

Website Status Report

Oklahoma City Business Meeting, August 2003

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Introduction

Over the past six years the Fellowship Internet presence has evolved from a simple website to a much wider range of services upon which the organization is becoming increasingly dependent. The website provides a primary means of contact with the public for purposes of promoting The Urantia Book and the activities of the reader community. It also provides us with a means of informing interested individuals about our organization.

In addition to these public services our organization is becoming increasingly dependent on the website and Internet services for its internal communications and business operations. As this process continues, it might be helpful to have a little perspective on present operations and developmental issues. The purpose of this report is to try and provide some of this needed perspective. This report will focus primarily on administrative issues, a little bit on technical issues, and will not cover the significant restructuring of content that is in a preliminary stage.

There are a number of ways of organizing -- into an architectural framework -- the data made available on a website. This framework is essentially an outline structure that guides site navigation and the philosophy behind the associations that are made between documents and services. The Fellowship website is constructed according to a model which is somewhat like an archive, or an encyclopedia.

Some Considerations on Going Virtual

Going virtual changes some of the areas of concern associated with maintaining the well being of the organization. Some of these are:

Protection of services and data from hackers: At present we experience 2 or 3 attacks on our security each week. In six years of operation there have been 2 attacks serious enough to take us offline for a short period of time. This may become a bigger issue in the future if The Urantia Book becomes more widely known and is associated with some controversy.

Sufficient redundancy to assure zero downtime: A backup network should be in place somewhere physically separate from the primary network. This issue is addressed in a little more detail later in this report.

Changes in staffing: Going virtual does not mean that we can operate with no employees. Going virtual eventually will require employees, volunteers, or consultants with more highly specialized skill sets than

would be the case with a non-virtual organization. Executive Committee members, who bear responsibility for the well-being of the organization, will need to be sufficiently informed about Internet processes in order wisely to direct the work of these people as well as effectively to guide continuing development.

Separation of public and private services: In-house and public data services should be running on physically distinct machines and perhaps eventually, physically distinct networks. Security and backup procedures would thus be much easier to manage and the organization would be in a much more secure position.

No data corruption: This is primarily a matter of making sure that people inputting and editing our data are well trained and that good backups exist. Much of the data entry and management process can be automated.

Protection of the privacy of system users: A good privacy policy must be drafted and put in place. Its provisions need to be clearly available on our website. Protecting the privacy of our users includes how we use their data and how we protect it from being accessed by unauthorized individuals. We will soon be able to let readers log on with a password and edit their personal address information. The Executive Committee will need to provide guidance on the implementation of this and other procedures that can reduce administrative overhead for our organization.

Enough in-house people who know the system to minimize using high-priced consultants: This is a similar situation to that which we have had with Dan Massey being able to provide information that helped to minimize our legal expenses. Fees for good technical consultants are on a par with fees charged by attorneys. Microsoft charges \$250.00 for addressing one technical problem. DellHost charges from \$50.00 to \$175.00 per hour for technical assistance.

Sufficient documentation to minimize consultant fees and to facilitate new people coming onboard to help: At present very little exists in the way of documentation except for a 3-ring binder of notes that I maintain. Areas in need of more accessible documentation are:

1. Details of website architectural structure
2. Details of IP address assignment and DNS services (these are technical details necessary for system maintenance)
3. Records of outside support services for which we have contracted
4. Records of license authorization codes for software we use
5. Records of payment for and expiration of domain names

6. Records of usernames and passwords for people who have access to the network for the contribution of website content
7. Details of system security scheme
8. Details of database schema and logic
9. Details of database backup and archiving procedures
10. Details of website backup and restore procedures
11. Details for retrieving archived versions of the website, archived email, etc.
12. Details for the management of email list servers
13. Location of records of correspondence with individuals and organizations with whom we maintain business relationships that support our online services
14. Records documenting the location of data used to maintain our services. For example, the location of the email address list for the urantianet newsletter service.
15. Copies of contracts, legally binding agreements, and approved workflow procedures need to be archived and made accessible to organization administrators.

