

◆ *A Debut in San Antonio: The Short Course for Web Editors*

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The World Wide Web has the potential to revolutionize our ability to communicate scientific information. The CSE short course for Web editors, offered for the first time in San Antonio, discussed the many advantages of this medium as well as characteristics of quality Web sites, Web structure and function, Web tools, and relations between Web editors, publishers, site vendors, and hosts. The comprehensive course, held 6 May, also covered some of the factors to consider when a Web site is proposed: purpose, finances, ethics, peer review, and ease of information retrieval.

Annette Flanagan, managing senior editor at the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, moderated most of the two general sessions, six breakout sessions, and lunch-table discussions. A particular advantage of the course was that participants could attend all six breakout sessions instead of having to choose among them. The sessions provided a wealth of useful information for “newbies” as well as for “old hands” at the Web game.

After introductory remarks from Flanagan, Patricia Baskin and Bill Silberg began the course with a tour of professional- and consumer-oriented Web sites in a general session titled “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”. Baskin, the managing editor of *GeneClinics: Medical Genetics Knowledge Base*, and Silberg, vice president and executive editor of *Medscape Professional*, discussed attributes of “good” sites:

- valuable, current content
- consistent, intuitive organization and navigation
- spare but effective use of graphics and other bandwidth-heavy features

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- judicious use of links
- discriminating search tools

Baskin and Silberg pointed out some barriers to easy use: information overload, slow downloads, distracting backgrounds and advertisements, typographic errors, and dead links. They discussed other issues that users should consider when visiting a site: What is the site’s mission? Who is its sponsor? (It might not be who the user thinks it is.) Is the content peer-reviewed, or at least objective? Is it appropriate for the intended audience? Has privacy or security been addressed?

Silberg talked about the use and abuse of Web statistics and procedures after the disclaimer that “all Web numbers are wrong.” He gave the example of using “hits” to track the traffic at a Web site. Every time users bring up a given page on their screens it counts as a hit, even if they simply are returning from another page. He said that a better way to assess traffic was through page views or registration of visitors. That brought up the issue of “cookies”, small programs that a Web server sends to the users’ computers to remember them the next time they log on to the site. A “good” site, noted Silberg, will use the cookie only for this purpose unless the user consents to other uses. Unfortunately some sites use cookies to track what other Web sites the users visit and to gather other information about the users. Typically Web sites bury privacy and tracking information in tiny print or by a link buried at the bottom of their pages, if they disclose it at all. Let the user beware, Silberg implied.

Next up was Timothy Roy, a senior analyst with Dynamic Diagrams, Cadmus Professional Communications in Providence. Roy discussed information architecture for the Web in this session. Many of the questions that people should ask before designing the structure of a Web site resemble those asked before creation of

any publication:

- What are the objectives of the site?
- How will the site communicate these objectives to visitors?
- What is the site’s overall structure?
- What are the general and specific qualities of the information?
- Who is the intended audience? (This is perhaps most important to editors.)

All those factors and more should be considered before any design occurs. Roy used the analogy of building a house to describe this process. You need an architect, who is responsible for the overall plans for building; you need a builder, who will provide the labor to construct according to the design; and you need an interior designer, who will furnish the “rooms”. These correspond to the information architect, the developer, and the graphic designer for a Web site. And just as with a house, it is difficult to retrofit a Web site when someone comes along with a late request. Roy said that the best thing you can do to ensure a good Web site is to encourage collaboration as soon as possible.

In a breakout session, Nancy Wachter and Bill Witscher then covered the relationship between journal editors and electronic publishers or vendors. It turns out that the perspectives of editors and of publishers or vendors have many similarities. Both aim to tighten production schedules, distribute valuable and reliable information accessibly and cost-effectively, and create communities of loyal readers. The Web can help to achieve this, but only with a clear understanding between the parties in advance. As Wachter, a senior managing editor at Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, said, “Hindsight is 20/20.” She discussed questions to ask of prospective vendors during the selection process:

- How long has the vendor been in business?
- What is its performance history?

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- What types of services does it offer?
- What type of in-house training would be needed?

