

The Web Insider . . .

Netscape, Standards, and You*

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Ms. Leiserson focuses on how the browser you use affects the move toward standards compliance in the Web environment. An appendix provides a checklist for converting bookmarks from Netscape 4 to Internet Explorer or Opera browsers.

¶1 As the Web matures, so do the technologies behind it and the standards that shape it. The standards, while less apparent to end users, are arguably the more important of the two, a stance that should ring true to librarians. Ironically, however, librarians can be a major force slowing standards compliance. How? In a word: Netscape.

¶2 To be fair, I mean Netscape Navigator 4 (versions 4.0 and 4.7 in particular), and in reality all version 4 and earlier browsers are at issue. However, Netscape 4 is the one that lingers on and on and on. It has a half-life unlike any other browser. Just this year it celebrated its fifth anniversary. The sun sets on most browser versions in a mere two to three years.

Why Netscape 4?

¶3 Librarians are chief among those who still cling to this now antique version. Why do they hold fast? For nonlibrarians, a primary reason seems to be the e-mail component, particularly a reluctance to export old e-mail into other software. For law librarians, however, who typically rely on technology staff to help with e-mail migration, this seems an unlikely cause. Recently I participated in an e-mail exchange on the discussion list of the AALL Online Bibliographic Services Special Interest Section (OBS) on this very subject. Librarians were responding to the webmaster's request to test a standards-compliant prototype of the OBS Web site.¹ In the course of the exchange, the participating librarians made it clear that the reason they favored Netscape Navigator 4 was that *it met their needs*.

¶4 With this in mind, let's remind ourselves of a little browser history. In the wake of an avalanche of browser changes from 1994 to 1997 (remember Mosaic,

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1. A special thank you goes to Anne Myers, head of technical services, Boston University Pappas Law Library, and webmaster of the Online Bibliographic Services Special Interest Section, for her thoughts on why law librarians use Netscape 4.

Netscape Gold, and even Lynx?), *Navigator 4 really worked*. Librarians (and others) were very happy. But starting in 1997, Netscape became stuck and did not release another version until 2000. And that first release of version 6.0 was a disaster. Not only did Netscape's new owner, America Online, give it the dubious version number of 6, managing to skip a version 5 altogether, but it would not install correctly, it was extremely slow to load, and for many it crashed repeatedly.

¶5 Meanwhile, as Netscape ground to a halt, Internet Explorer (which through about 1998 had not been nearly as good a browser as Netscape) continued to improve. Many librarians resisted Microsoft (and continue to do so today). It is the quintessential 400-pound gorilla. Moreover, librarians often have large sets of bookmarks in Netscape and worry about losing them. (If the latter is true for you, please see the appendix, which describes how to easily convert Netscape bookmarks.)

Why Not Netscape 4?

¶6 Given some resistance to Microsoft, concerns about bookmarks, and especially the feeling that it meets their needs, why indeed should librarians forsake Navigator 4? To users, particularly librarians who do not need the latest bells and whistles, there does not seem to be much incentive. In truth, the primary problem is under the hood, where it is much harder for users to detect. Getting to the heart of the matter, the trouble is that Netscape 4 is by far the least standards compliant of any of the major browsers in use today.

¶7 When a Web site is designed to the current standards, chances are that Netscape 4 will misinterpret or simply overlook some of the code. Thus, unbeknownst to users, they are not seeing what they should. Often important navigational elements, including the main menu, do not function as well. As time goes on, this lack of functionality will become more and more of an issue.

¶8 On the other side of the table, conscientious webmasters usually double or triple their redesign efforts so that their code "degrades gracefully" into Netscape 4. Moreover, one of the primary goals of current Web standards, separating content from layout, is close to impossible to achieve as long as Netscape 4 is being used. For all but the simplest sites, tables must be used for page layout in older browsers. With more recent browsers, it is possible to use tables as they were intended (for spreadsheet-like data) and do layout with Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). CSS is a major component of current Web standards.

What Are Web Standards?

¶9 Web standards (formally known as common protocols) are developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C).² Tim Berners-Lee, who invented the World

2. For more information, see ABOUT THE WORLD WIDE WEB CONSORTIUM, at <http://www.w3.org/> (last updated May 19, 2002).

Wide Web, directs W3C, which has about five hundred member organizations, including Microsoft, America Online, OCLC, and the Library of Congress. Its number one goal is universal access. Its efforts extend in many directions, but at the heart of Web publishing is HTML (HyperText Markup Language).

