Four years of *Oddens' Bookmarks:*
The Fascinating World of Maps and Mapping

by ROELOF P. ODDENS

INTRODUCTION

Not everyone will be interested in maps showing the distribution of various species of earthworms in North Dakota[1], especially as the design of these maps is not be very impressive either. Nevertheless, there is a link to such maps in *Oddens' Bookmarks*[2]. This is a Website that tries to provide as complete a coverage as possible of all Websites containing cartography. This paper is not attempting to show examples of Websites the bookmarks are linked to. Rather, it gives a short introduction to *Oddens' Bookmarks*, referring to the history and development of the site, its contents, the problems I am faced with, and my views of its near future.

HISTORY

In February 1996 the Website was opened as one single list of links with a limited number of sections. At the end of September 1996 I presented the site at the LIBER conference in Berlin. The number of links by then had increased to 600. This made the list too long, and I therefore solicited the help of Peter van der Krogt, a computer literate map historian at our Faculty of Geographical Sciences in Utrecht University. He designed a new lay-out for me. By the end of November 1996 this new lay-out was incorporated on the Website: it showed 40 sub-sections of the 13 sections, all clickable separately. These sections could be kept up to date as HTML files. Adding to them, changing or deleting them, proved to be rather time-consuming.

Nevertheless, the number of links in the files increased continuously. A year ago there were about 6,500. The new lay-out as well as the increased number of links positively influenced the number of hits on the *Oddens' Bookmarks* site; about a year ago there was an average of 20,000 visitors to the site monthly.

The actual situation, however, was far from ideal, as some parts of the site became too unwieldy, (for example, the electronic atlas section, with over 1,000 links). The server that provided access to the site was slow, and it crashed regularly, necessitating many nightly visits to the server in order to reset it. Luckily, a solution could be found for these problems. The Cartographic Laboratory of our Faculty employed a new cartographer, with a lot of expertise in the design of Websites (Ton Markus) who completely redesigned *Oddens' Bookmarks*. Using the FileMaker Pro package, he designed a database that made it possible to add links or to change them easily. Since last September this database can be consulted over the Web. Unfortunately this new set-up neccessitated a change of URL, but we allowed for that by still linking through from the former address. Today, 10 months since the new address was established, about 20 % of the visitors arrives at the new address after having been linked through via the former one. The Faculty put up the money for a new, faster and more reliable server, where the bookmarks were installed at the end of January 2000.

SOME FACTS

After being in the air for some 4 years, the site has received 850,000 visitors. Most of these visitors arrive either by being linked through from other sites that provide links to my Website, through portals, or via search commands given to search engines. Since the introduction of the new lay-out ten months ago, the number of visitors is over 30,000 a month, which makes it Utrecht University's most visited site. People from over 150 countries have visited *Oddens' Bookmarks*, although most of the visitors come from either Europe or North America. It is mostly from the United States and from The Netherlands, with the third largest number of visitors from Norway. This is because the bookmarks are listed in the map section of a much-frequented Norwegian portal, the *ABC Startsiden*.

The number of links contained has increased dramatically of late, and now lies above 10,500. Most of these links refer to maps and atlases (about 60 %). A stimulus for keeping the Website up to date is the regular reference to *Oddens' Bookmarks* in the framework of all types of educational projects that use the World Wide Web.

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As I said before, the contents of the site can be accessed through a database. The visitor can first select either the ‚Search' or the ‚Browse' function. Using the ‚Search' function allows visitors to type in one or several words and to select a country and/or one of the 12 main sections or headings. The ‚Search' function also allows visitors to directly access an island, country, province or city by typing in its name. When using the ‚Browse' function, one of the main headings or sections has to be selected before selecting a subsection and/or a country.

Of course the maps and atlases section is the most important one, and this section gets most attention when updating. When using the ‚Browse' function one may select one out of seven sub-sections here. The quality of the sites incorporated is rather varied - as it would be as well amongst the analog maps in a conventional map library. And, the same as in a paper map collection, not all material is incorporated. There are some fairly well-defined minimum requirements regarding design and contents for a site to answer to before I would incorporate it in the Bookmarks.

