The City Room: A View of a Virtual Repository

Ew Haven has been called the most researched small city in the U.S.—yet this knowledge has no single knower. Instead, it is scattered about in hundreds of books, research reports, dissertations, theses, data tapes, manuscript archives and the personal recollections of people who have studied or made New Haven's history.

At the same time, although many people, offices and institutions around the university and city are responsible for maintaining various parts of this "knowledge base," it takes considerable effort to find them.

Thus, in some cases, proposals and reports are written, grants are submitted, policies are made and organizations are started without benefit of the information that was "readily" available. In other cases, nothing at all happens because the effort never gets out of the starting blocks.

A parallel problem is faced by information providers, whether these be librarians, archivists, researchers or authors. Simply producing, amassing and arranging information does not guarantee it will reach the people it ought to reach.

A Solution

To address this problem, ISPS has begun to develop "New Haven On-Line," a network information resource center for researchers, policy makers and activists in the Yale and New Haven communities.

It will endeavor to provide "one-stop shopping" for information about the city of New Haven, lowering start-up costs for new projects and increasing access to data and analysis tools to enhance existing projects and programs. Run through an ISPS office called the City Room, New Haven On-Line will not be a physical repository of texts, manuscripts and artifacts, but, rather, a virtual repository of retrievable data sets, data summaries, maps, analysis tools and pointers to other sources of information.

The Ideas Behind "New Haven On-Line"

Since the problem is neither one of a lack of information nor of a shortage of persons whose job includes making this information available, the solution is not to be found in having more of either. Instead, a tool is needed that makes it easier for the providers and the users to "find" one another.

New Haven On-Line—a tool for connecting people who need information to sources of that information— will be implemented as a Gopher/World Wide Web (Mosaic) server accessible over the campus network and the Internet.

It will gather in one (virtual) place as much New Haven-relevant information as possible by recruiting "information providers" whose work already includes providing this information to the community and by commissioning special projects as the need arises. The information will range from census data to unpublished manuscripts to Yale library holdings to who's involved in what project now.

The City Room was conceived during work on a proposal to the federal department on Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to establish a Community Outreach Partnership Center.

There are three principles behind the development of the City Room:

- Emphasize the kinds of things scholars, public officials, activists and community-based organizations regularly need, rather than trying to collect everything under the sun.
- Focus on materials which someone already is responsible for making available.
- Model the system on what one learns about in the process of becoming a New Haven "old hand."

The work for this year—the first year of the project—will include setting up the City Room, surveying potential clients to determine just what information in what form would be most useful in their ongoing work, soliciting information contributions, and seeking funding to increase access among non-university clientele.

by Dan Ryan

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