¶10 The last iteration of HTML, also numbered version 4, became a formal recommendation in 1997. In 1999 HTML 4 was adapted to XML (or Extensible Markup Language), a code that tags for content. The result was the hybrid XHTML 1, which became the recommendation of W3C in 2000. If these acronyms cause your eyes to glaze over, the basic idea is that W3C is moving along in its goal of separating content from presentation, and XHTML is what it currently recommends.

¶11 The aforementioned CSS is the alter ego of HTML (particularly XHTML). CSS is the W3C standard giving style in the form of layout, fonts, colors, and even some special effects to Web documents. To give a simple example: Times New Roman is the default font for most browsers. To switch to Arial on a pre-CSS page, one must enter the code `` repeatedly. It is quite common to use such a font tag several hundred times in a single page. With fully implemented CSS, this can be done with one line of code: `font-family: Arial;` It not only saves work, it saves file size. Moreover, it is possible to use the same CSS file in every page of a Web site, making the labor and file size savings that much more impressive.

¶12 Beyond this, with CSS and XHTML, webmasters can set up multiple style sheets. It's truly amazing (limitless actually) how many ways one can easily alter the look of one page where content and style have been separated. The changes can be slight (such as the font face and size) or radical—for example, changing from a “Lo-Fi Grunge School” to a “Gothic Organic” style in just the touch of a button.³ Beyond such cosmetic changes, it's possible in the same document to have one CSS file that controls the way the page looks on a monitor, another for the way it displays on a Palm Pilot, and yet a third for Braille tactile feedback devices.

If Not Netscape, Then What?

¶13 Hopefully this has convinced you that the time has come to bid a fond adieu to Netscape 4. The question then arises: what does one use instead? One possibility is to migrate to the latest version of Netscape. As I write this, version 6.2.3 is the most current and, unlike 6.0, it works well. In addition, there is the ubiquitous Internet Explorer, version 5.5 or higher. Another favorite is Opera, version 6. It comes in two versions: one free with advertising in the upper right corner and the other costing a nominal amount.

3. For more information on styles of Web design, see CURT CLONINGER, *EYE CANDY FROM THE UNDERGROUND*, at <http://www.lab404.com/dan/index.html> (updated Mar. 9, 2002).

¶14 However, not surprisingly, such information changes rapidly. Two places to check for the latest browser versions are the evolt.org and WaSP Web sites. Evolt has an astonishingly complete archive of browsers.⁴ As well as the latest stable releases, it includes some cutting-edge pre-release software (for example, Netscape 7 as this article is written) and long-lost but not forgotten favorites such as Cello, developed by Thomas Bruce of the Cornell Law School. The other resource, WaSP, is the Web Standards Project, a self-described “grassroots coalition fighting for standards that ensure simple, affordable access to web technologies for all”⁵ and a goldmine of information for those wanting to know more about Web standards. One page of the site is devoted to a browser upgrade campaign, listing the latest, most standards-compliant browsers with links for downloading the software.⁶ For those dependant on technology departments that are not supporting such browsers, it might be helpful to point them to the WaSP site.

¶15 Whatever your choice, be sure to spread the word, especially to fellow librarians. And know that webmasters everywhere breathe easier as their site usage statistics show decreased reliance on older browsers.

4. EVOLT.ORG, BROWSER ARCHIVE, at <http://browsers.evolt.org/> (last visited July 9, 2002).

5. Web Standards Project, at <http://webstandards.org/> (last visited July 9, 2002).

6. *Id.* at <http://webstandards.org/act/campaign/buc/>.

Appendix

How to Convert Bookmarks from Netscape 4

To Internet Explorer 5 or 6

1. Open Netscape.
2. Open your bookmarks.
3. Click on “Edit Bookmarks.”
4. Click on “File,” then “Save As. . . .”
5. Save a “bookmark.htm” file to the directory of your choice.
6. Close Netscape.
7. Open Internet Explorer.
8. Click on “File,” then “Import and Export,” and then choose the bookmark.htm file you saved in Step 5.

To Opera 6

1. Open Netscape.
2. Open your bookmarks.
3. Click on “Edit Bookmarks.”
4. Click on “File,” then “Save As. . . .”
5. Save a “bookmark.htm” file to the directory of your choice.
6. Close Netscape.
7. Open Opera.
8. Click on “File,” then “Import,” then “Netscape bookmarks . . .” and then choose the bookmark.htm file you saved in Step 5.