Searching library Web site at the time of Web 2.0: Who does what? How FAQs can play a central role in retrieving basic information.

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Abstract

Online communication certainly carries out a strategic role in the process of innovation in different fields. Nowadays, besides the traditional Internet tools, Web 2.0 technology development underlines the strong need to maintain an open channel of dialogue either with or among users. As a matter of fact, the experience in searching library Web sites pointed out that the availability of too much help such as tips, sheets etc. instead of facilitating information access, often, can create confusion for users and make navigation through a Web site they are interested in a waste of time. On the other hand, a well structured FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) could be a precious customer support reducing the amount of noise and waste by increasing the efficiency of the answers. Starting from a survey, previously conducted on about 300 scientific library Web sites, involving FAQ presence, location, labelling and so on, this paper focuses on the effort to greater analyze possible FAQs normalization trying to build a methodology: assuming FAQs as a sort of knowledge base related to a particular specific Web site content the attempt to create a standardized model is presented. A series of measures to make FAQs more action oriented and attractive to user participation are suggested. Appropriate quantitative/qualitative FAQs can determine the success, in term of ease of use and quickness, consumers have in getting the information they need, and the manner in which they could be helped to manage it: in this reference frame a FAQs section can act as a successful tool to improve overall digital information usability as well as customer satisfaction.

Introduction

The widespread adoption of Web search engines and other Internet tools and services in the information-retrieval fields has pointed out, as a consequence, that there is more information than ever and more informed users with even greater information needs. In addition, the coming era of the Web 2.0 technology development implies a strong need to maintain an open channel of dialogue either with or among users [1]. Libraries are looking for ways to adapt to a changing world, keep their services relevant for today's information seekers and to address user needs adequately [2]. In particular, experience in searching library Web sites revealed that the availability of too much help such as tips and sheets instead of facilitating information access, can often create confusion for users and make navigation through a Web site they are interested in a waste of time. Whatever a user wants to learn, whatever he has questions about, whatever interests him, are all at his fingertips if he knows how to use what is available. Although a large number of instruments, such as general help, guides, and tutorials available on the library Web sites should support consumers to help themselves use information resources, in many cases, they do not act as a gateway to reduce noise, confusion and a waste of time but rather they add to the difficulties. How to solve the problem? Considering the FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) lists an answer to the most relevant and ever recurring information needs faced by users while searching Web sites, can be seen as a way to develop information skills of Web site library users giving them the knowledge of a fixed repertory of information resources and search strategies to apply to a life-long and continuously elaborating mode of thought regarding information seeking and use. In the new environment, it is important for librarians to offer users tools they can use to answer quickly and easily their immediate information needs.

Purpose
Over the last years Web search engine availability and the introduction of technologies that are Web 2.0 oriented have reduced users' dependence on library support to fulfil their information needs. At the same time, in adherence to these new concepts, users are becoming the focal point, and the services are being built around them [3]. In light of the expectations of today's information seekers, the experience in browsing Web sites pointed out a new opportunity in the role FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) sections could play in helping users find their way through digital information resources [4]. The use of a well organized FAQ section becomes even more relevant in many aspects of a Web site creation and organisation, as it improves information retrieval and users' understanding of the information and services offered, reducing, at the same time, demands on the supporting staff. Analysing the FAQ sections on library Web sites it was noticed that they could serve as a starting point in order to widen the information given, make the research process engaging, integrate it into users' normal workflow and improve digital information usability.
Starting from a survey, previously conducted on about 300 scientific library Web sites, involving FAQ presence, location, labelling and so on, this paper focuses on the effort to greater analyze possible FAQs normalization trying to design a methodology: assuming FAQs as a sort of knowledge base related to a particular specific Web site content the attempt to create a standardized model is presented. A series of measures to make FAQs more action oriented and attractive to user participation are suggested.

Approach
Later in 2006, a survey on about 300 scientific library Web sites was conducted in order to assess the presence and location of FAQ sections, the way the information was categorized, labelled, presented and the way the navigation/access was facilitated [5]. First of all, data gathering outlined that even if no rules exist on issuing a list of FAQs it would be good practice to establish the goals that need to be achieved when constructing an extensive list of FAQs: visibility, simplicity, pertinence, ease of search, feed back, updating are essential concepts strictly related to the FAQ structure. Furthermore, based on the features carried out during the survey fundamental requirements for FAQ sections have been suggested through a series of standard practices that involve FAQ location on the homepage, use of FAQ label even if the language is different from English (the acronym FAQ is internationally recognised), primary content determination and category definition, FAQ average number from 20 to 30 units maximum organized in a browsable list, use of the same word to indicate a given semantic content and short sentences with the same formal structure when possible. For present purposes, scientific library Web sites analyzed in 2006 were checked again between the end of 2009 and early 2010. Afterwards, data collected in 2006 were compared to the results carried out in 2009-2010 trying to investigate the possible changes undergone on Web sites and to evaluate the trend in adding, removing or maintaining FAQ lists. From the results some recurring aspects emerged which have led to the need to design a standardized pattern for creating a new approach.

