Business Historians and the World Wide Web

K. Austin Kerr

Ohio State University

The World Wide Web is an exciting computer technology that provides exceptional opportunities for business historians. The World Wide Web is the graphical interface for the Internet in which users need only point and click with a mouse or press a few keys to travel from site to site around the world. The Web is experiencing explosive growth. Access to the Web as a publisher is widely available, and knowledge about writing simple Web pages fairly easy to acquire. Educational institutions and business firms alike are turning with enthusiasm to the Web as a good, inexpensive way to provide information for a variety of audiences. The goal of my presentation this afternoon is to demonstrate the World Wide Web and to offer some thoughts about how we, as business historians, business executives, and educators may want to develop our use of this remarkable technology.

A few basic features about the Web are important to know. It is a multimedia environment, allowing the delivery of texts, pictures, sounds, and motion pictures or videos. To take advantage of the Web one needs a fairly powerful computer with good graphics capabilities; full advantage requires a sound card and speakers. The Web is also an interactive medium, a feature that has educators around the world excited. Companies also see the Web as a medium for interacting with customers; one can order products, see airline schedules and purchase tickets, and the like using the Web's technology.

We talk in terms of "pages" for the Web. An address has a "home" page and usually other pages that are linked to that home page. (The home page for my department is http://www.cohums.ohio-state.edu/history/.) The "language" of the Web is hypertext. Nothing is structured; one skips around from place to place. One writes Web pages in "hypertext markup language" or "html." These are standard codes that instruct browser software on what to do when the computer receives them. I will not discuss this technology further, but rather direct you to Robert Alan Harris's explanation, offered at the recent annual meeting of the American Historical Association, and stored at http://www.wilpaterson.edu/home/staff/RAHarris/AHA96/AHA96.htm.

My first demonstration offers some examples of the use of the World Wide Web for conducting research in business history. My demonstration is limited because I am showing you pages from an off-campus site, and cannot access services that Ohio State University has licensed for our use. Those

services include access to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on-line and to the databases in the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN). The latter service is essential for historians, because print bibliographies of materials like manuscript collections are not being maintained; the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections will not continue to publish on paper, so we can access up-to-date information about manuscript collections only with electronic tools. Historians generally are already familiar with on-line library catalogs. The Web represents another step toward electronic bibliographical information, and one that is both easier to use and visually more pleasing.

I can demonstrate some of the ways in which archives and libraries are making finding aids for research material available on-line. The next step, and one on which thousands of librarians and archivists around the world are working, is to make actual research materials available also. The advantages of electronic finding aids include their ready availability and the ability to search the text within them for specific words of interest.

- The Ohio Historical Society is constructing a Web site at http://winslo. ohio.gov/ohswww/ohshome.html. This site is beginning to allow researchers the opportunity to explore finding aids for collections, and eventually it will provide researchers with images of primary documents.

- Duke University Library Special Collections at http://odyssey.lib. duke.edu/ allows a researcher to obtain a finding aid on screen, and then to use the software's search procedure to find particular words in the inventory.

- University of Miami Library Special Collections at http://www. library.miami.edu/archives/papers/reposit.html has a wonderful search engine that permits the researcher to locate an individual term, such as "business," in all of the on-line collection inventories.

- *Appleton's Cyclopedia of Applied Mechanics* is at http://www. history.rochester.edu. In this example, the full text of documents that researchers will find useful is being placed on a Web server. Dr. Morris Pierce, who maintains this service, reports that up to 8,000 individuals access these materials each day.

Clearly this technology is exciting from the standpoint of scholarly research. It also offers extraordinary possibilities from a teacher's viewpoint. At Ohio State, for instance, we have started developing "course pages" to help deliver course materials to students. Such pages enable a professor to make materials available to students outside of class, and they allow students to publish their work with a world-wide audience in mind. At Rochester, for example, Morris Pierce has begun having students "publish" material on the Erie Canal. Someone at Akron has learned of this project, and plans to have students there add to the project with material on the Ohio and Erie Canal. About half of the elementary and secondary schools in the United States now have access to the Internet, and teachers elsewhere have begun having students engage in Web projects. I will offer some thoughts along these lines in a few minutes.

First, however, I want to point out briefly the historical material about some companies now to be found on the Web. There are firms both here and abroad that use their history to tell audiences about themselves. You can find a list of company home pages that provide historical material at http://www. cohums.ohio-state.edu/history/co-hist.htm.

Clearly for a few firms it serves their purpose – whether that purpose is public relations or some other goal – to include historical material as part of their Web service. When I see this material appearing, I wonder whether or not we business historians who are also educators might play a role. Certainly it could be to a firm's advantage to involve us, for sites like the one I have described at Rochester attract a sizable audience.

I think the Business History Conference should consider some ways in which we might foster scholarly cooperation between firms and historians. We have good ties with the Newcomen Society of the United States. Newcomen provides funds for us to award prizes, and the Society has expressed an interest in further promoting the study of business history in the United States. The Newcomen Society also holds banquets, usually in conjunction with the anniversary of a specific company, at which that member celebrates its history. Usually a printed pamphlet of the address, detailing the history of the company, results.

What I have in mind is a collaborative project in which the Business History Conference and the Newcomen Society would work with those firms (and organizations, because the banquets are not always about a firm) to have them provide documentary material about their histories for a Web site. The Web pages could be mounted either on an organization's own computer or they could be placed on another computer, such as the server operated by the Cliometric Society.

We could reach out to schools of all kinds with this type of material if we handled it properly. There have been – and are – American organizations trying to promote the study of economics in the schools. Some of what I have seen in this effort I find offensive, because it is clearly a biased and skewed economics, serving the interests of established centers of wealth and power in our society. What am suggesting is a business history service for schools at all levels that makes an attempt at neutrality and objectivity in a traditional academic sense. Our schools are riddled with enough propaganda, propaganda that usually alienates both students and the ablest teachers.

What I mean by handling material properly goes beyond avoiding obvious propaganda, however. By handling material properly I mean including aids for teachers in using business history material in their lesson plans, lectures, or discussions. We could develop "modules" of information focusing on businesses in a community, or an industry, or a particular technology. Materials such as photographs and advertisements are an obvious source of interesting images for teachers and students. But we should not stop with visual materials. How about sequences of annual reports, so that students can develop an understanding of how a company presented itself to the public over a period of time? How about personnel data, so that our audience can discover how employment

conditions changed over time? How about documents relating to a firm's past strategy, so that students can begin to appreciate the considerations that went into shifts in a firm's direction?

In short, it seems to me that the World Wide Web provides us with opportunities for a new kind of collaborative publishing. Business historians who teach in business schools work in an environment where the case method of instruction is common. The Web provides an opportunity to develop and publish "cases" at all levels of the curriculum. Business historians who teach, as I do, in a history department where lecturing is the common form of instruction can participate in and benefit from this new medium also. We have only begun to imagine the possibilities that the remarkable technology of the World Wide Web affords.