

Web rings

An alternative to search engines

by Carol Casey

The Web ring has quietly grown into an alternative method of cruising the Internet. Usually represented by a triptych of panels and accompanied by proud proclamations of membership, Web rings can be loudly obtrusive or gentle anomalies in the overall design of a Web site. As a way of collecting Web sites on similar topics into separate little universes on the Internet, the Web ring is an ingenious alternative to compiling a list of links.

A ring of Web sites

Generally speaking, a Web ring is a group of Web sites that are linked together in a continuous linear loop. An early example of this type of ring is EUROPa, the Expanding Unidirectional Ring Of PAGES, created by Denis Howe at London's Imperial College in December 1994.¹

The ring is comprised of sites chained together, and the only way to move through the ring is in a single direction. When a new site is added, the owner of the previous site has to add a link to it. It is also up to the Web site owner to keep track of the next Web site in the chain, in case it disappears and causes a break in the ring. As a free-for-all string of unrelated Web sites, EUROPa is a novelty without much practical use.

Topic-specific Web rings

Most of the Web rings found on the Internet have been created through the resources found at Webring (<http://webring.com>). Following the EUROPa concept, high school

senior, Sage Weil, and Troy Griffin developed a Web ring in June 1995. Two months later, Weil not only solved EUROPa's linear problem, but eliminated the need for maintenance by the Web site owners. With EUROPa, the Web site owners have to "constantly edit their page to point to a new site when it was added"² to a ring. Weil's Web ring has a centralized CGI script that runs the ring and directs users to the other sites. This means that a "central Web server maintains a list of sites tied to a specific theme or interest."³ The only editing a Web site owner has to do is add a link to the CGI script, plus insert the Web ring graphic and text elements into his or her site. Best of all, Webring, the organization founded by Weil, offers the HTML code and server space free to anyone who wants to create a topic-driven Web ring.

Why a Web ring?

At first glance, the concept of a Web ring is a bit bewildering to those of us who question the intentional imposition of a linear route through the nonlinear Internet. Closer inspection reveals that Webring's version of the Web ring is more sophisticated than a continual loop of Web pages. Weil said, "People can travel a ring in either direction, either jumping to (or skipping) the next site or previous site, list the next five sites in a ring, jump to a random site in the ring, or simply get a list of all pages in the loop."⁴ In other words, it is a more dynamic means of pointing a user to related Web sites than the usual lists of favorite links.

About the author

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Web rings and libraries

As "a novel, decentralized, and soothingly non-hierarchical way to experience and organize Web content,"⁵ the Web ring is worth investigating. The goal of Webring is to be an alternative to the major search engines by offering Web rings as a starting point for locating information. This is why the main criterion for developing a Web ring is that it must be devoted to a single topic.

Also, unlike the major search engines, Web rings are created and maintained by anyone willing to take on the task. All the rings that use Webring's HTML code and server space are listed by subject at RingWorld (<http://webring.com/ringworld/>), accessed through Webring's homepage. As of April 1998, there were 47,370 rings at Webring. For greater flexibility, the sites on the rings are also searchable by keyword.

To enhance access to Internet resources, a library can provide a general link to Webring's list of rings. If an Internet pathfinder is devoted to a specific topic, a link can be made to individual rings related to that topic. This gives the user the opportunity to explore single-topic Web sites without having to deal with dead links and nonrelevant Web sites, which are swept into a keyword search on the major search engines. It also is a good idea to check to see if a Web ring has been developed for a subject before undertaking the task of compiling a list of links. Why duplicate the effort if the job has already been done?

For those librarians who think they would like to create a Web ring, several things need to be kept in mind. Creating a Web ring is not like compiling a list of links. The owners of the Web sites have to agree to join the ring and be willing to add the graphics, text, and links for the Web ring to their site. If the Web site is already a part of one or more rings, the owner may not want to join another one. If nothing else, all the extra graphic

and text elements not only add clutter to the overall design of a site but increase precious download time.

So even if a Web ring doesn't quite cover or approach a subject the way you would like, it is best to link to the existing ring and maybe supplement it with a list of additional Web sites.