Other sections I regard as important are those on *Map Collections*, *Government Cartography* and the one with *Gazetteers*. These are relatively small. The *Map Collections* site provides information on about 250 different map collections, and I am always happy to discover a new one. The *Government Cartography* section now contains about 550 links. This heading refers to a wide collection of material. Sites that refer to a country's national geological or meterological organisations would also qualify, as would national archives. The *Gazetteers* section particularly allows map curators many opportunities to help their customers. I regularly use this section myself to help lawyers that want to prove that the town a refugee claims to hail from does really exist.

One of the largest sections is the one on *Sellers of Cartographic Material*. This section contains over 900 firms. It will not come as a surprise that especially for this section I receive spontaneous applications for URLs to be incorporated.

PROBLEMS

Problems crop up regularly, both for myself and for the visitors to my site. People that are not familiar with the field of cartography - and these form a

vast majority - can have trouble accessing the information required on my site. In my paper map collection it often occurs that people come in and state they require a map. This is also a potential entry to the virtual maps contained in the bookmarks. But the result could be that they obtain over 5,000 hits! So it would be necessary to use a degree of creativity - as indeed is necessary anywhere on the Web - and restrict the search.

Another problem would be the existence of many sites that require the use of a plug-in in order to be able to access their maps. Examples are Acrobat Reader, Cosmo Player, Quick Time Player, Shockwave and MrSid. These programmes can be downloaded for free from the Web, but I wonder whether all prospective users would do so, and are put-off by these potential invaders of their computers.

For myself updating the site is a major problem. Every week I spend more than 20 hours doing so. Although I perform this duty mostly in the evening and in the weekends, now and again it is rather difficult to combine it with my real job, that is the care of a well-frequented medium-sized (150,000 items) map collection.

The amount of information on the Web increases incrementally. There are many sites out there that deserve to be incorporated. Another issue is how to proceed with incorporating parts of sites. A famous, most useful collection is the University of Texas at Austin Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection linking to a large number of overview maps and thematic maps.[3] In *Oddens' Bookmarks* there are more than 800 links to sections of the Perry-Castañeda site. When the Webmaster of such a site decides to change the addresses of these links, for whatever reason, problems emerge for me, as I have to change all the old addresses to new ones. Only a couple of weeks ago I had to delete over 200 links to maps of towns and countries, because the Excite Travel site was restructured. The continuous disappearance or modification of addresses is the biggest problem of managing a reference site on the Web.

THE FUTURE

There are many ways to look for cartographic information on the Web. When using search engines one is often confronted with more hits than one can handle. Moreover, even for search engines it would be impossible to index the whole World Wide Web. In order to search more profitably most search engines nowadays use portals. Such portals have a hierarchical structure for

opening up the information on the Web. They would use the Open Directory Project structure[4] in which volunteer editors keep part of a discipline up to date. Another portal that uses volunteer experts, mostly from academic establishments, is the World Wide Web Virtual Library[5]. Libraries, companies, and universities may do likewise and support collections of cartographic links. Many of those can be retrieved in the section Carto- and Geoservers in *Oddens' Bookmarks*. Nevertheless, despite all these efforts, finding the required information on the Web still depends far too much on random factors, volunteer efforts and personal initiatives. More continuity and a better structured access to the Web will only be possible when supranational organisations like the United Nations or the European Union provide the necessary financial means.

FINAL REMARKS

I am quite content with all the positive feedback regarding my site. This is evident from the large number of sites that refer to *Oddens' Bookmarks*, the large number of visitors and the frequent coverage in newspapers and journals. There are even some unexpected benefits. When my sons were in primary school they were rather disappointed their father was a map librarian instead of having a highly respected job such as medical doctor or train driver. Nowadays, when they are avid Webservers themselves, they are quite content to frequently encounter references to their dad, and never to their friends' fathers. So this is another reason to continue this work of updating and extending my bookmarks!

REFERENCES

1   <http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/distr/invert/wormsnd/wormsnd.htm>

2   <http://oddens.geog.uu.nl>

3   <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/Libs/PCL/Map_collection/Map_collection.html>

4   <http://dmoz.org/>

5   <http://vlib.org/>