Witscher, an associate director at HighWire Press, covered the vendor perspective. He always asks journal staff what the intent of going online is, what types of features might be needed, and what type of content is to be published. With clear goals and open communication, the switch to partial or complete online publishing can be a win-win situation for both parties.

Ethics for Web editors and publishers was then presented by Margaret Winker, a deputy editor of *JAMA*. Winker's breakout session first covered the lack of standards and laws related to Web publishing. She gave several examples of organizations that have set their own standards in the meantime. The American Medical Association (AMA), for example, has developed such guidelines for its Web sites and for others if they choose to use them. They address principles for content, advertising, privacy, confidentiality, and e-commerce. Many of the principles resemble those that govern print publications, with some new wrinkles related to Web technology. As an example, Winker discussed how sites should publish a clear, prominent statement of privacy on the home page. Sites should provide viewers the opportunity to "opt in" to personal data being collected via a cookie and state specifically the purposes for which the data will be used. She also indicated that the AMA sites notify readers, if they click on an advertisement to leave the site, that they are leaving the site and give them an option to return. Privacy has become a major concern on the Internet, Winker said, given the use of personalized information-gathering and tracking via cookies and other mechanisms. Cyberplagiarism is another concern given the ease of "cutting and pasting" text and images. Winker noted that the Internet raises several new

legal issues for which new solutions no doubt will be developed.

When the course reconvened after lunchtable discussions with the faculty members, Tracy Keaton Drew treated attendees to a lively breakout session on Web graphics. Keaton Drew is creative director at Keaton Drew Design in Washington, DC. Graphics can add zip to a site and break up acres of dense text, but their use must be selective, Keaton Drew said. She also pointed out that, unlike text, graphics can appear different depending on the monitor, platform, and browser used. Attendees learned the difference between image-file types and when to use which. Finally, as most Internet users have already learned, Keaton Drew showed how bulky graphics can impede easy navigation of sites. As she pointed out, "Some people just won't wait, and they'll remember your site badly." She presented several solutions to avoid this problem.

Timothy Roy returned next with a breakout session on strategies for linking, searching, indexing, and archiving Web information. Linking often is overused; in fact, some Web sites are nothing but links. Roy presented several options for the effective use of links within and between pages, sites, and objects. He noted that links should be kept current, avoiding "dead" links which alienate readers. Link-checking software can help in this effort. As for searching, Roy pointed out the importance of choosing good search terms to avoid being drowned in extraneous sites. Good search engines should allow saving of search strategies, sort the results in some relevant way, and present results in context. Archiving should be planned during the initial design of the site and should offer several options for access. Roy noted that indexes should present information in various ways, such as by author and topic, with links to the full content.

Bill Silberg opened his breakout session

on financial considerations for Web-site development and maintenance with a joke: "What is a Web business?" The answer: "An oxymoron." At least that's the general perception. The truth is, Silberg said, that no one really knows how many, if any, Web sites are profitable. What is known, he said, is that dot-coms go out of business or merge as fast as they spring up. Silberg provided an overview of how Web sites have evolved over the years, from the first "shovelware" sites, which simply posted existing printed marketing materials, to the more current models, which provide live, original content. He also covered some of the hidden costs of Web development, staffing and infrastructure issues, differences between consumer and professional sites, and what he believes is the coming "shakeout" among Web sites as they consolidate and otherwise disappear as distinct providers of content. Silberg closed with another joke, saying that the only way to make a small fortune on the Web is to start with a large one.

Baskin returned to present the final breakout session of the course, on the advantages and disadvantages of performing various editorial tasks online. Baskin showed how using the Web for the editorial process can substantially reduce the time needed for submission, review, revision, and publication. She also pointed out specific advantages: reduced delivery costs, easier information retrieval, rapid content updating, and enhanced process tracking. These good points can be offset, Baskin said, by the need for increased staff training and investments in infrastructure. She summarized how several journals now use online editing and briefly described the strategies that they have developed to enhance the process for journal staff, authors, reviewers, and publishers. Clear and active communication, as always, is the key to success, said Baskin. 