Another point to consider is that developing and maintaining a Web ring can be time-consuming. It takes time to track down potential sites, not to mention contacting Web site owners and, in some cases, convincing them to join the ring. As the ring grows, the opposite problem of getting too many applications to join the ring may occur. To deal with this, a policy that controls the content and quality of the ring must be developed and more time spent evaluating these new Web sites. The number of Web sites in Web rings currently on the Internet range from a handful to several hundred, so the Web ring owner has to decide how many are enough for the ring to work effectively.

On the technical side, the ringmaster, as the owner of a Web ring is called, must have a good understanding of HTML and experience in creating Web pages. Each Web ring has a homepage that is created and maintained by the Web ring owner.

The design of the graphic and text elements that represent the Web ring on the individual sites is also the responsibility of the ringmaster. Because of this, the ringmaster must enjoy working with the technical aspects of the Internet and derive some kind of satisfaction from maintaining the Web ring or else it will quickly become a chore.

Given all this, maintaining a Web ring can help shape the quality of the Internet resources offered by a library. Perhaps someday the title "ringmaster" will have the same weight to it as "Web master." As Clinton Wilder asks: "How will 'ringmaster' look on your resume?"⁶ Only time will tell.

Full circle

Although Webring is branching out into more commercial uses of the Web ring, it remains dedicated to the original intent of the organization. Charley Lanusse, president of Starseed, current owners of Webring, assures us that they are "committed to open information. . . . We're concerned about getting as much in-

formation indexed as possible.⁷⁷ Anyone who wants to create a topic-specific Web ring is welcome to use the Webring resources free-of-charge.

As an information resource, Web rings are a good starting point on the Internet. Whether just adding links to existing Web rings or taking on the responsibility of developing and maintaining one, libraries are a natural place to exploit the potential of the Web ring as a minefield of topic-specific information.

Notes

1. Howe, Denis. Expanding Unidirectional Ring Of Pages. <<http://wombat.doc.ic.ac.uk/europa.html>> (April 20, 1998).
2. Webring. History. <<http://www.webring.com/history.html>> (April 17, 1998).
3. Taylor, Dave. "Use Topic-driven Web Rings to Rein in Intranet Traffic." *InfoWorld* 18 (August 29, 1997): 72.
4. Webring. "What is Webring?" <<http://www.webring.com/what.html>> (April 17, 1998).
5. O'Connell, Pamela. "Whither Webring?" Weekly feature from Your Mining Co. Guide

to Personal Web Pages. 3 Nov. 1997. <<http://personalweb.tqn.com/library/weekly/aa110397.htm>> (April 21, 1998).

6. Wilder, Clinton. "Lord of the Rings." *Information Week Issue* 605 (November 11, 1996): 12.

7. Marlatt, Andrew, "'Web Rings' Emerge as Alternative to Search Engines." *Internet World*. 20 October 1997. <<http://internetworld.com/print/1997/10/20/markcomm/19971020-webring.html>> (April 17, 1998). ■

Letter to the editor

Thank you for publishing "The Mansfield protocol for laptop computer circulation" (Jul/Aug 1998). Alfred University is starting a similar program and it was very helpful to read an article that outlined the specifics of an established program. It's so much easier to begin a project like this after reading such a relevant article than trying to start something from scratch!—*Laurie McFadden, librarian, Alfred University, mcfadden@king.alfred.edu*

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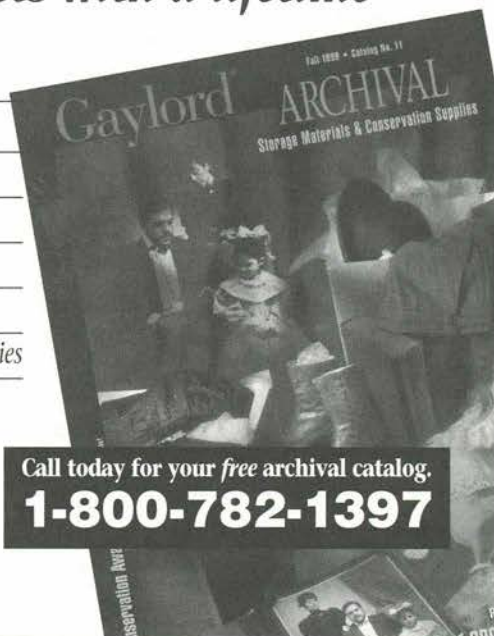
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