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Remarks by Joe A. Hewitt
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Again, I want to thank all of you for being here this afternoon to join us in this event. (And I thank Bob for that stimulating keynote. I have every confidence that DocSouth can fit into your vision of a Learning Place in Cyberspace.) As I've said several times over the course of planning this occasion, I certainly believe that the University and the Library, and the faculty and librarians involved in this project, deserve a self-congratulatory moment for what we have achieved with *Documenting the American South*. On the other hand, I wanted this occasion to be more than a backslapping, high-fiving celebration, and be primarily a moment of reflection when we begin to understand the meaning and ultimate potential of this enterprise that we are engaged in. Perhaps the most important view of *Documenting the American South* comes from the users themselves and that's what I would like to talk a little bit about now.

I believe all of you have the pamphlet "[Keep Up the Good Work\(s\)](#)" [presented on this website as a .pdf file] that has been available here in the room. If you do not have it, please raise your hand and one will be passed out to you. This booklet consists of a selection from over 1500 e-mail messages from DocSouth readers received between January 1999 and June 2001. I hope you will all find the time to read them. They are a powerful testimony on the value of DocSouth and projects like it to scholars, students, and ordinary citizens alike. So, while I believe that this small selection of quotes can speak for itself, I do want to talk this afternoon a little bit about the main themes that I have gathered from the study of the full collection of messages. I am especially interested in discerning just what these comments collectively tell us about where we need to be headed with *Doc South*, and perhaps, too, what kind of feedback we should send to agencies such as IMLS that have supported this type of project.

I have for some time been monitoring messages to DocSouth as they have come in on a daily basis and was quite impressed by their number and the variety of uses that DocSouth seems to be serving for its audience. But over Christmas I got printouts of 2½ years' worth of messages and I spent a lot of time reading, categorizing, coding, and making notes on these printouts. It was my work with this corpus of messages, some 500 pages in all, that has really affected my own thinking about DocSouth.

Before getting into the themes of the comments I want to mention briefly a couple of technical issues that will be dealt with more fully when I do a report on this study in the professional literature. First is that we know that these messages sent to DocSouth by self-selected volunteers represents a very small portion of total use. We know that DocSouth is a heavily used site, but for today's symposium I have decided not to dwell on the numbers because we know from previous discussions that they can lead to detailed technical debates of just how best to count website use.

Our approach here has always been in line with our State's motto "*Esse Quam Videri*," "To be rather than to seem." I have personally always been suspicious of the huge numbers you get from counting "hits" or even in some projects I've seen, counts of "page views" or "files retrieved" which on an annual basis of a course amount to millions and millions for a heavily used site.

We worked several years ago with former SILS faculty member Charles Viles to develop software for counting that reduced the numbers down to what corresponded as closely as possible to a "check out" of a book from a print collection, eliminating hits on the higher level pages of the website, on indexes, on image files, and so on, so that they measured only interaction with the texts themselves. We call these statistics "Charlie's Check Outs."

These run between 4 and 6 thousand a day. To give you a typical example, on Feb. 12 DocSouth had 136,549 "hits" as counted on the ibiblio web-server, which converted to 6,465 "Charlie's Check Outs." Keep these numbers in mind as you read "[Keep Up the Good Work\(s\)](#)." These messages are just the tip of the iceberg—they give voice to an audience of DocSouth readers that is very large.

Another preliminary point. I'm sure that if you've found the time to browse in "[Keep Up the Good Work\(s\)](#)," you will have noticed that all of the quotes are positive. This is not a coincidence—I did the selection. But I do admit that in the full record of 1500 there were some messages that were negative. But there weren't that many, really—take my word for it—and most of these were what I would consider constructive criticism and, as part of my study, I will make a list of all of the suggestions for improvement that have appeared in the comments. We will be evaluating and prioritizing these and I am sure that a number of them will be included in our plans for improving DocSouth in the future.

In terms of criticism of the content, we did have a strong message about the lack of Native American material and we are taking that seriously as we think about future segments. But on the whole, objections to content selection are surprisingly few. DocSouth seems to appeal to persons from all points on the political spectrum. Reenactors and confederate heritage groups have found just as much to praise as African-American historians and civil rights activists. Somehow, the primary sources in DocSouth seem to help people from different backgrounds to find their way back to a common culture.

