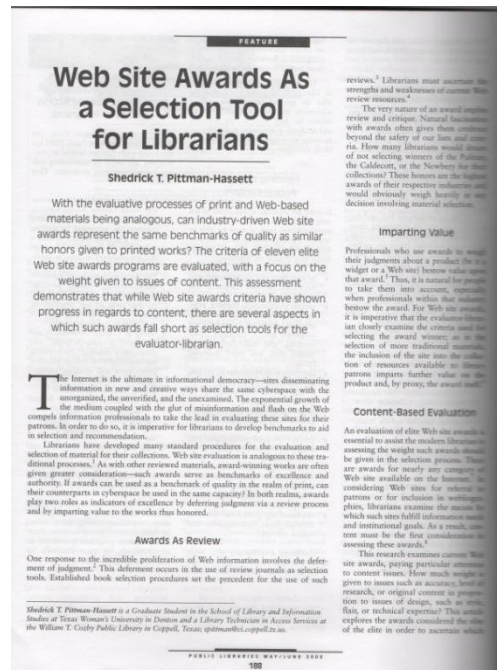
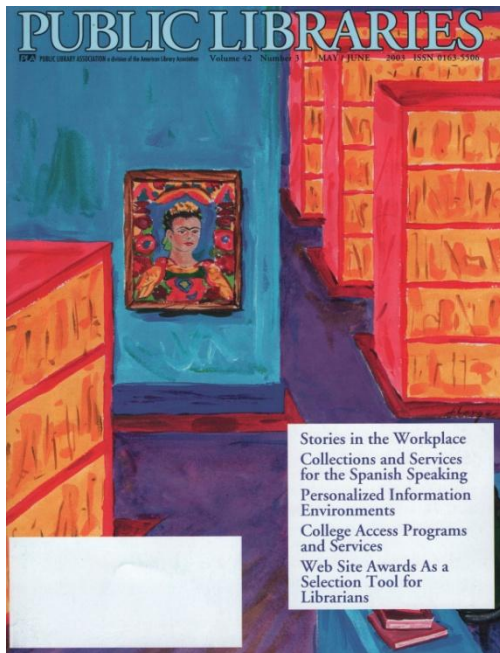


Shedrick Pittman-Hassett

3117 Briary Trace Ct. Denton, TX 76210

serialdistractions@gmail.com

<http://serialdistractions.wordpress.com>



“Website Awards as a Collection Tool for Librarians”

Public Libraries (May/June 2003)

Public Libraries is a peer-reviewed journal catering to the concerns of the public librarian. This research article comprised the independent study requirement that led to my attaining my Masters in Library Science. I conducted a great deal of research over a period of weeks and put together an article of my findings. I examined a variety of factors for a ten different website awards programs and rated them according to traditional evaluation criteria used by librarians to select materials.

Content-Based Evaluation

An evaluation of elite Web site awards is essential to assist the modern librarian in assessing the weight such awards should be given in the selection process. There are awards for nearly any category of Web site available on the Internet.⁷ In considering Web sites for referral to patrons or for inclusion in webliographies, librarians examine the means by which such sites fulfill information needs and institutional goals. As a result, content must be the first consideration in assessing these awards.⁸

This research examines current Web site awards, paying particular attention to content issues. How much weight is given to issues such as accuracy, level of research, or original content in proportion to issues of design, such as style, flair, or technical expertise? This article explores the awards considered

the elite of the elite in order to ascertain which honors should be considered benchmarks of quality from the content-oriented point of view of librarianship.

Content Qualifiers

All but one of the awards evaluated include provisions for the disqualification of sites according to certain content-based criteria. These content qualifiers usually indicate that sites containing pornography or nudity, advocacy of illegal activities, profanity, and racist themes or hate-speech will be instantly disqualified from winning the award. Some of the more interesting caveats disallow sites that include content “pertaining to the Occult, Wicca, or Paganism,” “political sites that espouse dangerous ideas,” or sites containing “controversial material of any kind.” Some programs rule out sites for having “any other content we find unsuitable.” One program not only prohibits sites with “racist, profane, or hateful content,” but also sites with links to similar subject matter.

Evaluation based on content is rooted in the concepts of authority, style, and professional practice, not on the level of distaste that the evaluator holds for the subject matter. These awards purport to be elite, a selection of the best the Web has to offer—so long as the evaluators are not offended by the subject matter. An excellent site on a controversial topic would be swept under the rug due to many of these caveats. Even if a site met these guidelines, it could be disqualified if it offered its visitors links to sites with opposing viewpoints. This style of blanket disqualification based on content runs contrary to the evaluative practices of librarianship.

Conclusion

Librarians desperately need benchmarks with which to judge the exponential growth of Internet content. The potential use of elite Web site awards grows from an acknowledgement of traditional practices of collection development and a natural need for the deferment of judgment. Benchmarks used by the evaluator-librarian must demonstrate an awareness of the importance of content.

Elite Web site awards attempt to demonstrate this awareness through content statements. However, these statements lack the support of posted points of evaluation. The few sites that do post criteria focus on the originality of the content, not on authority or accuracy. The disregard to the importance of current Web information demonstrates a lack of understanding of the medium’s shortcomings. The extensive use of content qualifiers, inimical to the traditional evaluative processes of librarianship, ensures that only the ideologically tame Web site can be considered elite.

Content-based evaluation is crucial in an open medium such as the Internet. These awards purport to be elite, but all fall short on key aspects of content evaluation. For now, librarians must continue to rely on other resources, such as reviewed directories and peer-reviewed articles, to assist them in recommending quality sources of online information.