(Development of a web-accessible documentation database is a task that needs to be addressed in the immediate future.)

A scalable and expandable architecture: The organization must have a long-term idea of goals and objectives for the system. This is essential for the guidance of day-to-day maintenance. It is easy under pressure to cobble together solutions to problems. If care is not taken, the code used to manage the system can evolve into a chaotic collection of such last-minute cobbles which is impossible to understand. When solutions to present problems are developed with an understanding of long-term objectives, desirable efficiencies may be realized.

A robust backup and restore system: A formal procedure for the backing up of organizational data needs to be drafted, approved by the Executive Committee and put into operation. The Executive Committee needs to review this periodically and make sure that backups are being made and archived per the approved procedure. Tests to assure that the data can be successfully restored need to be made periodically.

(It should be noted that the ultimate organizational backup would be the ability to easily revert to

a non-virtual operation. Contingency plans should be in place for this possibility and our virtual presence should be designed with this possibility in mind.)

Using common out-of-the-box software and keeping current with upgrades to all software and operating systems: Doing this will make it much easier to bring new people up to speed if necessary or to seek assistance from outside consultants. In-house coded software and clever patches may appear useful in the short-term but they are inevitably disastrous in the long-term and should be completely avoided.

Effective measurement, analysis, and reporting tools: Ultimately neither the Executive Committee nor the individuals directly managing Internet services can make good choices without good measurement, analysis, and reporting software. We need to know which areas of the website are most popular, where are our users coming from, which search engines are most effective in directing people to our website, what visitors are seeking, which website features are seldom used, which paths users most frequently take through the website, the pages on which they enter, the pages from which they leave, etc. Purchasing, installing, and using this software should become a priority as soon as possible. (It is an item which I've had to cut from my budget request for the past two years. I am hopeful that, by reducing some other expenses, we will be able to squeeze it out of this year's budget.)

All of the above could be classified under "*Maintaining the ability to assure continuity of all business operations.*"

Fellowship Internet Services at Present

Effective Internet services must reflect and support the core objectives of the organization they represent. For many people, our Internet services will provide their only contact with our organization. More effective Internet services can only follow upon a more sharply focused customer service model. We use the term "reader services" but we could substitute "customer service" and benefit greatly from studying customer service models in mainstream business literature.

At present the website is developed assuming the following three core objectives:

1. Stimulate interest in The Urantia Book
2. Provide information services to readers
3. Facilitate the development of social infrastructure within the readership

Our Internet services should support these core objectives or those objectives that might be established by further Executive Committee or General Council action. In any case, members of the Executive Committee need to be sufficiently informed to play a constructive administrative role in content management, developmental direction, and in the overall public image projected by our Internet services.

The Fellowship currently provides a variety of Internet services to the readership. An outline of these includes the following:

Websites

Urantiabook.org – Primary English website. (Also reachable via ubfellowship.org)

Ellibro.org – Primary Spanish website

The Fellowship has made its server and network resources available to other reader groups. At present these secondary websites are:

Uversapress.com

Retreatnetwork.com

Stillnessfoundation.org

Urantiabook.fm (Fellowship audio archive server)

Interfaithspirit.com (Website of the Interfaith Committee)

UrantiaGGC.org (Website of the Golden Gate Circle Society)

UrantiaNYC.org (Website of the New York Society)

Two new Spanish websites are presently being developed – GrupoOrvonton.org and Guetza.org. These will supplement Ellibro.org. GrupoOrvonton.org will be a password-protected site for administrative use by Spanish speaking readers. Guetza.org will provide on-line chat and other communication services for Spanish readers.

An important part of being able to provide a more comprehensive range of web services to the public involves distributing the responsibility for content creation across a variety of individuals and groups. At present the following individuals have security clearance to access specific areas of our network where they develop and maintain their own web spaces.

