

The wide, wild world of ibiblio

By CHRISTINA DYRNESS, Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL -- Surfing the ibiblio Web site is like having a conversation with an eccentric intellectual with good intentions to enlighten but little tact or organization.

Kudzu, beekeeping, Tibet, astrobiology, poetry, folk music, Dutch vocabulary words and, excuse me, what exactly is Pet Laundry? On top of general-interest topics, ibiblio hosts a huge collection for the truly tech-minded: resources and sites related to Linux, where dozens of versions of the open-source computer operating system (from Red Hat to VoodooLinux) can be downloaded by anyone with a modem.

In short, for average citizens and the tech-savvy alike, there is simply too much information to be absorbed in one sitting.

Welcome to the Internet's oldest online archive and one of the largest. Housed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's campus, ibiblio (www.ibiblio.org) fashions itself as the Internet's public library. It is free to visitors and users of its hosting services -- thanks to backing from the university, technology companies and private grants -- and exists solely for the purpose of putting information into the public domain.

Last year, the eclectic, electric morass celebrated 10 years online, raising the question: What's next? The answer is more of the same -- and then some.

"It's really pushing the edge of where the libraries are going to be," says JoAnn G. Marshall, dean of UNC's school of information and

library science. "It's a contributor-run library. Instead of one kind of library, we're going to have many different kinds of libraries, and they're going to be created by the creators."

Fans of free information are fans of ibiblio.

"We have the same philosophy," says Glenn Otis Brown, executive director of Creative Commons, an ibiblio-hosted, California-based effort to add flexibility to copyright law so that more information can be available in the public domain. "There are so many people who rely on them as a place to come for various kinds of materials."

It would be impossible to explain ibiblio without talking to its founder and fearless leader Paul Jones, whose meandering conversational style and poster-studded, tchotchke-strewn office reflect ibiblio's spirit. When someone comments on the eclectic nature of ibiblio, he's likely to say, "That's kind of the point."

Jones' home base, and that of the student-heavy ibiblio staff, is crammed into a small office suite in UNC's Manning Hall, the home of the School of Information and Library Science, which helps sponsor ibiblio along with the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Jones is on the faculties of both schools.

On a recent morning, he gathered his flock -- the human brains of the operation -- in the midst of the wall-less cubicles and desks studded with flat-screen monitors and laptops. The brute strength of ibiblio is yards away in the basement of Phillips Hall, where 10 servers take advantage of the same access and 24-hour support and security that protect the university's main computer networks.

The meeting bounces around the room as the eight-person ibiblio staff -- most are students who pass through the office between classes -- catch one another up on projects they're working on. The meeting is laced with inside jokes and quick side discussions about technical topics such as statistics and databases. When they get together, it becomes clear that behind ibiblio's virtual public library facade is a playground for geekdom.

Jones opens by announcing something exciting: Ibiblio is angling to get a treasure trove of new data from an open-source software foundation -- tens of gigabytes of data from code logs to e-mail lists.

"It's fairly raw," Jones tells his people, who have rolled closer on office chairs, some still tapping away on laptops. "But it would be cool to figure out what their data tells us."

In other words, a huge, new digital archive to study, organize and make available to others. For a place that has spent the past decade doing just that, it is, in Jones' words, "a gold mine."

Which brings up an important point. Ibiblio is all about free information, but it's also very much about free software.

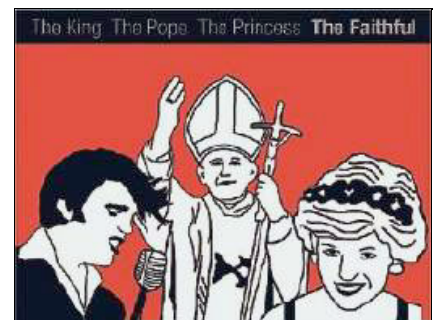
Ibiblio got its start in 1992 as SunSite. A press release that October announces the official launch of SunSite, a joint project of UNC and Sun Microsystems Computer, that "will act as a central repository for a collection of public-domain software, shareware and other electronic material such as research articles and electronic images."

Erik Troan managed the Linux archive -- organizing submissions of programming code and messages from hackers around the world -- from 1992 until 1995. "You have to remember that these were the days before Web browsers were very popular," Troan says. "The Internet was a different culture then."

Without Web pages to bounce around on, Linux enthusiasts communicated solely through e-mail lists and



ARCHIVES: Unofficial archives of Presidential materials includes the speech Bill Clinton gave at the 1992 Democratic Convention. Here is a picture of him at the convention with his daughter, Chelsea.



ELVIS LIVES: The Unofficial Elvis site links to a film about Elvis, John Paul II and Princess Diana.



FREE BURMA: 'A slogan, a hope, a certain number of Web pages ...'



THE SOUTH: Ibiblio has electronic texts of many Southern-themed books, such as this about a World War I aviator from North Carolina.

used ftp -- literally "file transfer protocol" -- servers to move files around. SunSite was one of the first dedicated ftp servers for public use.

"So if the electronic mailing list was the community, SunSite was the book shelf," says Troan, who is director of product marketing at Raleigh-based Red Hat, the world's largest distributor of the Linux operating system. It was "where you could get the latest code and play with it."

Eric S. Raymond, a respected voice in the Linux community and author of "The New Hacker's Dictionary" (\$24.95, MIT Press), took over management of the archives for a time after Troan, one of Red Hat's first employees, got too busy at work.

Raymond suggests that although ibiblio was in the beginning a virtual center for the open-source community, it since has ceded its position as the keeper of the culture to other Web sites that have sprung up in recent years.

