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LOOKING FOR GENRES ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF AMERICAN AUTHOR WEB SITES

Tim Hackman

Librarian for English & Linguistics, Univ. of MD

thackman@umd.edu

Karen Patterson

Librarian for Education & Information Studies, Univ. of MD

kpatter@umd.edu

ABSTRACT

This project entails content analysis of 200 websites for authors commonly taught in university-level American literature survey courses. Using a faceted classification scheme to categorize site content, the researchers explore the extent to which consistency has developed in the scope and content of Web sites for authors in the canon of American literature. The goal is to identify both the full range of unique content on these Web sites and, within that range, the core content elements that comprise the "American Author Web Site" genre. The authors also gathered biographical details on each author, to consider the question of whether Web site content varies by an author's gender or racial background. Ultimately, the goal is to identify a set of common and/or "best" practices for content and organization of author Web sites that will assist both undergraduate students and advanced researchers looking for author information on the Web, as well as site designers hoping to create quality resources for these users.

FINDINGS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In all, the researchers coded a total of 1,611 content elements for the 200 author sites, and identified 247 unique content elements. The average number of content elements per Web site for all authors was 8.06 (median = 6). There were some differences in this number by sex, race, and the number of anthologies in which the author appeared, with sites for white, male authors having slightly more content elements. The most notable finding was the extraordinarily high average of 12.7 elements per site for authors who appeared in all three anthologies, indicating that authors who are better established in the canon of American literature have more fully-developed Web pages.

There were also differences by sex, race and anthology in the content elements most commonly found on author Web sites. The chart on the reverse shows the most common elements by the percentage of sites in each category that featured that element. For each category we have listed the number of elements in the average site for that category; e.g., the average site for a male author has nine elements, so we have listed the top nine elements in the chart. For all categories, a biography of the author was the most popular content element, with between 84 and 95% of sites containing this feature. A picture of the author was the second most popular element for all sites except female authors and authors appearing in all three anthologies; in those cases, the second most popular elements were a bibliography of all of the author's works and a bibliography of criticism of the author's works, respectively. In all categories there is a sharp drop-off in frequency after these first two content elements. For Non-White Authors, for example, the biography, picture and bibliography of works appear in 93.4%, 64.5%, and 60.5% of sites, respectively. For the fourth through seventh most popular elements, however, the frequency ranges no higher than 31.6% and dips all the way to 22.4%. That is, only about one in five sites for Non-White authors contained the seventh-most popular content element, indicating that there is greater diversity than expected in the content of these author sites.

Future research with this data could involve additional analyses by author time periods (e.g., 19th vs. 20th centuries), geographic areas (e.g., New England vs. the South), and genres (e.g., poetry vs. prose). We would also like to compare content elements found in Web sites against those found in print reference sources such as *American National Biography* or the *Encyclopedia of American Literature*. Finally, the data could be used to formulate "best practices" or other guidelines for creators of American author Web sites.

EXEMPLARY WEB SITES

The following are examples of high-quality author Web sites containing a wide variety of useful content. Note that all but Martin Luther King, Jr. and Elizabeth Bishop were featured in three anthologies; King and Bishop were featured in one and two anthologies, respectively.

- *Elizabeth Bishop at Vassar College* <http://projects.vassar.edu/bishop/index.php>
- *Dickinson Electronic Archives* <http://www.emilydickinson.org/>
- *William Faulkner on the Web* <http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~egjbp/faulkner/faulkner.html>
- *MLK (Martin Luther King, Jr.) Online* <http://www.mlkonline.net/>
- *The Jack London Online Collection* <http://london.sonoma.edu/>

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(See p. 320 for an explanation of faceted classification.)

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