Richard Omura, Interfaith Committee

Michael Bain, Retreat Network

Tim Christiansen, Golden Gate Circle Society

Ken Glasziou, Innerface International Newsletter

Les Jamieson, Fundamentalism Studies

Les Jamieson, Uversa Press

Les Jamieson, New York Society

Sandy Porter, Stillness Foundation

Larry Watkins, technical support

Current Spanish content contributors:

Agustin Arellano, Mexico

Yolanda Silva, Chile

Email Services

The Fellowship currently provides email list services for several internal groups. At present we manage the following lists:

EC

Council

Socadmin

International Fellowship Committee

Family Life Committee

Prayer requests

Inquiry responses

PR and Book Marketing (not yet fully functional)

Urantianet services

Occasion-specific lists such as temporary lists for conference coordinators

I have avoided providing public email lists simply because they take a great deal of effort to monitor. I refer inquiries about such services to Pat McNelly who manages the UBRON discussion forums. In my opinion UBRON is one of the best Urantian services on the Internet and Pat is deserving of our recognition for the quiet service he provides in keeping this system online.

Developmental Directions

Studies of the evolution of corporate websites reveal distinct phases in the evolution of institutional web services. I've compiled the material which follows from three books on the topic. "Maintaining and Evolving Successful Commercial Web Sites" by Ashley Friedlein, "Building Enterprise Information Architectures" by Melissa A. Cook, and "Designing Large-Scale Web Sites" by Darrell Sand of Netscape Communications Corporation.

Please bear in mind that development may reach a plateau of equilibrium anywhere along the described developmental spectrum, depending upon the objectives of the organization and the volume of user traffic through the website.

Phase I: The Early Webmaster Phase

In this initial phase the job of managing site content is usually up to a Webmaster of some kind: someone charged with managing and updating the Web site whether part time, full time, in house or outsourced. Smaller, less complicated sites or sites that do not change that often can quite happily be managed by a webmaster.

In this phase site changes typically are made directly to the live site by the Webmaster. He or she will have a local copy of the files of the Web site to preview changes through a browser before setting them live and also to act as a rudimentary form of backup. Testing of changes is often done once the changes have been set live with any errors fixed directly as they are found. The site consists of several hundred files.

(The network upon which Urantiabook.org is currently running contains a development server – a machine on which website materials are developed and tested, and a public server – the machine which is accessed by website visitors and to which other content creators publish their materials. There are thus two complete and current copies of the website on separate machines at all times.)

Phase II: The Mature Webmaster Phase

By now the site has grown to consist of 1,000 or more files. (Urantiabook.org presently contains more than 19,000 files consisting of 605 Gigabytes of data.) Interactivity and functionality on the site is

increasing beyond the simple presentation of static web pages. Demands on the Webmaster are now coming from multiple sources within the organization. The site has become of increased interest and importance to the business, so quality control and uptime are more of an issue than in the first phase.

In this phase the organization begins to see the need for a staging server. This is a machine which is intermediate between the development server and the public server. The staging server is a machine accessible via password. When documents are completed on the development server and ready for the public server, they are first published to the intermediate staging server where they may be tested and reviewed by a larger group prior to going public.

By this time the Web development team consists of several people but all changes are still channeled through the Webmaster, creating something of a bottleneck. There are enough changes and additions being requested and enough people working on the development team that it is becoming increasingly difficult for each person to understand which changes belong to whom and which are ready, or not, to go live. Quality failures begin to appear in the form of incomplete link pathways, missing graphics, and other errors. Developing some method of version control becomes a necessity.

In this stage more of the work begins to be automated. Software used to develop the site becomes more comprehensive. Uploads to the public server can become automated. Templates can be created and provided to content creators to make their jobs less technical.