Another point that I would like to make has to do with why I have chosen to call these messages "readers' comments." Up until the time I sat down with the 500 some pages of printouts I had been referring to them as "user comments" following the pattern of the term "library users." It became clear to me, however, that most of the comments had to do with people's experiences as readers of the works and that the term "reader" would be more appropriate.

Certainly a number of comments were from persons who came initially to DocSouth to seek specific information, but most of these became "readers." They wound up browsing in the texts much as they would in the stacks of a library. It is certainly the experience of reading the *Doc South* texts that stimulated most of the response that we have gotten from our audience, not their use of the site as a database of information. This finding contradicts the stereotypical image of Web users as busy Internet searchers seeking a quick information fix from the most convenient sources possible, however fragmented they may be. The *Doc South* reader seems to correlate more closely with our idea of a more reflective traditional library user. I take that as a positive sign—that a carefully selected body of electronic texts will be used as such when made available on the Web.

Now let me give you a few of the raw statistics about the messages from readers. Minus spam and a few uninterpretable messages, 1468 messages were tabulated. Of these, 25% came from academic readers, 15% from K-12, and 60% from the general public. There were 394 reference questions in the messages, representing 27% of those received. There were also 90 permissions requests of various types, constituting 6% of the messages.

Academic Readers

Now, let me review very briefly some of the comments by category. First, academic readers. By academic, I mean any message from a reader associated with an institution of higher education. The original purpose of DocSouth was to serve the needs of the large Southern Studies community on the Carolina campus and those of scholars and students of the South around the world. It is clear that DocSouth is indeed serving this purpose, although messages from academic readers constitute only 25% of those received. We also have information about academic readers from other sources, particularly contacts with faculty and students on campus and from meetings of scholarly and professional associations that confirm the impressions we've gotten from the email messages.

The messages from academic users come from all levels—undergraduate through faculty, and from all types of institutions, community colleges to Ivy League universities with libraries that are among the largest in the world. Here are a few bullets that summarize these comments:

- Faculty comment more frequently about the use of DocSouth in instruction than in their own research.
- Graduate students appear to be especially heavy users of *DocSouth*.
- For some students, DocSouth is the principal source of materials for their research papers and even masters theses, and are an important resource for dissertation research. The availability of *DocSouth* has, in fact, influenced what graduate students have adopted as research topics in many universities.
- In some cases the materials are in the campus library in print or microforms, but the electronic format is preferred for convenience.
- Most academic users who reported how they discovered DocSouth said that it was through referral from a faculty member or fellow student. A fair number mentioned that they had discovered it through catalog records in their library's online catalog (through the OCLC collection records set program) and they thought this was truly a terrific service. Somehow, finding these works in their local online catalog was much more impressive than finding them on the Web through a search engine.
- 20% of the academic messages ask reference questions, the lowest rate of any group of readers.
- The most frequent area of improvement suggested by academic readers is MORE texts, sometimes accompanied by specific suggestions, but usually simply—MORE, MORE, and MORE.
- They also would prefer deeper indexing of some of the segments and sometimes mention that certain types of supporting materials would be useful, but the improvement that is stressed most emphatically is their desire that the scope of the content be expanded.
- Several academic readers made the observation that access to these kinds of primary sources has traditionally been a part of what distinguishes an education in the great institutions, and that the effect of making them widely available is to raise the quality of education in institutions of all types. (An astute point in my opinion.)
- The point was also made by several (who I suspect to be Carolina alumni) that Carolina is a leader in historical and literary scholarship, that the State and the South depend on UNC, and that DocSouth is an excellent example of our

meeting these obligations and high expectations.

- It is interesting to note that while 25% of total messages come from academic readers, almost all of the international messages are from academics.

All in all, I think these messages indicate that our service to the academic community confirms the assumptions of our original goals, and they also point fairly clearly to future directions for improving services to academics.

K-12 Readers

And now a brief report on K-12 readers. Included in K-12 are the students themselves, teachers, and parents who report that they are using DocSouth to help their children with classroom assignments. Here are a few bullets about the K-12 messages:

