Creating Database-Backed Library Web Pages Using Open Source Tools (review)

Frank J. Bove

It is impossible to deny that the Internet has changed the way in which librarians conduct business and serve user needs. The common tools we use and offer to patrons are often available in a Web-based format with new ones arriving on the scene each day. Where we once guarded the secrets of database searching as somewhat of a trade secret, today we encourage and teach our users to become savvy searchers in their own right. This change has forced librarians to confront technology. We know our users well and wish to provide tailored access to information, but many of us are unfamiliar with manipulating the technology that drives our new vehicle of information access. Fortunately, Stephen R. Westman has crafted a wonderful driver’s manual for our new set of wheels.

Westman clearly states his premise in the title of the book. This is a manual for librarians interested in crafting dynamic database-driven Web sites. He introduces the concept of relational databases with a hands-on approach using open source tools that are easily accessible. These tools and techniques were often hidden in systems and networking departments, but Westman strips away the veil revealing a path that allows librarians to build better bridges between our users and the information they seek. The only knowledge he assumes is a basic familiarity with HTML and the ability to create HTML forms.

Westman brings considerable talent and experience to the table. Drawing on almost two decades as an academic librarian at several cutting-edge institutions, his focus is on information retrieval issues. and he has specialized in developing relational databases to create dynamic Web content and applications. Luckily for us, Westman is first and foremost a librarian. This book is written by a librarian for librarians, and he consciously uses the terms and vocabulary familiar to us all.

The book is clear, concise, and beautifully written. The structure is divided into three main sections. The first section covers data management tools and techniques that include data storage and management options using a variety of powerful open source tools such as Apache, PHP, MySQL, and phpMyAdmin. The second section delves into the often times scary world of programming. His communication skills shine through this section as he is able to present difficult topics in such a way that the topics seem familiar while maintaining a rigor to conform to current programming.
standards and good practices. The third section brings everything together and covers the creation of a complete database-driven Web application. Westman addresses issues such as planning, data modeling, database design, front-end administration, user authentication, and security.

Westman’s book, of course, includes a very rich index and glossary that programming novices will find very helpful. He also hosts a companion Web site that is a wonderful complement to his tome (http://till.uncc.edu/ala_book/). There readers will find errata information as well as the scripts presented in the book in a downloadable file and an exhaustive bibliography of resources covering all topics presented in the book for further reading, reference, or research.

This work fills an important gap in the literature. Even though there is a wealth of information on this topic, it is the first book that I am aware of that addresses these issues specifically for librarians. This is certainly a book that can easily be adopted as a hands-on class or workshop text. I am sure we will see future revisions and editions as it joins the canon of library and information science literature.

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This work is the second volume of a collection of papers presented by leaders in higher education and libraries who attended the annual International Round-table on Library and Information Science at the Kanazawa Institute of Technology (KIT). KIT and the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) have been co-sponsors of the roundtable since 2001. Each year the speakers are invited to discuss and present papers on topics critical to higher education and libraries. This volume includes papers presented from 1999 to 2003. Of the authors represented, most are librarians, and all are leaders in their particular area of expertise.

The volume represents a good overview of the pre-2003 state of issues surrounding the development of digital libraries. This is not the book for someone wanting to know the latest standards and technology needed to develop a digital library. Instead, the authors cover a broad range of topics, including an historical overview of libraries by Stanley Chodorow, which is useful for helping both librarians and university administrators understand how libraries fit into the overall university organization, as well as an informed discussion by C. Lee Jones on document delivery and the effect that moving from paper to an electronic format has on libraries and delivery mechanisms.

The success of the volume is in its ability to address a variety of readers and a variety of interests. While one reader may be most interested in ways that technology is changing library organizations, another may want to focus on the copyright implications of digital information. The book is divided into four major sections—“Envisioning the Future,” “Facing Major Challenges,” “Creating Projects and Programs,” and “Developing Digital Libraries.” Many readers will find the section “Creating Projects and Programs” particularly useful because of its practical nature. Karin Wittenborg’s discussion of trade-offs made by the University of Virginia as it created