Phase III: The Early Database Phase

This phase sees the beginning of a transition from a website consisting of many static files into a site where the content is increasingly stored in a database and individual pages are increasingly created dynamically. Moving into the database phase helps to solve some of the Webmaster bottleneck problem. Site updates can be more easily automated, more advanced functionality may be introduced and the content can become increasingly dynamic. Personalization becomes more feasible along with more advanced search features. Content from multiple documents can be assembled by software to meet the requests of Web site users. This also provides a foundation for the more dynamic sharing of content across web sites.

The technical skills necessary for developing and managing the website are becoming far greater than was the case in the early Webmaster phase. Databases need administering. Optimal schemas and architectures need to be designed. Code often needs to be written to read and write content to the database from Web interactions and forms as required. Administrative tasks increase as increasing complexity increases the number of potential failure points.

At this stage the development team usually consists of more than five people managing the organization's data and content assets within the database. Increasingly, content is being provided from multiple sources within the organization directly to the staging server. As the number of content contributors increases, so does the need for administrative checking and approval prior to material going

live on the Internet. Hardware, network, and software requirements increase proportionally to increasing traffic and demands on the public site. Increasingly, software content management tools are deployed.

Phase IV: The Mature Database Phase

By this time the entire operation has been placed under the control of a commercial software Content Management System. The site has become a commercial enterprise with transactional capabilities and other systems integrated with it. Content is published not just to a Web site but also through other interactive channels such as data capable mobile phones, wireless handhelds, etc. Content may also be formatted and stored to feed directly into non-Web channels such as print media, CD and/or DVD production. By this time the core team may consist of ten or more full-time people.

Producing and managing multilingual and international versions of the content often become a key focus at this stage. The Content Management System provides a structure for distributed management, content creation, and publication. The development environment itself is becoming increasingly distributed. There may be a core team managing the operation, but this may be supplemented by freelance specialists from time to time who may be working from home -- and satellite development teams, who may be distributed around the world to cater to local versions of the site. It becomes increasingly important to have tools and processes to manage communications and work in this distributed, and yet still collaborative, development environment. Different time zones add to the challenges. Virtual project management tools and extranets with work management features such as task queuing, approvals management, discussion threads, and file sharing can help.

The technical infrastructure has evolved accordingly. Demands for system availability will have risen sharply as the site has become increasingly important as a business channel, meaning that sufficient redundancy needs to be built into the system to assure zero downtime. If localized versions of the site are being created and maintained in foreign countries by development teams based there, then further development environments need to be set up, and they may even require their own dedicated servers and networks to serve their version of the site to acceptable performance levels in their particular region of the world. Keeping all systems in synch and maintaining centralized management control with localized content ownership, presents additional administrative challenges.

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The evolution of Urantiabook.org over the past six years has followed much of the developmental sequence outlined in the literature used above. I would describe our current state of development as bridging the mature Webmaster phase and the early database phase. I do not foresee the Fellowship needing the sophistication of the mature database phase in the immediate future (although such a need would be a pleasant and welcome surprise.)

Given this schematic of Website development, I would like to highlight the following areas which have

become current development issues.

Segmentation

In addition to a viable content model, a website which is beginning to implement a foundational database should give consideration to a segmentation model. With a database it becomes possible to provide a modicum of personalization for website visitors – the system knows something about the person visiting the website and displays information targeted to that particular user.

While complete personalization is beyond anything we need at present, we can create segments into which we can put all website visitors. Pages such as the home page or the “What’s New?” page can have areas dedicated to the display of specialized information. For example, if a member of the General Council logged onto the website, he or she might see information about an upcoming Council meeting. Any member of the Fellowship might see a link to an internal newsletter that was not available to the general public. Unidentified visitors or surfers would see more general information designed to inform them about the book and about the Fellowship.

This concept is in line with our recent discussion about providing historical archives to readers while making it more difficult for the general public to find these documents. It would be helpful to have Executive Committee input regarding an effective set of categories for a productive segmentation model.

