



Retirement project puts historic publications on the Web

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NORFOLK -- The days of microfilm and microfiche are coming to an end.

Now researchers looking for newspaper or magazine material can type a keyword or two and find the same text online in far less time.

One electronic publishing company is pushing this process from the 18th floor of the Dominion Tower in Norfolk. HarpWeek LLC is placing a collection of Harper's Weekly, a current events magazine published during the Civil War and through the turn of the 20th century, on the Internet.

History buffs can also search through more than 40 Civil War-era newspapers that the company has placed at www.lincolnanthecivilwar.com. The site won the 2003 E-Lincoln Prize for works on American history.

HarpWeek's publisher, John Adler, 75, will pick up the award and \$50,000 during an April 15 banquet at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania.

Not bad for a "retirement project gone wild," which is what Greg Weber, executive vice president for operations at HarpWeek, has dubbed the venture.

While running a marketing research business in the 1970s, Adler came across a complete set of Harper's Weekly, similar to Time or Newsweek today, for sale through a New York Times classified ad. The original owner, going through a messy divorce, sold it to Adler for \$10,000.

About 20 years later, Adler, a Florida resident who lives in Connecticut six months of the year, decided to do something with the magazines. He took the advice of a history professor and set out in 1993 to archive the collection on CD-ROM and sell it to college and university libraries.

That's when he turned to Weber, an electrical engineer, asking him to build a text searching program that would make it easy to use the digitalized historic material.

"I know very little about computers," said Adler. "And I know very little more now. I'm a management consultant by profession. I can solve problems."

So it was natural for Adler to consult with librarians as he and Weber proceeded. The librarians complained they had too many CD-ROMs and too few computers. Adler dropped the CD-ROM effort and hired a programmer in 1997 to help Weber get the project online.

Seven years ago, Adler formed HarpWeek LLC in Norfolk with Weber, an Old Dominion University graduate, leading the effort. Now, three digital technicians and 10 staffers read and index each article, short story, picture and poem by title, author, subject, theme and several keywords.

The technicians have scanned and digitally cleaned at least 210,000 pages of Harper's Weekly. The indexers, most with advanced degrees or doctorates in history or literature, have read at least 3.25 million entries. They'll have read millions more before they complete the full set of magazines, which is expected to take about 15 more months.

The office manager photocopies each page several times. Some copies go to the indexers. But one goes to TechBooks, a data conversion company in New Delhi, India. About 15 staffers, most of whom speak only Hindi, enter the magazine content into a computer. Each article is typed in twice, by different typesetters. Then a computer compares the two versions, checking for accuracy.

"We even preserve the original typos," said Weber. "We don't want the typists to make judgment calls on the text."

The work is 99.995 percent accurate, he said.

It's less profitable.

Adler has put more than \$10 million into the project.

"I've funded the whole thing out of pocket," he said. "I've only made about 40 percent back." For the 500 colleges and universities in 37 states subscribing to online access to the full content of the magazines, it isn't cheap either. (The Web site, harpweek.com, makes some of the content available for free.)

HarpWeek sells the product in nine chronological segments for \$9,900 each. Clients can buy eight and get the ninth free, though.

And, there is a pricing package that allows a college system to share units among a larger number of libraries. For example, the Virtual Library of Virginia, a consortium of academic libraries, bought seven units for its 94 libraries.

Old Dominion University is one of HarpWeek.com's top 20 users.

Carolyn Lawes, the department of history's acting graduate program director, contributed to ODU's top-20 status.

She used to flip through paper after paper to research subjects such as birth control in the Victorian age. Her eyes would blur while she stared at microfiche projectors. She would lose her patience with microfilm snapping just before spinning to the page she needed.

Now she gets creative with keywords, and the information pops onto her computer screen.

As she scrolls through the entries, one question comes to mind: "Where was this when I was doing my dissertation?"

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