

A Social Science Gateway in a Shifting Digital World: Shaping SOSIG for Users' Needs of the Future

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Abstract for DigiLib2003 paper

This paper discusses the challenges facing a mature UK subject gateway, SOSIG, [1], nine years after its creation. There are two key challenges for SOSIG in the shifting information landscape: First, the sustainability of a labour-intensive service, in the face of new competition; secondly, evaluation and innovation to keep pace with user needs. The paper will focus particularly on the second of these challenges.

To begin with, we will sketch some of the background to SOSIG, its current place in the national information landscape and its national and European research and service collaborations. The paper will highlight very briefly how, in an increasingly competitive digital world, SOSIG has to address some of the sustainability challenges of an established digital library service. We shall then outline our range of evaluation and review activity and resulting changes in service content and functionality over the past nine years.

SOSIG (Social Science Information Gateway) was set up in 1994 and is considered a pioneer amongst the quality-controlled subject gateways in the UK. Initially SOSIG was the only gateway in the UK, but since then many others have been established here and throughout Europe. It is part of the UK's Resource Discovery Network [2]. SOSIG aims to "tame" the Internet, by providing a quality-controlled directory of Web sites suitable for social science students, lecturers and researchers (currently about 22,000 sites are listed). The work is carried out by a geographically dispersed team of subject specialists, plus a core team of information and technical specialists at the Institute for Learning and Research Technology (ILRT) at Bristol University. SOSIG also hosts a virtual community for social scientists called Grapevine.

The sustainability of the existing service is the first of the challenges we face. The successful growth of SOSIG has resulted in a large and significant resource which raises considerable issues of maintenance and management. For users it also presents conceptual and navigational issues. The paper will briefly outline previous content management and marketing strategies which drew on input from SOSIG users and the expertise of usability consultants. It will include a brief mention of improvements in the various SOSIG classification schemes for catalogue resources, in terms of metadata, browsing structure and interoperability. In addition it will look at our national and international collaboration. In the changing digital environment, we will also consider commercial collaboration.

The second and major challenge is keeping pace with user needs. We will consider problems facing SOSIG and other digital library services, offer insights into how we have addressed the issues so far, and describe how we hope to shape SOSIG for the future. These issues will be analysed in the context of changing Internet search technologies, new trends in user behaviour, and changes in higher education teaching or learning. For example, we discuss appropriate technical and design features to keep pace with information advances, such as portals and personalised services. The paper will highlight the benefits SOSIG offers which Google does not, such as human quality control, as opposed to automated searches. We ask which innovations we should be introducing, to address users' expectations of search services. How can we engage further with our user community in terms of participation?

We will ask who our audience should be - do we broaden our scope or go for niche marketing? How do we attract more users? The important area of non-use will be touched upon. The paper will look at methods for promoting SOSIG and ask how important our brand identity is.

The authors will describe how SOSIG has so far addressed the above issues, with a rich variety of activities: summative evaluations (user surveys and consultation exercises) and European collaboration; user interface research (focus groups and observations). They will discuss the resulting changes in service content and more recent micro-improvements. Some changes have occurred organically, through growth in collection size and the addition of functionality to content architecture, in reaction to immediate needs. Some additional features have stretched the existing technical base or have been created by using different technologies. The challenge is to take a more strategic approach, given the moving targets of audiences and technologies.

The paper will finally demonstrate how SOSIG will shape itself for the future, with three main strategies: the areas of collaboration, service design and user engagement.

References

1. SOSIG Available from <http://sosig.ac.uk>
2. Resource Discovery Network Available from <http://www.rdn.ac.uk/>

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