Migrating content development and maintenance to Fellowship committees

Some time ago we agreed that each committee should have a web liason person as a member – someone who was web literate and could help the committee utilize web resources to further its purposes. Each committee, with the possible exception of Judicial and Special Projects, stands to gain considerably enhanced effectiveness by utilizing currently available Fellowship Internet resources -- with virtually no increase in budgetary demands.

If each committee has such a member, these individuals can form a pool of backup persons who have some familiarity with the website’s technical structure and with Fellowship web publishing procedures.

There is a real need for a committee to take on the responsibility of maintaining the history archive – selecting documents from present activities that should be archived for future reference. There are still many documents of historic interest needing to be scanned and added to the existing archive. It would be helpful if Committee chairs would play a more proactive role in stimulating this much needed structural change.

Designing more efficient work-flow procedures

“Going virtual” includes modifying workflow in the organization. In some cases this will be

relatively substantial. We will saddle ourselves with unnecessary inefficiencies if we simply digitize current workflow procedures that have evolved in the environment of an office management system. The Executive Committee should take an active role in seeing to it that these new workflow processes are clearly defined and implemented. This will require an understanding of present workflow objectives combined with insight into how they may be effectively realized in the new environment. Documentation of these workflow procedures is just as important as documentation for the technical aspects of our operation. We must make sure that information essential to the operation of the organization does not reside only in the mind of a single individual.

Study group database updates: The site and the data in the database need to be kept up-to-date. Conference announcements and their link trails need to be removed after the event has passed. Reader address information and study group information need to be constantly updated. Once study group information has been updated in the database, new pages need to be automatically generated and uploaded for display on the website.

Reader database management: Guidelines and workflow procedures need to be established to control the updating of the reader database and the provision of mailing labels to valid requestors. Rules for database management and procedures for a robust backup and restore system need to be developed and implemented.

Archiving of approved meeting minutes: It would be helpful to the organization to have fully indexed archives of General Council minutes and Executive Committee minutes. At present we have a good collection of Council minutes available but I have been unable to obtain a set of back Executive Committee minutes. The workflow procedure which needs to be implemented here (in addition to someone finding and providing back minutes) is for a copy of the *approved* minutes to be sent to the website for publication. The minutes that get distributed prior to meetings are not the final copies. Sometimes there are specific items in the pre-approval minutes that we do not want in the permanent record, such as votes for a particular person running for the Council.

Publications: There should be an established workflow of materials from the publications committee to print media as well as to the website. The website needs copies for its archive as well as copies to send to the email list of persons wanting to receive these publications via email rather than through the postal service.

Conference presentations: Conference presenters should be strongly encouraged to provide printed (or computer file) versions of their presentations for further use in Fellowship print and electronic media publications. This would greatly expand the audience for such presentations and provide the Fellowship with materials to publish for readers who are unable to attend conferences.

Online Conference registrations: We can now provide online registration. This requires new workflow processes to assure that credit card charges are managed properly. Registrants can receive automated confirmation that their registrations have been received. How this is done needs to be

thought through and relevant workflow processes implemented.

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I have mentioned a number of items which I feel warrant administrative consideration. "Going virtual" represents a fairly radical restructuring of our organization and informed participation by Executive Committee members and General Councilors is essential to the effective realization of this change. Note that I said "informed" participation -- it is absolutely essential that we cultivate the participation of individuals in the process who are technically literate in such areas as web design, information architecture, online community building, online financial transaction management, and relational database management. In addition we must keep abreast of emerging communications technologies and be prepared to exploit the opportunities they might provide for facilitating our mission.

Lastly, we must appreciate the fact that we are utilizing available resources to create an infrastructure for the spread of the revelation that may be used by upcoming generations of readers, readers in different parts of the world, readers using languages other than English, and reader organizations that have yet to develop. Surely this is worthy of some careful consideration and decisive action.

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