by WWW infrastructure, has enabled very large numbers of people to discover, organize, and publish information, including bibliographies. Indeed, bibliographies, or at least bibliography-like artifacts, are a common genre of website, often published by people without specialized skills in information organization who follow non-rigorous selection procedures. Nevertheless, even if the items from these lists are poorly selected and described, this publishing activity is fundamentally important because it structures information locally, creating a patchy network of secondary access points. In turn, these access points enable information discovery, the formation and development of communities of interest, the estimation of document relevance by search engines, and so on. In sum, this activity, and the enabling technical infrastructure, invites bibliographies to take on new interactive possibilities. The aim of this article is to extend the traditional view of bibliography to encompass collaborative possibilities for wide, or narrow, participation in the shaping of bibliographies and the selection of items. This is done by examining the nature of bibliography on the Web, by proposing a conceptual model that opens bibliography to participatory practices, and by discussing a case study where a team sought to develop a bibliography of electronic resources. This examination reveals splendid opportunities for expanding the notion of bibliography with participatory policies while remaining true to its ancient roots.

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## 1. Introduction

In January 2004, over 50 million people in the USA published content to the Web, including photographs, messages, and files of various kinds and approximately 5 million people maintained a website (Lenhart, Horrigan, & Fallows, 2004). While this survey-based research did not examine the motivations, objectives and tasks surrounding this publication activity, we can assume that a significant number of people, perhaps millions of people, invested time in creating outbound links to websites. We can consider the work associated with selecting links, writing titles and descriptions, arranging the items on Web pages, and maintaining the integrity of the links a form of bibliographic work. Given the ancient history of bibliography and its importance in library studies and literary scholarship (Francis, 1973; Stokes, 2003), this position is admittedly idealistic. Nevertheless, we shall argue that making this conceptual move—that is, analyzing the production and organization of information in terms of the standards of bibliography—leads to productive ways for examining popular classes of information artifacts and for conceptualizing improved tools for the collection, and organization of electronic resources.

Websites, of course, serve different purposes and audiences and therefore present selective material and experiential opportunities. Thus, we can expect that the process of selecting, describing, and organizing links to electronic resources will vary depending on the genre of the website. The term genre is used by Web designers to characterize classes of websites that share critical features, such as personal e-commerce, daily news, community conference and so on (Crowston & Williams, 1997; Van Duyne, Landay, & Hong, 2003; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). With experience, readers are assumed to readily identify the genre of a website and orient their expectations concerning the nature of the material, information-seeking approaches, and options for interaction. When the genre of a website is difficult to detect, it can be disorienting to the reader. At the same time, the genre places constraints on the form and topic of the communication and the nature of the audience. Such constraints simplify the work of the website developer. For developers with experience in bibliography or collection development, these constraints might be carefully articulated in policies and procedures. More typically, however, the constraints of the genre, while being important for readers and readily observable through signals of various kinds, are implicit and not written down in policies. Thus, for example, a teenager's personal Web log of daily happenings, known as a *blog* (Blood, 2000, 2004), is likely to be readily distinguished from an elementary school teacher's list of homework links suitable to a 5th grade class. While the visual design and editorial style are salient signals of a genre so too is the nature and form of the outbound links. In short, the elementary school teacher will employ selection criteria and structuring and formatting standards that support his or her pedagogical objectives. Students might be asked to visit some links in a particular order whereas other links will be optional; at the same time, link descriptions and cited sources will be coordinated with the curriculum. The blogger, on the other hand, has a different audience in mind and different intentions for including outbound links in her entries. Nevertheless, in some important senses these are both bibliographies because pointers to resources are collected, collocated, and arranged. Indeed, the early blogs of circa 1998 were bibliography-like, rather than personal commentaries, with the twist that they focused on fast breaking news and newly available information (Blood, 2000). Still, today among the many journal-like blogs are blogs that predominantly contain lists of links with pithy descriptions that act as instruments for information discovery (Bar-Ilan, 2004; Schiano, Nardi, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004).

A common website genre, referred to as *resource page* in this article, draws significant benefit from bibliographic practices. We define a resource page as a website that contains an organized set of outbound links on a given topic. (Of course, a resource page might consist of multiple pages and frequently a resource page is one element of a website with a broader purpose.) Librarians might use the term *directory* to refer to this concept. The etymology of the term is unclear but may have been coined in distinction to *home page*, which typically contains personal information, by the early users of the Web who needed a genre to capture material concerned with projects or topics. A Google exact-match search for *Resource Page* restricted to

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