

MyLibrary@NCState: The Implementation of a User-centered, Customizable Interface to a Library's Collection of Information Resources

MyLibrary@NCState is an extensible implementation of a user-centered, customizable interface to a library's collection of information resources. The system integrates principles of librarianship with globally networked computing resources creating a dynamic, customer-driven front-end to any library's set of materials. It supports a framework for libraries to provide enhanced access to local and remote sets of data, information, and knowledge. At the same, it does not overwhelm its users with too much information because the users control exactly how much information is displayed to them at any given time. The system is active and not passive; direct human interaction, computer mediated guidance and communication technologies, as well as current awareness services all play indispensable roles in its implementation. The system is accessible to anybody at the following URL:

<http://my.lib.ncsu.edu/>

User Interface

From the user's perspective, MyLibrary@NCState is a customizable HTML page. It is accessible via any Web browser supporting Netscape cookies and the Secure Socket Layer (SSL) protocol. The process of creating a MyLibrary@NCState page begins when the user creates an account on the system. The account information includes rudimentary biographical data: name and email address. In addition, the creation of an account necessitates the selection of a primary academic interest from a pop-up menu. Once an account is created, the user's MyLibrary@NCState page is dynamically built and displayed. Afterwards other links may be added to or subtracted from the preconfigured list of recommendations to create a personal "digital library".

For example, by selecting among the system's many Customize hotlinks, a user is presented with lists of disciplines. Each list is associated with information resources (databases, journals, Internet resources, etc.) specific to that discipline. Resources from any discipline may be chosen to include in the user's MyLibrary@NCState personalized digital library, which appear in the Web browser after the selections are submitted. The next time a user visits MyLibrary@NCState, the system remembers all customizations and lists them accordingly.

Header and footer

The header displays the MyLibrary@NCState logo, a navigation bar, a customize link, and a logout function. The logo gives the service an identity. The navigation bar provides easy movement around the page. The customize link initiates the process for changing the page's content (described in the Customizing MyLibrary@NCState section below).

Global message and Message from the Librarian

These services provide the means for librarians to broadcast messages to the users of MyLibrary. The global message is a text intended for every user of the system. It is much like the message of the day (MOTD) function on Unix computers. Information intended for the global message function includes announcements in changes of service or downtime, news from around the campus, or simply an interesting URL from the university's newspaper.

The Message from the Librarian is intended to function exactly like the global message except its content is only displayed to people who have chosen particular disciplines. These messages are expected to contain information pertinent to the discipline like URLs of interest, announcements of training opportunities or the acquisition of new resources, or a short description of library-related services of interest.

Your Librarians

The Your Librarians section lists the names, telephone numbers, and email address of the librarians and collection managers associated with the user's chosen discipline. Because each user of MyLibrary@NCState is associated with a discipline, and since each discipline is associated with at least one reference librarian and collection manager, then each user can be made aware of the names and contact information of their discipline-specific librarians and collection managers.

Library and University Links

The Library Links and University Links sections work similarly. Each is populated initially with a librarian-defined list of hyperlinks to various library and university home pages. These home pages are of any type but usually include pages describing library/university services, hours, policies, finding aids, college home pages, or campus-wide directories.

These sections are customizable by the user. By selecting an associated Customize hotlink, the user is presented with a list of available library/university-related information sources deemed by the librarian as "important" or "useful to know". Each item in the list is associated with an HTML checkbox. The user selects or de-selects any number of these items, and by submitting their selections, the system records the user's preferences in the underlying database and redisplay their MyLibrary@NCState page with only the selected items.

Bibliographic Databases, Electronic Journals, and Reference Shelf

The Bibliographic Databases, Electronic Journals, and Reference

Shelf sections provide the means for the user to have displayed only the scholarly information resources they believe are important to their work.

Like the Library Links, these sections are initially populated with a list of recommendations prescribed by a discipline-specific librarian. The Bibliographic Databases section contains lists of journal indexes. The Electronic Journals section contains lists of digital serial titles. The Reference Shelf was originally intended to include links to Internet resources traditionally associated with traditional library reference desks (ie. dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, manuals, directories, maps, etc.) but it has since grown to include just about any type of Internet resource with scholarly content.

Personal Links

The Personal Links section allows the user to save links to Internet resources they use often that are not included in any of the sections above. No librarian can hope to collect the total sum of Internet resources and organize them into a database. Given this fact, the Personal Links section provide the opportunity for the MyLibrary@NCState user to add their own links to the system.

Quick Searches

The Quick Searches section provides direct access to a number of Internet search engines including local online public access catalogs (OPAC). By selecting a search engine from a pop-up menu, entering a query in the text field, and submitting the form, a database query is constructed in the form of a URL. The user's browser is then "redirected" to this dynamically created URL and the results of the search are displayed.

Current Awareness

The Current Awareness section provides the means for the user to search the library's OPAC for recent acquisitions in the user's interest areas. Optionally users can have these search results regularly sent to their email address. Assisted with a simplified version of the library's call number system, the user can customize this function so it saves ranges of call numbers (profiles) to the MyLibrary@NCState database. Users can save as many of these profiles as they desire. The profiles are searched on a regular basis (weekly) against a list of new acquisitions to the library's catalog, and the results are sent to the user's email address.

Administrative interface

Maintenance of the MyLibrary@NCState system is done through an administration interface. The interface is a menu of hypertext links protected by a simple username/password access control system. The administration menu allows administrators to create, modify, or delete just about any content item in the system's database. The most important item in the menu is the list of academic disciplines since each each and every other item in the system is somehow related to this list. Other important content

times include:

- the names and contact information of librarians
- links and descriptions of information resources (databases, journals, etc.)
- help texts,
- global message and messages from the librarians
- the system's header and footer

Not Just a Portal or Bookmark Manager

There are at least four things that make MyLibrary@NCState is more than a portal nor bookmark manager. First, the system includes a service allowing users to regularly receive and search lists of new books added to the library's collection, the Current Awareness service. Using Library of Congress call numbers for books and serials, users can create any number of Current Awareness profiles. The MyLibrary@NCState system saves these profiles and searches its database for them on a regular basis. Search results are sent to a user's email address, which allows direct access to the library's catalog via a hotlink and to more information describing the book.

Second, based on the selected discipline, the system displays the name and contact information for the appropriate librarian and collection manager who specializes in the given subject area. The library has learned from its users that although digital libraries are desirable, direct access to librarians is necessary as well.

Students and faculty or administrative staff do not always have time to be constantly on the lookout for new and better information resources. The library helps in this regard with another service of MyLibrary@NCState called Message from the Librarian. This section, updated regularly by the appropriate librarians announces, suggests, and helps users keep abreast of interesting information developments in their selected disciplines.

Finally, unlike bookmark managers, MyLibrary@NCState is portable and requires only a Web browser to use. Because access to the system's database is keyed to the university's authentication system, valid users can access MyLibrary@NCState from just about any Web browser in the world. MyLibrary@NCState can be accessed from offices, homes, or even within the library. Conversely, bookmark managers or locally defined sets of bookmarks are bound by a particular machine or computing system.

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