"I don't think it's as important as it once was. Sites with richer metadata and more active content, such as SourceForge and Freshmeat and Savannah, have become the center of the action," Raymond says. But Raymond calls ibiblio a valuable archive. "I still submit my stuff there as a hedge against the possibility that the newer sites might go belly-up."

Jones is quick to point out that ibiblio regularly partners with many of the sites Raymond mentions but says that ibiblio's main goal with open source has always been to offer access to the software and an archive of its development.

And ibiblio is hardly a boring backwater of the Web. Access data shows that about 5 million visitors poke into its various corners every day, whether to download a file, listen to one of five radio stations or look at the latest installment of Doctor Fun -- a Far Side-esque one-panel cartoon that pokes irreverent fun at topics that include world politics and Bjork's swan dress.

Doctor Fun says it has the distinction of being the longest-running comic on the Web. David Farley, who draws the cartoon in Chicago where he manages a tech-support group, says he moved Doctor Fun to ibiblio in 1993 and now gets close to 50,000 hits on his site a day.

Farley once had a contract to make Doctor Fun commercial through United Media, but the contract fell through, and he says he is happy sticking with ibiblio.

But the evolution of some popular ibiblio sites goes differently. If they become commercial in any way -- selling T-shirts, posting banner ads, taking a sponsorship from a corporation -- they get booted from the system.

Ibiblio was the original home of the Internet Movie Database (now at www.imdb.com), the Internet Underground Music Archive (now www.iума.com) and something called the Church of the SubGenius (now www.subgenius.com).

"Usually, it started out as their hobby. They started doing some interesting work and got people coming to their site," Jones explains. "Then they sold some ads on there, or a couple of T-shirts. And we tell them, 'We don't do that.'"

Ibiblio's guidelines are pretty straightforward. Web sites with material of interest to the public will be hosted for free as long as there is nothing commercial about them. Thus, the Unofficial Elvis site, built by Andrea Berman while she was procrastinating on her master's thesis in 1994, coexists with the WebMuseum, built by Nicolas Pichon of France who decided that same year that the Internet needed more artistic content.

They both share space with the Documenting the American South database, a sprawling depository of slave narratives and Southern literature assembled by the Academic Affairs library at UNC and launched in 1996. In other words, from wacky to scholarly, ibiblio has hosted, and will continue to host, it all.

When the ibiblio name was unfurled in 2000 (at that time the site was going by the name MetaLab), it came with a grant of \$4 million from the Center for the Public Domain that would help fuel an ambitious growth plan. Started by Red Hat co-founders Bob Young and Marc Ewing in 1999, the CPD called it quits in 2002. Ibiblio got half the money it was promised.

These days, ibiblio gets by on about \$200,000 from UNC -- covering salaries and office products -- and the remainder of the CPD grant, which Jones says will last an additional four or five years. By then, Jones hopes to set up an endowment that would generate the \$250,000 a year in funds he needs -- most of it goes to pay for bandwidth to handle the activity ibiblio generates online -- beyond what the university provides.

Beyond the money, Jones counts on technology grants from companies such as IBM, which in 2000 committed to give \$250,000 worth of equipment to ibiblio. Jones says ibiblio collaborates with IBM on some research that might be applied to future IBM products.

"We share some research stuff with IBM. They're interested in self-healing software, and we don't fail all that much," Jones says.

That's what Jones likes about the IBM relationship: the research. That, and he gets people such as David "Dr. Dave" Bradley, the IBM engineer famous for inventing the PC-reboot Ctrl-Alt-Delete command, to come have lunch with his "ibiblians."

Jones would like to see ibiblio share a lot more of its expertise with the outside world, especially academia, in the future. For example, a paper that uses ibiblio statistics to debunk a theory that older sites are automatically more popular on the Web because they're more frequently linked to will be presented by Miles Efron and Donald Sizemore, two ibiblio staffers, at a conference on digital libraries in May.

Beyond a learning bent, ibiblio will continue to grow as a digital library run by its contributors armed with



PLANTS: There are links to plant-related sites, including information about herbs and more than 4,000 photographs.



Director Paul Jones, right, leads a weekly meeting of the eight-person ibiblio staff -- most are students -- in the group's offices in Manning Hall at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

STAFF PHOTO BY HARRY LYNCH



DOCTOR FUN: The longest-running comic on the Web has been on ibiblio since 1993. The strip is popular, but not commercial. Going commercial gets you booted off ibiblio.

KEY EVENTS

1992: Sun Microsystems and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill team up to launch SunSite, the predecessor to ibiblio. Project Gutenberg, publisher of electronic books, is launched.

1993: SunSite chosen as a depository for speeches, press briefings and other material from the Clinton administration

1994: Doctor Fun cartoon; Free Burma human-rights site, and the Original Unofficial Elvis Presley Web Site come to SunSite. WXYC Radio launches a live Internet simulcast of its programming, one of the first in the world.

1995: North Carolina Multimedia Exhibition of Musicians and Entertainers launches on SunSite.

1996: Documenting the American South starts

information out there in new ways for everyone to see.

UNC's Marshall doesn't apologize for ibiblio's eclectic nature, nor does she think it will ever really change.

"It's experimental. It will never be a beautifully organized package," Marshall said. "Creative things are pretty messy, and they are always going to be changing."

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as a small effort to make some slave narratives available to the public.

1998: SunSite becomes MetaLab -- in part because Sun quits its commitment to fund SunSite going forward and in part to position the site to better take advantage of support and donations from other technology companies.

2000: MetaLab becomes ibiblio.org -- the name change comes with a grant from a nonprofit put together by the founders of Red Hat.

2001: The White House 2001 project concludes and is posted as a site to ease the transition between the Clinton and Bush administrations.

2002: Ibiblio turns 10 .

2003: The journey continues. See www.ibiblio.org for the latest.