- Students tended to find DocSouth through a search for information on the Web for a homework assignment or research project. Unlike academic readers, few K-12 students report being referred to the site by a teacher or a fellow student.
- In fact, a number of students said that they were going to tell their teacher about DocSouth and that, in doing so, they hoped to improve their grade; they were excited about the discovery and considered it an important achievement on their part to have discovered *DocSouth* and discerned its value for their class.
- Teacher messages often talked about how limited their library resources are in the subject areas covered by DocSouth and how important our site will be in providing enrichment materials for their lesson plans.
- The "Slave Narratives" were noted as especially important by K-12 readers, which was not surprising. But I was somewhat surprised at how important the literature section is for K-12. High school teachers report that their school libraries are completely unprepared to support courses in Southern literature, which are often taught as advance placement courses where teachers are left to their own devices in developing materials. A couple of teachers mentioned that now that they had found this site, they were going to propose an honors course in Southern literature.
- More so than academic users, K-12 students share the sentiment of the general public for "experiencing history" rather than "studying history."
- Some teachers reflected on how access to primary sources such as those in DocSouth would change the way they teach history and commented on the value of autobiography and "First Person Narratives" in new approaches to teaching.
- One comment coming both from K-12 teachers and from academic faculty was that DocSouth is especially useful in teaching how to use primary sources.
- As for suggestions for improvement from K-12 readers, there were frequent requests for outlines and summaries, reading lists for various grade levels, and things like more biographical material about the authors of the works.
- From other sources, we have been advised that to serve the school population well, we need to produce the content on compact disk because of the lack of connectivity and bandwidth in the schools. This confirms our experience in that most K-12 students seem to be accessing *DocSouth* from home and teachers frequently mention the need to download and even print out DocSouth texts for use in the classroom.

All in all, it is clear that DocSouth is providing a useful service to the K-12 population, but the texts alone, without supporting materials, are not quite as useful for K-12 as they are for academics and the general public. We recognize that we have a ways to go in serving this sector well and are beginning to work with Prof. Cheryl Mason of our School of Education, to plan some workshops for teachers this summer.

General Public

Sixty percent of the messages tabulated were from the general public. This category includes in effect all messages that are not K-12 or academic. It is a varied and wide-ranging category that constitutes a much larger proportion of our audience than we had anticipated. The majority of general public readers came to DocSouth because of personal interests, but a fair number are persons using DocSouth in their work when that work isn't associated with K-12 or higher education. These include journalists, creative writers, foundation employees, museum professionals, and managers and volunteer docents of historic sites and houses. Also there were a substantial number of persons with serious private research projects working from a non-academic setting—local and family histories, church histories, business histories, and non-academic publishers working on a wide range of publication projects. Here are a few observations about the messages from the general public:

- Most general interest readers come to DocSouth with a personal interest in the history and literature of the South, usually focused on a particular period or aspect such as plantation life or slavery, the Civil War, or reconstruction. Readers frequently express the desire to "see history through the eyes of those who lived it." This sentiment is well expressed by the quote I used in my preface to "Keep Up the Good Work(s)." They're seeking "a fluent empathy for the everyday lives of the past." These readers sometimes express distrust in what they have been taught in high school and college. They want their history unfiltered and finding it in the DocSouth personal narratives has, for many readers,

had a powerful emotional impact. The stories of revelation and epiphany at the back of "Keep Up the Good Work(s)" were selected from a fair number of similar statements.