Findings and Comments
If in the 2006 survey the Web sites providing FAQ lists were equal to 45% of the total the following check accomplished during 2009-2010 showed that their number rose to 65.5% with an increase of 20.5%. This is not surprising if it is considered that FAQs are now generally known to users and they expect to find them when accessing a Web site. Librarians are probably becoming more and more aware of the usefulness and the potentiality/capability this tool offers; they understand how FAQs can represent one of the best and more intuitive contact points between archived and searched information. Whereas users assign great value to ease of use, ease of access and speed that characterise Internet tools and services, FAQ lists seem to have a particular appeal as a faster way to make information easy to retrieve. Talking about the new Web sites providing a FAQ list it is interesting to note that 75% of them do not exceed the total number of 30 FAQs available which are

distributed in the same six main categories (general, reference, circulation, document delivery, facilities, library computing) outlined in the previously study conducted. Although the findings of the study are not entirely unexpected, it can not be underestimated that the number of FAQs offered and their distribution support the hypothesis of a common core content and the usefulness to establish which basic content is shared by all library Web sites.

No less important are the other data referring to those Web sites that in the previous survey had already built a FAQ section: in the new check, in some cases they have shown a change in adding/removing FAQs, in others they have remained unchanged. The disaggregate data present the following results: 49% of Web sites that have added FAQs do not exceed the total umber of 30 FAQs available; the same applies to 54% of those removing FAQs, 56% of those adding/removing FAQs, 75% of those rearranging them completely and 74% of those with FAQ lists unchanged all have a number of FAQs equal to or less than 30. The overall data related to the Web sites including no more than 30 FAQs available is equivalent to 62%. This high percentage reinforces again a number of key messages strictly related to tasks performed by FAQs and their constantly reiterated content: the function of providing primary information not less than the evidence of a standardized content is widely confirmed. Data collected indicates, at the same time, that the challenge to determine basic content with the purpose of building a FAQ set of maximum 30 questions/answers is a commitment which librarians are becoming aware of. Another useful issue to evaluate and highlight FAQ section current trends concerns global Web site percentage referring to added FAQs (32%), removed FAQs (15%), added/removed FAQs (10%), reorganized/modified FAQs (13%), unchanged FAQs (30%). The percentages indicated above, on the whole, can be read as a positive factor because only 13% of Web sites overhauled their FAQ sections compared to those that left them unchanged showing a percentage value of more than double. Furthermore, the percentages pertaining to added and removed FAQs reflect a similar situation: 32% versus 15%. That means that if FAQs are customer-tailored, therefore appropriate and pertinent, they do not need to be changed: unless a library modifies or integrates existing services they can be used over time in the research process avoiding revisions or rearrangements. In most cases, it is sufficient to adjust the target taking into account user feedback: this seems to be the case of added and removed FAQs. Finally, the low percentage of added/removed FAQs describes a context in which FAQs follow a bidirectional path: this category deals with very little change, about no more than two or three FAQs played out have been removed and the same number have been added, falling within a sort of maintenance work. Anyway, this group could also be assigned either to added FAQ list or to removed FAQ list unless the final result changes. Last but not least, the survey accomplished in early 2010 revised FAQ formal structures and language features. The goal to create a universal standard model which will be easily recognized by an audience as wide as possible implies a great effort in choosing appropriated construction forms: the format "How do I" being the most recurrent pattern, over 80% of Web sites use it, could represent a more understandable and user-friendly approach giving consumers immediate gratification. Closely related to the structure are linguistic terms, in particular the meaning assigned to them [6]. People may use different words that have the same meaning or they may use the same word to refer to different meanings: to reduce ambiguities and misunderstandings what is needed is a methodology to teach each other what they mean. A communication channel like user feedback, helping to provide a more precise definition of a meaning, could act as a medium for learning and translating similar semantic concepts to determine a shared knowledge between librarians and their different customers. Further elaborations on structure, language and semantic concept will concern the next step of this study.

Conclusions

In order to understand how to discover information available in a Web site it is necessary to learn how it is organized. At the same time, FAQs, being a process of finding information on the Internet they have to meet the same requirements used, as a general rule, in evaluating information: they must be credible, accurate, current enough for the purpose, relevant (e.g. what is the research

question? What information would help to answer it?). Furthermore, through the FAQ discovery and delivery system, libraries can present their Web site in a way which enables users to access an authoritative information landscape from a single point. In light of these perspectives, data gathering in the first and second survey encourages librarians to think that a path has been set out in the direction to create a standardized model of FAQ covering a range of quality criteria. If it is considered that most of the Web sites analyzed use the same six categories in distributing content information no less than the common criteria in the FAQ average number, two significant requirements to meet standardization are applied. Another positive mark is represented by the wide use of a formal structure like "How do I" easy to understand and not misleading. Even if there is a lot of work yet to do to improve standard practices in terms, for example, of language meanings and fragmented distribution of information, still influenced by librarians' old habits, some basic rules seem to be generally acquired. FAQ lists as a cross tool between other seeking systems could become a user interface to match their needs, making the research process as friendly and familiar as possible and, in a way making what they learn an asset to them now and in the future.

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