Global Issues in Digital Libraries

Gio Wiederhold
Stanford University

Global access to information over the World-Wide-Web raises a number of issues that should be dealt with in a thoughtful manner so that participants, in particular the providers of information, will not feel overwhelmed or disenfranchised.

One issue is the relationship of language to culture. If the language of the web continues to be dominated by English, then the cultural integrity of non-English areas will suffer. Automatic translation of text will help in accessing and sharing material, but cannot resolve the cultural gap. We hypothesize that there are similar cultural differences in visual imagery, even harder to quantify. Our children are growing up with a much greater reliance on visual input. The world-wide distribution of films and, even more, advertising snippets, are further homogenizing the world. Solutions to protect cultural identity and diversity are not obvious, and will not be simple.

Differences in attitude and laws about copyright remain. Those differences are affected by the ongoing change in public perception that information on the web is free. Driving all authors and creators to rely on associated advertising to obtain income is unattractive, but seems to become the norm. The trend is extending beyond the web. Newspaper prices, for instance have been driven down significantly in New York and San Francisco recently. Copyright still has the role of assuring authenticity and the protection of the author's reputation.

Repositories of documents can now be anywhere. The capacity of computer systems has grown so that all certified publications, say those assigned ISBN numbers, if available in coded digital form, could be stored at, say, all institutes of higher education. The resulting redundancy will ensure some degree of preservation, although the authenticity and correctness of the copies cannot be that easily guaranteed. It will be just as easy to store sloppy, biased, misleading, and outright false information.

Digital libraries will have to respond to novel user's expectations in this changing world, while finding it difficult to be reimbursed for the value they add in their function as quality mediating agents. I look forward to our interactions in this meeting, and hope that these will create an appreciation for the difficult issues that all libraries will face.