Foreign correspondent web site and discussion group

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I created the Foreign Correspondent web site (www.uq.edu.au/jrn/fc/) in December 1998, at the request of Anna Day from the Department of Journalism at the University of Queensland. Anna had been corresponding with an international collection of foreign correspondents and academics, coordinating their discussions via an email list. The list was not automated, however, and the group had no Web presence. It was felt that a Web page which focused on sites and tools relevant to foreign correspondence would be a useful resource for group members and a means of announcing and publicising the group and its activities to a wider audience. I had already created a journalism Web site, the Guide to Internet information sources for Australian journalists (www.uq.edu.au/jrn/ozguide/), so I had some experience in finding and organising sites for journalists and in publishing and maintaining a Web page.

The Foreign Correspondent site provides links to the kinds of materials foreign correspondents need to use for orientation and background when starting work in a new region. Country data – everything from geographic, historical and economic facts to basic tourist information – was the first priority. Data about governments and political parties, embassies, heads of state, elections and human rights issues, was also provided. The number of links provided per category has been purposely kept small – the focus has been on quality, not quantity. When a site is as useful and comprehensive as Governments on the World Wide Web (www.gksoft.com/govt/en/), the Euroinfocentre (www.euroinfocentre.com/) or Direct Search (gwis2.circ.gwu.edu/~gprcie/direct.htm), then it seems pointless to include more links for the sake of bulk.

Links to regional and world organisations such as charities, aid agencies and the United Nations and its subsidiary organisations were included as these sites often contain searchable databases, directories or full-text publications. For the same reason, sites providing links to “experts” were included as these can
provide useful contacts. Other areas considered vital included statistics, treaties, telephone, fax and email directories, online databases, information on currencies, languages (including translation services), links to the news media worldwide, as well as information on foreign correspondents' clubs, press freedom and censorship. There is an area set aside for members' research, but this has not been taken up by any group member yet.

There has been no problem finding resources for the site—it was simply a matter of selecting the most useful materials and organising them under various topics. New materials are being published constantly on the Web that would fit neatly into the page. The problem is more one of focus—the site is not a Virtual Library for Journalism, and it should not seek to be. Other people such as John Makulowich at the WWW VL Journalism (209.8.151.142/vlj.html) are doing that job very well already.

The site has little competition on the Web for its target audience. Signposts to Asia and the Pacific(138.25.138.94/signposts/index.html), a project of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism(138.25.138.94/acij/), provides useful contacts, links and articles for journalists working in that region, but does not cover other regions. A couple of sites that were live at the time the Foreign Correspondent site was launched have since closed down. Other sites that aim to cover the area are often the work of one dedicated individual, and are thus vulnerable to "linkrot" which reduces their usefulness.

The site is browseable only at present. A search facility may be introduced if the site grows bigger. Currently it is small enough to browse easily.

A Web-based discussion list (linked to the Web page) was started in February 1999. Since many Web sites were offering free automation of email lists, including the archiving of past messages, this option looked attractive as it involved no costs and required minimal maintenance. Links were added to the Foreign Correspondent page to enable people to subscribe to the list (called foreign) via the Web site or to view archives of previous discussions online. Joining is possible via the ONElist site (www.onelist.com/subscribe.cgi/foreign).

There are currently 55 subscribers to the foreign discussion list. They are mainly journalists and journalism educators, with some librarians. Subscribers come from all over the world, including Australia, the USA, the UK, Hong Kong, Japan, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Canada, South Africa and Fiji. The level of traffic has been reasonably light. Messages tend to be more focused on sharing information—news, announcements, new Web sites—than on debate.

The Foreign Correspondent site and discussion group
possibly need to be “marketed” more to media organisations and to journalists associations so that they can be used regularly by the people who might need it most. The site needs to remain focused on supplying top quality resources to journalists in the field. More feedback from working journalists or journalism educators interested in foreign correspondence would certainly help. Suggestions of topics to include or ways to improve the site are always welcome and can be made via the email link on the homepage.

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