- A number of others come to DocSouth in search of specific information. These are often genealogists or people doing family histories or church histories. It appears that DocSouth in a fair number of cases does NOT yield the specific information that people may be looking for, but it often serves many by contextualizing the periods and places that they are interested in. Rather than simply identifying and gathering facts on their ancestors, readers begin seeking to learn HOW they lived. It is clear that DocSouth often provides a broadening experience for persons who come to it initially for specific information.
- I was truly amazed by the large number of general public readers doing creative work. I gathered from some of the comments that these were both amateurs and professionals and some implied that they were quite successful. Attitudes expressed by some of these readers were quite interesting. Some said, for example, that DocSouth had provided a "breakthrough" in their career as unpublished novelists because they had gotten a lot of great ideas about characters and plots by reading the personal narratives. A few even implied that the reason they had not been successful in the past was because they had not had access to sources such as those in DocSouth—and now they were filled with new hope!
- Very touching for me was a self-conscious attitude, almost deferential, on the part of some readers. They were very conscious that they were not professional historians, and felt privileged to have access to these primary sources as if they had entered an inner sanctum were they did not fully belong. For me it was a humbling experience to understand how others view the scholarly resources that we have here at Carolina and at other research universities. We work daily among these great collections and perhaps take them for granted. For me, seeing how others react to discovering these primary sources for the first time has underscored the importance of sharing these resources through digitization programs. It raises such sharing to the level of a compelling social obligation for our libraries and universities.
- Also, there was frequent and sincere expression of appreciation for the fact that DocSouth is available for FREE. Several readers even asked for confirmation that it was free before they started using it, afraid that they might get some huge bill in the mail.
- Like the academic readers, the primary suggestion of the general readers is that they want MORE texts. They frequently suggest specific texts for us to digitize. Some of these suggestions have been very interesting. For example, we have some diaries up written by residents of New Bern during the Union occupation. A reader pointed out that there are unpublished diaries of Federal troops involved in the occupation of New Bern in a collection in Massachusetts, and suggested we digitize them for DocSouth. These are the kinds of specific suggestions we hope to follow-up on as time permits. But for the most part, general readers just want us to keep adding more and more works to DocSouth.
- While we expected academic readers to be discriminating, I was also struck by the fact that general readers truly understand and appreciate the quality of the work that has gone into DocSouth, especially on the part of our selectors and scholarly editors, as well as the careful digitization and coding that we do. They show great appreciation for the fact that we are taking the time and trouble to create a high-quality site for the general public. Presenting historical information in a "scholarly manner" (as one reader put it) is important to public readers when most of those who correspond with DocSouth appear to be well informed and sophisticated evaluators of website quality.
- The general public readers ask more reference questions than any other reader group, with 30% of their messages containing reference questions, which does have implications for the library service programs as the numbers increase.
- Bottom line, the public audience for DocSouth seems to represent a highly motivated, informed, and articulate group of readers who are using DocSouth for serious purposes that can only be described as educational. Their deep engagement with these works, the obvious thrill of discovery and learning, tell me that DocSouth, even as it now stands, is a powerful educational resource. For some people who are not interested in credit hours or certification, a collection of primary sources like DocSouth can have the effect of a distance education program without all the trappings. DocSouth is obviously not a passive force that requires a formal educational program to activate its potential. It is obvious to me from reading the full record of messages that a high-quality resource of electronic texts, like a great library, can be a profoundly educational force in its own right.

There are other ways to view the messages that I don't have time to go into in detail today. One is an analysis of the reference questions which run the gambit from the straightforward to the very complex. Some of the questions are entertaining and provide food for thought. For example, the following comes from a woman in Brighton, England, who asks these 3 short questions which she says "should only take a couple of minutes of your time."

1. Is the American south a distinct region of the United States? If so, in what ways?
2. Are the images portrayed in Hollywood produced films, such as "Forrest Gump" and "Deliverance," true to form?
3. Has the image of the American South and its people been constructed? If so, how and by whom?

What is most disturbing about this set of questions is that they come from a woman who is writing a dissertation at a well known British university.

Another view of the message data is the interplay of the electronic texts with the world of print. There are numerous reference questions about how to acquire originals for the works in DocSouth, for example. There are also questions about whether or not works have been reprinted in scholarly editions and where to acquire them. The heightened visibility that electronic access gives to these works appears to be increasing the demand for print versions.

The permissions requests also cast light on this phenomenon. There are a number of small publishers interested in publishing reprints of texts in DocSouth. One said that he had heard that we keep records of the most frequently used works and asked if we could share it with him so he could publish a reprint series.

Let me close with a final thought and an announcement. It is clear from reading the full records of the readers' comments that there are many readers for whom DocSouth is an important resource for research, education, and cultural enrichment. It might even be possible to say that there is a COMMUNITY of readers based on common interest and, to some extent, shared values. Many have volunteered their suggestions and some even their help to improve DocSouth and to ensure that it continues and flourishes. Many talented and enthusiastic people want to contribute to this effort to make primary sources available to the world.

So, I want now to announce our intention to establish over the next several months, the *Documenting the American South* Readers Advisory Board, which will represent all sectors of DocSouth readership and will meet at least two times a year in Chapel Hill to provide guidance on the management and development of *Documenting the American South* so it can better meet the needs of its constituents. The board will help in the evaluation of DocSouth from readers' perspectives and provide feedback on plans for future segments. *Documenting the American South* will take its direction in the future BOTH from our current editorial board consisting of faculty, librarians, and University Press representatives, and the Readers Advisory Board (and we may even ask the latter board to help us raise a little money).

Documenting the American South has shown clearly that it has the capacity to span public and scholarly interests and in establishing this board as a companion to the editorial board, I hope that we can add a small, but helpful, thread to the important bond between the public and the academy. Thank you for your attention.

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